

Ancient Truth: Old Testament History

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Outline

1. Period of Beginnings

- 1.1: Creation Theology
- 1.2: Why Creation?
- 1.3: In the Beginning
- 1.4: Temptation and Fall
- 1.5: Hiding and Hides
- 1.6: Divergence
- 1.7: The Flood
- 1.8: The Tower of Babel

2. Patriarchal Period: 2166-1527 BC

- 2.1: Birth of Redemption
- 2.2: Covenant of Abraham
- 2.3: Abraham, Lot and the Promise
- 2.4: Abraham, Sodom and Abimelech
- 2.5: Abraham's Final Days
- 2.6: Isaac
- 2.7: Jacob
- 2.8: Joseph

3. Exodus: 1527-1406 BC

- 3.1: Israel Enslaved
- 3.2: Moses versus Pharaoh
- 3.3: The Plagues on Egypt
- 3.4: The Exodus
- 3.5: Before Mt. Sinai
- 3.6: Rebellion on the Way
- 3.7: 40 Years' Wandering

4. The Conquest: 1406-1400 BC

- 4.1: Conquest Begins
- 4.2: The Southern Campaign
- 4.3: The Northern Campaign

5. Period of Judges: 1400-1106 BC

- 5.1: Bad Beginning
- 5.2: Early Judges
- 5.3: Gideon and Midianites
- 5.4: Abimelech ben Gideon
- 5.5: Jephthah
- 5.6: Samson, Part 1
- 5.7: Samson, Part 2
- 5.8: Migration of Dan
- 5.9: The Crime of Gibeah

5.10: The Story of Ruth

6. Early Monarchy: 1106-1011 BC

6.1: The Passing of the Old Guard

6.2: Samuel Established

6.3: Breaking the Philistines

6.4: Saul is Chosen as King

6.5: Saul Begins Auspiciously

6.6: Defeat in Victory

6.7: Saul's End

6.8: David's Rising Star

6.9: David and Jonathan

6.10: David Goes Underground

6.11: The War that Wasn't

6.12: Company of Fools

6.13: Out of Reach

6.14: Saul Passes

7. True Monarchy: 1011-971 BC (David)

7.1: King of Judah

7.2: A Partial Judge

7.3: Crown and Throne

7.4: God's Throne in Zion

7.5: Conquering Lands and Hearts

7.6: Losing While Winning

7.7: Out of Control

7.8: Absalom Plots Revolt

7.9: Friends and Enemies

7.10: Victory and Grief

7.11: Peace Never Comes

7.12: Sin and the Temple

8. Peak of Monarchy: 971-931 BC (Solomon)

8.1: David Retires, Solomon Reigns

8.2: More Royal Intrigues

8.3: Solomon's Temple

8.4: Wisdom, Power and Wealth

8.5: Folly of the Wise

9. Divided Monarchy: 931-722 BC

9.1: Messages from God

9.2: Judgment on Jeroboam

9.3: Good King Asa

9.4: Asa's Counterparts

9.5: Elijah and the Drought

9.6: New Missions for Elijah and Ahab

- 9.7: Ahab's End
- 9.8: Jehoshaphat and Ahaziah
- 9.9: Elijah and Elisha
- 9.10: Elisha in War and Peace
- 9.11: Elisha and Israel's Peril
- 9.12: Syria and Judah Decline
- 9.13: Judgment and Chaos
- 9.14: Divided Monarchy Declines
- 9.15: Syrian Threat Continues
- 9.16: Depths and Recovery
- 9.17: Three Published Prophets
- 9.18: Covenant Nadir
- 9.19: Samaria Falls, Judah Rises

10. Judah Alone: 722-586 BC

- 10.1: Hezekiah Renews the Covenant
- 10.2: Manasseh and Amon
- 10.3: Josiah's Reforms
- 10.4: Jeremiah and the End

11. Exile and Restoration: 586-425 BC

- 11.1: Exile
- 11.2: Exiles Return
- 11.3: Rebuilding the Temple
- 11.4: Esther
- 11.5: Ezra Comes to Jerusalem
- 11.6: Nehemiah Comes to Help
- 11.7: The Wall Is Built
- 11.8: Final Covenant Renewal
- 11.9: Malachi

12. Inter-Testamental Period: 425-4 BC

- 12.1: Greek Empire
- 12.2: Maccabean Period
- 12.3: Messianic Expectations

Addenda: Biblical Body Counts

Note on This Volume

This volume in the Ancient Truth series will not follow the same pattern as the others. The primary objective in the rest of the series was to counter a mass of scholarship which ignored, or was even hostile to, the ancient Hebrew intellectual assumptions which gave us the Bible in the first place. This problem looms quite large in New Testament studies but is less of an issue in the Old Testament, particularly in the history books and the general chronology of events. Among those who presume to offer an in-depth study of the biblical text, there is comparatively less trash written about the Old Testament. Countering the hostile scholarship is smaller task.

We will not be plodding through, chapter by chapter, in the Old Testament history books of Genesis through Esther. Instead, we will source the biblical narrative in offering a thread of events to help the reader's own mind to bring life to the characters and events. We will also add summaries from a selection of prophets as historical sources. This is an overview, a summary of events, with chapter and verse citations inviting you to read the Scripture for yourself.

Introduction to Old Testament History

The primary purpose for the Old Testament as it now exists is revealing why we have Christ. There is no pretense of answering all the questions of any particular age, much less ours today. Rather, we are required to examine the claims on their own terms. This requires we enter another realm; indeed, the Bible assumes the reader has already been drawn into that world and needs to understand what is required to live there. Only by accident does the Bible offer any sort of apologetic to those outside that realm. It isn't supposed to make much sense unless you are driven to obey what you find before you find it. It is already difficult enough to understand by those so driven. This study offers no grand scholarly defense of anything but pretends to open doors for those who struggle to make sense of something they already know they need.

The Bible must be read from its own context, which is the ancient Hebrew culture of the Nation of Israel, while under the Covenant of Moses. In Hebrew literature, context is everything. The writers of each portion of the Old Testament assumed a certain amount of common knowledge among the readers. From where we stand today, we find ourselves too often at a loss to understand the importance of some of what was written because we lack that context. Reconstructions are often a matter of ongoing debate. We would be fools to demand and expect all details be resolved to our Western cultural standards. Instead, we walk in faith, trusting God for two things in particular. First, that God has preserved the text with sufficient fidelity to the originals that we can bow the knee to what the Bible demands of us as if it were God's own words. Second, we trust He has preserved sufficient knowledge of how to read that text so we can obey Him according to His satisfaction.

The study aims to provide a rough outline of Old Testament chronology. While dates are offered in the typical Western notation, no one should assume these dates are certain. We should acknowledge that there is plenty of sincere debate and that part of it rests on the very questionable assumptions of dating the history of other nations, Egypt in particular. Modern

Western dating of Egyptian chronology is frankly a house of cards, so the best we have is a working estimate of dates. What matters far more is the apparent order of events and less the numerical dates. This study builds on certain assumptions merely for the sake of convenience. If the Hebrew authors didn't bother to nail it down so precisely, it must not have been too important.

The starting point is a desire to know what God demands of us. He preserved a portion of writings from the people He called to bring His revelation to the world. It is utterly impossible to extract from the Scripture narrative all the details that would satisfy our curiosity. This is the story of redemption, not the story of humanity from any presumed objective point of view. Beware the tendency to think we have the whole story. What we have is what matters for the sake of our obedience to God. There is no other purpose for the Bible, so any alleged pure history approach from our context would be misleading in itself. A primary difference between our context today and that of the ancient Hebrew people is the very fundamental assumptions about reality itself, the intellectual frame of reference regarding what matters in the first place. We seek in this study to bridge the gap between those two contexts.

1. Period of Beginnings

1.1: Creation Theology

The record of God's revelation begins at the beginning. The English name "Genesis" carries the connotation of source, how it all began. Out of the vast collection of narratives available to ancient peoples, it was necessary to filter out what was untrue or simply unnecessary for Israel to serve God under the Covenant. Whatever Moses did for that month or so on Mount Sinai in communion with God must have included editorial selection of the material known to Moses, who had been raised and educated in the cosmopolitan court of Pharaoh, and educated yet again in Mesopotamian traditions under his father-in-law, Jethro. The result included the Book of Genesis.

The book is divided into sections that don't follow precisely the chapter and verse structure added long after the time of Christ. The Creation Account is actually two different accounts. The first one, Genesis 1:1-2:3, is the theological account of Creation. It follows the particular logic of Hebrew thinking and provides an explanatory foundation for parts of Hebrew culture. This by no means denies the facts in this first account; rather, we place facts in the proper perspective of their meaning in terms of what they demand of us.

1:1-5 – The common dispute over words and phrases here is the result of importing Western logic, with a whole raft of alien assumptions. The Hebrew mind sees the picture of God hovering over His unformed Creation like a mother hen over her brood. Don't chase details; get the overall image. The first thing God does is to separate Light (Truth) from Darkness (Deception). He established a standard – there is a right and a wrong. Night gives way to dawn; falsehood gives way to Truth. Also note: the pattern of Hebrew reckoning is established for what constitutes "a day" – evening and then morning. The new day begins at nightfall.

1:6-8 – God created an open space between the dense collections of matter. Most presume this means an expanse of sky or air was inserted between the waters of earth and the waters of the sky, and that is the obvious literal meaning. Primordial earth was wrapped in a cloud layer. Our Western mind notes that this would make the entire surface of the earth tropical or subtropical. The cloud layer would also serve to block out many of the cosmic particles that cause aging and decay and would obscure the sky. You would be able to detect the sun and moon, but little else. This becomes more important later in terms of context. More important is seeing the entire vastness of the universe was God’s handiwork.

1:9-13 – Next came dry land and plants. Land was pushed up and water ran off into the low places. There was now a place to introduce the first form of life visible to human eyes – plants. Everything living is organized according to a pattern on earth, that everything would bear the seeds of its own reproduction. Those seeds would produce more of the same thing, not some other thing. Species of life could not readily cross by accident. We should note that God created DNA structures to enforce this plan.

1:14-19 – While the sun is necessary before plants can grow, that misses the point. The reason given for celestial luminaries is that humans could mark seasons and mark the passing of time in cycles that were predictable. Such a thing was so critical to humanity that most pagan religions have some sort of celebration of seasons, luminaries and the cycle of life. Again, the order is not chronological, but logical. The plants were a large part of the reason for celestial lights.

1:20-23 – Fish and fowl come next. The seas from the third day were filled with living, moving creatures. The sky of the second day was filled with creatures that were at home on the wind. A zoologist might note that the Hebrew word for “fish” includes a lot of things we don’t include under the English word. In the Hebrew mind it is enough to note that each step brings ever-increasing complexity to fill out the setting for divine purpose. Fish and fowl are the simplest of animals that humans notice.

1:24-30 – Land animals were the last group. Again, notice the inter-species barrier, “after their kind.” Notice how, so far, the logic has been from the simple to the complex. Finally, God makes a creature in His own image. Whatever else that means, it tells us this creature was inherently designed to commune with God. Further, this creature was the final step, the culmination and the whole purpose for the rest of His Creation. This resulted in the creature having dominion over the rest of Creation. There are other, unspoken purposes hinted at and they are the reason for the rest of Scripture.

1:31-2:3 – Finally comes the Sabbath, the day of rest. The cycle of Creation was complete, and God set apart the seventh as a day of rest. It was designed to bless the human race, by giving them a break from labor – no employer or master could require anyone to work that day – and provides an opportunity to turn and commune with God, one of the primary purposes for humans to exist.

We have established, then, the theological picture of Creation. Had we been there to witness it, would we have reported it this way? Would it have taken place in this exact sequence? That’s a silly question. The right question is: What does this report demand of humankind?

1.2: Why Creation?

We have seen that the initial narrative presents the theology of God's Creation, emphasizing the logical order. The rest of Scripture takes the six-day framework literally in terms of explaining things (Exodus 20:11; 31:17), but the Hebrew viewpoint is more about the way things relate versus how they were done. While we see that the entire universe was created as a tableau for human existence, we learn almost nothing of the purpose of mankind's existence. We know from Genesis 1 that man is required to seek fellowship with God, that such is man's nature by design, but nothing is said of why God desired this. It is typical of Hebrew writing to aim for an application, not necessarily an explanation. The purpose was declaring the grounds for God's claim to sovereignty in the human awareness.

Why God went to all this trouble is only hinted at in the Bible and never clearly stated. That does not imply that we must leave the question alone, since Hebrew literature assumes some things are obvious without statement. Writers often mention something important in passing, a reference to that common understanding not needing exploration. What happened "before" Creation? What prompted God, who needs nothing, to desire all this?

Genesis 2 sets a rather dramatic stage for several actors to play their parts. Genesis 3 begins quickly telling how it came to be that mankind should be born with a sinful nature. Abruptly, we are introduced to a character whose existence it is assumed the reader would already understand. He is called "the Serpent," a euphemism for Satan. How could such an evil creature, with obviously so very much power and authority, be in a position to soil the innocence of Eden? As the only clue to what is going on, the question of "why Creation?" quickly becomes "whence Satan?"

How much of Genesis is properly taken literally is subject to debate, but Paul's comment to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 is a reference to just such an effort – to accurately discern the natural intent of the Word. Don't envision a big snake or lizard, but an "Angel of Light" (2 Corinthians 7:14). From the context, we can assume that Eve saw no reason to be suspicious of him, that he appeared to her as someone in authority. If we compare this scene with the opening paragraphs of Job, we begin to get a picture of someone who was allowed to come and go on the earth at will, had tremendous power and yet was somehow accountable to God. Further, he had some access to God's throne room in some sense and seemed familiar with the protocols for addressing God.

There are other passages; look at Isaiah 14. Again, there has been much ink spilled over this one. One school of thought reminds us that every condemnation against a human, guilty of great evil, is at least an indirect condemnation of the one who inspired their evil: Satan. The poetic lines of condemnation for Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 12-15) sound a great deal like the condemnation against the "King of Tyre" in Ezekiel 28:11-19. In the case of Tyre, we know for a fact that there was never any person bearing the title "King." There was a Prince (more accurately translated "leader from among the people"). We also know that the Prince was simultaneously the high priest of a very nasty religion. In the eyes of Hebrew prophets, the pagan god a people worshipped was their true ruler. For centuries, Bible scholars have said that these passages in Isaiah and Ezekiel must address the question Satan, at least indirectly. Keep in mind that, from the Hebrew point of view, every pagan god and goddess was merely a front for

a demon (1 Corinthians 10:19-20). It's not too much of a stretch to see Tyre's demon as Satan himself.

If you chase down the passages in Scripture regarding Satan (aka Lucifer, the Enemy, the Accuser, etc.) and piece them together, you get a feel for this character. Seen as a whole, they describe one who, at first was the "Covering Cherub" of God. Try to imagine that no part of Creation can bear the Presence of God Himself, without dissolving its created form. Thus, someone had to be a cloak to shield Creation. No inanimate thing would do; God created a being to handle the task. This meant that all traffic or communication between God and Creation had to pass through this being conceptually described as a Living Cloak. No surprise that this being got a big head over his unique status and tried to skim off some of that glory and praise meant for God, keeping it for himself. It's all metaphor, because Hebrew is itself mostly symbolism.

We owe a tip of the hat to C.S. Lewis and his "Narnia" series of children's books, in which he offers the simplest explanation. He's not the only one who believes this but offers the best description. Knowing what we do about God, His holiness, etc., and His other characteristics, we can make certain assumptions based on the belief that God is also self-consistent on His own terms as revealed. God can't let this trespass by His Living Cloak go unanswered. He condemns Lucifer but may have felt magnanimous about the need for clarifying the rightness of His judgment. At the same time, the punishment will fit the crime. Given what God has stated rather plainly of Himself, we can guess He offers a proving ground between Lucifer's declarations about himself (declaration by behavior) versus what God had said was Lucifer's place. The proving ground would be a creature.

Of course, a place had to be made that would allow this creature to live and present this living proof of God's justice. So, we have the world and all that is in it. Man is in the image of God, who breathed life into Man. There is some inherent kinship. Man can choose to follow God, or he can listen to Lucifer's seductive lies about God and His purpose. All of humanity in history, until the Second Coming and Final Judgment, is one long courtroom testimony.

Throughout the prophetic testimony of the Old Testament, Satan is conceived as no longer under rebellion, but now living under punishment, confined to human space. In Hebrew thinking, Satan is rather like God's left-hand man, the punisher and jailer who stands outside of covenant boundaries, to enslave those who wander from God's revelation. Except that we are all born in that slavery, so we must turn to divine covenant to escape.

So much is plausible for us as we try to grasp the Hebrew context. We have pushed far enough at this point. This explanation forms a useful part of our faith life serving Him today. It seems to explain some things that happen beyond our control and it helps to explain even our own feelings at times. Is it "The Truth" as folks might see it today? That's the wrong question. The right question is whether it enhances our obedience to the larger image of what God demands of us. It seems to fit with all the other things that are much more clearly addressed in Scripture.

1.3: The Garden of Eden

Genesis 1 presents the conceptual sequence of events. Reading it as factual chronology is a

modern idea, not part of the author's intent. Beginning in Genesis 2:4, we have a distinct statement about a different sequence: The earth was formed, moisture was provided by a mist and plants had not yet grown. God formed the first man from the stuff of the ground, and then provided all manner of vegetation for food. There was also the one tree of Forbidden Fruit.

2:4-14 – The location of Eden is really not answered in terms we recognize. If we take the flow in Eden to be a literal river; then we run into a problem, because rivers run together but rarely separate into two or more distinct streams, except in a delta where the flow is slow and shallow. At least two of these rivers are known by name – Tigris and Euphrates – and are quite substantial. If we allow the word to mean a simple “flow” then perhaps as a watershed we are closer to something we can envision. The identity of the other two rivers remains a mystery. Indeed, the names of the territories mentioned as adjacent to their courses, in so far as they can be identified, are quite far from the Tigris-Euphrates Valley.

All of this is academic to begin with, as the topography of the earth has surely changed and probably quite radically, since primordial times. It may be that the modern Tigris and Euphrates Rivers are ancient names from other times and places given to more recent geographical features. Our author in Genesis 2 and 3 is much more interested in what took place than in geographical location. The terms used to describe the place may be little more than figures of speech, meant to prevent such questions. We don't need to place it geographically since Eden represents an existence we cannot approach from our fallen state.

2:15-17 – We cannot imagine what sort of work is implied by “cultivating” Eden. The feeling is more of management, rather than hands-on labor. We know that a part of the curse was that man would be required to perform hard physical labor (ch. 3:19). This indicates a change from his previous situation. It's probably safe to assume he used the same thing to manage nature that made it: the Word of God, as the expression of His will. Adam spoke the purpose of God and nature obeyed. This accords well with Paul's statement in Romans 8:19-21. After the Fall, nature became unmanaged, as there was no one to apply God's guidance in His name.

Since the name “Eden” essentially means “paradise,” and the word for “garden” is more like a “private park,” we do well to avoid trying to fix a concrete image and settle for a general feel for opulence and comfort. Again, this is imagery, not a precise description.

2:18-25 – It would appear that the animals were created from the same earthy stuff as Adam but came after he was alive. As a mark of his position and authority, it was his to name these creatures. And being like God, being able to commune with Him, man also needed one with whom to fellowship on his own level. The role of this “helper comparable” for the man is less of subordination and more of an extension of his mission. The emphasis is hard to miss, stated in some translations as “they shall become one flesh”

Thus, we see mankind as he ought to be.

1.4: The Temptation

Let me remind readers of the principle involved in understanding the entire Old Testament: It's all about application. What does the believer need to know in order to do what God wants done? Knowing what the writer intended requires some grasp of Hebrew thinking. Paul warns

us in 2 Timothy 2:15 that we must diligently study the Word so that we can correctly divide between fact and figure of speech, as well as the question of what applies to us now in Christ.

We know that the Six Days of Creation is rather literal, because of other passages that refer to it so – Exodus 20:11, 31:17 – but it would be best to see it as six days of revelation. It is the logical structure of Creation. The actual chronology, if there is one, is set forth in Genesis 2, with Man first, then plants and then animals. Last of all, Woman is built from the Man's rib.

They are depicted as actual people. Since all Hebrew names tend to be symbolic, noting the symbolism of "Adam" and "Eve" doesn't diminish the literalness of their individuality. Typical of Hebrew thinking, they are both symbol and reality; we are meant to see them on multiple levels at once. Using the term "The Serpent" for Satan was hardly meant to convey details of his appearance, but of his nature. The image of the serpent was something always dangerous, revolting and beautiful all at once. Taking that literally does violence to the author's intent. What Satan looked like is not mentioned, nor even hinted at, because that's not important in the Eastern mind. He was there and he had an evil plan for us, contrary to God's design; such is his nature and mission.

Much has been made of the precise meaning behind the conversation between Satan and Eve. We can safely assume she properly understood the prohibition included not touching the fruit. However, Satan managed to deceive her as to the reason for the prohibition. The question itself is intellectual, almost anti-spiritual. It seeks not to understand, but an opportunity to evaluate, to pass judgment. Satan made a very libelous claim about God's nature, as if He had some hidden agenda to withhold good things, while mockingly giving it center place in the Garden. It was hinted that God was denying Adam and Eve their rightful status as gods, something Satan no doubt believed God had done to him first.

It is important here to notice the content of this temptation (ch. 3:6). It can be broken down into three parts:

- 1 It was good for food.
- 2 It was pleasant to look at (and by extension, to touch).
- 3 It was desirable to make one like God.

We note that the pattern remains unbroken across the ages. When the same Tempter confronted Jesus in the Wilderness (Luke 4:1-13), we see that he used the same pattern of temptations:

- 1 To make bread from stones.
- 2 To create a spectacle before a crowd.
- 3 To become godlike in ruling all mankind.

The Apostle John lays it down for us in plain terms of human weakness (1 John 2:15-17):

- 1 Lust of the Flesh
- 2 Lust of the Eyes
- 3 Boastful Pride of Human Existence

All temptations can be seen as arising from these three, singly or in combinations. There is the appeal to (1) the fleshly appetites. They are not in themselves evil, for without hunger pangs, we might not know to eat and keep our body supplied. What is sinful is seeking to fulfill them outside the provision of God: thirst, hunger, sex, etc.

The appeal to (2) aesthetics or curiosity, the desire to see some new wonder, is taking advantage of another benign trait. It is simple human curiosity that has led to every good discovery of mankind since the Beginning. It is the desire to see things that we should not see, visions that would engender a desire for sights that can only come from exercising human depravity. How many of us are both repulsed and fascinated by the sight of blood? To see it often enough, in sufficient quantity, can harden us to the instinct to lessen human misery.

There is also nothing wrong in well-earned pride of accomplishment. It is (3) pride in things we did not accomplish that leads us to sin. The demand that God ease our path at the expense of others, to claim a status above others that He has not given, to demand others give way because we hold ourselves as superior – these are the sin in pride. Those placed by God in positions of authority are to humbly acknowledge His hand in placing them there and to bear the rank as a burden of service, not the privilege of power. The sin is in claiming to be something one is not, contrary to God's declaration.

The central element tying all of this together is the choice to place human rational capacity on the throne of decision. The intellect was given by God as the means to organizing the body's response to revealed moral imperatives. Satan enticed Adam and Eve to explore their world from the basis of their own intellect, as if they could know enough about things from their own sensory data what was moral. This is a rejection of revelation, daring to question God in the same way Satan appears to have done.

Paul says that Eve by her nature was deceived by this enticement, whereas Adam was not (1 Timothy 2:13-14). It's only modern Western feminism that sees this as an insult. To the proper Eastern mind, it's simply a differentiation of abilities and roles.

1.5: Hiding and Hides

Genesis 3:9-24 – In the state of innocence, being nude was simply a fact of life. Every other creature was nude, as well. Once Adam and Eve had taken the Forbidden Fruit, they were suddenly aware of good and evil by a direct participation in evil. What Satan had promised was a half-truth: While not like God, they did indeed know good and evil. They also knew they had done evil and couldn't hide it from God.

At some point in our human development, we all gain a sense of privacy and modesty. This reflects our fallen nature, but the principle here goes much deeper. For so long as they were obedient, Adam and Eve had no sense of exposure. When man sins, he must hide from the wrath of God. To survive that wrath requires a covering. The concept of covering is completely missing in our Western culture but looms large in Eastern thinking. It is a picture of our desperate need of protection from God's judgment against sin. At the same time, literal nudity outside private sexual intimacy remains shameful and sinful because the world remains fallen. Reasoning away the fact or the symbolism is rejection of God's revelation.

While both cultures recognize that all behavior has consequences, that sin behavior often has bad consequences, there is much more to it than that. The primary truth of human existence is that we are designed to fellowship with God and with each other, by extension. Sin breaks that fellowship; it transgresses the covenant boundaries. Sinners violate a sacred trust, whether it is persons or property. In this case, the judgment of good and evil is God's private reserve. The implied Covenant of Creation requires humbling oneself before God as Lord and Creator; failure was an injury to God Himself.

To make amends for transgressing a covenant requires healing the damage, of giving a part of oneself to restore what was lost. In this case, the damage was irrevocable; the change to human nature cannot be revoked on the human plane of existence. The knowledge, once gained, could not be returned or removed. The fruit could not be reattached to the tree. Innocence could not be restored; Adam and Eve knew this instinctively. They knew that they were wholly exposed before God and sought to avoid the pain of that exposure as transgressors, as those who had wounded God. There was no place to hide, of course. Their attempt to cover themselves with fig leaves was pointless, but typical of human behavior ever since then. It is our nature to attempt building layers between ourselves and our justified suffering. Today we call it "neurosis."

Hiding from the pain of their sin before the presence of God only emphasized the inadequacy of their abilities to deal with it. If there was to be a restoration of fellowship, it would have to come from God, the injured party. That is the nature of justice. Even between equal parties, to clean up the mess by meeting the demands of the injured party may still fail to make him forget. Things can never be the same. So, it was in this case. Both man and Satan had stepped into the curses of sin.

The author used myth as an image of God's judgment. The term "The Serpent" should not be taken as literal; it should be taken as literary. We know that literal snakes appear to us as crawling whips with fangs and scales and were created that way from the start. We cannot hold them morally accountable for our natural repulsion. The myth that snakes were once upright is ancient, used here by the writer of Genesis to declare that Satan would not be taken in trust so easily by mankind again, that sane people would avoid him at all costs. The only people who would embrace him voluntarily would be those who also embrace evil, for he would be known as evil personified. This was a change in status, as Eve had treated him respectfully before. Further, the seed of the woman would be his greatest enemy and would eventually strike a killing blow.

Scholars refer to this line as the "Proto-Evangelium" – the first promise from God to deal decisively with sin, once and for all. As is well known, it was Jesus Christ who had an earthly mother, but no earthly sire. He was the seed of a woman who struck that fatal blow on the Cross. The best Satan could hope for was to hobble our response to Christ's reign; he had no power to stop it by any means. Satan remains subservient to the Divine Heir.

Much has been made of the curse on woman from all angles. Most of it misses the point. First the obvious: One would look long and hard to identify any creature that risks so much in childbirth and suffers as much pain. More than that, nurturing is both, a woman's greatest strength and her greatest misery. How many normal women are eager for their progeny to leave home? The inevitable conflicts arising from this add to her misery. It is the source of great

conflict in childrearing between husband and wife, yet she would have a built-in desire for her man, and he would take authority over her.

Whatever it is that changed for man, it is certain that getting food by the sweat of the brow, implying manual labor against a reluctant natural world, was not the original plan. Work would become the primary feature of a man's life and would end with his death. Afterward, he would be forgotten, just another pile of dust. All his labor would blow away with the next strong gust of wind. In ancient times, the greatest blessing was to be able to leave a legacy that kept your name alive in human memory.

Because of sin, life became ugly. Intended for intimate fellowship, husband and wife would struggle to be on the same sheet of music. Futility would take over as the dominant factor of human existence. But all was not lost, in that a measure of fellowship could be restored by God's provision. In the provision of animal hides to serve as a covering, we recognize the shedding of blood was necessary. Thus, was established the principle of shed blood to answer for sin, the ancient image of blood price.

Yet all could not be fully restored. The immortality of innocence was gone forever; mankind was forbidden access to the Tree of Life. The path back was through the Flaming Sword, a terrifying symbol of the Word of God, of God's revelation of His holiness to fallen mankind. Eternal life required death of fleshly self-will, and this is clearly prefigured in the story. Mortality was also a new and permanent feature of human life.

Eden is not some place hidden in the sands of time, a literal location on earth. It is hidden as a parallel universe – it's right there, everywhere, but inaccessible. That is, it's inaccessible unless we pass the Flaming Sword. It must cut off from us death and sin. Without the change inherent in a revelation of God, there is no going back to Paradise, whence we came and for which we were designed.

1.6: Divergence

The focus leaves Adam and Eve as we see the result of sin on their children. In **Genesis 4** we are introduced to their sons, Cain and Abel. It is instructive to note the meaning of their names. Cain sounds very much like the Hebrew word for "acquisitive," implying greed. Abel means a "vanity," or something transitory, implying disappointment.

The symbolism of their names does not negate the presentation of them as literal people. These two were engaged in the necessary tasks of food production, Cain in farming and Abel in sheep herding. In the natural course of events, both brought their appropriate offerings – a specific type of free will offering, a donation-in-kind. We have no idea how this offering was tendered, or how it was actually used on behalf of God. There is nothing inherently superior in the specific thing offered by either, as both have been required since the beginning.

Being forbidden to approach God directly since expulsion from Eden, God was not forgotten, just harder to reach. The text assumes God had responded to the Fall with some sort of revelation that established a pattern of worship, including the sacrifice of a portion of the food production. The basic requirement for being accepted by God, as symbolized by having one's offering accepted, was honest commitment to getting to know Him and His ways. The human

spirit was now dead by default, and the instinctive spiritual connection is absent, requiring man actively seek communion with God. Cain's offering was unacceptable because of his unacceptable attitude. He rejected God's direct attempt to correct his immature thinking. Cain demonstrated his immaturity by murdering his brother out of wounded pride and envy.

He further demonstrated it by excuses and whining when God called him to account for the murder. To let Cain stay in the household with such an incorrigible self-centered attitude would be a threat to everyone. He was sentenced to banishment, away from the relative safety and prosperity of communal life. This meant "living in Nod," a literary phrase for nomadic living, but symbolizing moral wandering. He had polluted the ground with human blood. Any attempt to return to his farming would be cursed with utter failure, forced instead to gather what he could find growing naturally (hunter-gatherer).

Contrary to the speculation of modern secular scholarship, the nomadic lifestyle was not the original human condition, but a degradation from the original agrarian communal settlement style of living. It also meant Cain no longer had access to the worship and knowledge of God. We have no evidence of the original human settlements. In pursuit of their basic needs, it's unlikely that they would have needed much of a material culture, such as could be found by archaeological digging. The decentralized community structure and widely spaced settlement pattern precluded a highly organized society. Cain, on the other hand, was the predecessor of a very material and structured culture.

Pastoral mysticism is not necessarily uncivilized, but our modern prejudice shows in the academic assumption that Cain was the founder of civilized urban living. Civilization is defined as the set of cultural habits sufficient to enable living together in close quarters. A dense population allows material progress and development of advanced artistry. There had to be customs or rules of conduct also because the natural pacifying effect of worshipping God was absent. This was the birth of materialism. Indeed, Cain is responsible for the rise of all heathen (i.e., misguided) worship, along with the stratification of society into various upper and lower classes. Some, by virtue of their willingness and skill at killing and otherwise oppressing their fellow human beings, rose to a special status, with separate rules of conduct. Human life became cheap, not to mention short, for the most part. This sort of society is the one that has been amply illustrated by the discoveries of archaeology. The Bible refers to this human-oriented society as the "Children of Men."

In the meantime, the original family group continued to exist in its simpler lifestyle centered on the worship of God, as we see in Genesis 4:26. Throughout the rest of this early time, there was a strong divergence between the two types of human society. Those who followed God, called "the Children of God," were known for their tremendous longevity. It is not so far-fetched when we realize that there was still a thick cloud layer over the whole planet, which among other things, would tend to block cosmic particles and other celestial emissions known to accelerate human aging. The lifestyle of the Children of God was also presumably healthier, less stressful. We could further posit a direct result of sin – the loss of immortality – taking effect slowly, over numerous generations.

The long genealogy table follows customary Semitic form, in that it is not a list of direct lineal descent. Rather, it lists the more famous figures. This, together with the high longevity, makes it

virtually impossible to estimate a time span. There is no way of knowing how much time had lapsed between the expulsion from Eden and the building of the first cities.

1.7: The Flood

Our text here is **Genesis 6-9**. We can give an educated guess for the date of Noah as around 6000 BC., if not earlier. By this time, the Children of Man had become horribly corrupt (ch. 6:1-8). They pursued every sort of hedonism imaginable. This included the birth of Black Magic as an attempt to regain Adam's legendary authority over nature. Probably late in the Stone Age, some of it would appear to modern eyes as attempts at primitive science, including early experiments with metals.

From the biblical point of view, of more concern were these pursuits of power, which gave rise to a long legacy of experimentation with the Spirit Realm. This opened the way to demonic presence, to include "possession" of human souls. It is not explained how, but this was connected to the appearance of a race of giants: the Nephilim. The ambiguity of the Hebrew word makes it uncertain, but it appears that they were both physically large and exceptionally intelligent, not to mention outrageously ambitious and brutal. They were people who transgressed the limits in every way. This manifestation of evil power among the Children of Man was enhanced by seducing with the Children of God, likely seeking some magical advantage. To corrupt the godly became a major preoccupation of the Children of Man. They succeeded to the point where God decided it was time to wipe out humanity and start afresh.

The man Noah ("Serenity") must have been the last Child of God who hadn't surrendered to this madness. God told him he would have 120 years to prepare for a worldwide flood. He was to do two things: (1) build a boat large enough to carry a breeding pair of all faunae, along with the extended family of Noah, and (2) to prophesy of the coming doom to the corrupt society around them.

His instructions for building this boat included using cedar, a nearly indestructible wood that didn't weaken much from age or long exposure to water. Estimates for the size of this craft, based on interpretations of the term "cubit," generally run about 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high (137 x 23 x 14 meters). These turn out to be very stable proportions for a boat, but huge, displacing over 40,000 tons (36,300 metric tons). It may well have required 120 years for four men to build something that large using Neolithic ("new stone age") tools. Large as it was, many contend that the Ark would not have been large enough to hold a whole zoo, even allowing no room for the animals to move around. Include food for them and it would seem preposterous. More than likely, though, many of the animals would have hibernated the whole time. The weeks of heavy rain and the following flood would have lowered the temperature for quite some time. God had planned this carefully. The animals on the Ark came to Noah at God's prompting; He would have chosen and prepared these animals completely. We have no way of knowing what mechanism God would have used to multiply species in the first place.

As to the volume of water sufficient to flood the whole earth, recall the picture of very little land surface before the Flood. Geophysicists are quite certain that today's continental land masses were originally part of a single, smaller one. Even today, the continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean appear to be growing larger by virtue of uplift, while the circumference of the earth

slowly increases. The crustal material of the earth is oozing up through a rift running the length of the Atlantic, hardening and pushing the continental plates apart, according to the commonly accepted Tectonic Plate Theory.

We have already described the primeval thick global cloud bank. It would have been quite easy to precipitate the whole thing by a few well-placed eruptions from the vast subterranean pools (“fountains of the deep”) spewing miles into the sky. God precisely planned the timing when the heat and pressure in this subterranean pool built to the point of bursting through the crust. The accompanying earthquakes would have caused vertical displacement of the earth’s crust, sinking many parts. It took quite some time to bring the entire cloud bank down, along with all that had gushed from below the earth’s crust (“forty days” was a common Hebrew expression, an approximation between one and two moon phases).

We have today evidence of flood strata at high altitudes all over the world; inexplicable, unless one takes this story seriously. The flood hid from Noah’s view the relatively low pre-historic mountains by some 20 feet (6 meters). Under the cover of water, great upheavals of the earth’s crust would have shifted some of the land upward again, as the plates shifted against each other. They would have crumpled and folded at the edges, creating today’s mountain ranges. The single ocean of earth would begin to run off new land masses, carving deep new valleys in the process. It took birds to test the new situation. While a raven would be comfortable resting on floating carcasses, the dove was the key signal for Noah. She would only light in a tree or on exposed ground.

The boat came to rest somewhere in the Ararat Mountain Range. We believe this to be in modern day Armenia. The post-Flood world would have been drastically altered. The permanent cloud layer was gone, with blue skies and starry nights now. The structure of the earth’s crust had also changed but was just getting started. Even then, mountains would be much higher and valleys much steeper. With the cloud layer gone, only to reappear temporarily as mere shadows of its former self, the world would now see significant temperature fluctuations and highly variable weather patterns. It is doubtful the winds would have blown nearly as much, or nearly as hard before the Flood as they do today. For the first time, direct sunlight could be refracted through the mist in the air to form rainbows.

Promptly upon exiting the Ark, Noah reestablished the worship of God. He had carried on the boat an extra set of “clean animals” (the selection later enshrined in Mosaic Law as kosher) to sacrifice in worship. The appearance of the rainbow occasioned God’s promise that He would never bring a global flood again. He also promised that the weather variations would stabilize into a pattern of predictable seasons. He removed a part of the curse pronounced at the Fall: Nature would become a little more cooperative in the effort to grow crops. No doubt this was partly due to global redistribution of fertile soil as silt carried by the Flood. God also promised that man would gain complete dominance over the creatures of the earth. However, there were conditions attached.

For his part, Noah was commanded to establish a firm shepherding tradition of men ruling their families more vigorously, reclaiming in part what Adam should have done with Eve when she was tempted. Social stability became paramount as a human duty with severe penalties for violations (9:1-7). We are given the germ of the Covenant of Noah, a mere hint without the full

explication of legal requirements. Those were probably formalized later, though whether it was ever precisely what Jewish scholars assert (“Seven Noachide Laws”) is subject to debate.

This new social order was to begin with the community arising from Noah’s three sons, Shem (“Authority”), Ham (“Hot”), and Japheth (“Expansion”). Let there be no mistake; this social order must of necessity be tribal in structure. This was the unwritten assumption of the whole covenant. Despite perceived flaws in this system and centuries of trying to design something better, no other social order is acceptable under the Covenant of Noah. The greatest sin of modern government is ignoring the sacred requirement that no one shall have significant rule in your life without first being related by blood or marriage.

Apparently Ham still carried with him something of the corrupt culture developed by the Children of Men. When Noah had taken advantage of the new soil fertility to grow grapes, he was able to extract some juice and ferment it as wine. Even if Noah had tasted wine before, it would have been a long time since doing so. At any rate, he imbibed enough to get drunk. It’s not exactly clear what followed, because simply being naked in one’s home isn’t condemned anywhere in Scripture. It would seem that the story as recorded was a euphemism for some form of sexual contact (see Leviticus 18, “uncovering nakedness” as an obscure reference to sex).

The curse on Ham’s family is also difficult to understand, since it focuses on his third son, Canaan. Once again, we see a case of Hebrew narrative where the story includes only those details pertinent to the larger objective of the tale – revelation for the nation of Israel and her situation. Thus, we have here an incomplete record of the curse due to the obvious emphasis a Hebrew writer would place on explaining why God would eventually command extermination for the Canaanites. Moses was instructed to record God’s wish that they all be slaughtered. It is obvious that they carried Ham’s propensities. Today, we are hard pressed to find a culture with more disturbing religious practices than were common among Canaanites. Even Greeks and Romans, with their immoral tastes, found the Canaanites despicable.

With this curse is also a prophecy of Shem’s descendants becoming the channel of God’s revelation, that through them, Japheth’s descendants would find God. Today, the Gentiles (Japhethites) owe much to the Hebrews (Semites) as the source of Christianity.

1.8: The Tower of Babel

The list of Noah’s descendants in **Genesis 10** has been fully identified with known nations of Ancient times. Unlike pagan myths, the Bible describes both the name and location of each nation accurately. This Table of Nations includes Japheth’s son Madai as father of the Medes. His other sons went mostly north of the Ark’s resting place. Shem’s sons settled closer to the south and east. Ham’s descendants went south and west, to include populating Africa. Mizraim (“Two Rivers”) is both Upper and Lower Egypt, while Put is eastern Libya (old Cyrenaica).

Yet, we know that the sons of Noah did not at first scatter so far and wide as God had commanded Noah (**Genesis 11:1-9**). One of Ham’s tribes, Cush, gravitated to the lower half of Mesopotamia, followed by the rest of the descendants of Noah. They all spoke the same language still and they fell under the sway of the Cushite tribe. At the same time, they carefully

maintained their tribal identities. This does not mean that there was little or no inter-marriage, only that it did not affect the identity of the tribes. One of the sons of Cush – Nimrod – gathered a kingdom around himself. He was reputed to have been a great hunter, but his name was later synonymous with rebellion against God. In the Hebrew mind, the proper model for a king was the shepherd, not the predator.

Nimrod's kingdom would have been rather small, but he wasted no time in building a city in the fertile lands of Shinar (Lower Mesopotamia). The people found mud that could be baked into bricks for building and petroleum deposits that leaked onto the surface of the ground, from which they made mortar. The sticky substance soaked into the dried bricks, making the structure as stable as solid stone. Under the leadership of the Cushites, the kingdom began to defy God's revelation.

With the appearance of stars for the first time in human history, the people began to worship them as gods. The high fertility of the Shinar Plain allowed them to use less of their labor resources to grow food and more for their astrology religion. As kings and high priests of this religion, the Cushites directed a great building project, the first ziggurat. A ziggurat is basically an astrological observatory with a shrine on top. We can safely date this kingdom before the earliest ziggurats discovered so far, prior to 4800 BC. This is about the same time pottery appears in archaeological excavations. The Cushites were literally kings of the world and had no intention of losing their place. They convinced their subjects that it was the will of the star gods to keep every human on earth together in this first Kingdom of Babel.

The name the Hebrew writers gave this kingdom, "Babel" (*baw-bel*), was a play on words, a common feature of Hebrew literature. The Babylonian word for ziggurat was *bâb-ili* (whence our English Babylon), meaning "Gate of the Gods." The closest word in Hebrew was *baw-lal*, "to confuse." God could not allow the situation there to continue, or things would have become hardly different than they were before the Flood. He caused their mouths, and by implication their ears, to vary from their single language to the point where the clans were mutually incomprehensible. It is not stated how this was done, nor how long it took. It was obviously quick enough to stop the project. Without a common tongue, their unity was doomed. Recall the intent of Noah's Covenant was to create widely dispersed, small and tightly knit communities. The tiny Cushite kingdom scattered across the world, as God had commanded and the disappointed Cushites themselves migrated to the coastal area of modern-day Ethiopia.

The focus of the Hebrew text moves next to the descendants of Shem (**Genesis 11:10-32**). They stayed closest to old Babylon. Again, the genealogical table is not to be taken necessarily as a lineal succession. It covers a period no less than 2000 years. During that time, there was a radical shift in the tectonic plates of the earth, sliding on the remnants of the subterranean pools before things settled into their current relative stability. One of the names in the table – Peleg – means "Earthquake," or "Fissure" (1 Chronicles 1:19), a name commemorating a change in the earth's topography. The implication here is that the continental separation occurred over a short period of time, as opposed to the common assumption today that it took millions or billions of years. The crustal plates would have slid rather quickly on a cushion of water. (The Hydroplate Theory is not widely accepted in academic circles yet but provides one of the best explanations for all the current facts.)

At any rate, by the time we come to Terah, we note that the ancient longevity had been significantly reduced to 200 years, down from Noah's 600 years. During that time, the knowledge of the One True God was nearly drowned out by a mishmash of mythology. Somewhere in the history of the Mesopotamian Valley, there arose one or more schools primarily studying religions, with several religions overlapping there at various times. The God of Creation became in their minds one of many other gods. Yet it seems there was always at least a few scholars who knew the basic requirements for worshipping Him. He would not allow the knowledge of revelation die out.

2. Patriarchal Period: 2166-1527 BC

2.1: Birth of Redemption

No other part of the Bible has generated so much controversy as Genesis 1-11. Whole libraries have been written on various aspects of these chapters. We have seen some pointless efforts to organize and present the biblical narrative in forms that could be accepted by secular academia. None of it went anywhere. It is not their story, but a divine privilege of insight granted only those under covenant with the Creator.

We recognize that what is recorded in these first few pages of Genesis sets the stage for all that follows. We could wish the ancient Hebrew record keeping included more precise descriptions of the circumstances of these events. That would accord nicely with our Western thinking. We could further wish for a record of other events surrounding the ones preserved for us. The Hebrew writers took for granted a great deal of reader knowledge, knowledge lost to us today. Despite the dearth of details, we still find enough to make sense of the rest of the story, if we set aside our own prejudices and cultural arrogance and simply listen to the ancient voices in their own context.

It cannot be said enough that efforts to convince by logic are a waste of time. The Hebrew people themselves would denigrate such futility. We expect no peace with those outside of God's covenant. History indicates we gain little or nothing from it, even when we invest monumental efforts toward it. Study that seeks to make faith more reasonable may help clarify things for us standing on the inside of the faith, it cannot do much for those outside. Only the Holy Spirit can move a heart to faith. Thus, reason must serve faith, as true faith is often quite unreasonable. The Ancient Near East as a whole would have understood this on some level.

Abraham is the archetype of the Man of Faith. Yet this image of him came as the result of trials and much error. He was born in a culture we scarcely understand simply for lack of information. He gave birth to a new culture many do not understand for lack of trying, a failure to look beyond shallow and unexamined assumptions. We are introduced to him as Abram, living in the Lower Mesopotamian Valley.

It was no doubt due in part to the instability of the earth's crust that so many large tribal groups would simply pick up and migrate long distances to re-settle in some other land. Archaeology tells us that sometime after the continental separation, the Sumerians appear to have moved

from Central Asia and settled in the Lower Mesopotamian Valley. Arriving around 3500 BC, they were one of many groups to build cities, along with dikes and canals. They developed a rather high culture and written alphabet, today called *cuneiform*.

This culture included building and rebuilding the old Babylonian style ziggurats. Each of their large cities was dedicated to at least one of their numerous nature deities. Sumer was a small empire of city-states ruled by a royal priestly caste. When the Akkadians rose to conquer them, they built their own, much larger empire. They seem to have adopted the whole culture of the Sumerians, except for the language. They hardly destroyed the Sumerian people. The Akkadians simply took the place of the ruling class and rebuilt much of what was damaged in the conquest. This new empire was powerful, yet very unstable.

The Persian Gulf extended much farther inland in those days and the old Sumerian city of Ur would have been on the coast. It was here that Abram (“High Father”) was born into one of the upper-class Akkadian families, circa 2166 BC. He married his half-sister, Sarai (feminine of “Ruler”). Abram was the eldest of three brothers. The second was Nahor (“Snorer”). The third, Haran (“Mountaineer”), died before the family made their move north, but not before he sired a son, Lot (“Veil”).

A century before their departure the Akkadian Empire was falling apart. As the central imperial control was loosened, the southern coastal city of Ur rose to prominence as the greatest city in Mesopotamia. To their east, in the foothills of the Zagros Mountain Range, was the rising Elamite Kingdom. Ur’s prominence served only to provoke conquest and destruction by the neighboring Elamite princes, who were ambitious to displace the old Akkadian power.

It was probably due in part to the rising tensions among the southern cities of Mesopotamia that Terah decided to move to the northern city of Haran, more accurately spelled Charan (“Road”). There is also evidence of catastrophic destruction due to a massive meteorite strike in the area about that time, from which God wanted to save them. Both Ur and Charan were dedicated to the worship of the moon goddess, Sin. There is strong evidence that Terah was one of the high priests in her service, or at least among the scholarly temple staff (temples were also libraries). His extended family household could have constituted the whole population and property of a substantial village. There would have been slaves and servants to keep the facilities, as well as care for the mixture of herd animals and perhaps some farming. Under ideal circumstances, the move would have taken months, covering a distance of some 550 miles up the Euphrates River (Genesis 11:27-32).

Thus, while God had called Abram to leave Ur (Genesis 15:7), for reasons we can only guess, his father moved the entire household, as well. We can safely infer that Abram stayed in Charan a while before he realized that he had not fully carried out that calling.

2.2: Covenant of Abraham

We have no way of knowing for sure, but it seems unlikely that Abram would have begun his part in the story as a firm believer, solely dedicated to Jehovah (the English form of *Yahweh*). Indeed, that name for God was first revealed to Moses, 700 years after Abram’s time. Abram doubtless used the name *El*, or variations of that title, to refer to Him. At best, Abram probably

knew Him as one of many gods. At any rate, Jehovah was able to make it clear to Abram what He required. At age 75, Abram was told to leave the civilization he knew and adopt the lifestyle ridiculed by the highly educated Akkadians: to become an "Amorite." The name was not so much a race of people as a type. To the Mesopotamian urbanites, tent-dwelling Amorites were filthy nomads who talked and dressed oddly. They produced nothing of value and probably stole the few trade goods they brought to sell at exorbitant prices. They had strange, barbaric customs.

Further, Abram was to leave behind his material inheritance. The vast estates of his father would pass to the younger brother. Nahor would later become rich enough to build a city of his own near Charan, bearing his name. Indeed, some travelers referred to Charan itself as the "City of Nahor." In return for leaving this all behind, Abram would inherit directly from Jehovah ownership of the whole land of Canaan for his descendants. As mentioned before, we have the first recorded incidence of Jehovah offering a personal relationship with an individual human.

Abram accepted this tremendous sacrifice, taking only his movable property and his nephew, Lot. In 2091 BC, Palestine was thinly populated by a mix of tribes known as Canaanites. These would have dwelt mostly along the seacoasts, the Jordan Valley and any year-round spring. The central highlands were heavily forested and unpopulated. After the long journey of some 220 miles, easily taking more than a year, Abram pitched his tents at the future site of the Jewish city of Shechem ("Ridgeline"), in the saddle between the twin peaks of Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. The site is referred to as the Oak of Moreh ("Oak of Teaching"), indicating that it was a well-known religious shrine. Abram built an altar to Jehovah there.

It appears that the bulk of Abram's worship practices were adapted from common Semitic rituals, but he may have been one of those religion scholars who knew something about the worship of "God Most High" (*El Elyon*). Seven centuries down the road, the Law of Moses would codify a great deal of the common practices already in place. It was the peculiar ethic of life, the values that were new and took Abram some 50 years to grasp.

Genesis 12:10-20 – As befitting the life of a shepherd-sheikh, Abram migrated from place to place around the Land of Canaan. He would naturally want to see the land Yahweh had said was his. Abram was quite wealthy by local standards. The region was given to recurrent droughts and nearby Egypt had long established her power largely because of the wealth arising from the Nile Valley agriculture. The Nile seldom suffered real drought. Egyptians had long since developed extensive irrigation, as well as flood control. Abram would have been one of many petty lords visiting Egypt looking to pasture herd animals in the Nile Delta.

This first recorded challenge to Abram's faith in his new life was a failure. Abram relied on deception when it was quite unnecessary. Had he trusted his God, he would have found himself quite safe in this very strange land, with a very strange and ancient culture.

It was common practice for local rulers to confiscate single women from less powerful lords' families. It was more of a ritual than an actual threat and taken as quite a compliment, since it signaled a desire for political alliance, as well as obligating the ruler to give large and expensive gifts as a dowry. The Egyptians were famous for their wealth and high culture, including a

great lore of scholarship in magical arts and divination. Whatever it was that struck Pharaoh's household, he was able to divine the reason for the plague. He publicly censured Abram for his deception. Pharaoh's troops then escorted Abram's household to the northeastern border whence it came.

During Abram's lifetime, that border would have been a string of forts across the northern end of the Sinai Peninsula. They gave their name to the area and the road that strung them together: *Shur*, "The (Fortress) Wall." The last of these forts would have been very near the Negev, virtually a desert in the summer. The shepherd-sheikh would never have been in a hurry. At the end of some months, Abram was back at his first campsite, Shechem.

Aside from a very public embarrassment in Egypt, Abram fared rather well during his early period of adjustment to nomadic living. It would be many more tests and failures, more painful lessons before he became the man God had intended. In the end, he would become a symbol of faith to thousands of generations to follow.

2.3: Abram, Lot and the Promise

Genesis 13-14 – By this time, Abram's flocks and herds required too much range to share comfortably with Lot. His nephew had become a sheikh in his own right. Their respective herdsmen were beginning to fight over resources. Lot chose to dwell in the fertile Jordan Valley.

The Jordan River ran roughly 120 miles in a deep rift to the Dead Sea. South of the Dead Sea, the lowest point, the rift continued another 120 miles or so to the Gulf of Aqaba. In 2000 BC the Dead Sea was much shallower, almost unrecognizable from today. In the past, most scholars were convinced that the Pentapolis ("Five Cities") lay in the southern end of the Dead Sea: Sodom ("Volcanic"), Gomorrah ("Ruined Heap"), Admah ("Red" as in dirt), Zeboiim ("Beautiful Ones"), and Zoar ("Ignoble") or Bela (a single "Gulp"). Recent investigation now seems to indicate that they were scattered on the northeastern shore. The two largest cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, had already distinguished themselves in moral depravity among Canaanite cities. By degrees, Lot changed from Amorite shepherd-sheikh to urban dweller in Sodom.

Abram remained in the sparsely populated central highlands. Though Hebron was not built for another 300 years or more, it serves as the reference point to identify the location of lands used by the Amorite Mamre ("Lusty"). The site of Hebron today is 3040 feet (927 meters) above sea level, and it may have afforded Abram a good view of part of the Pentapolis. He would have seen at least the smoke of destruction from the Mesopotamian invaders. Their raid on the area is placed at about 2080 BC, when Abram was 86 years old.

The Coalition invaders are easily identifiable with known historical figures. *Chedorlaomer* (or *Kudar-Lagamer*, "Servant of Lagamer") was probably a title, not a proper name. It indicated he served Lagamer, a patron deity of his people, the Elamites. Elam is a well-known region in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, just east of Lower Mesopotamia, near the ancient Persian Gulf coast. The Elamites probably dominated the invading Coalition. *Amraphel* is mentioned as King of Shinar, a broad plain in Upper Mesopotamia. The name of the place was often applied by Hebrew writers to the whole of the region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In this

context, it seems to cover the middle portion of that. *Arioch* is a Babylonian title for the Lord of Ellasar, or Larsa, a major city in southern Babylon. *Tidal* ("Fearfulness") seems to have been a Canaanite mercenary warlord. He is called King of Goiim ("Nations" or "Gentiles"), indicating a mixed army for hire, not a place. The primary function of any king is warlord.

After conquering the cities of Lower Mesopotamia, including destroying Ur, the Coalition raided their way up the Mesopotamian Valley. After passing through Damascus, the Coalition struck the major power centers along the East Bank of the Jordan. The *Rephaim* ("Giants") of Ashtoreth-karnaim ("Astarte of the Double Horns," a reference to a symbol of power) in the Golan area are mentioned, along with the *Zuzim* ("Bigshots") of Ham in Gilead. Further south were the *Emim* ("Terrors") of Shaveh-kiriathaim ("Plain of the Twin Cities"). The Hebrew names for people were more of a description than identification. Finally, there were the Horites (Hurrians) in Mount Seir. These were non-Semites who established themselves around 2400 BC as strong rivals of the Sumerians and Hittites in culture and learning. They were later absorbed by the descendants of Esau (Edom). This raid hastened a decline into which the Horites had slipped some time earlier.

South and west of the Dead Sea, the Coalition made a sweep of just about every place that had anything of value. En-mishpat ("Fountain of Judgment") is identified with Kadesh-Barnea. The Hebrew scribe is careful to make the appropriate geographical references from his own era. El-paran ("Oak of Paran") is the area around Kadesh. There were tribes of the Amalekites and Amorites living near Hazazon-tamar ("Row of Palm Trees") as the raiders approached from the south their ostensible target in all this. The Hebrew writer explains that the Pentapolis had rebelled against the Coalition after twelve years of paying tribute. Part of their great wealth was due to petroleum tar, salts and rare metals, especially copper. The Coalition's objective was movable goods and captives, not destruction and perhaps to reassert their rule over the area.

Their captives included Lot and his household. As the Coalition headed north with all this, Abram was notified of his nephew's capture. In his own household, Abram had 318 trained professional fighters, as a sort of bodyguard, a good indication of his wealth and status at the time. He also had the help of fighters mobilized from the households of his neighbors and allies, Mamre, Eschol and Aner. It appears that Abram led the expedition himself. The Coalition camp was at the north end of the Jordan Rift Valley, a march of 120 miles. Catching up with them at the future site of Dan, called Laish at that time, Abram employed highly unusual tactics. Many pagan believers refused to fight at night, in fear that their souls would not find the way to their rest. Also, it was rare to divide one's army, when concentrated force was considered the key to winning. In the darkness, it would seem a much larger force coming from two sides. The Coalition army fled, leaving everything behind. The huge load of captured goods and slaves had forced them to travel slowly. Abram pursued them another hundred miles to Hobah, or Chobah ("Hiding Place").

Abram's motives were to fulfill his customary obligation to rescue a relative from slavery. He would have been loath to enrich himself with property from the likes of Sodom and Gomorrah, though it would certainly have been his customary right to do so. As commander of the rescuing army, he used his prerogatives to allow his allies their share of the plunder and to give a tithe to Melchizedek ("King of Righteousness"), who was priestly king of Salem ("Peace and

Prosperity”), later Jerusalem. Abram and Melchizedek quickly recognized each other as fellow worshipers of *El Elyon* (“God Most High”). Nothing else is known of this priest and king. We also have no way of knowing how this city and its priest-king became a pagan stronghold in later times.

What we do see is Abram growing comfortable with the land promised to his descendants and his new lifestyle.

Genesis 15-17 – Jehovah’s next appearance confirmed the continuation of Abram’s blood line. As was the custom, Abram had taken steps to bequeath his property to his chief servant, Eliezer (“God is my Helper”) of Damascus. Jehovah had other plans. To solemnify the promise, Jehovah instructed Abram to prepare the Ritual of Covenant. This was widely used by Semitic tribes, usually to seal agreements between equals. We have nothing in modern life resembling covenants; considering them anything like contracts is absurd. Covenants were a deeper commitment of the person, rather than a simple commitment of impersonal resources.

Abram took one each of several animals – later included under Kosher Law – and cut them through at the midriff. The halves were arranged on either side of a sloped trench, so that their blood and other fluids flowed into a trough at the bottom. Normally, the participants would wade the length of the trough barefoot to signify the horrible consequences of breaking the covenant. In this case, Jehovah Himself passed alone through the trench. His presence was symbolized by a torch and a fire pot. For the descendants of Abram – Israel – these symbols came to mean light and heat, revelation and trial. This signified the prophecy of their later captivity in Egypt. Before the promise was fulfilled, the descendants of Abram must pass through severe testing of their faith, much as was the case with Abram. Yet, in that testing would the greatness and power of God be revealed.

This solemn vow by Jehovah was insufficient to prevent Abram from following customs of his time, as a sort of shortcut to a son. He impregnated a concubine designated by his barren wife. This half-way measure was a time-honored tradition, acceptable practice in Abram’s time. It would hardly be contested by his relatives in Charan. However, it resulted in a very painful domestic situation. When tensions became too high for peace between Hagar and Sarai, Hagar was dismissed. The flight of the Egyptian slave, Hagar, pregnant with a legal heir would have been viewed as scandalous. Abram was legally obliged to treat her far better than a simple slave and should have restrained his wife’s hand. Only God’s gracious intervention prevented Abram destroying the great good will he had built up with the local population.

Ishmael (“God Hears”) was born in the same year as the Coalition invasion. The events as related in the Bible overlap somewhat. Various threads are followed as separate stories because they came from different sources. Hebrews seldom rewrote narratives but saw no problem with weaving them together with editorial comments. Thirteen years after Ishmael’s birth, Jehovah instituted the rite of circumcision as a requirement for Abram and his family. While it was common in Egypt and with some Canaanites, Mesopotamians despised the practice as barbaric. Accepting this custom was yet another painful sacrifice for Abram, in more ways than one. It was to be done on the eighth day of life. For Israel, it became the day when males were presented to Jehovah and publicly named. For Abram, it was the day Jehovah changed his name to Abraham (“Father of a Multitude”). Sarai became Sarah (“Princess”).

As is typical of Jehovah, he reaffirmed yet again His intentions via His covenant with Abraham. We do well to notice the time lag between the first revelation of that promise of an heir at age 75 and the final birth of that heir at 100. That's a quarter-century just for the first part of the promise. Abraham never did see the possession of the land in his lifetime, yet learned to regard that future promise as truth and act as though it were present possession. That no one else living in the land knew of it was a small matter.

2.4: Abraham, Sodom and Abimelech

Genesis 18-19 – For Abraham, now a century old, life was to become more pleasant. As his faith grew, his understanding and acceptance of Jehovah's plans put him less often in conflict with His purpose. Abraham laughed in marvel that Jehovah would give him a son at his age. His prayer for Ishmael, though misguided, was nevertheless answered in the affirmative. Three times in one year Jehovah visited Abraham. Even Sarah laughed, though in scorn.

She did so on the day Jehovah set for the final test of Sodom and Gomorrah, in 2067 BC. Abraham recognized the visitors immediately as emissaries of Jehovah. He reacted as a vassal to his Sovereign, lavishing his best on the visitors. During this visit, not only did Jehovah promise to bring about the birth of a legitimate heir for Abraham, He also included him in His counsel. Following normal protocol, Abraham prayed for reasonable limits on the extermination of the Pentapolis residents.

Lot, too, followed the customs of his people. While not a party to the Covenant, it is safe to assume Lot was generally as righteous as Abraham, especially in contrast to the Canaanites. Unlike the native Sodomites, he offered hospitality to the visitors. He probably did so all the more knowing who they were and how the Sodomites would behave. We are not told the reason why Lot had moved into the city. It is implied he did so out of a lack of commitment, which in turn was due to the apparent lack of calling, or at least lacking a sense of calling.

The sordid episode that followed served to explain to the Hebrew readers that the cataclysm in the Pentapolis was not a simple accident of nature. There were certainly natural elements involved, though. The seismic activity of the area, combined with the volatile mix of free sulfur and petroleum, was a disaster waiting to happen. Thus, a simple volcanic earthquake became a massive explosion. Super-heated salts and rock would have been thrown miles into the air to rain back down as flaming hail. As late as 2056 BC (nine years later), after-shocks and subsequent explosions still rocked the area.

All life and soil fertility in the area was extinguished, except for Lot and his daughters. They eventually hid in the caves high up the eastern side of the Rift Valley. Even in this escape, Lot manifested some of the immoral character of the Sodomites, though his culpability is somewhat assuaged by his daughters' determination. His daughters gave birth to boys, Moab ("From Father") and Ben-ammi ("Son of My People"). Thus, the Hebrew authors explain the genesis of two enemy nations: Moab and Ammon, who would later hold the eastern heights of the Lower Jordan Valley and of the Dead Sea.

The most obvious lesson is that sin can have far-reaching consequences that no one can predict. While we are properly loath to oppress another with our personal sense of right and wrong,

there are some kinds of sin which can never be seen as merely a personal choice. The gross immorality of one generation can become multiplied to the detriment of numerous generations to come. It's a contagion of immense proportions.

Genesis 20-21 – There's no doubt Abraham saw the destruction of the Pentapolis from the heights west of the Dead Sea. The disaster in the valley probably released a large amount of pollutants in the air. This may help explain Abraham's move downslope toward the Mediterranean Coast, after a stay in the south.

He had not yet learned from his experience in Egypt simply to trust Jehovah's protection. He committed the same lie to the local king, whose title was Abimelech ("Royal Father"). Once again, the pagan ruler is more honorable than the servant of Jehovah. Abimelech acted from the same customs as the Egyptians, seeking alliance with a very powerful prince. Both a dream and a plague of infertility in the royal household came to the king. His reaction to this was also similar to Pharaoh's, except that he offered to Abraham protected residence anywhere in his domain.

It was there in the lands of Abimelech that Isaac ("Laughter") was born. At age 16, Ishmael was afflicted with the same attitude as his mother. He harassed his younger half-brother without mercy. Abraham defied custom in sending Ishmael away from his inheritance. Sent away a second time, Hagar headed in the same direction as the last time she fled Abraham's household, toward her homeland in Egypt. She had barely managed to get 15 miles (24 kilometers) before she despaired of finding the Way of Shur, which ran nearby. After her miraculous rescue, she changed her mind about her final destination, and raised her son in the east central area of the Sinai Peninsula.

Abimelech tried another tack at allying himself with Abraham. He brought along Phicol ("Mouth of All" a title meaning commander of troops) and proposed a covenant. The servants of Abimelech were not as enthusiastic as their lord about the presence of such a powerful foreigner. They quarreled with Abraham's servants over water rights. They drove his household up into the edge of the highlands. This is the same area where Hagar and Ishmael had gotten lost. It may have been the same well, but at last Abraham found water for which he wouldn't have to fight. He was probably on the fringe of, or beyond, the perceived land holdings of Abimelech.

Yet, acting in good faith, they agreed to solemnify the covenant in a ceremony which gave Abraham unquestioned control of a well belonging ostensibly to Abimelech. They swore an oath on seven things ("to seven oneself") – thus, the name of the well, Beersheba ("The Well of Sevens"). The scribe recording this narrative used a contextual reference to "Philistines" to identify Abraham's location. The people later known as Philistines did not arrive in Palestine before 1200 BC, some 800 years after Abraham. This was not deceptive, but a common practice for Hebrew literature.

As far as the biblical record, this is the last time Abraham fails a major test of faith. His final test he passes with flying colors.

2.5: Abraham's Final Days

Genesis 22-24 – There were several factors in Jehovah's final test of Abraham. Child sacrifice was common among the Canaanites. Indeed, Mount Moriah ("Son of God") was later the Temple Mount, yet stood above the awful shrine of Molech, which lay in the Hinnom Valley. Worship of the god Molech ("King") included tossing children into the arms of his statue, which was formed on a large bronze oven. It's no wonder the Israelites later defiled this valley as a garbage dump, known in the New Testament as *Gehenna*. The peak of Mount Moriah was just above Salem, Melchizedek's city. From his home in Beersheba, Abraham traveled the 50 miles (80 km) there to offer his son as a whole burnt offering. The writer of the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews states that Abraham had by this time enough confidence in Jehovah to believe Isaac could be resurrected (11:17-19).

On the heels of this pivotal event, Abraham received word that his brother's household in Charan was growing. It would be important good news in his determination to carry out his part of the covenant with Jehovah. This was followed in turn by the sadness of Sarah's death. Abraham had been living near the site of Hebron again for quite some years. By this time, the Amorites had been displaced by Hittites ("Sons of Heth"). They would later conquer much of the Fertile Crescent in force during Israel's sojourn in Egypt.

After the days of mourning for Sarah, Abraham came before the local ruling council of the Hittites to buy a burial place. Had he had accepted the offer to use the land without purchasing it, he would have been subject to feudal obligations to the owner. Ephron ("Fawnlike") would have greatly benefited from having a powerful prince like Abraham in his service. This service would have included participation in the worship of Ephron's household deities. Abraham dared not accept those terms. He embarrassed Ephron into selling a piece of land with little agricultural value. The whole transaction follows known Hittite customs, including the use of local currency and the mention of trees. It was thus necessary for Abraham to buy real estate in the land promised to his descendants.

Before his own burial in the Cave of Machpelah ("Fold" as in cloth), Abraham had to ensure Isaac didn't marry locally. Lot's experience illustrated the necessity of this. Abraham forced Eliezer to swear a powerful oath, signified by placing the servant's hand under his master's thigh. Eliezer thus left his entire household hostage during his absence, expecting their slaughter at the hands of Isaac if he proved disloyal in this mission. The servant had no trouble acting according to the customs of his former homeland. Rebekah's generous offer to water his camels was no mean feat. Each camel could drink as much as 30 gallons (113 liters) and there were ten of them. He gave her very fancy jewelry there at the well. To her family he offered very precious and rare gifts, to seal the betrothal and to demonstrate his master's worthiness. Waiting to eat until after relating his business was customary, as well as their asking Rebekah ("Fettering" as by her beauty) her wishes.

At this point, Isaac becomes the focus of the story. Dispatching Eliezer was Abraham's last official act as head of the household before vesting Isaac with that authority. Eliezer returns to a new master. While we see much less of the face-to-face interaction between Jehovah and Isaac, he nonetheless inherits the full Covenant promises from his father.

2.6: Isaac

Genesis 25-27 – On the long trip home, it would have been customary for Eliezer to describe to Rebekah the virtues and exploits of her future husband. He would have also brought out a new gift for her now and then, reminding him of another tale, to help build her anticipation and to keep her in high spirits. As they approached the Negev, where Isaac had moved the household, she easily guessed his identity. He had been out in the fields mourning his mother, Sarah. His grief was somewhat assuaged by his bride, whom he placed in the position of authority as mistress of the household. This was signified by giving Rebekah Sarah's accommodations.

The Hebrew scribe inserts a couple of genealogical accounts. The final note in Abraham's life was that he had remarried and had more sons. He also had concubines who had sons. In obedience to Jehovah's plan, these sons were sent away, to become the East Arabian tribes. Ishmael's descendants settled the Sinai Peninsula and northwest Arabia. Then begins afresh the stories of Isaac.

When Isaac was 40 years old, in 2026 BC, his wife gave birth to the twins Esau ("Palpable" due to a rough texture) and Jacob ("Heel Catcher"). They are so named due to the circumstances of their birth. The descriptions portend their personalities. These personalities are established quickly by the story of the birthright. Jacob is smooth in more ways than one. All the more so, since his domestic ways pleased his mother. He was the proverbial Mamma's Boy. As the second-born, he would have inherited one-third of his father's estate. Rough and ready Esau was his father's favorite, in spite of his crude sense of values. He would have inherited two-thirds of Isaac's estate. All of this he traded away for a meal of red-bean stew and bread, simply because he was hungry at the moment. It proved he placed no great value on his birthright as an abstract concept.

Meanwhile, Isaac seems to have learned from some of his father's mistakes. He stayed in the Promised Land in spite of the famine. He simply moved down to the coast, into Abimelech's territory. The Hebrew scribe again uses the term "Philistines" to denote the geographic region. What Isaac failed to learn about was deception. He lied, saying that his wife was his sister, out of fear that the local lords would kill him for her. His father had used this ploy twice, for the same reason. This Abimelech was more cautious than his father had been and spotted Isaac and Rebekah acting more like a married couple than siblings. We have no way of knowing the nature of Abimelech's fears. They were sufficient to give Isaac strong protection. Under this cover, Isaac reaped Jehovah's promised blessing in the form of a bumper crop and a dramatic increase in wealth.

Wealth was power and Isaac's power provoked fear in Abimelech's people. As with Abraham, they drove Isaac out to the edge of the kingdom. It was the same old issue of water rights. Esek ("Push" as in a quarrel) and Sitnah ("Opposition") were names that commemorated their petty insecurity. Rehoboth ("Wide" as in streets) was 20 miles (32 km) south of the upper Gerar Valley, on the edge of the Negev. Here and in Beersheba, Isaac was no longer perceived as a threat to Abimelech's people. In yet another parallel to his father's dealings with these people, Abimelech brings an entourage, including Ahuzzath ("Seized Property") the chief tax collector, to ask for a covenant of non-aggression. Abimelech exaggerated his own goodness, perhaps as a sarcastic reminder of Isaac's deception. They sealed the covenant with a ritual shared meal, the

universal symbol of peace. On that same day, Isaac's servants re-excavate Abraham's Well of Sevens (Beersheba) and Isaac gives it the same name.

To further demonstrate that he was not a fit heir of the Covenant, Esau married local Hittite nobility. This was a clear violation of Jehovah's prohibition against mixing with the resident population. In spite of this, Isaac was determined to invest the Covenant blessing in his first-born, something that should have gone with the birthright. The account demonstrates Isaac's foolishness in doting on Esau. Jacob was no hero of righteousness, but he at least had potential. Esau was utterly hopeless, manifesting symptoms of psychopathy. It's hard to judge whether Rebekah was motivated by faith in the prophecy of which son was Jehovah's chosen, or that she simply doted on her own favorite. Perhaps it was both. She clearly knew how to play on her husband's carnal lust for barbecued venison and his failing senses. She also knew how to keep an eye on Esau, foiling his murderous plans for Jacob. By reminding Isaac of their mutual disgust over Esau's choice of brides, she prompts him to perform his duty to send the new Heir of the Covenant back to her homeland to marry. Furthermore, the only one permitted by custom to execute Jacob for his deception in the matter of the blessing was Isaac himself. Semitic morality doesn't permit farming out one's corrective authority, but requires the elder to get off the fence and act one way or the other. Since Isaac was unwilling to correct, he was obligated to protect his heir by sending him to safety.

It would be unfair to say Isaac was not a good and righteous man. His behavior was more obedient than that of his father, Abraham. Yet, he was but a man and still bore the mark of the Fall. Still, human failings cannot frustrate the will of God. The long thread of redemption continues.

2.7: Jacob

Genesis 28-30 – We are not told what happens to Jacob's material inheritance while he is gone. He took very little with him. Yet, it would be unthinkable for Isaac to send his heir off with only a knapsack. It is therefore reasonable to assume that he had at least a couple of beasts of burden and perhaps a servant or two. We do know that Jacob did not carry the customary bridal gifts, such as Eliezer exchanged for Rebekah. That would have taken too long to gather. Jacob was hastily fleeing a confrontation for which he was ill-equipped. What he needed was the journey itself, a long route to manhood.

Traveling lightly, Jacob would have made the fifty miles (80 km) or so to the city of Luz in two or three days. His vision there was the beginning of a long, hard struggle to become Jehovah's man. His shallow commitment at the time was provisionally accepted. Jehovah alone can judge the sincerity of a man's commitment and what He accepts from him. To mark the event, Jacob set up a stone pillar. This would be any naturally occurring rock that so much as vaguely suggested a pillar. The commemorative pillar would not have been large, but it would have been recognized by any passer-by for what it was. Such stones are seldom left standing by natural forces; the seasoned olive oil coating on it was used in numerous religious rituals.

We aren't given the time frame for his arriving in what is today Northern Syria. Jacob's queries of the shepherds would have been typical of that day. Flocks were normally gathered at dusk for protective purposes, so gathering them at midday puzzled Jacob. The well was probably the

only source of water in that area. From the context, it seems to have been a matter of the stone cover's size and weight that necessitated the gathering of several flocks in order to water them. Shepherds worked virtually alone, so it would take several people to move a large protective cover. Jacob felt joy and relief at finding so quickly a member of his kin, as well as being thrilled with her beauty. Together, these feelings provoked him to remove the stone cover over the well and bring up enough water for the flock of sheep Rachel was tending. Thus, we have an odd reversal of Eliezer's experience in finding Rebekah.

Jacob's uncle Laban welcomed him with open arms, and then promptly began to prove a far greater schemer than Jacob ever dreamed of being. Laban's claim of custom dictating the marriage of the elder daughter is not supported by archaeological evidence. We have a wealth of knowledge on the marriage customs of that place and time, so we can take it as a lie. This was simply a ruse by Laban to dispose of an unattractive daughter, for whom there was little hope of finding local suitors. After seeing what a circus this family became, we little wonder that the Law of Moses prohibited a man marrying sisters while both lived. The mention of mandrakes reflects the silliness of the sisters jockeying for position. Mandrakes were a yellow plum-like wild fruit, commonly referred to as "love apples," ripening in May when wheat was ready to harvest. It was believed they had magical powers to improve fertility. Oddly enough, it was Leah who got pregnant, after she traded them away. Jehovah was not impressed with the mandrakes.

Laban also practiced magic: divination, through his household gods. Yet it took no revelation from demons for him to know that he prospered at the hands of Jacob. As Laban's victim, Jacob was learning to trust Jehovah to keep the covenant they made at Bethel, now fourteen years past. He boldly offered to accept the smallest share of the herds by coloring. Sheep were normally all white and goats were black. Exceptions were rare. Such a choice guaranteed Laban could not cheat Jacob of his wages. At least, so Jacob thought. Laban immediately directed his sons to drive all such animals in a herd roughly fifty miles (80 km) away. This would minimize their presence in the gene-pool. Acting on a revelation from Jehovah, which came in a dream, Jacob used prenatal influence on the healthier sheep and goats, a practice that is known today to be somewhat effective; all the more so with Jehovah's divine support of moral justice.

Few men of the Covenant lineage were as morally and ethically challenged as the scheming Jacob. Yet we see the miraculous power of God at work in the man's heart, taming the selfish impulses. The change is nothing less than dramatic. Notice the image of manhood isn't raw power or skill, but moral justice that gives him the courage and authority to stand tall.

Genesis 31-36 – After seven years of this genetic manipulation of Laban's herds, Jacob was quite wealthy. Things were tense between his and his uncle's households. Jehovah came in a dream to tell Jacob it was time to go home. Foregoing the usual formalities to avoid further efforts by Laban to detain him, Jacob simply fled Paddan-aram ("High Plains"). His wives went willingly, in part because Laban neglected to give them the customary bridal share of his wealth. Rachel was not content to simply leave; she took her father's household idols (*teraphim*). Possession of these would mark Jacob as the legal heir to Laban's household. It was no doubt this that was Laban's real concern in pursuing Jacob.

Hastily departing the sheep-shearing festival with his armed men, Laban caught up with Jacob

in the hills of Gilead, some 300 miles (480 km) away. His violent intent blunted by a warning from Jehovah, Laban was left with bluster and threats. Rachel's wicker camel saddle was a convenient hiding place from his search, not to mention quite comfortable for just sitting. She knew Laban would be loath to touch a woman in menses, or anything on which she was sitting. Relieved that Laban found nothing, Jacob was in a position to deliver his own sharp rebuke. With no leverage, Laban settled for a covenant that would prevent Jacob avenging his mistreatment. It was sealed with a ritual peace meal and a monument to represent Jehovah as the sentry blocking the path of retribution. Laban departed, his schemes finally defeated.

Meeting Esau was the final test of Jacob's moral character. While he was not above deceiving Esau about his intentions, Jacob was able to trust Jehovah for the outcome. His savvy preparations for the worst shows he was resigned to a bad ending, trying to reduce his losses to a minimum. The theophany wrestling match indicates how far Jacob had come since his last dealings with his brother. It was common for lords to give new names to their servants, usually to indicate recognition of some newly earned respect, or to mark a promotion. Jacob's new name, Israel ("Prevails with God"), indicated a complete change in character, as well. The new names Israel gave to the places along the way, to mark pivotal events, traced his path down the Jabbok River. Mahanaim ("Two Camps") is half-way up the Jabbok Valley, Peniel or Penuel ("Face of God") farther down and Succoth ("Tents") at the mouth, where the river flowed into the Jordan. His brother Esau had made his home in the old Hurrian Kingdom southeast of the Dead Sea. Because of his nickname, Edom, the region is known by that name, as well as by the name Mount Seir, or simply Seir. The area was also known for predominant red sandstone. In the New Testament, the descendants of Esau were known by their Roman name, Idumaeans, derived from Edom.

Israel's sons seemed to have learned some of his previously deceptive ways. Israel wisely made peace with the local powers by purchasing land Jehovah had promised that his descendants would inherit. Two of his sons arrogantly butchered the whole male population and plundered the city as well. It is noteworthy that this crime forfeited their standing as second and third in line to inherit their father's throne as grand sheikh. Indeed, their actions threatened to provoke the demise of their entire household. At Jehovah's prompting, Israel moved his small kingdom south to Bethel. Eventually, he moved farther south to Ephrath, later known as Bethlehem. On the way, he lost Rachel in childbirth. With the birth of this last of his twelve sons, the Hebrew scribe inserts a list of those sons in birth-order. Mentioned in passing is Reuben's trespass on his father's harem, forfeiting his rights as first-born. This shift of the birthright was not formally announced until Israel was on his death bed. The passing of Isaac is noted. The records of Esau's descendants and those of the Hurrians (Horites) with whom he lived, follow that.

No effort is made to hide the sinful acts of the main characters. Indeed, much of the story centers on showing how much they were changed by living under the law portion of Abraham's Covenant. More than just the maturity of becoming a man, or the wisdom of aging, this is the Omniscient hand of God at work in forming the character of each man to pass on the obligations of the covenant. Again, fallen man cannot frustrate the plans of God.

2.8: Joseph

Genesis 37-50 – While there is no condemnation for having a clear favorite among his sons, we see that Israel nonetheless suffers much for it. The expensive, ankle-length robe appears to have been a symbol of Israel's intention of making Joseph his prime heir. Somewhere between a native lack of character and Israel's failure to teach them better, his older sons continued to display immoral behavior. In the face of the constant provocation from Joseph, the Dreamer, they first conspired to murder him. Scarcely to their credit, they sold him into slavery instead. Only Reuben acted responsibly, in planning to secretly rescue his little brother. Judah's inspiration to sell him to their relatives, the Ishmaelites and Midianites, was hardly for the money. It was a convenient and bloodless way to get rid of him. The caravan route was within hailing distance. Rather than starvation at the bottom of a dry water storage pit, Israel's favorite son faced a life of slavery. Slavery itself was not the issue, as it served the same function as modern prison confinement; it was wholly unjustified in this case. As the eldest, Reuben was still responsible for his siblings' welfare, but he took the coward's way out. The cover story was sufficient to deceive the old deceiver, their father.

The inserted tale of Judah's misadventures serves as a further contrast to Joseph's moral uprightness. The custom of a surviving sibling impregnating his deceased brother's wife was to preserve the dead brother's share of the estate. Onan's refusal was likely based on greed over Er's assets. Onan stood to gain in a redistribution of Er's double portion if he failed to produce sons in his brother's name. He may also have resented being saddled with a wife not his own choosing. He would have had to provide for her and her children along with his own. Onan joined his elder brother in tasting Jehovah's displeasure. Sons of their father, Judah was little better. He neglected his promise and was himself deceived. It was the custom for a Canaanite temple prostitute to hide her face, to preserve the notion that her customers were focused on worshiping Astarte, whom she served. A man of wealth and power like Judah would have had an official seal— usually a small cylinder-shaped object, carved so that rolling it in soft clay left a unique mark representing the signature of its owner. It would have hung on a cord of better material, perhaps a family color, to be worn around the neck. Some translations of the Bible choose alternative terms more fitting to a later period in history: signet ring and bracelet. The staff was a shepherd's crook, the ubiquitous symbol of power in that part of the world, bearing unique markings to identify the owner. Indeed, the word for staff also means one's tribe or clan.

By the time Joseph arrived in Egypt, around 1800 BC, the native pharaohs would have delegated important royal functions to the nobility. This was a political necessity, since it was they who maintained his position. His presumed divinity was an imperfect protection. *Potiphar* is an Egyptian title that seems to mean "Chief Slaughterer," perhaps in charge of providing meat for Pharaoh's sacred table. Joseph was so upright in his service that he was quickly promoted to chief steward, or manager, of Potiphar's entire household, including the details of his service to Pharaoh.

Egyptian records of that period, the XII Dynasty, support the precedent of foreigners in high positions. Even as a prisoner, falsely accused, Joseph remained true to Jehovah's standards, quite the opposite of his brothers. He served faithfully as the prison trustee. As a result, Jehovah prospered everything he touched, and he was talented in dream analysis. One of Pharaoh's

customs was, on the anniversary of his ascension to the throne (his “divine birthday”), to selectively pardon some of his failed servants. In belatedly keeping his promise, two years after his release from prison, the Chief Butler recommended Joseph to interpret Pharaoh’s perplexing dreams. The royal magicians and priests would have searched an extensive collection of dream analysis texts, dating back more than a millennium. This time they searched in vain. When it was Joseph’s turn, the court attendants made some hurried changes in Joseph’s appearance. It was customary for anyone entering Pharaoh’s divine presence to have his head shaved and to be dressed in white linen. Joseph’s analysis of the dreams was too obviously correct, his advice too wise, for him to serve anywhere below Viceroy of Egypt.

With his promotion, Joseph received the native name *Zaphenath-paa’neah*, implying that he was the voice of God. No doubt Pharaoh associated Joseph’s Jehovah with On, the god of the sun, at that time the chief deity of the Nile Valley. Thirteen years after arriving as a slave, Joseph now ruled Egypt as Pharaoh’s prime minister. He was in a perfect position to save his family back in Canaan from the impending famine. While famines in this part of the world were not rare, ones so protracted and widespread were. By this time, the population of Egypt was sufficient to make extended droughts a serious problem, despite the proximity of the Nile River. Even the Nile could be reduced to a mere trickle by comparison to its normal flow. Foreigners from nearby lands seeking to buy grain would only increase the pressure on resources. An additional duty of Joseph’s was Granary Steward. It was his duty to collect and rotate the annual surplus from the fat years, so that there would be plenty in the lean years. He was also responsible for balancing the need to feed Egyptians first against the need to boost Pharaoh’s power and prestige by trading the excess grain to foreigners.

Pharaoh’s court ruled on the basis of presumed divinity, with everything in his service bearing pagan religious overtones. With Joseph appearing so totally Egyptian, apparently with Jehovah’s permission to engage in some of the pagan practices, his brothers never recognized him. An Egyptian noble would have maintained a ritual purity by putting as much distance as possible between himself and these unholy foreign visitors. Even when he knew the language they used, he would engage an interpreter rather than speak directly to them. The Hebrew scribe makes mention of this policy in regard to the shared meal. Once Joseph had ascertained their repentance for past wrongs, he was able to reveal himself to them.

The entire account of Joseph is one of the better literary pieces in the Pentateuch. The details match known customs of the XII Dynasty and much of the story is structured according to the same customs. Pharaoh’s grant of Goshen was easy for him; though rich pasture lands, it was away from the irrigation canals and unfit for the sacred Nile-centered agriculture of the Egyptians. It was also quite distant from his capital in Thebes, which sat far to the south of the Nile Delta. Thus, he gained a strong ally as a buffer on the northeast, his weakest border. At the same time, it cost him almost nothing. Under Joseph’s administration, Pharaoh gained full feudal ownership of all but the priestly estates. The instability, the rather fragile position of Pharaoh, witnessed by Abraham much earlier on his visit to Egypt was resolved in Pharaoh’s favor. We are allowed to see that the elder brothers of Joseph finally rise to Jehovah’s standards. At the same time, Israel’s prophetic utterances over them serve to reveal the unmitigated character flaws of some. He promotes Joseph’s sons as his own, giving them an equal share in

the birthright. Judah is formally given the status of first-born. Yet his brothers still recognized Joseph's very real power over them. They were certainly safe during their father's lifetime. After Israel's funeral, they threw themselves on Joseph's mercy and learned that he had never intended them harm. The moral justice that powered his rise to power also protected them.

Recent archaeological digs in Egypt have uncovered what we believed was Joseph's retirement villa, in the midst of a large settlement in Goshen. Graves nearby are purely Asiatic (as opposed to Egyptian), including one for an Asiatic nobleman. On the rubble of this villa was built the *Hyksos* palace. The *Hyksos* (Egyptian for "Foreign Rulers") arrived shortly after 1700 BC from Syria and developed a strong presence in the East Delta region. From this power base, they eventually conquered Egypt and took the place of the native ruling elite. Having adopted the bulk of Egyptian culture, they were referred to as "Egyptian" in contemporary records.

The *Hyksos* altered a few cultural details in Egypt. For example, they instituted the practice of using the Pharaoh's personal name in written records, but not those of vanquished enemies. They also introduced the horse-drawn chariots and bronze weapons, which enabled their conquest in the first place. Thus, pretending to be true Egyptians, chosen by the Nile gods to rule, they clearly distinguished themselves from the native regime of their predecessors. It has proven exceptionally difficult for historians to determine if it was they or a later regime that enslaved the Hebrew people. No one of several suppositions adequately answers all the difficulties. 1 Kings 6:1 places the Exodus 480 years prior to Solomon's 4th year of reign, known to be around 967 BC. This puts the Exodus around 1447 BC. Based on this internal evidence from Scripture, we will assume here that the pharaoh of enslavement was *Hyksos*, but that the enslavement was continued after they were expelled.

As a further note, much of what we know in the Ancient Near East is dated from the basis of Egyptian history. It is quite possible the currently accepted system of dating for Egypt is a house of cards, ready to collapse with the next archaeological discovery. Already, there have been credible scholars challenging the system. While we use the accepted timeline for these lessons, nothing important here requires that system to be accurate.

3. Exodus: 1527-1406 BC

3.1: Israel Enslaved

Exodus 1 – According to the text, the Hebrew nation had stayed in Goshen 430 years (Exodus 12:40). During that time, as we saw in the last lesson, the *Hyksos* arrived and took over Egypt. We are assuming it is they who enslaved the Hebrews. Israel had become rather favored by the native Egyptians of the Old Kingdom. The nation of Israel had become large enough to present a military threat in the new seat of *Hyksos* power. The preventive measure was to subject them to harsh slavery in the great building projects typical of monarchies throughout history. While this slavery included a host of agricultural tasks, as well, the focus was on the brick making that dominated their workload. The Hebrew scribe calls the cities built from these bricks by the later names Pithom and Raamses. This latter was the site of the *Hyksos* capital, which they called Avaris (also known as Zoan or Tanis).

Typically, enslaved nations were assigned some task on the basis of a production quota. The management for this assignment was likely drawn from the subjugated native Egyptians. These royal works managers were held directly responsible for the quota and were punished for falling short. They were thus, in turn, encouraged to punish their charges in like manner. Archaeology has revealed that these royal works projects could be extremely harsh. For example, the royal bakers spent their days in a smoke-filled oven-house, and probably died early from lung disease. The *Hyksos* sought to drive a wedge between the native Egyptian population and the Hebrews, to prevent these long-time allies from combining to overthrow the Asiatic invaders.

Never totally dominating the Southern or Upper Nile, there were several wars fought between the *Hyksos* and old native nobility based there. Eventually, an army led by a prince defeated them and drove them out, in about 1570 BC. He took the throne as Ahmosis I, and apparently continued the enslavement policy for the Hebrews. It seems he used them to destroy the old *Hyksos* cities, and to in turn rebuild the temples from the Old Kingdom destroyed by the *Hyksos*. Since there was no change in their treatment, there is little wonder that the text doesn't mention the change of regimes.

All this sad state of affairs for Israel was a clear fulfillment of the prophecy Jehovah hinted at in His Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:17). The torch and oven was to show that while things would be incredibly harsh (the oven) it would bring about a starkly clear revelation (the torch) of God's new covenant with the nation of Israel.

Exodus 2:1-15 – The Hebrews would have been careful to maintain a distinct national identity during their time in the East Nile Delta Region. The early necessity for the Egyptians to remain aloof from these wandering sheep herders encouraged the Hebrews to develop a distinctive culture around the devotion to Jehovah, handed down from the patriarchs. The substance would be a larger understanding of Noah's Law through Abraham's Covenant. While their rituals would have been based on ancient Semitic customs, it would have become quite ingrained by that time. It no doubt included taking note of the patriarchal aversion to mixing with primitive pagans. Israel was not entirely free of pagan elements, as we learn from later biblical texts (Amos 5:25-26; Acts 7:39-43). Yet, they were clearly distinct and identifiable to the *Hyksos*.

It's important to understand the *Hyksos* were the invader ruling class over the native Egyptians. The surviving Egyptian nobles formed the middling class of imperial administration. They were still rather friendly with Israel on the whole, due to being saved from famine by Joseph.

The harsh oppression by the *Hyksos* did not serve to reduce Israel's population, as would be expected. It seems only to have accelerated their growth rate. There was no help for the rulers from the native midwives, either. In exasperation, the new Pharaoh resorted to male infanticide. This created the circumstances that brought about Moses' unique upbringing. His parents couldn't bear to carry out the royal edict to toss him into the Nile as an offering to the pagan gods. After it was no longer possible to hide him, his mother half obeyed the command by setting him adrift on the Nile in a watertight wicker basket. His elder sister was set to watch his fate. Her offer of finding for the *Hyksos* princess a wet-nurse among the Hebrews guaranteed he would know of his Hebrew heritage and his own family. Weaning would have been between

the ages of three and five, quite likely closer to the latter.

Thutmos I was on the throne at that time. Maintaining the old Nile-centered religion, his daughter Hatshepsut would have gone daily to the river as an act of worship. Though she recognized him as a Hebrew baby, she must have taken Moses as a gift from the Nile gods. The name Moses (*Moshe*) means “Son” in Egyptian and “He draws them out” in Hebrew. Thus, Hatshepsut unknowingly prophesied his future. She was neither the first nor the last Egyptian princess to raise a foreigner in the royal household. As an adopted son of royalty, he would have been highly educated and trained in leadership and warfare.

For a while, Moses’ adoptive mother ruled Egypt. She was co-regent with her husband, then Queen-regent after he died, while her stepson was yet too young to rule. With the support of the nobility, she had herself declared Pharaoh and donned a false beard in public to keep up the appearances of a male-dominated society. Her stepson, Thutmose III, titular ruler from 1504, never gained complete control until she died in 1482 BC.

The Bible states the reason for Moses’ flight from Egypt as the murder of a low-ranking Egyptian official. That appears to have been merely the official reason. There is credible evidence that Moses had been the general in command of a large expedition to the south, into Ethiopia, to conquer an invading army that had already won one battle against the Egyptians. His success may have brought popular rumblings of making Moses the next Pharaoh. At the very least, as a presumed supporter of his adoptive mother’s rule, he would have been an enemy to the supporters of Thutmose in his rival claim to the throne against Hatshepsut. The killing may also have represented an act of rebellion against the younger ruler, a signal of his intent to deliver the Hebrews according to the means of intrigue and warfare he had learned at court. It would seem Moses meant to give a signal to the Hebrew people, but to have kept it a secret from Thutmose.

This would have been the typical human approach and not in itself especially sinful. However, this would have made Moses the hero, not God. Clearly, it is in all Creation’s best interest for God to get the glory, not any created being. Therefore, God aborted this man-centered attempt. Moses had so very much to learn before he was ready to be God’s man. Yet, when it was all done God’s way, it secured Moses’ place in human history as nothing else could have done.

3.2: Moses versus Pharaoh

Exodus 2:16-4:31 – Moses fled in 1487 BC at about the age of 40. He took up with the Midianites, the descendants of Abraham through Ketura. Looking every bit the Egyptian nobleman and warrior, he was able to protect the tribal priest’s daughters from rough treatment at the hands of male shepherds. Such a man would make a welcome addition to Jethro’s (“His Excellency”) household, which was apparently devoid of male heirs. He spent the next 40 years as a shepherd, married to Jethro’s daughter Zipporah (“Bird”). He named their son Gershom (“A Stranger Here”) to remind him he didn’t belong to these people. The years had changed the sophisticated Egyptian nobleman into what Abraham had been, a wandering Amorite sheep herder with a highly civilized background. He was no doubt grown accustomed to his situation. It was then he met Jehovah in the Burning Bush. We have to keep in mind any glow in ancient times was associated with fire, so Glowing Bush might be more accurate, if less poetic.

Thutmose III had died in 1450 BC, replaced by his son Ahmenhotep II. He was apparently worse than ever in his abuse of the Hebrew people. His father had conquered a vast empire, stretching as far north as Syria, and as far south as Ethiopia. His mighty army was legendary for crushing all in its path. His economic control reached even farther. Ahmenhotep inherited a Theban court filled with exotic delights, unparalleled wealth and power – every reason in the world for monumental arrogance. Against this, Jehovah had called Moses to stand before Pharaoh and demand the release of the Hebrew people, with only a shepherd's staff and his elder brother as spokesman.

That the shepherd's crook was an ancient symbol of power in Egypt was not lost on Moses or on Ahmenhotep, despite the Egyptian distaste for sheep herding since before the days of the Old Kingdom, beginning around 3100 BC. To carry that staff would have been an open insult to Pharaoh and a challenge to his authority. It would have re-opened the wounds of unforgotten rivalry between two political camps among the power elite of Egypt. Moses was uniquely able to bridge the gap between the pastoral life Jehovah had in mind for the Hebrew people and the inner workings of the Imperial Court. He had an equal number of years in each setting. Jehovah repeatedly promised to humble the arrogant Ahmenhotep. At the same time, He warned Moses that it would not come without an extended conflict, one that would make things worse for the Hebrews before it was over. Yet, it would all be done with Moses playing only the role of emissary. This was a far cry from the role he sought to play before fleeing Egypt.

Having been promised that his old antagonists were dead and gone, Moses gained release from Jethro's service. On the way to Egypt, a visit from Jehovah served as a stark reminder of the seriousness of his mission, and of the necessity for strict obedience. Given that the best land route from Midian to Egypt then went around past Mt. Sinai, it served as the half-way point where Moses and Aaron met. There, and again in the presence of the Hebrew elders, Moses demonstrated the miraculous signs Jehovah had given him. Seeing these miracles and hearing Moses' promises raised great hopes in the Hebrews. They had not forgotten that this was the man who all but ruled Egypt. Those hopes were promptly dashed when Pharaoh responded by making their brick production more difficult. Moses himself suffered the same emotional roller-coaster ride.

In our tightly scheduled modern life, we would find the ancient Semitic concept of time completely foreign. While we impatiently do everything in a hurry, they would have defined a different pace for different activities. In many cases, time was not a factor at all. For this reason, we get a poor sense of the passage of time from the text. Pharaoh's court was traditionally at Thebes, some 300 miles (480 km) south of Goshen. While Pharaoh may have set up court temporarily at various places throughout his empire, we have no way of knowing how often Moses and Aaron had to travel the full distance between the Nile Delta and the old capital far upriver. It is quite likely that they spent more time near the imperial court than in the delta. It appears the Ten Plagues occurred within roughly one year. Further, Moses actually spoke not at all in public. Aaron was his voice and often the one to perform the ceremonial acts for each miracle.

Given that the sort of details we take for granted today are missing from the account, we wonder why Ahmenhotep didn't simply kill the two troublemakers and be done with it. We

lack sufficient data, but it seems probable there remained too much political weight attached to Moses for Pharaoh to act with such haste. Further, it seems Pharaoh wanted to demonstrate his contempt by showing how little of a threat he saw in Moses.

3.3: The Plagues on Egypt

Exodus 5-9 – With each confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh raised the ante. At first, the court magicians were able to duplicate Moses' miracles. This made Pharaoh bold in rejecting Jehovah's demands. When the plagues went beyond the magicians' abilities, Pharaoh would surrender a little ground. As soon as relief came, his reflexes would reassert themselves and again he would reject the demands. With each new plague, Moses would present an increased demand. Each plague was representative of a strike at the various deities worshipped in Egypt. Religion and politics were inextricably bound together in the ancient world. On another level, each curse was a grand extension of something occurring naturally there.

Turning the Nile to blood was similar to the annual red silting that lasted up to three months during the flood season, beginning in late June. The water remained drinkable during the flood season. In this case, though, it was undrinkable. It was not confined to the river, but all water in the land, even in storage containers. Finally, it lasted only seven days. This would be a slap at the two gods *Khnum*, Giver of the Nile, and *Sothis*, Lord of the Seasonal Flood.

The second plague was a severe imbalance in the natural Nile ecosystem. Frogs were a symbol of the primordial goddess *Heket*. They were normally thick after the flood season, but never bad enough to invade every house in Egypt. While the magicians could duplicate this, their magic could not reduce the plague any. Moses allowed Pharaoh to choose the time of the frogs' removal, to show that it was not a case of Moses taking advantage of something produced by any Egyptian deity.

Various suggestions have been made as to which type of insect is described by the Hebrew word *kinnim*. It was obviously a stinging pest. In modern times, the most common culprit is the mosquito. Coming out of the earth was to signify power over *Aker*, the Earth god, at a minimum. While the magicians retired from the contest in disgrace, this was not enough of a nuisance to impress Pharaoh. The next plague built on this one, by adding a mix of different insects and intensifying their presence. It was severe enough to disrupt the economy. Further, this began the separation between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. The plagues no longer affected the people of Jehovah. This struck at *Ra*, the national god of Egypt.

When the departure of the insects brought renewed hardness of Pharaoh's attitude, there was an even greater economic disaster. All the livestock owned by Egyptians died. No domestic animal escaped the disease. Several gods and goddesses were represented by domestic animals. While there are a few likely candidates, the specific disease is not clearly identified. *Isis*, goddess of Life and Healing was unable to help here. Nor could she stop the boils. The magicians themselves became noteworthy victims. These open, weeping sores were painful, but not deadly.

Exodus 9-11 – Up to this point, practically no one died from any of the plagues. On the other hand, the hail and lightning were quite fatal. Hail is rare in Egypt. Some in Pharaoh's court

were by this point defecting from their confidence in the Egyptian deities and the gods' stamp of approval on the "divine ruler." The lightening was severe enough to be described as fire running through the hail. The specific timing showed authority over the domain of *Seth*, god of the Storm. To some degree, this and the next plague diminished *Thermutis* as goddess of Fertility and Harvest. The hail and lightening took out the flax and barley crop, nearing their harvest in February.

The plague of locust caught the only surviving crops in the land. Wheat and spelt ripen in March and were merely green sprigs during the hailstorm. Locusts plagued Syria and Palestine often, but seldom visited Egypt. When they arrived, carried on an east wind, they consumed all vestiges of green in Egypt, except in Goshen. This proved *Osiris*, god of Vegetation (among other things), could not protect the Egyptians. During the spring of each year, prevailing winds in that part of the world come more often from the southeast. The west wind that drove the locusts out to sea was quite rare.

Even rarer was the *khamsin* wind that followed it. The majority of biblical scholars agree that the description of "darkness that could be felt" was the dreaded sandstorm off the Sahara Desert. The air was hot and choking and it remained totally dark. This was a miracle of degree, for the *khamsin* seldom does more than turn the day dark orange and brown. This would bring into question the various gods of sky and sun: *Aton*, *Khepri*, *Mut*, and *Nut*.

Having been forbidden to return to court, Moses made the final trip to Goshen to prepare the Hebrews for the last plague. Even this long after Joseph, the Egyptian population in the Delta Region still held the Hebrews in high regard. At the very least, it can be assumed that they greatly supported the departure of the Hebrews for the sake of their own survival. They no doubt heard the reason for the series of disasters and that they had their Pharaoh to blame for them. This would help to explain their apparent willingness to be plundered of their treasures.

There is no natural explanation for a plague that kills only the first-born, much less one that is blocked by lamb's blood on the posts and lintel of a house. Egyptian custom forbade recording military defeats. It's no surprise this humbling series of disasters was never mentioned in Egyptian records. We do know that Ahmenhotep's first son died young, never succeeding his father to the throne.

While the primary reason God gave for going through all this was that He might humble Egypt in full view of the world, some of the plagues struck His People, as well. At first, Israel suffered as much from the plagues as everyone else. Eventually, they were protected. There would be little point in deliverance if everything they owned was destroyed. However, suffering some discomfort is simply the lot of our fallen human existence. Our inclusion in the world's suffering, or our deliverance from it, will be based on God's Laws and on His plans. It will seldom take into account our wishes or our comfort. Still, better by far to suffer at God's hands than to prosper by worldly standards while living in sin.

3.4: The Exodus

Exodus 12-18 – The institution of the Passover (more accurately translated "Sparing") ritual serves as a stark reminder of the circumstances of the Israelites' departure from Egyptian

slavery. They were literally expelled from the land and had no time to prepare the normal evening meal the night before. They were not permitted the luxury of letting their bread dough rise (to become “leavened”), which required at least a couple of hours sitting undisturbed in a warm moist place. Thus, the presence of a leavening agent became a symbol for ritual impurity, by virtue of its association with being unprepared to move at a moment’s notice by Jehovah’s command. Do not confuse this with a judgment against having a bit of luxury, as if asceticism is inherently virtuous. Nice, yeasty bread is not a sin in itself, nor is the crisp, unleavened *matzo* particularly righteous. This was one small sacrifice, a proper response for one who has been rescued from slavery. The larger picture is teaching us to loosen our grip things, to regard worldly comforts as inconsequential. It was here also that Jehovah lays claim to every male that opens the womb of every family, including the livestock. While He later takes the entire tribe of Levi into His service in exchange for the human males, there remained a requirement to acknowledge this symbolic debt by specific ritual offerings. These two rituals are the first instituted into the Hebrew religious culture.

The text refers to the nation moving “in martial array” to describe an orderly column of people, by tribes and clans, much as an army lined up in rank and file by combat units. Here we run up against one of the longest standing debates in Bible History. If the men alone numbered 600,000, they could easily have overwhelmed Pharaoh’s army, which was never larger than 20,000, by the best estimates. That many men would have meant at least two million people, counting women and children. It’s not a question whether Jehovah could have increased the population from seventy people to two million in 430 years, or if He could have led them and cared for them in that nearly barren wasteland for 40 years. It’s a question of whether the text is properly read that way. The term translated here as “1000” (*‘eleph*) was also translated as “family/clan” or as “company” (a military unit) in other places. Indeed, “family” would be more to the point in an Eastern mind. This would give us a body count of some fifty or sixty thousand, still a massive number for a hike in the desert. (See the Addenda on Hebrew numbering.)

We know they brought along herds of domestic animals and wagons of some sort. They also carried the remains of Joseph, who confidently predicted that they should be able to bury his bones in the Promised Land at some point. There was also a large contingent of folks who were not Hebrew. The first leg of their journey was from their rallying point at *Avaris* (which the scribe calls by its later name, *Raamses*), to Succoth, a distance of some 50 miles (80km). From that point it is hard to identify any of the landmarks in the text. It is quite possible that “Red Sea” is a bad translation of *Yam Suph*, which we think might have been “Reed Sea”. There are two bodies of water known to exist in ancient times that are likely candidates for that name. Both are in the path of today’s Suez Canal. In the south are the Bitter Lakes; in the north is a lake called Timsah, at times perhaps a tidewater marsh connected to the Mediterranean. Both would have been deep swampy bogs, unsuitable for travel except by means of a small, shallow-drafting boat. Either way, the progress of this massive column was observed by the Egyptian border guards. Their route gave the impression that they had no sense of direction, first southeast, then north, most likely to Lake Timsah. Giving this impression was precisely Jehovah’s announced intention, for He had determined to have one more final act of destruction to humble Pharaoh. On his part, Pharaoh could not resist one last opportunity to salvage his wounded pride.

Israel was cornered on a spot where the shore curved out into the water. Riding down on them was the pick of Pharaoh's army. At this point we begin to see the character of the Hebrew people. Various prophets would later refer to Israel as the most obstinate and contentious people on earth. In spite of all that they had seen and heard, they accused Moses of bringing them out there to die. All this time they had been following a massive vertical cloud that glowed at night. Now this cloud moved to shield them. Pharaoh was undaunted by this apparition. His troops encamped a short distance away from his former slaves, typical of an army the night before a battle. That night, while Pharaoh's vision is obscured by this glowing cloud, a dry solid path began appearing in the swamp beneath where Moses had ritually extended his shepherd's staff in accordance with Jehovah's instructions. By morning, the bog had become a hard-packed highway for Israel's escape. At dawn they had set out between two walls of water and were well on their way across the lake when the cloud moved from its overwatch position. Pharaoh promptly ordered his chariots to pursue them. Upon entering the now well-trampled path, the water returned to the lakebed and quickly made it a swamp again. The chariots bogged down, trapping the entire army until the water rose to sufficient depth to drown them. The Hebrews looked back to see the bodies of dead soldiers drifting to the far shore.

What followed served the Israelites as a crash course in nomadic living. Their querulous nature was never far from the surface. While their precise route cannot be determined, their constant whining serves as a monument to Moses' patience. Even today, the route, as well as the identity of Mount Sinai, is hotly debated. While for centuries it has been taken for granted that Jebel Musa, some 50 miles (80km) inland from the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, was the "Mountain of God," recent work has indicated a reasonable alternative just east of the Sinai, across the Gulf of Aqaba. This would have the Nation of Israel crossing the Gulf of Aqaba, instead of the Gulf of Suez. There are significant problems for us with either proposed route. Yet, more important to the narrative is how Jehovah never let His people down, though they clearly deserved to be left to die in the desert. They were provided a grain-like substance they called manna (from Hebrew *man-hu*: "what is it?"), and quail, which migrated in flocks but a few feet (1-2 meters) off the ground. Water came from various sources, including a rock. Even in the harsh slavery of Egypt, the one thing they never seemed to lack for was abundant food and water. Here they had a completely different diet and less of it, though they were quite likely never very bad off nutritionally at any point.

Yet, the journey was not without some mortal risk. One of the tribes of Esau that never became a part of the Edomite Kingdom was the nomadic Amalekites. In the vicinity of Rephidim these began attacking the Israelites from the rear, where much of the herd animals would have been. In the process, they were gratuitously slaughtering the stragglers of Israel – the old, the weak and ill. Moses ordered out the best fighters under Joshua's command to stand and defend against these brutal raiders. In what is universally recognized as the ancient near eastern prayer posture, Moses held his hands aloft over the battle scene. With help from a pair of assistants, Moses was able to maintain this posture until the raiders had been mowed down. Jehovah declared that the character of these raiders' people merited genocide.

Taking the advice of his father-in-law, Moses delegated leadership to various levels within the

nation. The numbers should not be taken literally. They were used to estimate the authority of the position. They were representations of natural divisions in a tribal culture: tribe, clan, and family. This political structure was the rule among most Semitic cultures of that day, but would easily have atrophied under centuries Egyptian slavery. The leaders were chosen not on the basis of birth order, but on demonstrated ability and reputation; this was very much a departure from Semitic culture. It would be a bone of contention later. These leaders were vested with powers typical of Semitic sheikhs, combining executive and judicial functions. The legislative function was handled by Jehovah Himself, building a whole new cultural identity.

There was much in this plan that drew resistance from the people. It's not hard to see that tribal politics were always at play when there was a dispute. They conveniently forgot, almost every day, who it was that brought them out of slavery. Most debates were started by someone in traditional roles of power threatened with loss of prestige. Throughout Hebrew history, this continually crops up. Those holding power will find all manner of excuses for keeping it, when clearly God had said it would be otherwise.

3.5: Before Mt. Sinai

Exodus 19-40; Leviticus; Numbers 1-10 – After three months of getting acquainted with the basics of survival away from the Nile Valley, the nation of Israel was ready for the one event that would forever establish the character of the people we know today as Jews. This was the Giving of the Law. It was not law in the modern sense, but more in the form of a treaty, a common type of treaty in that time now known as a “suzerain-vassal treaty.” It closely parallels that of the Hittites, who had conquered the Fertile Crescent during Abraham’s lifetime, but who gradually lost power from that time on; they were better warriors than administrators. Still, The Ten Commandments (Decalogue) was legal policy, much like any ancient treaty of that day. Its relationship to the details of the Law of Moses, laid out in the rest of the Pentateuch, is much like that of a modern constitution as it relates to the laws of the land. The Decalogue presents the essence of all that follows. The laws must in some way reflect, and conform to, the Decalogue. That it was carved in stone symbolized its immutable nature, from which we derive the metaphor in modern English. The Decalogue was one of the first things every Israelite memorized, starting as young children.

It is difficult to determine whether parts of the text tell of overlapping events, told from different perspectives, or a series of separate events. Israel arrived at Mount Sinai in July, probably. While the tribes were settling into their distinct encampments, Moses was called up onto the mountain and instructed to prepare the people to be presented before their new Ruler. This was a common ritual from earliest recorded history, continuing until the Middle Ages. The smoke and rumblings invoked instant terror in the people. While in this state of fear, they quickly agreed to any impending proposal that might come. The whole national leadership ascended the mountain at least once. They were presented with an awe-inspiring vision of One too great for human eyes to look upon and live. Yet, they were spared, while Moses was singled out to come closer for an audience. There was at least one such meeting on the mountain.

While camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Israelites encountered sights and sounds that should have symbolized for them the gravity of the events. Moses was permitted to see and

hear things that few humans lived to describe. The “forty days” he spent on the mountain was a common Semitic expression to signify the passing of several weeks. The text indicates Moses engaged in some sort of notetaking. It required quite some time for Moses to absorb all that Jehovah had for His people. Constructing a new national identity was not something that could be rushed. It is believed by many scholars that Moses was informed as to which of the various national legends were to be included in what later became the Book of Genesis. We know that Moses was in some way given a tour of Jehovah’s heavenly courts, from which the Tabernacle was modeled in concept. It was an opulent affair laid out in the pattern common to the most powerful and wealthy desert sheikhs. This temple of tents became the national symbol of Israel for the next 300 years or more.

The rituals of worship were also revealed at this time. An examination of the Law will reveal that the whole code of conduct was cast in terms of ritual purity, quite unlike the laws of every other nation in that part of the world. While most nations in those times blended ritual code somewhat with customs of daily secular conduct, we know of none that overlapped so much as Israel. For the Nation of Israel, all human behavior was a concern of Jehovah. To be holy and to be lawful meant the same thing. This was because here, Jehovah was both God and Ruler. Israel’s God was not a construct of myth and legend, interpreted by a secretive priesthood. Everything was out in the open, despite accusations to the contrary. He was a very real Sovereign offering a covenant-treaty to those who would be His vassals.

Of course, the mass of people gathered at the foot of the Mountain of God included plenty who had none of Israel’s blood in their veins and no loyalty to his God. Their presence was tolerated on the basis of their willingness to adapt to the demands of Jehovah. While Moses was engaged in these revelations, his prolonged absence from the camp, along with the national commanders and elders, seemed to this mixed mob an opportune time to assert their own preferences for the future. By the time Moses and the seventy elders returned, this rabble had completely subverted the nation. They were celebrating a late summer feast in honor of a new manifestation of the god whom, it was declared, led them out of Egypt. It was fashioned from sheets of gold hammered onto a frame of wood. The golden calf was not this god, but rather portrayed as the mount ridden by an invisible god, a common Semitic concept. This feast would have included riotous behavior wholly unacceptable under the older Semitic customs, much less the newly revealed Law. We are told that it was no great task to divert the Israelites from their sober duty.

The scene was so disturbing that Moses smashed the stone tablets, a ritual act showing that the people had broken the Covenant before even hearing it. They had rebelled against their Sovereign before He had offered peaceful terms. Their must certainly be a penalty. The Levites rallied at the call of Moses and were directed to execute the most flagrant offenders. Since pagan feasts typically included public sexual orgies, it would be easy to imagine that anyone running around improperly dressed was a prime candidate for putting to the sword. By the time the slaughter was finished, the fallen were enough to man three combat companies. It was only by Moses’ intercession with Jehovah that the whole nation was not wiped out by some divine punishment. Still, God refused to personally accompany the nation any longer. He sent an angelic being to represent Him. The Tent of Meeting was ceremonially moved outside the camp to remind the people that Jehovah was no longer personally present. This should not be

confused with the Tabernacle, around which their tent city was ranged, also at quite a distance. The Tent of Meeting was a much simpler affair, existing solely to afflict the Israeli conscience. They had exiled their God.

From the start, we are allowed to see that God chose a monumental task for Himself in shaping His own peculiar people from this most intractable of raw materials. Later, their own prophets would declare them “a stiff-necked people,” quick to stray from the clear path of righteousness.

The Tabernacle had yet to be constructed at this point. This was most likely the primary reason they stayed at Mt. Sinai for about a year. There was also the need for public teaching sessions to promulgate the Covenant Law. The plunder from Egypt was more than adequate to provide the materials for the Tabernacle. With a new set of stone tablets from the hand of Jehovah, Moses set about renewing the Covenant. As time went by, Jehovah provided more and more details on His expectations for Israel. This sort of give and take was customary. The Laws presume mostly a settled agrarian lifestyle in the land of Canaan, something these people had yet to experience. Much of the Law’s content was already a part of the customs of various Semitic peoples at that time. There were plenty of directives that were a reaction to what we now know were pagan rituals practiced by the Canaanites. Israel must learn to see her Lord as as unique from other gods. Since it is doubtful that the Israelites at this time could fully grasp the concept that there was in reality only One True God, it was necessary that they at least see Him as distinct from the others, as their own national God. While the Tabernacle rituals included much that was familiar to them, there was plenty of new things to establish uniqueness.

There was a good deal of case law in the Covenant record. As time went by, incidents called for clarifications. In some cases, the wise mind could discern an obvious implication of legislation. Often, though, Moses was obliged to confer with Jehovah on a particular incident. This would have been perfectly normal if Jehovah had been a human monarch. It takes a number of months, perhaps years, to have collected enough rulings on specific cases for the servants to grasp the mind of their sovereign.

As already noted, the whole of the Law was a sacred duty, for all conduct carried ritual importance. Thus, this Law was administered by the Levitical Priesthood. The priests were one clan from the larger tribe of Levites. The term “Levite” refers to anyone of the tribe who wasn’t a priest. It eventually became the whole tribe’s duty to teach the Law. For so long as there was a Tabernacle or a Temple in Israel, education was the responsibility of the priests and Levites. The welfare of the nation fell upon their shoulders. The promised blessings of obedience were theirs to share with the people, as well as the curses of divine wrath for rebellion. On a more mundane level, though, we in modern times can recognize the generally good sanitation practices found in the Law. On a purely secular level, obeying the Law of Moses would be as good a guarantee of prosperity and health as could be expected in ancient times. Much of it remains surprisingly applicable for that purpose in modern times, even with modern science.

While all the promises and curses seemed to apply to conduct alone, there is clearly an underlying purpose here of requiring much more than mere conduct. The benefits of the Law apply to all those capable of rendering proper observance. Yet there are passages in the Law that attempt to capture the very hearts and minds of the people. The stone tablets divided the Ten Commandments into two groups; one set applies to relations with the Sovereign, the rest to

relations with people. Summarizing the second table is the ultimate concern for social stability. One could conceivably be a bad person and still keep the Law, but it is highly unlikely, because the first table demands a genuine concern for a clear conscience with God. Jehovah declared He was able to discern when His Law was given grudging acceptance. His true intent was to attract their personal affection and devotion. We have a hard time understanding the fundamentally personal nature of Hebrew legal philosophy; we have a mental reflex for objectifying things these days. But even in the context of the Scripture, we see a fundamental resistance among Israelis for owning their personal duty. In the history of Israel, we will see very clearly that those who actually cared about Jehovah's feelings were always in the minority. Often, a very tiny minority it was.

3.6: Rebellion on the Way

Numbers 10:11-36 – Having already noted the difficulty in dealing with headcounts in the text, it can be stated here that the primary purpose of any census in Israel was to determine the number of men available for war. They were divided into two groups. The professional soldiers (denoted by the word often translated “thousand”) were fully armed, usually with the rarer metal weapons and trained for war. It was safe to assume these were typically noblemen, though the degree of social stratification is hard to ascertain. We have examples of peasants rising to distinction because of demonstrated talent in warfare. Someone of that sort would be noticed and recruited by the wealthy and powerful, thus conferring some status, if none existed before.

It's easy to imagine a conscripted peasant demonstrating a hitherto unrecognized talent for war. Draftees, the citizen-soldiers, were always counted in hundreds, presumably because they maneuvered in such groups. These latter were often armed with such weapons as any man might construct from available materials: slings and stones, spears, clubs, axes, etc. This was the common system of census accounting in most Semitic cultures in ancient times. The numbers would be stated as so many professional soldiers, and then so many hundreds of draftees. A reasonable reconstruction at this place in the text would be 600 professional soldiers and about 25,000 conscripts. (See the Addenda for details on Hebrew counting.)

A few final events took place at the foot of Mount Sinai before the nation marched out toward Palestine. The Tabernacle was dedicated in a lavish ceremony (ch. 7), the clan of Aaron vested with the authority of the priesthood. The other Levite clans were assigned their tasks and there was a short period of training for all. Three weeks after the troop census, after the first official celebration of the Passover, the whole nation set out in specified order. This part of their voyage was through more desolate territory than their approach to Mount Sinai. After some initial generalized griping, fire broke out on the edges of the tent city. This was merely the first in a series of such events that attended the whole journey.

11:1-15, 31-35 – Jehovah had been providing manna, appearing overnight with the dew. There is no known natural explanation for it. The pagan rabble still accompanying the march acted as a goad and the natural contrariness of the Israeli character manifested itself repeatedly. After a year of manna, they whined about the monotony of it, so Jehovah provided quail. These had appeared on the march to Mount Sinai and a year later on the march away from it. This breed of

quail typically flew in large flocks just a few feet off the ground. Migrating from Europe during April, they would often settle on the ground for a day or two to rest. In flight or at rest, they were easily captured by hand. Jehovah directed the flight path of the quail across the route of Israel both times. Along with quail they were given a plague to discipline them for whining. Quite likely, on the second event, the quail carried some sort of disease that affected humans.

11:16-30 – At the same time, in a move apparently aimed at bringing some form of civil order to the nation, a fresh cohort of the Seventy Elders were appointed and given a portion of Moses' spirit. The original Seventy Elders being displaced, judicial elders had risen through tribal politics. These new officers were above the normal tribal leadership based on birthright. They were clearly not volunteers for the job, as demonstrated by the two who refused to show up for their commissioning at the Tent of Meeting. When the spirit from Jehovah fell on the appointees, the two abstainers were overpowered by an urge to prophesy, even while still in their tents.

12 – This newly empowered leadership may have helped for a while, but then Moses' older sister Miriam raised a controversy over his qualifications as national leader. By custom and by Law, Aaron, as the elder brother, would have been the civil leader as well as spiritual leader and High Priest. The issue of Moses' marriage to an Ethiopian woman was just a ruse. At the Tent of Meeting, Miriam was struck with leprosy. With the law excluding lepers from close contact with the general population, she would have been unable to stir up any more trouble for the rest of her life. Upon Moses' appeal on her behalf, the sentence of exclusion was shortened to seven days, and the leprosy was healed.

On the one hand, we are left wondering why God would have anything to do with these people. On the other hand, it's clear their frequent accusation that God intended to kill them in the wilderness was false. What lay ahead of them was far better than they ever deserved, though tough enough at times. It is also solid proof of God's patience and steadfastness in the face of incredible provocation.

13 – Moses sent spies, apparently the senior ranking soldier from each tribe, to assess the military strength of the enemy they were to conquer in Palestine. As they had been doing all the way from Mount Sinai, the nation had set up camp for a time. This Wilderness of Paran was not exactly a sandy desert like the Sahara of North Africa. It was a dry, rocky area of hills and valleys, with seasonal vegetation. Since this was the early summer, there would have been some vestiges of this greenery left from the spring rains that ended in April. The spies were directed to travel from there north across the Negev, a much drier area, into the southern hill country of Palestine. From there they spent a month or so wandering possibly as far north as Damascus. They brought back a cluster of grapes, plentiful and in season in the Hebron highlands. The bunch was large enough to require it be suspended from a pole carried between two men. They also brought back descriptions of fortified cities occupied by the "Sons of Anak," (*Anakim*) a term used to describe giants. The majority of the surveyors professed no confidence that the nation could overcome such obstacles to conquest.

14 – That the nation gave more credence to the negative report was the last straw. Jehovah determined that his earlier threat of killing the nation was to be imposed half-way: The current generation of whiners would have to die before the nation could enter Palestine. Ex-slaves in a

new land seldom make good warriors. The new generation would grow up in the semi-desert wilderness, struggling for a living, but free. They would develop a wholly different set of attitudes and expectations from life. That it only took a few decades pointedly testifies to the softness of the slave generation. Those that conquered the Canaanites were indeed a different people.

16 – The same rebelliousness that was demonstrated by the belated and ill-fated assault at Hormah, on the hills of southern Palestine, was amply expressed in other ways. At one point there was a dual rebellion. Korah, of the Kohathites – responsible for the Tabernacle furnishings – objected to what he felt was an arbitrary choice by Moses that only Aaron’s family could serve as actual priests to make offerings. The Reubenites objected to the apparent disregard Moses had for the tribal birthright system. He had appointed the Seventy Elders with special powers above those of the tribes. These princes of Reuben wanted to reassert the traditional government of Semitic tribes of that time. As descendants of the first-born son of Israel, this put the Reubenites at the head of the line, never mind that their ancestor lost that privilege for them.

A particular sore point was no doubt the failed assault on Canaan. In their eyes, Moses had prevented the Ark of Covenant being moved, so the people went to war without their sacred talisman and their tribal god had consequently not aided them in battle. In both cases, the rebels clearly demonstrated a complete failure to grasp the radical difference between their God, Jehovah, and all the other so-called gods of which they had heard. As far as they were concerned, their problem was Moses, who held a monopoly for his family as the primary servants of Jehovah. This was the same view generally held by most of the Israelites, as they blamed Moses for the deaths of the rebels the following day. Whether they ever understood that Moses had little control over the miraculous events they witnessed seems unlikely.

It requires we take a moment here to paint a clear portrait of the attitude and mindset of the rebellious leadership. It’s rather hard to picture just how deeply sunk these people were into superstition, at the same time holding a deep cynicism. They had adopted the concept that supernatural powers were generally available to anyone who took the time to grasp them or managed to discover the secrets. The gods were often seen as indifferent to the human condition, offering their powers to the highest bidder, as it were. They did not at all doubt the reality of the powers Moses seemed to wield; they doubted that the God who gave them really cared much who was His representative. They assumed He was as venal as any ruler and would use first one, and then another servant, as His whims and vanity might incline. Moses’ declaration that he was *chosen* was just so much propaganda to them. Thus, if they could pry from him the secret knowledge, any man could take his place. They sought to compel Moses to reveal the arcane rituals that persuaded Jehovah to empower men. Not everyone thought like this, at least not all the time, but the attitude was present in the nation as a whole, much as any culture might have it’s own collection of old wives’ tales.

There was a clear collusion in this revolt between the Reubenite princes, who sought to wrest political control from Moses, and Korah, who sought to displace the priests loyal to Moses with another group gathered from all the tribes. Korah planned to raise up a priesthood loyal to the Reubenites. As it was, the conspirators were geographically close to each other in the tent city of Israel, given the ordered layout they had. The Kohathites formed a row between the Tabernacle

and the three tribes on the southern quarter, the quarter led by the Tribe of Reuben. The fissure that opened up beneath their family tents was a symbol of the shaky ground on which their rebellion was built. Jehovah was careful to take only those who dared question His choices. The plague that followed from the next day's grumbling was less precise in the choice of its victims. What could hardly be missed was the clear reinforcement of the Aaronic priesthood. First, he offered incense on behalf of those in the path of the plague, an act that had just the day before caused the immolation of 250 men aspiring to priesthood. Not only did he not suffer the same fate, but the plague was stopped. Secondly, his carved almond staff, a symbol of tribal authority, was the only one that blossomed with foliage and fruit. Whether in their minds it was the choice of Jehovah or of Moses, no one was in a position to object any longer.

3.7: 40 Years' Wandering

Numbers 20:1-13 – Other instances of rebellion over the next forty years are not recounted in detail but mentioned in other texts. The period is popularly referred to as the Forty Years' Wandering, but it doesn't seem from the text they physically wandered at all, but migrated within the Paran Wilderness (Deuteronomy 1:46). Miriam, Moses' sister was buried near Kadesh-barnea, on the northern edge of Paran. Rather, it was a moral wandering. The rebellious nature of this people finally infected Moses himself. His natural anger at their constant carping and whining got the best of him, provoking him to disobey Jehovah's instructions. It's not uncommon in that part of the world for limestone formations to conceal water, but without our modern technology, it was only by revelation from Jehovah that Moses could identify where to seek it. The water found was abundant, but His failure cost him entry into the Promised Land.

21:1-3 – A little out of sequence in the text is the raid by the chieftain of a community called Arad. This was a small clan of Canaanites holding territory on the northern edge of the Negev desert. The reprisal was apparently quick and easy to execute, with no spoils were taken for private use. Moses renamed the place *Hormah*, often translated as "Destruction," but also meaning something set aside for total destruction as an offering to Jehovah (the concept was of a costly act of self-denial, rather than the item's usefulness to Him). This was a means of healing the raw memories of defeat at another *Hormah* nearly forty years before. Though never positively identified by archaeologists, *Arad* would have been on the southern approach to Palestine, the first to face an invasion from Israel. Of course, the one opportune moment for entering that land from the south was long gone. Now they would have to come in from the east, across the Jordan River.

20:14-21 – The usual route for such an approach was the King's Highway. This was a wide and well-used path dating back before the time of Abraham. The road ran through several independent kingdoms, and each maintained their own portion of the route as a source of toll and services revenue. Israel would first have to cross the Kingdom of Edom, which at that time occupied the hills east of the Rift Valley and southeast of the Dead Sea. Edom refused passage, even with generous offers of payment for services. No doubt, Edom's rulers knew that conquest was the eventual purpose of Israel, and no amount of reassurance could convince them that their cousins had not added Edom to the list of lands they aspired to occupy. Edom's troops marshaled a visible presence on the southern border. The defense of this southern border, a

long uphill climb, was much easier than fending off an enemy already inside the kingdom. Jehovah made it clear that He would not permit Israel to defeat these close relatives, so they must take the long way around, to the south and east, over open terrain with few roads.

20:22-29; 21:4-9 – On this circuitous route was Mount Hor, a landmark named after the ancient Hurrians displaced by the Edomites. It was here Aaron passed his high priesthood over to his son, Eleazer, and then died. No one can be sure of the exact identity of this landmark today, but we have some idea of the route. The only reasonable place to mount the heights east of the Rift Valley outside of Edom was down near the Gulf of Aqabah. Ezion-geber there on the shore at the apex of the Gulf was a mining and shipping center and much of the trade would have run west to Egypt, past the Sea of Reeds. Thus, the route was referred to as the Way of the Sea of Reeds. No sooner had the time of mourning for Aaron passed but the nation began to grumble about the difficulty of the route. Such talk would certainly lead to a revolt, but they passed through an area infested with bronze-colored poisonous snakes. The metallic bronze version Moses made was mounted on the national standard and would have stood near the Tabernacle.

21:10-20 – There is celebration over a well dug at the bottom of a wadi. In some places these seasonal water courses held a high-water table in a sandy bottom year-round. No more than the thrust of a staff might bring it to the surface. This was the last event recorded before the actual conquest begins. In passing, we have a sample of an older document, perhaps the direct handiwork of Moses or one of his assistants. This *Book of the Wars of Jehovah* has never been seen in modern times, nor mentioned in any other text we have today. It would appear to be a book of verse, most likely the original source for our Scripture text. The inserted Hebrew verse is much older than the narrative. To a nomadic nation of Semites, writing would be relatively unimportant as a means of record keeping. Recitations of epic poetry would be more accurately transmitted over a longer time span than if the book had simply been prose written on the fragile materials available at that time. Once the nation settled in the Promised Land, it would be much easier to have developed the culture and habits of keeping written records. Most of these would have been kept as a part of the royal treasury or in the Temple that was eventually built. Since it was a stated concern of Jehovah to preserve these records, we can be sure that nothing essential was lost in the process.

4. The Conquest: 1406-1400 BC

4.1: Conquest Begins

The psychology of battle is recognized as critically important in today's military services. Wise military leaders have always kept an eye on the mental and emotional state of their fighters. In the Ancient Near East, it also mattered, but carried a totally different significance. The ancient soldier did not "psyche himself up" for battle courage. He invoked a spirit of battle frenzy, the sort of rage that ignored all risks and any injury that did not honestly debilitate him. For him, it was a literal spirit, a supernatural presence. If he could not summon this battle rage, then he assumed that his god was not with him. Thus, it was probably not the will of this god to proceed into battle. The Bible text uses the same sort of imagery. Troops in a hasty retreat were

said to have “lost their spirit” in a literal sense: Their god(s) had deserted them. When the army of Israel fled before the enemy, this was regarded as proof that Jehovah was not with them, not supporting them in battle. Jehovah seems to have spoken in these terms Himself.

In the battles with the Canaanites, Jehovah’s stated purpose was to remove an irredeemable race from the face of the earth. Our modern sensibilities make it difficult to grasp such a concept. We have already noted that Noah’s son, Ham, was given to evil desires. We have seen where the Pentapolis, populated by his descendants, were even worse. They were found worthy of incineration by means of what appeared to be a natural disaster. Every record of the Canaanites unanimously notes their horrific morals and degrading religious rituals. Even the worldly Greeks were surprised by the depth of Canaanite depravity: drunken orgies where the custom was to have sex with anything that moved, parents making ritual sacrifice of their first-born in the arms of a super-heated bronze idol and a host of other unpleasanties. Whether this genocide was justified can best be seen by the failure of the Israelites to carry it out. The People of Jehovah were subverted by these miscreants and their practices at every turn.

Note the ritual instructions about booty and captives from Midian in Numbers 31:13ff. Keep in mind the ultimate human value under the Covenant was social stability. There were multiple threats from being too easy on the losing side. From ancient times, experience had shown that virgins alone would adapt to their new national identity. Even that was somewhat risky. This was no mindless prejudice, but a savvy grasp of how their victims acted when given a chance. The ritual cleansing of plunder and captives was also as much a matter of sanitation as religion. Disease was far more rampant than we can imagine, even up until just a couple of centuries before our time. However, the bottom line is this was a command from God, delivered in the same fashion as everything we’ve seen so far. We can guess some of the reasons, but His decisions are hardly subject to our biased review.

Moses also transferred his authority to Joshua at this time, in a public ritual before the nation (Numbers 27:12ff). At about the same time, he renewed the Covenant rituals that had lain fallow during the 40 Years (ch. 28-30; 33; Deuteronomy is more in depth). His last official act was to recount for this generation raised in the wilderness all that had happened starting with the departure from Egypt. Much of the material in Deuteronomy (“Reiteration of Law”) covers the extended stay on the Plains of Moab, an area just north of the Dead Sea, where the Jordan Valley broadened a great deal on its east bank. At this point the “Cowboy Clans” got permission to leave their families on the East Bank of the Jordan, in the grassy hills and plains (Numbers 32). The general division of land for the tribes was discussed (ch. 34-36). The text ends with Moses’ death somewhere on Mount Pisgah, buried by Jehovah Himself, in 1406 BC (Deuteronomy 34).

Joshua 1 – The nation’s new chief elder received from Jehovah a personal covenant calling him to take up the leadership duties of Moses, not the priesthood. After a public ceremony whereby the nation pledged to follow him, Joshua began making plans for the conquest of Palestine. This was no simple raid for plunder, nor a conquest such as was common in that time, taking over a land and people as the new upper-class rulers. This was to be a multi-generational war of extermination, beginning with a purely religious conquest. In Israel’s favor was that Egypt, under Amenhotep III, had lost interest in Canaan, which they still ruled legally as a tributary.

There was to be no help from Egypt, in spite of the pleading letters sent by her Canaanite vassals. Further, the Philistines had not yet arrived in force to oppose from the southern coast of Palestine. Finally, the old Hittite Empire, somewhat overlapping that of Egypt, had already begun to lose any hold it may have had in this region. The Canaanite culture had sunk to the lowest depths of depravity and the people had little heart for a noble and coordinated defense against the invading Israelites.

Jehovah's people, on the other hand, had been conditioned by a full generation in harsh conditions. They had a vigorous culture that saw everything in terms of solemn sacred duty. In less than a year, they had become an army of combat veterans with a string of heartening victories. Joshua was a proven leader, trustworthy as a spokesman for their God – a God who had promised to give them overwhelming victory, having already delivered on that promise several times. They were united strongly in a sense of destiny that they could set the world right. They had rested and were ready to move.

2:1-21 – The Jordan River Valley just north of the Dead Sea was a lush tropical paradise. On the far bank was Jericho, a city-state ruled by a petty king. At this time, Jericho's one gate opened on the east, where a fresh-water spring flowed out of the ground. This city had already served as the symbol for the first thrust of any intent to make war further west. This was the price they paid for their favored location. It was a double-walled city, built on the mound of rubble and dirt left by previous occupants reaching back into pre-history. They had heard of the conquests already won by the hoard camping in plain sight across the Jordan. There may have already been some routine civilian contact between individuals from each side, as is common in every war in human history. Jericho had heard of Jehovah and dreaded the battle that must inevitably take place. Keep in mind, there were other tribal groups wandering the area, and a steady stream of trade traffic from all over that part of the world. The narrative sticks with the main thread of the story, ignoring all the bystanders.

Joshua, having been on the first spying mission some 40 years previously, wisely sent two spies to examine Jericho's defenses, but more importantly, the state of mind of its inhabitants. The general strategy of this conquest would be to split the land in two, driving a wedge between the north and south. Jericho was the obvious starting point. The city had not been occupied long, perhaps only since 1410 BC, after a period of about 150 years' vacancy. The previous occupants had been the *Hyksos*. The spies entered the city along with all the normal trade traffic any such city had. They sought out the traditional accommodations for wandering traders, one of possibly several hostels.

Every hostel would be an ideal place to hear all the news. In the Land of Canaan, Rahab's ("Proud") profession attracted none of the social stigma it would today. She ran a busy motel and also produced linen goods; prostitution was frankly a minor part of her business. When the king's soldiers came searching for the spies reported to have entered the city, she hid them under the piles of flax stalks, which were drying in the early spring sun (v. 6). These stalks would have been 3 to 4 feet long and had been soaked in water for a time to make them swell. Air drying would cause them to burst open along the length and release the linen fibers. It would be quite time consuming to move them in a search, not a pleasant hiding place, anyway. Her ruse was quite plausible. Rahab had already switched her loyalty to the new power in the

land: Jehovah. After securing a conditional oath from the spies that she and her family would be spared in the coming battle, she let them down through a window that faced out over the wall of the city. The red rope, probably one of her trade products, was left hanging down the wall to mark her house as the only safe refuge in the city (v. 21).

2:22-24 – The spies had but a short distance to travel straight out from the west wall of Jericho to the maze of caves in the limestone cliffs of the West Bank. They took advantage of the three day’s delay Joshua had set as preparation time for the attack on Jericho. The pursuit force had returned to the city empty handed. On the eve of the march to Jericho, the spies reported to Joshua the good news.

3:1 – The first day of movement saw the distance covered was but a mere ten miles or so, from Shittim (“Acacia Trees”) to the very bank of the river. This movement was in proper military tactical order, literally translated as “in five parts” – the vanguard of professional soldiers, with a similar group as a rearguard, a large body of the citizen warriors in the middle, and two wings of professional fighters on either side. They camped for an additional three days, a time of ritual purification, waiting on Jehovah to reveal His plan. This ritual of waiting on Jehovah became one of the critical parts of each battle. Noteworthy defeats came with failing to do so. In this case, the word from Jehovah was regarding the virtual impossibility of crossing the Jordan at that time of year. Not everyone was a swimmer, let alone of sufficient strength to deal with a spring flood current, swift and deep.

3:2-17 – Marching behind the Ark of the Covenant for the first time required careful instruction (ch. 3). There had to be a space of some 3000 yards (2700m) between the holy Ark and the vanguard following behind it. At the moment the priests stepped into the shallows at the edge, the river simply stopped flowing from above. The water in the bottom ran on down, leaving a dry bed. The text (v. 16) describes a crucial point above the crossing – Adam (“Red” as soil) about 15 miles upriver at the confluence of the Jabbok – where the water was dammed, probably by the caving of the soft high banks in that area. This has happened at least twice since then and is well-documented. Most recently, in 1927, the river was blocked for 21 hours. The resulting temporary reservoir could easily flood some dozen miles back upriver. Such an event in connection with Israel’s approach to Jericho would hardly go unnoticed and was attributed far and wide to the Israeli God. At the bottom of the riverbed, the priests stopped while the army crossed on either side, probably hundreds abreast, to complete the crossing in one day.

4:1-5:10 – When the crossing was completed, a matching pair of stone monuments were erected, one on the western bank at Gilgal (“Circle” of stones) and one in the middle of the river where the priests had stood all day holding the Ark of the Covenant (ch. 4:1-9). At the precise moment the priests’ feet cleared the riverbed on the other side, the water above broke over the dam and returned to its normal flow. This whole affair fixed in the people’s hearts their loyalty to Joshua. Their first residence in the Promised Land was the appropriate place to carry out the Covenant requirement of circumcision (ch. 5:2f). During the period of Wandering, this had been neglected, as the Covenant was suspended by the disobedience in the Wilderness of Paran. This would remove the stigma resulting from a people whose hearts had never left Egypt, were never really free. It required a week or so for recovery, after which they celebrated their first Passover in the Land; indeed, it was the first Passover since the one celebrated on the Sinai

Peninsula. Having commandeered the now ripe barley in the fields belonging to Jericho (ch. 5:10f), the manna ceased to fall for their food in what is now late March or early April.

5:11-6:27 – Gilgal was just north, over a wadi from Jericho. At the first sign of Israel crossing the Jordan, the king had ordered the gates of the city barred (ch. 6:1ff). The city considered itself under siege. With the confidence of having met the general of Jehovah’s angelic army (ch. 5:13-15), Joshua gave the strange battle order: to march around the city mound once daily for six days. On the seventh, they were to make seven circuits. In this region known for seismic disturbances, it’s not hard to imagine an earthquake, timed to the end of the last lap, could flatten both the inner and out walls. Jericho’s walls were made of stacked mud brick, recovered from the previous *Hyksos* occupation. Recent archaeological work confirms that a small section of the western wall, where Rahab’s hostel was located, was the only portion left standing at about this time in Jericho’s history. Joshua had ordered the pact she made with the spies be kept, and only her family survived. She eventually married into the nation, and was an ancestor of King David. Everything else in the city was *kherem*: totally devoted to Jehovah, as the first-fruits of Conquest. In practice, this meant that everything of use in the Tabernacle service would be salvaged and ritually cleansed; all else was completely destroyed. No individual was allowed to keep so much as a souvenir. This act of delayed gratification came from the same discipline that kept the army silent while circling the city, with the inevitable ridicule this would have brought from the defenders on the walls. Even the city mound was put under the ban. Joshua’s curse on the site came literally true in mid-9th century BC, under the rule of Ahab (1 Kings 16:34).

7:1-5 – That a single member of the nation had, in effect, stolen from Jehovah was sufficient cause for Him to abandon the troops in battle. We may find it odd that the silver was buried deepest (7:22). That fact simply adds to the evidence that silver was more highly valued than gold in that part of the world, until Solomon brought so much into his kingdom that gold became the rarer of the two. Achan (“Troublesome”) had secreted this loot from Jericho in his family tent and this caused the first Battle of Ai to bring such embarrassing results. We should also note that Joshua failed to consult with Jehovah on the plan of attack, relying completely on the report and recommendation of his scouts (vv. 2-5).

7:6-26 – While this is not clearly stated, Joshua would surely have known of the problem had he first consulted God. It is worth noting here that the punishment for this violation of Achan’s was in keeping with a trend that appears common in Jehovah’s dealings with His people. The first violation that takes place merits the utmost penalty possible, in this case, execution of the entire household. Later offenses of the same kind didn’t always bring such severity. Stoning in ancient times was not a mass pelting of fist-sized stones, except perhaps the first few rocks. For the most part, rather large stones were simply piled on the body of the victim until they suffocated under the weight of their combined mass. Marking the event with a large heap of stones meant simply adding a few more on the pile. This done, the wrath of Jehovah was averted.

8:1-30 – The site currently identified as Ai is perched atop a high point on a ridge, which runs mostly north and south at that point. There is a gentle slope on the north and east side. It was the home of ancient pagan temples. Ai (“Ruins”) was occupied just as its name suggests, by an

Amorite tribe that had not yet fully rebuilt the impressive fortifications since their destruction sometime between 2500 and 2000 BC. It is not hard to imagine the Amorites, normally nomads, having pitched their tents inside the ruins, perhaps in preparation for rebuilding the city. Such an occupation would quickly become urban in nature, in spite of the use of tents. Whether the residents had begun using the temples again is not certain, but the city served at least to help protect Bethel, only 1.5 miles away. Bethel (“House of God”), the city near which Jacob had his dream, is scarcely mentioned at this point. Not only had its glory and importance declined, but nothing of significance occurred in connection with the battle. It is hinted that they came out in support of Ai, but their part in the battle does not enter the narrative. We know only that all the available men of fighting age came out to fight (v. 17). We also know that Bethel appears on the list of conquered cities later in the text (ch. 12:9ff).

In the first attempt, only three companies of conscript soldiers had been sent to Ai. An initial loss of 36 was a disaster on that scale, when one adds those killed as they retreated back down the valley. For the second battle, Joshua had the advantage of Jehovah’s advice and promise of victory. He sent thirty professional soldiers to hide in ambush in a ravine on the south side and down-slope from the ruins. They were in place before dawn. There was another ambush of five companies to block reinforcements from Bethel. The main attack force of conscripts had camped the night before on the ridge to the north and in full view of the city, with a dry flat valley between them. When the Israelite conscripts formed up on the valley floor at dawn, the residents of Ai, emboldened by the previous victory, came out to meet them. Every man in the city wanted a share of the glory and the city was left totally undefended. As the Israelite conscripts fled from the Amorites, the ambush force moved in and took the city. They set ablaze anything that would burn. The smoke served as a signal to the army below to turn and fight. The ambush force descended on the Amorites’ rear. Caught between the two, the fighters of Ai perished to a man. Then, the victors returned and slaughtered the rest of the panicked inhabitants, leaving only their king alive. He was executed by hanging or impaling on a stake (the word usually translated “tree” refers to the source of the item), shaming him as a common criminal. He was buried in the same manner as Achan, in the gate of his former city, once again a complete ruin.

8:30-35 – We can be certain that there were other battles, but the necessity of fighting over Shechem is doubtful (ch. 8:30ff). There is evidence that this place, so sacred to the Patriarchs, may have remained in friendly hands, perhaps through some of Ephraim’s children. We are certain that at least one left Egypt, returning to build Beth-Horon (1 Chronicles 7:24), approximately 13 miles northwest of Jerusalem, long before the Conquest. At any rate, the wedge had been driven between north and south Canaan Land and it was celebrated on the slopes above Shechem on either side, as prescribed by Moses before his death. Joshua brought up the families and clearly meant to begin occupying conquered territory. Thus, it was critical that Israel be made to understand, beyond all doubt, what Jehovah required of them. In an elaborate ceremony, where the nation – “congregation” – was divided between the two great bowl-shaped hollows on either side of Shechem, the Covenant Blessings were pronounced from Mount Gerizim (“Rocky”) on the south and Curses from Mount Ebal (“Bald”) on the north. Along with this ceremony, a symbolic altar to Jehovah, using only uncut natural stones, was raised on the top of Mount Ebal. The Law of Moses, which had been read aloud at the

ceremony, was also inscribed on the stones of this altar.

Certainly, things were not perfect, but it would be hard to ignore the obvious mood of determination and hope that flared in the heart of Israelite. Egyptian slavery was a dim memory, an experience few living could describe. The shame of rebellion had been wiped away, and victory was on-going. Thus we find ourselves at one of the highest points in the history of this nation.

4.2: The Southern Campaign

Joshua 9 – By this time, the various rulers in Palestine realized what Israel meant to do. There could be no surrender, since the aim was genocide. Whatever petty rivalries there may have been between the Canaanites were set aside as they allied to face this common threat. However, one city-state decided to capitulate, but deceptively, in hopes of surviving. They sent emissaries who would appear to have come from too far away to reside within the Promised Land (v. 3-14). Again, Joshua failed to consult Jehovah. He and the elders made treaty with these frauds, in terms that were absolute (v. 19). When the fraud was discovered, there was no legitimate way to back out. The Hivites (“Villagers”) of Gibeon (“Hilly”), along with its dependent towns, thus survived to become virtual slaves of Israel (v. 27).

It must be borne in mind that an invading horde like Israel, while bringing their families, could not have moved far in one day. Research indicates that a large force, fully loaded with provisions and support people, seldom moved more than 5 miles (8km) per day. Consider that each day the routine was to tear down the camp, pack it up, form the various elements into marching order, and then move off. At the next site, there would be a reverse of the process. If they were security conscious, there would be an advance guard that would keep watch while everyone prepared to displace. The rear-guard post security as the camp slowly emptied, then march out last. The advance guard would move out to secure a perimeter at the new site, followed by the lead elements. Late in the day they would be displaced again by the rear guard, which had held the line at the previous camp while the baggage elements moved out last. All the meal preparation would normally take place during the waning hours of the daylight at the new camp.

During the times that the nation of Israel was marching with families, there would be a good deal less of the full setup and takedown process each day. For example, the Tabernacle was erected only when the situation called for an extended stay. The text of Joshua indicates that the main body of Israel remained encamped at Gilgal for quite some months. Manna ceased falling because the found sufficient forage and grain crops there on the lush Jordan Valley floor. From this base of operations, most of the Conquest took place.

10:1-4 – Whatever plans Joshua had will never be known, because the King of Jerusalem forced his hand. Upon learning that Gibeon, no small kingdom, had made peace with the invading Hebrews, Adoni-zedek (“Lord of Justice”) called up his vassals to mobilize against the traitors. Hoham (“Lord of the Multitude”) is named as the king of Hebron, which we noted was the name later given to the site. Apparently, his city was Kiriath-arba (“City of Arba” named after a giant Anak) near the site of Hebron, on a hill just west of there now called Jebel er-Rumeidi. Piram (“Wild One”) ruled Jarmuth (“High Place”), currently associated with modern Khirbet el

Yarmuk, a very high hill in the rolling plains of southwest Palestine. However, the name probably had more to do with the pagan religious connotation of a “high place” as a shrine to various gods. Japhia (“Bright” or “Exalted”) was lord over Lachish (“Impregnable”). This is one of the better-known sites, with evidence of a thriving community as far back as 3200 BC. Once established, the site was easily defended and controlled several major routes passing through the area. Debir (“Scribe”) was the king of Eglon (place of the “Bull”), tentatively identified with modern Tell Nejilah.

10:5-9 – These all converged on Gibeon, which stood on high ground on the eastern side of a valley occupied by smaller villages, essentially suburbs of Gibeon. The combined forces had encamped in siege within this valley. Hopelessly outmatched, the Gibeonites appealed to their new masters for protection. Joshua wasted no time in assembling his troops to relieve Gibeon. Apparently, he had sought Jehovah’s word on this, for he was assured of victory. The hasty night march would have been some 26 miles (42km); proceeding without the usual support train, they covered in one night what usually took three days. In the cool of darkness, such a march would be somewhat less exhausting. They surprised the besieging troops at dawn, attacking without delay. This was exceptionally rare in ancient warfare, when opposing armies seldom joined battle the same day that they came within sight of each other. Each side would be hoping for at least one good meal and a night’s rest to fortify them for the demands of fighting. Since this was during the warm season, when the heat of day sapped a man’s strength quickly, it was all the more unlikely any battle-wise commander would attack without resting his troops.

10:10-15 – As Jehovah had promised, the combined Amorite, Hittite and Jebusite army melted before Israel’s assault. The siege troops immediately fled west toward Beth Horon (“House of Caves”), 10 miles (16km) away, on the last ridge before the coastal plain. Quite likely, the intent was to disperse across the foothills where there was more room to maneuver and plan the next move. It was to Israel’s advantage to slaughter the bulk of these local troops while they were confined in the upper hill country. The approach to Beth Horon was a narrow twisting gorge. Once reaching Upper Beth Horon on the ridge, it was a mad dash at least two miles (3km) down the rugged slope, made passable only by local residents having cut steps into the rock. Hoping to take advantage of this bottleneck, Joshua prayed to Jehovah for help.

For the Creator of the Universe to stop or slow the spinning of the earth, prolonging the hours of daylight, without disrupting anything else, would be hardly a challenge. However, given the circumstances, this would not have been a wise request, nor is it likely what Joshua actually prayed. The Israeli troops were already tired and hot; the best hope was that it would stay cool, in order to press the tactical advantage. The ambiguous Hebrew phrase appearing to ask that the sun “stand still” could also mean to be “held back” from shining. That the greater slaughter came at the hand of Jehovah from a hailstorm – totally out of season – would indicate a very thick cloud cover that would indeed keep the ambient air temperature relatively low for that time of year. It’s hardly less of a miracle that there was any cloud cover at all, much less a storm producing deadly hail at that time and place, leaving Israel’s troops unscathed.

10:16-27 – The text includes overlapping accounts of the same event told from different angles, rather than a single chronological account. The army of Israel finished an exhausting day pursuing surviving remnants of the enemy back to their fortified home cities. During the battle,

the allied kings were found hiding in a cave at Makkedah, 14 miles (23km) from Lower Beth Horon, where it stood at the head of the Aijalon Valley. Stones were rolled up to block the door and guards were dispatched from the command element so that the forward troops were able to continue their pursuit. Whatever support Israel had, whether it was the grateful Gibeonites or a delayed contingent from Gilgal, would have caught up late that day or early the next. Before recovering with food and a well-deserved night's rest, the army assembled at the cave and the kings were brought out. Combat leaders performed a ritual of victory by placing their feet on the necks of the kings, indicating total dominance. Then Joshua himself executed them and hung their bodies until evening (i.e., the next day in Hebrew reckoning).

10:28-40 – None of the symbolic meaning in this was lost on the inhabitants of Makkedah ("Sheepfold"), for they had provided the shelter for these kings. The city was captured, and the people slaughtered for it. While the phrase in the text rendered in English indicates it was all the same day, "that day" was a figure of speech often meaning "during that time." Taking out Makkedah was probably over the next day, or even a week, depending on the degree of fortification. There is some uncertainty over the site's identification today, so the degree of fortification remains an unknown. The campaign for the other cities mentioned there in the southern half of Palestine probably occupied the rest of that summer. That the "whole army of Israel" participated indicates waiting for the rest of the army to join them from Gilgal, setting up a full siege encampment against several of the targets.

Here in the Land of Canaan, religion was politics. The Southern Campaign was primarily aimed at shutting down major religious centers. In a few cases, there was a pure tactical motive. There was no hope of a political conquest at first, in the sense of taking control of every acre of ground. It would have been an awesome task to occupy every town, village and hamlet and then defend them, too. However, what was clearly happening was a conquest of hearts. The Canaanites saw that none of their gods would or could keep them safe from the nation of Israel. Every major temple city fell. The God of Israel was supreme.

4.3: The Northern Campaign

Joshua 11 – It appears Joshua simply extended the effort in the same year for the northern half of Canaan. The description is rather terse and routine, indicating that once again, it was the locals who sought a preemptive strike against the invading Israelites. Again, Jehovah promised victory, with descriptions of the subsequent destruction of the cities and inhabitants. Hazor ("Village") led the Northern Confederation under their king, Jabin ("Wise and Intelligent One") – no doubt a title rather than a proper name. Having mobilized the entire army of the north, Jabin marshaled them around the Merom Springs that fed a major tributary of the Jordan via the Sea of Galilee (called the Sea of Chinneroth at the time). While they were preparing for their battle with Israel, Joshua had been marching troops up from Gilgal, so caught them by surprise. As in the south, having defeated the armies in the field, it was easier to capture the cities from whence they came. It is noteworthy that Hazor was one of only three cities – along with Jericho and Ai – that were actually razed and destroyed. Each was a symbol for Israel and for the inhabitants of the land. Jericho was "devoted" in that it could have no use by man again. At least part of the reason for destroying Ai was what it meant to Israel after dealing with the sin of

Achan. Hazor was probably the single most powerful city in the whole of Canaanite territory. Estimates place its population at some 40,000.

The Wars of Conquest continued for at least five years (see below). Once the primary source of resistance was removed, there was still a great deal of mopping up here and there, putting out small fires of resistance as they arose. This was all accomplished by soldiers on foot. Jehovah ordered Joshua to hamstring Jabin's horses and burn the wooden chariots, destroying the ancient equivalent of cavalry. It was more than just a means to keep them humble and dependent on Jehovah. These and other nations in the north used their chariots and horses in pagan rituals; their use in combat always represented a faith in pagan gods. The riders were a select group, sacred and apart from the common soldier. While Israel also had professional soldiers, they were hardly held as a class apart from the conscripted citizen-soldiers. Conscripted troops were drawn from a population that valued men brave and athletic, familiar with the weapons of war. Each man had his own short-sword of bronze, roughly a foot long (30cm), or a lance with a bronze head. Many had both. There were also lighter throwing javelins, along with slings and stones, mentioned previously. A few even had scimitars, such as Joshua used to signal the successful attack at Ai. It all compares favorably to modern Switzerland, where virtually every able-bodied person is a lifetime member of the defense militia and required to keep a weapon at home.

Joshua 12-24 – We know that Joshua was 40 at the time he helped with the original spying mission, then approximately 80 at the beginning of the Conquest. We also know his close friend Caleb was roughly the same age. When Caleb asks permission to possess the area of Hebron, he tells us that it has been 45 years since that first spying mission under Moses (ch. 14:6ff). His request seems to indicate that enough national targets have been removed that it was time to pass the remaining occupation fighting tasks to the tribes. In the 5-year interval between the first battles and Caleb's request, his inheritance must be re-taken from when the Anakim were destroyed (10:38-39). It was probably the remnants of the original residents.

When the primary targets of conquest had been disposed of, Joshua began the long task of parceling the land among the tribes. The text serves as the official record and goes into great detail (chs. 13-21), but many of the landmarks are no longer recognized by the names recorded. Overseeing the surveying and marking of tribal borders, plus settling a couple of disputes, took quite some time. When next we are told Joshua's age, he is 110. Jehovah told Joshua to retire, with a rough dating of 1387 B.C. With his retirement the flush of victorious conquest lasted well into the next generation. However, almost immediately, small failures of faith became readily apparent here and there. The tendency to pursue pagan gods and goddesses remained never far from the surface for a significant portion of the nation. To best we can determine, they never again rose the heights of faithfulness as during the Conquest.

5. Period of Judges: 1400-1106 BC

5.1: *Bad Beginning*

Scholars have a fancy word for it: *amphictiony*. This is a Greek word describing a loose

confederation of neighboring states, bound together only by a common religion and implies their alliance is chiefly aimed at defending some central religious shrine. In some ways, this period in Israel's history, lasting roughly 350 years (approximately 1400-1040 BC), was just that. Even when under extreme pressure, it often took heroic prodding to unite enough of the people to take any action at all.

This Book of Judges was probably written during Saul's reign, most likely by Samuel. It appears to be a compilation, not necessarily in chronological order. Some of the foreign oppressions overlap, with different actors working on different problems. Thus, to view the book as a straight-line chronology is a serious mistake. Twelve judges are mentioned, six in detail. All are quite human and failing themselves, some more than others. We can see a pattern of common human conduct: We fall into disunity without something to hold us together, something that grips us. The lesson from God is clearly that He alone is the one operable gripping force. All others fail.

Judges 1:1-8 – Who's first? The remaining task of military/civil conquest was hardly the same kind of thing as the religious conquest of Joshua. This is more like work and frankly more hazardous. Still, they were asking God and it should have turned out well. The text indicates it did. We can't know if the sack of Jerusalem (v. 8) was separate from the Jebusite fortress there, or if it was later re-occupied by them. The inclusion of Simeon in the battle plans was an invitation for the latter to also help settle the area. Simeon was offered no distinct territory because of the curse in Genesis 49:5-7 (including Levi), with the result that they were to be scattered and merged with other tribes.

1:9-20 – While Caleb is not named specifically as the commander, this describes his victories in the Hebron area. He would naturally take up a strong leadership after the death of Joshua. The names of the other kings in the area are Aramaean, suggesting they were populated by the same folks who later conquered Damascus. No one knows exactly where they came from, but it illustrates how Israel wasn't the only nation trying to occupy this land. The little story of the giving of Caleb's daughter in marriage indicates a major promotion for the groom. The word describing Othniel's relationship to Caleb means a close male relative, but more often a cousin than a brother (v. 13). The hand of Achsah, as well as the rule of the city, was implied by this offer. What Achsah requested was a gift of springs to compensate her for the land being so arid (v. 15). The term "southland" was synonymous with "arid, dry place." So Othniel got the girl, the city, some dry ranch land and water rights as well. Including such a detailed record of the transfer of title would prevent any dispute arising later, as it surely would otherwise.

The Kenites are mentioned as helping to conquer and occupy the area. They were the relatives of Moses by marriage to Zipporah. They left Jericho (v. 16, "City of Palm Trees") and scattered across the dryer region in the far south of this southern hill country. This whole region was the first liberated, longest held and the best held of all the land of Canaan. While Judah and Simeon early on took the coastal area later occupied by Philistines, they never held all of it securely. This was the birth of the Iron Age and Israel did not gain that technology until about the time of David. This early display of iron weaponry – specifically chariots – was beyond the tactical abilities of Bronze Age warriors of Israel. These chariots would be lighter and more maneuverable than the older wooden ones. This may have been some early colonists of the

ancient sea-faring folks, because the Philistines didn't come and occupy in force for a century or so. They jealously guarded the secrets of iron forging until David conquered them once and for all. We are guessing the Philistines were allies with the old Hittite Empire, the first people to capitalize on the use iron weaponry.

1:21-26 – Judah and Simeon thus paved the way for Benjamin's claim, which included Jerusalem (v. 21). The Jebusite fortress was separate from the city that fell. This verse is the clue that the Book of Judges was written before David's reign, for he took it early on (2 Samuel 5:6-9). Ephraim and Manasseh together finished off Bethel. It would be fair to assume that earlier fighting in the area over Ai was not a complete capture of the city, but the slaughter of its army. The city was probably secured well and required a serious siege. We have here a story how scouts found a fellow willing to trade his life for betraying the city (v. 24). Reading between the lines, we see a city well protected by a wall, perhaps with hidden gates aside from the obvious main entrance. The man was allowed to escape and flee to Syria – at that time the southern edge of what remained of the old Hittite Empire. We note the name of the city later called *Bethel* had not yet changed from *Luz* yet, as the man built a new city with that old name (v. 26).

1:27-29 – A string of forts held apparently under Egyptian authority defied them, running along the valleys of Jezreel to Megiddo and across to Dor on the coast (vv. 27-29). While Israel did at times prosper to the point of oppressing them, they never got around to clearing them out. Gezer was an ancient fortress with walls 14 feet thick. The town held the pass between Joppa and Jerusalem, and was eventually granted to Solomon as a gift from Pharaoh.

1:30-36 – We can't identify all the cities left by Zebulun, Asher, and Naphtali (vv. 30-33). These three were granted land in the area from Carmel, up the coast of Phoenicia and inland to the Rift Valley. While we know that David and Solomon were on friendly terms with Phoenicia, we are told here they were supposed to be gone. Dan was pressed back into a tight pocket around Zorah and Eshtaol, a foothills area west of Jerusalem (v. 34). We learn later a large portion of Dan finds it easier to migrate the the headwaters of the Jordan far to the north (ch. 18). It appears these same folks kept an area on the southwest of the Dead Sea. We know where the famous Ascent of Akkribim ("scorpions") is, which climbs the north face of a wadi that feeds into the Dead Sea, but would be hard pressed to identify "The Rock."

The narrative attributes all of these failures at clearing the inhabitants to a lack of faith in God's promises. All of these had been delivered into the hands of Israel, but there seemed insufficient will to keep coming back to God and seeking guidance. Too many shortcuts were taken; too often they compromised. They seemed to have grown weary in the task and fell short of God's command.

2:1-5 – Due to this failure of faith, Jehovah announced His judgment against Israel at Bokim. We see the first full generation that followed Joshua and his lieutenants but did not seem to remember Moses. Almost immediately, they began adopting the pagan deities of locals: Baal and Astarte. It was quite easy for an early pagan mix to find its way into the traditional worship of Jehovah, since many of the Mosaic rituals were derived from common Semitic rituals also used in Baal worship. It was to be a very long time before they were completely cured of this sin.

5.2: Early Judges

Judges 2:6-9 – Just so long as Joshua lived, all was well. In this sense, we see that he serves as the first judge. It is important to see that the office of judge in this setting is more of national chieftain or elder and includes the idea of interpreting the application of Moses' Law. These judges were executing the judgments of God. Thus, most of them were military leaders, for they executed Jehovah's judgment against the sin of oppressing His people.

2:10-23 – We are given a recitation of a clear pattern, repeated endlessly:

- Israel would remain faithful under a judge.
- They would fall away as soon as the judge passed.
- They would be oppressed by some foreign nation.
- They would repent and cry out to God for deliverance.
- The Lord would send a delivering judge.

At the conclusion of this description, we are reminded that Jehovah announced from this time forward, the Canaanites would not be driven out. Whatever was left after Joshua was buried would remain.

3:1-11 – Othniel vs. Cushan-rishatahim: The Hittites had surged into Assyrian holdings in an area known as Mitanni, which was the northern end of Mesopotamia (includes the City of Charan). This was not the original Hittite people, but an element from within the withered old empire, claiming their former glory. One of their petty Lords extended his conquests into Canaan (v. 8). It's hard to be sure what his name means, given the Hebrew habit of twisting a despised name sarcastically to give it a unique meaning in their language. Scholars tell us this ruler's name as given probably means "Doubly-Evil Cushan." You may recall the difficulty with calling Othniel Caleb's "brother," when they have different fathers -- Caleb, son of Jephunneh versus Othniel, son of Kenaz. Kenaz was supposedly the head of the clan, so it's more likely Othniel was an uncle, but perhaps born later than his nephew. We know nothing of this battle.

3:12-29 – Ehud vs. Eglon: The King of Moab rose up and began ravaging the Jordan East Bank. He also took the area around Jericho. He had an alliance with Ammon and the scattered Amalekites. This was quite likely more of a regional subjugation rather than national. Reading between the lines, we get a picture of a petty tyrant always fearful and suspicious of those around him. It might have been that Eglon was one of several lords eligible for the throne and held it rather precariously with the help of a private troop of bodyguards. Quite likely they were drawn from his relatives. A man in his position could ill afford to trust anyone when there is significant competition for his place. There is a distinct sense of political instability, intrigue and layers of secrecy.

The Benjamites (v. 15) had a large number of lefties and ambidextrous men. Ehud was to carry the tribute, and the official greetings, etc. He also carried a rather long sword (approximately 18 inches/45cm) strapped to his right thigh (v. 16). Many ancient cultures regarded lefties with suspicion if not loathing and would never think to expect a weapon there. This man Ehud was a young nobleman, important enough to bear the tribute as an official representative for his own

tribe of Benjamin, at least.

This being summer, Eglon was taking his ease in a small room atop his royal manse, built on the shore of the Dead Sea, just about where the Jordan flowed into it. This upper room would have been latticed on all sides for maximum cooling. It's unlikely he would deign to appear in person for the presentation of tribute, so we have to imagine courtiers carry the message to him. Once the ceremony was complete (v. 18), the delegation left and Ehud stopped at the entry way where there would have been statues (Hebrew: "quarried" stone) of pagan gods (v. 19). He claimed to have a more private message for the king. Once Eglon heard this, he would have invited this head of the delegation up to the breezy chamber to relate something too important to be trusted to servants. Besides, Eglon was a nervous and vulnerable ruler, not trusting even his own servants. He sent them out before he allowed Ehud to speak. He closed the doors (v. 20). Eglon would have been sitting in a rather informal session, receiving a report from a spy or informer, he thought. Whether Ehud expected this is not the point; he may have been willing to die in the attempt. However, he claimed to have a word from God and Eglon was sure it was good news. He stood as he would before any oracle from a god. Ehud's weapon was lost in the fat of Eglon; his subterfuge was quite sufficient to allow his escape.

His act was heartening and helped rally the soldiers for something they had long wanted (vv. 28ff). They first blocked the fords to prevent reinforcements, then destroyed the royal bodyguard and slaughtered the king's entourage. Reading between the lines again, it would seem the bodyguards were the sole source of Eglon's power. Once they were removed, the rest of the Moabites and their friends weren't too interested in pursuing the matter. Eglon's nervousness would indicate he was not all that popular with his own people.

3:31 – Shamgar vs. Philistines: Shamgar was a Hurrian; "son of Anath" was a figure of speech meaning "warrior," a professional soldier. This fight was probably against an early invasion force and Shamgar took the only plausible weapon at hand at the time, an ox goad. This would have been a long, stiff cane pole, with a sharpened metal point at one end and a chisel-shaped blade at the butt, for scraping the plow. He would have used it as a lance, a long spear-like weapon, but heavier. Most likely a small patrol stumbled upon him, and he took them out and the activity gained the attention of other Philistine patrols in the area. We have to understand the Philistines customarily lined up in a queue to fight one-on-one as an honorable challenge. By day's end, 600 died. This discouraged further Philistine incursions for a while.

4:1-24 – Deborah and Barak: Notice the ruler of Hazor arose at the death of Ehud, indicating Shamgar was active during Ehud's judgeship. Now both were gone. *Jabin* was surely a title instead of a proper name for the ruler of Hazor. Since the city had been destroyed once under Joshua, this would be new occupants pretending to her former glory and power (v. 2). There was a central, upper mound that goes far back into pre-history, but the city Joshua destroyed had spread far out around that central mound. This later re-occupation seems restricted to the original mound and archaeologists have found there hints that this was sponsored by the revived Hittite Empire. This accords with Jabin's use of iron chariots (v. 3), another Hittite innovation. Hazor's ruler managed to re-take enough territory to hold the combined valleys of Meggido and Jezreel. The two together formed a broad open area from the Mediterranean coast north of Mt. Carmel, slanting a bit southeast and running down into the Rift Valley. In such

terrain chariots hold a tremendous advantage. The warlord Sisera was native to Harosheth, a city well-placed where the Kishon River (Meggido Valley) passed through a narrow gorge just above the coastal plains.

Deborah was clearly a national judge, working from under a famous landmark not far from the Tabernacle (v. 5). She summoned Barak from his home far north of Chinnereth, in Kedesh of Naphtali (v. 6f). He was told to raise an army of 10,000 from Zebulon and Naphtali and face Sisera near Mount Tabor, where Barak would have some tactical advantage over the charioteers. Barak lacked sufficient trust in God to go without the prophetess. While her comment about a woman taking the glory might have been taken as a warning that it would be hers, she was actually referring to Jael. Jael was the wife of a Kenite man named Heber, who departed from his kin and moved farther north. He must have become rather powerful and well-known. We cannot estimate the nature of his apparent neutrality, be Sisera certainly believed in it. It was this bunch of Kenites that reported the Israeli army marshaling at Mount Tabor.

As Sisera led his troops toward the mountain, he sought the shallower fords far upriver between Taanach and Meggido. To his utter surprise, he was hit by high water from unseasonal storms, which he would have taken as a manifestation of his god, Baal. We learn this from the Song of Deborah (ch. 5). The Hebrew troops were able to take advantage of Sisera's problem, advancing down from the high ground and catching the Canaanites mostly dismounted and stalled at the ford. The Canaanites were scattered and lost their chariots; Sisera fled on foot. His goal was what he believed were neutral holdings of the detached Kenite Heber, living in the area east of Chinnereth Sea. Jael was the lady of the nomad sheikh and contrived to hide Sisera in her private tent, under a heavy blanket, used as flooring in ancient tents. Instead of water, she gave him milk, which would have made him drowsy on top of his physical exhaustion. However, in the Song of Deborah, it's described more as a large meal of something resembling cottage cheese. It's still a delicacy with Arabs today. While he slept, she was able to drive a tent stake through his temples. This would be a slender metal rod, driven in by a large wooden mallet. Even today, the tent is the responsibility of women among Bedouins, so we can assume she was adept at this. We have no way of knowing her motives for violating this supposed truce between her household and Jabin's people, but to Israel she was a heroine.

5:1-31 – The Song of Deborah: We have a rather difficult time making sense of all the imagery here. The words and syntax are about the oldest samples of Hebrew anywhere in writing. It's very much more archaic than the language of the Book of Judges itself. Part of what we do understand is the chiding of those who chose not to participate and the praise for those did. The East Jordan tribes stayed home, but probably gave it serious thought. Large portions of Zebulon and Naphtali left a few of their own to handle it alone. Most of the tribal leaders were behind it, but wide swaths of the populace were unwilling.

5.3: Gideon and the Midianites

Judges 6:1-10 – We have here a general picture of Arab raiders. They lived in tents, often bringing the whole family. It appears the Midianites would establish a base camp, and then send out raiding parties in all directions. Most likely, they were simply collecting crops after

they were harvested and processed for storage. For the first time we know of, camels were used as combat animals. Their use enabled far longer ranging on non-stop trips. The Ammonites arrogantly moved into the land and occupied open areas as if vacant. In a certain sense, it was becoming true, for during these raids a lot of Israelites hid in caves. Most people took care to travel off the beaten path, often crossing terrain where there were no paths.

6:11-24 – Gideon was nobility. He would have been working with servants, which are seldom mentioned in the biblical text. Under better circumstances, his personal presence might not have been so critical to the task. Threshing wheat in a low place like this is very inefficient. Threshing included the idea of winnowing, but without much wind in this case. The hollow of a wine press would not be large, so not much grain could be threshed at one time. Gideon felt the greeting from the angel was mocking (vv. 12-13). That he wanted a sign (v. 20) is not so much to diminish his character, but is more a measure of his discouragement and desperation. He then realized the visitor was God's direct representative and that it might herald his death, but God reassured him (v. 23).

6:25-32 – There was as much politics as there was religion in what followed. Gideon was required to do something that would be a strong statement about where his loyalty lay. His act deprived the community of their center of pagan worship, which had been sponsored by Gideon's family. He was to take the young bull (previously marked for pagan sacrifice) and offer it to God, in such a way as to be obvious what it was about. He was also to destroy the altar to Baal and the Asherah's "grove" – the word meant anything from a single stump to a large collection. The point was that they were grown, lavishly nurtured, then they were chopped off high and carved into an image. Whatever it was, Gideon made total destruction of the community shrine. So politically sensitive was the act that he did it at night. The community wanted to punish him for this affront to their god. Apparently, Gideon's family was with him on this, because the patriarch (his father Joash) defended him. If Baal is truly a god, let him punish Gideon himself. His answer implied there might be a fight and no one wanted to go that far. They already had trouble enough with Midian.

6:33-40 – At the usual season of harvest, the Midianite hordes moved into the Valley of Jezreel, grazing their camels and harvesting Israel's grain, raiding their other food supplies, etc. Gideon rose up and announced his intention to resist this time – "blowing the trumpet" (*shofar*, a ram's horn hollowed out) should not necessarily be taken literally, but is an expression commonly used in that time. His clan rallied to him and made preparations. During these preparations, Gideon put out his fleece.

7:1-8 – The Well of Harod is not fully identified today, but was probably at the foot of Mount Gilboa on the south side of River Jezreel, or just opposite across the river. Either way, the assembled Israelite troops would be just out of sight around a long bend in the river, with a low crest between them. At the nearest, the Midian army was encamped about 4 miles away. The armed troops of Midian had taken a solid commanding position with good water and grass, while the raiding parties spread out over the land.

Whittling the attacking troops down to a level that would give God the proper credit was tricky. The first bunch to leave did so voluntarily – they simply weren't ready to fight. That would make sense; don't use conscripts, but volunteers. Still too many, the final test was purely tactical

in nature: those who went face down to drink would not be aware of their surroundings. The few who thought to drink from their hands were being cautious and could keep their eyes on surroundings. The result was a mere handful of folks by comparison to the original muster.

7:9-15 – The Lord confirms yet again His support for Gideon, by having him and one other person sneak up and spy on the Midianite camp. They overheard the best evidence that Midian was already worried. This spying mission would have taken place just after nightfall.

7:16-22 – Apparently, the order to attack came that same night, given the method of time keeping. The night was roughly 12 hours, divided into three 4-hour watches. The spying mission could have been completed before the first was up. The battle orders would have taken a few minutes to implement, using clay pots (with handles, “pitchers”) to mask the glow of torches. There was no real need of weapons. This was an example of psychological warfare, because no one actually attacked. In the confusion, the Midianites and their allies attacked each other. They fled to some unidentified location, but it was obviously down in the Jordan Valley. While helter-skelter at first, they would have attempted to stay together in an orderly withdrawal, marching in mass, but without the full complement of camels, many of which would have been sent out with the raiding parties.

7:23-25 – The uproar served as a signal to surrounding communities that now was the time to attack. As the sun rose, the pursuit was joined. The other clans and tribes of Israel were asked to converge on the Jordan Valley from both sides to prevent escape. Messengers would have been dispatched, individual runners moving far faster than marching armies. They would have had plenty of time to arrive and pass the word, it appears, because the slaughter was considered successful.

8:1-3 – The fuss that followed was about captured booty. The Ephraimite leaders charged Gideon with excluding them from an opportunity to reclaim some of their lost wealth, under the custom that to the victor goes the spoils. The battle in the valley near Moreh would have presumably netted quite a lot of stuff. But battles are about glory, too. Gideon’s answer indicated they really didn’t get that much and that the glory of capturing the kings (essentially generals) was a better prize. This indicated they captured the most powerful groups with their plunder, anyway. “We got a little stuff; you got lasting glory.” This answer appeared to pacify the offended leaders.

8:4-17 – The pursuit turned up the Jabbok River Valley (same route in reverse that Jacob took on his return from Damascus). When Gideon requested food support – not even troops – he was rudely dismissed. Since they were technically at war, all communications would have been from the top of the walls to the troops on the ground below. The towns would have remained closed to at least appear they felt threatened by the passing Midianites. These towns were somewhat in the service of the Midianites, having let them escape, and probably gave them safe passage into Canaan in the first place. Why else would this be the goal of the fleeing army as their exit point? When the unidentified speakers on the walls answered arrogantly, Gideon promised to treat them as the collaborators they were.

The Midianites thought they were safe out in the desert. Gideon’s pursuit was wholly unexpected. The attack was successful enough to permanently terrorize the Midianite nation.

Upon his return back down the Jabbok Valley, he mocked the two cities' leaders and punished them as promised. This included leveling the refuge tower of which Penuel was so proud, along with executing their leaders. For Succoth, he first got intelligence on who the city's leaders were, then proceeded to humiliate them in public.

8:18-21 – Gideon queried his captives about an execution they held when they had occupied the area near Mount Tabor. Gideon no doubt knew about this already, but was preparing them for their death, that they would know why they were about to die. Their actions forced upon Gideon the requirement of blood vengeance, for the victims were his literal brothers, of both the same father and mother. Their answer was an attempt at flattery, but to no avail. He attempted to humiliate them by having his young son execute them. Arrogant to the end, they insisted he do it himself. The final note is not praiseworthy, for it implies he took the crescent amulets that were on the camels' collars, superstitiously regarded as protection from demons.

8:22-28 – Their offer was natural and Gideon's refusal to become king is laudable. "Stay on as our king." Instead, he asked that they give him one small part of their war trophies: the gold earrings worn by every free man among the desert tribes. It amounted to about 70 pounds (30 kg) and he made it into an *ephod* – a word describing something that could theoretically be worn as part of priestly regalia, but no one is quite sure what it looked like. Whatever it was, it became a symbol for pagan worship.

8:29-35 – While declining to become king, Gideon nonetheless took advantage of his fame and built quite a large household. He had 70 sons, legitimate heirs and at least one from a Canaanite concubine. This sign of compromise became the source of his family's near demise. The name *Baalberith* means "Lord of the Covenant." While the Lord is indeed a God of covenants, this was not Him being worshipped, but a pagan corruption. It involved at least a temple building with all the pagan trappings of the day. It would have been the center of perhaps a federation of cities in the area, the very thing Joshua went about destroying.

With every judge, we get the distinct sense that Israel as a people sank deeper into superstition and heathen religion. The Law of Moses, along with a large corpus of unwritten teaching in how to deal with Jehovah, was gradually passing from memory.

5.4: Abimelech ben Gideon

Judges 9:1-6 – Gideon was unwilling to take any throne, but his illegitimate son was hardly so noble. Aside from wives with legitimate heirs, Gideon felt a need for a concubine. This woman was a Canaanite, belonging to the clan of Shechemites that had been in the land from long ago. We see the place called Shechem in the days of Abraham (Genesis 12:6), but quite likely that was a scribal update for a much older name. The city traces roots back near the time of the Tower of Babel. When Israel was living in the land with his 12 sons, you may recall the incident where a young man named Shechem raped Dinah, their sister (Genesis 34). While the men of the town were slaughtered, that does not mean every male, nor would that prevent the women from bringing in distant male relatives to repopulate the city. Hamor had other sons beside Shechem. Later, the city became a central focus for worship during the Conquest. The first service of worship in celebration of victory inside Canaan took place on both sides of city, which sat in the saddle between two peaks, Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. The name Shechem was

rather common, meaning “Neck,” and implied someone who worked hard bearing burdens, taken from the idea of a yoke.

We find that this son of Gideon wanted to bear the burden of ruling as king. He left his father’s home in Ophrah and went north to Shechem. While the city had been given to the Levites as a City of Refuge, we can be sure they were at this point still a minor presence there. The place was dominated as yet by the old Canaanite clan of Shechem. Excavations have identified the old Tower of Shechem as a double tower over the gate, which gate faces southeast. Just beside this stood the temple of Baal-berith. Abimelech took advantage of his father’s fame and sought the political support of his mother’s relatives. With this support, he persuaded the old nobility to consider the advantage of having this single son of the aging Gideon – one of their own – ruling in place of the 70 other sons of Gideon, who would surely have to fight it out among them as to who would have primacy.

Apparently, these same nobles were members of a political faction we would call the Shrine Party. These men would hold a great deal of power and influence in the city. The Temple of Baal-berith was no doubt secure enough to function as the city’s treasury, a common arrangement in ancient times. Later we will see that they are not the only party seeking political power in the city. As the official treasurers, they were in a position to disburse a pile of silver to Abimelech to secure his ascendancy over the rest of Gideon’s sons. While not a great deal of money – one piece of silver for each life to be taken – it was a clear symbol of the party’s backing. It was enough to persuade young and foolish men who would do anything for a few coins. They captured all but the youngest son of Gideon. It was clear the action was not a battle, but a serial execution. It probably took place over several days and each was killed much as one might slaughter an animal for sacrifice. Upon his triumphal return to Shechem, the Shrine Party held a ceremony on the open plain in front of the city. This was near an ancient tree, well known for the place where Israel had buried the collection of pagan idols his family kept (Genesis 35:4). It’s also where Joshua had erected a pillar as a monument to the renewal of the Covenant (Joshua 24:26). It was before this pillar they crowned him king. While we know next to nothing of Beth Millo, it would appear this was a large noble family that could muster a powerful force of armed men, based in a fort. While that fort may have been the double tower of Shechem, it seems to have been someplace outside the city.

9:7-21 – From his hideout, the surviving son of Gideon, Jotham, heard of the coronation. He climbed up onto Mount Gerizim, where there is even today a flat triangular table-rock. It’s a perfect pulpit and a single man with a good strong voice could be clearly heard in the city below, even as far as the peak of Ebal beyond. There he told a parable of what had happened. He shows how those with worthwhile occupations have no desire to rule. Only the most worthless dream of ruling. Thus, Abimelech compares nicely to the dry brambles clinging to the side of the mountain at Jotham’s feet. That such could offer a “shadow of protection” is ludicrous on the face of it. Instead, it was the one greatest threat to everything, because these were the first thing to catch fire if hit by stray lightning. What the men of Shechem sought for their protection would eventually destroy them. When his sermon was done, before anyone could act to detain him, Jotham fled to someplace called *Beer* (“The Well”). While many places are so named, a good guess would be Beersheba, far to the south.

9:22-29 – The author of the text makes clear it was the hand of God that caused a falling out between Abimelech and his chief supporters. While evil, he was crafty enough to realize they were an unsteady support, and he was not living in the city where they could easily harm him. So, when three years had passed, it occurred to them that, since they were not good enough to host his court, they would set up ambushes so that anyone bearing tribute to Abimelech, or toll-paying traffic, would be plundered, denying him revenue. In connection with this, a fellow named Gaal came with his cousins during the grape harvest. This was a major festival in what might well be considered the heart of the largest vineyard territory in Canaan. Gaal campaigned for a revival of the old Shechemite nobility to rule, instead of this upstart “king.” He won over the Temple Party, but the city administration remained loyal to Abimelech.

9:30-41 – The mayor, Zebul, advised Abimelech to bring his troops overnight. This would offer quite a sunrise to Gaal. Most battles took place at dawn, the day after arriving at the field of contest. Troops could hardly be expected to fight well after a full day’s march. Gaal had issued a challenge to Abimelech and expected to have a fair chance to see what he was up against before he decided to fight or flee. Gaal’s reactions seem to indicate he expected a small force. He had seen no evidence of a major encampment.

Instead, as he went out to face Abimelech, he was greeted by a substantial force. While the Hebrew wording is difficult, it seems to describe a force that came over the ridge directly across the open field in front of the city gate, with another group coming up out of the trees, of which the huge ancient shrine oak was the closest. Two more groups were descending from the hilltops on either side of the city. When Gaal wondered out loud what he was seeing, Zebul mocked him, implying that he was seeing the ghosts of his own guilt. When the battle was joined, Gaal and his rebels fled. Abimelech didn’t bring the battle inside the city walls at that time. Rather, he had a more dastardly plan in mind. He knew Zebul would gather enough power from those opposed to the Temple Party and have Gaal and his kin evicted from the city. Abimelech backed off to a nearby town, Arumah.

9:42-49 – Under normal circumstances, the defeated bunch would have been driven out under amnesty. They would have made a deal to leave the city under a promise that they could travel unmolested. Yet, no sooner had the last of the train cleared the gate, and then Abimelech’s troops attacked, killing everyone, including women and children. This time divided into three companies, one group of attackers blocked the city gates to prevent retreat, while the other two attacked the travelers in the field. Then the troops merged into a single force and turned to attack the city itself. After decimating the civilian population, he turned to the soldiers who had been quartered in the gate towers. This surviving group had moved into the temple, which was probably well fortified itself. The Temple Party had fled there with all their families. The structure must have been partly of wood, for Abimelech told his troops to follow his example in cutting a leafy branch for tinder to start a fire. Anyone who has played much with tree cutting and fire knows green oak leaves burn exceedingly well, once a fire is started on dry grass. His final act was to ritually sow the city with salt, which was a warning to anyone not to rebuild the city or replicate their rebellion.

9:50-57 – It’s safe to assume the city of Thebez, 13 miles to the north, was party to this revolt. Abimelech wasted no time in attacking that city. While Shechem’s double tower was technically

outside the city proper, the tower in Thebez was inside the walls. After breaching the walls, he still had to flush the inhabitants from their refuge. Before he could repeat his fire trick, a woman dropped an upper millstone on his head from above. This would have been a large flat wheel of stone, light enough for one person to carry, but heavy enough to break toes if dropped on one's foot. From a second-floor level, it was fatal, though not immediately in this case. To die by the hand of a woman was the ultimate insult for an arrogant warrior like Abimelech. He persuaded his equipment steward to finish him off first.

As soon as he was dead, it was as if everyone woke up from an awful nightmare. Suddenly, the fighting stopped. As if puzzled and embarrassed to find themselves there, the soldiers dispersed. The author reminds us that Abimelech was repaid for his evil, as was the city of Shechem. Jotham's parable was prophetic.

10:1-5 – We are told of Tola, who came next, but whose judgeship went unremarked. A few more details are given of Jair, whose sons founded the cities known as *Havoth-jair* scattered along the Yarmuk Valley and hills directly south of there, in northern Gilead. Riding on donkeys (actually, onagers) signified their noble status.

5.5: Jephthah

Judges 10:6-9 – Because of their unfaithfulness in chasing every pagan god and goddess from the Canaanites and surrounding nations, God withdrew His protection from Israel. The wording in Hebrew is emphatic that the Children of Israel left no stone unturned in looking for new deities to worship. Thus, they fell under the oppression of two nations. They were pressed on one side by the ever-increasing presence of the Philistines and on the other side by Amorites. In the midst of all this, the Ammonites had mobilized to take advantage of their weakness.

10:10-18 – The folks called on God and He told them their sin. They turned around and put aside their pagan habits. The Ammonites had gathered in Gilead. This had once been their home long ago between the Arnon and Jabbok Rivers, but the Amorites had driven them out into the wilderness to the east. The army of Israel marshaled at Mizpeh (Mizpah). The word means "tower" and could be any number of places in Israel where such a structure stood, but was probably the one northeast of Gibeon. The leaders of the Gilead clans, as the primary victims of this event, decided that if they could find a decent commander, he would become their king.

11:1-3 – There was a particularly heroic warrior named Jephthah. He was the illegitimate son of Gilead by a harlot. When Gilead's legal heirs grew up, they ran off this whoreson. Obviously, they had the support of the community elders in this act. He moved to the area called Tob, just to the northeast of Gilead, far out in the upper Valley of Jair. Being such a grand warrior and leader, all sorts of adventurous types gravitated to him. The term "lawless men" means those like himself who had little to lose.

11:4-11 – So when the Ammonites began ravaging the land, the elders sent messengers to Jephthah and begged him to come home to help out with the war effort. He answered harshly with the question, "Where were you when I needed you?" They promised to make him their king and he yielded. The whole thing was confirmed in a solemn ceremony before the Lord –

that is, in the presence of the priests, etc. with lots of witnesses.

11:12-28 – Jephthah showed incredible tact in dealing the Ammonites. He explained how the nation endeavored to pass through in peace and found the disputed territory in the hands of the Amorites. While Israel avoided conflict with Edom and Moab, they were directly attacked by the Amorites. They trusted God, won the battle and won the land by right of conquest. Showing his limited understanding of Jehovah, Jephthah commented that a nation should gladly accept whatever land their god gives them – Chemosh, the Ammonite god, had apparently given them their territory east of the Amorites, just as Jehovah had given Gilead to Israel. Balak never went to war with Israel but tried to persuade Jehovah to abandon His people. Would the Ammonites claim to be any better able against Israel? In many ways, the Ammonites were regarded as more or less one with Moab, since they were both sons of Lot. Moab’s lack of dispute over Aroer, right on the north bank of the Arnon, gave Israel tacit right to keep it. In all that time, not once did the Ammonites present their claim. Now they want to stake their claim? Jephthah used a customary exaggeration of about 300 years, a round number, when it may have been just over 200.

11:29-40 – Jehovah fell upon Jephthah and empowered him to lead the army over the Jordan, past some unknown landmark called Mizpah of Gilead and right down on the encamped army of the Ammonites. He defeated them and pursued them. The narrative names places we cannot now identify, but the scene described is one of pushing them back out into the wilderness areas. The Ammonite forces were so badly reduced they could not rise again for quite some time.

In the midst of all this, we see Jephthah vowing to offer Jehovah a human sacrifice. He clearly had insufficient knowledge to understand this was not a part of God’s ways. However, by this time the copies of the Law of Moses may have been unseen for a long time and certainly not commonly taught, as the priests had been commanded. I’m sure Jephthah expected to lose one of his better servants, but it was his daughter and only child who met him that day. He was heartbroken. There is no justification for assuming he simply made her the equivalent of a nun. Since she did not weep for something so simple as being forced to remain a virgin. Rather, it was a deep shame for a woman to die childless. Without giving birth, she had completely failed her purpose, according to that culture then. The resulting festival of weeping would have little meaning if she had simply lived without marriage.

12:1-7 – Ephraim had been slow to support Gideon in the past and pulled the same stunt here. Then they had the gall to complain that Jephthah had hastily gone off to battle without them. Recall that Jephthah had gone in God’s timing, at God’s urging. Taunting the Gileadites as deserters of the tribe of Ephraim, they mobilized and crossed over the Jordan in Gilead. So, Jephthah’s army reassembled and met their cousins at Zaphon, somewhat north of the Jabbok on the eastern hills above the Jordan. The Ephraimite army was soundly defeated. Further, to prevent them escaping back home, elements of the Gileadite forces held the fords of the Jordan and proposed a test to see if anyone crossing was from the West Bank. By this time, the northern tribes had lost the sharp “sh” pronunciation, having softened it to an “s” sound. It became apparent when they were asked to pronounce the word “shibboleth” – meaning “an ear of grain.”

Jephthah’s tempestuous rule ended after six years. His burial appears to have been near the fort

from which he launched his attack on Ammon, Mizpah of Gilead.

12:8-15 – We next see relatively uneventful periods of rule from Ibzan, Elon and Abdon.

5.6: Samson, Part 1

Judges 13:1-7 – After the Philistines had established their presence on the southwest coast of Canaan, they began to exercise dominion over Israel. Their rule was harsh and oppressive and was allowed by God because of yet another apostasy. This domination continued unchallenged for 40 years. Such a long period of judgment was in part due to their complete failure to call on their God. Conspicuous by its absence is any mention of calling on Jehovah.

The Tribe of Dan is described as being in a camp. This indicates the degree of difficulty they were having, since they had never possessed their allotment of land. What little they may have occupied was taken from them by the Philistines, so they were already prepared to migrate to another region of Canaan. While they were thus abiding as yet in the wadi just downslope from Jerusalem, in the Valley of Sorek near Zorah, one of the local families had a visit from God. An angel appeared to the barren wife of a man name Manoah. The end of their public shame was heralded by this visitation, typically marking the birth of someone great. The angel ordered that both mother and child must come under the Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:2-21). She reported the visit to her husband, apparently believing the visitor was simply a prophet of God.

13:8-14 – The man requested in prayer that the “Man of God” would return and confirm his wife’s report. When the visitor reappeared to her, Manoah’s wife ran to get him. The angel reaffirmed his instructions from God, leaving no doubt in Manoah’s mind what was required.

13:15-23 – Manoah also had in mind to give proper honor for this blessing. The angel’s name would be meaningless to Manoah, but it was a typical request of that day. To know someone’s name was believed to offer some power to invoke the person so named. Had the man been a prophet of God, he still might decline such honor, but all the more so an angel. However, it must be clear that Manoah suffered a bit from having mixed notions of paganism, along with the general low level of proper knowledge of God that was endemic in the nation of Israel at that time. He offered to prepare a ritual meal to honor his guest. The angel declared Manoah should instead make an offering to God. It would be typical of people at this time to offer as much hospitality as an honored guest might accept. The motive was not entirely selfless, because to have such a powerful man staying in their home would promise all manner of blessings from God. As soon as the offering was made, the angel ascended in the flames, an unmistakable sign he was not human. Manoah’s fearful reaction was typical of someone largely ignorant of the Word of God and his wife answered his concerns correctly.

13:24-25 – The child she bore was named Samson (Heb. *Shim-shone* - “little sun”). This showed how far things had gone, for just across the Valley of Sorek there was a shrine to the sun god at Beth-shemesh (“House of the Sun”). For Manoah to name his son after the local shrine god indicated the deep ignorance of God’s Word. Still, God kept His promise. Samson became quite the leader among his people.

14:1-9 – It was a mere 5 miles or so down the valley to Timnath, just over in Philistine territory. Samson fell hard for a young lady there and asked his father to negotiate a marriage, as was the

custom of the time. He waved aside his father's objections and insisted she was the best choice. This would be a violation of the Nazarite Vow, which we often see Samson seems to despise. His parents went along with it, certain it was God at work making an opportunity to embarrass the Philistines. As a part of this customary negotiation between families, the trio went down and stayed in Timnath a few days.

While there, in a place holding fruit forbidden to Samson – a vineyard – he was attacked by a young lion. The lions native to that area were relatively small, rather like the American cougar. They were deadly, yet Samson shredded the creature as if it were a tiny lamb, because of the power of God working in him. He didn't report the incident to his parents. On a subsequent visit to his intended bride, Samson checked the place where the lion was killed and found that bees had made a hive in the carcass. Bees won't approach rotting flesh, but this dry climate would have desiccated the body quickly, providing a good shelter. He managed to pull out some honeycomb, touching the carcass in violation of his Nazarite vow. He was munching this on the way home and brought some to his parents, without revealing how he had gotten it. His silence was probably to keep from revealing he had violated his vow.

14:10-20 – Manoah went for one last visit to finalize the details of this odd marriage, after which Samson proceeded to host a celebration according to custom. The local notables selected 30 local boys to ensure all social obligations were met. Naturally this would call for some sort of competition, measuring each other. We don't know the rules of his wager and riddle, but they evidently found it appropriate. Samson offered to provide 30 nice outfits to these fellows if they could solve his riddle. If not, they would have to collect that much for him.

Such outfits would have included body armor and weapons. This was probably more than they could afford, but it appears Samson was prepared to make good on his wager. The text is a bit confusing here, but it appears the celebration was supposed to last seven days, after which the union would be consummated. After three days they had no clue to the riddle and blackmailed the bride into wheedling the answer out of Samson. He hadn't told his own family; how could she expect higher regard? Still, her constant nagging did him in and he told her.

The group of young men sprang their surprise on him just before they were to depart and leave the couple alone. It was obvious to him how they got the answer, and his anger was boundless. He left the celebration and his bride, which would be a scandal, indicating she had been found unfaithful. To prevent such a public embarrassment, she was given to the best man. From there Samson traveled down to Ashkelon, a major city of the Philistines about 20 miles away.

Chances are the folks there wouldn't know who he was, nor would the folks back in Timnath hear about it. His encounter with 30 men was likely one or two at a time in ambush or in some sort of challenge combat, which was common in Philistine culture. By taking advantage of the right of plunder, he paid off his lost wager at the cost of 30 Philistine warriors. Samson would have chosen his opponents on the basis of their attire and good armor.

5.7: Samson Part 2

Judges 15:1-8 – Thinking to reconcile with his abandoned bride, Samson brought a gift to her house to make amends. Her father wouldn't allow him to see her but attempted to distract him with what he felt was a better offer: the younger sister. While we cannot know precisely why

this angered him, we can see it certainly did. In his rage, he decided that the Philistines as a whole were at fault.

The Hebrew word is ambiguous; the beasts he captured are more likely jackals than foxes. He caught a large number and tied them in pairs. Then he tied their tails together with a torch and lit it. When released, the tethered pairs ran zigzagging through the countryside, setting afire various Philistine crops. The loss was quite large, and the Philistines inquired who caused the damage. Whoever answered told the whole story, connecting the damage to vengeance over a soured marriage and to the family in Timnath. The officials punished the family with burning to death. Samson's response was to again take vengeance, this time on the official party that carried out the immolation. The phrase "smote them hip and thigh" (v.8) means he slaughtered the whole group of them. He then retired to stay in a cave near Etam, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem.

15:9-17 – The Philistines weren't just going to take this lying down. They sent a military expedition up to Lehi, half-way up the Sorek Valley from their border. When the local Israelite officials asked the cause of this obviously punitive raid, they were advised to find Samson and hand him over. They gathered together 3000 men to show him how seriously they viewed this and went to Samson's hideout at Etam. Their discussion with him indicated Samson felt he had simply been getting even. After promising they would not physically attack him themselves, so that he wouldn't have to defend himself and kill any of his countrymen, he agreed to be bound with new ropes, which would be stronger than used ropes.

When the Philistines saw Samson bound, they burst into celebration. Once actually among them, Samson was seized by God's power and snapped the ropes like soft linen twine. Unlike other battle scenes, we here get the distinct feeling of a wild melee in a cluttered camp. He managed to find a donkey's jawbone, which would be shaped like two hatchets side by side, joined at the base of the handle and killed a thousand of them. Being the witty poet, he composed a victory song about turning the tables on the Philistines. The place had been named Lehi ("Jaw") probably because of the shape of the bend in the valley. It gained a new name: Hill of the Jawbone. He wisely tossed the weapon away, preventing it from becoming an object of veneration.

15:18-20 – The battle took place in a dry area, probably in the dry season. While wandering about the battlefield, he was seized by a terrible thirst and cried out to God. Was he to wreak so much vengeance on Philistia only to die of thirst? God allowed him to discover a spring that broke open nearby. He named the spring *Enhakkore* – "The Spring of He Who Called" – and the name stuck. It was common for new sources of water to be named by the discoverer. It is mentioned in passing that his judgeship lasted 20 years.

16:1-3 – Samson's exploits of strength continued, as did his immoral living. While visiting a prostitute in the city of Gaza, some troops set an ambush outside the city gates. These gates would have been closed and barred at night. They expected to catch him when he came out at the opening of the gates at dawn. Samson didn't wait, but simply tore off the gates and door frame as one unit and carried them all 40 miles away to a hill near Hebron.

16:4-17 – Apparently spending most of his days in the Sorek Valley, Samson again falls for a

Philistine woman. We have a name this time: Delilah. The arrangement is not described, but it would seem simple co-habitation. The Philistines governed their coastal region through the office of a lord over each of the chief cities: Gaza, Ekron, Ashkelon, Gath and Ashdod. It was these five lords who came to visit Delilah and persuade her to help them by offering each 1100 pieces of silver if she could reveal to them the source of Samson's inhuman strength. He responded with several lies: seven new bowstrings, new ropes, weaving his 7 locks of hair together and so on. Each sounded plausible to her in her pagan belief system. Each time, a Philistine ambush was in the house and he rose up from the various bindings and killed them. Why it is he would continue going back again and again, knowing what awaited him is confusing only to modern Westerners. He wanted what he wanted and didn't expect Delilah to be faithful.

16:18-21 – Eventually she wore him down and he spilled the truth. She recognized the connection instantly with his Nazarite vow and his long hair. Every other part of the Nazarite vow could be broken and recovered shortly. This item would require quite some time to recover. So, she cut his hair and the trap was sprung. This time, he was no greater than any mere man. He was captured, taken to their work prison and blinded. They also bound him with brass fetters, just to make sure and forced him to grind grain on a large mill usually run by a draught animal.

16:22-31 – However, they forgot about the hair issue over time. We have no idea how long the hair or the time, but we do now there came a point when God was ready to use him again. It became long enough for him to renew the Nazarite vow. This came at the time when the Philistines were honoring their god Dagon, whom they had adopted from the Syrian city of Ugarit. This came no doubt during their association with the renewed Hittite Empire.

The celebration called for the five lords to gather in the temple, which seems to have been built like a theater. In the midst of this, wishing to credit Dagon with their capture and humiliation of Samson, they had their enemy brought to the temple. The place where he was chained was between the two central pillars holding up the roof of the structure. The best seats in the house were on the roof, overlooking an open area in the center. Samson asked his tender let him lean on those pillars. He prayed to Jehovah for the return of his strength one last time, so that his calling might be completed. The Lord granted his request and Samson was able to move the massive pillars from their place, collapsing the entire building in a jumble of cut stone blocks and crushed bodies of the Philistine nobility. The body count in that one event was higher than that of his entire 20-year judgeship together.

His family managed to remove his remains from this mess and buried his body in the family grave.

5.8: Migration of Dan

Our narrative ties up loose ends, explaining why the City of Dan remained deeply pagan throughout its history, and whence came its pagan priesthood. The nation of Israel had sunk into a deep spiritual ignorance. The Law of Moses was all but forgotten, honored only in a smattering of cultural reflexes and badly diluted with heathen superstition. The writer of this portion clearly lived during the Monarchy Period and so described the times as hopelessly

lawless.

17:1-6 – The location of the story is some unidentified hamlet in the mountains of Ephraim, presumably near Shiloh. A young man of noble birth, introduced to us as Micah, had stolen a pile of silver from his mother. She had pronounced a curse on it and the fellow obviously feared its power (v.2). In her joy at recovery, she attempted to undo the curse by devoting a portion of it religious purpose, giving it to a silversmith to fashion into an idol. The language describes a wooden carving with the silver applied as a coating. The artisan would have been allowed to keep a certain amount of the silver from the project. Micah took the new idol and gave it a central place in his shrine. The shrine included an “ephod” – something used in divination – and some wooden idols for a supporting cast. He commissioned one of his sons as a full-time priest. Thus, in Micah’s poor benighted mind, he had established himself in Jehovah’s good graces.

17:7-13 – A young Levite, who was supposed to teach the Law of Moses, was at loose ends, looking for a chance to capitalize on his position in seeking a better job than simply joining the dozens already hanging about the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Likely he had come up from his family home in Bethlehem for his rotation in the temple service and was hoping to improve his circumstances while in the area. We later learn his name was Jonathan, known to be a “son” of Gershom (also spelled Gershon) – that is, descended from the Gershomite Clan of the Tribe of Levi, those responsible for carrying the Tabernacle furnishings when moving. They were otherwise hauling just about anything for temple use – menial labor, but requiring a devoted cadre, holy unto the task (Numbers 4:21ff). How it is his family had moved to Bethlehem, 10 miles SE of Jerusalem, when their allotment was across the northern end of Canaan (Joshua 21:27-33) is not mentioned.

This young Levite, with a certain social standing, was probably traveling from town to town, looking for a sponsor. Passing by Micah’s home, he was offered the customary hospitality given to VIPs. Upon learning the Levite’s ambition, Micah just knew Jehovah was smiling on him, for here was an official priest of God looking for just such a situation. Micah installed him as the new household priest and was ever more certain of God’s favor.

18:1-6 – The Tribe of Dan, pressed into a narrow strip in the western foothills of the Judean Ridge, was ready to make a move. They sent out 5 of their best men to survey the land and find a likely place. As leading men, they were offered lodging in Micah’s household. They recognized the voice of the previously wandering Levite. Finding this genuine priest of Jehovah and a fancy shrine, they asked him to perform divination on their behalf. He assured them their mission would succeed and they departed in a positive frame of mind.

18:7-10 – They found the City of Laish, or Leshem, probably a colony of Sidonians, living prosperously and without any significant security arrangements. Of particular note was their isolation from Sidon and no other local alliances. The spies brought back a report to their tribal leaders encouraging a war party to go conquer and colonize.

18:11-13 – This war party was so confident of success, they brought all their families, animals and property. This means traveling rather slowly. The first stop outside the Upper Sorek Valley was a campsite west of Kiriath-Jearim, formerly Baalah of the Gibeonite Confederation. Their

stay gave the place the name “Camp of Dan” which stuck from then on. Following the same path as the spies (now guides), they also passed by Micah’s home.

18:14-21 – Remembering the good word they got from the household priest, the guides mentioned him to the leaders of the expedition. It was decided they had a greater need of his service and the contents of the pagan shrine than Micah did. They began gathering all the furnishings and invited Micah to join them. Ever the ambitious one, Jonathan quickly agreed. Expecting a hostile reaction, the soldiers positioned themselves to the rear of the formation.

18:22-26 – Micah mounted a recovery effort. He found himself outnumbered and the Danite expedition would not even listen to his complaint. Lacking sufficient force to respond, Micah went home. Clearly, his mother’s curse came true, and the apparent blessing was short-lived.

18:27-31 – The expedition arrived in the valley above Lake Huleh, the source of the Jordan River and managed to take the city of Laish and its surrounding lands. They rebuilt the place and called it after their tribe, Dan. They built Jonathan a new shrine and he became the progenitor of a long line of priests serving the city and its pagan temple until Assyria came and took the northern tribes of Israel captive. Indeed, the city served as one of the two centers of worship to rival the Temple of Jerusalem, when the northern tribes went their separate way under Jeroboam.

5.9: The Crime of Gibeah

It is hard to imagine the degree of moral decline that set in before there was a king over Israel. This last section of Judges helps to explain several things:

- just how badly the Law was ignored or unknown
- why the tribe of Benjamin was so small
- how the tribe came to be so prominent

Not to be confused with the pagan city of Gibeon nearby, Gibeah can be thought of as the tribal capital of Benjamin’s small territory. It was just north of Jerusalem, which was still in Jebusite hands.

Judges 19:1-14 – We have an unknown Levite, apparently living near the Tabernacle at Shiloh. He traveled to Bethlehem and took a concubine. While not forbidden, such arrangements were discouraged in the Law. After a time, she “played the whore against him.” Whether that is meant literally is in dispute, but she surely did so in Covenant terms. She left a man serving Jehovah in the Tabernacle and went away into pagan living.

The Levite could have had her executed but was not that kind of man. He went to retrieve her lovingly. She had returned to her hometown and when the Levite found her, she brought him home to her father. Her father was overjoyed by this meeting and persuaded the Levite to stay awhile. Motives are not mentioned, but he pressured the Levite to stay longer than planned. At midday, the Levite departed with his concubine and two servants, riding donkeys. The dozen miles to the Jebusite stronghold brought them near sunset. The servants were eager to seek lodging there, but the Levite would have none of it. He observed the scruple of refusing lodging among pagan enemies.

19:15-26 – They pressed farther north and reached Gibeah. With adequate supplies, the Levite proposed to spend the night in the open town square. Just being inside the city gates was safety from wild beasts and that was good enough. As the skies darkened, an older fellow hurried in from the fields and saw them there. Apparently, they were acquainted with each other, as the old man was originally from the Levite’s hometown. He insisted the party lodge with him. While he may have been observing old-fashioned courtesy, it’s more likely that he knew all too well the current moral climate of that city and did not approve.

Most city dwellers of any means had a home with a courtyard. Visit any European nation’s countryside, and you’ll see many of the better farmhouses built that way. While doors themselves weren’t that secure, an enclosed courtyard would have been built with rather heavy gates. It would have required some heavy work to break in, but it appears that was a part of the threat. The scene that follows echoes that of the angels’ experience in Sodom some 1000 years before. The chief city of Benjamin had sunk that low. The phrase “Sons of Belial” is more than just a figure of speech. These men had entered a pagan cult that called for this behavior, probably one of the Baals. Raping a servant of Jehovah would be a combined religious and political act.

The offer of women was rejected, but the Levite sent out the concubine anyway. Nothing can justify this act; it shows just how deeply the moral decline had gone. Such treatment of women as animals is definitely not consistent with the Law. The horde of men gang-raped the concubine to the extent she died. She had managed to crawl back to the gate of the courtyard.

19:27-30 – At dawn, the Levite tried to arouse her, but she was dead. He loaded her body on the beast she had been riding and went home. There, he carved up her remains as the symbol behind a message to the leadership of each of the Twelve Tribes. Their reaction was strong. They agreed that nothing this evil had happened since the Exodus.

20:1-11 – So the nation gathered at Mizpah, a town on the northern edge of Benjamin’s tribal territory. Whether for war, politics or even sacred assembly, it would have been the same crowd for any purpose. This was the leadership of the nation. They were numbered at 400,000. The leaders of Benjamin could not have been unaware of such a gathering. The Levite was asked to relate his story and it was just too much for them. They determined that no one would go home without first taking some sort of action. They settled on a drawing of lots to determine who should represent the nation. It would mean sending roughly one-tenth of the force to fight, while the rest would gather supplies in support of what might be an extended effort. This atrocity had brought the nation together as never before and they wisely began calling on Jehovah.

20:12-17 – The first act was to send messengers throughout Benjamin’s territory. They first publicly declared the rape night a crime, and then demanded that the guilty should be turned over for judgment. The issue was framed in terms of holiness: Sin must be purged. The Benjamites resented this intrusion on what they considered a local matter and mustered their own forces in preparation for the confrontation. It is worth noting this is not some empty gesture, as the Benjamites were easily some of the best warriors of Israel. Not only were many of them lefties, but quite skillful at long-range weapons – slingshots and archery. There were a surprisingly large number of professional soldiers.

20:18-28 – After seeking Jehovah’s guidance at Shiloh, the first attack was led by Judah. The Benjamites were outnumbered but took advantage of their distance weapons in battle to weaken the opposition before making direct contact. The troops of Judah would be in some disarray from the missiles and unready to join battle. On the next day, it was much the same story. This time the whole army gathered at the Tabernacle for fasting and prayer. We may be sure God took them seriously before, but here they were making a commitment far greater than before. When God was sure He had their undivided attention, He changed the course of events. The High Priest again came before the Lord and was assured they should try yet again and were promised success this time.

20:29-48 – The next day they assembled for battle as before but set up an ambush. Since Gibeah was Benjamin’s safe fortress against defeat, it was necessary to remove this haven to ensure victory, as well as bring the judgment directly where it belonged, to the city that hosted this heathen debauchery. As the field forces melted under the rain of missiles as before, the Benjamites got too confident and ran out of the shadow of the city walls. When the fleeing national troops reassembled (the site of Baal-tamar is unidentified), the pursuing Benjamites had left the city undefended, just as had happened under Joshua at Ai. The ambush forces rose up out of the fields west of the city and destroyed it. The smoke of the fires was the signal for the national troops to turn and engage Benjamin. The majority of Benjamin’s forces were killed. A mere handful escaped to Rimmon. The carnage did not stop, however, until the rest of the Benjamite people had been killed.

21:1-4 – The thrill of victory was short-lived. Once complete, the reprisal left everyone with a sense of remorse. Obviously, they had gone too far. In their indignation before the battles, they had universally vowed before Jehovah not to allow any of their daughters to marry a Benjamite. The nature of the vow precluded undoing it. The thought of cutting off the whole tribe was too much to bear, as the whole of Benjamin was a mere handful of surviving warriors.

21:5-12 – They needed a loophole. Taking note of another vow made at the assembly in Mizpeh, they investigated the possibility that any city had failed to send troops in response to the Levite’s grisly message. It turned out Jabesh-gilead, in the Jordan Valley just above where the Brook Cherith flowed into the river, had not sent a single man. The vow had been to destroy any such city and so the troops turned to yet one more raid of reprisal and carried out their vow. Only virgin women were allowed to live, but that was still not enough to begin the task of rebuilding Benjamin.

21:13-25 – A group of messengers was sent to declare peace to the Benjamites at Rimmon and persuade them to come down to Shiloh. The brides were given, but it left them short: 400 virgins of Jabesh-gilead for 600 surviving soldiers of Benjamin. Determined not to fall short of any effort to revive Benjamin, one final measure was proposed. Since giving their daughters was forbidden, the Benjamites would have to be allowed to kidnap brides. To avoid violence, the leadership of the nation decided to wait until the next festival that brought crowds down to Shiloh. The Benjamites were advised to hide in the vineyards on the hillsides around Shiloh. When the virgins made their processional dance around the area, the men were to nab what they could from the crowd of eligibles. The leadership promised to intercede with the girls’ relatives if trouble arose. Having secured a bride for each man, they returned to their destroyed

cities and rebuilt.

Reading between the lines, we can see that this was the turning point in many ways. As a sort of compensation, the Tribe of Benjamin hereafter are accorded much deference. National leaders made every effort to rebuild the tribe, seeking ways to compensate for what turned out to be injustice. Also, having such a small number, the Tribe of Benjamin had a very easy time of keeping genealogical records. Upon returning from the Exile in Babylon, they were the one tribe that knew exactly who was related to whom. Further, this wave of sentiment here at the end of the Period of Judges paved the way for Saul's coronation as king, for he was a Benjamite. It is noted in the text one last time that this story took place before there was a king, with no structure to guide the people or to enforce the Law on any consistent basis.

5.10: The Story of Ruth

Ruth is Scripture, but also one of the most moving love stories. While it's quite likely the book comes to us through the work of Samuel, it is uncertain whether he composed the story. It's obvious he was not the last editor, as there is mention of Ruth's connection to King David, who rose to prominence after Samuel's death.

Ruth 1 – A man of the Tribe of Judah – Elimelech – living during the period of Judges fled with his family to Moab to escape a famine in Israel. This meant a journey of roughly 50 miles, assuming they went the better route north of the Dead Sea. Recall that Moab is on the eastern shore of that sea, with her northern border at the River Arnon, about halfway down the coast.

While there, Elimelech died, and his two sons married local women. This was not contrary to the Law of Moses, provided the women adopted Judaism. We can assume they did, insofar as anyone kept the Law back then. Then the two sons died, and the household was not but widows. In ancient times, this was a guarantee of poverty. Naomi had had enough misery and tragedy, so proposed to release her daughters-in-law back to their own people, as they were young enough for some hope of remarriage.

On the way home, she persuaded Orpah to accept this idea, but Ruth would have none of it. She had become thoroughly attached to her mother-in-law and risked a great deal to help her survive. When they arrived in Bethlehem ("House of Bread"), at the beginning of the barley harvest, everyone marveled to see her return, speaking her name, which meant "Pleasant." She insisted they call her "Mara," meaning bitterness. Don't mistake her words as blaming God in our modern sense. She had accepted her fate and was still trusting Jehovah to take care of her. She clearly knew in Whose hands her fate rested. Her comment is in the same vein as Job's "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away."

2:1-3 – One of Elimelech's relatives fared much better financially. His name was Boaz, and he owned a great deal of land. In ancient times it was common at grain harvest to leave a few stray heads lying here and there. Conditions of agriculture would produce a crop that was thin in spots, short stalks here and there and so forth. Given that most landowners paid day laborers to harvest their crops, these areas were bypassed. The method of harvest was to cut an armload of what amounts to tall dry grass, tie it in a bundle (sheaf) with a few loose stalks and leave the sheaf standing in the field. At the end of the day, these would be gathered and stacked for

processing later. The entire process resulted in stray stalks falling out here and there. In Leviticus 19:10ff Jehovah clearly demands that such losses were to be left for the poor to glean, especially widows. While they would thus have to work a bit harder to get much grain, one could usually gather enough to make it worthwhile.

Ruth suggested Naomi let her glean in the fields. These fields were all in one area, with markings, but apparently no fencing, between different owners. Ruth could ignore the boundaries so long as she didn't get in the way. At one point found herself in the section belonging to Boaz. As relatives, Naomi and Ruth had an even stronger claim on his gleanings than the simple demands of the Law. By this kinship Boaz was supposed to make some minimal effort to take care of Naomi, but the obligation was a moral one, not a matter of direct command. Boaz was not the nearest relative living.

2:4-23 – When Boaz made his inspection that day, after a hearty greeting of the reapers, he asked about the young woman gleaning. His steward identified her as his relative and he immediately stated his intent to extend his favor on her efforts. His stated reason was that he knew well her circumstances and that she had taken on herself a burden of responsibility in caring for an elderly widow. He offered far more hospitality than was necessary, or even customary. Her humility is genuine, and we have a picture of two people with unusually high character. Then he ordered his workers to be sloppy enough in harvesting to ensure she got plenty without much work. She brought home an “ephah” of barley grains, roughly the same volume as about 5 gallons of water (22 liters). Naomi was impressed and asked whose field had yielded so much. When Ruth mentioned the name Boaz, Naomi recognized him as her husband's relative, using a phrase implying he had right of redemption (Leviticus 25:25ff). So, Ruth stayed in his fields for the duration of the harvest.

3:1-5 – We get a picture here that Ruth was still quite young. Though known to be a despised Moabite, she had quickly established herself as honorable. With no other family support to work on her behalf, Ruth had only Naomi to arrange a second marriage for her. Tradition has it Boaz was already quite old and apparently a bachelor still. There is a suggestion in the text his wealth and good reputation were not enough to overcome some unknown deficiency that kept him single. Ruth could have easily gone after a younger and more desirable man and surely Boaz assumed she would. The only family within reach of Ruth was her mother-in-law, so it fell to Naomi to arrange a marriage for her.

3:6-13 – Keep in mind the cultural settings that placed significant barriers in the way. There were few situations in which an honorable man would address a woman not of his household or employed by him. Naomi cannot approach him about a marriage proposal, because that's the province of men only. She instructs Ruth in the customs regarding this, then suggests Ruth do something that would normally be scandalous. At the end of a good harvest, Boaz would spend the night on the threshing floor, ostensibly to guard his grain, but it was a good excuse to sleep on high ground during the season of cool breezes. As soon as reputable folks were in bed asleep, Ruth approached Boaz and lay down at his feet. During the night he awoke and was startled by the form lying at his feet. When he asked who it was, she identified herself and essentially proposed marriage. That is, she asked him to execute the levirate obligation to raise up children in his cousin's name (Deuteronomy 25:5ff). The concept was keeping a family line

from dying out if it could be helped. In this case, Boaz would be the nearest eligible relative, except for one other man. Boaz praised her on the grounds that she once again took the more honorable course. She chose a lonely elder bachelor over any number of younger eligible men.

3:14-15 – The most difficult thing for us to grasp here is the completely different perspective folks had toward marriage in those days. We are taught to think of romantic love as a powerful force that takes its own path, often in complete disregard of common sense. We assume happiness is invariably bound to what amounts to irresponsible passion. The ancient Hebrew saw love as devotion, trusting passion to grow from that. Any man who could redeem her would have to be wealthy. Ruth could have sought out a younger, more desirable redeemer and had a long marriage and the attendant social opportunities. In seeking out Boaz, she was sacrificing all that, giving a few years' happiness to someone who had given up hope on marriage. However, to maintain her high honor, he suggested she could stay only until dawn neared and then must depart before she was recognized. He also had her take home as much grain as a human could possibly carry, as a gift for Naomi in recognition of the part she played in this.

3:16-18 – She managed to arise while it was still dark, as evidenced by Naomi's question. Upon hearing Ruth's story, Naomi was certain it was only a matter of time. Boaz was not the sort of man to put off such important business.

4:1-8 – It was apparently that same day Boaz went to the city courts. That is, he went where legal business was conducted, as publicly as possible, in an area near the city gate reserved for such things. It was common to find retired men of honor sitting there, acting as a people's jury, but with some genuine judicial powers. Ten men were the traditional minimum requirement for many things: a synagogue could be formed, some capital sentences could be passed on criminal acts and the marriage blessing could be pronounced before God. In the presence of such a council, Boaz pulled aside the relative who had first right of redemption on Elimelech's property. When the man declared his intent to redeem it, Boaz advised him the property had other obligations attached, which the man found disagreeable: having to marry Ruth and raise up children in her husband's name, which was essentially in Elimelech's name. He would also assume responsibility for Naomi's welfare. He could use the land but could not keep it once those children were of age to take possession. The man suffered no dishonor; his refusal was on the grounds of risking his own family inheritance. He simply couldn't afford it on those terms; it would have meant borrowing money he could not pay back before losing possession of the land. To publicly seal his passing of rights, the man took off one of his sandals and handed it to Boaz to "stand in his place" on this matter. From the context, we can assume that custom died out before the Monarchy.

4:9-22 – Boaz summed up the legal action before this court of ten men. At this point, Ruth was legally his wife, and he received the ritual marriage blessing. The announcement would spread like wildfire in the little town. In essence, the family name and property of Boaz and Elimelech were combined into a single household. Their son, Obed, was the heir of both. Naomi sealed the inheritance beyond any challenge when she adopted Obed as her own son (v.16). The author closes by reciting the family lineage by going back to Pharez. He was the son of Judah by Tamar, his Canaanite daughter-in-law (Genesis 38). Tamar was the woman who used

subterfuge to force Judah to perform his levirate duty.

6. Early Monarchy: 1106-1011 BC

6.1: *The Passing of the Old Guard*

1 Samuel 1:1-7 – The date is roughly 1106 BC. Much has changed these 300+ years after the Conquest. The Law is nearly forgotten, and the divine Presence has departed from the Tabernacle at Shiloh. A man of the Kohathite Clan of Temple singers, Elkanah (1 Chronicles 6:33f), lives in Ramathaim-zophim (“Two Peaks of Zuph”). The town is called in other places Ramah and Arimathea and we believe it is a site 12 miles west of Shiloh. Elkanah has two wives. The one, Peninnah (“Pearl”), had several children. The other, Hannah (“Favored” modern Anna) was barren. Peninnah never let Hannah forget it, either. The bitter rivalry was intensified by Elkanah’s favoritism for Hannah.

1:8-19 – This Levite was at least faithful in his annual appearance before Jehovah to present a Peace Offering, the only offering wherein worshippers ate a share in the presence of God (Leviticus 7:11-18). After a particularly nasty episode between the wives, Hannah went back into the Tabernacle. She vowed that if the Lord should relieve her barrenness, she would dedicate the boy to lifelong, full-time service in the Tabernacle and adherence to the Nazarite vow. Both of these were more usually temporary. Full Levitical service usually ended at age 50 and the Nazarite vow was normally of a specifically stated time. Obviously, she knew of Samson and clearly would be able with one such child to overcome all shame associated with having no others.

This outpouring of a distraught soul did not follow the custom of praying audibly. Her whispering was observed by the current High Priest, Eli and seemed to him a mockery. He rebuked her accordingly, calling her a drunk. Hannah responded truthfully and reverently, so Eli pronounced a blessing on her petition. She returned to the ritual meal with an assurance. While it is implied Eli merely recited a pious wish on her behalf, both Hannah and the Lord took it more seriously.

1:20-28 – It appears the boy was born at about the time of Elkanah’s next annual pilgrimage. Hannah chose the name Samuel (*Sh’mua-el* “The Lord has Heard”). Rather than use that occasion for her ritual cleansing and his presentation, and perhaps to avoid risking the infant’s health, she decided to stay home the next few years until it was time to fulfill her vow and present him to God once and for all. At this time, weaning still took place between three and five years. Samuel’s behavior later on indicates the latter is more likely. Elkanah consented to this technical violation of the Law (Exodus 22:29) on the grounds that this was a special case.

Upon his weaning, Samuel was taken to the Tabernacle with much fanfare. The bulls indicate somewhat the status of Elkanah as rather well off and were in part to ensure Eli could afford to raise the boy. One was given as the annual Peace Offering, at which time Samuel was officially presented to Eli. Hannah reminded Eli of the event that he probably had forgotten. Some English translations have Hannah saying she would “lend” her son to God. What we have is a

Hebrew pun, as she uses the word twice with a different meaning. The word *sha'al* pictures a request or demand, but the context changes the thrust of the verb. God loaned her a son, responding to her request. She made an open-ended loan of the boy to God in response to His mercy.

2:1-17 – The Song of Hannah (vv. 1-10) is loaded with Hebrew imagery. In essence, Hannah feels vindicated and can now walk proudly in public. There is a hint of warning for Peninnah to back off out of reverence for God.

In contrast to this clear call for adoration and obedience of Jehovah, we have the tragic examples of Eli's sons. They cared nothing for their responsibilities as priests and took full advantage of every opportunity to fulfill their hedonistic desires. While it was required in the Law that the priests be fed from offerings (Leviticus 7:29ff), the junior priests had developed a custom that was taking grand liberties with this provision. Instead of an honest poke with a fork to see what it brought up, these two had begun using a three-fingered claw and took away all that it could hold. On the one hand, we can see how a busy priest might not be able to accept all the official invitations to join in a Peace Offering meal, yet the custom by this time had degenerated to sending a servant to make sure the priest's household got the lion's share of every meal possible. This let the priests pick and choose from the best. They would also intercept slaughtered offerings before they had been presented.

2:18-21 – While the sons of Eli represented the worst of things, we see little Samuel rising up as the best. The term "ephod" is here differentiated from the term for the ritual vest used for divination. Still, the ordinary ephod carried the connotation of being rather light and minimal. It was a distinctive symbol of religious duty and typically went over other garments. As Elkanah continued his annual pilgrimages, Hannah would bring a new robe for Samuel, something considered extravagant as the symbol of high social rank. It was long, loose-fitting and sleeveless, worn by kings and prophets, as a garment unsuitable to one who engaged in physical exertion. Eli would give them special attention and his heartfelt blessings were honored by God. Hannah went on to have 3 more sons, and two daughters.

2:22-26 – The contrast continues. Eli was aged and would normally have retired by now, but hung on to counter the nightmare his sons had unleashed in the Tabernacle. For example, young women could volunteer to serve at the Tabernacle for a time, performing tasks normally associated with women, but it often included ritual dancing. These two sons of Eli would rape them, knowing that they would be far from home and to whom could they complain? Any sermons from Eli fell on deaf ears. He warned them that when they sinned against a fellow Israelite, they stood a fair chance of escaping punishment because they could argue before judges. But to sin against God was a grave mistake, for there could be no advocate on their behalf. Their behavior was driving the worshippers away from God. Having chosen the path of sin, the Lord hardened them to any chance of feeling the slightest sense of guilt. Meanwhile, Samuel was the complete opposite.

2:27-36 – Eli's words to his sons rang hollow, because he had not the will to force the issue. Had he brought them before any judgment seat, they would have been executed. Thus, we have the accusation from the unknown prophet that Eli favored his sons over God. Failure to keep the office of priest holy, Eli was guilty by omission. He was warned the end of this matter would be

the end of his line of succession. His sons would die without heir, and he would follow them. This implied Eli's reluctance in referring them for judgment was because he knew he'd have no heirs. In this, he should have trusted the Lord, for now he would lose all hope of keeping his line alive. Worse, he would die after seeing God's enemies enter the Tabernacle, something that would surely break his heart. The sign of this warning was that both his sons would die the same day, still in their prime. Instead, God would raise up a righteous priest and everyone in Eli's family would have to beg him for a menial job in the Tabernacle.

It is noteworthy here that this prophecy sounds an echo of the Messiah. He would be a Priest like no other: He would have God's own heart. His household would be greater sure than any has ever been, for it would last forever. Anyone wishing to partake in God's affairs would have to submit to Him as servant.

6.2: Samuel Established

1 Samuel 3:1 – Tradition says Samuel was 12 when this story took place. We are told there is no official prophet of God. An actual message was exceedingly rare, and visions came only to individuals here and there. The writer mentions this because it was Samuel who turned things around. Not only did he begin hearing from Jehovah, but also established several academies to train men in the sort of moral discipline required to be a prophet. You may hear the term "School of the Prophets," and for much of her history following, there was at least one such academy in Israel somewhere.

3:2-10 – The scene opens with the remark that Eli was now near total blindness. He would need constant attendance from Samuel, so the boy was used to responding to a call. It was near morning, as the menorah, usually filled with enough oil to last until daylight, had not quite burned out (Leviticus 24:2-3). Samuel was in his small chamber near the Holy Place, reserved for priests on duty. When the voice of God called to him, Samuel made the only sensible assumption and responded as if Eli had called. This happened three times and each time Eli insisted he had not called. The third time it dawned on Eli what was happening, so he told Samuel how to respond. The term "hear" implies more of "paying attention" and carries the implication of already committed to obey.

3:11-13 – What Jehovah claims He will do would hold spellbound anyone hearing it. He reveals to Samuel the word given to Eli some years before by another prophet, declaring the depth of this sin was so great that there no longer remained any acceptable sacrifice to cover it. Dismissing his family from the priesthood was irrevocable.

3:14-18 – By this time, it seems apparent the Tabernacle had been buttressed or replaced by a permanent structure. Rather than a curtain, the entrance had regular doors. Part of Samuel's duty was to open them to worshippers at the appointed time. The phrase implies he began his daily duties. Eli insisted Samuel reveal the whole thing. In the first place, this is excellent training. During those hours, beginning with Samuel bursting in claiming to have been summoned, Eli had been reawakening the memory of proper handling of the Word of Jehovah. That included not holding back the truth, even if it was heart-rending to consider what it meant. "May God do so..." was a figure of speech accompanied by a physical demonstration of dire consequences, roughly equivalent to today's drawing the finger across the throat to signify

decapitation. Eli responded with resignation, for how does one dispute with God?

3:19-21 – This event was a clear signal God intended to make Samuel a true prophet. Not once did something he claimed was a word from God fail to come true. His reputation was firmly established from “Dan to Beersheba,” a phrase signifying the whole land of Israel. Further, the glowing presence of the Lord returned to the Holy of Holies. This was a turn of affairs for which many had hoped. Sadly, they did not seek God’s Word in everything.

4:1-4 – Some 20 miles west of Shiloh, in the coastal plain, were the cities of Aphek and Ebenezer. These sat at what was then the northern end of Philistine territory. The occasion of battle is not given, but we can be certain the location gave the Philistines the advantage with their chariots. Naturally they won the first day’s fighting. The Israeli leadership decided they needed their sacred talisman, the Ark of Covenant. Their thinking is nearly pagan in flavor, as they assumed God was tied to the box, else He wouldn’t have let them fail in battle. While Eli had no power to reject the idea, he did send his two corrupt sons to stay with the Ark, as if it would help matters. Indeed, it was they alone who could touch it to carry it.

4:5-9 – As the Ark was marched into the war camp of Israel, the spirit of the soldiers revived and their shout of elation was heard across the way by the Philistines. As soon as they knew what had happened, the Philistines trembled. They had never faced the God of Israel. What they did not understand was the the apostasy of the Hebrews was their only advantage. Their real danger was from God’s own hand, far greater than the threat of the soldiers claiming His protection. They possessed enough character to insist it was better to die in battle than to lose and serve Israel, as Israel had served them.

4:10-11 – This fatalistic spirit carried them through the next day’s fighting and they slaughtered a larger number than ever. It was decisive, for the Hebrews fled, leaving the Ark to their enemy. As prophesied, the two sons of Eli died that day together.

4:12-18 – A refugee of Battle, a Benjamite, marked himself with the traditional signs of mourning a great loss: he tore his clothes and put dust on his head. In his haste, he ran past Eli, who was sitting in the gateway of the city awaiting news. The messenger shouted his report for all to hear and the resulting tumult came to Eli’s ears, but not the report. So the refugee returned to explain. It was not the death of his sons that shook Eli, but the loss of the Ark. He collapsed and died on the spot. Notice how the messenger reveals the four-fold calamity in increasing order of significance: Israel’s flight, the great loss of life, the death of Eli’s sons, and the loss of the Ark of Covenant.

4:19-22 – News of the disaster brought Eli’s daughter-in-law into labor. The phrase describes the Egyptian habit they had picked up of kneeling to deliver. Hearing that she brought forth a son was not enough to relieve her distress. There was no glory to be taken to the grave. She managed to mumble something about the glory of God departing before she died. Thus, her son’s name was Ichabod: “Where is the glory?” or more precisely, “Where is God?” Here we are reminded yet again how deeply sunk into to pagan thought were God’s people. They were so wrapped up in the symbols of His presence they could not separate them from His actual Presence.

Records are silent on the matter of timing, but it is all but certain this event was followed closely

by yet another raid by the Philistines, in which the city and Temple of Shiloh were destroyed. It is mentioned by Jeremiah in 7:12-15, 26:6-7. What Jeremiah describes shows it was never rebuilt there. If there was any bloodshed, the site was defiled, neither Tabernacle nor Temple could stand there again. We have some unlikely traditions claiming that the man who brought the bad news to Shiloh was Saul and that in the heat of battle he had tried to protect the Ark, but that Goliath snatched it away. What is not lost on anyone who reads is the clear and obvious reason for the multiple disasters: unfaithfulness to Jehovah.

6.3: Breaking the Philistines

1 Samuel 5:1-5 – Dagon is the chief god of the Philistines. He was adopted from ancient Syria and was envisioned as a fish-man: body of a fish, hands and head of a man. He was generally a god of grain; for the Philistines to raid the standing grain of Israel at harvest time is in part an assertion of that belief. Since all grain is given by Dagon, it is only natural that his true worshipers go forth to take it from those who failed to recognize him. Putting the Ark of the Covenant in his temple was a natural extension of tribute.

However, Jehovah made it quite clear He was no captive of the Dagon or of the Philistines. If making Dagon's image bow to the Ark was not enough, breaking the symbols of his power (hands and head) on the threshold could not be ignored. It is noted a new custom developed among the Philistines from this.

5:6-12 – Furthermore, Jehovah struck the area of Ashdod with a plague. The Hebrew term for this disease is difficult to translate, but a good guess is that mice or rats swarmed the cities, carrying bubonic plague. They would have devoured the grain crop, further discrediting Dagon, and their fleas would pass the disease to humans. Bubonic plague gets its name from the swollen lymph nodes ("buboes") it leaves in the groin and armpits.

Determined to keep their trophy, the Lords of Philistia convened and sent the Ark to Gath, another of the chief cities. Things only got worse there than in Ashdod. The next city they tried was Ekron, but the residents had already heard of the disasters attached to the Ark's presence and wailed that it was brought there to kill them.

6:1-9 – This business lasted a total of seven months. If we consider the Ark was captured at the beginning of the fighting season (*March*, so named in English because it is the first month when armies march to battle), we are now approaching harvest. The Lords of Philistia gathered again with their scholars of religion to see what can be done.

The advice first was to make sure a peace offering was made. Since food was out of the question, it was made in the form of gold formed to represent the mice and buboes from the plague, one of each from each of the five lords. Then it must be sent back by the most unlikely means: two milk cows that had never been trained to pull in a yoke. They would not normally be able to pull in unison, but instead would likely turn back to their calves. These two were hitched to a cart loaded with both the Ark and a box containing the offering. If indeed all this was from the God of Israel, the cows would immediately head for the border with Judah nearby, at Beth-shemesh. With this advice the scholars warned the lords not to delay, for the known acts of Jehovah had devastated Egypt.

6:10-18 – As soon as they had this all ready to go, the cows immediately began mooing loudly and headed straight up the road to Beth-shemesh. As this was indeed the grain harvest, the entire town was out in the fields. When the cows and cart came near, the men of the place immediately began cheering and praising God out loud. The cows could never again be used for a mundane purpose, nor the cart, so the whole thing became a burnt offering to God. The contents of the cart were placed on a huge stone out-cropping. Having witnessed all this, the Philistines knew they were fortunate to have survived as well as they did.

6:19-21 – Of course, the level of understanding about holiness and the Ark was completely lacking in Israel. The men of Beth-shemesh foolishly touched the Ark and a plague broke out on the city. It is truly difficult to be sure of the numbers here, because there is such a wide variation among the manuscripts available today. At any rate, the loss of just 70 men in this small town would be a major disaster. If it were numbered in the thousands, we are surely referring to men from the whole region, as Beth-shemesh was not that large. They called for the leaders of the largest city nearby, Kiriath-jearim, to come fetch the Ark. This had been the southern-most city of the Gibeon alliance during the conquest and quite large and powerful as the new home of some Israeli nobility.

7:1-2 – Probably it was a Levite family that took in the Ark. Abinidab had his son, Eleazer, consecrated themselves to handle the Ark and it apparently worked out. The Ark rested there for the next 20 years. That it sat there, with no tabernacle or temple to host it, was the source of great embarrassment for Israel. Its loss, the disasters associated with it and the lack of a proper center of worship, brought about godly sorrow. Along with this was the continued oppression from Philistia.

7:3-6 – By now, Samuel had been fully established as the Judge of Israel. He advised the leaders of Israel that if they were truly ready to return to Jehovah, there was a proper way to do it. First, they must commit to faithfulness, completely breaking the habit of the old Canaanite gods. The worship of Baal was very similar to that of Jehovah, so early on a blended worship set in with Israel. Also, the word here for Baal's consort, *Ashtoreth*, is a Hebrew pun. Most likely the proper pronunciation approached "ash-tart" but the Hebrews often combined the names for pagan gods with variations of *bosheth*, the word for "shameful." As the goddess of sex, among other things, her worship would include some fairly depraved behavior. In solemn convocation, the leaders met to repudiate all this.

7:7-12 – The nation met at Mizpeh (or Mizpah). Depending on the exact location of this meeting area, it may have been a large flat space on top of a ridge, not far from Jerusalem. This all happened soon after the Ark had returned to Israel and during or just after harvest. This was the usual time for Philistine raids and having the leadership gathered at this prominent open place could easily be taken as preparation for war. So the Philistines made ready to attack this place first. In response to the leadership's cry for Samuel to pray seriously for God's protection, he made a simple whole burnt offering, and then told them to watch for Jehovah's deliverance. His promise indicated the Philistine power was about to be broken for good.

Sure enough, by some miracle of God's hand alone, the Philistines were put to flight. It would appear their camp was struck repeatedly by lightening, because they were described as badly broken. The fleeing invaders were pursued and cut down for quite some distance. We cannot

currently identify the location, but Samuel raised up a memorial stone and called it *Eben-ezer* – “The Stone of (God’s) Help.” Such monuments usually took the form of a large flat section of rock, stood on end and braced by smaller stones. Such markers would have been universally recognized as a monument to some great event.

7:13-17 – From that time on, the Philistines did not recover enough power to invade Israel again. While not completely driven out just yet, some of their cities were taken by Israel and their acknowledged border collapsed inward a great deal. To add some confusion about the location of places named Mizpeh, it would appear that Samuel’s annual circuit, in the absence of a temple or other central gathering place for worship, would include a path across the middle of Israel ending in Mizpeh of Gilead. Gilgal returned to prominence and Bethel rose with it. Samuel’s altar back home in Ramah was accepted by God, though technically a violation of Moses’ Law (Deuteronomy 12:5, 13). This is clearly a case of accepting the man for his holiness and the frank inability to keep the Law on that point.

6.4: Saul is Chosen King

1 Samuel 8:1-3 – One might get the impression great men of God used up all the family supply of holiness, leaving none for their sons. First Eli, then Samuel, but there’s more like it to come. We don’t know enough of Samuel’s personal life to guess why, but his two sons were nothing like him. They judged from the southern city of Beersheba and were infamous for taking bribes.

8:4-22 – This trouble became the excuse for the tribal leaders of Israel to demand that Samuel choose and anoint a king. Here they are demanding a clean break between civil and religious rule in their lives. Previous to this, engaging in politics was a purely local occupation. National government ostensibly permitted no politics. In one sense, it might be said they wisely saw their inability to stand before God faithfully and rule themselves on the basis of their adherence to the Law of Moses. In another sense, they were completely foolish in thinking this would make any difference. Instead, the nature of monarchical rule called for taxation they had never seen. Rather than foreigners pillaging them when they sinned, they would have a king pillage them regardless of good or bad. Samuel, after conferring with God, went to great lengths to detail for them the nature of that taxation. Surely, a king must live a kingly lifestyle and would exercise harsh power over every detail of their lives. They weren’t willing to listen to God in their religion, nor were they willing to listen to His prophet. After receiving assurance from Jehovah that He planned to grant them their request, Samuel dismissed the assembly of leaders.

9:1-2 – Saul is introduced by his lineage. His family was Benjamite, notable for their warriors. Saul was no different, except he possessed that advantage of being roughly a cubit taller than average – quite large, indeed. An established man, he had his own teenage son by this time.

9:3-10 – Saul, as the good son of his father Kish, went out with one of the household servants to find where the herd of asses had wandered. This was before the introduction of horses in Canaan and asses – also known as “onagers” – were rather larger than donkeys, but just shy of the size of modern horses. These had been in use for some time by Mesopotamia, Akkadia and the Hittites for pulling chariots. They could be ridden unsaddled as one might donkeys. They were quite valuable and seldom owned by anyone but nobility.

We cannot positively identify Shalim and Shalisha, but it seems Saul's search took him north from Gibeah as far as Shechem, and then down slope into the edge of the Plain of Sharon. From there he went down through the low rolling hills as far as the Valley of Sorek, turning back upland and passing through the length of Benjamin. From there they circled back toward Ramah. At this point, Saul despaired of finding any trace of the herd and felt it was best to report back to this father. The servant suggested they visit the seer in that region. It would appear Saul knew not who this was but did know the custom of presenting a gift when approaching a superior. Even so much as a pita loaf would have been sufficient, but theirs was gone. The servant had some coins amounting to one-quarter shekel and that seemed appropriate.

9:11-17 – Like most cities, Ramah was built on high ground, but not on top of the hill. Hilltops had long been reserved as places of worship. The well was typically just outside the gate, where the men met young women coming out to draw water, usually in the evening. One of the rare occasions when a man might address a strange woman in public, Saul asked them if “the Seer” was in town. Not only was he there, but had just returned in time for a festival. This festival would not proceed without his offering a blessing over the food. This apparently was the sort of offering one “ate in the presence of the Lord” because there is no other mention of a priestly blessing at mealtime in Scripture. If Saul was to catch Samuel in time to finish his errand, he would have to find him immediately. Once engaged in the festival ritual, it would be unthinkable to pull him away for something so trivial.

As they came into city square, they saw him opposite them. This was a moment of high drama, in spite of its apparent humble nature. Just the day before, Samuel heard from Jehovah that as evening approached on the day of the festival, he would meet the man whom the Lord intended to be the “captain of My people” in war against the Philistines. Here we see that the nature of the king's office is rooted in the need for a battle leader, a warlord. At the sight of them, Samuel received yet another word that this was the new King of Israel.

9:18-27 – By now all the important people of the city would be assembled at the high place. This seer would have been dressed as a man of privilege and Saul addressed him courteously, asking where to find the prophet. Samuel answered that he was indeed the man Saul was seeking and to go up and wait for him at the high place. They would enjoy the festival meal and tomorrow Saul could be on his way. Anything he might be willing to ask would be dealt with then. Meanwhile, he told Saul to forget the onagers; they had been found. Further, Saul was the most important man in Israel!

Saul was stunned. His family was Benjamite, the smallest tribe, especially after that business in Gibeah a couple of generations back. Furthermore, Saul's family was the smallest and lowest ranking of the noble families in Benjamin. Like many men in Israel, Saul had probably dreamed of finally breaking the Philistine oppression and was now being told he was indeed the key to that relief. At the banquet hall, Samuel directed Saul to sit in the seat of honor. Then, Samuel told the cook to bring out the priest's portion and serve it to Saul. This would later become known as the “royal portion.” We can just imagine Saul's mind spinning, full of a thousand questions about all this fuss over him.

Those questions were answered. After the ritual meal, they left the banquet hall and went up on

the roof of Samuel's home. There they talked long into the night. We can safely assume that Samuel taught him about being a king and what was required of him, among other things. The term used here in Hebrew is based on the idea of putting all things in order. This open rooftop was also the favored sleeping area for honored guests. Early in the morning, the three men set out together. Samuel asked Saul to send his servant ahead so he could share a private word from Jehovah.

10:1-8 – The two men came to a stop and Samuel then produced olive oil and anointed Saul as king. The kiss was a personal sign of high honor, an act not required in ancient times when greeting royalty. Samuel was personally invested in this man's future. He then described to Saul events that were to shortly take place. This would serve to ensure Saul learned to trust the word of Samuel and to believe that all this business of being king was not some wild dream.

First, he would come upon some men telling him the onagers were safe and that now Saul's father was worried about him. Next, he would pass the Oak of Tabor where Deborah sat (Judges 4:5), a well-known landmark, one normally associated with religious instruction. Deborah had been as much a teacher of Jehovah as a prophetess. There he would meet some fellows carrying offerings toward Bethel, probably in anticipation of meeting Samuel there for worship. They would salute him with reverence give him enough bread for a meal. Then, he would pass the Philistine garrison near the "Hill of God." Given the circumstances, that might mean any number of places ranging from Mizpah, scene of recent gatherings in the presence of God, or as far as south as Mount Moriah, which had been a shrine of worship to Jehovah since before Abraham and was just above the old Jebusite fort. The former is more likely, purely on the grounds of Saul's probable route home. Coming down from the high place, Saul would meet one of Samuel's academy of prophets. They would be praising God with instruments and prophesying on His behalf; that is, they would be calling people to turn to Him purely, as was their purpose. For a brief time, Saul would become a totally different man, moved by the Spirit of God to join the prophets. At that point, he would be given an opportunity to do something for God and it would be obvious at that moment what that should be. Then he was to turn and head to Gilgal, to await Samuel's arrival there, seven days later.

10:9-16 – It didn't wait for the meeting of the School of the Prophets for Saul to experience a change of heart. God endowed him with the courage and sense of purpose necessary to carry the burden of kingly rule. Nonetheless, the meeting itself so astounded everyone that, from then on, the event gave rise to a figure of speech expressing total surprise at some unexpected turn of events: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" It appears the servant that had been with him up to now went on home. When questioned by Saul's uncle on their extended absence, the servant told all except the matter of Saul's anointing as king.

6.5: Saul Begins Auspiciously

1 Samuel 10:17-27 – Saul had been instructed to wait for Samuel at Gilgal. However, we next see Samuel calling a national assembly at Mizpah. Again, we do not know which Mizpah, but it's a safe guess it was the one in northern Benjamin, the high flat ridge just north of Gibeah. There Samuel goes through the rigmarole of showing divine election by the casting of lots. First, the tribe of Benjamin, then the clan of Matri, then the family of Kish was chosen. When the lot

fell to Saul, he wasn't in sight. The Lord Himself reveals Saul was hiding in the baggage brought by those who had traveled from afar to the assembly. The mere sight of this tall man, yet shy, was quite moving to those assembled. Samuel described the laws of God regarding kings, writing it on a scroll. We have never found a trace of this royal charter, but it was clear that one existed.

The assembly was dismissed, and Saul went back home. There was no palace, no grand city of the king. He simply ruled from his farm, though he gained that day a retinue of men. These were moved by Jehovah to establish what served as a cabinet, the beginnings of a royal court. These first would have served at their own expense, powerful leading men of the various tribes. That there was an opposition party willing to give offense, defying tradition regarding gifts of homage, brought no response from Saul. This was a very noble start, indeed.

11:1-3 – There arose a king over the Ammonites, whose name was *Nachash* (“Snake”). He gathered his forces and set siege to the city of Jabesh-gilead. This is the large city in the Jordan Valley, on the East Bank, that had refused to send troops against Benjamin back in Judges 21. The population had been decimated and the surviving virgins given to the remnant of Benjamin, because of the oath the national leaders had taken. The town had been repopulated by a nobler group.

When the people of the city asked terms of peace, Nachash stated he had determined to humiliate the Nation of Israel. He would do this by putting out the right eye of every man in the city. They promised to get back to him in seven days. Bear in mind that most cities were prepared to wait out a siege at least that long. Ancient battles over cities were often a matter of which side could out-wait the other. If the walls and gates were particularly well-built, there was little to gain by attacking directly with Bronze Age weapons. Barring some heroic deed of entry, or simply finding a secret entrance, it was a dreary affair. In this case, given the fertile Jordan, well-watered, the invaders had an advantage. The city had said if no relief came in seven days, they would surrender.

11:4-11 – The messengers from the city would have made it to Gibeah in two or three days, traveling hard. When Saul's court heard the news, they wept aloud. Even today, in times of disaster, it is common to see in Middle Eastern cultures that folks put on quite a loud display of sorrow. It's not fake; the demonstration is appropriate for the occasion. Saul, going about his daily business of farming and ranching, comes upon this scene and naturally asks what it's about. When he's told of the siege of Jabesh-gilead, he takes royal action. First, he carves up a pair of oxen and sends the butchered parts across the nation by messengers. With this ghastly symbol is the warning that he would take forceful action to do the same to everyone's oxen if they didn't send troops for the defense of the city.

Since Saul had done this under the urging of Jehovah's Spirit, that same Spirit ensured the message struck home to all. They mobilized quickly. The assembly was called at Bezek, a city on the West Bank ridge just above the besieged Jabesh-gilead. It is noteworthy that they are numbered separately for Israel – the northern 10 tribes – and for Judah, which included Simeon. The total muster was 330 thousand. The messengers of Jabesh were told to report back that by the heat of the next day, it would all be over. This news was quite joyfully received by the leaders of the city, and they promised to Nachash they would capitulate at about that time.

Saul divided his army into three huge waves and struck the Ammonite camp at dawn. The fighting continued until midday, at which point the surviving Ammonites were too thinly scattered to make a pair of them anywhere in the area.

11:12-15 – With this first successful act as king of the nation, Saul’s supporters were ready to execute the opposition party. They demanded of Samuel that they be officially identified before the assembly. If Samuel were to point them out, no one would argue. Rather, Saul took the noble course of halting this action. His reason was that the Lord had given them a great deliverance and it would not be fitting to execute anyone, criminal or otherwise, on such a holy day. To forestall further political turbulence, Samuel suggested they renew the royal charter in the presence of Jehovah at Gilgal. The resulting scene of sacrificial offerings and celebration left everyone feeling quite warm and fuzzy about having such a fine king.

12:1-25 – Samuel brought the assembly back to earth quickly. First, he demanded that any with a complaint against him should bring now the evidence against him, so that he could settle accounts and retire. There was, of course, nothing against him. He then delivered a long, impassioned message of how this Nation of Israel had sinned repeatedly, been punished for it, been delivered repeatedly and still acted ungratefully. From the time of Israel, the man himself, the nation was quick to stray from the high calling of Jehovah. To impress upon them the certainty that this was the Word of God, Samuel called for a storm, at a time when such was rare. Wheat was harvested in late June or early July.

At this, the assembly repented and asked forgiveness for daring to seek a king, contrary to God’s revealed will. They had rejected Him who made them and felt the sting of shame. Samuel reminded them that despite this sin, God was gracious and would use their sin for His own glory. He would continue to prosper this king’s reign, but they must devote themselves wholeheartedly to serving the Lord faithfully. It was clearly implied that the throne could easily be taken out from under the king if he failed in this, as well.

6.6: *Defeat in Victory*

It is essential that we see a picture of Saul as a national king, ruling over a people, but not necessarily over the territory they occupy. The acknowledged borders of Israeli land were still in a state of flux. Though Saul is indeed King of Israel, his authority is far closer to that of the judges than to a genuine monarch. Thus, his is the rule of a warlord, closely linked to the primordial function of what we now refer to as a king. He had no administrative offices in his court, only a collection of lieutenants to his command of troops. Records are poorly kept, if at all and there is no evidence whatsoever of any official chronicles. They are conspicuous by their absence.

We also see that his rule seems at times to be rather tenuous, and he relies much on threat of punishment. The nation had begged for a king but was not yet ready to accept the daily assumptions of life under a monarch. His first muster for battle at Jabesh was based on a threat for non-compliance. While the Lord continued to grant him military victories until the end, the flaw in his character begins to show. He was somewhat noble, but never regal.

1 Samuel 13:1-4 – This and the next chapter have proven quite difficult to translate and they

suffer much from manuscript variations. Saul's one effort to begin an organized defense of the people was to establish a full-time army. Of the 3000 selected, most were quartered at Michmash, a hilltop town overlooking a major trade route that ran more or less north-south through the hill country. Just to the south a few miles lay Geba, sitting astride a crossroad with another major trade route, running east-west from the coast to the Jordan. We are then told how it came about that Michmash was taken from the Philistines, who had a garrison there up to this time.

Saul's eldest son Jonathan was quite the valiant warrior. The Philistines had risen once to oppress Israel. The tension was sure to result in some kind of provocation. For whatever reason, Jonathan attacked and killed the Philistine tax officer in Geba, along with the guards. It was this toll station that the garrison just north, in Michmash, was to protect. It amounts to an assassination of an official representative of the Philistine government. While their armies had been soundly defeated and some of their peripheral cities taken back by Israel, it would seem they sought to reassert their former rule. It was at best an uneasy truce that left various Philistine officials here and there collecting tolls and taxes of various kinds. Naturally Jonathan's action was reported to the Philistine lords down on the coast and they began to mobilize. Saul stood by his son's actions and conducted his own mobilization. Israel assembled at Gilgal. Reading between the lines, this follows Samuel's teaching that battle is joined at the command of Jehovah and the King of Israel had to seek His counsel as the True King.

13:5-7 – The number of Philistine troops is exceedingly difficult to establish from textual evidence, but the point is it hardly mattered. They were enough to form a credible threat, causing fear in the whole nation. This came at a time when there was already considerable fear. The people quickly reverted to the mode of life they had under the Midianite oppression (Judges 6:1-4), living in caves and such. A significant portion moved out of the reach of Philistine interest, on the East Bank of the Jordan, in Gilead. Thus, when the mustered troops met Saul at Gilgal, they were quite nervous about the whole thing.

13:8-10 – By pre-arrangement, Saul was waiting seven days for Samuel to arrive. Keep in mind that each side in this looming battle had runners and spies keeping an eye on each other. While the Philistines were ostensibly massing reinforcements at the point of conflict, in the toll district of Michmash, it was clear they were prepared for full combat. If the assassination in Geba was a local guerilla act, then the troops there would simply grind the locals into the earth. If it was the signal for a genuine national conflict, this local harassment would surely bring the Israeli army out to fight. Saul began by obeying the command from God's man, by waiting until His plan was revealed. But the general fear of the troops caused many to slip away in the face of apparent inaction.

Finally, in exasperation, Saul presented the offering himself. Since it is known that both David and Solomon did this without rejection by God, we must assume it was not the act of offering itself that was Saul's sin. As we see from Samuel's response, it was something more subtle, more substantial than the act of offering alone.

13:11-15 – Immediately after the offering ceremony, Samuel was spotted, and Saul went out to meet him. When Samuel confronted him with his sin, Saul overstated the excuse about desertion of troops. It is quite unbelievable that Samuel had not already taught him, and the

witness of history had shown, that whole nations could be defeated by God alone, without man's help. If the Lord had held Saul in place until only his devoted friends were left, that would be enough. The statement that Saul feared the Philistines might descend on Gilgal was most likely a lie. Either way, the sin was in disobeying God's command to stay and wait on His guidance. Rather than an opportunity for Jehovah to establish a dynasty from Saul, it was the beginning of the end for his reign. Having no further reason to stay at Gilgal, Samuel went back up to Gibeah to pray over the coming battle. By now, Saul had a mere 600 men.

13:16-18 – This rather small force joined Samuel at Gibeah. By this time, the Philistines had begun their rape of the countryside, sending out raiding parties. One company headed north toward Shiloh. Another headed back west toward Beth-horon. The third took the route south or southeast, but their apparent destination – Zeboiim Valley – is not certain. A good guess might be in the direction of the Wilderness of Judea, along the western shore of the Dead Sea.

13:19-23 – We are told pointedly that Israel still relied on bronze weapons. The Philistines had kept iron-smithing a secret and used it to extort high fees from Israelis for working on iron implements. Perhaps captured in battle, Saul and Jonathan alone had iron weapons. Those Philistine troops not assigned to raiding teams then took up a position to block the pass running through Michmash. The town itself sat on a hilltop just above the pass and held a commanding view as the highest point on a ridgeline pierced by the trade route. To the southwest, the road dropped into a steep gorge, which gorge runs northwest to southeast at that point, then followed a winding valley cutting up into the opposite ridge toward Geba. On its way to Geba, the road passed in the shadow of Migron, which was also opposite Michmash, but almost straight west.

14:1-3 – While Saul is deciding how to make a useful attack, Jonathan ordered his equipment steward to join him on a scouting mission. This younger man would have been responsible for hauling whatever equipment a warrior needed that he did not wear on his body. On long hikes, that would mean carrying the shield until making enemy contact. During actual fighting, this steward would then strike any necessary final killing blows for the enemy troops dropped by his master. While grisly to imagine, it shows that a professional soldier counted on slashing his way into the enemy line, with but a minority of his blows being fatal, but mostly enough to take his opponents out of battle, leaving them for the steward to finish.

By this time, Saul had moved his forces up to Migron, in sight of the Philistines across the gorge. He had with him the last survivor of Eli's household, acting as priest, wearing the ephod containing the sacred lots for seeking word from God. Jonathan had not discussed his mission with anyone but the steward with him, so no one knew they had left.

14:4-5 – We cannot know what route Jonathan took to get there, but it was most likely off the beaten path to the east, because it seems he approached the eastern wing of the Philistine lines. There was a secondary route that followed the gorge around from the east, and then went up to a separate, smaller pass that joined the main road at the highest point, on the far side of Michmash. There was a ridge between the two and at one point this lesser path ran between two sharp bluffs. The cliffs were named Bozez and Seneh; the cut ran almost east-west at that point and the latter cliff was on the north, where the Philistines had a lookout.

14:6-14 – Clearly Jonathan understood the principles lost on his father, that God could use as many or as few as He wished to deliver His people. When he suggested to his steward they attack the Philistines on the opposite bluff, the steward was all for it. Confirmed in his intent, Jonathan decided he would take them on whatever terms the enemy chose, because perceived advantage would not matter. He had the assurance of God’s hand. When the Philistines dared Jonathan to come up after them, he and his steward literally crawled up the face of the rock. Even with this disadvantage, Jonathan managed to mow them down. In the small space atop the bluff, he killed about 20 Philistines.

14:15-23 – It seemed God Himself was celebrating this victory, as the earth began to quake. The Philistines scattered, as their position was particularly unsafe in the shadow of the high ridge. Flawed though he was, Saul knew what this scene meant. He had the troops assembled for roll call and found his own son had gone. Having brought out the Ark of Covenant with them, Saul called for the priest to bring it before him. Before the priest could complete the ceremony, Saul decided the time to strike was nearly past. The small army of Israel plunged down the slope of the gorge, coming up on the backside of Michmash. All along the way, they slaughtered the frightened Philistines. The turn of battle caused the Israeli traitors in the Philistine camp to turn back to their own side. As the pursuit wore on, those who had fled Saul at Gilgal returned and joined the battle. The bulk of the Philistines fled north toward Bethel (called “Beth-aven” here) and attempted to regroup.

14:24-30 – Showing the early stages of his later insanity, Saul made a foolish demand that no one stop to eat until he had called a halt to the fighting. Jonathan, having forged ahead with his own attack, had no knowledge of this command. As the pursuit passed through a forest, Jonathan stabbed the end of his battle staff in some honeycomb and licked it off as he moved. Obviously, this would provide an instant energy boost for a man weary from fighting and chasing all day. When one of the troops told Jonathan of his father’s edict, he spoke of how foolish it was and why it would have been better to let the soldiers graze on the supplies of food abandoned by the fleeing enemy.

14:31-35 – The result of this battle was a return to the old status quo, wherein the Philistines never ventured east of Aijalon in that area. The effort was exhausting, and Saul’s edict left them starving. As soon as the halt was called, they were so ravenous they even ate some of the plundered meat raw without proper preparation. When word of this got back to Saul, he had reprimanded his commanders for not supporting him better. Then he issued the order that everyone must bring their meat animals back to his camp and eat properly in his presence. He then stacked up stones to make an altar to God. This was the first time he had done so, and it was proper, since there was as yet no temple.

14:36-46 – It occurred to Saul that he could follow up on this victory by pressing the attack further on the Philistines, by raiding their camp at night and perhaps finishing off the whole of their troops. When he inquired of God, there was no answer. Remembering at least some of what Samuel had taught him, he knew it was because of a particular sin. His edict to refrain from food was made in the form of an oath before God. Perhaps to teach him better, God was holding him to the conditions of the oath, that whoever ate food before the halt would be executed. Saul addressed his commanders, declaring he knew someone had broken that oath

and it didn't matter if it was his own son. Nobody spoke up. So, Saul, in anger stood himself and his son on one lot and rest of Israel on the other. He asked the Lord to make it clear whose was the guilt. The lot fell to him and his son. Then a second lot was cast between himself and Jonathan and it fell to Jonathan. When Saul demanded a confession, Jonathan told of the honey in the forest, and then stated he must now be executed. Clearly beside himself, Saul made yet another oath that he would surely execute Jonathan himself.

The troops watching made it clear how silly this whole thing was, since Jonathan was the hero of the day. Had he not gone out in faith, it's doubtful anything would have gone right. As it was, Jonathan's trust in Jehovah was sufficient to slaughter superior numbers. More importantly, it brought God into the battle Himself. His act was holy, implying that Jonathan himself was holy, at least that day. They shamed Saul into backing down on the execution. Thus, the remaining Philistine soldiers were spared for another day. However, God did not forget Saul's second oath. God most certainly did "do so" to Saul, when Saul's job was finished.

14:47-52 – What follows is a summary of Saul's rule. His whole reign was consumed in carving out the land rights of Israel and suppressing everyone on the borders. Anytime Saul spotted a manly fellow, he was drafted for the army. Here we finally have an effort to record the basic biographical details of this first King of Israel. It was clearly written in retrospect. Because of textual problems, there is some confusion about the names and number of his sons. Knowing that many Hebrews might carry more than one name, we still have difficulty knowing for certain if the second son, here called "Jishui" or "Ishvi", is the same as Abinadab or Esh-baal in 1 Chronicles 8 & 9. While it is probably the latter, we have yet another reminder: On the one hand, we cannot claim to have a perfect record; on the other, we can be certain that nothing critical is in dispute in God's Word. Several minor details are missing or don't match the record elsewhere. We can rest assured that what is uncertain is also unimportant.

6.7: Saul's End

1 Samuel 15:1-5 – As if it were a test, Samuel told Saul that Jehovah had determined to exterminate the Amalekites, a tribe descended from Esau. These folks were wholly despicable, opportunists and the proto-typical devious Arabs. They had attacked from the rear during the Exodus (Exodus 17:8), where the guard was lighter and where one would find the animals, as well as the aged, children and pregnant women. For this and similar crimes, they were marked for genocide, to include all their herd animals. The Hebrew term is *cherem* – in this context, "devoted to destruction."

Saul mustered his troops at Telaim (or Telem), a location unknown today. We can safely assume it is down on the southern end of Palestine. The wording is a little uncertain, but it appears only Judah sent troops for this, and the numbers are, as usual, not clear from the various manuscripts. However, the count is given in the standard: so many conscripts and so many professional soldiers. His plan was to approach their main city at night, then prepare to assault from the valley below.

15:6-9 – First, Saul sent word to the Kenite leadership to separate themselves from the more numerous Amalekites, among whom they lived. The Kenites were old allies, the tribe of Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. The Kenites had remained Bedouin in lifestyle, so moving out of the area

was no big hardship for them. Once they were clear, Saul attacked, pursuing this enemy of Israel all the way to Shur, beyond which was under Egyptian control. However, Saul failed to go the whole way in obeying God's command. He allowed their king, Agag, to live. He also joined in his people's plundering of the finer specimens of domesticated animals. They had no trouble destroying everything else. Furthermore, a few Amalekites survived until the time of Hezekiah, probably after taking refuge in the Sinai awhile.

15:10-16 – Samuel, still God's prophet to the nation, got word that Saul no longer had a zeal to obey. Jehovah found Saul unworthy of ruling His people and was determined to replace him. Samuel wept all night in prayer, in a final attempt to stay God's judgment, but the Lord had removed His Spirit from Saul. The next morning, Samuel received word that Saul had returned and set up a monument to himself at a place named Carmel (not the mountain far to the north) and was waiting at Gilgal.

When Samuel arrived, Saul was all cheery, declaring he had done God's will. The racket from the animals was obvious testimony Saul was less than truthful. Saul began to bluster piously about offerings to honor God, but Samuel cut him off abruptly. Taken aback, Saul dutifully awaited the message from God that so obviously weighed on Samuel's mind.

15:17-23 – Using Saul's own expression from that day back when Samuel first anointed him king near the gate of Ramah, the priest brought that scene back to Saul's mind. Was it not God Himself who had promoted this nobody, Saul? It's not as if God was asking so much in wishing to destroy the Amalekites. They were already delivered into Saul's hand and would be unable to resist. Saul insisted he had done so, but that he couldn't restrain the people from keeping some plunder, with the false justification of planning to offer them up to God. Samuel responds with a bit of Hebrew poetry that has been widely memorized in many languages. Piety means nothing without full obedience. So, inasmuch as Saul rejected strict obedience to the command of God, so God rejected Saul as king.

15:24-33 – Saul's admission of sin is obviously superficial. He cared only about his reputation and fame. He pressured Samuel to stay on for this one ceremony, so as not to be publicly humiliated. When Samuel turned to go, Saul grabbed the edge of his priestly robe, which tore. This prompted Samuel to utter that just so, had God torn the throne from the hand of Saul and would pass it to a better man. Even though Samuel could be persuaded to play along, Jehovah was not a mere man who could be cajoled into anything. As a part of the ceremony, Samuel demanded the captive Amalekite king be brought before him. Saul had no doubt planned to keep Agag around as a living trophy in his palace, a common practice in ancient times. Agag was nervous, but hopeful of his own life. Samuel pronounced and then executed God's judgment.

15:34-35 – Once Samuel left and got away from Saul, he was able to maintain proper decorum. His love for the man remained strong to the end. Still, he would have to act on the judgment of God and not appear with him ever again in public.

16:1-5 – Though Samuel mourned for Saul, the Lord told him to get over it. The time came to anoint another king. This one would be in Bethlehem, to a son of Jesse, who was of the royal tribe of Judah. Samuel's question was not an objection, but a simple request of how to carry this

out without raising Saul's suspicion. Saul had already demonstrated his willingness to sin for personal gain and might not hesitate to kill God's prophet. We might say Saul had become a psychopath. The Lord's reply was for Samuel to go with the pretense of making another of those numerous visits he once made as a judge over the nation. He was to take along a heifer to sacrifice as a ritual meal before the Lord and invite Jesse as the guest of honor. The man would naturally present his sons and one of them would be chosen king.

His arrival was at first worrying to the local leaders. They feared Samuel had come to pronounce judgment on some sin. Their question implied, "Are we in trouble?" Samuel answered that he came for a celebration and that he wanted them to join him. Naturally, this required they pass through some purification rituals. These rituals in the Law of Moses echoed what was required throughout that part of the world when one came into the presence of a ruler or a god. While in our Western culture this smacks of putting on a false front, to the Eastern mind it was a matter of treating this as a special occasion, reverencing some higher power. A special effort went into preparing Jesse for the seat of honor at this feast.

16:6-13 – While Samuel's eyes saw the man, God saw the heart. The first born would naturally be the preferred candidate. Yet God passed over all seven of the men Jesse brought before Samuel. When Samuel asked if there were anymore, Jesse offered that his youngest was out with the sheep. While it is fair to see here that David was being left out of things because he is the youngest – and therefore least important – it also foreshadows David's virtue. David was a shepherd at heart, and we can safely assume he was hardly offended at being left out of the festivities when *someone* has to watch the flock. Samuel declared that the feast could not begin while David was absent, so they must fetch him. He is described as handsome, with obvious intelligence. Upon his appearance, God declares him the one and Samuel anointed him in front of everyone. From that time, the same royal spirit torn from Saul now rested on David; though imperfect, he was considerably more cooperative with God's plans.

16:14-18 – Bereft of God's guiding presence, Saul is left instead with a demon. The author brings us back to look upon the fallen king as now an object of pity. Whatever flaw in his character led him astray was now magnified. At times he would be someone else entirely. The symptoms are today known as schizophrenia, or "split personality." A primary symptom is for the milder self to forget everything that happened while the demented self is manifest. It was known then, as now, that music could help to calm raging passions and restore clear thinking. Saul's counselors advised him to find a good musician who could play the lyre and sing. When he put out the word to find one, somebody recalled meeting a young fellow named David who would fit the bill and was quite a valiant warrior, as well.

16:19-23 – David was sent with proper supplies and gifts. He was indeed quite the musician, but in this case, it is more a matter of David singing praises to God that drives Saul's demon away. His manners fit him well for Saul's court and his debut as royal demon-tamer was successful. Saul was so delighted with him as to appoint him as his armor steward, at this a point a position with many additional ceremonial duties. This was the best excuse possible for keeping him at hand. Saul sent word asking that David be released for royal attendance, though it is wholly likely he himself never paid attention to who David's family was. We see a man quickly becoming ever more dependent on others. Saul was a deeply troubled soul and left many

details of his life to others.

6.8: David's Rising Star

The one thing Saul valued most was the love and admiration of his subjects. He had already proved this mattered more to him than obeying God. He thus allowed the people to rule him. As he begins to lose even this, Saul shows himself a desperate man.

1 Samuel 17:1-3 – The Valley of Elah makes several sharp bends near the City of Sochoh, on its way down to the flatlands and the Mediterranean. The Philistine-Israeli border was in flux, and this represented disputed territory. The presence of the Philistine army is a provocation. They take up the high ground on the north side of the valley, but because of the sharp twisting, find themselves looking down on the village of Azekah almost from the east.

Saul mobilizes his troops and takes up a strategic position on the opposite hilltop, almost due west of the Philistine, cutting off their direct route home, but exposing their backs to Philistine territory. Thus, both armies are in effect isolated from support. In the ancient ways of war, this would set the battle to take place on a rather flat valley floor, right out in front of the little village of Azekah.

17:4-11 – For the Philistines, it was quite a gamble, having suffered defeat so often against Saul. They brought out a champion, someone probably known to Saul. Goliath was one of the Anakim refugees, which Joshua had driven from the hill country of Judah. They had settled in several of the Philistine cities and this one had joined their army. Saul knew him to be a veteran of battle. As king and one of the tallest fighters in the camp of Israel, it would be his responsibility to face Goliath himself. This challenge to decide the battle one-on-one was not something Israel could easily turn aside. While the two sides faced off just outside sling and arrow range, this giant – something over nine feet tall (nearly 3 meters) – issued his challenge as an insult to Jehovah. Yet there was no Israelite with enough faith in the Lord to face Goliath. From a human perspective, there was no hope of fighting him in single combat. Just the weight of his combat gear was enough to stagger most men: a coat of plates down to the knees weighing roughly 110 pounds (50kg), not to mention the helmet, greaves and shin guards; a spear whose head weighed 13 pounds (6kg) and an assortment of other weapons. His defense weapons were all bronze, the offensive ones were iron. All told, this approximates to a 600 pound (270kg) human juggernaut. People rode animals smaller than that.

17:12-19 – David is brought back into the picture. David was not yet old enough to go to war, which was traditionally 20 years. Thus, he couldn't be drafted for any official duty as a man. Ostensibly a full-time member of Saul's court, he occasionally returned to the family home to take his turn at shepherding. While thus occupied, Jesse asks this youngest of his sons to take food to the battle front for his three eldest brothers. Jesse was too old to go himself but was eager for news. Not every confrontation of ancient armies resulted in an immediate clash. Negotiations might take place, minor skirmishes, or various contests of honor, all before a major battle, or even without one. This ties up lots of bodies and someone had to feed them. While Saul should have had no trouble demanding taxation-in-kind, what Jesse sends represents the best of home food. Parched grain was roasted on a pan the same day it was harvested and is still a favorite today in that part of the world. The bread would be flat disks of pita and the

cheese would be the soft, white sort, kept in a cool cellar. All these would be in short supply to troops in the field.

As always, the phrase “forty days” is not to be taken literally. Still, this was quite some time, the face-off dragging on interminably. To say they were “fighting with the Philistines” means simply that they remained on full alert, ready to fight and within sight of the enemy.

17:20-27 – At 17 miles (27km) by air, but considerably more by ancient roads, it took David all day to get from Bethlehem down to Azekah. He would have left the loaded onager with the baggage stewards, somewhere to the rear of the battle formation. In obedience to his father’s wishes, he met with his brothers. Then while observing the situation, Goliath made his daily appearance. The forward pickets would flee as he strode boldly within hailing distance and shouted his defiance. The troops standing nearby mentioned the terms of the challenge and Saul’s offer to anyone daring enough to even try facing Goliath: instant wealth, the hand of the king’s daughter and his family property becomes tax exempt.

17:28-30 – As David asked a few others to confirm the story, his brother Eliab lashed out at him. He knew David was just the sort of fellow to respond to any insult against God, regardless how improbable it might be. He obviously feared being upstaged by his youngest brother. If Eliab was such a real man himself, he would have already volunteered, and David’s question branded him a coward. David’s response was a subtle reminder he was there in obedience to their father’s command, indicating the two had shared harsh words often in the past: “What did I do now? As if you needed any excuse...” David ignored his brother and continued his conversation with the troops nearby.

17:31-37 – Surely everyone was looking for a way out of this impossible situation. As soon as David inquired about Saul’s promises, it was reported to the king. Was there a volunteer at last? Indeed, David made it clear he was quite ready to fight on God’s behalf. Saul said more than he realized, when he warned David that Goliath had been a warrior at least as long as David had lived. David described how his faith in Jehovah had seen him kill many predators of the flock. Bad as the cougar-sized lions of that area were, the Syrian bears were even worse. He saw this situation in the same light. If the soldiers of Israel were going to act as sheep, then they needed a shepherd and David was as good as any, regardless of age. The same God who delivered bears and lions into his hand would do the same with this Goliath.

17:38-39 – Saul gave David his armor. It was a high honor, marking David as his personal champion. It was also the only edge he could give David against a warrior he probably had met in battle before. But David had not trained in armor – any armor, much less *this* armor. Whether David was anywhere close to Saul’s size would make no difference, though it appears he was close enough. David opted to wear his faith as his only armor.

17:40-47 – David took up his shepherd’s staff and selected good round stones from the wadi bed running across the battlefield between the armies. Many commentators make much of his taking 5 stones, given that Goliath had four brothers. While that may be true, it’s more likely the standard load for a slinger. In typical battle conditions, a slinger would have time to launch only a few missiles before the confusion of mass melee would make it too hard to select a target. Samples of these stones have been found in piles by archaeologists. They ranged up to a 4-inch

(10cm) diameter and weighing two pounds (1kg); we have already seen how the Benjamites were deadly accurate with them. Still in use some today, the maximum range is about 600 feet (180m), and terminal velocity exceeds 146 feet per second (45m/sec). It was altogether deadly, regardless of whether the target was armored.

Goliath did his utmost to insult David, even cursing him by his pagan gods. David responded that his faith in Jehovah was more than enough armor and weaponry to defeat any foe. David then promised to carry Goliath's head away as a trophy and the whole Philistine army would be left as carrion for birds and beasts. The God of Israel could do this with anyone, even a shepherd boy.

17:48-54 – The two mismatched combatants approached. As a slinger, David had one natural advantage: he could strike first, well before any of Goliath's weapons could be useful. Indeed, Goliath never had a chance to use them, because David's first shot was fatal, striking Goliath on the head and crushing his skull at the exposed forehead. Before the watching armies, David used Goliath's own sword to behead the carcass. The Philistines melted in confusion and Israel stormed down the hillside in attack. The pursuit pushed the Philistines to their very city gates. Returning from the pursuit, Israel plundered the Philistine camp. Each time this happened, more iron weapons passed into Israeli hands. David's share of plunder as the champion was everything Goliath owned. The value of the metal alone was considerable. Goliath's head was displayed at Jerusalem, the city outside the Jebusite stronghold. Perhaps this was David's way of warning the Jebusite garrison their days were numbered.

17:55-58 – Saul had never really known much about the young man who often played the lyre in his court. He asked his general, Abner, to find out. Since Saul had promised to make Goliath's killer his son-in-law and was going to make his family tax exempt, he had to know more about who that would be. Abner went down to the celebrating troops and escorted David to the king. In front of official witnesses, David identified the household to receive this bounty.

18:1-4 – Saul decreed that David was now a man and could no longer be called home by his father. Jonathan knew immediately that he and David were the same sort, the same kind of faithful servant of Jehovah. It's only too natural there would be a powerful bond between them. In the Presence of the Lord, they made a covenant that essentially places each in the highest position of the other's life. Among humans, there would be no higher loyalty for these two. Though David had nothing to offer except his sling, Jonathan exchanged armor with David, the same as saying, "I will protect you as my own skin; my life for yours."

18:5-9 – David was the type of fellow who seldom made mistakes that mattered. His wisdom was beyond his years and his insight into human nature made him everyone's favorite. As was common in ancient Semitic culture, wives and daughters would celebrate their soldiers' homecoming with dancing, including mimicking their warfare, as a means of praising their exploits. They would typically chant a simple refrain. If they knew the hero's name, he would be the subject of the chant. While Saul was quite a warrior, David was praised as even better. Saul instantly regretted the whole thing. He had made extravagant promises, and someone had taken him up on it. Now he was stuck with a protégé whom, he felt, was also his worst enemy, a rival for the one thing that mattered to him: the people's adulation and his throne.

18:10-11 – The next time Saul came under attack from the demon, David began performing his regular duty of playing the lyre. As with many ancient kings, Saul held a spear or javelin as his scepter. He still operated as the warlord-king. Seized by this demonic fear of David's threat to his position, he attempted to pin David to the wall by throwing the spear. This happened twice, but David escaped both times.

18:12-16 – The writer reminds us that Saul was not blind to the spiritual issues involved. He knew full well that the royal Spirit of God had left him and rested on David. To alleviate the nagging reminder, he gave David a job that would keep him away from the court. David became a troop commander and was frequently on various missions with his soldiers. He came and went in full view of the public and they loved him. His leadership was flawless, and troops and elders loved him. As usual, David acted in the wisdom of the Lord, making Saul all the more worried. David *acted* like a king, nobler than Saul.

18:17-21 – Finally, it was time for Saul to make good on his promise to marry David to his daughter, Merab. This would be a promotion for David and the news would surely come to Philistia. Thus, Saul could legitimately let David take his place as the primary leader in war and as the Philistine's number one target. David resisted, giving the excuse he was a nobody and too poor to pay any dowry. When it came time for the wedding – probably in connection with a birthday – David was still not ready, so the girl was passed to another. However, Saul had another daughter that was deeply in love with David. When Saul heard of her affections, he was tickled. Here was another chance! Once more, Saul announced his intention to make David his son-in-law.

18:22-27 – This time, Saul got his servants in on the effort. They whispered to David about how Saul really did want David as his son-in-law and turning him down was quite an insult. David complained he just couldn't afford the dowry. When they reported this back to the king, Saul saw his chance. He didn't have any use for a dowry of money or property. All he really wanted was the death of 100 Philistine men. Since Philistines didn't practice circumcision, the best symbolic proof of this feat would be to bring back their foreskins. This mutilation of the dead would also be a gesture clearly understood by any Philistines finding their bodies – Israel had killed these men they considered filth. Thus, David and his men could keep any battle plunder for themselves.

When the servants relayed this to David, the whole idea seemed splendid. Kill some Philistines, rub their leader's faces in it and bring glory to God. The next morning, David took his troops out. As usual, he went in faith; he brought back twice the prescribed number of trophies and insisted they be counted out before the king. While Saul gained either way, it was not what he expected. Still, he married his daughter Michal to David.

18:28-30 – So it went for Saul. He looked ever more the crazy fool, while his new son-in-law seemed ever more kingly. His own family was turning one by one in favor of David. When the Philistine lords dispatched their troops for raids on the Israeli grain harvest, David was there and frustrated them to no end. He frustrated Saul as well, but for different reasons. David was God's man and quickly became Israel's man.

6.9: David and Jonathan

Scripture says little on the nature of demons. This one had permission from God to oppress and provoke Saul to folly. As time passed, the demon appears to have made himself a home in Saul's heart, as Saul's state worsens. He determined to murder David. At the same time, the spiritual fellowship between David and Jonathan deepens. Jonathan clearly sees that David will displace him as the next king, yet David has no such pretensions.

1 Samuel 19:1-3 – Saul orders the death of David. In this context, it was yet another momentary raving of a man living with a demon. The order would have been an urgent command to do so that day. Saul is not yet fully aware of the covenant between David and his son, so includes Jonathan in the plan. Jonathan warns David to disappear until dawn. He further promised to approach his father and seek a reversal of this order.

19:4-7 – Jonathan reminded his father of all the things David had done right, especially in royal service. If Saul could rejoice when David, at great personal risk, faced Goliath alone, how could he now order his death? David only did as Saul had asked and saved his kingdom from slavery. Saul relented, or so it appeared. The author constantly alludes to the spiritual forces at work. The demon's greatest enemy at this point is David, who is an agent for God's power and presence. If the demon can persuade Saul to kill David, there is little to stand in the way of full possession and unimaginable havoc in the kingdom.

19:8-17 – As was David's routine, he went out to meet a Philistine assault and defeated them sorely. Afterward, while David celebrated God's victory in song, the demon provoked Saul to skewer him with his javelin. Saul missed and the weapon lodged in the wall. As it was evening, David escaped into the darkness. Saul ordered soldiers to lie in wait outside David's house in the city, to ambush him as he came out the door in the morning. Michal knew her father well enough to insist David escape completely from the city. Apparently, their home was on the wall, and she let David down through a window that faced out over it.

Like many women in Israel, Michal secretly kept a wooden Asherah image. It was a common thing for women who were barren. She used this wooden image and some goat hair to simulate David in his bed. When David did not come out that morning, Saul sent messengers to the house itself, to arrest him and bring him out. Michal lied that David was ill and a glance in his bedroom presented a plausible image to the soldiers. Upon their report to Saul, the king demanded they bring the bed with David on it. All the better, since a man so ill would not resist when Saul performed the execution himself. At this point, it seems obvious Saul would not have dared to fight David one on one. Discovering the ruse, the soldiers brought Michal before her father. Upon demanding why, she was conspiring against him, Michal claimed David had threatened her. If in this state Saul believed her, it shows how much he was out of touch with reality.

19:18-24 – David took refuge with Samuel in Ramah. Samuel took David with him down to the Prophet's Academy, a place called Naioth ("Residence"). Most likely this was one or more buildings, either in town or near it, dedicated to housing the students and their training sessions. Saul got wind of it and sent soldiers to arrest David. As they approached the academy, they saw Samuel standing in leadership of the academy, which was actively engaged in

prophesying as a group. While public prophecy might take any number of forms, it was often something dramatic, as a means of calling the heart to ponder God's holiness and human sin. Such demonstrations might last days. As soon as the soldiers got close enough, they were seized by the Holy Spirit and joined the group in prophecy.

Again, Saul got a report, this time of how his deputation had been co-opted by the school. This happened twice more. Finally, Saul went himself. As he had done once long ago, Saul stopped at the great well outside the city gates of Ramah and asked where he could find Samuel and David. The text names this place outside the gates as Sechu ("Climbing" Place), which accords well with an image of the city built up the side of a hill, with its main entrance on the low side. When he was told they were at the Prophets' Academy, he went straight there. Yet again, he was overtaken by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the extent he disrobed – a common prophetic image of the shamefulness of sin, which leaves one naked before a judging God. This renewed the byword, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" Yet, echoes of his past could not touch Saul's heart.

20:1-11 – Taking advantage of the situation, David fled the next morning and found Jonathan. Upon asking what the nature of his offense was, why it merited execution, Jonathan was stunned. Having just received assurance a few days previously that David was safe, he could not imagine Saul would change his mind without mentioning it to his own son. David offered a solemn oath before the Lord as assurance he spoke truthfully. Jonathan had not secured David's safety but had merely succeeding in tipping Saul off that he needed to keep Jonathan out of his counsel. Jonathan asked then what David would suggest he do.

We should remind ourselves that Israel's whole culture was agrarian, with events reckoned by seasons and by the phases of the moon. Every new moon (completely shadowed) was marked by a festival lasting three days, marked by ceremonial meals in the evening. Scholars tell us most likely Saul took the seat of honor – his back to the wall and facing the door – at a table for four. Jonathan would face him, with Abner to his right, and David to his left. You can be certain David would be conspicuous by his absence at this feast. On the first night, it was all too common that a soldier would in the course of his duties make himself ceremonially unclean (touching dead bodies). Thus, for the duration of that one day he would be forbidden to participate. He couldn't use that excuse twice. At the same time, as David's father aged to the point where he passed the household management to his eldest son, it could be that son's judgment that David should come home for one last annual sacrifice before their father passed. This would normally be a valid excuse, as that social ritual takes precedence over most other duties. In fact, it is one of the few times an elder brother could give a legally binding order to a younger, while both were adults.

That this failed to pacify Saul was all the proof anyone would need. Jonathan held senior place in their covenant, David reminded him. If anyone should be the first to uphold God's honor in passing sentence on a sinner, it would be a covenant brother of the sinner. A true friend in the Lord would not let you carry on in error. We scarcely understand that sort of honor code today. Jonathan was sure such a measure was unnecessary and promised to inform David of the results of this test. They went out to find a suitable place for passing this information.

20:12-16 – Jonathan revealed how clearly he saw the hand of Jehovah in all this. Rather than

jealously guard his place in line for the throne, he remarked that the royal spirit obviously rested on his friend. Given that David was God's chosen king of Israel, he made a request that in his reign, David deal kindly with him and his household. When he spoke of God cutting off David's enemies, he knew that meant his own father. Then the two extended their personal covenant to include their future households. One particular part of this pact was to ask the Lord to oversee the terms of the covenant during the impending forced separation of the two. If David failed to give it full effort, God was called to witness and strengthen David's enemies to punish him.

20:17-23 – This place was near some boundary marker, but within walking distance of Saul's palace. The scene is laden with sorrow and compassion. The two men agreed on a time to meet the second day from then, with David hiding by the boundary marker stone. They agreed upon a secret signal, something subtle that would appear to be within the normal routine for Jonathan. During archery practice he would give one of two typical commands to his helper. With a final reminder that God was watching them both, they parted.

20:24-40 – David slept in the fields, as he had done so often when pasturing his father's flocks. At the first meal that night, Saul said nothing of David's absence. He supposed the most obvious, that David was ceremonially unclean that day from killing the enemy. At the second evening meal, Saul asked. When Jonathan replied he had dismissed David for what amounts to a final visit with his aging father at a traditional family gathering, Saul exploded. In the presence of his court, the king declared Jonathan unfit to be his heir. Saul's declaration was that Jonathan was more the son of rebellion than of the king. While some scholars contend the word "woman" is implied by the phrase, it is by no means certain that he was calling Jonathan the son of a whore. The context seems to deny that, for in the next breath he says Jonathan was as shameful as one who stripped his honorable mother naked in public. Saul also reminded Jonathan he would not sit securely on the throne as long as David lived.

Jonathan called for his father to announce publicly the nature of David's crime. Saul's response was to throw the same javelin he had used to try killing David. Inflamed at his father's complete lack of justice, Jonathan left the hall without touching food. This was to honor God, by not defiling the celebration with his anger. He was torn by sorrow over David and his own shame. The next morning, he went to the boundary as promised and shot his three arrows. Aside from the signal that David was truly in danger and should flee, Jonathan added the admonition that David should waste no time about it, though the boy chasing arrows thought the comment was aimed at him. Jonathan dismissed the boy to take the weapons back to the armory.

20:41-42 – Knowing they might never meet again, David came out of hiding when he and Jonathan were alone. He greeted Jonathan with an extravagant display reserved for the rarest occasions of appearing before royalty, bowing three times to touch his forehead to the ground at his superior's feet. It was a clear declaration he had no intention of seizing the throne for himself. As far as David was concerned, Jonathan was still the royal heir until God changed things. Then they exchanged a more ordinary greeting, which is echoed today in Eastern nations, wherein two men embrace and touch the sides of their faces together, alternating sides, three times. They also exchanged tears at the bitter fate in which they were caught. Jonathan accepted the senior role and dismissed David into God's hands.

6.10: David Goes Underground

1 Samuel 21:1-6 – The date is approximately 1039 BC. From his last meeting with Jonathan, in the vicinity of Gibeah, David headed south to the area of Jerusalem. Recall that at this time, there was still a garrison of Jebusites on the high ridge above the actual ancient city of Jerusalem. Already David had favored this place by displaying there the trophy of his battle with Goliath. David had a love for this place.

Just a mile north of Jerusalem, on a ridge, was Nob (today Mount Scopus). This may well be one of the officially sanctioned “high places” dedicated to the worship of Jehovah. Sometime during Saul’s reign, the old Tabernacle of Moses was in use once again, or a copy of it, erected on top the ridge. Proper worship took place according to the ceremonial law. However, the Ark of the Covenant had not yet been moved from its resting place far away in Kiriath-jearim. Perhaps Samuel did not yet trust these priests to guard it again, since it was Eli’s sin that caused its loss. The entire village belonged to the family of Ahitub. From 14:3 we are reminded that Ahitub was Ichabod’s brother, the man born when the Ark of Covenant was taken by the Philistines. The prophecy had been that any surviving members of Eli’s household would be fortunate indeed if Samuel allowed them to remain in the priesthood. Samuel was rather kind to them, after all. Surely it was he who raised anew the wilderness worship center and employed the survivors of Eli’s household to serve in it. If one stood on the southern brow of Nob’s ridge, he could see the top of Mount Moriah, soon to be called Zion.

On duty that day was Ahimelech (“Brother of the King”), son of Ahitub. When David arrived there, he had already been without food since fleeing his own home in the evening two days before. Whether we see sin in David’s lie to the priest is a matter of perspective. It may well be he intended to protect the priest from being cognizant of the situation, preserving his innocence from knowingly aiding a fugitive. Either way, it was still a lack of faith on David’s part. He should have allowed the priest the option to turn him away. From Jesus’ words, we learn that there was no sin in David eating this bread (Matthew 12:1-8). It had been the Bread of Presence from the past week, now recently replaced by a fresh batch on the Sabbath (Leviticus 24:5-9). By Hebrew reckoning, David had not engaged in sex for at least three days, which is the only condition the priest raised.

21:7-9 – Doeg (“Anxious”) was Edomite, a descendant of Esau. For reasons we aren’t told he was detained at the Tabernacle in Nob. Possibilities include some ceremonial uncleanness, or suspicion of leprosy. His position was Chief Herdsman for Saul. Such a job would mean he was Saul’s manager for all the king’s personal herd animals. Rather than work in the fields, he remained at court, though hardly as an adviser. Saul’s royal court was rather primitive, and his “palace” was little more than a large house with one fairly large room. Thus, the distinction between a royal adviser and a personal servant was obscured by the informal nature of things. Saul was far closer to ancient warlord, rather than our idea of a monarch.

Doeg observed David’s meeting with Ahimelech. When David asked for a weapon, the only thing at hand was the sword of Goliath, brought there by David himself sometime during the past year. It would have been stored in a cloth that had been soaked in oil. The sword would be one of the few iron weapons taken from the Philistines. Successive battles wherein such weapons were captured had helped this situation some, but we can be sure Goliath’s old sword

would have been unique. The primitive Bronze Age swords would be reliable only if kept to about 12 inches (30cm) in length. Ancient wrought iron would allow something just over 24 inches (60cm) or so. Goliath easily had strength for larger weapons, but the material itself would have set limits, though perhaps this one would be bit heavier than usual. It would have been custom made for his hands, probably twice the breadth of David's, allowing him to use both hands for swinging it.

21:10-15 – With the food and weapon he got from the Tabernacle, David made his way southwest to Gath, by now just across the border in Philistine territory, toward the southern end of Palestine. The wording here indicates he went with the intent to serve perhaps in the court of Achish, king of the city, who would also be known among the Hebrews by the title Abimelech. The king's advisers warned this David was the de facto ruler of the Hebrews and mentioned the victory chant that praised David as a better warrior than Saul. With no place to go for the time being, David made himself non-threatening by feigning insanity. He would go to the gates of the city and make indecipherable scratches on the wooden doors with stones. He would appear to drool into his beard. We get the picture of a man who might wander about conversing with inanimate objects and generally demonstrating no contact with reality. When the king's guards brought David in, the king reacted with distaste, declaring he suffered no shortage of insane clowns.

22:1-2 – As soon as they let him go, David went back toward his home. About halfway between Gath and Bethlehem, just about an hour's walk east of the valley where David killed Goliath, is the city of Adullam. Its former king had joined the resistance to the Conquest and the city had been given to Judah. While there is no direct evidence to identify any of the caves in this area as David's favorite hideout, there is one that seems to fit the description. On the south face of a wadi is a cliff that opens with a 7-foot (2m) circular hole. There is a narrow passage to a small room. From there, a winding passage opens into a massive hall of approximately 5000 square feet (465 sq. meters), with numerous anterooms. Nothing else in the area comes close.

Word of David's presence there got back to his family. The whole household joined him, as it was common in those days that whole villages could be destroyed for the crimes of one resident. Soon, anyone with a complaint against Saul's increasingly mad regime joined with David. In a short time, he had gathered a small army of 400 men.

22:3-5 – Rather than risk his family's safety in this military hideout, David visited the king of Moab to seek refuge for them. He had family connections here. We don't know if his great-grandmother Ruth had any significant standing in Moab, but the royal family of Moab recognized David as a relative. For a time, David and his men stayed in Moab's fortress. Here we have the first appearance of the prophet Gad, who later became David's Chief Seer. At his urging, David left the Moabite stronghold and returned to Judah. We cannot identify the Forest of Hareth or Chereth, but it seems to be the time and place where David's royal bodyguard formed. They became known as the "Cherethites."

22:6-8 – Saul was holding court in the shade of a tamarisk tree, likely indicating this was during the hot season, July or August. As was Saul's habit, he sat with a javelin in his hand as a scepter. That he calls his attendants "Benjamites" indicates he had little loyalty among the other tribes by now. This is the habit of petty tribal rulers. He indicates that David, from the Tribe of Judah,

would act no differently. If king, Saul alleges that David would give all the positions of importance to men from Judah. We see later this is quite the opposite, as David strives to be so inclusive as to risk losing his own tribe's loyalty. Saul makes the mad claim that his servants are conspiring against him. "If you really loved me, you'd have told me that my son was against me and where David is hiding!" His impatience and obsession are palpable.

22:9-10 – Doeg's position would normally keep him silent. He's a personal servant of Saul and not a member of the War Council. This position leaves him clear of the charges Saul makes. As a foreigner eager to promote himself with Saul, Doeg speaks about the meeting between David and Ahimelech. It is almost certain he knows where this will lead. It is also certain he knew the priests were not guilty of knowingly aiding David. He was willing to let others die for his own advancement. He is true to his name, "Anxious" to ingratiate himself.

22:11-19 – From the time a messenger is sent, it would have taken a couple of hours or so for the priests of Nob to be assembled before Saul. His accusation is dramatic and full of lies. Ahimelech speaks truly that no one was more loyal than David, so that this whole business was unnecessary. That was hardly the first time Ahimelech used the ephod on David's behalf to inquire of God. Otherwise, the priest would have indeed been in rebellion, refusing to aid the king's best servant and son-in-law. He rightly professed no knowledge of Saul's warrant for David's arrest.

There's no question that Saul was wrong all the way through on this. If he had any complaint against the priests, it should have gone to Samuel to judge, for he was the High Priest still. Ahimelech's answers were manly and accurate. The king is the one who should be on trial. Saul took it as arrogance and condemned him on the spot. The Benjamites knew better than to break the law, but Saul could count on his good servant, the foreign-born Doeg, to do the job. Saul further gave Doeg the honor of destroying their village, as well, killing every living thing. The text indicates the site became defiled by the massacre. We know the Tabernacle was moved from there, as it shows up later on the hilltop above Gibeon.

22:20-23 – One of the priest's family escaped, Abiathar ("Father of Abundance"). Since it's unlikely they would have left the Tabernacle completely unattended, it's probable he was left in charge. He may have been able to catch wind of the whole thing before Doeg got to him. He fled to David in the Forest of Chereth. His report of the massacre caused David great chagrin. Having seen Doeg there, he should have simply gone on his way. By staying to seek support, he doomed the whole village. The least David could do was promise to protect the priest by keeping him close. If David survived, according to God's anointing and promise, so would Abiathar.

In yet one more way, the Lord had left Saul. Samuel refused to see Saul. The only other priest capable of inquiring of God now stood before David.

6.11: The War that Wasn't

David has already begun to serve as ruler. He had a small army and accepted food and support from the local population. Objectively, he appears to be a rebel warlord, a guerrilla freedom fighter. However, he uses his army to protect those in distress from invasion and offers

absolutely no threat to the established king.

1 Samuel 23:1-5 – While hanging out mostly in Forest of Chereth and keeping his residence in the cave at Adullam, David gets word of a Philistine raid on Keilah. It's mostly ruins today, but there are ancient terraces that were clearly used for growing grain. That the Philistines are robbing the threshing floor indicates we are again at harvest time. David has been on the run for the better part of a year. He inquires of the Lord whether he should deliver Keilah. The answer is yes, but his men are frankly fearful of adding to their enemies. David double checks with God and is assured yet more strongly that it's right to attack the Philistines. Not only did he rescue the wheat harvest but captured all the livestock the Philistines had brought to feed their troops.

23:6-8 – David would naturally have stayed in the city awhile. Having delivered them, it was customary for the city to feed and house them awhile. It was all too likely the Philistines would come back. Saul eventually got word of David's location. Rather than being grateful that his people were spared from a Philistine raid, he felt he had David trapped and summoned troops. The city had a wall, with a single gate which they would have kept barred. If Saul could approach the city unobserved, David would not get his men out in time. Saul planned to lay siege to the city.

23:9-13 – There was no shortage of messengers running for both sides; it's the nature of politics that various citizens in the countryside would support one or the other. David heard of the call-up and inquired of God whether to stay and fight or flee. His question centered on just how grateful the city would be under such pressure. The Lord warned David they would capitulate and hand him over to Saul. By now the small army was 600 men. They left the city and scattered, becoming less of a target for Saul. The mobilization was called off.

23:14-18 – If we draw a line east and west through Hebron, another one north and south, we would find that the southeastern quadrant of our grid is wide open territory, with precious few towns. Recall that this region was given to Caleb's daughter Achsah (Judges 1:15) and was so dry as to warrant an additional gift of springs that were not geographically part of the grant. This area is also rocky limestone, shot through with caves and would have had some dry forest cover in places. Saul kept sending patrols, but they never spotted David and his men. Nonetheless, Jonathan was able to find him this one last time. Jonathan encouraged David to be ready to rule soon and asked that he be allowed to serve in David's court.

23:19-23 – The City of Ziph is on the edge of this desolate area. Most likely David was asking voluntary support in exchange for protection. However, some would naturally see it as stealing and drawing unwanted attention. They sent a report that located David's camp in a natural fortress in the craggy forest area. Saul was very pleased, but not quite satisfied with the report. He sent the messengers back to obtain more details. Also, he wanted to muster an invasion force and have them in position, with a fresh report when they were near the target.

23:24-26 – As his troops arrived, they were met with a report of a pinpoint location five miles (8km) south of Ziph, in Maon. As the expedition approached, David was warned, so he left the town and moved out into the hills, placing a particular landmark hill between himself and Saul. As Saul's troops bore down on David's little army, circling in from both sides, there would be no escape, as they were backed against a bluff. Even with fast climbing, some contact could not

be avoided.

23:27-29 – At the last possible moment, Saul received a report of Philistine invasion. Without having actually seen David’s troops, he called off the pursuit and immediately turned north to deal with the invaders. From then on, the place was known as the Rock of Escape. David decided to move to a more remote location, down on the shore of the Dead Sea at En Gedi.

24:1-7 – En Gedi sits in a wadi, on a shelf well above the Dead Sea, watered by a spring from above. The flow splashes down the steep drop in several waterfalls. The caves are as numerous as ever. After successfully dispatching the Philistines, Saul was notified that David was in that area. Of the force with him, Saul selected 3000 to return to their original mission of chasing David. We note that virtually every cave in this area today has a stacked stone wall in front of it for use as a sheep pen, to keep out predators. Many of the caves were merely small chambers in the face of the rock. A few hid large networks of rooms behind the initial opening. Most would have been up a way from any valleys.

The best road wound down through the wadi. As Saul was marching down this road, it passed several of these walled openings above him in one place. He decided to take a break. While subject to debate, it was most likely he simply wanted to relieve himself. He would have removed his robe and armor for this, leaving it near the entrance and looked for a spot that had been used for the same purpose he had in mind. David, hiding unnoticed by Saul in the same cave, managed to steal close to the royal robe and cut off a section of the hem. He restrained his buddies from killing Saul in the cave, where it would have been easy.

24:8-15 – As soon as Saul had redressed himself and climbed down from the entrance, David came out of the cave and stood behind the enclosure wall. Calling out to Saul, he made it clear that, had he wanted, Saul could have been easily killed. To prove it, he waved the section of robe in the wind. His remonstrance was in terms of God’s judgment. Clearly Saul was in sin, and perhaps Jehovah would judge him for it, but David was certainly not going to play that role. “Let God punish you, but I will not touch you.”

24:16-22 – Saul was stung by guilt, to the point he wept. He agreed that David was indeed more righteous and clearly was not his enemy. Further, it was obvious to all that David would soon be king, for he was not only more noble, but stood in God’s favor. He asked that David not deal harshly with his household when it finally happened. David had no trouble swearing an oath before God to do this. Saul turned back to Gibeah, and David went back up into the caves. Clearly, though wracked with guilt, Saul had not repented. This was not over yet.

6.12: *Company of Fools*

1 Samuel 25:1 – During the time of truce between Saul and David, Samuel passed away. David is free to pay his respects, and then head out to Paran. Recall that this is the north-central Sinai Peninsula, used in ancient times as seasonal pasturage for sheep and goats.

25:2-9 – A very wealthy Calebite brought his sheep in for shearing. He had a wife, Abigail (“Source of Joy”) who was everything he was not. The man’s name translates as “Fool.” To be a fool in the Hebrew sense meant more than poor judgment, but to reject all that was good in life for the sake of selfish indulgence. This man had few friends and deservedly so. Sheep-shearing

was typically the end of March and was one of several major agricultural celebrations. Shortly following would be the grain harvest with more celebrations. The sheep usually found shearing quite a relief from the coming summer heat. Quite likely the man had pastured his flocks as far south as the Wilderness of Paran for the winter. David and his men had given good protection to everyone in the southern end of Canaan. We must not forget that raiding tribesmen had not simply gone away with the Conquest. David's presence in the area made life better for everyone. When he sent messengers to Nabal to share in the celebration, he didn't really ask that much, just whatever Nabal found convenient to send. It is highly unlikely Nabal was the only one to receive such a visit but was surely the wealthiest.

25:10-13 – Nabal was not politically active on Saul's behalf. However, that was a part of the excuse he gave, alleging David was no more than a runaway slave. It would be difficult for him to have said anything more insulting. Even today, Bedouins receive gifts, which in our eyes amount to a protection racket. Roving bands of armed men can be a major problem, but David was anything but a problem. Nabal also acted as if he couldn't afford any gifts. Even then, the issue was the insulting response. David mobilized two-thirds of his forces.

25:14-17 – Nabal's servants knew better than he. One of them informed their mistress of Nabal's stupidity in rejecting David's peaceful overture. In the process, he affirmed that David truly deserved better. Even had he not known David's plan, no one would be surprised at some sort of retribution. Nabal's rebuff was essentially a criminal breach of social obligation.

25:18-22 – What Abigail prepared to send would have been a decent meal for about 200 men. This was no doubt a small portion of what had already been prepared for the festival. While we cannot know where precisely this story is set, it's easy enough to envision if you could see southern Palestine today. Without informing Nabal of her actions, Abigail had the food sent ahead of her, while she ensured he noticed nothing. When the convoy was out of sight, she herself rode on a donkey to meet David. She would have screened her actions by taking the same route out that David would have taken coming in. Since sheep-shearing almost surely took place in a flat valley area, a wise raider would have approached from one of the numerous wadis in the area, or from behind a hill, out of sight until it was too late for the target to mount a defense. In this case, there was apparently a distinct hill or ridge above the shearing floor. David had already advertised his intent to kill all the men in Nabal's household, though apparently Nabal was unaware.

25:23-31 – Abigail approached David as an important woman, but made it clear she was honoring him as a lord. Her words were carefully chosen, showing she was wiser than most men. She took the blame for the incident and agreed that her husband was complete idiot. She seized upon the image of God having prevented David from avenging a grave insult, because the Lord would handle this sin Himself. Better it would be that the future king should not create hard feelings unnecessarily with the local population. She mentions how Saul's schemes had failed, because Jehovah regarded David as a precious stone, but his enemies were disposable, like a sling stone. She ended with the standard appeal for consideration when all this came true, as a means of affirming she really expected it to happen.

25:32-38 – David realized he was in the presence of a living gift from God. He praised Abigail's wisdom and promised that she had well succeeded in her mission. Upon returning home, she

found her husband hosting a royal feast. Her husband having by now become drunk, she waited before explaining things. By morning he had slept it off and she told him the whole story. The shock to him was so severe he became more or less catatonic. Within ten days, he died.

25:39-44 – Learning of Nabal’s death by God’s hand, David rejoiced how things turned out. Far better it is to let Jehovah handle His own business. Abigail was so clearly superior among women, David proposed marriage to her. She accepted with all seriousness and brought along a retinue of 5 handmaidens. This serves to remind the reader that, while seldom mentioned, virtually everyone of importance would have always had at least one servant or slave with them. We are informed at this point that David had already married Ahinoam from Jezreel. She is always mentioned first when David’s wives are listed, so she held the important place of David’s first wife. Michal, having had a very brief consort with David, was passed off by her father to someone else. This was an insult and crime against David and set the other fellow up for unnecessary suffering later.

26:1-4 – The people of Ziph were ever eager to please Saul and rid themselves of David. They reported to Saul David’s campsite near Jeshimon, a place currently unidentified. Saul mobilized his usual 3000-man force and camped in the place where he was told David was hiding. The wary David had seen them coming and moved farther out into the wilderness. Meanwhile, his spies kept an eye on Saul’s forces.

26:5-12 – From one of the nearby hilltops, David came to see for himself what he was up against. Observing them asleep, David asked two warriors which of them was in the mood for closer look. Ahimelech was a Hittite, the race that had held ascendancy in the land from the time of Abraham, until their empire collapsed around 1600BC, a century and a half before the Conquest. They still carried the pride of conquering warriors, though now serving in the armies of other nations. Abishai was a fellow Hebrew and would prove himself one of David’s best supporters. It was he who volunteered to go as backup. The pair managed to creep up to Saul’s sleeping place. Saul’s erstwhile scepter, a decorated spear, was standing in the ground at his head. It would have borne distinctive markings, as might the water jar there, too. In an odd reversal, Abishai suggested that this same spear, having been thrown at David at least twice, be used to finish this business of living on the run by killing Saul with it. Abishai was certain he could finish the job with one stroke. David restrained him, warning that he was sure Saul’s fate had already been set by God. However, he would take the spear and water jug in yet another attempt to get Saul’s attention. God assured that no one could catch them, by keeping the camp under a supernaturally heavy sleep.

26:13-20 – After hiking a safe distance away, up to the top of the hill again, David called out the Abner, the chief bodyguard. Abner’s response was to ask who dared to wake the king. David responded that with all Abner’s devotion and combat prowess, he had failed spectacularly. To prove his point, David showed his trophies. Abner was shamed into silence. Saul confirmed that it was David calling out. Again, David asked what it was all about, this constant pursuit of a nobody. If Saul was there in response to a command from God, then David could settle that with God in accordance with the Law. God was perfectly reasonable about such things. In contrast, David indicated that it was more likely a mere human agency, deserving a curse. This

was because of the net effect of this persecution was to drive David away from Jehovah. It was typical of someone adopting a new country to adopt the local deity there, as well. David's ancestor Ruth had done this. Perhaps someone expected David to do the same, perhaps among the Philistines. David urged Saul to end the feud.

26:21-25 – Saul expressed anew the sense of guilt that David was a better man, unworthy of any harm. David's response was to return the symbol of royalty – the spear – and included a hint of that being "the Lord's anointed" carried a heavy burden of responsibility for acting right. Saul pronounced a sort of blessing on David and two parted again in peace.

6.13: Out of Reach

David knew better than to trust Saul's word. Saul was not his own man anymore. The situation had become impossible for David. He was loath to leave the southern region, but some of the clans of Judah were clearly against him. The prophet Gad had already warned him not hide out in Moab. Still, David knew he could not simply dissolve his army and send them all packing when they barely survived as a strong force together.

1 Samuel 27:1-4 – In desperation, David presented himself and his army to Achish, the Philistine lord of Gath. His domain was the closest of the five capital cities and it appears the ruler personally favored David. This was the same man who a couple of years earlier claimed he believed David was insane. It is the subject of some debate whether David's choice here represents a failure of faith. On a human level, it is clearly understandable. It is also a very carefully planned move, in that David had no intention of harming his own nation. His intent was not so much to serve Achish as to avoid Saul. In this, he certainly succeeded.

27:5-7 – After a brief stay in Achish's accommodations, David suggested to his new master that such an arrangement was burdensome to him. At least part of David's reasoning was to stay as remote as possible while earning his own way. Achish responded by making the town of Ziklag a personal gift to David. From that time on, the royal House of David kept the city as a personal possession. It is noted that David remained in the service of Achish for about a year and four months.

27:8-12 – Raiding the Amalekites served a treble purpose for David. It weakened an enemy of Israel, it provided him with an income of sorts, and it gave him a means to convince Achish that David had truly come over to the Philistine side. David also hit the allies of Amalek, the Geshurites and Girzites. All of these occupied the Negev, but while badly hurt by Saul's attack early on (ch. 15), they were not wiped out. Saul had failed to press for a full destruction, so they continued as a threat to Israel. David worked at finishing the job. He would kill all humans on each raid, which in the bargain prevented anyone from revealing the source of his plunder. He was then free to tell Achish what he wanted to hear, that the raids were on Judah and her allies. Achish was sure he had a servant with no place else to go, since attacking the Hebrews would alienate them from David.

28:1-2 – The time of grain harvest came around and the Philistines mobilized for raids on Israel. Achish gave David marching orders to join in the fun. David carefully avoids making any promises, merely remarking, "You know what I can do." Achish took this as an oath of loyalty

and promoted David and his men as his royal bodyguard. It is an ancient tradition that a ruler would select foreigners for this task, as there was less chance they would take any interest in local intrigues. There was no way foreigners could simply take the throne and they were quite unlikely to be bought off by any would-be usurper.

28:3-6 – The scene switches to Saul in his mobilization to meet the Philistines. We are reminded that Samuel had died. Saul had long ago exiled known witches, mediums and anyone else practicing pagan magic. An advance party of Philistines took up a position that had been often used by invaders before: the foot of Moreh Hill, near the source of the Jezreel River. The area was rough, but fairly flat, with freshwater springs all over. Saul's advance party was across the valley on Mount Gilboa, Gideon's stand. Saul possessed none of Gideon's courage. Seeing the preparations taking place in the valley below, Saul knew the follow-on invasion would be huge. His natural human fear could find no ease from God. Jehovah had clearly made Himself completely unavailable to Saul.

28:7-14 – In desperation, Saul asked his men to help him break the law, by finding a medium. This was someone, usually a woman, who claimed to channel for spirits of the dead, but in reality, communed with a single demon. Dabbling in the spirit realm was dangerous business and mediums developed a familiarity with their one demon; thus, the term "familiar spirit." They avoided communicating with any other spiritual entity. As the medium peered into the spirit realm, she could detect their approach. A part of the show she might put on was to speak in screeches, whispers and incomprehensible mutterings (Isaiah 8:19, 29:1) or ventriloquism, making it appear the voice came from the ground. All these together were a part of the shtick of getting in contact with departed spirits, whether the demon manifested as someone sought, or it was faked with tricks.

Saul removed his distinctive royal garb and wore common clothes. He had been fasting already as a part of his effort to get hold of God. Now he had a two-hour hike at night over rough terrain, by-passing an enemy camp. He arrived in quite a state at Endor. The medium gave an obligatory warning that she was officially out of business and asked if this was some sort of trap. The penalty for what Saul was asking was execution if she was caught. Swearing by a Lord he no longer knew, Saul promised to keep the business secret.

The medium began her effort to contact her familiar, asking whom Saul was seeking. He answered Samuel, the well-known prophet. The medium was stunned when the real thing began to approach. She knew immediately this was King Saul, for nothing else could explain an actual spirit of the dead in place of her familiar demon. Clearly, this situation was not under her control, for God had taken the opportunity to give one last message to Saul. While Saul could not see the spirit, the medium could. She described the old prophet in his distinctive dress and Saul prostrated himself.

28:15-19 – Samuel berated Saul for disturbing him. Saul answered describing his predicament, complaining that God was avoiding him. Samuel then asked how Saul could have the nerve to expect anything better from Samuel, one wholly devoted in life to serving the God that had rejected Saul and had become Saul's enemy. He reminded Saul of the promise that the kingdom had been given to David, how that was the result of failing to destroy Amalek as commanded. His final words were Saul's doom: the Hebrew troops would lose the battle; Saul would die and

his sons with him.

28:20-25 – Saul collapsed into a semi-conscious state, overcome with physical and emotional exhaustion. The medium tried to arouse him. At great risk to her own life, she had done what Saul asked. The least she could do to make it up to him for the net result was to offer him food and water. Saul refused, but after some urging from his servants there, they finally prevailed upon him to dine. She prepared her best as quickly as possible and Saul sat up and ate, along with his servants. While it was still dark, they left and returned to the camp at Gilboa.

6.14: Saul Passes

Let's put this in perspective. A probable sequence of events goes like this: The Philistines mobilize just as grain harvest ends. Most ancient armies would send an advance party whenever possible to secure and set up a campsite. The Philistines did so in Jezreel, near Shunem. Their activity was reported to Saul, who immediately went in charge of his own advanced party, setting up at Mt. Gilboa. From the heights, Saul could see the massive scale of the Philistine campsite plans as their advance party secures the area. Still using chariots, the Philistines had a tactical advantage that discouraged early interference with their preparations. Saul most likely sent messengers to mobilize Israel and spent the day trying to get a word from God. Meanwhile, the main Philistine army musters at Aphek, some 45 miles (72km) away, on the fluctuating edge of their own territory, preparing to march to the camp in Jezreel.

1 Samuel 29:1-5 – Most likely, the Philistine army assembled at dawn to pass in review before the five lords of Philistia. These lords were not military men themselves but would stand at some high vantage point and watch as the troops ride past in chariots, with some in the rear marching on foot. All would be passing by on the way out of the area, heading for the Jezreel Valley, at least two days away. In the rear of this parade were David and his men. The other four lords turn on Achish demanding to know why Hebrews were present in the formation. His answer does not satisfy them. They reason that the one chance David has of returning to Saul's favor would be to turn against the Philistines and attack from the rear.

29:6-11 – Achish summoned David and told him the situation. David complained that this was clearly an unreasoned prejudice, since nothing he did could have been the basis for a complaint. Nonetheless, there was no reversing this decision. He was ordered to stand down and remain in the camp at Aphek. At the next sunrise, he was to return home.

30:1-6 – The trip home took David and his men three days. This was a forced march of about 70 miles (112km). They found Ziklag a smoking ruin from an Amalekite raid. They were obviously taking revenge for David hitting them so hard for over a year. There were no bodies, so clearly all the women folk were still alive. Most likely, they were to be sold as slaves in Egypt. There was hope for a rescue, but the unspeakable grief even led some to suggest stoning David. David gathered his faith before acting.

30:7-20 – Wisely, David summoned Abiathar to consult with God about pursuing the raiders. The answer was an expansive assurance that he would succeed in rescuing every soul. The troops had not yet unpacked and recovered from the forced march back from the Philistine muster. Just about 5 miles (8km) down the road behind the raiders, they came to the Brook

Besor. Both Ziklag and this watercourse are as yet unidentified to us, but the Hebrew writer's choice of words suggests a fairly deep ravine. One third of the men were simply dead on their feet, so David left them to guard the baggage while the rest pursued. Carrying only weapons would make the pursuit easier for men who had endured quite a hike already.

They stumbled upon an Egyptian, a slave abandoned by the fleeing Amalekites. The fellow had fallen ill and was of no greater value to his master than a lame herd animal, left to die. David ordered food and water given to the man, who had been without for three days. As David had expected, the slave had belonged to the one of the Amalekite raiders and provided excellent information. The raiders had struck several small places around southern Judah, made references to the region given to Caleb and had intentionally been seeking David's base. David and his men were known as "Cherethites," a reference to their stay in the Chereth Forest. In exchange for his life and freedom, the slave promised to show David where the raiders would be stopping for the night.

True to his word, the slave brought them to a huge camp. They found the raiders celebrating lavishly and already mostly drunk. It was evening and David's army attacked and destroyed the entire force of Amalekites. It took them until the same time the next day, but the only survivors were 400 camel riders who had ridden off immediately. All the women were recovered alive, including David's two wives. The raiders had taken a tremendous load of plunder and by right of victory it was all David's now. While his men were free to gather what they wished, David commandeered all the herd animals for himself. He had plans for them.

30:21-31 – While David's men were certainly loyal, brave warriors, not all of them were fine gentlemen by any stretch. A good number of them were quite nasty with their fellow soldiers who had remained with the baggage. Though David had saluted them respectfully, the nastier sort among those who had ambushed the Amalekites were suggesting the rear guard deserved no share of the spoil, only let them have their families back. David squelched this talk by establishing a decree that in Israel, every soldier took an equal share of the spoil regardless of his particular duty. While the greedy bunch were emphasizing it was they who bore the risk in combat, David reminded them it was the rear guard that made their success possible, by guarding the gear they left behind.

When they arrived back at Ziklag, David sent the herd animals as presents to his supporters throughout Judah. The scribe lists the major cities where David and his men had roamed in the past and it was these who were some of his strongest supporters later.

31:1-7 – Meanwhile, far to the north, the sad tale of Saul's end is told briefly. They fought, the Philistines won, and Israel fled. The troops were chased up the slope of Gilboa. Saul's sons died all three. Saul was mortally wounded by archers. Unable to continue, he asked his armor bearer to finish him off to prevent the Philistines torturing him while he still lived. The young man refused, so Saul committed suicide, a rare event in Scripture. An armor bearer dared not return alive without his master, so took his own life, too. So fierce was the slaughter that the Hebrews in the vicinity of Jezreel on the bank of the Jordan abandoned their cities. The Philistines stationed garrisons in the empty towns.

31:8-13 – During the grisly task of stripping the dead the next day, the Philistines identified

Saul's body. Perhaps in retribution for Goliath's end, they removed Saul's head and sent it on a tour of Philistia. The armor was stored in the treasure house of Astarte, which is likely to have been quite close by the battlefield. Excavations have found such a temple there. The bodies of Saul and his sons were hung from the wall of the fortress town at Bethshan.

The last favor they could give Saul, the men of Jabesh-gilead slipped up to the fortress at night and took the bodies down. Theirs was the town that Saul had rescued in his first act as king some 20 years before. So, they brought the bodies back home to Jabesh. While cremation was rare among Hebrews, they probably took this step to prevent the possibility of a Philistine reprisal recovering their trophies. This act of reverence was altogether honorable and quite risky.

Had David remained in Saul's service, he would no doubt have died in that battle. We remember Saul's good traits – his kindness and generosity, his courage and leadership, even his early humility – but cannot forget he never seemed to press to completion many of the less pleasant tasks he was called by God to perform. His primitive rule was done; David was now king.

7. True Monarchy: 1011-971 BC (David)

7.1: King of Judah

2 Samuel 1:1-10 – The day-long slaughter of the Amalekite raiders after 3 hard days of marching called for a good rest. David and his men had been home three days when a messenger from the Battle of Gilboa found his way to Ziklag. The man had adopted the mourner's costume: intentionally torn clothing and dust on his hair. Prostration before David was as much a part of mourning the slaughter as it was honoring David. The context paints the picture of a younger fellow, not quite of legal age, but perhaps old enough to serve as someone's armor steward. The interview produced news that was unlikely to be a surprise to David. However, the close questioning was necessary to make sure his next move was legitimate. The messenger's story was partly a lie, under the assumption it would curry David's favor.

1:11-16 – David immediately assumed a mourning posture and it was obvious he expected everyone else to follow. It must be noted here that in Jewish theology, while death was inevitable and Saul's the more so for his sin, death was never accepted as simply "a part of life." It was seen as a corruption of God's plan. Thus, public mourning was in part to honor the dead, but also to sorrow over sin's fruit.

At evening, it would have been "tomorrow" in the Hebrew mind. The day of mourning was past, now to the business at hand. With no other testimony to contradict the messenger, David publicly executed him. As much for daring to kill the Lord's anointed, this act was legally equivalent to ensuring there was no doubt David had no desire to see Saul dead. No one could accuse him of having any part in it if he didn't rejoice.

1:17-27 – What follows is a martial song, a lament that would have the same stirring effect as

“remember Pearl Harbor” had on American troops during WW2. Various elements in the song can be explained, but it would be extremely difficult to make a full translation of the cultural impact. In the last few lines, David makes a personal note regarding Jonathan and their mutual covenant.

2:1-3 – As usual, David inquired of the Lord before making a significant move. He could hardly rule as king from his remote home in Ziklag. The Lord revealed that David’s reign would begin in Hebron. This would be the largest urban area in Judah at the time. The name “Hebron” means “Brotherhood of Cities” – a series of hilltop towns centered on the old Kiriath-arba from before the Conquest. This was where the giant Anakim had their capital, and its conquest was a powerful symbol of success for Israel. David moved his entire army and their households to Hebron.

2:4-7 – Here the tribal elders of Judah, including the Calebites and Simeon, met David and declared him their king. They also advised him it was the men of Jabesh-gilead that provided burial for Saul and his sons. David’s first act as king was therefore an outreach to that city and to the Gileadites in general. He sent messengers to proclaim his favor on their final honor of Saul, with a promise of a concrete reward. However, his power to reward them might depend on whether they joined in supporting his reign. If he could win the support of this now-famous city, it would go far in establishing his claim.

2:8-11 – David’s message arrived too late. Abner, the shamed chief of the bodyguard whom David had rebuked at the last confrontation with Saul, had taken the last survivor of Saul’s family, Ishbaal, and presented him as the new king. Sometime later, scribes changed that name to Ishbosheth, when it became politically incorrect to use the word *baal* in its original context. While it had a variety of applications, ranging from simply the term a woman called her husband, to any man of importance, it was the religious use of the term for addressing the pagan gods of the Canaanites that brought the term into disrepute. Thus, *baal* (“lord”) was usually rewritten *bosheth* (“shame”).

Abner’s quick action was a sin, for it was widely known that God had chosen David as the next king. Oddly, he chose the town of Mahanaim, meaning “Two Camps” – an obvious symbolic meaning in this case. David was reluctant to press his claim on an unwilling population. The text describes how Ishbaal was recognized first in Gilead, then the whole tribe of Asher, the residents of Jezreel Valley, then Ephraim, and finally Benjamin. His reign lasted but two years, though there was a lag in switching everyone’s allegiance over to David. Thus, David stayed in Hebron a total of seven-and-a-half years.

2:12-17 – Abner went with troops to press Ishbaal’s claim. They camped at Gibeon, Saul’s former royal city. Joab, as Abner’s counterpart, brought David’s troops to meet them, presumably for battle. The two men met to parley, facing each other over the Pool of Gibeon, a landmark situated in an open field, unknown today. Abner suggested they hold a contest. This was somewhat similar to what was suggested by Goliath when he demanded Israel send forth a representative champion to face him. In this case, it was a dozen from each side. They clashed in the open field nearby. Joab’s troops must have had the better training, for they all used the same tactic. Rather than facing off as we might expect, David’s men simply tackled their opponents, grabbed them by the head and stabbed the soft space between the rib cage and the pelvic girdle.

The scribe notes that was the origin of its name in his day: The Field of Sharp Swords. As was often the case, the results of the contest stirred the rest of the troops to attack with assurance. Abner's troops fled the field.

2:18-23 – No one can say with certainty why Joab and his brothers are named as sons of their mother, Zeruah. Such a reference to maternal parents was quite rare in ancient times. A good guess would be that she had been widowed at least once between their births. At any rate, the third brother, Asahel, was particularly fleet of foot. He took it upon himself to focus his pursuit on Abner. Abner warned him off, to no avail. Fast as Asahel may have been, Abner was a much stronger fighter. He simply stopped, planted his feet and without turning thrust his spear straight behind him. Since the head of the spear was typically facing forward, the butt end was what Asahel ran upon. This would have been the heavier sort of spear, also called a lance, versus the lighter javelin. Javelins were thrown in combat, but too light for hand-to-hand fighting. Most heavy spears had a short taper on the butt end to enable planting it in the ground briefly when the first onslaught of enemy lines clashed. This was also the best way to defeat horses drawing chariots. Asahel was being foolish in pursuing Abner and seeing him fallen pretty much slowed the momentum of everyone else's pursuit.

2:24-29 – A bit farther behind in their chase, Asahel's elder brothers were also determined to catch Abner, the leader of the opposition army. By the time they caught up with him, he was at the top of hill above them. The scribe's description was well known in his day but lost to us now. The fierce Benjamite troops rallied to Abner, taking a commanding position on the hilltop. He called to Joab below and warned the tide of battle could turn at any moment. Joab's answer indicates he realized that things had gone far enough. He remarked that his troops would have pushed on until dawn, as was their normal tactics. Since Abner suggested a truce, he was willing to go along. The verbal exchange indicates to the reader the sun was going down. Abner's remaining troops marched all night back across the Jordan to Mahanaim.

2:30-32 – Joab assembled his troops for a body count, and noted a loss of 19 men, plus his brother Asahel. For their loss, they netted a solid victory, having killed 360 of Abner's men. They would have stripped the slain of weapons and armor as a standard practice, so the count of enemy fallen would be rather precise. For their part, they also marched overnight, returning to Hebron at dawn. As a man of noble birth, it is noted the body of Asahel was carried back and placed in his father's tomb in Bethlehem, which was on the way back to Hebron.

7.2: A Partial Judge

From the very first, David shows he is a complete failure as an administrator. As combat commander, he is unsurpassed. As a charismatic king and shepherd of the Hebrew people, he is the standard others must strive to match. As administrator making smart personnel decisions, he was hopeless. Even his political maneuvering is pretty smart, but he fails time and again to act as impartial judge in ridding his court of troublemakers. We call him noble for supporting the royal prerogatives of Saul and Saul's household, but he goes too far in keeping a sentimental attachment to certain people. He loved too much and could not bring himself to do what was wisest at times.

2 Samuel 3:1 – This verse is more of a summary that belongs with the previous chapter. That

first battle set the tone for the bitter feud that followed.

3:2-5 – All the while, David begins to build a family in Hebron. Each of these sons is born to a different mother and we discover that David has added to his harem. Maacah of Geshur comes from an area very near his rival's throne in Mahanaim; marrying her may have been purely political. Her homeland was just east of the Sea of Galilee.

3:6-11 – The real power behind the effort to maintain Saul's dynasty was Abner. Ishbaal knew this and may have been looking for a way to assert himself. His accusation against Abner is most likely bogus, but correctly captures the sort of power Abner held. A royal heir inherits the harem of his predecessor. To claim access to the harem is to claim the throne. Ishbaal was whining about Abner's de facto control of the kingdom and accuses him of treason.

Abner's retort basically asks if the king regards him as a supporter of that usurper in Judah. On the contrary, all his immense power and influence has been turned to keeping Saul's dynasty alive. Had he wished to betray Ishbaal, he could easily have done so by now. With this unforgivable insult, Ishbaal succeeded in making his best ally into his worst enemy. Abner quotes the prophecy he had previously fought against on behalf of Ishbaal. The young king was left silent, implying he was also powerless. The charade was over.

3:12-16 – Abner offers to come over to David's side and use his influence to bring the northern part of the nation under his rule. David welcomes the offer but sets one strong requirement: that Abner return Michal to him. While this is politically proper, in that his marriage to Saul's daughter strengthens his claim to the throne, it is most likely illegal. While it is true Saul's giving of her to another man was forcing her to commit adultery, not to mention a major public insult, for David to reclaim her is tantamount to adultery, too. Still, his prior claim was honored by Ishbaal's court. Abner took custody of her, threatening her second husband in the process.

3:17-21 – Abner made good on his promise to make David king of all Israel. Apparently, he had previously resisted a strong element in the northern tribes wishing to embrace Samuel's prophecy about David. He signified his intent to now go along with that. Critically, the writer also mentions he persuaded the Tribe of Benjamin to transfer their loyalty, as well. Their stamp of approval would deflate anyone else's resistance, since Saul had been one of their own. The celebration was appropriate honor for Abner and his entourage of representatives. Abner promised his next appearance would be at the head of the official crowning delegation.

3:22-27 – Joab's embrace of the blood feud was completely unwarranted. His younger brother died in combat, and it was childish to hold Abner personally accountable. All the more so since Abner tried his best to avoid killing Asahel. Joab might have been the better warrior and commander, but he was far beneath Abner's honor.

When Joab came back at the head of a victorious raiding party, he was told he had just missed Abner. They specifically mentioned that Abner was sent away in peace, as a friend of David. Joab rushed in to tell David he was foolish for believing Abner and that he was spying. It didn't matter what David said, because Joab was determined to take revenge. He secretly sent messengers to catch Abner and persuade him to come back. Joab went out the gate to meet him, pretending to have a private conversation and pulled him into one of the numerous small chambers found near the gate of every large city. These would normally be used for public legal

matters and would be the easiest place to meet strangers coming into town. During war, these served as guardrooms and armories. Joab murdered Abner, having the element of surprise. Had it been a fair fight, things might have turned out different.

3:28-30 – David’s public excoriation of Joab was hardly going far enough. The man had committed murder and David refused to take proper action. While this may have had political overtones, the real fault is David’s own character flaw, which would haunt him all his life. We also learn the Abishai was complicit in Abner’s murder.

3:31-39 – In an effort to further distance himself from this crime, David insured full military honors for Abner’s funeral, requiring Joab and Abishai to participate publicly. David’s mournful lamentation was yet more shame heaped on Joab. The public took notice of David’s extravagant mourning over Abner and approved of his sentiment. Still, David fell short of proper response, and it would cause him grief later. Joab, faithful and mighty warrior, was an incurable troublemaker, constantly jealous of others’ glory.

4:1-3 – Still, some good came of Abner’s death, in that Ishbaal and his court realized it was all over. The scribe of our text pulls together some loose ends here. After Abner’s departure, Ishbaal was at the mercy of his own Benjamites. Two of his captains were from a Benjamite clan that had been enriched by Saul, when he gave them one of the old cities of the Gibeonite Alliance, Beeroth. To do so, Saul had to drive out the resident Gibeonites, violating a treaty promise they could stay, after finagling peace with Joshua (Joshua 9). They fled to Gittaim, also known as Gath, and still lived there at the time this was published. Thus, Saul sinned in this and the clan that occupied Beeroth also sinned. This was a subtle indicator these two captains could not have been honorable men.

4:4-8 – There is an abrupt introduction of Mephibaal (recall notes above about changing the suffix from *baal* to *bosheth*; see 1 Chronicles 8:34). This was Jonathan’s sole surviving son, five years old when his father died. In fleeing with the boy, his nursemaid dropped him and permanently crippled his feet. Thus, we note that, while the royal line of Saul is about to pass, there is one survivor of Saul’s household.

We return to the scene at Ishbaal’s court. Like most places in the world where daytime temperatures in summer can become intolerable, the custom in Israel was to take a sort of siesta during the hottest part of the day. The young king was resting as expected and the captains entered under the pretext of fetching rations for their troops. The soldiers would normally have been fed from the king’s larder. Even the most rudimentary palace would have been built with an outer court, probably open air, with outer rooms for servants and a kitchen near the family rooms of the king. So, it was just a few steps from their supposed errand to the king’s bed and they removed his head.

These two escaped by heading straight down the Jabbok Valley and across the open plain along the Jordan River, crossing it at night. Sometime the next day, they arrived at Hebron, bringing their grisly trophy to David. Their pious exclamation that God had avenged David by their hands was just for show. These men were not even as honorable as mercenaries.

4:9-12 – Apparently David had asked them to describe in detail how they came to possess this head of Ishbaal. His response indicates he knew what they had done and there had been no

time for a runner to arrive before them. So, David used their words and declares that, as surely as the same Lord lives, so they too shall receive their just reward. Notice that his order to execute went to the “young men” – a term usually denoting those old enough to volunteer as armor bearers, but not old enough to draft as warriors. They are essentially teenagers in training to become soldiers. For them to execute army captains would be heaping shame on the condemned, for it indicates they were not regarded as proper men. The act strips away their rank. To dismember their bodies of hands and feet was a very strong symbolic condemnation reserved for thieves and murderers. Hanging corpses near the pool would guarantee maximum exposure, since someone from each household in the city would pass there at least once each day. The news would spread quickly.

David is quick to execute judgment on strangers, but utterly fails to balance things. He shows far too much favoritism to those close to him.

7.3: Crown and Throne

From here on in our study, the primary focus will be the text in Samuel and Kings. These appear to have been the records maintained by the Schools of the Prophets and perhaps eventually stored in the Temple. However, we will frequently make reference to the royal court records we know of as Chronicles. At times we will refer to some of the prophets.

2 Samuel 5:1-5 – The rest of the nation finally come to Hebron and declared their loyalty to David, making him their king. Whatever speeches they made, the resounding theme was that David was chosen by God and this was backed up by his unfailing battle success, even under Saul. Insofar as Saul was no more than a warlord, David was better at it. The account by the school of prophets was that David ruled in Hebron over Judah seven-and-a-half years. The balance of his 40-year reign was in Jerusalem, which included all of Israel. Keep in mind that the name “Israel” is ambiguous at times, meaning the whole nation in some contexts, and at other times as the 10 northern tribes apart from Judah and Simeon.

When the tribal delegations came, they were escorted by all the troops from each tribe. These armies were composed of various professional warriors, most of whom were noble families, major landholders who could afford the expense of weapons and the time to train. There were also the hordes of conscripts, performing their duties as soldiers under various arrangements that amounted to taxation in man-days paid by peasant households. These same tribal delegations also brought along huge caravans of food and related supplies. These supply trains would have been staged to arrive over the three-day feast, keeping the festivities well stocked. All of this was a form of tribute, voluntarily brought under the same management plans as mobilizing for war. They had long practice at it. However, this included luxuries normally reserved for high holy days.

1 Chronicles 11:10-12:37 tracks the various troop counts. It also relates the history of David’s army, from the days when he hid out at the cave in Adullam, through his stay in Ziklag and his service to Achish, to his reign in Hebron. While it is unlikely that this massive army at his coronation would have remained with David year-round, there was a dual purpose here. Certain actions required the whole army.

2 Samuel 5:6-10 – David had long been in love with the area of Jerusalem. It is quite certain he knew that Abraham had prepared to sacrifice Isaac on the peak of Mt. Moriah above the ancient city. There was but one thing standing in the way: the stronghold still manned by the Jebusites from before the Conquest. The people were a mixture of Amorite and Hittite. The city often went by the name of the apparent ancestor of the lot, Jebus. Ancient records refer to it as *Urusalim*, which is obviously similar to Jerusalem. While David led his men into battle, he was more than a mere warlord. Thus, as a true king he would order his loyal combat leaders to carry the honor in leading their own companies. The actual breakthrough was accomplished by Joab.

The army would have marched into the area, with their approach and intent known to the inhabitants well in advance. The occupants would have closed the gates and barred them after having gathered supplies for a long siege. We get the feeling there had been a long-standing tension between David and the leaders of the city. The structure itself was called The Millo, a term referring to a man-made terrace, by which the foundation was extended out over the slope of the ridge, increasing the difficulty of attack. The fortress thus had a steep drop on three sides, since the ancient city was built on a narrow ridge extending south from Mt. Moriah. The hilltop above it was holy ground from ancient times and avoiding desecration made that approach difficult. Attacking troops would be quite vulnerable to just about anything dropped from atop the wall. The garrison inside boasted that their blind and lame could have held off David's men. The only weakness was the east wall. The sole source of water for the city was a spring which lay below the natural line for wall building.

Recent archaeology findings shed light on the likely scenario. The spring once bubbled out of the hillside from a chamber inside the limestone bluff. Sometime before, the city dwellers had cut a shaft down to the chamber, probably dropping a ladder inside to allow access. By expanding the chamber, they minimized water loss. The Hebrew text is a bit ambiguous, but it seems that the original exit out in the Kidron Valley was enlarged, allowing access to the chamber far below the floor of the fortress. Some troops slipped in via this unlikely entrance, fought their way to the gates and got them open, allowing a full invasion.

David renamed the place *Zion*, "Landmark." Never again would the center of gravity in Israel move with each new leader or judge. Because of the taunting, the nickname in David's court for Jebusites, some of whom still lived in small pockets in the land, was "the blind and the lame," and they would never be allowed to enter the palace on pain of death. Still, they were allowed to remain subject to the Covenant of Noah.

5:11-16 – Hiram had arisen to power over Tyre, an island city off the coast of modern Lebanon and was celebrated in ancient literature as a powerful warrior and very wealthy trader king. He may also have been the titular high priest of their religion, which would eventually become deeply evil some 300 years later. At this point rather early in his reign, he offered an alliance by sending David a gift: enough cedar and workmen to build a real palace. We have a picture of David becoming the first real king of Israel, with all the trappings, including sumptuous quarters, a large and ever-growing harem and enough children to populate a small town. Other alliances came along and helped to stock the harem. We note a minor difficulty in the Hebrew text with different spellings between Samuel and Chronicles. This merely serves to illustrate that ancient Hebrew had no written vowels; some words could be pronounced and spelled

differently depending on who was saying or writing them. Also, it shows that there is some inevitable loss of precision over time and in translation of some minor details. When compared to other ancient documents, though, we are amazed at the lack of variation and very little remains in doubt.

5:17-25 – The Philistines were hoping to take advantage of the unsettled situation with David’s coronation and mobilized for war. While the valleys around the city were rather narrow, the main Kidron joined others into a broad open area a short distance to the south. This Rephaim Valley was connected to the Sorek, which formed a broad highway inland from the Philistine Plain. Once in bivouac in Rephaim, they would send out the usual raiding parties to capture the grain harvest. Eventually, they would attempt to take Jerusalem. David had moved from his more vulnerable palace down to the now rebuilt and improved fortress. As usual, he sought the Lord’s advice on whether he should respond and whether he should expect victory. Jehovah answered both questions in the affirmative. David attacked from the direction of an old pagan shrine village, called *Baal-perizim*, “Lord of the Breakthrough.” The name denoted a rather strong flowing spring. In his victory celebration, David changed the connotation from that of a pagan Baal to the God of Israel, who was Lord of this particular breakthrough. He paints an image of water bursting through a dam. It is noted that the Philistines had brought some of their pagan idols with them. This was an ancient practice, as reflected by the earlier Israelite urge to carry the Ark of Covenant into battle. The pagan images would have been made and decorated with expensive materials, so became a part of the battle plunder.

The Philistines were not done yet. They came up again and occupied the same valley. Doubtless they had made plans based on the last battle. Thus, when David inquired of the Lord, he was warned to come around the south side of them, which would be quite unexpected. Stealth and surprise attacks in battle were rather uncommon in ancient times, since the movement of large numbers of troops was rather hard to conceal. The scribe makes note of the memorable signal Jehovah set, telling David to listen for the sound of troops in the mulberry trees overhead his position. This time the Philistines fled north and were pursued as far as Geba and Gezer, indicating the path of their flight. Geba is in northern Benjamin, while Gezer was far to the west just in Philistine territory. Most likely the pursuit went through Beth Horon, the city split between the head and foot of a long stone stairway. The parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 14:8-17 is almost the same word for word.

To our knowledge, the Philistines did not recover from this. Their power had fluxed a bit from the time of Samson but had generally followed a long decline starting with the battles shortly before Saul’s coronation. It seems their power had been broken for good under David. By choosing the old Jebusite citadel, David symbolically broke down the last Canaanite stronghold within the Hebrew heartland. He also built a capital city that was easily defended and located in a place not previously claimed by any tribe and could not be associated with either Judah or Israel. It would later become God’s symbolic throne, as well.

7.4: God’s Throne in Zion

2 Samuel 6:1-5 (1 Chronicles 13, 15-16) – Recall the Ark of the Covenant was last seen resting in the home of one Abinadab, in Kiriath-jearim (1 Samuel 7:1-2). That city was the southernmost of

the old Gibeonite Confederation that made peace with Joshua (Joshua 9). The city had gained a nickname, *Baalath Judah* – “The Lords of Judah.” This indicates that it had become the home for many of the highest noble families in the Tribe of Judah and may help to explain why the residents of Beth-shemesh deferred to them (1 Samuel 6:20) on how to handle the Ark. The parallel passage indicates that Abinadab kept it in his manor on a hilltop. He had consecrated his son Eleazer to care for it, meaning he could not do other work.

There could be several good reasons for bringing the Ark up from its erstwhile home in Baalah. The obvious one is to help cement David’s hope of making his city the new center of gravity for the nation. If his and God’s thrones together were in the same place, challenges to his authority would become far more difficult. While this may have been a part of David’s thinking, it is more likely he intended to protect the Ark from any recurrence of past adventures. Keep in mind the new royal city of Jerusalem was one of the best situated, easier to defend than most. Baalah was a bit too close to what was then Philistine territory. David was careful to call together the elders of all Israel for consultation and made it a point to officially include the Levites. These had been scattered throughout the land, having no real sacred duties for the most part.

Oddly, David did not have the Levites move the Ark in accordance with the Law of Moses (Numbers 3:31). Rather, two of Abinadab’s sons – Uzza and Ahio – neither of them the one he had consecrated to the task, were the movers. Recall that the knowledge of the Law had declined deeply during the Period of Judges, so it may have been largely forgotten. Conspicuous by absence is David’s usual inquiry of the Lord on what to do. So, the Ark was simply placed on a new cart, copying what the Philistines had done (1 Samuel 6:7f), which in itself was not completely wrong. The concept of “holy” was rooted in the idea of something set apart for a single, divine purpose and not for common use. As long as no human hands touched the Ark, that was fine. The caravan was accompanied by great music and celebration.

6:6-11 – We cannot know the exact path, but it’s likely they took the most direct route possible, not more than 5 miles (8km). As the journey passed near a threshing floor on the way, Uzza reached out to steady the Ark and died on the spot. The obvious reason is that he was neither a Levite, nor otherwise authorized to touch it. However, even the Levites had to carry it indirectly, not touching it, but putting poles through a set of rings built into the corners of the wooden frame. It could also have been because he treated it no better than simply a good piece of furniture, steadying it with a rather casual hand, touching the Ark itself rather than one of the poles. David himself seemed not to understand, for he over-reacts, calling the place *Perez Uzza* – “Breakout against Uzza.” He had it dropped off at the nearest home, which belonged to the Levite family of Obed-edom, who had originally lived in their allotment under the tribal division of land far south. The term “Gittite” means “from Gath (Rimmon),” which had been a part of what Dan had failed to conquer (Joshua 21:25) in southeast Philistia, not far from David’s city of Ziklag. This household of Obed-edom began receiving notable blessings for the Ark’s presence.

6:12-15 – When David heard of these blessings, he put two and two together and realized the cause: it was being handled by Levites. Thus, after a short layover (3 months; 1 Chronicles 13:14) in the Levite’s home, David made plans to finish the trip properly. First, he set up a proper tabernacle to shelter it. Then he called for the Levites to prepare themselves ritually to

handle the Ark. Finally, the Throne of Jehovah was moved into the City of David. To celebrate, David donned a linen ephod and little else. When the first six steps of the journey passed without incident, David was flooded with relief that this time it would work. He ordered a huge sacrifice readied for its arrival.

6:16-19 – David set the example by completely abandoning himself in the moment, dancing wildly, singing and playing music. It's a safe guess the shelter for the Ark was in the open courtyard always found in the shadow of ancient palaces. At the approach of this noisy celebration, David's wife Michal spotted him acting rather unkinglike in her mind and felt ashamed. It would seem she was deeply affected by the fear of embarrassment Saul held during his reign. One can sense she felt David was slandering her family by association. Unaware of this, David acted the over-joyed host, having the Levites offer burnt offerings (*olah*, whole burnt offering) and peace offerings (*shelem*, priests kept edible portions). It was his place to pronounce the dismissal blessing and he also gave to all in attendance a substantial meal to take away.

6:20-23 – Coming in the door of the palace, David's family would have stood assembled in ceremonial waiting. There he pronounced the blessing of the day on them, as well. Michal had sharp sarcastic words about David's undignified performance, likening it to the shocking behavior of low-life scum on the street who would expose themselves to young girls. In truth, it was more like a boy in training for the priesthood, wearing only a linen ephod. Her comment clearly referred to some alleged former glory under Saul's reign that was lost with David. He reminded her that glory is whatever God says it is and it was He who put David in Saul's place. David was ready to grovel as a naked slave for God's glory. In all this, those young girls she mentioned would be the first to recognize the rightness of David's actions. They would jump at the chance to take Michal's place, which she would now lose. From then on, David had no conjugal relations with her, relegating her to the gravest disgrace any Hebrew woman could face.

7:1-3 – The Chronicler places in this context the gift of a stone and cedar palace from Hiram of Tyre (1 Chronicles 14). While David enjoyed such royal accommodations, during a time of peace, he became painfully aware that his Lord seemed left out in the cold by comparison. This thought plagued him greatly and he asked of Nathan the Prophet what to do about it. Nathan's response was to note that Jehovah had prospered everything David did so far and that he should continue acting according to his conscience.

7:4-17 – However, the Lord sent word to Nathan that night that David was not the right man for building a temple. First, Jehovah saw no shame in associating Himself with nomadic tent-dwellers. On the contrary, it was to such a life, from the comfort of settled urban dwelling, that He originally called Abraham. Perhaps by reading between the lines, we see a risk that David would assert reflective glory for himself by having the honor of building God's House. David went from shepherd boy to shepherd of God's People; was that not honor enough? Furthermore, Jehovah had plans to establish the House of David as a permanent dynasty over His People and His Land. There was no reason to rush around and build up a mighty edifice in the name of the Lord. The Lord would build a temple for Himself in the flesh and history of His People, a history yet to come. David's job as warrior was not yet finished and warrior was David's calling. This time of peace was just temporary. There were more conquests in store for

David and he should focus on that task, to insure first that Israel was truly secure. A son born in his household would build that temple soon enough.

7:18-29 – When David heard this message, he went down to the tabernacle. He entered as one in his master’s court. Without having been specifically bidden to enter, he appeared on the general principle of being ready to obey any command that might come. Finding a place in the corner to wait, he dropped to his knees, and then sat back on his heels. In this mode, he spoke quietly, remarking how the Holy One of Israel should even notice him. There was no question of debating what God had said. This promise of a permanent dynasty, the one greatest possession any man on earth could ever wish, was far more than he had dared to ask. To be made the shepherd of God’s own People was beyond fathoming itself. David clung to that promise with his whole being and resolved that, for his part, Jehovah should never regret this decision.

7.5: Conquering Lands and Hearts

The year is approximately 996 BC. Following the Lord’s revelation that David was called to conquest, and to secure the land on all sides for Israel, the king began warring against every adversary. It was the one thing he did best. **2 Samuel 8** here is parallel to **1 Chronicles 18**.

2 Samuel 8:1-2 – Whatever the status of Philistine Gath had been in the past, by this time it had become the chief city of that nation – “Bridle of the Mother City.” This was the city where David was once a servant of the local ruler and had been the home of Goliath. It was also a natural gateway for attacks into Israel. By capturing this city, David finally silenced the long-standing threat to his people. It’s likely the bridle was some religious object that symbolized the city as “mother” over the others.

The description of David’s conquest of Moab is difficult to translate. It could be that he divided their troops into three ranks and killed all but one rank. It could also be that he killed everyone above a certain height, given that a “cord” (line) could have been standard measure of length. This would mean mostly killing adults. Either way, it seems brutal by modern Western standards. Worse, it seems odd that he would fight someone who had previously harbored his parents from Saul (1 Samuel 22:3-5). We must bear in mind, though, that such harboring was not simply a way of getting back at Saul, but a sign that Moab held animosity against whatever government ruled Israel. When David ascended to the throne, he became *de jure* their enemy and they his. This is the same nation that had asked Balaam to curse Israel at the end of the Exodus.

8:3-8 – The Kingdom of Zobah is not well known. As with many smaller city-states of that time, its borders might fluctuate from time to time, different families might seize the throne, etc. In this case, all we know is that a family line descending from a fellow named “Rehob” once ruled over a ridge of land that stood between the Lebanon Valley and the wadi that fed into the sources of Lake Huleh, running down past Dan. This ridge-top kingdom, running mostly north and south, extended up as far as another small kingdom, bordering the Euphrates River, called “Hamath.” At various times, these two appeared to take turns dominating each other. Early in David’s reign over Israel, the ruler of Zobah, titled Hadadezer (reference to a pagan idol, “Hadad is his Helper”), of the House of Rehob, went to war against Hamath.

David may have been looking for a good opportunity to take control of this region just beyond his northern border. Who can say what friction had arisen? It may have been a simple matter that David had an alliance with Hamath. David attacked from the army's rear. Just off to the east sat Damascus, with a territory essentially covering what we know today as Syria. Their army came out in support of Hadadezer, and both lost the battle to David. While it is noteworthy the numbers are, as usual, a bit confused in translating from Hebrew, the net result is that David captured a huge army. Up until this point, Israel still fought on foot and still regarded horses and chariots as playing with pagan gods. Most of the horses captured were hobbled by cutting their leg tendons. They could still serve ceremonial purposes, but not pull a chariot. David also plundered their treasures and stationed garrisons in the defeated kingdoms. He kept most of this plunder in preparation for the temple he was told his son would build.

8:9-14 – The king of Hamath expressed deep gratitude for David's rescue of his kingdom. The gifts brought by the prince of Hamath were added to the collection for the temple. Mentioned in passing is the list of border nations David held and from whom he received tribute. Adding to all this was a successful battle he fought in a place called the "Salt Valley," a region of the Rift Valley just south of the Dead Sea. There is some confusion between Hebrew texts, because one calls his enemy Syrians, while another the Edomites. While the latter makes more sense, given the battle was on their ground, they may have hired Syrian mercenaries for the job. Either way, the victory was an upset, for the battle became a primary reference showing David was a major figure in the region. We also note the Edomites became a tributary of Israel.

8:15-18 – David's name also became synonymous with justice in Israel. All the generations past had seen periods of relative justice interspersed with near chaos. Under Saul, once Samuel had passed, there was no judge, as Saul was neither capable nor willing. Thus, David returned the sane standard of justice, something commonly attributed to kings as a boon to their nation. He also developed a fully organized royal administration: Joab as General of the Army, Jehoshaphat as Chief Administrator, Zadok and Ahimelech Chief Priests (essentially bearers of the Ark of Covenant), Seriah the Chief Scribe and Benaiah as chief over the Cherethites (Royal Bodyguard) and Pelethites (Royal Messengers). These last two services were mostly Philistines, it seems. There had long been Philistine converts who gave their loyalty to David. Recall that ancient kings wisely chose foreigners for sensitive missions, since there was little chance they could be subverted by partisan concerns from family or tribe. Their professional future lay in the king's safety and prosperity. A usurper would likely execute them first thing. David's sons held positions of power, too, though it's unlikely they were literally "priests" in a religious sense.

9:1-4 – True to his promise, David asks if there is any survivor of the house of Saul to whom he could show "covenant faithfulness." Ziba had been a chief steward of Saul's property during the latter's reign. In the process of carrying out David's search order, he would be one of the first the royal servants to ask. He knew of a survivor and his whereabouts. For the time being, we see Ziba as a faithful servant, loyal to his new king. He described Meribaal and how he was lame and had been living in Lodebar, one of the cities known as Havoth-jair (Judges 10:1-5). There is some doubt as to who Meribaal's benefactor was because many Hebrews would be given the name of a dead relative. Machir is a clan of Manasseh, but also the name of the fellow

here who hosted Meribaal, in a city in Manasseh's tribal allotment.

9:5-8 – Who knows what passed through Meribaal's mind when summoned to the throne? He may have expected imprisonment or death but seems to have been manly in facing it. David's statement indicated he detected an element of fear and bade him dismiss it immediately. David promised to return to him possession of all the personal property held by Saul. This would elevate Meribaal to the wealth and status of a prince. David confirmed that status in designating for the young man a place at the family table. This included a place in the royal quarters of the city. Meribaal's response was not a genuine request for information, but a way of expressing deepest gratitude.

9:9-13 – David then gave Ziba the commission to manage Meribaal's property on his behalf. It became Ziba's primary charge in life and his entire household would have been involved. To "provide food" for Meribaal was a phrase meaning to ensure the fellow could live like nobility. To have "a place at the king's table" did not mean literally room and board, per se, but that he was welcome as a member of the court and household. Whenever there was a formal meal, Meribaal had a good seat at the table. Otherwise, he was free to eat from the king's kitchen if we wished. In later times this would be merely symbolic.

7.6: Losing While Winning

2 Samuel 10:1-5 (1 Chronicles 19) – Many scholars connect the events in this chapter with those in chapter 8, from the previous lesson. There's no particular reason for insisting this be a separate event, since so little is known in the first place. Indeed, it would seem that vanquishing the Syrians once and having garrisons in their lands would assure they were not able or willing to rent their troops out for yet another battle against their new master, David. More than likely, this chapter describes the unknown provocation that caused the battles in chapter 8.

It seems David planned only to secure his own border. Thus, we can be sure most of his warfare was aimed at that, though he was quite willing to take advantage of anything that helped his people. We know the name of this ruler of Ammon, Nachash, as the leader of the attack on Jabesh-gilead, right at the beginning of Saul's reign (1 Samuel 11). How it is he befriended David is not known, but David had not forgotten. Having no official reason for hostility, David sends a delegation to the capital with appropriate gifts for a funeral. The nobles of Ammon are convinced David had his sights on them and that this delegation is actually a spying mission before invading.

Their advice to the heir of the Ammonite throne, Hanun (more properly, *Chanun*, "Favored One"), was to treat them shamefully. The delegation would have been elder noblemen, not soldiers, and they would dress in longer garments than most men. Real men also had full beards, and these had one side shaved off. This was much worse than simply shaving the whole thing, since it would be clear they had one to begin with. This half-shave and exposure of legs by cutting off the outer garment in the back would be as much an indignity as tar and feathers today. Just as hot tar on skin and subsequently peeling it off would leave slow-healing wounds, so these men could not appear in public again until their beards had regrown. David kept them secluded in Jericho until they could show their faces in public again.

10:6-8 – If they had been under pressure from David before, real or imagined, the Ammonites were most certainly in trouble now. They knew they stood no chance against the army of Israel under David, so they hired mercenaries from the previously mentioned Zobah. They also got a few from Maacah, a small kingdom of Canaanites near the new city of Dan and a few from Tob, the city-state just east of Israel’s border near Gilead. These were all natural allies with each other. When they had mobilized and moved down to Ammon, David responded by mustering the Army of Israel.

10:9-14 – Apparently the battle took place at the capital of Ammon, Rabbah. As the troops of Israel marched to engage, they found the home warriors in front of the city and the mercenaries out in the field. This was a classic move. Attack the city and be hit from the rear or take the field army and get hit from the rear. Joab wisely divided his troops under his own and his brother’s command to attack on two fronts. Noteworthy here is that he didn’t seek a miracle, only a fair chance to get the most from his soldiers. Whatever the Lord did in response was left to Him.

As with most warfare in ancient times, it was a matter of chasing the enemy from the field. The mercenaries fled Joab and the Ammonites facing Abishai decided they were out of luck. There was no immediate need to destroy the city or pursue and kill the hired army. Any further actions from David against Ammon would find them hard put to resist. It is almost certain that the battles in chapter 8 followed this. Ammon itself would face David’s full wrath later.

10:15-19 – With the embarrassment of their loss, the ruler of Zobah brought in his own extras from beyond the Euphrates. This bunch assembled at Helam, just north of Tob, on the verge of the desert wilderness to the east. When the armies clashed, it was the enemies of Israel, as usual, who melted. Because of the similarities in the numbers here with chapter 8, we have one more reason to see that this is the same story with a different angle.

We are left seeing that most political conflict had multiple and complex causes, just as today. On the one hand, we know that Zobah had plans to attack Hamath, perhaps as the last area near him that he didn’t control. He appeared to have strong influence in Damascus, as well as somewhere beyond the Euphrates, perhaps in Charan. Thus, it makes a sort of sense to try taking Hamath, bulging into his domain at the river. He may have been gathering and equipping an army for this expedition but rented them out to Ammon as a warm-up. When he saw that he now had to take care of Israel first, his plans for Hamath had to wait a bit longer. With David’s victory, all of that was forgotten. Hamath would have breathed a sigh of relief and sent the gifts we looked at in the last lesson. It is well to note that Scripture seldom includes every detail to satisfy our curiosity.

11:1 – Having finished the business with Zobah and the Syrians, David turned his attention to Ammon. The grave insult was as much against the God of Israel as Israel itself. David’s commission was to secure the nation and Ammon was not yet pacified. Most likely the campaign against Syria consumed the whole of that year’s war season. Ancient nations seldom fought in winter, when food would be hard to get and weather a problem. Thus, we see the issue with Ammon waited until that next spring. The armies clashed in the field, but Ammon had no hope of doing more than delaying the inevitable. The siege of Rabbah began. David himself stayed in the royal capital.

11:2-5 – Besieging a city was seldom quickly done. David would keep the messengers running back and forth to the front but would otherwise have little more than the organizing of support to occupy him. While it is certain his commanders encouraged him to stay out of the battlefields for safety's sake, this was not something David liked. It's likely he tried to keep busy, but his heart was with his troops. Unable to sleep one evening, he went up on the roof. While we might expect he would have gone to pray, he didn't get to that. Instead, he spied a woman taking advantage of the cool evening and washing herself in the open court of her home, obviously close to the palace.

Here we see most clearly that David was what we today would call a "skirt-chaser" – with his entire harem, he never had enough women. Taken with her beauty, he decided to find out who she was. His servants informed him her name was Bathsheba ("Daughter of an Oath"), daughter of the man who had sheltered Meribaal. She was married to Uriah, a noble Hittite warrior on David's military staff.

While it's unlikely Bathsheba intended to expose herself, since it was not full daylight, we note she offered no resistance to David's invitation. David was quite the man, both in appearance and charm, with great power to boot. The scribe slyly notes she was just past her monthly feminine discomfort, so should not have gotten pregnant – but she did. She duly notified David, as the only hope to protect her from shame. David's motives are not obvious. He would probably want to prevent her being stoned as an adulteress because he genuinely cared about her. Whether he was worried about his own skin is not so certain, given his character, though it would seem natural.

11:6-13 – Laying siege to a city might not involve fighting daily to gain entrance, but it could. It usually involved camping a large force outside the city, blocking all traffic in and out. The residents inside would slowly starve to death. When it appeared the folks inside were growing desperate, attacks on the gates and other weak points would begin. Giving honored individuals a break during the long wait was not unheard of, so David's message would raise no eyebrows.

The Hittite warrior class was intensely proud and held to a high standard that would compare favorably to the Western medieval code of chivalry. Uriah gave a full report of the siege activity. David dismissed him by telling him to spend the night in his own bed at home. Uriah's ethics forbade this, so he stayed in the guardhouse. Even with feasting and getting drunk, Uriah refused to violate his code of honor.

11:14-17 – Having taken it this far, David saw only one way out of the mess. Uriah must die. It was not uncommon for even a nobleman to be illiterate, so sending Uriah's death warrant in his own hand was probably quite safe. Whatever else the letter said, it indicated to Joab he should, if necessary, make an assault just so that there would be an opportunity to get Uriah killed. The best of the city defenders came out to engage and Uriah died with several others. Joab's loyalty to David was sufficient reason for him to carry out an execution under cover of battle.

11:18-21 – Joab prepared the usual battle report but added a footnote that supposedly only David would understand. Knowing how David talked, he briefed the runner on what he might hear, adding that if David had a harsh rebuke for Joab's work, he should remark on the demise of Uriah. Only a man mentally unfit to serve as runner would fail to grasp something of the

intent.

11:22-25 – The messenger did his duty, reporting to David the events of battle. While the trapped residents of Rabbah might be running low on food, it was sure they had amassed plenty of weapons before the siege. Archers would be used to prevent the attackers from beating down the gates too soon. There would be a wide kill-zone around the city walls as long as the arrows lasted. When things were getting tight, before everyone began to faint from hunger, the troops inside the wall might rush out now and then to try and break through the lines, or perhaps try whittling down the odds against them. One such rush was beaten back and the Israeli soldiers nearest that gate pursued them back inside. When the pursuit got too close to the wall, archers would stop them from following the fleeing defenders inside. It was this sort of thing that killed Uriah. David's response was to let Joab know he had done well and added a typical encouragement to finish the job soon.

11:26-27 – To all appearances, the whole mess was now covered, and life could go on as normal. While covering David's sin had cost the lives of more than just Uriah, he was prepared to accept that. They might have been as easily lost in battle anyway. Bathsheba received the official notice of her husband's "honorable" demise and went through the standard period of mourning. When that was done, David took her into his harem. This would appear quite honorable, as the best means of supporting a good man's widow. She now had the best compensation a soldier's widow could get.

For all the appearances of honor, though, nothing was hidden from God.

7.7: Out of Control

David has demonstrated a lack of personal restraint. The humility of his youth now forgotten, he would come to realize that there was a high price to pay for self-indulgence. He was also a man of passion, but passion cannot point the way in every area of royal leadership. David has shown he is one of best warriors in human history and will reveal he is one of the worst administrators in human history.

2 Samuel 12:1-6 – Nathan comes to visit David during this time and proceeds to tell a story. David assumes it is an account of actual events, but it's a parable. A wealthy and powerful man with innumerable herds took the one and only lamb, a beloved pet, owned by a poor fellow in the same town. This was to avoid the obligation to offer his best to a guest. David declares the rich man deserves to die, but shall at least make restitution four-fold, according to the Law (Exodus 22:1).

12:7-14 – Once he had David's attention, Nathan revealed the nature of the story. Not only did David have wives he married himself, but he also had concubines from Saul's harem and could have had any number more. Instead, he let his lust get the best of him and it ended in killing someone unjustly. David quickly confessed the righteousness of God's judgment of him. While his standing with God was restored, the consequences of his poor choices were already running rampant.

David would have to live with strife in his household. It would start with sex and would see his precious harem violated. There would be constant turmoil in his household because he no

longer had any credibility to act against his equally passionate and unruly sons. Doting on them instead of God's justice, they would cause him no end of anguish.

A very difficult principle is enunciated here, and many miss it. Nathan says that David's sin as God's man has given power to God's enemies. That power sets them free to blaspheme, or to defame the name of Jehovah as Creator and Master of all. The glory of God is our strength and defense against evil. When that glory suffers, so does our defense against evil. It delivers power into the hand of Satan over various parts of our lives. In this case, it gave Satan the authority to demand the life of a child. Morally, David is guilty of that child's blood.

12:15-23 – Indeed, the child of adultery becomes ill. While it yet lives, David does his manly duty of seeking God's face on behalf of innocent life. His commitment to the task was so resolute that his servants mistook this for yet another expression of David's passion. When the child died, they were afraid David would take it hard. However, David already expected it. His fasting was but intercession, just in case God changed His mind. Having failed, David had nothing else to do but go on with life. David's passion here was not the self-pity of mourning.

12:24-25 – David did his best to comfort Bathsheba for the loss he caused. Most likely this meant spending extra time alone with her, more so than usual. In the end, she conceived again, and this time God sent word via Nathan that this one was blessed. While this child's name was Solomon ("Peace" with God) he was given a second royal name as was common in those days: Jedidiah ("Beloved of Jehovah").

12:26-31 – Meanwhile, back before this second child was even conceived, Joab managed to break through the fortifications the Ammonites had built to protect their water supply. Since we know that the city was built next to a river, this may have been a sluice that brought water into the city, or simply an extension of the city's fortifications to include protected access to the river. The Hebrew term is rather literally translated "water fortress." Either way, in a matter of days, they would be dying from thirst. It was for David to show up now and take the credit for the final battle, or Joab would certainly claim it. The relaxed atmosphere of the long siege was over, and it was time to bring in the whole army.

Here we see rather strong evidence it was Joab who had advised David to stay away from the siege in the first place, making all this trouble possible. While he was indeed David's best warrior, he is not David's best friend. Joab was a soulless, worldly man, 100% soldier with no heart for what's good and right beyond a mere human level. Because he did not know Jehovah as David did, as his personal Lord, he pulled David away from a deeper trust and obedience of God. To Joab, Jehovah was simply his national deity, no different from any other.

David did indeed lead the final battle. He went through the various symbolic acts of eastern kings victorious in battle. He took the Ammonite crown for himself, which weighed some 66 pounds (30kg) and plundered the city of their considerable wealth from trade tolls levied on passing caravans. Rabbah was near a major stop on the King's Highway. To insure they did not rise up again, David levied a heavy labor burden on them. Almost the whole tribe was engaged in work reserved for slaves.

13:1-6 – David's demonstrated lax attitude about sexual self-control was the gateway for his sons' rampage. With such an example, why should his sons not demand whom they wished?

Absalom and Tamar were children of Maacah of Geshur. Amnon was born to David by Ahinoam of Jezreel. At this time, it was most likely that David observed the ancient custom of giving each of his wives separate quarters within the palace grounds. Their children would live there until they were old enough for their own home within the sprawling hilltop residence. Single daughters would be guarded most carefully, seen in public only on holidays, if at all. Their distinctive garments were rather expensive, multi-colored gowns that set them apart from everyone else.

Amnon became obsessed with Tamar. His abnormal behavior came to the notice of his cousin, Jonadab. This cousin was a son of David's brother, Shimeah. Jonadab was one crafty fellow, who paid attention to palace politics, an astute observer of the king's behavior and moods. He persuaded Amnon that the only chance he had of talking to Tamar alone was to feign illness and make a request that Tamar hand feed him.

13:7-14 – Such a request was odd, but not odd enough to raise alarms. It's the sort of thing David might do himself. David told Tamar to go to Amnon's quarters and she went. The Law of Moses forbade marriage between half-siblings, though it was common enough in those times. Amnon decide to throw all caution to the wind and seize the moment. Note that royalty were, as usual, seldom physically alone. He had to specifically order his household servants out and have Tamar bring the whole operation into his private bedroom. Rather than take advantage of the chance to reveal his love for her, he simply raped her. She resisted as much as she could and warned him it was all unnecessary. Lawful or not, there was a good chance David would have gone along with a marriage between them. Then he could hold her to his heart's desire.

13:15-20 – Once his lusts were fulfilled, Amnon decided she wasn't worthy. He compounded his crime by rejecting her completely. Had he simply kept her there, he might still have gotten away with it. Instead, he kicked her out, symbolically locking the door behind her, indicating she could never return. Following custom, she signified her chance at a normal life was over. She tore her gown near the collar, put ashes on her head and went out with a hand covering her shame. She ran into her brother, Absalom, first. He advised her she could take refuge at his house. This was as much as he could do for her at the time.

13:21-27 – David was angry, but hardly had moral standing to take action. His sons surely knew of the whole story about Bathsheba. However, Absalom did not forget. He planned his revenge carefully. He made sure no one suspected his rage. He continued acting toward Amnon precisely as before.

The wait was two years. As David's sons prospered and pursued their own wealth, Absalom was hosting a sheep-shearing feast about 16 miles north of Jerusalem, at Baal-hazor, on the way to Shiloh. He invited everyone in the royal family to celebrate with him, but David suggested that was too many mouths to feed. So, Absalom pressed for at least the attendance of his brothers, especially Amnon, the heir-apparent at the time. David had no real excuse to resist.

13:28-29 – Sensing his one best opportunity to avenge his sister's rape, Absalom had already briefed his servants on how to help him. There's no doubt Amnon was the guest of honor; when he was drunk enough, Absalom would give the signal and they would kill him. The other sons immediately fled. Notice that they road mules. This is the first mention of them in Scripture. At

that time, horses and onagers were used only to pull chariots. Hebrew culture still forbade riding horses as pagan. Besides, it was still more difficult to ride horses since the stirrup would not be invented for another 1500 years or so. Onagers, with a different body motion, were slightly less likely to throw a bareback rider. However, mules were even easier. Oddly, this sort of crossbreed of horse and onager was also forbidden under Mosaic Law.

13:30-33 – It's doubtful Jonadab had expected Amnon to rape Tamar, or he might not have been so helpful. It's not necessary for him to be seen as a bad guy, just very sharp about human nature. He was sure to have guessed Absalom's intent for revenge and the extent of his action. When the first runners from Absalom's sheep-shearing party arrived, they had missed the conclusion of things and assumed it was a mass slaughter of the king's sons. So, David and his servants believed the report and responded appropriately. Jonadab advised them it was not likely, since Absalom was involved and with only one motive. While not a party to the plans, he saw all too clearly what it was about.

13:34-39 – Absalom probably expected his own execution would follow, since he had killed the heir-apparent and put himself next in line. Never mind what it looked like; he stayed with his mother's family in Geshur. True to Jonadab's guess, the king's other sons rode into view over the ridge to the north of Jerusalem. Most likely, this long entourage came down the western side by the ancient trade route, coming around through the Hinnom Valley and thus were in full sight of the city guard on the north wall and west walls. The palace mostly stood on a high terrace against the northwest corner of the city. The whole city wept loudly and publicly, as was customary then.

David clearly doted on this second son of his. We can only guess that David saw Absalom as yet another victim of his own failure to do the right thing. He owed a great debt to his son for having favored his elder unjustly. This surely intensified his natural feelings for his son. Most likely David declared him banished but could not get over losing two heirs in one day.

7.8: Absalom Plots Revolt

David had been in the habit of taking cases on appeal, even on small matters. When Nathan brought his metaphorical suit before David, it was indeed a trivial case and could easily have been handled by any elder who knew the Law. Joab takes advantage of this in promoting his own favorite policy.

2 Samuel 14:1-7 – Joab was not truly David's best friend. He believed that Absalom was the best choice for heir to the throne, despite Absalom having forfeited his place in the line of succession. It didn't matter to Joab that Absalom deserved execution as a murderer of the heir before him. Joab took advantage of David's passionate love for his own flesh and blood by maneuvering him into bringing Absalom back from exile.

Joab went back to his hometown, not far from David's, and convinced a well-spoken elderly lady to play a role before the king. She was to bring a fake lawsuit that would play on the David's indulgence for family and trap him into releasing Absalom from exile. The old woman told a story of two sons that had fought in private, and one was killed. In ancient Israel, one of the male relatives of the victim would be appointed as an avenger to execute justice. It would

seem from the bare tale she told that the survivor deserved execution, according to the Law. However, the loss of all heirs and extinction of a family line was considered a supreme tragedy in Israel.

14:8-11 – Apparently David’s answer was to put her off, taking the case under advisement until he could discuss it with the elders who should have already handled this matter. So far, David is right. She has appealed to the highest court, and he should not rule on so little information. Her response was to accept upon herself any guilt that would fall to David if he ruled improperly. This was a release of sorts, implying by the highest possible oath that her explanation was accurate. She was willing to stake her whole property and life itself on her verity. This left David with no excuse for withholding judgment. He hedged a bit further by promising to insure she wouldn’t be harassed until he was ready to rule on the case. She made it clear none of that mattered if her son was turned over to the avenger’s execution. With nowhere else to run legally, David ruled that the social necessity of a surviving heir outweighed the strict rule of law.

14:12-17 – She went on as if to present another case for David’s judgment. If this principle held with one, why not with another? Why not allow the king’s own son to have the same courtesy? Thus, she had actually been appealing on behalf of Absalom, that his sentence should be lifted, as he was the heir. David was enough overwhelmed by the moment that he forgot her story was not quite true. David most certainly did have other sons and there was surely one of them already eligible for heir to the throne. Her explanation of the true reason for coming into the king’s presence was filled with hyperbole about how the nation suffered because Absalom was under sentence.

14:18-24 – It is here revealed that Joab had been pressing David on this matter for quite some time. Whatever Joab’s reasons, it was certain to have been personal. The king gently ordered the woman to reveal whether Joab had put her up to this. She answered courteously in confirming his suspicion. David responded directly to Joab, which made the general quite happy. David tried to limit the damage by demanding that Absalom be forbidden to enter his presence. He knew all too well his own weakness.

14:25-27 – Under these conditions Absalom returned and lived in his own quarters within the palace grounds. It was essential for the reader to understand that Absalom was a very angelic man in appearance. To see him was to be taken with his good looks. His thick flowing mane grew each year approximately 3 pounds in weight, enough to need cutting for sure. Even his daughter was the envy of women in her beauty. According to tradition, this second Tamar married Solomon’s son, Rehoboam.

14:28-33 – Tiring of this game after two years, Absalom tried hard to contact Joab to plead on his behalf. Joab avoided him, having been warned by the firmness of David’s command not to present Absalom for a full pardon. Living in isolation from the court was just too much and Absalom provoked Joab by an act that would force him to come in person. Absalom ordered his servants to set fire to Joab’s barley field. Ripe grain burns easily while standing in the field. As expected, Joab came to present a grievance and Absalom explained his desperation. He knew his father had no heart to execute him and his message via Joab would surely bring the desired result. David indeed gave in and allowed Absalom a greater measure of pardon, though it’s

obvious David could not restore succession rights.

15:1-6 – Absalom knew his father would not allow him to succeed to the throne. Still, he never let that stand in his way. He hired some fifty men to be his official entourage, wowing folks wherever he went with his importance. This was more ostentatious than most kings would have dared. Seeing that David was such a poor administrator, Absalom studied the situation for a way to gain advantage. Having been forgiven so much, he was seized by an incredible arrogance that he truly deserved to rule in his father's place. Over the next four years, he set about his own judicial reforms. This might normally be seen as the acts of a faithful son serving his father, the king. In all this, his true aim was to steal the hearts of the national leadership.

Before litigants could come before the king, they would be filtered up through the court system common to all Semitic nations. Elderly men of learning and rank would sit in the gates of the city and hear cases. On simple matters of contract and property disputes, they were universally regarded as competent to judge. The assumption was that they had lived long enough to see it all and knew what would and would not work to keep social stability. They were guardians of *shalom*. More serious matters would be passed to a higher court. As the capital city of the nation, this gatehouse court in Jerusalem would offer preliminary hearing for matters worthy of the royal court. It was their job to sift out the petty local disputes from major cases.

In this setting, Absalom found his opening. Men of means not yet wizened by age might still serve well as judges and Absalom's interest in justice would be laudable. Overhearing some major cases, he would take aside whomever he deemed best connected politically and sympathize with them. He would draw them out by asking where they were from and note that their city or tribe had no official advocate in the king's court. Then he would lament that he was not yet a judge so as to secure their rights. If someone was sufficiently impressed by this show that he came to bow before the prince, he would be treated with high honor publicly. In other words, Absalom was the ultimate politician in an age when such was uncommon.

15:7-9 – Translations saying this lasted forty years are probably incorrect, a scribal error, because it conflicts with the timeline established elsewhere in Scripture. More likely it was four years. We note by this time David had long given far more attention to the more powerful northern tribes, neglecting his old power center in Hebron and the allies in the Negev. These were first to crown David as king and had kept him safe from Saul. Absalom had lived more or less under house arrest for the past six years. David seemed oblivious to the revolt forming under his nose. Thus, Absalom sagely chose his final move, by convincing his father he owed a vow to God that required visiting Hebron. Hebron was Abraham's old home, the family burial plot and first known center of worship for Jehovah.

15:10-12 – Having already curried favor all over the nation, especially in the south, Absalom made plans to announce his usurpation during this visit to Hebron. There were a couple hundred big shots with him who didn't know, yet it would appear they were in on it. Absalom had left no stone unturned in seeking those disaffected with his father. Recall that Bathsheba was daughter of Eliam, who had taken a powerful position in Lo-debar. Eliam's father, Ahitophel, still had his home in Giloh, just a few miles northwest of Hebron. While serving as one of David's counselors, he apparently had a grudge against David, too. A good guess is that Ahitophel had been angered by the family scandal between David and Bathsheba. Absalom

sent for him while in the act of offering sacrifice on the old altar of Abraham in Hebron. Day by day, while Absalom tarried in the old mountain top city, his supporters grew into a massive throng.

15:13-23 – Before Absalom had a chance to make his announcement, one of David’s messengers warned the king what he saw, that a revolt was surely brewing. David was instantly the military tactician and ordered an immediate evacuation of Jerusalem of the entire royal household. Time was of the essence. Fleeing the city would buy time and introduce an unexpected element into Absalom’s plot. There would be no easy pickings here. Had David stayed, the mere act of setting siege to the city would have brought war fever to the nation most assuredly in Absalom’s favor. Those sitting on the fence would more likely come down on the side of a clear victor. On the run, David was the most difficult adversary, as everyone would surely remember. This is the situation under which David rose to prominence. David left ten concubines to keep the house. They would have had authority over the slaves who were bound to the palace facility itself, as the status of concubine was somewhere between slave and wife – both, yet neither. David led the way to the path across the Kidron Valley just east of the walled city, and then stood near the city wall. There he took account of who was with him: the Royal Bodyguard, the Messengers and his own personal troops, Philistines from Gath who had given their loyalty to David personally. They had remained all this time with him, well known by the term *Gittites* (“those from Gath”).

David argued that Ittai had joined staff too recently to be seen as a threat to Absalom. Recall that foreign servants were viewed as non-partisan. David tried to convince Ittai there was no need to uproot his entire household, as there was no threat to him. Ittai made the point that his own safety was not the issue. He came to serve David, whether he was king or slave, alive or dead. Such loyalty ended any argument David might have raised.

15:24-31 – Zadok and Abiathar brought the Ark of Covenant, along with the whole Levite service that had been staying in Jerusalem. David ordered them to take the Ark back. He regarded the city as more God’s place than his own. If Jehovah allowed him to prevail, he would return to the Ark’s resting place. If not, having the Ark along would not help him. Zadok’s position as official seer and high priest should have been enough to protect him personally, along with the rest of the Levites. Besides, David had real need of loyal spies in the city. He told Zadok of his plans to camp in the plains of the Jordan Valley. As events warranted, Zadok could send either his son or Abiathar’s with news to David there. This loyalty was not forgotten, as Solomon later elevated the House of Zadok to primacy in his temple, over the old House of Eli.

This whole sad convoy brought great mourning to the folks living in and around the city. As they crested the far side of the Kidron, they took the road leading to Jericho. When David heard that Ahithophel had gone over to Absalom, he prayed God would make this very wise counselor look foolish before his son.

15:32-37 – The final key to David’s hope for return was Hushai the Archite. His official title was “King’s Friend” and meant a particular position as close advisor. David asked Hushai to return and pretend that he was loyal to the throne, not so much the man on it. He was further asked to be the prime conduit of information passed to the sons of the priests, so to David. Hushai

obeyed and returned to the city. He didn't have long to wait. Absalom came to find the palace vacant. Rather than besieging the city, he simply marched in as the new king.

7.9: Friends and Enemies

Everything depended on the friendship of others. David had little need of counsel in this situation; he was in his element. However, as in the past when on the run, he was always in desperate need of support. Absalom had the upper hand but was too young to know what came next. He relied heavily on the advice of older men.

2 Samuel 16:1-4 – The path of escape led from the city wall, down into the Kidron Valley, up the valley a bit to a cut that ran up the opposite side. This cut gave way to a pass between two small hilltops, which pass itself became a cut on the far slope downward. As David brought up the rear in this long train of escapees, he passed between the peaks and was met by Ziba. This is the Ziba whom David had directed to manage the lands Meribaal had inherited from Saul.

Ziba had brought a hearty snack for everyone in David's household. The small army of troops with David would naturally have had some rations ready for short notice situations. It was the family household that would have been most needy. We can only guess that Ziba had, in the course of conducting his master's business, come to cast an envious eye on the property or Meribaal. Taking advantage of the David's vulnerability, Ziba's thoughtfulness concealed an opportunist's greed.

While it is not clearly stated, Ziba's story about Meribaal's treachery was a lie. Meribaal could hardly have thought he would manage to knock off Absalom and keep David from returning at the same time. Ziba had carefully calculated David's response to this story, as the king awarded him ownership of Meribaal's inheritance. We should not see David as harshly judging Meribaal, but simply rewarding Ziba. Ziba's thanks were perhaps his one moment of honesty.

16:5-8 – David's path from there is not exactly known. Bahurim doesn't appear on Bible maps, but we can guess it was in the tribal district of Benjamin, for the man coming out to meet David was clearly a Benjamite, of the same clan as Saul. This Shimei threw stones at them, not to injure, but as a sign of contempt. The road appeared to have run along the edge of a ridge here and Shimei followed them atop a parallel ridge, from across a narrow valley.

16:9-14 – Shimei's curses were technically illegal and justified the offer of David's guards to execute him. Yet David was absorbed in his sorrow, showing a deeply depressed mood. This is in part atonement for sin, because David knew it was his failures that brought on this whole affair. His response was, "No, I deserve this." If not, then it was typical of God to take a sinner's curses and make them blessings. Somewhere in that vicinity, they all stopped for rest and a meal. This was probably but an hour or two out of Jerusalem.

16:15-19 – We are given the impression that Absalom had entered Jerusalem right behind his father's departure, certainly on the same day. Immediately the tension between Ahitophel and Hushai set in, as Hushai greeted his new king. Absalom's questions should not be taken as a concern for insult to his father, but a justifiable suspicion. Hushai was able to deflect that suspicion and was accepted as a counselor to Absalom.

16:20-23 – Ahitophel urged Absalom to strengthen his position in the eyes of the people. The symbolic act of taking the royal concubines was not an abhorrent or especially evil act. It is what one would expect a usurper and conqueror to do. It was just another ritual in claiming the throne. However, it was also proof Absalom was burning his bridges. There was no going back, no making peace with his father. Absalom meant to secure his position and would surely kill David at the first opportunity. This public act of taking the women would make it clear to all his supporters that one of the two men would have to die before it was over. Such advice from Ahitophel was brilliant, as was everything he said.

17:1-4 – That was the last chance Ahitophel had to shine. God had honored David’s request to make him look a fool. The counselor asked Absalom to send the bulk of their current forces in pursuit of David. This was an excellent idea, as it gave the best chance to catch David at the only moment that he was vulnerable. With David having fled in such disarray, with no more than 1000 warriors at hand, a good, organized attack as Ahitophel suggested could hardly fail. It would be their best chance to kill David, the only one that really mattered. Once that was done, all other resistance would fade to a level hardly worse than Saul or David faced during their reigns. Only so long as David lived could a concerted resistance be expected.

17:5-14 – When Absalom asked for second opinion, Hushai sprang the trap. His claim was that, while David and his men might be disorganized, they’d fight fiercely like any cornered carnivore. Further, this was the best fighting men in the nation, led by the best commanders in Israel’s history. This would be no quick and easy capture. Hushai proposed instead something that appealed very strongly to Absalom’s arrogance. He suggested that the whole national army be mobilized and that Absalom himself lead. At the head of a far superior force, he could expect to ride in victory regardless of David’s wily tactics. No city could hide him. Absalom fell for it.

17:15-22 – The two sons of the priests felt it best to keep out of sight. En-rogel was the name of a spring outside Jerusalem, situated in the junction of the Kidron and Hinnom Valleys, and was across from the southern tip of David’s capital city. There was probably a small village there and this was most likely the local laundry center or “Fuller’s Field” during the monarchy. The arrangement was for the young men to wait there for a message from a young servant girl who could come and go into the city unnoticed. Most likely she was in service to someone at En-rogel.

On one of her trips into the city, delivering finished laundry and retrieving the dirty, she came and told them about a message from Hushai, warning of Ahitophel’s counsel. Hushai’s advice would only delay things but a few days, so he warned David not to camp in the plains of Jordan on the near side, but to cross over to the East Bank and take refuge in the cities. Despite their best efforts, a lad spotted Jonathan and Ahima-az and reported it to someone at Absalom’s court. Still, they had time to get as far as Bahurim, where Shimei had cursed David.

We don’t know what sources of water may have existed in this unknown town, but we do know it was common in the area for people to dig water pits or cisterns to catch rainfall in this rocky land. The man with whom the messengers took refuge had such a cistern and they hid in it. The opening would have been as small as possible to limit evaporation loss, but still had to be just large enough for a man to enter for digging it in the first place, plus cleaning it out later. Most of them had some sort of covering cut to fit. The maid servant tasked with processing the grain

simply buried the covering in a heap of grain.

When Absalom's armed pursuit arrived, she dutifully misdirected them. Once the searchers left the area, the two men were pulled out of the cistern and continued their mission. They warned David not to dally in the plains of the Jordan, as pursuit may come soon. So, all that night they continued fording the Jordan. By dawn, everyone had at least the river between them and any attack.

17:23 – Ahitophel was now in an impossible position. He had publicly switched his loyalty from David to Absalom. There was no chance of reconciling with David, especially after advising Absalom to take the harem. He was quite certain his advice to pursue immediately was the one hope of winning. When he failed to convince Absalom of this, it was certain David would win. David would surely have him executed. Even if, by some chance, Absalom should succeed against David, not only would Hushai have taken the senior position, making Ahitophel less important, but he would have been proven wrong. His spotless reputation for perfect wisdom would be gone, his career finished. Thus, his suicide was not a simple matter of childish personal pique. He felt it was better to end his life while still quite the man, than to die in shame and be executed as a criminal. Indeed, his kin felt safe giving him the standard burial in the family cemetery.

17:24-26 – David managed to get all the way to Mahanaim. This was quite a powerful city at the time and carried the mystique of being the home of "Jacob's Ladder," which the patriarch had seen in a dream on his own flight from the land.

When Absalom had mustered the national forces, he led them across to Gilead, indicating they were all around Mahanaim. At this time, the area was still heavily forested in places, so a massive bivouac would have been no great challenge. While Joab had fled with David, Absalom chose a new commander from the same part of Judah. There is some confusion over the man's family line among the various texts used for translation, but we will assume he was Ishmaelite, since there's hardly any reason to mention his ethnic background if he was an Israelite. This is also supported in 1 Chronicles 2:17. This Amasa was the son of one of those Ishmaelites that traveled to Canaan with Moses on the Exodus. His mother was of the same family as Joab's mother.

17:27-29 – Though Absalom had the might of the Army of Israel, he did not have the whole of it. The tributary Ammonites came out in support of David, as well as Ahitophel's relatives living in Lo-debar of the Cities of Jair. Also, there was Barzillai from Rogelim, another large city in the north of Gilead. His name suggests he was of Aramean stock. These brought equipment and supplies of food, and it is implied they brought troops, as well. The stage was set for a great battle.

7.10: Victory and Grief

Not every tribe and clan in the nation went over to Absalom's side. While the partisans might not have engaged in battles amongst themselves, they were ready to fight if mobilized by their favorite.

2 Samuel 18:1-5 – David mustered all those willing to remain loyal. This would have been by

far the better trained, more seasoned of Israel's warriors. Absalom would have drawn a rather younger crowd. In the standard practice of the day, conscripts were grouped in companies of about a hundred each and a cadre of professional warriors was placed over the companies. The companies were grouped into battalions of a thousand each. Most ancient battle formations would find a professional group in the lead, on each flank and as a rear guard. The main body would have been conscripts. Battles were less about mass casualties and more about persuading the enemy forces to break and flee. Well-disciplined conscripts could win a battle simply by not breaking ranks.

David divided his forces into three battle groups, showing a growing distrust for Joab. One group was under the command of his very faithful friend, Ittai from Gath. He was careful to publicly order his son be spared, if at all possible. We get the feeling he viewed this whole thing as little more than a youthful indiscretion. Actually, it's just another example of David's favoring of kinship over justice. His commanders refused to let David go into battle over them. They knew all too well this was about killing David or Absalom; winning battles was simply the means.

18:6-8 – Unlike most battles out in the open fields, this one took place in the forests that once stood in Ephraim's land. We are not told how the battle moved from Gad and the vicinity of Mahanaim. The veteran fighters were much better prepared to take advantage of the terrain, which itself killed more than died by the sword.

18:9-16 – Absalom rode a mule, a symbol of royalty in a nation fighting afoot. Apparently, he tried to flee a company of his father's soldiers, but his head got caught in a low-hanging branch, while his mule ran out from under him. (Josephus, the Jewish historian, is responsible for the false image of Absalom being caught by his long hair.) One of the battle messengers brought word while the troops simply surrounded the still-suspended young usurper. When Joab groused that Absalom was not killed, the soldier reminded him of the stern warning David gave. This time, Joab was right. Absalom could not be allowed to live, no matter what his doting father might say. Joab made sure to finish off the young man.

18:17-18 – With Absalom dead, the rebellion was over. Joab announced this with a signal understood by all. The remaining rebels fled, as Joab called off the pursuit. Absalom received a criminal's burial. Even today, in the Middle East, people will toss stones on the grave of a major criminal figure. The bigger the heap of stones, the more serious the offense. Absalom's cairn was quite large. The final epitaph is to note that his three sons had apparently died, for Absalom had erected a monument to himself as childless, but the location is unknown today. The so-called Tomb of Absalom in the Kidron Valley was created during the latter Roman Empire, with no evidence beyond myth.

18:19-23 – Joab knew that David would interpret the arrival of Ahimaaz as a signal of good news and this was not exactly true. So, Joab insisted the message be carried by a Cushite. Ahimaaz pestered Joab until he got permission to at least go back to the city, but Joab held him off long enough to give the Cushite a head start. No doubt Ahimaaz was quite the runner. While the messenger took the most direct route, Ahimaaz dropped down to the Jordan Valley, rather like a highway in those days and managed to pass the Cushite.

18:24-32 – The City of Mahanaim had inner and outer gates. David took a seat in one of the alcoves that were usually found in such a structure, between the two gates. The chamber above the gate was higher than the wall running off to either side. From there, the watchman had the best view. These chambers would have had a portal of some sort through the floor that allowed communication with those in the guard posts between the gates. The watchman spotted each of the runners individually and David decided the news was good, since they came alone on different paths. Ahimaaz was recognizable to the watchman and arrived first. Having no official dispatch, he would have simply reported what he saw, that there was an awful lot of shouting between David’s warriors. His wording indicates it was quite an unusual scene, not typical of warriors after battle. The Cushite brought what he believed was good news. His answer was typical of victorious announcements, wishing that all the king’s enemies could meet such an end.

18:33 – David went into mourning immediately. We are assured it’s a good thing to mourn the loss of family, but this very public demonstration was quite extravagant. His outcry indicated he wished he could join Absalom in death. We rightly condemn David for not seeing this also as the hand of God. While David might well suffer depression for a sad end to a tragedy of his own making, at least by neglect, he utterly fails as king and commander for not keeping his mourning private, especially over one who had caused his supporters so much grief.

19:1-8 – When Joab found out about this travesty, he confronted his king with the harsh reality of politics. David’s overly indulgent behavior got them into this mess. Now that many had taken tremendous risks on his behalf, exerting themselves to the utmost, he repays them poorly, with nary a word of thanks for anything. If David didn’t correct this situation immediately, he would never sit on the throne again. Joab hints that he would take the lead in deserting David over this. So David composed himself and went out and sat in the public speaking place in the gate of every city. His presence there was automatically a call to assemble. The enemy had all fled, everyone skulking home in shame and his servants needed a good word.

19:9-10 – For a time, David remained in Mahanaim, in a sort of internal exile. The nation of Israel was bitterly divided over whether to let him regain his throne. Those supporting David’s return, by recalling how he had vanquished all the nation’s enemies, made the better argument. Even though many had lined up behind Absalom, he was now dead, so to whom could they give their loyalty now if not David? Still, the political impasse led to no one taking action. The context indicates that the ten Northern Tribes were completely indecisive about it.

19:11-18a – It was only natural then, that David would appeal to his own tribe of Judah to get things rolling. He could rule the Southern Tribes, at least. He sent a message prompting Zadok and Abiathar to visit the elders of Judah and get them moving, as they were the most obvious choice. If he couldn’t get the support of his own relatives, he couldn’t be king anyway. He even went so far as extending an olive branch by offering to promote Amasa, his nephew and Absalom’s commander, to Joab’s place as military Chief of Staff over the nation’s troops. This was also a public notice to punish Joab for defying orders to save Absalom. Thus, it should be clear David harbored no hard feelings and no one needed to fear for his life over this rebellion.

This worked, for the eldership of Judah moved unanimously to call David back as King. In a grand ceremonial journey, they met him at the Jordan near Gilgal with a ferry to cross in

comfort. Even David's erstwhile enemies met him there – Shimei, along with a large delegation from Benjamin and Ziba, who had swindled Saul's estate from David.

19:18b-23 – Shimei made a fine speech begging forgiveness for his insult. Abishai still wanted to execute him, but David made clear this was a day of forgiveness and restoration. Unlike pagan potentates, who often killed a symbolic representation of those who rebelled upon returning to their throne, David was gracious. He took that day as sacred to the Lord. He gave Shimei a strong royal oath of pardon.

19:24-30 – Meribaal had not been in Jerusalem on the day David fled. During Absalom's brief stay, there was all the more reason to stay away. Upon David's return, Meribaal came to meet him at the city gate. He bore the obvious signs of one who had been in mourning, by neglecting his appearance. When David asked what had happened, Meribaal explained that Ziba had said he would saddle a donkey for him to ride so as to accompany David into exile. Then Ziba simply took off with the load of food and lied to David about the situation. Meribaal hadn't left his home the whole time. Still, Meribaal was so grateful David was back that he really didn't care about the loss of his inheritance. David, having too much else to worry about, simply made a quick judgment to return half the property back to him. Meribaal didn't care either way and wouldn't press the case against Ziba.

19:31-39 – Back before boarding the ferry to cross the Jordan, David had said farewell to his good friend, Barzillai. David offered the old man a place in the Royal Court, but Barzillai declined. He was too old for such a move and could hardly have enjoyed it at this point. He preferred to remain close the family grave, since he would surely need it soon. Rather, he asked that the favor be offered to someone tradition identifies as his son, but may have been any favored young relative in his household. Thus, Chimham joined the Royal Court on Barzillai's behalf.

19:40-43 – As we have seen in the past, the elders of the Northern Tribes were a contentious bunch. While they dilly-dallied over renewing David's place on the throne, Judah took appropriate action. The leading lights of Judah were escorting the King back to Jerusalem, along with the loyal portions of the Northern Tribes. This most likely was not the most powerful leaders. Those with the greater power had gone over to Absalom and were the ones who approached this royal entourage a little too late for the crossing.

Their complaint presumed a falsehood, that they were good loyal servants of David, too. They acted as if betrayed, rather than as traitors, by not having been invited to the party. The big shots were covering their shame with bluster, saying they had more right to lead the parade than Judah and that it had been their idea in the first place. We don't know the substance of Judah's response, but it clearly made Ephraim look foolish.

It is clear at this point, more than ever that there is a firm division between the Northern Tribes led by Ephraim and the Southern Tribes led by Judah. More, we can see a glaring lack of honor in the former's actions. When the heat was on, their loyalty to David's throne and to Jehovah melted quickly.

7.11: Peace Never Comes

Even as David resumed his throne, there was yet more strife, instability and rebellion. Further, though the Philistines were beaten repeatedly, they rose from time to time in a futile attempt to regain at least some measure of their ascendancy.

2 Samuel 20:1-2 – During the confrontation between the leaders of Judah and those of Ephraim, a particularly obnoxious Benjamite named Sheba declared a revolt. Using an old phrase from the nomadic days under Moses, he encourages the Northern Tribes to cease following David and “return to your tents.” It conjures the image of demobilizing and returning to the farm. Since the nation had long ago traded their tents for regular homes, this was no more than political rhetoric. However, it proved effective for the moment; for we are told most of the Northern Tribes took his advice and dropped out of the parade. The folks from the Southern Tribes remained in the escort.

20:3 – In a brief footnote of sorts, we see that David did not mistreat the ten concubines defiled by Absalom. Rather, he declared them widows and provided them an appropriate retirement. Joining the king’s harem offered grand luxury, but high risks. Most kings of that day would have killed the women, sold them off as slaves, or simply tossed them out on the street to live as prostitutes and beggars.

20:4-13 – While everyone was settling back into a normal routine, David gave his first commission to Amasa, the new commander of troops. He was to muster the troops of Judah in three days and report back for further instructions. Amasa would have to contend with folks not knowing he had replaced Joab, or who wouldn’t accept that. There was also the completely unsettled political situation, with many elders still not fully convinced David should be king. Along with all the other mass confusion, things must have fallen apart in Amasa’s hands, because he missed the deadline.

Sensing that this business with Sheba could get out of hand quickly, David ordered Abishai to take whatever troops were available in Jerusalem and pursue the rebels. Note that he by-passed Joab altogether by speaking with his brother. Once en route though, Joab would hardly consent to a secondary role. Leading the Royal Guard, the Messenger Corps, Joab’s own troops and the battle cadre who normally took charge of the conscript formations, they set out northward.

Following the path taken by Sheba and his gang, Joab led the little army past the landmark stone near Gibeon. From a side road, Amasa approached to meet them. Joab was wearing his full battle gear, including a sword hanging in a sheath at his left side. It would have hung at an angle with the handle pointing somewhat forward for grasping with the right hand. Joab probably bumped into something, and the sword was tipped out of its sheath Joab caught it in his left hand, and then simply held onto the sword as he walked up to his cousin, Amasa. Recall that most swords were only about 12 inches (30cm) long, so he could have held it against his inner forearm, almost invisible.

In a gesture still seen today, he grabbed Amasa’s beard in his right hand and pulled close for the standard Middle Eastern greeting of a kiss on the sides of the face. Amasa would have placed his hands on the upper arms of Joab. While thus distracted, Amasa never noticed the sword in Joab’s left hand. Joab stabbed Amasa in the stomach just once. Certainly fatal, it also

guaranteed a slow and painful death. Joab understand nothing but his own ruthless ambition.

Joab and Abishai immediately returned to the task of chasing down Sheba and the rebels. As Amasa died noisily, one of Joab's lieutenants stood in front of and shouted to encourage the men to keep up with Joab, as an expression of their loyalty to David. However, the grisly sight was just a bit too much for some of the men, who simply stopped and stared at the writhing figure of Amasa. So, the lieutenant dragged the body off into the field, out of hearing range from the road and covered him with a cloak. This broke the spell, and the troops continued their mission.

20:14-15 – It probably took at least a week for Sheba and his gang to travel the length of Northern Israel, ending up in the rich valley north of Lake Huleh, in the vicinity of Dan. Along the way, he managed to gather some more troops, but apparently the whole revolt began to wither. The rebel forces holed up in the city of Abel, an old capital of the Kingdom of Maacah. While this small nation was a tributary of David's, their allegiance was no doubt weakened a bit by their support of Absalom, whose mother was from the royal house there and was where Absalom had been exiled after murdering his elder brother.

This Abel-beth-Maacah had long been a chief city, with several dependent villages in the surrounding area. It was also at times a place famous for its reputation as an arbitration city. The disputing parties going there had averted many wars. Under the city elders' wise guidance, conflicts both great and small were settled. Such a reputation would have included serving as a refuge city and necessitated not keeping too many troops, only enough to stay neutral. This probably explains why there was no army in the valley when Dan attacked to gain a place during the Period of Judges.

Having chased Sheba and the rebels to Abel, Joab ordered his troops to begin piling rocks and soil to form a ramp up the side of the city wall. Sheba may have taken refuge deceptively, claiming their protection from unjust persecution. Thus, Joab had not bothered to follow the Law's requirements in Deuteronomy 20:10ff by giving the city residents a chance to parley. When the ramp was as high as possible, given the materials, it would have still been somewhat short of the top of the average city wall. However, the difference could be made up by battering with logs to knock loose the closely packed stones. In an age before cement was discovered, stone walls were carefully fitted together in a time-consuming process and sometimes coated with mud or similar materials. The result was certainly sturdy, but could be eventually knocked loose with a battering ram.

Throughout the Old Testament, we note that women often lead the way in trying to settle problems without bloodshed. Thus, a very wise woman, no doubt on the arbitration council, called out to Joab and asked him to hold off a minute so she could talk to him. Joab agreed and got an earful. The woman enlightened him to the city's heritage of peacemaking. She described herself as fully loyal to King David, implying the city also was as a whole. She also noted that this was one of the administrative centers for the area, responsible for funneling a great deal of taxes to the throne. Finally, it would be an incalculable loss as one of the oldest cities in the kingdom.

Joab replied that he really wasn't interested in destroying anything. He only wanted to arrest

Sheba for challenging David's authority. If the city handed him over, Joab and his army would go away. The woman told Joab to be ready to play catch, because Sheba's head was on the way. Then she spoke to the city leadership, who promptly agreed to the wisdom of sacrificing one refugee for the good of all. They quickly behead Sheba and tossed his head over the wall. Joab signaled to all the troops arranged around the city to stand down. They reassembled into formation and marched away with their prize.

20:23-25 – These last few verses close the Temple Journal regarding David's reign. The chief officers are identified. David never managed to replace Joab, because Joab kept murdering his replacements. Adoram's position as Revenue Chief actually was mostly about the forced labor started by David, a taxation-in-kind where men were drafted for royal building projects. The Recorder was a records custodian, keeping track of the details necessary to run the Kingdom. The Royal Scribe was a different position, since the ability to write was quite rare and far more complicated and time-consuming than today. The Prime Minister was from Jair, which helps to indicate just how strong the support for David was in that part of Gilead. The final chapters in 2 Samuel were clearly added later by a different writer on the Temple staff. They appear to cover incidents during his declining years.

21:1-6 – Sometime during this chaotic reign of David, the nation was hit with a drought that continued three years. This guaranteed a famine. When David inquired of God, he learned that Saul had broken the covenant Joshua had made with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9). We recall that the two captains who murdered Ishbaal (2 Samuel 4:1-3) had come from the City of Beeroth, which Saul had stolen from the Gibeonites. The refugees from that attack had fled to Gath (probably the northern Gath) in Philistine territory. Given that the Tabernacle had been erected on the high place near Gibeon sometime during David's reign, we can surmise the Hivites of Gibeon had begun pressing their complaint directly to God. The result was the drought and famine.

David summoned the Gibeonite leaders and asked what it would take to break the curse, since they were the aggrieved party. They didn't want any monetary settlement from Saul's estate and didn't want David to execute anyone in the nation. Relieved, David said whatever else they wanted, he agreed up-front to provide. Then they lowered the boom: They wanted seven descendants from Saul's household. Their promise to "hang them before the Lord" is really not that specific in the Hebrew language. The phrase implies merely some form of execution, though we could guess it meant impaling on wooden poles standing upright in the ground. However, they would do it in the shadow the Tabernacle.

21:7-9 – Keeping his covenant with Jonathan's household, David passed over Meribaal in favor of better symbolic choices, from his point of view. He arrested the two sons Saul born to his concubine Rizpah. He also grabbed the five sons of Merab, the other daughter of Saul that had been promised first to him (1 Samuel 18:19ff). Some texts have the name "Michal" here, but that's not possible; she died childless (2 Samuel 6:23). These seven men were turned over to the Gibeonites. They were executed on the same hill where the Tabernacle then stood, at about the beginning of the time of barley harvest.

21:10-14 – The timing is noteworthy, for it puts their execution around the first of April. At this time, the bereaved Rizpah went up to the flat space of rock where the bodies had been

ceremonially exposed to be picked clean by vultures and other scavengers. This represented the severe shame of covenant breaking. It didn't matter if the creatures never got their meal; the ceremonial execution and placement of the bodies was the point. The woman essentially spread a tent over their bodies and guarded them. This prevented the birds from lighting on the bodies and the carrion eaters of the night. She stayed until the second rainy season, late in December.

Two significant points arise. First, the bodies would have rotted, then dried, and then the fleshy parts would wither and fall away, leaving only bones. Second, this latter rain was sufficient notice from God that the curse was past. David took advantage of the opportunity to tie up some loose ends. He exhumed the bones of Saul and his sons buried in Jabesh-gilead and collected with them the bones from Rizpah's 9-month vigil, burying them all honorably in the same grave with Kish, Saul's father. The drought was over.

21:15-22 – The rest of the chapter notes that Goliath had four relatives still around to cause trouble. The material is paralleled in **1 Chronicles 20:4-8**. The phrase "son(s) of the giant" in Hebrew is actually a generic term, referring to any surviving member of the Anakites. During one incident, the giant *Ishbi-benob* ("His Dwelling is in Nob") was leading the Philistines and charged David when the latter had gotten weak, most likely aging a bit. Abishai just managed to kill the giant. The captains got together and insisted David wasn't going out to fight any more, as the risk of his death was too great.

During a later incident in Gezer near the famous Valley of Aijalon, the Philistines had brought out *Saph* ("Like a Basin" wide, perhaps tubby) who was killed by a hero named Sibbechai. At the same site, a later battle saw Lachmi ("Big Eater"), a brother of the former Goliath, killed by one of David's cousins from Bethlehem. Yet another battle took place in Gath itself and David's nephew born to his brother Shimea, named Jonathan, killed some unnamed giant with six digits on each limb. Thus, we note the Philistines rose up in revolt from time to time and the Sons of Anak were still a problem.

7.12: Sin and the Temple

Readers are reminded that minor discrepancies in the Hebrew text between Temple records of Samuel-Kings and the court records of Chronicles are seldom irresolvable. Given that we have no copies from the time close to original publication, we should expect a few scribal mistakes to creep in over the centuries. We do well to remember the numerous copies and manuscripts in various languages, spread over a wide geographic area, have given us a text more certain than the works of Shakespeare coming far later and in our tongue. Usually, the differences are in numbering. Numbers were represented by words that often had other meanings, as well. Sometimes a simple matter of viewpoint – the prophetic/priestly view of Samuel-Kings versus the official scribal report in Chronicles – can account for many differences in detail.

We need not examine in detail every verse and chapter. 2 Samuel 22 is a copy of Psalm 18. Also, we note that chapter 23 is another Psalm followed by random accounts of why certain men were promoted. Noteworthy is Joab's absence, stricken from the record for his crimes. The heroes deserved their place in the record.

2 Samuel 24:1-4 (1 Chronicles 21) – Late in David's reign, he is stricken with hubris. Over a long

and successful career, David managed to humble every enemy of the Nation of Israel. However, this nation was often divided, failing to follow God's anointed king with a whole heart. For this and other sins, the Lord had determined to judge the nation. We are permitted to see between the two sources just how this works. The sin of the nation puts them out from under the covering of Jehovah's mercy. Without that protection, they are under His wrath, a wrath personified as Satan. By leaving the protection of God, David has no resistance against a temptation Satan is permitted to bring. In his pride, David decides to call a census. More than just counting noses, this sets up the means for a more precise and oppressive taxation, as well as the count of men available for conscription. As with modern times, it required a bit of prying into every man's affairs in a very intrusive manner, often costing the citizens a week or more in lost time better spent doing other things. A census is not in itself sinful, but was required by God at least twice in the Book of Numbers (hence the name of that book). God did not order this census. Despite Joab's many character flaws, he knew this census was not a good move. He warned David so, but David insisted.

It was the count of eligible soldiers that formed the basis of this census. Bearing in mind the ancient practice of counting professional warriors and conscripted troops separately, not every professional warrior remained near Jerusalem. Only a few were kept permanently quartered as staff in or near the palace. Most were noblemen who owned great property and spent most of the year managing their business affairs. The conscripts were essentially peasants, those whose lives required working full time just to live. They would naturally have some limited experience in swordplay, but only in the off-season when there was no work to do. Local noblemen typically organized these training events and would keep some rough count of available men. The census bypassed their rough count, demanding that everyone stop what they were doing and present themselves in some local assembly area to be counted. Our trouble comes in that the numbers of conscripts would be easily confused by names of ranks for the noblemen. (Review the Addenda on Hebrew counting and numbers.)

24:5-9 – We learn the route Joab took: crossing the Jordan, counting his way north along the Gilead side. From there he crossed back over and north to Dan, and then down the coast, weaving inland and back as he worked his way down to the far southern wilderness. From there he swung back up to the Judean Highlands and into Jerusalem. Given what we know of the land and people, a million is not too high a number. The Chronicler notes Joab skipped Benjamin and Levi. The count took almost ten months.

24:10-14 – David's conscience was stricken. When his heart was ready, the Lord sent Gad the Seer to announce the bad news. Again, we see a discrepancy between Samuel and Chronicles, but it would appear that the counts of three were the theme: 3 years of famine, 3 months of fleeing an enemy, or 3 days of plague. Having regained his senses, David knew immediately God's mercy in wrath was a far better place than any trouble from humans. Thus, the Lord chose the plague.

24:15-17 – This was no ordinary plague but was directed by the hand of an angel. The angel began his work in Dan and rolled south across the nation. Having arrived just north of Jerusalem, just as he was about to strike the city, the Lord relented. The angel stopped and stood over Mount Moriah. David knew this was his chance to act and wasted no time.

Announcing his contrition, he went out to the flat space of ground above the city. In one of the rare glimpses of how the Lord's angels manifest themselves, we are told that this one appeared to hang in the air, yet low enough to remain visible and identifiable. We are never advised in Scripture how they appeared; beyond some vague resemblance to men, no one mistook their appearance unless it was part of the plan.

24:18-25 – The man who owned the bit of real estate was a surviving Jebusite with a Hurrian name. Because Hebrew is written with consonants and no vowels, it can be read as either Ornan or Araunah. The man's sons had fled upon seeing the angel, but he himself continued his work threshing the grain he had harvested. A good guess is that he knew whatever happened next would require his responsible hands to act. Upon seeing the king and his servants approach, Araunah paid proper respects by prostrating himself at David's feet. David explained his mission, asking to buy the place. Araunah answered as anyone in the Middle East today might answer, especially to someone of high importance. Further, his offer was perfectly matched to the need. However, David insisted that the offering must cost him personally, since the sin was his. Scholars vary on what to make of difference between the two texts here: 50 shekels of silver versus 500 shekels of gold. Most likely one amount was for the oxen and equipment, while the other for the real estate. In any case, David paid a pretty high price.

Tradition says this was the same ground we know today as the Temple Mount. This accords well with David purchasing the place as a gift to God. We are reminded that the Tabernacle constructed in the Sinai Wilderness was standing at Gibeon in those days. David desperately needed to make his offering to God there in the presence of the angel while he was stopped. Had he rushed off to the Tabernacle, it would have been a couple hours or so longer. The angel keeping his sword of death unsheathed, pointed at Jerusalem, indicated things were not yet settled. Once the offering was made, the sword was put away and angel withdrew.

1 Chronicles 22 – The Chronicler connects the purchase of the threshing floor with the building of the Temple. The reason is obvious: the Tabernacle standing at Gibeon is a problem. We are not told, but it seems the Ark of Covenant must have been moved to the Tabernacle, where it belonged. Since the king served at the pleasure of Jehovah, why not build the Temple near the throne? Obviously, this met with the Lord's approval. Mount Moriah had long been a holy place, both for pagans and with the Hebrew Nation since the time Abraham prepared to offer Isaac. David had been forbidden to build this, so he simply went about collecting adequate materials for both the structure and new furnishings. He also sought the Lord for plans, to ensure this was not the work of mere man. Thus, he was able to hand over to Solomon the full set of drawings, the details of the furnishings, everything.

David knew early on that Solomon was God's choice to succeed him. David had been a man of war and could not afford to be distracted from the task in order to build such a monumental thing. Solomon would be a man of peace, so it was important to train him differently. The character of his reign was administration, not conquest. This Temple construction was not something that would be finished quickly. Solomon spent the next few years working on little else. That's why David gave his son the task long before retiring from the throne. Solomon would not dedicate the finished Temple until he had ruled fourteen years. It cannot be understated what a monumental task this was. We get the sense David had not gotten too

involved in the details of preparation. Solomon would have needed to take a detailed inventory of all the materials available, and then compare with the details of the Temple structure. It seems David was waiting for Solomon to have the plan well in hand before he could retire.

The Chronicler continues noting the administrative details worked out during this period of transition. In chapter 23, the Levites are reorganized according to their new duties. The priests were lined up in the rotation of duties in chapter 24 and the musicians in chapter 25. The next two chapters cover a host of administrative tasks for the management of the Temple activities and facilities maintenance. Having taken a census, the information was not wasted. The army was reorganized for a wholly different mission. We are told elsewhere their tactics and equipment was generally modernized during this time. This all takes us to the end of chapter 27.

8. Peak of Monarchy: 971-931 BC (Solomon)

8.1: David Retires, Solomon Reigns

David held on to the throne too long. It appears he kept putting it off while Solomon was engaged in preparation for the Temple. More than just the materials and plans, with all the organizational tasks necessary to enroll the priesthood and the various Temple workers, along with plans to administer the kingdom in a wholly different manner than his father, Solomon would have been kept busy full time. But the preparation never came to an end and the actions of others forced David to pass the rule to his son before the construction began. We pick up the story in 1 Kings.

1 Kings 1:1-4 – David’s health had declined to the point he pretty much had to stay in bed. He was now about 70 years of age. Perhaps one of his last tasks was to compile the Psalms that would later be used as the Hebrew hymnal of worship. David never lost sight of the goal to build a Temple to Jehovah. Toward the end, he had great difficulty keeping warm. Though the servants pile up the covers, it was not enough before their weight became a threat itself. So, it was prescribed a solution still practiced as late as the Middle Ages: that a young woman would lie next to him to keep him warm. This had nothing to do with sex and no one would have thought so. Nonetheless, she became a member of the royal household. The maiden Abishag (“Blunder”) was from the Tribe of Issachar, from Shunem, in the Jezreel Valley at the foot of Mount Hermon.

1:5-10 – Sensing that his father was as good as dead, Adonijah (“Worshiper of Jehovah”), the younger brother of Absalom, decided that he would declare himself king. Quite as handsome as his elder, the younger man was a little less bold. However, he pulled the same stunt with runners and a chariot to get everyone used to the idea of him being the next ruler. This was not a revolt per se, as he was the eldest son of David, but a major sin in trying to displace God’s chosen, which everyone knew by that time was Solomon. True to his nature, David never bothered to rein in his headstrong son, and many in the court must have thought it was acceptable. David had not officially vested Solomon as his successor. Joab, David’s old commander, along with Abiathar his chief priest, joined Adonijah in this. The latter was the last

surviving member of Eli's household. Adonijah chose carefully and excluded those unlikely to support him.

Prior to any real effort to take control, Adonijah gathered his conspiracy to the Rock of Zoheleth ("Crawling Snake"), just above the Spring of En-Rogel (The Fuller's Spring). Here the deep shadow of the steep bluff forming the southern face of the Hinnom Valley would stay cool and comfortable most of the day, even in summer. These gathered supporters would proclaim him king at this feast, hoping the celebratory mood would prove infectious and usher their candidate into power. They would have offered the standard toast to the king from the beginning of the banquet, "Long live King Adonijah!"

1:11-14 – Nathan the Prophet had no doubt been watching Adonijah's behavior and was somewhat bothered by the contradiction to the command of God. When the banquet guests all left the city, headed to the shady spot in the valley below, he noted that he, Zadok the Priest, Benaiah (head of the Royal Messenger and Security Services) and Solomon had been excluded when all the other sons of David had gone.

It is noteworthy here that while Nathan had brought word of God's judgment for the adultery of David and Bathsheba, as well as the murder of her first husband, he appears to have borne no personal hostility to her. The issue was Jehovah's command regarding Solomon, and there was also the matter that she personally stood to lose a great deal from this mess with Adonijah. Nathan thus went to Bathsheba as the one who could bring suit on Solomon's behalf. Clearly David would not stop Adonijah, but perhaps he would at least perform his duty and make the official declaration of his heir. As the only person left in the royal household who could legitimately advocate for her son, Nathan persuaded Bathsheba to make an official appearance before the king so that he would know this was important business and would need to rule as judge of the realm. To support her suit, Nathan would come in behind to confirm it all, preventing any need for delay while David sent someone to investigate on his behalf. Thus, Bathsheba would not seem to be just nagging from fear.

1:15-21 – Bathsheba's ritual entrance alerted David to play his royal role, in spite of lying in bed. Bathsheba reminded David of his promise and how he had neglected his duty by allowing Adonijah to declare himself king with a big banquet and powerful allies. The people were wondering whether David would act to support or deny Adonijah's claim.

1:22-27 – Before David had time to make an official response, Nathan entered the chamber, announced by court servants. We are not told, but Bathsheba leaves in deference to Nathan's position and the serious nature of his work. Again, the ritual greeting kept things official. Nathan asks rhetorically if David had decided to crown Adonijah as royal heir. He describes the banquet and names the major figures in the conspiracy, noting who was left out. Was this really what the king had planned?

1:28-31 – David had Bathsheba called back in, so that he could settle the open case she had brought. He ruled officially that Solomon was the royal heir; now all debate on the issue was out of bounds. David swore a binding oath before the Lord. Bathsheba closed the proceedings by ritually prostrating herself before the ultimate judicial authority of the kingdom and his final pronouncement.

1:32-37 – David then called in the faithful members of his staff, those who would be ordered to execute his judgment, as well as any additional actions necessary to carry it out. Having previously shared duties with Abiathar, Zadok was now acting High Priest alone. Nathan was the ad hoc executor of the judgment, having been involved in the suit, on top of his place as Court Prophet. Benaiah in his role would command the royal escort, lending weight to the action, with the implied threat of violence against any who dared argue.

It was ordered that Solomon would be placed on David's own onager, the white royal mount recognized by everyone. They were to hold this ceremony at the city's main spring, Gihon, still regarded as the location for public announcements. While prophets called by God had His power and Spirit anointing as their spiritual badge of authority, priests and kings were symbolically anointed to an official office among men. Next, they were to use the ancient symbol of the *shofar* to call attention of all men to the declaration that Solomon was king. "For I have appointed him" would be next to the last official act of the aged warrior king. The officers closed the pronouncement by asking God to bless the choice.

1:38-40 – There is little chance anyone in town missed this massive parade from the high terrace of the palace down the center of the old city, to the gate that opened on the Gihon Spring near the city wall. There, they carried out the ceremony as prescribed. All the residents of the city, who had not been invited to Adonijah's banquet, would have gathered around to watch. It is noted that Zadok used the ceremonial oil he carried for use in the Tabernacle, which still stood over at Gibeon. As the officers pronounced the ritual toast to the king, the whole crowd joined in gleefully. The celebration included all the usual musical instruments, dancing and singing, shouting and general hullabaloo. The earth shook and the noise carried quite far.

1:41-49 – Just at the feast at Zoheleth was winding down, the noise of the celebration in the city reached them. The guests and host began discussing what it might be, when Abiathar's son Jonathan arrived. Adonijah greeted him still in the magnanimous spirit of a new king and said surely, he brought good news. On the contrary, Jonathan recounted the coronation scene ordered by David. Solomon at that very moment was seated on the throne and everyone was paying their respects, wishing the new king greater prosperity and fame. David himself celebrated having an heir on the throne before he died. The conspiracy collapsed immediately, everyone slinking away, hoping to avoid notice.

1:50-53 – Adonijah did the one thing that made sense at that point and fled straight to the Tabernacle some distance away at Gibeah. There, he grasped two of the horns on the corners of the Altar of God. He knew that his actions had become a de facto revolt. This symbolic act was supposed to guarantee he would be spared, since there was a general prohibition against killing humans in the Court of the Tabernacle. He refused to let go until guaranteed a pardon. Solomon issued a ruling of probation: Adonijah could live only on good behavior. Then he sent guards to drag him from the altar and present him before the throne. Adonijah prostrated himself before his brother, indicating his voluntary subjection to the new king. He was curtly dismissed.

The story now jumps back to 1 Chronicles. Internal evidence indicates that David held the prerogative to make one last official act as king after the coronation. He called a solemn assembly, as much of the nation had not yet heard of coronation of his son.

1 Chronicles 28 – The year was 971 BC. David killed two birds with one stone. This solemn assembly was called to insure no one misunderstood who was king and to offer everyone a chance to participate in building the Temple. He recited the whole story about God revealing who was to build the Temple, thus signaling a great shift in the identity of the Nation of Israel. By degrees they had gone from being conquering nomads, to primary residents, warring constantly on all borders and internally, until all resistance to their supremacy was quelled. With the passing of David's rule was the last of the warlord kings. With Solomon would begin the settled monarchy of an established nation. It was critical that the symbolic house of Jehovah should also reflect this change.

In everyone's presence, David made a show of presenting to Solomon all the plans and the precious materials for the furnishings, along with the completed enrollment of priests and various offices in the Temple. He also added some new gifts from his personal wealth. This ceremony would have taken at least two hours. Then, David publicly charged Solomon with the task of bringing it all to reality.

29:1-20 – Then David turned to the assembly and invited them to give toward the effort. No doubt informed in advance, they had brought a vast hoard of treasures in an attempt to match what David had already gathered. David composed one of his numerous Psalms in worship to Jehovah. Many forget how advanced the theology of this "primitive" nation was as revealed in David's Psalms.

29:21-25 – This whole affair took place in the shadow of the Tabernacle at Gibeon. The next day was consumed by yet one more ceremony, Solomon's coronation, a second time now in the presence of the whole nation. All the officials and the whole royal household joined in declaring their loyalty. This extravagant ritual included a seemingly endless train of sacrificial animals, along with all the usual drink and food offerings. This was the offering one brought to consume before the Lord, a ritual meal shared with God. Zadok was also confirmed as High Priest in preparation for the new Temple. The sad old years of instability and doubt about David's reign were forgotten, as the nation now seemed comfortable with this new situation. Solomon was royalty in every way.

29:26-30 – We are given an epilogue of David's 40-year reign. The Chronicler tells us of the records of his rule in the various books composed by the prophets Samuel, Nathan and Gad the seer. Of these, only that of Samuel survived to us today.

8.2: More Royal Intrigues

Solomon first had to tie up some loose ends left by his father. Then he needed to face his own collection of problems, for his arrogant half-brother was not finished intriguing to take the crown, not to mention a few others also hoping to rule. Holding the throne required keeping a strong measure of political support. There were numerous elements in maintaining legitimacy and each one could become a political football.

1 Kings 2:1-12 – As David saw the gathering gloom of his death, he charged his son Solomon to carry out the things he never quite had the heart to do himself. Solomon is clearly wiser about justice and sets the tone for balanced and passionless judging. David indicated manhood was

marked by a strong commitment to obeying God. The first order of business was executing Joab for his numerous crimes. The exact fate of Shimei, who had cursed David when fleeing Absalom's revolt, was left to Solomon. The family who supported David in Gilead, House of Barzillai, was elevated to the highest level of peerage, which includes tax exemption. We are then given another epitaph for David, paralleling 1 Chronicles 29. The rest of the story appears to be within the same day or the next from Solomon's ascension to the throne.

2:13-18 – Bathsheba was now the Queen Mother, a position far more than merely honorary. Even more than this, she had actively participated in Solomon's coronation against Adonijah's attempted soft coup. If there was anyone to whom Solomon might listen, it was his mother. Given the recent battle of wits and timing, Adonijah could be expected to harbor hostility; the dust had hardly settled when he came to her quarters as a supplicant for some favor. He lied in claiming his intent was peaceable. While not openly hostile, he was still after the throne.

He talked Bathsheba into making intervention on his behalf for the hand of Abishag, the maiden who had been David's bed-warmer. Recall that her place was honorable, serving as a nurse and not a sex partner. Still, she was officially a part of the harem. Having her as wife would increase Adonijah's claim to the throne. Once again, his actions echo those of his elder brother, Absalom. While Bathsheba appears to have taken this as merely a case of love and longing, it was an audacious maneuver, incredibly arrogant. While Abishag may have been a virgin, it was like asking for a key to Solomon's harem. It took some gall to request this after being spared from a just execution, and we marvel that he would not realize how foolish it was.

We get the feeling she acted in a manner of giving Adonijah enough rope to hang himself. She surely knew how her son would react. It was a subtle role-playing of pretending to be sympathetic to Adonijah's request, but with the intended result of finishing him forever.

2:19-25 – Solomon's response to his mother's entrance was a generous outpouring of honor. Setting her on a throne in his presence was a de facto announcement that she had no equal in his realm. When she got around to discussing the reason for her visit, he promised nothing was too great for her. When Solomon heard it, he saw straight to the heart of the matter. Why didn't she just ask to have the crown handed over to Adonijah? That was clearly what he was after. And while at it, why not a full pardon for all the other conspirators? He was making it obvious her request was impossible, even for the King.

He swore an oath before God, to drive home the point that her request was against His will. With the customary shaking of his robes – "May God to *this* to me if me if I don't..." – he vowed to repeal the pardon he offered his half-brother. The insult was more against the divine order than against Solomon, and Adonijah's life was forfeited that very day. Solomon ordered his Chief of Police, Benaiah to carry it out immediately.

2:26-27 – On a roll now, Solomon deposed Abiathar from office and sent him home in shame. The office of High Priest was supposed to be for life; to lose it while still able to serve was a grave dishonor. Of course, this set a bad precedent, with the kings interfering in the office for political purposes later. His reprieve from death was because of his eager service to David when it was most dangerous.

2:28-35 – As soon as Joab got wind of his doom, he fled to the Tabernacle. Solomon was notified

Joab was gripping the horns of the Altar. Benaiah was dispatched again for an execution. When Joab refused to leave the sacred court of the Tabernacle claiming they would have to kill him there, Benaiah asked Solomon how to respond. Since the crimes of Joab had brought ritual desecration upon the throne, his life was a threat to the Covenant, and his execution would most surely be honoring to Jehovah. In this case, to shed his blood in the Tabernacle was not a sin. It was a question of priorities. Thus, the order was to do what Joab had said. Once the office of Commanding General was vacant, Benaiah was promoted to it. Oddly, the body of Joab was buried on his own property, a mark of honor. At the same time, we are reminded that Zadok was made High Priest.

2:36-38 – Solomon decided to place Shimei under house arrest inside Jerusalem. In his keen insight, he probably knew the man would not honor the conditions. As far as we can determine, Shimei would have been next in line for the throne, had not the scepter been taken from Benjamin. At any rate, Solomon was clearly showing a regal hesitance to execute capital judgment. The real threat here was that as long as Shimei was with his Benjamite supporters, there remained a risk of revolt over the passing of royal status to the Tribe of Judah. Some of the symbolism is lost here unless we realize that the Kidron Valley was the border between Judah and Benjamin. Shimei could gaze upon his homeland east from the city but could not go there.

2:39-46 – We jump forward three years to find Shimei having lost two slaves, apparently returning to their home in Gath. If all we had to go on was the recorded words of Solomon, we might find a loophole, because pursuing his slaves meant Shimei went west, farther from his tribal homeland and didn't cross the Kidron Valley. When he returned, he was summoned to Court. Solomon reminded him of the solemn vow Shimei had taken and how it had allowed him to escape the death penalty called for by cursing the King. His arrogance and spite toward the new royal line dared him to curse David and to ignore the conditions of his pardon. Solomon had given him enough rope to hang by his own arrogance. All his spite at the House of David was for nothing, as God determined such things, not man. All rival claims to the throne were now gone.

3:1-3 – It is difficult to be sure of the order of events in the next few chapters. Very early we see Solomon's preference for worldly wisdom over godly wisdom. Do not confuse this with modern notions of logic; he remained a completely Hebrew man intellectually. He was also far more the womanizer than his father. It is said he walked in the guidelines established by his father, but at the same time suffered compromise morally. We don't know which Pharaoh he made treaty with, but the issue was bringing a pagan woman into the City of David, soon to be the City of God. That sort of thinking led him to join in some pagan celebrations from time to time. We know from hints here and there that the Nation of Israel continued suffering from falsely identifying Jehovah with some of the old Canaanite gods, due to ritual similarities. In many ways, they honestly thought they were honoring the Lord, but they were not obeying the Covenant. Thus, while the Tabernacle had lost its central place in the religious attention of the people, it was hoped by the prophetic scribes of Samuel-Kings that the Temple would help things. We are given a hint that Solomon had expanded his Temple plans to include a new palace and a far more extensive wall around the whole Temple Mount. This would more than double the land occupied by Zion.

3:4-15 – We note here for a moment that Gibeon lay within Benjamin. It was the ancient capital of the Gibeonite Confederacy. The city was actually down off the peak on the west slope of the hill, while the peak remained bare and became an early symbol of Jehovah’s presence after Joshua’s victory there. During Samuel’s service, it had been in constant use as a place of worship for Jehovah, often called simply “the High Place.” It is here we should picture the Tabernacle standing during David’s reign. This would be a natural move also because the Gibeonites were more or less enslaved for the purpose of providing wood and water for the Tabernacle in the first place.

The occasion of Solomon’s visit there is uncertain, but early in his reign he brought a huge sacrifice train of 1000 animals. All of them were whole burnt offerings, so this was an extravagant gift to honor Jehovah. This took place in front of a massive crowd, as we are told in 2 Chronicles 1 this was a solemn assembly with the whole nation. Though the Ark of Covenant was still in Jerusalem, it seems, the bronze altar of sacrifice was at the Tabernacle. Given the likelihood such an extensive offering would take more than a single day to execute, it’s no surprise Solomon slept at the door of the place that night.

During a dream God asked him what he most wished. At about 20 years of age then, Solomon felt keenly his lack of experience and understanding. Just about anything Solomon could have said would have been completely justified, thought it might not be justice. The substance of what Solomon asked was the ability to discern in every case what was good or bad, to have a heart that listened to God. Thus, he asked to be able to understand well enough to judge with true moral justice. The path to justice is a sharp mind that misses nothing, never failing to grasp what is the core issue on every question. This was the wisdom Solomon asked. Because it was precisely the thing God most wanted him to have, all the other stuff was thrown in for good measure. Solomon declared that God had fulfilled His Covenant promise to Abraham, particularly in relation to ownership of the land. To celebrate further, when he got back to Jerusalem, Solomon presented several kinds of offerings, including wave offerings, before the Ark of Covenant and feasted with everyone serving in the Royal Court.

The Ark remained in the Royal Courtyard instead of at the Tabernacle for security reasons. The Tabernacle was not a secure facility. Once the Temple was built, it could be defended at least as well as the royal household, the most secure facility in the kingdom.

3:16-28 – The best demonstration that God did indeed give Solomon a just mind was the story of the two harlots arguing over whose child had survived a bad night. Each claimed the living newborn was theirs and that the other had rolled over and suffocated her son in the night. When Solomon offered to divide the living child with a sword, he was testing for the mother instinct. The liar would obviously not care much either way, having already lost one son through carelessness. The woman who conceded the case to save the infant was the real mother; so Solomon declared it. This story was oft repeated even beyond the kingdom’s borders.

8.3: Solomon’s Temple

The first portion of our review covers several chapters: **1 Kings 4-7** is paralleled in **2 Chronicles 2-4**. These passages are filled largely with the details of describing the Temple size and design. There is little to gain from hashing over the minutiae; it would be far more profitable to look at

some of the well-done drawings based on these descriptions found in reference books or sites around the Internet. The Dedication of the Temple in **1 Kings 8** is paralleled in **2 Chronicles 5-6**. The Ark is finally moved into the Temple.

Solomon began to rule in 970 BC. We are given a list of chief ministers in Solomon's court. What is important to note is that Solomon divided the Kingdom of Israel into 12 administrative districts, which did not coincide with tribal borders. Rather, the kingdom was divided more or less into equal size regions, but the issue was the production of support in kind for Solomon's sumptuous lifestyle. We know from other sources there was some resentment to this non-traditional system.

The far more contentious issue was taxation. Every day Solomon's court required a small herd of animals and what we now regard as a truckload of produce, mostly grain. This was on top of the tribute Solomon received from all the kingdoms his father had conquered. From the River Euphrates far in the north down to Egypt in the south, from the deserts on the east to the Philistines on the coast, Solomon either ruled directly or exerted tremendous control over every living thing. At no time did Israel become an empire proper. This was not from lack of military and economic power, but inhibitions from both cultural background and the Law of Moses.

Israel at her height was a moderate power in a very large vacuum. Assyria was in decline and dared not cross the Euphrates to provoke the mighty King of Israel; Egypt could hardly afford to raise his ire, either. On the other hand, Solomon made no effort to enforce his reign directly over these distant peoples. Instead, everyone surrendered a great deal of wealth every year to Solomon, and it was mostly the massive harem and royal staff, not massive structures that consumed it all. Solomon did have a building program that never ended, but most of it was typically something destroyed later by accidents of history. Missing were the grand cultural icons common to other ancient empires because they would have been gross violations of the Covenant.

Eastern opulence was not efficient use of resources, as we would think of it. For his allies and friends, Solomon was generous. David had been great friends with Hiram of Tyre and Solomon kept that friendship alive. In order to obtain sufficient cut stone and lumber for the Temple, Solomon made a deal to trade grain and olive oil. The hundred thousand or so bushels Hiram requested were an annual payment and this was drawn from the produce of the kingdom as taxation. On top of this, a huge army of workers was kept on the leash in a three-month rotation. That is, citizens of Israel worked one month out of three on the Temple project, along with all the year-round slave labor from subdued enemies. Adoniram was Solomon's minister of this forced labor and became the most hated man in the kingdom. The Temple construction began in about 967 BC.

There was more detailed and time-consuming care taken than we might expect because of the nature of the building. Note that cutting massive stone blocks with hand tools is an incredibly labor-intensive task. Each block had to be finished at the quarry. Then, moving each stone was yet another massively labor-intensive task. Finally, the whole thing was covered in cedar paneling, so that no stonework was visible. The interior paneling was also overlaid with gold. Hiram of Tyre sent a half-Israeli craftsman, also named Hiram, to oversee the artwork of the Temple. It appears the building was finished by 959 BC. Despite the planning of David and

saving up of material during most of his 40-year reign, the Temple was still a bit of a “money pit,” sucking up a major portion of the whole economic output of that part of the world for several years.

It is known that Solomon personally owned a quarry near Jerusalem, but it could not have been enough for this huge job. Quite likely, the local quarry was used for Solomon’s palace. This structure was even larger than the Temple. While the palace didn’t get the cedar and gold treatment of the Temple, it was simply huge by even modern standards. There were the living quarters, which accommodated much of the eventual harem of some 1000 women, but also a large judgment hall, an armory and barracks. Add to this a project extending the wall around Jerusalem to thrice its original run and we may begin to see just how much the people were hurting. It took another thirteen years after the Temple was finished to build the palace.

Even when the palace was done, the building projects never ceased. To the day of his death, Solomon laid a crushing burden on his people. He seemed to recognize no limits. Aside from the grandeur and religious unification of the Temple, Solomon gave back to his people a gift many could not appreciate. The royal court was open to all visitors and there were many. Each VIP that came was accorded the same lavish accommodations, but most came because of the legendary mind of Solomon. Regardless of how vexing the legal case, Solomon always had an answer, and it was always recognized as the best that could be. This mind produced psalms, proverbs and all manner of writings we now refer to as the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. We credit to Solomon the whole of the Proverbs with sage advice and pithy statements on human nature, Ecclesiastes with its ruminations on holiness, happiness and being a good man of God, and the epic Song of Solomon celebrating the holiness of romantic love in its godly ideal. It is known he kept an encyclopedic knowledge of nature itself, too.

1 Kings 8:1-11 – The month of Ethanim, later called Tishri, is late September and early October in the West. This was 11 months after the actual building of the Temple was finished. It would have taken some time to get the priests’ cells set up and the rotation begun, with all the training that could not take place while workmen were all over the place. By holding Dedication during the Feast of Tabernacles, on the first day of the month, the Temple would be ready for the upcoming Day of Atonement, just ten days away.

Solomon called a solemn assembly of the leaders of Israel and Judah. They all attended in parade the moving of the Ark up the hill from the tent David erected over it in old palace courtyard, up to the new Temple on the peak of Mount Moriah. By now the contents had been reduced to Moses’ tablets, but the manna pot and blooming rod of Aaron were somehow lost. From the old Mosaic Tabernacle in Gibeon, all the other furnishings were brought over, leaving the ancient tent empty. The presence of the Lord returned in force. Once the Ark was placed, the smoke of God’s Presence drove out the priests. Meanwhile, Solomon had prepared a steady stream of sacrificial animals and the fire of the Altar never dimmed. The ceremony included every priest from all the rotations at once and all the musicians were praising God.

8:12-53 – Solomon delivered a speech recounting how his father David had commissioned him to build the Temple. He noted that all the promises of the Lord concerning the Temple and the Davidic throne had been kept. Then Solomon knelt publicly, facing the Temple, and offered a prayer so moving it has often been quoted since then. Many have gone so far as to refer to this

as the Covenant of Solomon. However, there is nothing to indicate anything new was being established. This was a renewal of the standing Covenant of Moses. Solomon went into detail recounting the different ways the people as a nation might come before Jehovah to pray at the Temple, or facing it when far away. Each of them is but an echo of previous instruction from the Law.

8:54-66 – Finishing this lavish prayer, Solomon turned and blessed the nation. Not only burnt offerings, but also several other kinds of offerings were brought, to include the kind shared before the Lord. This ceremony carried on for seven days, celebrating at the same time the Feast of Trumpets. While it is noted that Solomon dismissed the nation from the Feast on the 8th day, the parallel passage in **2 Chronicles 7** suggests that they stayed for the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles, finally leaving on the 23rd of that month.

This is rightly considered the spiritual high point for the entire history of Israel. There were plenty of wonders and miracles to follow, but nothing approached this event for grandness of scale and its impact on the minds of the nation and the watching world. That it went downhill from here is partly Solomon's own fault.

8.4: Wisdom, Power and Wealth

It is not enough to know all the ways of justice and understand the full mystery of human behavior in light of God's revelation. One must also *do* justice. Solomon failed to grasp this. Our primary passage in 1 Kings is paralleled in **2 Chronicles 8-9**.

1 Kings 9:1-9 – We note there was no hint of scandal in Solomon's reign, unlike his father David. But then, he also completely failed to rise to his father's level of spirituality. God had appeared to Solomon once at Gibeon. When the Temple was complete and Solomon had prayed, fire fell from Heaven to light the altar (2 Chronicles 7:1). The only time this had happened before, as far as we know, was at the dedication of Aaron as High Priest (Leviticus 9). After Solomon's dedication of the Temple, here the Lord appears to him again and speaks to him. There is a conditional offer, the same personal extension of the Covenant offered to David. If Solomon could obey the Lord by staying clean of idolatry, his dynasty was secure. Upon departing from that standard, the scepter would depart his household. Further, if his sin caused the people to sin also, the Temple of God's own Presence would be destroyed.

9:10-14 – The passage here is quite unclear and assumes the reader knows far more than we do today. Scholars speculate that Solomon was unable to keep up the steady payments in grain and oil. After twenty years of building, the royal treasury had dwindled and may have actually been in arrears. To settle this debt, Solomon offered some 20 cities in a region west and north of what was then called Lake Chinnereth. Even then, this area of land was called Galilee. This would be a loss of land deeded to the Tribes of Asher and Naphthali, but apparently a part that had not been conquered, so it was still Gentile territory.

As far as we can tell, the area was rather swampy then. Hiram came up to see the cities, which would have been an extension of his eastern border. He was not impressed. His nickname for the place was *Kabul*, meaning worthless. That Hiram gave Solomon some gold may have been a symbol of suspending the payments and instead extending a cash loan for the sake of

development. Hiram gave the cities back, and Solomon sent Israelites to colonize the place, something they had failed to do since Joshua's days. In the process, Solomon invested in the area to improve the likelihood of paying his debt to Hiram. It's not out of the question to see in all this Hiram giving Solomon a lesson or two in investing to make a royal profit. We know for certain Hiram in his island fortress was very wealthy from trade. From this low point, Solomon becomes steadily wealthier.

9:15-23 – We need to note a distinction here between the labor tax Solomon laid on Israel and the full-time enslavement of the resident Canaanites. The labor tax continued throughout his reign. We estimate that he reduced the burden somewhat after the Temple was completed, but still demanded enough labor to build up resentment in the tribes.

Some of the projects included rebuilding the old Jebusite fortress and terrace, called the Millo, as a fortress to defend the main eastern gate in the Lower City of Jerusalem. It had been used as David's palace. He also built a fortress at Megiddo, which guarded the pass from the south into the Jezreel Valley. The city of Gezer, out on the edge of old Philistia near the Valley of Aijalon, had remained a Canaanite fortress, never taken during the Conquest. As a wedding gift to his new son-in-law, Pharaoh brought up forces from Egypt and laid siege until it fell. Solomon rebuilt it under Israeli control. Just east of there, Solomon built up both Upper and Lower Beth Horon, another critical pass. Baalath is not currently identified.

Tadmor is the name of a city far to the north, in the territory captured by David. Halfway between Damascus and the Euphrates was an oasis out in the desert wastes. By building a city there, it enabled the hardier traders to save time and expense by cutting off a long loop up to Charan to enter Assyria. The investment was known to bear high returns in tolls and services. (In texts that add "in Judah" to verse 18, we note that is not in the original.) Throughout the rest of his domain, Solomon placed granaries and stables.

The men of Israel released from the labor tax became soldiers and officers. There was a battalion of officers riding herd over the slave labor working on building projects up to the end of Solomon's reign.

9:24-25 – A brief section is inserted to note that, early in his reign, Solomon was quite circumspect in ritual observance. He quickly moved his first wife into her new quarters up beyond the peak of Zion. No doubt the residents of the city, as well as any visitors, had taken offense at the presence of an unconverted pagan in the vicinity of holy ground. The old palace terrace of David had been the resting place of the Ark of Covenant and it became known as *Zion* – a holy landmark. The term eventually applied to that and the Temple grounds, too. Once she was moved from the old palace, Solomon then had it restored to its original purpose as a fortress.

9:26-28 – At the north end of the Gulf of Aqaba was a city belonging to Edom, named Elath. Solomon controlled Edom at the time and built the Port of Ezion-geber there. He brought Hiram of Tyre in on the business, in part because of the debt still owed and in part because Israel knew little of sailing and shipping. Archaeology tells us that Solomon had copper smelters there and it was this he traded in places far down south of the Red Sea, trading with Sheba, known today as Yemen. He also traded on the coast of Africa, where perhaps was Ophir, though we do not

know for sure. This was the turning point for Israel's treasury. Israel went from deeply in debt after 20 years of constant building around Jerusalem, to become the wealthiest kingdom in the world at that time.

10:1-10 – Yemeni scholars claim that, during this period, women ruled the land, and it was called Sabah, so we have a tentative link with the biblical Sheba. An alternative spelling refers to the people as Sabeans. From Solomon's trade contacts there, the queen decided to come and see if the stories she heard were true. As typical of diplomatic and trade missions throughout history, she brought a huge retinue and rare trade goods, most likely from India and farther down the coast of Africa. We know from ancient records it was a sport of royalty to test each other on reputation. What she found was beyond her expectations, to the point she felt rather humble. Nothing she proposed to Solomon as judicial knots could he fail to resolve.

10:11-13 – During her visit, Solomon arranged a trade deal between Sheba and Tyre. The almuq or algum wood appears to have been red sandal wood from Ceylon and would be rare indeed in Israel. Solomon used it to build steps in the Temple Court and in the palace. The queen left all her gifts, taking away even more in terms of Israeli pricing. She spread abroad the fame of Solomon to all her trade partners and they in turn sought to visit him.

10:14-23 – As the trade profits rolled in, Solomon pampered himself and built a lasting legacy of fabulous wealth and power. He had gold to waste on large shields to hang in the Lebanon Forest House. He had a throne built of ivory. More than just a fancy chair, this included six steps up and a platform, carved to resemble lions. This was then overlaid with gold decorations. Solomon brought in so much silver, it became far less valuable than gold. All the royal dishes were made of gold, along with just about every decoration one could imagine. On the long voyages of those days, it would take Solomon's ships three years to make a trade circuit. His wealth went beyond accounting.

10:24-29 – No less was Solomon's political and military power. Every visitor coming to hear his words of wisdom brought lavish gifts. All his tributaries brought annual gifts, which included animals, armor and spices. Solomon amassed a huge army of chariots and horsemen. The royal city reeked of Lebanese cedar and silver festooned common objects. While Egypt was not known as a horse-breeding center, most likely Pharaoh was simply the agent for them as part of their trade in chariots.

There is some dispute as to what the original texts said here. What's worth noting is that this was a specific violation of Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 16:17) to buy horses from Egypt. It would appear the wealth and power was turning Solomon's heart from trusting wholly in God.

8.5: Folly of the Wise

1 Kings 11:1-8 – Solomon's heart drifted so far from his original promise to God that it destroyed the kingdom. Moses warned specifically that the king should not gather up multiple foreign wives, nor pile up the gold and silver (Deuteronomy 17:17). The Temple scribe quotes this; yet it is exactly what Solomon does. The warning had foreseen precisely that the danger would be apostasy.

Many pagan nations had a version of Astarte worship. From the mountains east of Babylon to

the Phoenicians in the Mediterranean Sea, there were variations on the idea of a fertility goddess, usually symbolized by a carved tree stump. She was called Asherah, Ishtar, Esther, Oester and so forth. There were also variations of Molech: Milcom, Melech and it is believed Chemosh was related. Just below Jerusalem in the Valley of Hinnom, there had been an ancient shrine to Molech, where children were burned alive as offerings. During David's reign, the place had been defiled by garbage, burned from time to time to reduce its bulk. Solomon replaced the shrine at his own expense on the Mount of Olives.

All this was the result of marrying foreign women. Foreign rulers offered them as a means of making alliance with the most powerful man in that part of the world in those days. It went to Solomon's head. He utterly failed to convert any of them to Judaism. Instead, he allowed them to lead him into pagan idolatry.

11:9-13 – Here was a man who had spoken with God twice, yet lacked the power to remain faithful. Only because of David's own faithfulness was the wrath of God tempered. Solomon was told directly that he had broken the Kingdom of Israel. While it would remain united during his lifetime, his son would lose all but one tribe, Judah. Of course, that included Simeon, but the other Ten Tribes, who had long kept their own identity, would depart.

11:14-22 – As a way of demonstrating His seriousness, the Lord raised up a couple of rebels during Solomon's reign. Back when David and Joab were decimating the adult male population of Edom (2 Samuel 8:13-14), the heir escaped to Egypt as a boy, carried off by some of the bodyguards from Edom's royal court. It appears he did not first go to Egypt proper, but stayed in Midian for a while. When it was safe to travel, he passed through the Wilderness of Paran and gathered up a few supporters and moved on to Egypt. There, he became a favorite of Pharaoh's court. He was permitted to marry Pharaoh's sister-in-law and his son was raised with Pharaoh's. All of this signals very high honor. When David and Joab were dead, he begged leave to return to Edom. We aren't told what mischief he got into, but it gave Solomon trouble.

11:23-25 – During David's battles with Zobah and Damascus, one of the chief officers of Hadadezer of Damascus deserted. This fellow, named Rezon ("Prince"), became a desert raider. Sometime later in Solomon's reign, he made a surprise attack on Damascus and drove out the Israeli garrison left by David. Solomon never managed to regain control and the city became a haven for caravan raiders. This threatened the tolls Solomon collected in that area.

11:26-28 – The real threat was a member of Solomon's own court. Just after rebuilding the Millo, restoring it to its function as fortress, an Ephraimite named Jeroboam ("The People Will Contend") came to Solomon's attention as a talented man of character. He took Jeroboam into his service as overseer of public works in the House of Joseph, a nickname for the northern Ten Tribes of Israel. This position was prophesied to become King of Israel, as separate from King of Judah.

11:29-40 – We first meet here the Prophet Ahijah of Shiloh. He made himself a new garment, and then went out to meet Jeroboam on his rounds. They met in an open field and the prophet ripped his new robe into twelve pieces. Ten he gave to Jeroboam and told him what God was about to do. After Solomon passed the scepter to his son, Jeroboam was to lead a revolt. He was told specifically the reason for this: Solomon's apostasy. The prophet related the long list of sins

and the various gods. He reminded Jeroboam that Jerusalem was the royal city and the Holy City. Then the Covenant of Kings was offered to him: if Jeroboam would be faithful, his reign would be secure, and his dynasty could last forever. Further, the House of David would remain too weak to attack him. Solomon got wind of this and sought to execute his officer. He, too, fled to Egypt and took refuge with Pharaoh Shishak.

11:41-43 – The scribe mentions the Chronicles of Solomon, no doubt a source for our 1 and 2 Chronicles. His reign is noted to have lasted forty years, with another two years at the start, as co-regent with his father. His heir was Rehoboam (“The People Are Enlarged”).

12:1-5 – The year was approximately 931 BC. Our parallel passage is **2 Chronicles 10-11:4**. The coronation was to be held at Shechem in Ephraim, the one city that had been allied to Israel from before the Conquest. Just before the ceremony, the elders of Israel called Jeroboam up from Egypt. In his office as Chief of Public Works over the Ten Tribes, he had formed a strong bond of leadership. He was their representative to present their complaint to Rehoboam. Before crowning him, they demanded to know if he would lighten the painful load of his father Solomon. With such a promise, the coronation would go off without a hitch. Rehoboam decided to consult with his advisers and promised an answer in three days.

12:6-11 – The elder statesmen from his father’s court advised him Jeroboam was right, that Solomon had been altogether excessive in his taxation. They told him his task as king was to serve the people, not the other way around. Rehoboam didn’t like the sound of that and discussed it with his peers. They advised him to act the mighty king and arrogantly tell Jeroboam they had seen nothing yet. Solomon had been pretty light compared to Rehoboam’s plans.

12:12-15 – Deeply bitten with the arrogance of his father, Rehoboam told them to stop whining and get ready to work even harder. His tone was distinctly abusive and contemptuous. His father’s rule was likened to a plain whip of leather straps, typically used judiciously on horses and the like merely to urge them on. The “scorpion” was a whip with metal studs in the straps and was used to discipline slaves. This was deeply insulting. The scribe reminds us that this was what God had foretold.

12:16-20 – In reply, the elders of Israel raised the old chant, rejecting the House of David as their ruler, as they had once before. The resounding refrain, “every man to his tent” was the same rejection David had faced more than once. It was a signal to go home; stop serving this man and let him take care of himself. As if the division had not previously been bad enough, from here on we must keep in mind a sharp division: “Israel” is the Northern Tribes and “Judah” the Southern.

We need not envision everyone suddenly turning and walking away. The two groups would have been camping out, assuredly in separate areas. During the aftermath, before departing Shechem, Rehoboam called out Adoram to go and present a demand for the next corvée for work. When he got to the camp of the elders of Israel, Adoram was stoned to death. On seeing this, Rehoboam realized the seriousness of things. He mounted his chariot and fled to Jerusalem.

12:21-24 – Upon gaining the safety of the City, Rehoboam called out the troops. We are told the

troops of Benjamin joined them, which leaves Jeroboam with nine tribes, to be precise, but the term Ten Tribes remains symbolic of Israel. While preparations were under way, a prophet named Shemaiah brought a message from God that this was His doing, and He would not bless any battles with their brethren to the north. They obeyed and called off the attack.

12:25-33 – However, Jeroboam wasted no time in defying Jehovah. First, he fortified Shechem as his capital. He also went across the Jordan and fortified Peniel. Next, to prevent the hearts of Israel from longing for the Temple in Jerusalem, he built two rival temples. The first was at Bethel, a mere 12 miles north of Jerusalem. The other was far to the north at Dan. The problem was that he chose the old pre-Mosaic motif of golden calves. While it is widely understood that folks did not worship the calves but used them as symbolic mounts for their invisible God, this was clearly a departure from God’s revealed will. Forever after, this would gain Jeroboam the nickname of “he who made Israel sin.”

He also built numerous shrines throughout the land. Then, with all the Levites now tied to Solomon’s Temple, he ordained priests from every tribe. There was now no reason at all for his people to travel to Jerusalem for worship. Then, to top it off, he made a celebration to rival the Feast of Tabernacles. Tabernacles was in early October and signaled the beginning of plowing season. Jeroboam moved his version to the end of October, during grain planting and the early rains.

Thus, we come to the end of era normally called the United Monarchy. This next period is, obviously, the Divided Monarchy.

9. Divided Monarchy: 931-722 BC

9.1: Messages from God

God proves He is slow to wrath, in giving both Rehoboam and Jeroboam chances to repent. Rehoboam’s sin is less, so his reign was simply shortened, and he lost a lot of wealth. Jeroboam was evil to the end and destroyed Israel in the long run.

2 Chronicles 11:5-17 – Rehoboam built up fortifications, somewhat a continuation of his father’s work. In all the cities he fortified, he added garrisons of troops, plenty of food stores to withstand a siege and a stockpile of weapons. Judah was also strengthened by the arrival of all the Levites, who left behind their holdings in Israel. For a few years, their presence gave Judah a heart to worship God, which protected them from wrath.

11:18-23 – Rehoboam took somewhat fewer wives and concubines than his father. Of 18 wives, three were fairly close relatives. He also had sixty concubines and altogether 28 sons and 60 daughters. His chosen heir was Abijah (*Abiyahuw*: “Worships Jehovah”), born from his favorite, Maacah, a granddaughter of Absalom. The one smart thing he did was dispersing his sons around the realm in his fortified cities. He made sure they lived a lavish lifestyle. Not only did this increase the likelihood of having a survivor in case of war, but would prevent the sort of conniving that plagued his grandfather.

12:1-4 – Once everything was set, Rehoboam also turned from God. As punishment, the Pharaoh Shishak came up from Egypt in 925 BC, bringing a massive army that included allies from other African nations. After successfully taking every fortified city on the way, Shishak laid siege to Jerusalem. This story is paralleled in 1 Kings 14:21-31.

12:5-8 – The prophet Shemiah, who had warned Rehoboam about going to war with Israel against Jeroboam's revolt, came and told the royal court that this siege was punishment for defying God's law. They responded by humbling themselves and calling on God, confessing their sins. The Lord was impressed. He allowed them to buy off Shishak. The word of the Lord was that they should experience serving other kings and realize the difference between that and serving Him.

12:9-12 – Shishak took all the royal treasures. This included the golden shields, probably the ivory throne and most everything else that was loose. Worse, they gave him all the treasures in the Temple, too. The gold shields, a real point of royal pride, were replaced with bronze ones. The royal bodyguard brought these out on parade whenever Rehoboam went to the Temple. For a time, he was rather faithful about it. Things went pretty smooth for Judah after that.

12:13-16 – We are offered a quick review of Rehoboam's reign. He took the throne at age 41, lasted 17 years, which has him buried at 58. The scribe here introduces the tradition of judging each ruler based on how well he obeyed the Lord. Here, Rehoboam is labeled evil for not really having a heart for God. He was faithful only when things got rough. His intended heir, Abijah, succeeded him.

1 Kings 13:1-10 – On a day when Jeroboam was in the temple he built in Bethel, quite likely near the end of Rehoboam's reign, he was standing before a crowd of people. As he prepared to offer incense as a symbol of prayer, he received a strange visit. The visitor was from Jehovah, but was hardly welcome. A prophet sent up from Judah entered the Temple. Just as Jeroboam was about to place incense on the altar, the prophet cried out, speaking to the altar.

His warning was that Jehovah would raise up a man named Josiah (*Yoshiyah*: "Founded by God") of the House of David. This man would desecrate the altar by burning on it the bodies of the priests Jeroboam had consecrated. The sign that it would indeed happen was that the altar in question would split apart and dump its sacred ashes on the ground.

Jeroboam was enraged and pointed to the man demanding his guards arrest him. Barely had the words escaped his mouth when his hand and part of his arm was paralyzed. He was unable to pull his hand back. At the same time, the altar split and broke open, dumping its ashes on the floor. At this point, Jeroboam realized he was in trouble. He also realized the visitor was truly from God, so begged him to intercede with God on behalf of his arm. After praying a bit, Jeroboam got his arm back.

Relieved, Jeroboam offered to reward the man from his personal wealth and invited him home for a meal. The prophet refused, citing a strong warning he had from the Lord to eat or drink nothing, nor even go back the same way to Judah. Had the prophet accepted, it would have blunted Jeroboam's fear of God and might indicate the final punishment had been somewhat lessened or averted. The prophet's refusal was a blunt statement that this was not so. The Lord had ordained these things and there was no going back. It was too late for Jeroboam and his

house. Everyone attending this worship service knew what it meant.

13:11-22 – Among those in attendance at this worship were the sons of an aged prophet there in Bethel. His sons came home bursting with the miraculous encounter. The visitor’s path away from there was well known and they told their father which road he had taken. The old prophet wanted to fellowship with this very real man of God, but was too old to catch him on foot. He had his sons saddle a donkey for him and took off after the visitor. The old prophet caught up with the younger resting in the shade of an oak. He invited the stranger home with him, but the younger man begged off reciting his command from God. We don’t know what the elder had in mind when he lied, but he told the young prophet an angel had instructed him to countermand those orders from God. The younger prophet believed it. While they sat at their meal, the elder prophet was seized by a word from God, warning the younger he would die for disobedience.

13:23-32 – Finishing his meal, the elder saddled a donkey for his guest. The young prophet had not gotten far when a lion pounced on him and killed him. This was clearly a miracle, for the lion simply stood next to the corpse. It did not tear the man’s body, nor attack the donkey, which stood placidly by the two. Some travelers saw this scene and told of it in the town. The old prophet heard about it and went out to see for himself. He knew what it was about and had his sons saddle his donkey again. He mounted the body on his other donkey and brought both back to his home, where he buried the young prophet. He was deeply sorrowful for the part he played in all this and ordered his sons to bury him with the young prophet when the time came.

This story grates on Western sensibilities, causing some to question whether it should be included in Scripture. Yet could we possess an Ancient Hebrew sense of humor, this tale would be perfectly sensible. Not all prophets were alike, nor should we attempt to limit in our minds how God can call and use them. In a context where our sense of purity and intellectual orthodoxy simply didn’t exist and would be regarded with distaste by the best of God’s prophets, the burden is on us to yield to ancient sensibilities. The Judean was young and inexperienced. More importantly, he was called to die and carried a sense of fatalism common among Old Testament prophets. It is quite likely the sons of the elder prophet (“son” is an ambiguous term including servants and disciples) attended the paganized ceremony simply to observe, perhaps even expecting something unusual. It’s too easy to miss the point: Both Jeroboam and the young prophet had a clear command from God. It was irrevocable and only a liar would seek to change it. Just as surely as the young prophet died for defying the command of the Lord, so Jeroboam would surely have no excuse for his rebellion.

13:33-34 – Jeroboam was not impressed by this lesson. He persisted in his evil, adding more priests to his collection. He even went so far as having himself anointed as priest. He brought the sentence of death to his whole kingdom.

9.2: Judgment on Jeroboam

God’s prophet gives a more precise description of judgment on the House of Jeroboam. Israel suffers severe losses in battle with Judah.

1 Kings 14:1-4 – Within days of the lesson from the young prophet of Judah, Jeroboam’s son fell ill. It seems he liked the name Abijah for his son, as had Rehoboam. He knew this charade of his

false religion would not help him at all. He sought to get in touch with the prophet who had told him God's plan to raise him to rule over Israel. Sending his wife, he convinced her to go in disguise to inquire of the prophet Ahijah. He also had her take a significant offering, as was the custom when noblemen inquired of prophets. Her effort at disguise was wasted for two reasons. First, Ahijah was blind.

14:5-16 – The other reason her disguise was wasted was the Lord told Ahijah what was going on. When she arrived, Ahijah called her by name, and rebuked her ruse. His message to her was harsh. God Himself had raised up Jeroboam to reign for Him over Israel. Jeroboam refused to obey the clear command from God and sinned far worse than the man whose sin brought about Jeroboam's reign. Jeroboam was to be a one-man dynasty, as no male from his household, slave or free, would long survive him.

Jeroboam's wife would return home. When her feet crossed the threshold of the city, their son would die. He would be buried properly, as he found a measure of favor with God. Yet on this very day, God would prepare a usurper to slaughter the entire house of Jeroboam. All their bodies would feed carrion eaters. Further, the nation of Israel would one day be scattered in exile beyond the Euphrates. This was because Jeroboam made Israel to sin; it was all on his head.

14:17-20 – Sometime during his reign, Jeroboam had moved his throne to Tirzah, several miles north and east of Shechem. This was the city where his wife entered the gates at the death of their son. There was an appropriate funeral for him, with elders and officials from across the kingdom mourning for him. He was the only male of the household to receive such honor. The writer leaves the story there and we shift to Chronicles for the last tale of Jeroboam.

2 Chronicles 13:1-12 – We are introduced to the brief reign of Rehoboam's son, Abijah, 913-910 BC. In **1 Kings 15:1-8** we learn he was no better than his father, walking in the same sins. Both had permitted a recovery of the nasty practice of male homosexual prostitutes ("dogs") in pagan temples. His entire reign was absorbed in war with his neighbor Jeroboam to the north.

Abijah was able to muster 400,000 troops. Jeroboam was able to double that. In one particular battle, Abijah advanced into the north, to an area that was originally the north edge of Benjamin. From his position on a hilltop, he addressed his enemy. In his speech, he conveniently forgot that God had taken away the north and given it to Jeroboam. Abijah told the story as one of simple rebellion against God by rebelling against the House of David. He referred to the golden bulls and the Levites driven out of Israel. He notes that any man who can get hold of a bull and seven rams can become a priest. This compared to the Levites following the Law of Moses in the Temple. Thus, he invokes the name of Jehovah as their general in battle and the northern tribes as in rebellion against Him. That much was true.

13:13-20 – Meanwhile, Jeroboam's troops set up an ambush behind Judah's position. With double the number of troops, either half, one in front and one behind, was an equal match. In response, the army of Judah called out to God, even sounding the Levitical *shofar* trumpets. This fired up their courage and men of Judah gave an ear-splitting yell as they prepared to charge. The Lord used this sound to put fear in the men of Israel and they fled. Most the Jeroboam's troops were cut down. The loss was staggering. Judah managed to capture Bethel, a major sore

spot with its rival temple, as well as Jeshanah and Ephron. Jeroboam never recovered enough to fight Judah again. His death is described as being struck by God. Whether by sword or by beast, Jeroboam died and was not laid to rest.

13:21-22 – The rest of the story describes how Abijah still broke Moses’ command regarding multiple wives, but not quite so many as his father. He took 14 wives and between them they bore him 22 sons and 16 daughters.

9.3: Good King Asa

As we seek to follow the twin threads of monarchy in Israel and Judah, it is difficult to give a fully chronological account. The focus of those writing both Kings and Chronicles is to relate the actions of one man at a time and mention his opposite only when they cross paths. Asa succeeds Abijah as King of Judah one year before Jeroboam dies. Asa’s father reigned but three years in large part because of his continuing the sins of his predecessors. Asa rejected those ways and followed the Lord, at least for a while. We take our text primarily from 2 Chronicles, with the parallel in **1 Kings 15**.

2 Chronicles 14:1-8 – We are told that Abijah passed, and Asa succeeded him in about 911 BC, with first a decade of quiet. Recall that his father had already crushed Israel and his grandfather had bought off Pharaoh. One of his first royal acts was to remove the pagan shrines in his realm. By this time, the shrines consisted of a carved stone image of Baal and a carved wooden image of Astarte. They were worshiped primarily as general fertility deities. There would be incense stands in front of each. However, we know that Asa’s prohibition was not wholly effective in stopping the pagan practices. Nonetheless, the Lord honored his intent and kept enemies at bay. Taking advantage of this peace, Asa rebuilt the fortress cities of Judah. The total manpower pool of fighters was 300,000 from Judah and 280,000 from Benjamin. The latter included those who defected from Israel.

14:9-15 – His first test of faith was the arrival of a massive army of Ethiopians, probably under the rule of Pharaoh. Typically, the count of “a thousand thousand” was a round number indicating a force far outnumbering the army of Judah. Asa met them at Mareshah. This city stood on a hill overlooking the one primary pass between the Philistine Plain and the Hill Country of Judah. The city sits a few miles north of a line drawn between Gaza and Hebron. There, Asa called on the Lord to give victory. His public prayer in the presence of his troops included a confession that it mattered not at all what the opposing army was, Jehovah was not much troubled delivering them into the hands of His people.

God heard and granted Asa’s request. The Ethiopians were so badly routed the Egyptian Empire did not return to bother Israel for another 170 years. The pursuit continued as far as Gerar, roughly 20 miles. Since it was the Philistines who helped supply this massive force and gave them safe passage to Judah, Asa’s forces captured Gerar and all the cities around it. Not just the spoils abandoned by the Ethiopians, but huge amounts were taken from the Philistines around Gerar. The text indicates the Philistines capitulated quickly rather than fight, so great was their fear.

15:1-7 – We know nothing of Azariah save his brief appearance here. The meeting was shortly

after the successful battle at Mareshah, thus about 900 BC. The prophet noted there had not been a teaching priest on the mold of Samuel, so the knowledge of God and the Law had languished. Yet He remained available to those who called on Him. Still, there was no peace. Asa was encouraged to continue the work of God and his reward would be great.

15:8-15 – With this behind him, he spent the next five years reinforcing his previous command to end pagan worship in the land. All the more so did he enforce this in the cities captured from Israel. He refurbished the altar in the Temple Court. Seeing all this power and holiness, a large number from Ephraim and Manasseh, as well as the resident Simeonites, came to support Asa. At the end of this five-year revival, the elders of the kingdom brought a large collection of offerings, including some of the plundered animals from their victory over Ethiopia and renewed their vow of covenant obedience before the Lord.

15:16-19 – In keeping with this commitment, Asa removed his mother Maacah from her position as Queen Mother because she had purchased an obscene image of Ashterah. He destroyed the image in a public ritual in the valley between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. Unfortunately, the people insisted on rebuilding their hilltop shrines behind his back in the north. Finally, he replenished the furnishings of the Temple. The peace that followed lasted twenty years, until his 35th.

15:25-33 – We drop back to Kings for a moment to pick up the thread of events in Israel. In Asa's first year, Jeroboam was struck down by God. His son, Nadab took the throne, just as evil as his father. He had powerful ambitions and began by laying siege to the Philistine city of Gibbethon, which was very close to the fortress Solomon received as a wedding present from the Pharaoh of a previous dynasty in Egypt. This was under way during Nadab's second year on the throne. While thus engaged, one of his lieutenants from the Tribe of Issachar, Baasha, murdered him and took the throne. He then proceeded to murder the entire House of Jeroboam, as prophesied. This was about 909 BC. Baasha reigned some 24 years. During this entire time, he maintained hostilities with Asa.

2 Chronicles 16:1-6 – At one point, this hostility led to an attempt to fortify Ramah, in Benjamin, not the old hometown of Samuel the Prophet. This was about 875 BC. No doubt he was stirred to action by the defection to Asa of so many of his subjects. It is believed he managed to retake Bethel at this point. Fortifying Ramah would have been the first of a string of fortifications just a few miles north of Jerusalem.

At that time, Damascus was an ally of Israel. We recall that Rezon (also called Hezion) was a rebel against Solomon, taking over Damascus and creating trouble (1 Kings 11:23f). At some point, his son Tabrimon made amends with the House of David during the reign of Abijah. However, the current ruler of Damascus, Ben-hadad was in league with Baasha. When Baasha began work on fortifying Ramah, Asa forgot the Lord and traded his former piety for politics. He raided the Temple treasury, along with his own personal treasure and induced Ben-hadad to turn on Baasha. He was successful in his aim, as the troops of Damascus began raiding in Galilee, starting with Ijon in the far north, then Dan and Abel-maacha, along with all the storage cities that Solomon had developed under the advice of Hiram of Tyre (1 Kings 9:10ff). Baasha was forced to withdraw from Judah's border and defend his northern border. When Ramah was deserted, Asa commanded every available man to go and remove all the building materials

Baasha had left. These materials were then used to fortify Geba to the east of Ramah and Mizpah to the northwest.

16:7-10 – We are introduced to the family of seers now headed by Hanani. His son would become Court Seer to Asa's son. He announces to Asa that, had he relied on God instead of man, he would have defeated both Israel and Damascus. Instead, Damascus remained a future threat. Any king that could be bought off by one was surely for sale to another. Hanani reminded Asa that Ethiopia was a far bigger threat, but the Lord handled them easily. The principle is stated that Jehovah was constantly on the watch for opportunities to support those faithful to Him. The punishment would be no end of warfare during Asa's remaining years. Asa put this messenger of God in prison. His change in attitude from his former days is further exemplified by selectively oppressing some of his own people at that time.

16:11-14 – During his 39th year, Asa began having serious trouble with his feet. Speculation includes the possibility of diabetes causing poor circulation and gangrene. Rather than seek the Lord, Asa went to pagan healers. He suffered thus another two years, and then died. He was buried in the royal tomb and his funeral service included the burning of a lot of incense, as well as quite a bit mixed to anoint his body.

9.4: Asa's Counterparts

During Asa's long and prosperous reign of 41 years (911-870 BC), things were not so peachy in Israel. We have already mentioned how Jeroboam's dynasty hardly outlasted him, with his son Nadab murdered after only two years. However, Baasha was hardly any better.

1 Kings 16:1-7 – The prophet Jehu was a busy man and appears more than once in our story. In 887 BC, after Baasha was forced to defend Galilee from the turncoat, Ben-hadad of Syria, Jehu came to see him. Having continued the sins of Jeroboam, Baasha was to reap the same ignoble end. He declared that there would be no heirs to the throne from that household ruling long.

16:8-14 – Elah managed to survive two years. It is fair to assume that this one story finds him doing his usual thing. He sat in the house of his chamberlain, Arza, roaring drunk. While thus indisposed, one of his two cavalry commanders came in and murdered him. It appears Elah used the cavalry as his bodyguard, because the regular army was off in battle. Arza was probably in on the plan and arranged the party as a set up. The assailant's name was Zimri and his first royal command after usurping the throne was to kill all the surviving males of Baasha's household, along with many of their political supporters. The writer notes this was just recompense for the sins of that family.

16:15-20 – Zimri lasted a week. His messengers declared his assumption of the throne, as was the custom. It took half of that week for them to catch up with the troops of Israel, again besieging Gibbethon of the Philistines. Recall that a siege was often a relaxed affair at least part of the time. It was simply a matter of keeping the inhabitants of the city surrounded until they starved or decided to fight, all the while staying out of range of wall-top archers. How long it took depended on how well the city was stocked and whether the residents had access to water. The Israeli troops, when they got the news, decided to challenge Zimri by making their commander, Omri, the king instead. They left off the siege of Gibbethon and marched back to

Tirzah. In about three days, the army had moved siege operations to their own capital. It's not likely the job was all that hard, since most of the nation's troops were outside attacking, rather than inside defending. The city fell probably the same day and Zimri decided not to face his opposition. Entering the fort that served as his castle, he burned it down around himself. Again, we note this was a just end for his sins.

16:21-28 – While the troops were already promoting Omri as king, it seems the rest of the nation preferred a man named Tibni. The civil war between the two parties lasted five years, but in the about 880 BC, Omri prevailed and Tibni was killed. Shortly after he secured his throne, Omri decided to quit the ruined palace of Tirzah and purchased a hill about 10 miles (16km) to the west. Thus, echoing David's purchase of land in Jerusalem, it was a personal possession. The location was very strategic, straddling a major trade route. He built his new capital there and named it Samaria, after the previous landowner, Shemer. Omri's reign lasted another seven years and was even worse than Jeroboam's, because he intensified the sins of idolatry. However, he managed to make his name known beyond the Euphrates, for the city and nation were known ever after by his name in that region. Thus, he should be regarded as an evil, but otherwise capable, ruler.

16:29-34 – About the time Asa began to suffer in his feet, Omri's son, Ahab, succeeded to the throne of Israel. He was by far the most evil of the Kings of Israel up to this time. Besides the pagan temples, numerous shrines, male and female temple prostitutes and so forth, Ahab was married to the daughter of a singularly satanic man. By this time, Hiram of Tyre was long gone and ruling in the other great city of Phoenicia was Ethbaal of Sidon. This man had resurrected the awful practices of Molech. The god of Sidon was named Melkarth and he required children burned alive on his altar. His daughter, Princess Jezebel, was also a high priestess of this despicable religion. In marrying her, Ahab gave the worship of Melkarth a central place in Israel. Ahab dedicated a new temple to this Baal in his capital. Satan's power was so pervasive that all manner of strange things came about. For example, in defiance of the curse laid by Joshua on Jericho, someone from Bethel rebuilt that ancient city. His name was Hiel; as prophesied, his eldest died in laying the foundation and his youngest in erecting the gates. While not clearly stated, it is hinted he may have offered his sons for sacrifice at those events, fulfilling the curse voluntarily – all the more evil. We note the Omride dynasty is marked by lavish building programs throughout the kingdom.

2 Chronicles 17:1-6 – In 873 BC, one year before Ahab became king, Asa was succeeded by his son Jehoshaphat. Thus, he begins to rule before his father died, according to this account. We should envision him gradually taking up his duties during co-regency with his ailing father. His first order of business was to reinforce all the fort cities of Judah, particularly the cities taken from Israel. Since he was a man after God's heart, like David in his early years, the Lord insured this was not wasted effort. Jehoshaphat was so in love with the Lord that he aggressively removed all of the pagan shrines still standing.

17:7-19 – To further his efforts to revive holiness in the land, he sent out several court officers, along with an entourage of teaching Levites and priests. Their mission was to hold teaching sessions on the Law of Moses, copies of which they carried with them. As a consequence, the Lord brought fear on the bordering nations. Even the Philistines brought tribute out of fear of

Jehoshaphat. In many ways, it was indeed a return to the early Davidic rule. The revival of faithfulness brought with it a revival of exemplary military leadership. The fame of his commanders warranted recording their names for posterity, just as in David's time. Jehoshaphat's combined regional forces numbered 780,000 in Judah and 380,000 in Benjamin. This would include every man available for conscription in wartime. Meanwhile, Jehoshaphat became gloriously wealthy himself.

We stop for a moment to note from outside sources several important events. Omri was evil, but highly intelligent. He made a strong alliance with Phoenicia by marrying their princess to his son. This assured a perfect market for Israel's agricultural products, since the Phoenicians grew little. This alliance gave Israel a strong position to discourage Damascus from any further adventures in Galilee or Gilead. Ahab continued this shrewd policy of peaceful alliances by coming to terms with Judah, eventually.

During this time frame, Aramaean Assyria rose to great power under Ashurbanipal. Just a few decades prior, the Assyrians had managed to finally break the remnants of the second Hittite Empire. For the previous five centuries, these Aramaeans had been terrorizing the Mesopotamian Valley, with their harsh tactics and even harsher treatment of fallen foes. Even those who capitulated were humiliated. Having taken from the Hittites their one advantage – iron weapons – they had a far better political organization. They were more warlike than any previous people in that part of the world; violence was a social virtue for them. Yet their society internally was quite orderly. It was they who began requiring women to stay inside the home out of public view, allowing them out in public only when veiled. Here, too, was one of the first great libraries of ancient times, with the imperial court funding a massive project of collecting and translating cuneiform clay tablets from all over the region.

Ashurbanipal II (883-848 BC) carried the expansion farther. During his reign, his troops crossed the Euphrates and took over some Syrian city-states, including Hamath and parts of Zobah, reaching to shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Ashurbanipal had his eye on Damascus. This looming threat is the background for what follows.

9.5: *Elijah and the Drought*

1 Kings 17:1-7 – About halfway through Ahab's reign (c. 868 BC), we are introduced to the Prophet Elijah. Ahab tended to view Jehovah through political eyes. Not to deny He was real, or deny He had power, but serving Him would be submitting to the primacy of Judah and the House of David. He sought to bring his nation under Melkarth, god of a neighboring country, but referred to in the text by the generic title of Baal. Jehovah might not like it, but Melkarth would take care of it. The idea of a single, true God without peer was just too foreign to human imagination in those times. The message of Elijah was that departing from the rule of Jehovah was not an option. By speaking to Ahab in the name of the Lord (literally "Jehovah"), his prophecy would indicate God could not be so easily dismissed.

This Elijah ("My God is Jehovah") hailed from Tishbe, a town in Gilead on a wadi upstream from Jabesh-gilead. As near as we can tell, this wadi was the Brook Cherith. His message to Ahab was that there would be a drought. This was a direct attack on the supposed primary sphere of authority held by Melkarth, as with every pagan Baal in Canaan, reputed to be gods

of the storms and weather in general. Further, the drought would end only at the word of Elijah. In effect, Ahab would find no relief without humbling himself before Jehovah and dealing with His prophet. Elijah was then commanded to make himself scarce, by camping in the Cherith Valley, away from any human settlements. He would find sufficient water there and ravens would drop food to him that they had scavenged. They did this in the morning and evening when birds would be most active during a dry season. In due time the sources of the brook dried up.

17:8-16 – Now that the drought had taken hold, Elijah was at risk for the crime of cursing the King, of inciting a deity against the nation. Jehovah commanded Elijah to flee Ahab's jurisdiction. He was to take refuge in the land of the god he had challenged directly, Melkarth of Sidon. Zarephath was on the Phoenician coast roughly midway between Tyre and Sidon. God had appointed a widow there to provide for his maintenance. Upon approaching the city, Elijah spotted the woman. We don't know the specifics, but something in the situation made clear by custom that she was a widow. Quite likely it was the activity itself of gathering bits of firewood that had fallen from the loads passing into the city. Only a desperate widow would do this.

Elijah's request for a drink was quite according to custom. The well would be near the gate of most cities and women only would be sent to draw water. They were expected to show hospitality to a stranger by fulfilling a request for a drink. Turning him down would be a scandalous insult to the town and she would risk social, if not official, sanctions. She was under no obligation to provide more than the water he could drink at one sitting, but it was common courtesy to respond to reasonable requests.

Elijah also asked for what amounts to half of a pita disk. His clothing, manner and speech identified him as Israeli and probably as a prophet. Her reply was prefaced by an oath upon his God that she spoke the truth: The sticks she had gathered were for her last meal to share with her son. There were no leftovers in her home. Elijah replied that his God was prepared to meet all their needs for the duration of the drought if she would act in faith. As an offering to the Lord, she was to give Elijah the first portion of this last meal. She obeyed and we are immediately told God kept His promise. There could be no natural explanation for the unending supply during the several years this lasted. Elijah's ministry was marked by miracles, and this was just one more.

17:17-24 – The woman agreed to host Elijah, treating him with the honor of a genuine prophet. There were many superstitions tied to dealing with prophets. When her son fell ill, she surmised that Elijah's presence was God's plan to make her aware of her sin. Many regarded sickness as a visitation of judgment. His response was to show this had nothing to do with sin, but to settle her doubts. The boy was dead. Acting in full faith, Elijah persisted in calling on God until the boy was resuscitated. When he brought the boy alive down from his loft, the woman's doubts vanished forever.

People of Western sensibilities may think this sounds like terrorism, but God is not a Western intellectual construct. In His revelation, life and death on this fallen plane are merely circumstances. Painful in passing and sorrowful to those left alive, but life itself is one big lie. God Himself is in the business of preserving truth in revelation; preserving our pitiful human

existence is merely incidental, as it should be in our minds.

18:1-6 – After three years of this, the Lord directed Elijah to present himself to King Ahab. By this time the land had been stripped of all edible vegetation. Ahab didn't trust anyone to be honest, so determined to conduct a search himself, with the help of his chamberlain, Obadiah. This Obadiah happened to share none of Ahab's religious inclinations and had remained faithful to Jehovah, though secretly. Using his personal wealth and influence, he managed to rescue a hundred prophets of the Lord from an order of execution from Queen Jezebel. Obadiah divided them between two caves and fed them the minimum of bread and water, which was more than many people had in those days. Ahab's plan in this search was to avoid having to put down any royal livestock. By searching all the likely places for grass, he hoped to find emergency fodder. Unspoken is the assurance Ahab would willingly confiscate any available forage for his personal needs. As always, important men traveled in the company of slaves and servants. These two would have personally led a search party to insure bribing the searchers was impossible. Likely Ahab went south and east from Samaria, while Obadiah went north and west.

18:7-16 – Thus, of the two, Obadiah was first to encounter the returning Prophet Elijah. The context indicates that the king and his chamberlain had scarcely parted company when Elijah appeared, placing this scene very near Samaria. As befitting a man faithful to Jehovah, Obadiah bowed to the Prophet of the Lord. Falling on his face was an unspoken appeal to Elijah to deal mercifully with him. Just meeting him without reporting it to Ahab would be a capital crime. His question to Elijah was a bit like asking if he should pretend to forget meeting him. Instead, Elijah told him to abort the search for pasturage, as there was more important business at hand. Obadiah's fear was palpable. Ahab had been rather forceful with neighboring rulers in demanding Elijah be arrested and extradited if found in their lands. He required they invoke a curse on themselves if they lied about hiding him. Most likely it was this failed search that irritated Jezebel sufficiently that she vented her wrath on all of Elijah's associates. Elijah was famous for his ability to travel quickly and without notice. Tradition says he was a consummate runner, easily the equal of modern marathoners. Obadiah politely stated his fear that Elijah was playing games, suggesting that if he went to fetch Ahab here to meet Elijah, God might by then have moved the prophet somewhere else. Obadiah asked whether his faithfulness to God was in vain, appealing to Elijah as a fellow servant of Jehovah not to play games with his life. Elijah's response was an oath of assurance that this very day he intended to meet Ahab at that spot. Obadiah obediently set out to catch up with his master.

18:17-19 – Ahab confronted the prophet, calling him a threat to the nation. In Ahab's mind, this prophet had used his power to invoke Jehovah's wrath. Gods in ancient times were considered easily provoked. It was believed they would respond to anyone employing the proper rituals, but seldom acted on their own initiative. Elijah corrected him by stating flatly that the Omride rejection of Jehovah was the problem. He issued a challenge, with overtones not obvious to us from this distance in time and place. Carmel was actually a series of peaks, the northern end of the mountains of Ephraim, running along the southern bank of the River Kishon, and then dropping suddenly into the Mediterranean. The territory was in some dispute between Phoenicia and Israel. Either way, it was surely considered under the power of Melkarth at that

time. Further, it had long been regarded the haunt of any number of Baals. Thus, Elijah was daring to face the opposing gods on their home turf. More, he would face the entire corps of priests alone and in the presence of the whole nation as witnesses. The stakes could not have been higher.

18:20-24 – Under the best conditions, the summons to a solemn assembly would take at least three days to deliver across the kingdom. For the elders of the nation to respond to the most urgent summons would take at least another three days. It's safe to say the appointed day was a week or more later. When the assembly met just after dawn that day, the prophets and priests of Melkarth and friends stood ready. Elijah took the opportunity to ask the elders a pointed question: How long would they dither between a full commitment to Jehovah or compromise with Melkarth? There was no middle ground; this was more than just politics where a truce could be negotiated. The claims of each side were mutually exclusive. Of course, no one would commit themselves prior to the demonstration. This was very much like a trial between legal adversaries and judgment would be rendered after all evidence was presented. Elijah suggested, in plain sight of all, having the nation offer two bulls, giving the pagans every advantage. The pagan priests got first choice. Each side would slaughter their bull, place it on the altar as they saw fit, but neither would kindle a fire. The god that sent fire to burn his sacrifice would be declared the national god once and for all. The elders agreed.

18:25-29 – At the traditional time of the morning offering customary to both religions, the pagan priests were allowed to go first. They called on their gods all morning. Around noon, Elijah jeered them, suggesting they weren't loud enough. Maybe their god was preoccupied, or too far away, or inconvenienced. Their rituals continued with frenzied renewal, including gashing themselves with sacred implements. The image is one of the pagan priests sparing no effort, even to the point of improvising new ways to express their urgency that Melkarth respond. By mid-afternoon there had not been the slightest indication of response from their god.

18:30-40 – As the time of Jehovah's evening offering approached, Elijah called the elders to come near and join themselves in his act of worship. Reminding them of the obvious, he rebuilt the altar to Jehovah that had been desecrated long ago. Adhering to the ancient Law of Moses, he used uncut stones, one for each of the Tribes of Israel (all twelve). In the process, he added a trench around it sufficient to hold roughly two bushels of seed. He laid the wood in order, slaughtered the bull and arranged the carcass on the altar. He had the whole thing doused with water repeatedly until the trench overflowed. At the proper moment, Elijah prayed rather simply that God would confirm His Word and light the offering for Himself. God's answer was fire from Heaven. The flames enveloped the whole altar down to the ground, devouring the offering as well as everything loose on the altar, and evaporating the water in the trench. In awe, the elders began chanting that Jehovah was indeed the Lord of all. Upon their confession, Elijah ordered the now exhausted prophets and priests of Melkarth arrested. The nation had rendered its verdict; the death sentence was automatic. They were marched down the north slope of the mountain, where Elijah had them executed according to the Law of Moses, on the bank of the Kishon River.

18:41-46 – Elijah warned Ahab to dine immediately so that he could leave before it started raining. The king returned to his chariot near the peak of the hill and did so. While the king ate,

he could watch. Elijah returned to the peak and began praying, with his knees on the ground and his face between them. Periodically, he had his servant go and gaze out east across the Mediterranean Sea. Each time, the servant returned saying he saw nothing different. On the seventh time, he reported seeing a tiny lone cloud over the sea. This was the sign of rapid evaporation taking place in unstable air masses aloft, which presaged a massive rainstorm. Elijah told his servant to warn King Ahab to flee the coming storm. To Ahab's winter palace at Jezreel was at least 20 miles (32km). Even in the ideal chariot grounds of the Jezreel Valley, this could be no less than a two-hour ride. Before he got there, the storm clouds formed, turning the sky black as the wind rose. In yet another miracle, the prophet was seized by his zeal for Jehovah and managed to outrun Ahab's chariot and entered the gate before the King.

9.6: New Missions for Elijah and Ahab

We begin to get a picture of Ahab as a man often steered by others. This is most certainly true in the case of Jezebel. His inaction against Elijah's execution of the prophets of Melkarth was not simply a wise choice in the face of overwhelming political momentum, but hints he was a mere figurehead when it came to things like that. Jezebel was the real power behind royal religion.

1 Kings 19:1-8 – What follows is proof Elijah was truly human, not a one-dimensional character. We have an English phrase that comes from the previous chapter: “a mountain-top experience.” To have experienced such use by God was no doubt an emotional high no chemical substance could match. The miracle of God did not extend to changing natural human chemistry for Elijah. Just as a woman after childbirth, Elijah fell into the depths of depression. Upon hearing from Ahab what happened at Carmel, Jezebel sent a terrifying message to Elijah, promising to bring him to the same end as he did her priests the same time the next day. No doubt she meant it. Elijah fled, not just into Judah, but also to the far southernmost city in Judah, Beersheba. In fear of possible spies from Jezebel, he went out into the Negev a day's walk. There in the shadow of a broom tree, Elijah engaged in a pity-party. After two naps, each ended by heavenly sustenance, Elijah was led by God to Mount Horeb. As usual, the Hebrew phrase “forty days and nights” is not literal, implying roughly a month. Elijah made the entire journey sustained by the divine provision under the broom tree.

19:9-18 – By this time, the natural cause of depression was long past and we see Elijah cherishing it sinfully. While in the cave, he heard from God a query why he was there. His calling had been to prophesy in Israel against the sins of Ahab and Jezebel. Having proven Jehovah's power over all the gods of man's imagination, he feared the rage of woman publicly humiliated. Was the God who lit his own sacrifice atop Mount Carmel, on Melkarth's own home ground, somehow unable to keep him from her vengeance? His response to the question amounts to a childish accusation that God had not kept things perfectly suitable for his mission. We sense that he felt he should not have had to face Jezebel's natural response. Perhaps she should have humbled herself to him? While her threat was real, so was God's calling and protection. He should have been glad for a chance to die for his Lord, had that been God's plan. Elijah indicated God was capricious and would not finish what He started, that He was toying with Elijah, as Obadiah had feared Elijah was doing to him there in the shadow of Samaria.

To remind him that same power at Carmel was still behind his calling, God showed him a

storm, with winds powerful enough to shatter stone. Then there followed an earthquake that shifted the very ground itself like water. Finally came fire, a natural result of earthquakes opening up the ground for lava flows. Had God meant for Elijah to die, no human effort could have saved him. Just so, had God meant for Elijah to live, neither human effort nor worldwide catastrophe could harm him. When the cataclysms gave way to the gentle presence of God dealing with His servants, Elijah came out of the cave. Covering his face was a customary way of showing shame before his Master. Facing the same question as before, Elijah gave the same answer. The new context changed the meaning of both question and answer. Now Elijah was simply stating the facts and had no excuse for being away from his mission.

Therefore, Jehovah instructed Elijah in the next few matters of business. Acting as the high priest of God appointed over Israel, he was to go and anoint several people for their future callings. First, he was to travel north on the ancient Trans-Jordan Highway to Damascus. Out in the wilderness near there, he would meet and anoint the future king of Damascus, Hazael. Such an act would confirm for the man his ambitions to rule one day. Then Elijah was to anoint Jehu as the founder of a new dynasty in Israel. Before actually taking the throne, he would have ample time to consider accepting the Covenant of Kings with God. Finally, he was to anoint Elisha to take his own place. God would use these three as a chain to execute His judgment on sinners. Then the Lord bluntly reminded Elijah that He had no less than seven thousand servants still actively serving Him in Israel, so Elijah was hardly alone.

19:19-21 – While not specifically stated, we can imagine Elisha was working on his family farm. Abel-meholah stood in one of the rare West Bank wadis that run north before dropping into the Jordan Valley. It was less than 10 miles northeast of the old capital of Tirzah. There we find Elisha supervising the servants with a dozen teams of oxen plowing a field. As Elijah approached, Elisha was walking near the last team. Having seen his performance on Mount Carmel, it was sure anyone who was anyone knew Elijah on sight. In a customary gesture, Elijah slung his cloak over Elisha's shoulders to signify his intention to make the farmer his successor. The description suggests he did this as he passed by, without stopping his quick stride.

Elisha turned and chased after him. What Elisha requested was an opportunity to settle his personal affairs and engage all the extended social rituals before taking up his new calling. That could take days, even weeks. Elijah's response was rather like, "What's your hurry?" This rough reply, with a bite of sarcasm, was typical of Elijah. The elder prophet delighted in springing surprises on people and clearly expected Elisha to drop everything. If the farmer expected to walk in Elijah's footsteps, he would have to learn to dispense with social niceties, ready to jump at God's command. As a compromise, Elisha organized a hasty feast in the field in honor of Elijah, who apparently played along. Seizing the nearest team of oxen, Elisha slaughtered them, built a fire from the plowing equipment and boiled the flesh. Upon finishing the meal, Elisha left with the prophet and began serving him as a disciple.

20:1-6 – Recall that Assyria had been making noise in the states north of Syria. The records of this period are rather confused, and we are hard pressed to guess the precise motive of Ben-hadad of Damascus in attacking Israel, aside from the usual expansionist lusts and perhaps having an old score to settle. Given the threat from the north, a very plausible explanation is

that Damascus was forging an alliance to face Assyria. Damascus comes with an already sizable alliance and makes demands of Ahab. The essence of Ben-hadad's demand was that Ahab assume feudal dependency on him. Such a relationship would authorize the confiscation of Ahab's personal wealth and moving the most suitable members of his household into that of Ben-hadad. When Ahab accepted this standard service, Ben-hadad pushed things a little farther. Demanding that all Ahab's servants become directly beholden to Ben-hadad was unacceptable, implying there was no reason for Ahab to continue living as titular ruler. Rather, he was subject to demotion and replacement.

20:7-12 – Upon consultation with his advisers, Ahab declined this second demand. By this time forces of Syria had encamped around Samaria for some time. We are permitted to see Ahab's careful dealings in statecraft and his answer is polite. Ben-hadad responds that his troops were so numerous that they could level the city without much effort, each warrior needing only to carry away as much as handful of dust. Ahab's response was that boasting was dangerous. The image is of a man donning armor for a fight, not in a position to celebrate a victory (remove armor) not yet won. Both were using common figures of speech from that part of the world. When Ben-hadad heard Ahab's answer, he was about to take the midday siesta still common today in that part of the world, even going so far as drinking too much in his overconfidence. The command of battle order was a bit unusual and assumed right after their break they would assault the walls. Most battles were joined in the morning light.

20:13-22 – At that moment, an unnamed prophet of Jehovah approached Ahab. His message was that Ben-hadad's multitude would not have a chance to begin fighting. This was not for Ahab's sake, but a part of God's plan to annihilate Damascus and give Ahab a bit more time to realize just who was God of Israel. Ahab asked whom he would send into battle first. The prophet answered that the younger nobles from the realm would lead the attack and Ahab would himself command. When Ben-hadad's troops first appeared, among those who had answered Ahab's mobilization order were found 232 such young nobles, backed by 7000 conscripts. They marched out at noon while Ben-hadad and his associates were hitting the wine hard in the command tent. There's a good chance the troops in their tents during this siesta were in no better shape. This was the celebration Ahab had warned them not to engage. The minimal patrol on duty noticed the gates of Samaria open and troops issuing forth. When reported to Ben-hadad, he assumed they were coming out to surrender, but if not, it wouldn't matter. He completely underestimated the situation. When the Israeli nobles struck, not one of them fell, something exceedingly rare for an assault force. As the Syrian forces fell at a 100% loss of those engaged, the rest fled in disorder. As the conscripts followed on to mop up and give chase, only those with chariots escaped unscathed. Ahab ordered his own chariot troops into pursuit, and they proved more expert at navigating in the hilly terrain. Syria's troops suffered a major loss that day. Upon returning, the same unnamed prophet informed Ahab that Syria would try it again next spring – when kings typically went to war – and that he should build up his forces for the next time.

20:23-27 – Ben-hadad's advisers knew that most of Israel served one Baal or another, all of whom were generally thought of as gods of the mountains. Thus, in the battle just past, the hilly ground around Samaria was their strong point. If they could draw Israel into the plains, the

Baalim would be powerless. They obviously had little idea that much of this was about Jehovah's claim to the Nation of Israel and He was certainly not confined in His power to the mountains alone. At a more mundane level, the Syrian charioteers were more used to the flat terrain of their homeland, so they chose to challenge Ahab at Aphek that next spring. There are at least four places named Aphek ("Fortress") and this one was surely the fortified town on the hills above the Sea of Galilee on the southeast side. Having already taken a few cities in previous generations, the Syrians added this Aphek to their conquests as a means of provoking Ahab. Israel responded to a mobilization order and the force was fully provisioned by the king. They marched off to Aphek and camped in two small groups, while across from them lay a sea of Syrian warriors.

20:28-30 – An unnamed prophet of Jehovah again addressed King Ahab. We can be sure they were easily marked by their manner and dress, rejecting the popular fashions of the day for the strict adherence to Mosaic dress codes. This one advised Ahab of the planning of the Syrians and their assumptions about the God of Israel. Again, Ahab was advised that a major reason God was promising this was to show him He was indeed the One God of Israel. We aren't given a specific reason for waiting seven days for battle to be joined, but it was not uncommon for armies to parley and delay until they felt ready to fight. Quite likely the cause was Ben-hadad running down the list of his demands, sending messengers back and forth. When the forces clashed, Syria was delivered wholesale into Israel's hands, and some 100,000 Syrian soldiers fell. The balance fled for refuge into their newly captured fortified city of Aphek. The fortifications were in bad repair, it seems, for a section of wall collapsed under assault and killed another 27,000. This was an end to Ben-hadad's adventures, as he was trapped in a secure chamber inside the city.

20:31-34 – Ben-hadad's advisers knew that Israeli customs were unlike most others, in that kings tended to be less severe with surrendering enemies. Ahab's sole success as king was in making more friends than enemies. The Syrian court unanimously donned garments of mourning and penitence, and then sent a delegation to Ahab. When they asked Ahab to spare Ben-hadad's life, Ahab jumped at the chance to make friends, calling him a brother. The delegation seized on this turn of phrase as they pressed their case. When Ben-hadad came out, Ahab invited him to sit with him in the royal chariot. The terms of surrender were to restore the cities originally held by Israel and the markets of Damascus would be open to Israeli agents. Ahab released his new ally.

20:35-43 – This was not what God had in mind. Apparently, Samuel's old School of the Prophets had reconvened under Elijah. One of the trainees asked his neighbor to strike him hard enough to wound. This was a command from God and when the other refused, his doom was announced. Most likely others heard the sentence and heard that it came true. When the student prophet asked another man to wound him, this one complied. Then the prophet bound his wound, mostly covering his eyes in the process. He was probably known to Ahab and needed to avoid being recognized until his message was given in a parable. Waiting by the main road back from Aphek, the prophet accosted King Ahab, calling for justice. Kings were customarily obliged to hear cases. Flush with victory, Ahab was in a mood to show off his success with magnanimity. The man presented his case that he had been assigned to guard a prisoner, presumably because the visible injury he took had ended his combat effectiveness. It was a

common practice to leave prisoners under such a guard. The penalty for letting the prisoner escape would be death, or ransom of an outrageous sum. Such guards would often be tempted to gather plunder and souvenirs of the battle. Was it not natural? In the process, the prisoner escaped. Was the guard truly at fault, seeing all these other requirements? Ahab ruled he was indeed, and he would pay the penalty he mentioned, for he had essentially confessed. Jerking the bandage off his head, the man revealed his identity as a known prophet of Jehovah. Just as the supposed plaintiff had condemned himself by his own mouth, so had Ahab. The king had been summoned by Jehovah for a mission and had been handed the life of his enemy. But Ahab had elected to pursue other goals for his own comfort and allowed his prisoner to escape.

The judgment on Ahab was final. He would lose his own life for this failure, just as a soldier assigned to guard duty forfeited his life for dereliction of duty. Worse, his failure was no mere personal loss, but would cost the whole realm freedom and life. Syria would survive, but Israel would cease to exist. The moment of joyful victory had become a depressing loss for Ahab.

9.7: Ahab's End

After a scathing rebuke for letting Ben-hadad live, Ahab assumes a sullen mood. He becomes complicit in conspiracy and murder, once again letting his evil wife have her way. He tries to get his latest ally killed, but dies in the process.

1 Kings 21:1-4 – Naboth owned a small vineyard in the shadow of Ahab's winter palace in Jezreel. In accordance with Mosaic Law, the man refused to sell to Ahab, on the grounds that it would certainly result in a permanent loss to his tribe. While a man could legally sell or exchange his inherited property voluntarily, it was forbidden to coerce such sales. In this case, selling to the king would muddy the clan's claim to the original allotment among the tribes. If the king were to build a wall around it, he could claim it was part of the city and need not return it at Jubilee (Leviticus 25:23-34). Ever the petulant child, Ahab went home and sulked.

21:5-10 – Jezebel despised the Law of Moses but was not above using it to get her way. First, she suggested the Ahab was not asserting his royal prerogatives, accepting humiliating limitations not binding on pagan kings. Then she promised to get the vineyard for him. Surely, he knew she would do evil in the process. The nobles allowed to live in the city with the king were those willing to dance to any tune he or Jezebel played. She issued letters with the royal seal instructing the nobles to arrest Naboth and put him on trial before a noble assembly. Then they were to hire two of the low-life scum present in every city to make false accusations against Naboth. This would satisfy the letter of the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 17:6f) she despised.

21:11-16 – These noble lapdogs had no trouble fulfilling Jezebel's command. The charges brought against Naboth were that he cursed the king, a capital offense by itself, and that he cursed God. This is the same God who had no honor with anyone except the man accused. For Jezebel, this was just another political propaganda opportunity. She used the provisions of Moses' Law to destroy the righteousness it demanded. A man found guilty of such high crimes forfeited his property, along with his life, to the crown. Thus, Ahab simply went and took possession of the vineyard.

21:17-29 – While Ahab busied himself converting the vineyard to a vegetable garden, the Lord

sent word to Elijah to confront Ahab. He told Elijah where to find him, too. So when Elijah appeared before Ahab, the latter knew he was in trouble and why. His question implies wondering if Elijah found him out, which Elijah bluntly confirms. The place of the public trial of Naboth would have been near the city well or spring, usually just outside the city gates. This one had an opulent public bath, used by prostitutes as a means of advertising. Naboth would have been executed there because of tradition and it would be a convenient place to clean up the mess. Then his body would have been buried in a public place nearby, under a heap of stones to remind all of the seriousness of his crime. Elijah declared that the same dogs that had cleaned up the blood of Naboth would lick the blood of Ahab. Further, the same dogs would also consume the body of Jezebel near the palace wall in Jezreel. Finally, the household of Ahab would join its predecessors in obliteration.

The scribe takes a moment to sum up Ahab's reign as the most evil of all men, who allowed his wife to make too many decisions for him. He went out of his way to insult Jehovah openly. Yet right after this confrontation with Elijah, he was overtaken by fear and humbled himself publicly before God, mourning for his sins. As a result, the final end of the Omride dynasty would be moved from Ahab's life to that of his son.

22:1-4 – This chapter is paralleled in **2 Chronicles 18**. Probably in connection with his return to piety, Ahab reaches out to his previous enemy, the King of Judah. The two were celebrating their new friendship by sitting in their ceremonial robes out on the threshing floor near the city gates of Samaria. We learn elsewhere that Jehoshaphat married his son to Ahab's daughter, Athaliah. Noting that he had been at peace with Damascus three years, Ahab comments on the situation. The peace with Damascus had worn thin, as Ben-hadad failed to keep his promise of returning one of the cities his predecessor had taken from Israel, Ramoth-gilead. When Ahab invites Jehoshaphat to support him in sending troops to seize the city, the latter agrees in principle.

22:5-12 – However, Jehoshaphat wants to hear from God about such a military venture. Ahab had not cleared his court of Jezebel's pagan priests, but rather allowed her to replace the ones executed by Elijah. He asks them to prophesy on the matter. They, of course, say what the king wants to hear. Given his past success, they make a safe guess. Jehoshaphat said he would prefer word from a prophet of Jehovah. Obviously, the King of Judah doesn't realize how bad things are with Israel. At this time, the only prophet of Jehovah available in the city is Micaiah. Ahab hates to hear from him, because he reminds the king constantly how he lives in sin. Jehoshaphat politely suggests Ahab overstates the matter and wants to hear from the prophet. While awaiting Micaiah, the pagan priests put on quite a show demonstrating how things were sure to work out well against Damascus. One engages in a bit of sympathetic magic with a pair of iron horns, representing the two kings destroying all before them.

22:13-28 – Micaiah is warned to behave himself and talk nice to the king. This he does, but with sarcasm, so Ahab knows it's fake. He demands Micaiah say what he really believes. In reply, the prophet describes a vision of the whole army scattered like lost sheep, because there was no shepherd. This implies Ahab would die in the battle. He then tells a story regarding his vision of how it all took place in Heaven. The Lord asked the spirits who would persuade Ahab to attack Ramoth-gilead. After hearing several proposals, one came forward promising to deceive Ahab's

pagan seers to trick him into going. The Lord accepted that plan. The prophet with the iron horns, Zedekiah, slapped Micaiah demanding he explain how the Holy Spirit got from him to Micaiah. Aside from being a very grave insult – only very bad children were struck with an open hand – this was ludicrous on the face of it. That Zedekiah even knew Jehovah was out of the question. Micaiah answered that Zedekiah will find out the answer when he runs to escape disaster. Ahab grumped about this whole business and commanded Micaiah be imprisoned at hard labor until he returned in victory. Micaiah answered he would then die in prison gladly, for if Ahab returned alive, this prophet was deluded.

22:29-36 – Just to be sure Micaiah was wrong, Ahab decided to fight in disguise. That is, he would set aside his unique royal armor, wear standard equipment and ride in an ordinary chariot. He also set up Jehoshaphat for death by asking him to go as usual in his royal attire. Meanwhile, Ben-hadad instructed his chariot commanders to engage only the King of Israel and ignore everyone else, letting the foot soldiers carry the main battle. Not knowing the King of Judah was involved, they went after the only symbol of royalty they could see. When Jehoshaphat fled with a whole company of chariots in pursuit, they quickly realized this was not Ahab and let him go. But Ahab was not safe, for during battle a random arrow struck in the gap between his armor plates. He had himself propped up as if surveying the battle while he bled to death. Eventually his death was announced, and they sounded retreat.

22:37-40 – Ahab was buried in the royal tomb in Samaria. His blood was rinsed from the chariot during the time the prostitutes bathed at the public gate pool. The dogs, indeed, licked his blood, all according to prophecy. His son Ahaziah reigned in his place.

9.8: Jehoshaphat and Ahaziah

Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, reigned 25 years from 873 to 848 BC. The story comes somewhat out of chronological order in the text. King Ahaziah of Israel reigned briefly during the latter years of Jehoshaphat.

2 Chronicles 19:1-11 – Returning safely from the battle that ended Ahab's reign, Jehoshaphat is warned by the Seer Jehu (son of the seer his father had imprisoned, ch. 16:7) that allying with wicked men will purchase the wrath of God. However, the warning is moderated by Jehoshaphat's general desire to please Jehovah. Taking this warning to heart, the King redoubled his efforts to draw his nation closer to God. The text implies he himself went out and preached the Law. He then established a court system, selecting judges for each locale at various levels. He solemnly warned them this was all about holiness before the Lord. Jehoshaphat went on to establish a formal central appeals court system in the capital. While noting that all legal matters are under the Law of Moses, there is an administrative division here between civil and ceremonial judges. The senior judge in ceremonial cases was also the Chief Priest, Amariah. For civil matters Jehoshaphat appointed his chamberlain, the Ishmaelite Zebadiah, as chief justice. Throughout the system, there was stern warning that all judges were answerable to God for their work. This whole business would have taken several years.

20:35-37 – Meanwhile, we jump to end of the next chapter to catch a story mirrored in **1 Kings 22**. Jehoshaphat carried over his alliance with Ahab to the heir, Ahaziah, and allows him to play minor partner in the trade based in Ezion-geber, on the Gulf of Aqaba. The Lord's wrath is

kindled, and the first joint trade mission is destroyed by a storm. Afterward, Jehoshaphat distances himself from Ahaziah. The judicial reforms took place at the same time as the trade mission.

20:1-4 – The crushing power David and Solomon had brought against Ammon, Moab and Edom eventually bred rebellion in 852 BC, just three years after Ahab died. This passage is slightly confusing and there are variations among sources as to who exactly had allied together against Judah. There was probably a people known as the Mehunites and it's possible they may have hired some Syrian troops, who had just successfully defeated Israel and Judah in battle at Ramoth-gilead. The allied nations began sending a massed army, working its way around the south end of the Dead Sea. They had seized and occupied Engedi, on the west shore of the sea. Jehoshaphat wisely proclaimed a fast, calling the leaders of his kingdom to join him in a solemn prayer assembly at Jerusalem.

20:5-13 – Mentioned in passing is that the King had expanded the Temple to add a new courtyard. His impassioned plea recalled the prayer of Solomon. The questions are purely rhetorical, implying most certainly a yes answer. Now they were gathered according to the promise made to Solomon, calling out to God from the Temple dedicated to His Name. Jehoshaphat notes that, while the Hebrews had crippled these nations in the past, they had never taken from the inheritance designated for them by Jehovah. What thanks was it they now sought to drive Judah from their inheritance? Finally, the King notes their forces outnumber those of Judah.

20:14-19 – A Levite of the Sons of Asaph (Temple Musicians) named Jahaziel was moved to speak the Lord's reply. This is echoed in Psalm 83, which gives a more complete list of the allied nations. By adding Tyre, the Amalekites, the Philistines and elements of the Assyrian Empire, it explains how the invaders could boast such a massive army as to frighten Judah, with roughly a million soldiers at last count. The musician told how this was God's fight, not Judah's. He instructed them to go down and meet the enemy as they marched up the Ascent of Ziz, which began a few miles north of Engedi. This was a broad wadi that opened out onto an area called the Wilderness of Jeruel. This would permit a first strike at Hebron, which we believe was better defended than any other city at that time. Victory there would be a massive psychological blow, laying the ground for attacking Jerusalem. However, there would be no need to fight. Judah's army should stand and watch how Jehovah would defeat the invaders. The only appropriate response from the nation's leadership was to bow their faces to the ground at such a mighty promise of God. The rest of the Temple Musicians broke out in a praise chorus.

20:20-23 – The dramatic scene that follows is hard to do justice with mere words. At dawn, the army of Judah marched some 10 miles (16km) to the wilderness area near the city of Tekoa. As they drew near, it was time to set the troops in battle order. Normally this includes dividing the troops into manageable formations, deciding where to place each and so forth. After consulting with the leaders of Judah, Jehoshaphat placed the Temple Musicians in the vanguard, as the first to meet the enemy. Their song was a simple praise of God's glory. The enemy horde was already in position, divided into national armies. In response to praise of His Name, the Lord incited the Edomites ("Mount Seir") against their allies. When the Edomites had been destroyed, the remaining nations turned on each other.

20:24-30 – Imagine the scene as the army of Judah tops the rise and looks down upon the invading hordes. There was nothing but a sea of dead bodies. The only thing left was to strip the dead, who for some reason had brought an unusual amount of valuables with them. It took three days to plunder the invaders. Then they all reassembled in the valley where the bodies were left to rot and be devoured by carrion eaters. They named it the Valley of Berachah (“Blessing”) with a thanksgiving ceremony. The entire army of Judah returned rejoicing, and the realm had peace for the rest of Jehoshaphat’s reign.

20:31-34 – The story of Jehoshaphat closes with the statistics of his reign, with a scribal note that he stayed faithful to Jehovah. In spite of his efforts, the people of his realm rebuilt some of the shrines he had destroyed earlier.

2 Kings 1:1-4 – As a build up to the battle with Judah, the Moabites rose in revolt against Israel. They were encouraged in this by the defeat of Israel and Judah at Ramoth-gilead. Over the next two years they made life miserable for Ahaziah, the heir of King Ahab, on top of his lost alliance with Judah. His short reign (853-852 BC) ended because of his immense evil. Earlier, we described how it was common for the wealthy to build a latticed room on the roof of their homes, as a place of refuge from the heat of summer. Ahaziah had such an addition on his palace in Samaria and fell through the lattice to the ground at least one story below. His injuries appeared serious enough that the King sought word on his fate from a prophet.

However, he sent his inquiry to prophets of a pagan god, dispatching his servants to the temple at Ekron. There the Philistines worshiped Baal-zebul (“Lord of the Home”), a title implying the God of Life, their chief deity. The scribe engages in the typical Hebrew mocking by changing the spelling just a bit to Baal-zevub, “Lord of the Flies.” As they depart on this mission, Jehovah sends an angel to Elijah, now master of several academies of prophets. The Lord tells him to intercept the messengers. Elijah was to send them back with the question of how a King of Israel would seek word from some other nation’s gods, as if there were no God of Israel. For this blatant rejection of Jehovah, who had repeatedly clarified the issue with acts of power often involving Elijah, the King would die soon of his injuries.

1:5-12 – A mission that should have taken at least a week saw the messengers return the same day. When the King asked why they returned, they told him of their encounter with a man they didn’t know. We finally learn of Elijah’s appearance: a hairy man who wore a wide leather belt, instead of the more common cloth. Ahaziah knew by the description this was Elijah. Reviving his mother’s animus against the prophet, he sent a company of his bodyguard to arrest Elijah. We find him sitting atop a hill, probably just out of easy reach on a rock out-cropping. The captain approached at the head of his troops and ordered Elijah down, sneeringly addressing the prophet as “Man of Jehovah.” Elijah replied that if he were indeed a Man of Jehovah, then let fire come down from Heaven to consume the soldiers. Immediately that very thing happened. No doubt there were onlookers there to watch the fun, dismayed by this result. A report came back to the King, who sent another company. Using the same rude address, the captain demanded Elijah come down. This group met the same end.

1:13-18 – The third captain was considerably wiser. The issue was not respect for Elijah the man, but as Man of Jehovah, Prophet of the God of Israel. Having heard from the onlookers what happened to his peers, this captain paid proper respects and pleaded with Elijah not to curse

him and his troops. The angel that had sent Elijah in the first place appeared again and gave Elijah permission to be taken into custody, as no harm would come to him. Upon entering the King's presence, he repeated the message again: Is there no God of Israel that the King would enquire of Baal-zebul of Ekron? For this sin and insult to Jehovah, the King would not recover, but die in his bed. He passed a short time later. Having no son, his brother, Jehoram took the throne. We note that there was later a King of Judah by that name and we should not confuse them.

9.9: *Elijah and Elisha*

The sin of the kings of Israel was diminishing Jehovah to a mere political symbol. They determined who to worship based on human wisdom and perceived political advantage. The people of power and wealth preferred the Baals and Asherah, while a less powerful faction longed for the service of the Temple in Jerusalem and would gladly return to the reign of the House of David. This faction saw that as their Golden Age and resented the upstart House of Omri. None of this mattered to Elijah and Elisha. For them, the issue was Jehovah, the One true God, who ruled Israel, acknowledged or not.

2 Kings 2:1-9 – There were two places named Gilgal. This one was just southwest of Shiloh and was apparently the location for an Academy of Prophets. It had been a seat of Jeroboam's false worship of the calf riding god, according to Amos 4:4 and Hosea 4:15. Quite likely this site was used when Israel lost control of Bethel (2 Chronicles 13:19, battle between Jeroboam and Abijah) for a time. Tradition says Jeroboam rebuilt his southern temple there to challenge the memory of Shiloh as the first home of Jehovah's Tabernacle, as well as asserting his own national gods. When Israel regained possession of Bethel and restored Jeroboam's temple, they kept the temple at Gilgal of Ephraim active. It's no surprise that Elijah would build a prophet's academy near both false temples. Certainly, Ahab would have converted these temples later to major centers of worship for Melkarth and other Baals. Thus, Elijah made one last circuit to strengthen his students against the coming moral battles and against subtle inroads of pagan elements in their service.

Elijah would have set out at dawn. He challenged Elisha by suggesting the latter stay there at Gilgal. Elisha refused. As the man groomed to take Elijah's place, he was determined to follow to the end. Along the way, the students accurately prophesied the day's final events. The third academy was near Jericho, down in the Jordan Valley. This final farewell before crossing the Jordan brought out 50 men, perhaps the entire body of students and teachers. This entourage followed the two prophets to the spot Elijah chose to cross. He pulled off the cloak that every man wore or carried while traveling, rolled it up in a long bundle and slapped it down on the surface of the river. The water simply divided, much as it had at the Red Sea crossing under Moses. The description of it takes away any possible natural event, but was rather sudden, leaving a dry crossing on the riverbed. Up to this point, the two prophets had traveled over 30 miles (48km), so the day was nearly gone, even with Elijah's vigorous stride.

2:10-18 – Most likely the school was watching from a bluff overlooking the river and could observe the whole thing. Elijah turned to Elisha and asked what boon he could offer his closest disciple. Elisha's answer is one of the most misunderstood requests in all of Scripture. In the

context, he asked the first-born's portion. A "double portion" is what was given the first-born son of a man who had more than one son. The man's estate was divided into equal shares numbering one for each son, plus one more share. A man with 6 sons would parcel out 7 shares. The first-born, carrying the full responsibility of the father's business and covenant obligations, received two shares, while the rest got one. Elisha asked for a confirmation that he had fully inherited the calling and office of Elijah. The act of dropping his cloak on Elisha's shoulders some years before was indeed a calling to at least try succeeding Elijah in ministry. Confirmation was what Elisha sought and that was the "hard thing" he asked. The confirmation would hinge on whether Elisha was acceptable to God and would come in the form of seeing Elijah taken up.

Elijah had known beforehand where he was to catch his ride into the spirit realm. As they strolled along the East Bank of the Jordan, he described what would happen within the next few moments. The whirlwind recalls the pillar of cloud and fire that Israel followed from Egypt. It was the earliest symbol of God's might in battle, as well as the chariot. In this case, it was to be Jehovah's own battle chariot. Sure enough, Elisha saw both symbols. The glowing chariot pulled alongside and picked up Elijah, then rose into the sky on a whirlwind. Elisha cried out in ecstasy, letting Elijah know he had seen it all. Then he tore his clothes near the collar to indicate customary bereavement. Picking up the mantle was both literal and symbolic, as it was his in flesh and spirit to carry the cloak of Elijah's ministry. Repeating Elijah's act at the riverside, he called out. It was not a question of doubt, but a rhetorical question with an obvious answer: The Lord was with him. Upon repeating the crossing on a dry riverbed, he was met by a respectful proclamation from the school. Their words and actions were a commitment to treat Elisha with the same respect they had held for Elijah.

Their obsession with finding the body of Elijah shows a clear lack of understanding. While it was almost unprecedented that a man would simply leave earth without dying (Gen 5:24, Enoch), it was not beyond comprehension. The school had not seen Elijah's glorious departure, so had to accept Elisha's word on it. They didn't. Insisting they would find the body, they harassed Elisha until he gave in to their request for a search party. Three days of fruitless searching brought them back in shame.

2:19-25 – Immediately, the miracles that had clung to his predecessor also followed Elisha. First off, the academy at Jericho suffered with the city. While the area is known today as a tropical paradise, the whole area was plagued by bad water. Most likely soluble material from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah polluted the ground water. The context indicates women were suffering an unusual level of infertility and stillbirths. Elisha called for symbols: a new bowl because God's vessels must be His first and edible salt as a symbol of cleansing and purification. In a brief ceremonial act, he declared the waters healed by the power of Jehovah. To this day, the main spring of Jericho is sweet, while all the rest are brackish.

Elisha began a return circuit. Approaching the school at Bethel, he was accosted by some young men of the town. Keep in mind that this is as much politics as religion. Elisha was in their eyes a reactionary partisan trying to draw the Kingdom of Israel back under the House of David. Everyone forgot that Jehovah Himself had called for the division of the nation, and it was loyalty to Himself that was at issue. The youths may well have been a group organized by the

opposition party to harass Elisha as they had Elijah. The point was Jehovah was the same God, whatever the political situation. As best we can tell, they are taunting him about Elijah's translation into the Spirit Realm. They told Elisha to disappear into the heavens ("go up"), as well, so the land could be rid of him. At the same time, they ridiculed his balding head. Most baldness then was the result of leprosy, so they were implying he was unfit to enter the city. Their behavior was deplorable, beyond rudeness to the point of cursing him, as it were. He turned and pronounced God's curse on their sin and some forty-two of them were badly injured or killed by she-bears. It is well known female Syrian bears that roamed the area were more vicious than males, who were simply bad tempered by comparison. His next stop was Mount Carmel, symbolically claiming to inherit the legacy of what happened there several years before. Then he headed to Samaria, the capital.

9.10: Elisha in War and Peace

In 852 BC, Jehoram succeeds his brother Ahaziah to the throne of Israel. Elijah's departure came shortly after his prophecy to the dying Ahaziah; Elisha now serves the same ministry as Jehoram reigns.

2 Kings 3:1-8 – What kind of king was Jehoram? He did take down the sacred pillar his father had dedicated to Baal, but hardly departed from the politically oriented refusal to return to Jehovah. Moab had begun throwing off the yoke of Israel under Ahaziah, but was in full revolt against Jehoram. The King mustered his army. As this was shortly before the passing of Jehoshaphat of Judah, Jehoram sent an envoy asking help to subdue Moab. They agreed to circle around from the south, passing through Edom. This was after Edom had joined Moab, Ammon and a mixed host of others in attacking Judah. God provoked the others against Edom, so she no longer regarded Moab as a friend. On top of that, the military victory placed Edom firmly subservient to Judah and had already thrown her lot in with them against Moab.

3:9-12 – Their route was down the west shore of the Dead Sea and around the south end. While this area was generally dry all year round, it could be extremely so during the dry season. There are few springs, and they tend to be seasonal. By the time they joined up with Edom after crossing the Rift Valley, they were in bad shape. This was the north end of Edom and the southern border of Moab. They halted at the mouth of the Wadi Zered. We have no idea how it was Elisha was with them, but it appears Jehoram was unaware of it. The King of Israel made some sarcastic remark how Jehovah had abandoned them all to die. It was a not-so-subtle way of reminding all who heard that he felt justified in rejecting the Lord as God of his kingdom. Jehoshaphat's response was to insist they call on Jehovah via one of His prophets. A servant of Jehoram mentioned Elisha was with them, referring to him as the closest disciple of Elijah. Taking that as a commendation, Jehoshaphat demanded they go see him.

3:13-19 – When they confronted the Prophet, Elisha proved to have learned well from his master and told Jehoram to go back to his family gods for consultation. The King of Israel retorted they had come to him because it was his God that got them in this mess. Elisha responded with a phrase that Jehovah was indeed the One Living God; were it not for the faithful King of Judah's presence, Elisha would have ignored them in the first place. Since he was bound to honor Jehoshaphat's request, he would seek the Lord by way of music praising Jehovah. When a

musician began to play, the Spirit of God gave answer to their request. There at the wide, flat mouth of the Wadi Zered, Elisha told them to start digging ditches to catch the rain that was about to fall. However, they would not see the storms, nor feel the wind, for it would be far to the east and south, beyond the range of hills through which the Zered cut its path. He reminded them this fulfillment of their request was a small task for God and He would allow them to defeat Moab's army, as well. Further, He wanted Moab destroyed, leaving no fortified city standing, no usable trees left growing, every spring stopped with sandy rubble and stones scattered over every arable stretch of land. This was no mere battle for political victory, but a command to press the campaign for weeks until the job was complete.

3:20-25 – As a pointed reminder, the scribe mentions the dawn as the time of the morning grain offering. This was a free-will gift to God, most of which was used to feed the priests on duty in the Temple. By this time, the various offerings were presented in a specific sequence. The moment folks in Jerusalem were presenting this grain offering, far away on the border of Moab, the allied armies of Israel, Judah and Edom watched water begin flooding the Wadi Zered. On the heights of the northern bank, Moab had massed every male capable of holding a weapon. The sun was rising in the east, filtered by the storm clouds just visible on the horizon from the heights, but not in the valley. Moab's troops on the high ground saw a red dawn, reflected off the pools of water in the dark valley below. Assuming a repeat of the recent battle they fought against Judah, but this time her enemies fighting each other, Moab's commanders urged the troops to seize the moment and plunder as they had been plundered the year before. They plunged down the slopes first into Israel's camp. Since this is primarily Israel's war, she would have been in the vanguard of any battle. The troops camped in the valley had been gathering water, already refreshed. When the Moabites flooded into the empty camps, it was like a baited trap. The headlong rush was brutally halted, and Moab fled a fierce army, intact and ready. On the heels of this battle, the entire allied force rolled up all resistance from the south and destroyed the Land of Moab as God had commanded. Pulling down the fortified cities supplied the stones for scattering in arable fields. The only city they couldn't destroy was Kir Haresheth. This city stood at the end of a narrow gorge on a hill. The best the allied forces could do was sling stones over the city walls from the surrounding heights.

3:26-27 – Convinced that Edom was the weak link, Mesha himself led a small force of professional warriors numbering 700. He was unable to approach their lines directly. This same King left an inscription called the Moabite Stone in Dibon, a major city of Moab just north of the River Arnon. This city was on land that was supposed to have been in the tribal grant to Reuben. On this stone, he confesses that Israel had been allowed by his god Chemosh to oppress Moab, due to the god's anger with his people. Under this apprehension, Mesha is facing the final end of his nation. Consistent with his pagan concepts, he goes up on the city wall in sight of the besieging forces and offers his heir in ritual slaughter. The troops of Israel, long under the sway of pagan superstition, find themselves unable to continue the war after seeing this. At their withdrawal, the war is over.

4:1-7 – The following year, we find Elisha back managing the Academies of the Prophets. One of his students died, leaving a widow and two sons deeply in debt. She approached Elisha seeking God's protection from the creditors, who had already presented her with a claim to confiscate

her property and enslave her sons. He asked what she had left in the house. She replied it was a mere jar of oil. He told her to go and borrow from her neighbors every empty container she could find. He cautioned her not to take this task lightly, but to fill her house with empty vessels. Then she was to retreat with her sons behind closed doors and begin pouring her one jar of oil into these vessels. With her sons bringing empties to her, they took away everything filled with oil. When the last was filled, the oil stopped flowing. Reporting the results to Elisha, he told her to sell the excess, pay her debts, and live on what was left. The abundance of God's provision in this case was limited only to her exercise of faith in collecting containers.

4:8-17 – On his rounds in the Kingdom of Israel, Elisha passed often through Shunem, a city of Issachar near Jezreel. This was the place where the army of Philistia camped in preparation for the battle that ended King Saul's life. In this city was a noble woman, faithful to Jehovah, who persuaded Elisha to have lunch in her home when he passed. She even persuaded her husband to build on a room for him on the upper floor adjoining the wall of their large home. This was a choice accommodation, a high honor, and Elisha became comfortable with staying the night there on his travels. He felt obliged to offer some favor in return. With his servant Gehazi as go-between, he first offered to use his influence at the royal court on her behalf. Finding she was quite content with her life, he asked his servant's advice. Gehazi noticed she was childless and her husband aging. So, Elisha announced to her that when he came again the same time next year, she would be holding a baby boy. She pleaded with Elisha not to tease her. Yet the promise came true.

4:18-31 – A few years later, this same boy went out in the morning to where his father was managing the grain harvest. This was the warmest part of the year; it may be that the lad got over-heated. The boy suddenly grabbed his head and complained of pain. His father had a servant carry him home, where his mother held him until he died, around noontime. She laid the boy on Elisha's bed, then went out to her husband in the field and asked for a donkey to ride and a servant to lead it to Elisha. Her husband wondered at the errand, since it was not yet near any of the occasions for taking a special offering, but she insisted. Once mounted, she ordered her servant to drive hard and straight to Mount Carmel. This would have taken her until mid-afternoon.

Spotting her from afar, Elisha knew something was up, so ordered Gehazi to meet her and inquire if all was well. She didn't bother to tell Gehazi her mission, so he reported all was well with the family. Upon arriving herself, she ran to grab Elisha's feet in an emotional outburst. Gehazi was naturally concerned this would appear scandalous, but Elisha told him to give her time to compose herself and explain the cause of her sorrow. Whatever it was, Elisha had no word from God. When Elisha had promised her a son, it was no doubt a desperate longing she was sure she'd never see. She had just about gotten used to the situation when Elisha stirred that wild, improbable hope again. Once granted, it now seemed a cruel trick to lose him so young. Her question implied she would have been better off had Elisha not stirred things up. Immediately he knew her son was ill or dead. He ordered Gehazi to take his staff, his symbol of power as a shepherd of God's people, ignore everyone and everything in haste and go lay the staff on the child's face. If the child were merely ill, this would suffice. She warned Elisha she would not leave his side. If he wanted to end this crisis, he would have to go himself. Before

they arrived, Gehazi came out to meet them, relating that the staff brought no reaction from the boy.

4:32-37 – Entering the house, Elisha went straight up to his room. Seeing the boy was already dead, he realized he underestimated things. He closed the door and began praying. As an extension of his prayer, he laid himself on the child symbolizing what he sought. When the flesh of the boy had warmed, Elisha went down to the main house and paced, awaiting God’s answer. Then he went back up and repeated his symbolic prayer act. The boy sneezed, indicating he was alive, and then opened his eyes. Elisha then called the woman via his servant and told her to embrace her son. She bowed at Elisha’s feet in gratitude, then took hold of her boy and left the room.

9.11: Elisha and Israel’s Peril

Elisha continues his divine service of miracles in the Kingdom of Israel. Jehoram is still king, Ben-hadad rules Syria and things are not friendly with the two kingdoms. Between war campaigns there is an uneasy peace. The time is very near the death of King Jehoshaphat of Judah, 848 BC.

2 Kings 4:38-41 – There were a few years of drought in Israel, resulting in famine. On one of his rounds between the Schools of the Prophets, Elisha came to Gilgal of Ephraim. He suggested they put on a large pot of water and make stew from whatever can be found. One of the students finds what he takes to be edible wild cucumbers. However, they are the bitter-tasting variety that causes indigestion and diarrhea. The taste is the same as a rather deadly plant and the students refused to eat it. Elisha adds a bit of flour, and the Lord purifies the pot, perhaps symbolizing how the Bread of Life added to our lives can remove our poisonous sins.

4:42-44 – To insure we know that Bread of Life is always sufficient, we are told of a man coming from an area near Gilgal called Baal Shalisha, or Beth Shalisha, “The House of Three Valleys.” He was able to produce a crop of barley, which can grow under conditions many other things will not. Barley harvest is near the first of April and this man had no priests or Levites to whom he could present his offering, so he brought to Elisha as much as a man could carry. This would be twenty flat disks of barley pita and a large bag of roasted grain, still a favorite today in the Middle East. This might have fed Elisha and his servant Gehazi for a week or so, but Elisha wanted to share it with the whole school. The giver questioned how some hundred men would profit from a mere mouthful each, but Elisha promised by the Word of God there would be enough for all and some left over. Thus it happened; the students came and took enough for a full meal, and all were fed.

5:1-4 – Jehovah designed a way to bring His servant into the limelight. Naaman was the commander over the entire Syrian army. Leprosy in the Old Testament was more a descriptive term than a precise medical diagnosis. It was most likely not what we call “leprosy” today (Hansen’s Disease). Tradition describes a condition much more like eczema, where the skin dies off in thin layers, turning white and flaking, and exposing raw flesh underneath. Eventually it progressed to the point of limbs dropping off. It actually was not very communicable. In Syria it was not regarded as abhorrent but could limit one’s physical performance. Naaman had valiantly led in battle, but his affliction threatened to cut short his illustrious career. During one

of their petty raids, the Syrian troops brought back an Israeli girl captive and made her a gift to Naaman. The context indicates serving him was quite an honor. The girl was aware of Elisha's miracles and spoke glowingly of his power. Word got back to Naaman and then Ben-hadad.

5:5-7 – While the two kingdoms might conduct raids in disputed areas, they were ostensibly at peace. Not knowing the situation, Ben-hadad assumed Elisha served in Israel's court, as he represented the old God of Israel. Thus, he sent a delegation to Samaria with a generous gift, a customary offering of royalty and noblemen in exchange for a great favor. The suits of clothing would most certainly have included some light armor. It was a mark of nobility to bear arms and armor routinely. When Jehoram discovered the reason for the visit, he thought it was some sort of outrageous provocation, a pretext for war. The request was beyond any king to fulfill, save the King of Kings. Jehoram tore a section of his royal garments near the collar as a sign of mourning for what was surely a war to come, one he knew Syria could win.

5:8-14 – Elisha heard about it and sarcastically taunted the King, asking why he should be all out of sorts, since Jehoram need only request help from Elisha. We have seen already how such a thing would be galling to the royalist party, which for mere politics rejected allegiance to Jehovah. Still, Jehoram sent Naaman back with Elisha's messenger to the Prophet's quarters there in the capital city. Humbly obeying the rules about lepers entering the home of the God-fearing, Naaman expected Elisha to come out and perform some elaborate ritual. Instead, the Prophet sent a servant with instructions that made no sense to Naaman: wash seven times in the Jordan. Indignant, the General left, taking the main road back home. While his path almost certainly crossed the Jordan, he muttered how the rivers near Damascus were at least as good as the Jordan, but his servants asked him to see things in a different light. If Elisha had ordered some grand performance or sacrifice, it would have made perfect sense to Naaman. One pays a high price for a great healing. Why was bathing for cleanliness so objectionable? How hard could it be to get wet in the Jordan? Thus, he could quickly and easily prove whether this man really was a servant of Most High God. Naaman relented, made a stop at the Jordan and dipped himself seven times under the water's surface. Upon drying his skin, he found it as soft and pink as that of newborn.

5:15-19 – Realizing no other god even claimed the power to heal like this, Naaman returned to Gilgal determined to honor this prophet and his God. Now clean, Naaman came into the courtyard of Elisha's dwelling, along with his ranking servants. He presented himself as a servant to a king. His offer was again rebuffed, for it would miss the point entirely. God is honored more in the heart than in material things. Still acting under the assumption Jehovah was merely a national god of some locale, he begged to take as much Israeli soil as he could carry away, so as to make a place of worship. He further begged indulgence when his job required him to pay lip service to his master's god, Rimmon. Rather than struggle with the man's misunderstandings, Elisha blessed the plan and sent Naaman away in peace.

5:20-27 – Gehazi just could not understand how Elisha would turn down such good and useful gifts. He never really absorbed what he saw and heard in his years of service to the Prophet. Chasing after Naaman, he requested a portion of the gifts. The two suits of clothing, including dress armor, would be a heavy bundle. The silver was measured by weight, for the coin by the same name did not yet exist. Altogether, what Naaman sent back required two or more men to

carry. Once the goods were hidden, Gehazi returned to his master as if nothing had happened. Elisha was a true prophet of God, from Whom nothing was hidden. The Lord could reveal any truth to His prophets. Elisha gave his servant a chance to confess, but Gehazi lied. Elisha's question indicated Gehazi understood nothing, for by rejecting the gifts, Elisha showed Jehovah was not about stuff, but about the heart. The high honor to His name from refusing the gifts was deeply compromised by Gehazi's actions. Since he sought Naaman's wealth, he would also have Naaman's disease. Thus, he could no longer serve Elisha.

6:1-8 – The witness of Elisha turned many hearts back to God and the School of the Prophets was bursting at the seams. The students suggested going down as a group to the Jordan Valley, where tall straight trees grew in abundance and fetching back logs for construction of a larger facility. Elisha agreed to go with them on this trip. The role of prophet included relying on God for everything that mattered, but otherwise a carefree existence without significant private property to hinder service to God. Primitive axes were often nothing more than a strip or wedge of iron, sharp on one edge and squared flat on the other. A heavy club would be split at the top, the blade embedded sharp side out and the top of the split bound with a thong. Just as with modern axes, such a haft was regarded as easily replaceable, but the head was rather expensive. It was nothing for the thong to break and the head slip out of the handle, but this time it landed in the river. The man who lost it was intensely sorrowful for the loss it would mean to the owner. Even in such a minor thing, the Lord responds to the cry of a pure heart; Elisha tossing a stick in the water where it fell recovered the blade. The stick sank and the axe head floated to the top, instead.

6:9-12 – In this last year of Jehoshaphat's life, Syria went to war against Israel. No doubt, Jehoram blamed Elisha for restoring the health of Syria's brilliant commanding general for making it possible. However, the Lord was not in this attack. The secret war counsels of the aging Ben-hadad were revealed to Elisha. This was a war of raids to provoke a defensive response. The plan was to ambush the troops of Israel when they came to aid the cities under attack. Elisha sent messages to Jehoram to prevent the army falling into these ambushes. Ben-hadad was sure he had a spy in his court. However, they reminded him the one who brought about the healing of Naaman was no sham shaman, but a true prophet of Jehovah, on Whose turf they brought war. For this God, the deepest thoughts of man were open. The Syrian spies in the Land of Israel could confirm Elisha's inexplicable insight.

6:13-18 – After checking with these spies, it was reported Elisha was in Dothan. This town was about ten miles (16km) north of Samaria, just one ridgeline south of the Jezreel Valley. The city itself sat low in a high valley. During the night, a battalion or so of the Syrian army surrounded the town, lining the hillsides that sloped down to the city. By dawn, the new servant of Elisha was distraught; for it was obvious they had come for the Prophet. Elisha prayed the man would see the truth and the servant suddenly saw an even greater Army of Heaven on the ridges above the troops surrounding the city. When the Syrian troops converged on the city, Elisha prayed, and they were struck blind in the sense they were hypnotized and under Elisha's power. Whatever he said was their reality.

6:19-23 – Elisha told them they were at the wrong place and had not found their man. In a daze, they followed him the three hours' march to Samaria. He led them into the open square of the

capital city, and then prayed they would come back to their senses. Realizing they were inside the city of their enemy, they recognized that they could easily be killed by the large garrison of troops there. This Jehoram eagerly suggested, even honoring Elisha in his excitement. Instead, Elisha insisted they be treated honorably, feasted and sent away. The message to Syria could be no louder. God was fully against their current campaign, so they withdrew from raiding Israeli cities.

6:24-29 – However, Ben-hadad could not give up his dream of conquering Israel and expanding his empire. The context assumes we know Jehoram still refused to pay more than lip service to Jehovah. The drought returned and Syria took the opportunity to lay siege to Samaria, hoping the drought would humiliate the city and shorten the time required to win their surrender. In a very short time, people were reduced to eating anything organic and the price was quite high for something normally tossed out to vultures or washed down the gutters. As the King passed through the city, a woman in dire straits importuned him. Before he even heard her claim, he told her only Jehovah could help her and He had apparently abandoned them, since there was no food to be had for anyone. Did she think there was so much as a floor sweeping of dirty grain, or a even the merest stain of wine that had not already been peeled from the dry wine vats? Then he invited her to share her yet-one-more tale of woe. What she told him was beyond even his jaded imagination. The woman complained her neighbor had entered into a deal to eat their children. After consuming hers, the other welched on the deal and hid her child.

6:30-33 – The King was shocked by the depravity of this story and tore his robe in the universal symbol of distress. He continued walking along the top of the wall, now wearing sackcloth under his royal vestments. It was not enough Elisha had commanded the Syrian soldiers be set free, but they should also be feasted from the royal stores. Instead of delivering the Syrians into his hand, Elisha had freed them to come back and fight again and helped make the city less prepared for famine at the same time. In an outburst, he vowed to behead the Prophet. It happened Elisha was in the city, in his own dwelling, talking with the elders. As the King approached with his bodyguard, a servant went as usual before him to announce his presence. Even before the runner came in, Elisha proclaimed how the King was a true son of his murdering father, coming with the intent to murder him. He told the elders to seize the runner when he came in and bar the door. As they stood holding the door against the arrest party, the King shouted through the door. Since this dire situation was the doing of Jehovah, why should the King honor Him?

7:1-2 – Elisha had an answer. By that time the next day, prices for food would be back to normal. That is, the whole thing would be over and daily life would be as it was before, the famine eased, and the invaders gone. A chief minister of the King asked sarcastically how this could be. Experience alone indicated this promise from Elisha was mere babbling. Was Jehovah going to open windows in the sky to rain food on the city? It would still not be enough. Even God could not make that promise come true. Elisha solemnly promised the official would see it, but not live to enjoy it.

9.12: Syria and Judah Decline

In about 853 BC, Assyria crossed the Euphrates and invaded the area far to the north of

Damascus, near the Orontes River. There was a fierce battle at Qarqar in which the combined forces of Ben-hadad of Syria, the Omride Dynasty of Israel and Hamath backed by a collection of petty kings in that area blocked the Assyrians. As best we can tell, the battle was a draw. Shalmaneser of Assyria recorded a victory but didn't come back to advance further for some years. We believe he exaggerated and was rebuilding after massive troop losses. Neither he nor his empire had lost interest in this area. They would eventually take revenge on all who met them at Qarqar.

2 Kings 7:3-8 – We return to Syria's siege of Samaria, already weakened by famine. Recall that lepers were not allowed to enter homes of the healthy, or most cities. A city of any significant size might have several former residents stricken with leprosy, allowed to stay in hovels not far from the gates. Their families would typically bring food out to them. During this famine, there was no food to bring them. Even if they dared enter the city, sneaking in without giving the customary warning, they would still find no food. These four lepers decided the only thing left was to go out to the Syrian camp. If they were driven off, it would at least break the boredom. Given Syrian attitudes about lepers, they may well be received and fed in exchange for information about the city. In the worst case, they would be killed outright, which they decided would be a relief. The distance would have been at least 100 yards (91m), just out of bowshot from archers atop the city wall. Waiting until darkness began to fall, they crept out cautiously only to find the Syrian camp empty.

Sometime during the day, the Syrians had deserted their camp in haste, having heard what they thought was the sound of an approaching hoard of chariots. There were only two nations capable of fielding a mass of chariots then. The tattered remains of the Second Hittite Empire, who had introduced iron weapons and chariots to that area, were still quite powerful and numerous. The petty kings who claimed the legacy of the Hittites in far northern Mesopotamia were known to hire out their armies as mercenaries. The Egyptians were not mercenaries, but could also field a huge number of chariots. While no friend of Jews, they were even less friendly with Syria. An army of infantry could not get close enough to effectively strike without drawing notice in advance. An army of chariots could camp far away and attack unexpectedly after a traveling all day, as they could advance faster than a runner bearing the alarm. The Syrians fled before they could find out. Thus, the lepers found the place deserted and immediately ate to the full, and then began plundering.

7:9-15 – Their conscience struck them before long. They realized, as well, that if they delayed until dawn to inform the defenders of the city, they would justly deserve punishment. The lifting of a siege against a starving city was not something that could wait until morning. They went in the darkness of early evening and reported to the soldiers at the gate. The message was passed to the King, who decided it was a trap, much like the one sprung on the Moabites in the Valley of Zered just a few years before. The need being so urgent, the commanders suggested a search party using the few horses left. We note they had already been eating donkeys, which were also not kosher. Two chariots went out, each pulled by two horses. They circled the camp and followed the main road toward the Jordan crossing, on the way back to Damascus. All along the route were the kinds of personal property dropped by men fleeing in haste for their lives. They came back and reported what they found to the King.

7:16-19 – Though it was probably near midnight now, the residents of the city rushed out to plunder the camp. That there was no battle fought prevented soldiers from claiming prior right. The Syrians had been exceedingly well supplied and prices in the city quickly came down to normal. It was also noted the fate of the officer, here called third in command from the King, who sarcastically commented to Elisha that afternoon that God Himself could not have provided such food supply. He had been assigned command of the gate, which would include the open market square near the gate, to keep order before the mob was released. When the city got word that the siege was lifted, they rushed the gates and trampled this officer to death. This is recorded in the narrative along with a recount of the verbal exchange he had with Elisha.

8:1-6 – Sometime before all this, Elisha had warned a friend of bad times – the noble lady of Shunem who had been such a good supporter of Elisha. She it was to whom God had given a son, then raised him from death by Elisha’s hand. Eventually she became a widow. The context of the story in chapter 4 indicated the woman was considerably younger than her husband and this was not uncommon at that time and place. Elisha went to her with warning the famine had just begun and would last another seven years. She moved her household to Philistia. Displaced Jews would probably have crowded the coastal plains, but Philistia had been quite subdued since their last venture (ch. 3). With famine just beginning, she would have left without finding a buyer. The property would be considered abandoned and occupied by whoever dared make the first move to take it, most likely some less noble family. Returning after the famine, she found herself locked out of her own home. Having no husband to make a case before the King, she naturally went to Elisha.

This was probably not long after the Syrians had fled. King Jehoram was feeling a bit of admiration for the prophet who had proclaimed their deliverance. Jehoram had asked the disgraced Gehazi, former servant of Elisha, about his master’s other miracles. While recounting the story of the Shunamite lady and the resuscitation of her son, she appeared with Elisha to make her case before the King. Gehazi pointed this out to the King, so he naturally asked her to confirm the story. He was so swayed by the tale he not only ordered her lands returned to her, as she asked, but added that she should be paid rent from the profits gained by the occupiers.

8:7-15 – Some twenty years earlier, Elijah had returned from his depression in the Sinai Wilderness and anointed Hazael to replace Ben-hadad over Damascus and Jehu to end the Omride Dynasty in Israel (1 Kings 19:15-16). The man Elijah had anointed his own successor would now stir these men to claim their thrones. It was about 847 BC when Elisha went off to Damascus for a visit. At that time, Ben-hadad had become very ill and believed he might die. When he heard the famous Elisha was in town, who had healed his Field Marshal, Naaman, he sent messengers with a much larger gift to inquire of Jehovah if he was dying. The much larger gift, requiring forty camels to bear, reflects his claim to be a petty emperor. The man in charge of the delegation was Hazael, Ben-hadad’s chamberlain.

So great was the respect for Elisha that Hazael addressed the prophet as superior to the King. Elisha gave to Hazael an unexpected answer to Ben-hadad’s question. His words make clear he saw right into the heart of the man. First, he knew Hazael had already planned to kill his master. He told him, in essence to carry out that plan and lie to the King by telling him he would recover. Then Elisha stared at him until the Chamberlain was embarrassed. Tears came

into the prophet's eyes and Hazael, eager to say anything to deflect attention from his shame, asked why the weeping. Elisha described Hazael as revealed by Jehovah, a man who was already planning to make war on Israel and the kind of man who would not simply accept victory and surrender, but would execute his prisoners of war, murder male children and rip open the wombs of pregnant women. Hazael would try to exterminate the entire nation of Israel by killing every male and any who might eventually be born male. Hazael protested he was unworthy of the attention of God and could not bring himself to such acts. Elisha's only answer was to remind Hazael he was going to become King of Syria. So Hazael returned to Court, lied to his king, and then suffocated him to death the next day, using a wet blanket. Ben-hadad lacked the strength even to uncover his face at that point. Ancient texts in Assyria mention the event, referring to the usurper Hazael as "the son of nobody."

2 Chronicles 21:1-11 – This passage parallels **2 Kings 8:16-24** but includes more detail. It was during that same year of Ben-hadad's death that the aging Jehoshaphat of Judah died. He had passed much of his authority since 853 BC to his son, named Jehoram like the King of Israel. The other sons were given wealth and authority over major cities within the realm. This Jehoram of Judah also sinned like his namesake of the Omrides. We are told he took the scepter at age 32 and reigned until he was 40 (848-841 BC). As soon as his father passed, he hunted down his brothers and murdered them. Not content with that, he liquidated anyone remotely in line for the throne. Apparently, his sinful path was in large degree due to his wife, Athaliah, a daughter of Jezebel and Ahab. Rather than take it out on the nation of Judah, the Lord kept His promise and found other ways to punish their King.

For example, the dominance over Edom was lost. We aren't sure, but it seems the name Zair was the latest pronunciation for Seir, the mountain in Edom on which the ancient capital stood. As a response to their revolt, Jehoram took his army down and camped in preparation to lay siege to the city. The Edomite defense forces moved in to surround them, preparing an ambush for dawn. Jehoram surprised them by attacking in the darkness before the Edomites could get in place. Yet the Edomites remained in a state of active revolt from that time on. Their restiveness incited Libnah, a large city of the Philistines, to revolt as well. Meanwhile, the king sponsored pagan shrines in high places near Jerusalem, following the same behavior as Ahab, his father-in-law.

21:12-15 – So it was odd timing when a long-delayed letter from Elijah was delivered to him. It's safe to guess Elisha kept it for this time. Elijah left the earth about one year into this king's coregency with his father. The letter condemned Jehoram for the same sins Elijah so actively fought under Ahab. His punishment would be a nasty intestinal ailment that afflicted his entire sin-stained household. It would be so severe his intestines would burst from his body – most likely something akin to dysentery.

21:16-17 – Of course, Jehoram of Judah did not heed the Word of the Lord. So, late in his reign the Philistines as a whole rebelled and hired some Arabian raiders who had been living in the Sinai between Philistia and Egypt (ruled at that time by Ethiopia), to come up with them and raid across Judah. They managed to break into Jerusalem and pillage the royal palace, murdering the king's sons, leaving only his youngest, Jehoahaz (also spelled Ahaziah).

During this time frame, we know from the words of the Prophet Obadiah that Edom committed

a major crime. While never long at peace, the Edomites and Israelis were blood kin. By custom, while they might fight and kill each other, neither would attempt to occupy the land of the other. There was an assumption they would attempt to ward off common enemies. Obadiah tells us Edom had sunk so far below any hint of righteousness they willingly sold out to the enemies of their cousins. During the attacks by Philistia and the Arabs, Edom captured all the civilian refugees departing the area. They then sold these people as slaves, with Philistia as a broker. It's rather difficult to explain how heinous a crime this was. The popular response at that time would be equivalent to any modern-day atrocity, on a par perhaps with the My Lai Massacre. It wasn't even for the money, but sheer hatred and perversity. For this act favorable to Philistia, they were permitted to participate in the plunder of Jerusalem. It's not known when Obadiah the Prophet lived and wrote, but it is quite certain he refers to this event.

21:18-20 – Perhaps the raiders carried diseases with them for which Jehoram had no resistance. He became painfully ill, lingered in this state, declining over two years. His death came as a relief to all, and he was unmourned. He was buried in the city cemetery, but not among the royal tombs.

9.13: Judgment and Chaos

With the death of Ben-hadad in Damascus things were naturally a little chaotic before Hazael could assert full control from the throne. Taking advantage of the turmoil, Jehoram of Israel managed to re-take Ramoth-gilead. He persuaded the new king of Judah, Ahaziah, to join him. While they succeeded, both were injured in battle when Hazael counter-attacked from Damascus (2 Kings 8:28-29). They managed to hold the city, though. Jehoram was worse off and Ahaziah came to visit him recovering in the summer palace at Jezreel. The timing was perfect for a move of God's hand.

2 Chronicles 22:1-9 – We saw the end of Jehoram of Judah, much to everyone's relief. His youngest son, Ahaziah, was the sole survivor of the Arabian raid on Jerusalem. The elders made him king, which may indicate some dispute over succession. We note this passage says he was 42, but 2 Kings 8 makes him 22, reminding us numerical corruption is frequent in Hebrew texts. Given the context, the younger age is more likely. His choice to follow the evil ways of his father and mother justified God giving him not even a full year on the throne. He had chosen to continue using the services of the Omride counselors his father had brought into Jerusalem. After the battle at Ramoth-gilead, Jehoram retired to the palace in Jezreel, where his young nephew, Ahaziah, came to see him. What follows received expanded treatment in 2 Kings 9.

2 Kings 9:1-10 – Elisha sent one of his students to handle the next task. Recall that Elijah had already once anointed Jehu to destroy the Omride Dynasty and become King of Israel (1 Kings 19:16ff) some 24 years earlier. This reaffirmation of that anointing was to stir immediate action. Jehu had been left in command of the garrison occupying the recently re-taken Ramoth-gilead. The student prophet was told to do the act, and then flee immediately without bothering to close the door as he went out.

Upon arriving at the garrison headquarters, the young prophet asked to see the commander in private for a message from Jehovah. Confirming it was for the commander himself, they went inside the private quarters. After the ceremonial pouring of oil on the Jehu's head, the student

prophesied that God Himself had anointed him King of Israel. He was chosen to avenge the murder of His prophets at the hand of Ahab and Jezebel. No living male was to escape; the entire extended family was to meet the same fate as that of Jeroboam and Baasha. Finally, Jezebel was to be left for dog food. Then the young prophet fled.

9:11-13 – As Jehu came down the stairs to the common area, his subordinates were waiting with bated breath. Having seen the student flee, they asked what the “madman” had to say. He played it off as something they had staged. They would have none of it, insisting he divulge what was obviously something important and unknown to them. When he told them about being anointed King of Israel, they seized the moment to proclaim their support. This was done in the customary fashion, where they laid their garments for him to walk on and blew *shofars* to draw attention to the fact, shouting in the streets that all should now join the acclamation.

9:14-16 – Jehu was far from arrogant, but quite a man of action. His orders rested on the will of the people. That is, if they were going to make him king, there were certain things that went with that. It was well known that Jehoram, like any good king, especially a son of Ahab, kept spies all over his realm. Jehu commanded the gates of the city closed to all civilian traffic so that none of those spies slipped out to report the rebellion. Then he left town with a company of trusted aides in heavy battle chariots for Jezreel.

9:17-20 – Jehu lost no time in going straight to the summer palace at Jezreel. He drove his chariot like a madman. The watchman in the tower saw him afar off, coursing the wide flat valley of Jezreel. Yelling down to his superior, he described the rapidly approaching company of chariots. Having just come from a battle at Ramoth-gilead, the king was concerned what this might be. A single chariot would be a messenger almost certainly signaling new trouble there. A whole company made him uneasy, and he sent a light chariot of his own to meet the approaching group to see what was going on. When the messenger delivered his request for news, Jehu responded it didn't matter and ordered the charioteer to follow in his train. We see here that Jehu was obviously quite popular and influential in the military services of Israel, for the messenger obeyed, probably aware of what it all meant. The tower watch reported what he saw and another messenger followed, again enlisted in the new order of things. Upon seeing this, the watchman noted by now he could tell it was Jehu in the lead.

9:21-26 – Jehoram knew there was in trouble, but not what kind. He ordered his own chariot readied. Both kings went out in their chariots and confronted Jehu on the garden plot Ahab had taken from Naboth. When he greeted Jehu, his question was more than just the polite, “Shalom!” It was a genuine question as to what the situation for the kingdom was. Jehu's response was to bluntly declare there could be no “shalom” so long as the Queen Mother Jezebel was alive and active. With a shout of warning to Ahaziah that treachery was afoot, Jehoram turned and fled. Jehu had an arrow ready and drew his bow full length; the arrow struck Jehoram square in the back and pierced his heart. With no driver, the chariot halted. Jehu, recalling the message from Jehovah condemning Ahab for taking Naboth's vineyard, ordered his captain Bidkar to dump the body in that plot of land. This would fulfill the prophecy of blood for blood on that soil.

9:27-29 – It was clear the idea was to exterminate every relative of Ahab. This branch of the House of David had become completely intertwined with the House of Omri. As a grandson of

Ahab, Ahaziah fled, and the story is a little confused at first between the texts in Kings and Chronicles. After fleeing the execution of his uncle Jehoram outside Jezreel, he headed south to Samaria. The young king had a good head start, as he had ducked behind the garden house to avoid being an easy target. Ahaziah hid among the nobles in the Israeli capital, but Jehu's troops found him. They dragged him back to Jehu and the two met outside Ibleam, about halfway between the two royal cities of Jezreel and Samaria. There the road climbed steeply to the City of Ibleam, and it was where Jehu ordered one of his soldiers to shoot Ahaziah with an arrow while he stood in his chariot, same as Jehoram. It was not immediately fatal, so he fled to the fortress at Megiddo. It was there he died sometime later. His body was returned to Jerusalem for burial.

9:30-37 – There is no doubt Jezebel was quite a bit younger than Ahab when they were married. We aren't certain of Jehoram's age when Jehu killed him, but it seems Jehu the usurper was a good bit older, having served as an adult under Ahab. Thus, Jezebel may well have been a bit younger than Jehu, certainly no older. For her to pretend to entice him by her beauty to let her live was not unreasonable. Calling to him from the top floor window of the palace near the gate, she attempted to stop him by reminding him that Zimri, a century before, had committed regicide and lived but a week or so. She pretended to care about Jehu's future. He called out to the servants and asked if any supported him. A handful of eunuchs, male servants committed to serving in the royal harem, signaled readiness to give him their allegiance. He ordered them to throw Jezebel out the window. He was positioned on the pavement just below the window and her impact splattered blood everywhere. He immediately turned his horses to trample her body. By now the entire palace serving staff were aware of the new order of things and served him as king. After his first royal meal in the summer palace, he ordered a proper burial for Jezebel as royal family. When the servants reported finding only a few fragments, he remarked it was according to the prophecy of the student of Elisha. The parts they found were symbolic: she was so evil, even scavenging dogs wouldn't eat some parts. The head in ancient times was anointed as the place of the mind and memory, the hands as symbols of power and action, with feet as taking the path to which one was committed.

10:1-8 – Eventually Jehu went down to Samaria to make a clean sweep. First, he gave the city elders a chance to decide whether they would accept him as king. He sent a letter instructing them to decide who should succeed Jehoram so that they could rally around him if they intended to resist Jehu. They wrote back asking what they could do to indicate their capitulation. As any good king, Ahab had parceled his numerous sons out to be raised by trusted noblemen. This kept the lesser sons out of the heir's way but insured they would be trained for any royal service. It was a mark of honor to the noble families and served to enhance their loyalty by giving them greater prestige. Jehu told the city leaders he wanted the seventy surviving sons of Ahab beheaded. As proof, they were to deliver those heads to him by the same time the next day. When those heads were delivered, he had them piled in two heaps on either side of the gate of Jezreel.

10:9-11 – The next morning, Jehu called together the local leaders and servants of the Court. Such an assembly was normally held in the public square inside the city gates. With the two piles of rotting heads as a backdrop, he gave a speech. First, he told the people something

equivalent to, “You be the judge.” He freely admitted conspiring to usurp the throne by murdering the king, but disavowed direct responsibility for the execution of the surviving Omrides. He spoke of how this was all according to the Word of God. Thus, the continued executions would be the will of both God and the people. Jehu slaughtered everyone close to the former royal household.

10:12-14 – Somewhere on the way between Jezreel and Samaria was a large sheep-shearing floor with a building for storing the wool. At this place, Jehu encountered a large group of important-looking folks. When asked, they revealed they were first cousins of Ahaziah, whose body had not yet returned from Megiddo. Thus, they had no idea what was going on. He suddenly ordered his troops to capture them. They were trooped down to the well, away from the road, where all 42 men were slaughtered. This represents the entire surviving male population of the royal household in Judah, with a few exceptions.

10:15-17 – We recall a clan of Moses’ in-laws, named Kenites, had joined the Exodus. We know them as a branch of the Midianites, cousins of Israel through Ishmael. Those who joined the Exodus were adopted into the Tribe of Judah. We can’t be certain of their status under the Covenant, but they had been unquestionably faithful to Jehovah since the time of Abraham. Scribes and coppersmiths by profession, they retained their nomadic lifestyle, moving freely on neutral terms around the area. The head of the family at one point was named Rechab and he had formalized their unique identity. He gave orders that they should ever live in tents, never drink wine and always provide refuge to those wounded and sick. This later gave them the name Rechabites. It was one of their numbers who had welcomed Sisera during the judgeship of Deborah (Judges 4:14ff). On the way to Samaria, Jehu met one of their leaders named Jehonadab. This Kenite would have been a major figure in opposition to the Omride dynasty, faithful to Jehovah. Jehu asked if Jehonadab approved of this purge, implying he wanted to forge a political alliance. Jehonadab accepted and joined Jehu in his chariot. Entering Samaria, this was an unmistakable signal to all. Thus, the executions in Samaria that followed gained a far greater credence by the old opposition party. It was indeed a fulfillment of Jehovah’s command.

9.14: *Divided Monarchy Declines*

The year 841 BC saw tremendous changes in the Divided Kingdom. Jehu slaughtered the royal households of Israel and Judah. In doing this, he broke the bond of alliance between the two kingdoms. He also broke the alliance with Phoenicia on the coast. Fifty years earlier, Ahab sent 2000 chariots to fight Shalmaneser at Qarqar. Jehu’s son will send tribute to Assyria, breaking what few ties there were with Syria. In every way, destroying the works of an idolatrous Omride Dynasty, he destroyed the civil peace. That in itself was no sin, but his failure was in turning away from Jehovah’s guidance and power.

2 Kings 10:18-28 – Jehu devised a sneaky plan. He declared in Samaria that his service to Melkart would make Ahab’s household seem disinterested by comparison. In preparation for a massive great offering, he required every priest and every serious devotee of Baal to gather in the temple. It seemed legitimate, even to the point of passing out the sacred robes for all the participants. Once everything and everyone was ready, he ordered them all to double check

that no follower of Jehovah had slipped in. Then, he stepped outside and ordered his select warriors to slaughter everyone in the temple. It was strictly enforcing Covenant Law to slaughter the priests of Melkart, but slaughtering all the worshipers was going overboard. There was nothing wrong with destroying the pagan temple.

10:29-36 – In the end we see that Jehu never really cared about Jehovah. His was a rule of military brutality. While exceeding the mandate by killing so many might be forgivable, his adherence to mere politics disqualified him. The Lord gave him a chance to do right, but Jehu turned to the cult centers founded by Jeroboam for purely political reasons. He was granted a dynasty of four generations on the strength of his initial obedience. For his tossing away the last chance for Israel to turn around, during his reign Hazael began seizing the East Bank of the Jordan bit by bit. By the end of his 28-year reign, Israel had lost nearly all of Gilead and the grassy highlands.

11:1-3 – The parallel passage is **2 Chronicles 22** and **23** for this section. Eventually the body of Ahaziah was returned to Jerusalem. Word of the execution of his adult cousins also arrived about the same time. It was the end of the line for those who worshiped Melkart, except for one: Athaliah, daughter of Ahab and Jezebel. She finished off the younger cousins of Ahaziah and any of his children, but one escaped. An aunt saved the infant named Joash (also Jehoash) from grandmother's wrath. His rescuer was Jehosheba, daughter of Jehoram, half-sister of Ahaziah and wife of Jehoiada, the High Priest of God. The infant boy was quickly transferred to the custody of the priests in the Temple of Solomon. There he was raised during the six years his grandmother reigned.

The text says little of this, but Athaliah was hardly idle. She built up a temple to Melkart and established Jerusalem as the new center of his worship. She made every effort to prevent support for the Temple of Jehovah but couldn't penetrate the security excluding women to get at Joash. That she was so poorly supported by residents of the city and elders from all over simply goaded her to greater wrath. Tradition indicates she committed a number of atrocities, but we cannot be certain of the details.

11:4-12 – Jehoiada was also busy as High Priest. **2 Chronicles 23** provides some details. The commanders of the Cherthites, the Royal Bodyguard, began campaigning politically across the realm. They drew in the Levites and some of the priests who had been forcibly retired from temple service under the previous three kings. By the time the boy king was seven, there were enough supporters to field a very substantial guard rotation. They were armed from the ancient weapons stashed in the Temple by David and Solomon. On a certain Sabbath, the boy was brought out to the pillars of the Temple. There he was given a copy of the Law of Moses, in a literal fulfillment of the Law itself. The guards who typically prevented unconsecrated people from entering the Court of Priests were actually more of a guard to prevent interference with the ceremony. On reserve were the other two shifts of priests and Levites, who had been kept around instead of being dismissed after their service. Thus, the maximum personnel available during a rotation of duties were still on hand. This was sufficient strength to enable the declaration that Joash was the King.

11:13-16 – Such an announcement would naturally be well received by the population in attendance at Sabbath worship; it was probably a high holy day, as well. The noise attracted

even more support from the less important rabble in the city. The increasing racket drew the attention of the Queen. She forced her way somewhat into the Temple grounds, stopping at the terrace that separated the Court of Women and the Court of Israel. When she began to scream about treason, Jehoiada ordered her removed from the Temple grounds before executing her. The guards marched her east to the Horse Gate and killed her. Anyone foolish enough to support her was also executed.

11:17-21 – So it was in 835 BC, Athaliah was executed, and a seven-year-old boy was placed on the Throne of David. Under Jehoiada's tutelage, the boy swore a covenant with the Lord and the nation. Both King and people would serve Jehovah. To seal the deal, the crowd went to the temple lavished by Athaliah and tore it down, executing the priest. Such action would have provoked the few supporters of Athaliah left, causing them to identify themselves by opposing the destruction. Once all was right, there was a ceremonial march from the Temple to the Royal Court. The land had peace with Athaliah gone.

9.15: Syrian Threat Continues

The boy-king Joash was faithful to Jehovah only so long as his mentor, Jehoida the High Priest lived. His sins bring a measure of destruction to Judah. Meanwhile, things in Israel begin to turn around.

2 Chronicles 24:1-3 – The parallel passage is **2 Kings 12**. We are given a quick overview of Joash's reign. During the life of Jehoida, the High Priest, this king did well. When the elder priest died, sometime after 813 BC, things went downhill fast. Even during his tutelage, the people were allowed to practice an impure worship of Jehovah on the various high places throughout Judah.

24:4-14 – Sometime around the death of Jehoida, Joash decided the vandalism of Athaliah's followers on the Temple should be repaired. The general lack of maintenance was obvious even without the intentional damage. Joash ordered the priests and Levites to divert some of the Temple income to the repairs. He even commissioned them to go out and solicit a building fund offering throughout the realm. However, the Temple staff had long done things their own way and never seemed to find enough extra beyond their own needs and current daily expenses. There seemed no time to collect anything not brought in by worshipers. After a couple of years of this, Joash came down hard on the Temple staff. He ordered them to specifically collect the half-shekel Temple Tax (Exodus 30:14-16), which, up to that point, had been technically embezzled for other purposes. He forced them to apply it to facilities maintenance as the Law of Moses required. He further ordered they add to that any offerings made as substitutionary atonement – first born sons, various accidental ritual defilements, etc. – along with any freewill offerings specifically given for the building fund.

This was all collected in a designated chest, with a slot in the top to receive the offerings. At this time, there was no regular coinage. A shekel of silver was a standard weight of about 0.4 ounces (11.4g) and most tokens were square-cut from a standard thickness sheet of hammered silver. These tokens were various fractions or multiples of a shekel. It's quite likely the sheets produced for this purpose had lines embossed on the surface to mark these gradations. The chest was guarded, counted each day. At first the collections were taken next to the altar, but

since the atonement offerings could not be brought into the Temple court itself, the chest was moved to the outer gate.

Joash announced throughout the kingdom the purpose of the chest and offerings, which was favorably received. They made it a point to bring extra for the offering during this time of renewal of the Covenant. The King and appointed managers of the offering were thrilled with the strong response. With an urgency that bypassed the normal accounting procedures, the daily offering was given directly to the maintenance crews. We note they were wholly honest in their dealings, so the Temple was restored. Not until the buildings were up to standard was any of the silver used to replace the Temple furnishings defiled by Athaliah.

24:15-27 – Within a few years, Jehoida died of old age at 130 years. In honor of his faithful service to the House of David, he was given a place in the Royal Cemetery. The higher-ranking noblemen of Judah, usually referred to as the Princes, came to visit the King. As a class, they were most likely to chafe under the Law of Moses. They lobbied the King to soften some of Jehoidah's rules, taking advantage of Joash's vanity. In no time they had rebuilt their shrines to Baal and Astarte. They led astray the citizens and brought God's condemnation on the whole realm.

Several prophets gave warning this could be fatal. Zechariah, the son of Jehoida, Joash's mentor, was one of them. His message embarrassed and infuriated the King. As a priest, he was in an excellent position to use the Altar platform for a few sermons. During one of these messages, he was knocked off and stoned to death. Jesus makes mention of his death between the Altar and the Temple (Luke 11:51). It was during this time we probably have the prophecy of Joel. He seems to have warned of the approaching army of Syria as a manifestation of the Day of the Lord, a judgment on sin. Apparently, this was preceded by ample warning in the form of a massive locust swarm ("Joel's Army") followed by drought.

This accords well with what happened during the same year of Joash's treachery against the Zechariah. Hazael of Damascus had gone down and destroyed Philistine Gath, then turned and marched toward Jerusalem. Along that route, he passed several strongholds of Judean nobles. He plundered their homes and cities and took hostages. Presented with this threat, Joash stripped the Temple and palace to buy him off. The Army of Judah, having starved a year or two and living in sin, were hardly a match for the single Syrian battalion that defeated them in the field, and then camped outside the walls of Jerusalem. Taking the tribute, they left the city after abusing and wounding all the able men of the royal court. Given this all was the result of arrogant sin, it was no surprise Jehoahaz was executed a short time later by members of his own bodyguard, who took advantage of his condition. His son, Amaziah, succeeded him in 796 BC.

2 Kings 13:1-9 – During the long, 40-year reign of Joash in Judah, Israel went through two more kings. Jehu died in 814 BC and was succeeded by his son, Jehoahaz. No wiser than his predecessors, he maintained the rival temples at Bethel, Gath-Ephraim, Dan and elsewhere. During his sixteen years on the throne, Jehoahaz found himself constantly under the thumb of Hazael of Damascus. Having long ago lost the East Jordan lands, Syria now began raiding and ruling parts of the West Bank. Eventually Jehoahaz realized only Jehovah could deliver him; he began praying and fasting. The Lord responded, sending some unnamed hero who stirred the puny Army of Israel to victory. However, due to his leaving all the pagan shrines in place, the

king did not see this deliverance before he died in 798 BC.

13:10-19 – Another Joash (also spelled Jehoash) succeeded his father, Jehoahaz. Thus, kings with the same name briefly ruled Judah and Israel again. By this time, the ruling class can no longer comprehend that golden calves cannot be used to worship Jehovah. The practice is deeply entrenched, though we see no return to Baal worship, yet. During this reign, Elisha the Prophet lay on his deathbed. Coming to pay his respects, the King wept over him. His comment about the “Chariot of Israel” translates roughly to the idea that, when Elisha was gone, Israel would lose her one best source of enlightenment and strength.

Elisha had one last message. He instructed the King to take up his bow and arrows and bring them to the bedside. While the King held the bow, Elisha wrapped his hands around the King’s. He then had him open the east window of the room and shoot an arrow out. Just so, the Army of Syria would fall at Aphek, a popular battleground. Then Elisha told the King to grasp the rest of the arrows in a bundle and strike the ground to symbolize laying his enemies in the dust. Failing completely to grasp the significance, the King responds rather perfunctorily, simply doing as told instead of acting from any passion for the nation. He stopped after three strokes. Elisha angrily censured him for failing to show any real zeal. While he would defeat Syria three times, he would not destroy her. Again, for lack of royal interest, Jehovah would not end the threat of Damascus.

13:20-25 – Even in death, Elisha’s miracles prove the faithfulness of God. After Elisha’s funeral, Moab comes up and raids, most likely in Elisha’s hometown area of Abel-meholah. There was an Israeli honor guard preparing to inter a soldier who died in the fighting. They spied a band of Moabite raiders, dropped the body in Elisha’s grave, and gave pursuit. The body touched the skeletal remains of Elisha and promptly revived, ready to join the battle again. We note again the Syrians had been harassing Israel all during the reign of Jehoahaz. His earnest plea before he died was heard and Hazael died, probably killed in that first battle of Aphek prophesied by Elisha on his deathbed. Hazael was succeeded by his son, Ben-hadad II, who continued the losing streak. Not just the West Bank cities, but Joash of Israel also recovered the East Bank cities lost to Hazael long before. In three successive battles, Gilead was restored to Israel. Given the overlapping dates of Joash and his son, Jeroboam II, in co-regency we can safely assume the latter had a lot to do with these military victories, perhaps as “the deliverer” mentioned earlier.

9.16: Depths and Recovery

While the story begins with the wars of Amaziah, King of Judah, he suffers severe losses. They came at the hands of Israel. The Lord gives the northern kingdom one last chance to turn. The parallel passage is **2 Kings 14** and part of **15**. After reaching its nadir, Judah later rises from the ashes to prosperity under Uzziah.

2 Chronicles 25:1-4 – In 796 BC, Amaziah takes the throne of Judah. His reign is described as halfway faithful in the beginning. He fails to assert his authority to break down the paganized shrines to Jehovah on the high places, but it appears he clamped down on the pagan worship of the Princes of Judah. Upon settling all the legal requirements to actually reign, he immediately executes his father’s murders. However, it is noted he strictly follows the Law of Moses in not executing their entire households, something common in those times.

25:5-10 – Right away, Amaziah took a military census, reorganized, and then mustered the forces. His army was far reduced from former times. This should indicate a general decline in population, as well. Asa in his day (ch. 14) had fielded 580,000, representing a healthy population of at least 2 million. 125 years later we have Amaziah's 300,000 troops, just over half. The primary weapons were heavy spear and shield. Raiding the royal treasury, he hired another 100,000 from Ephraim. His plans were to reconquer Edom, which had been free for some 50 years. No doubt this was also in retribution for the hideous act described by Obadiah. Amaziah promptly received a visit from a prophet. He was warned that whatever he planned should not include pagans from his northern neighbor. If he brought them along, God would not prosper any military action. Without them, God would surely deliver victory. When Amaziah asked about the money already spent, the prophet assured him Jehovah could easily replace it, with more beside. The Ephraimite troops were dismissed and took it as a grave insult.

25:11-13 – After making sure the troops were fully equipped and supplied, Amaziah marched to the southern end of the Dead Sea, the Valley of Salt. There he met and defeated the army of Edom. During the mop up that followed, he took their capital, Selah, today known as Petra. Edom lost 10,000 casualties in battle and as many in executions. They were thrown from a cliff. The victory is according to the prophet's promise from the Lord, but the executions were probably excessive. Meanwhile, the mercenaries from Ephraim decided to conduct their own war, raiding the cities of northwestern Benjamin (this "Samaria" is clearly not the capital of Israel). They murdered and plundered disgracefully.

25:14-16 – The idols captured from Edom were probably made of precious materials. Instead of stripping them down for the treasure, they were left intact like trophies, and eventually became a spiritual snare. Amaziah made them his own household gods, the same gods that had no power to prevent his victory over Edom. When a prophet pointed this out to him, the king ordered him to shut up, lest he be killed. The prophet's final words were to note he realized the Lord had already judged Amaziah and there was no going back.

25:17-28 – Amaziah was feeling powerful after his victory over Edom. He decided to challenge Joash of Israel, no doubt as retribution for what the mercenaries of Ephraim had done. His message demanded that Joash appear before him as tributary or face him in battle. Joash responded by warning him of his arrogance. Having dispatched the great armies of Syria, the military power of Israel was well proven. Amaziah was warned his over-reaching would lose him the glory of defeating Edom. Amaziah insisted, it is noted because the Lord had determined to judge him, and set the battlefield in Beth-shemesh, down in the Valley of Sorek. The two kings did indeed meet face to face, but the battle went to Israel. The army of Judah disbanded in defeat.

Having captured Amaziah, Joash dragged him up Mount Zion, making him watch while the troops of Israel tore down the entire northern end of the wall of Jerusalem. Symbolically, this declared the city open to her northern neighbors, to come and go as they pleased. Joash plundered the palace and Temple, as well. Finally, he also took hostages, including Obed-edom, the family of Levitical porters and singers. A few years later (782 BC), Joash died. His son, Jeroboam II, having already served some years as co-regent, took the throne and was very prosperous. Amaziah lived another 15 years until 767 BC. However, the text is a bit fuzzy here.

A plot arose against the king in reaction to his paganism, reaching fever pitch with the humiliating loss to Israel. His son, Azariah, had been made co-regent as early as 790 BC, starting when he was 16 years old. This was rather irregular and indicates the urgency of the rulers to dump Amaziah. It places all his actions in a short, six-year time frame. The nature of the plot forced Amaziah to flee, a sort of forced retirement to the city of Lachish, far southwest of Jerusalem. It was straight west of Hebron, on the main road to Egypt. Amaziah must have stirred up trouble eventually, as the conspirators sent assassins to finish him and haul his body back home to the royal cemetery.

26:1-5 – Azariah is introduced by his other name, Uzziah. Both names mean approximately the same thing: “Jehovah is his Help.” Upon entering his co-regency at age 16, the princes and nobles stopped paying any attention to his father. Once Amaziah was entombed, Uzziah went to work. His first notable act was to restore Eloth, part of the mining and shipping complex formerly known as Ezion-geber, down on the Gulf of Aqaba. This would bring trade, prosperity and a resultant population growth. With his reign beginning at his co-regency, he ruled 52 years, one of the longest careers. As a young lad, while the priest Zechariah still lived (ch. 24:20ff), Uzziah began seeking the Lord. His career prospered as long as that continued. His only failing was leaving the paganized shrines to Jehovah, called “high places.”

26:6-15 – Uzziah was a very able ruler. He reasserted Judah’s power over the Philistines, destroyed the walls around their chief cities, and then built garrisons with supporting villages near those conquered cities. The Philistine allies, nomadic tribes out in the southern wilderness, were also pacified. Even the Ammonites paid tribute to Judah. Jerusalem was rebuilt and fortified with corner towers. He also built towered forts in the southern wilderness and dug lots of wells. He even kept his own cattle there and in the Ammonite plateaus east of the Jordan, which had been lost to Israel previously. He planted his own vineyards in the other Carmel, south of Hebron. We are told he loved farming. His army was better organized than most before it, with a large cadre of 2600 noble warriors commanding as many as 307,500 conscripts. Uzziah was the first we know of who provided armor for his conscripts, as well as a wide array of weapons. If that were not enough, he hired engineers to build primitive catapults and ballistae (launching giant arrows) for the towers of Jerusalem.

26:16-23 – Sadly, all this went to his head. Uzziah must have thought himself the equal of David, for he went into the Temple to burn incense like a priest. The Sons of Kohath, Keepers of the Temple, led by their chief with the same name as the King (but consistently called Azariah), did their duty precisely in guarding the Holy Place from unfit men. The Kohathites were probably outfitted as guards, so this large company of 80 was not to be taken lightly. They blocked Uzziah from the Altar of Incense and the confrontation was ugly. They ordered him to leave, as only consecrated priests and Levites could even enter the Temple, much less burn incense. As Uzziah’s anger flared, so did God’s wrath, in the form of leprosy that replaced his red angry skin with white, beginning prominently with his forehead. At this, they immediately hustled him out, as this made his presence downright defiling. They need not have pushed, for in his sudden apprehension of fear, he ran from the Temple courts. From that day, he was forced to live alone in separate quarters, never to enter the Temple Plaza again. His son Jotham took up co-regency in public royal duties, in 750 BC.

Uzziah lived another decade. We note at the end of his reign in 740 BC, a young relative, traditionally believed a half-brother of King Amaziah, was called to prophesy: Isaiah.

9.17: Three Published Prophets

The reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam II together are referred to as the Indian Summer for the nation, a last chance before the storms. Both kingdoms experienced significant prosperity as a declared gift of God, with a final opportunity to turn around. Uzziah did quite well with his chance; his realm lasts for quite some time after him. Jeroboam rejected Jehovah, so Israel soon disappeared. Having already mentioned Obadiah and Joel, we will examine those prophetic books that appear to have been written during this time.

Hosea – From the content of his prophecy we can discern Hosea ministered roughly between 750 and 725 BC. He almost surely knew Isaiah and was contemporary with Amos and Jonah, as well. Hosea personally experienced what it felt for God to deal with Israel. He married a known harlot and named his children as symbols of Israel’s unfaithfulness. He eventually divorced her but love triumphed as he married her again. Hosea shows proof positive that what is mistaken for mere politics is actually a matter of righteousness. He addressed the oppression of the peasantry by heavy taxation and regulation. He survived the fall of Samaria in 722 BC and published his work afterward, during the reign of Hezekiah.

Amos – While we cannot link him to an important ruling family, Amos was clearly better educated than average. He did not bear the office of prophet, merely prophesied once. He was called directly by God from the sheep pastures of Tekoah, a dozen miles south of Jerusalem. He also cultivated fruit-bearing sycamore trees. His phrasing is loaded with images of this pastoral lifestyle. He accepted his prophetic call to Bethel in the northern kingdom, around 760 BC. The comfortable prosperity and the trendy pagan worship practices of the nobility of Israel led them to flout every custom and law. Not only would they not obey the law, but they also actively prevented others, thus denying justice to the citizens. Eventually Amos was driven out of the area near the Bethel shrine, came home and recorded his message.

Jonah – Jonah relates more of his own story than his contemporaries and is named in the historical texts (2 Kings 14:25). He predicted that Jeroboam II would successfully pacify his enemies. Jonah hailed from the area we now call Galilee. The story in his prophetic book takes place sometime between 780 and 750 BC. After the Battle at Qarqar, Assyrian power and threat had subsided a great deal. The imperial capital was then at Caleh, a royal suburb of Nineveh. Imperial records indicate during this time frame the palace took a swing toward monotheism for a time. There were also several major events regarded as portents of divine judgment, including plagues and a total solar eclipse. These may have paved the way for acceptance of Jonah’s message.

Jonah was already a prophet when the Lord directed him to Nineveh, the capital of an empire regarded with some contempt as an especially cruel and rapacious enemy of Israel. As a true patriot, Jonah didn’t want to help the enemy of his people, knowing God would surely be merciful if they repented. Rather than travel northeast up to Charan and back down the Mesopotamian Valley, he headed west down to the Mediterranean coast. There at the Philistine port of Joppa, he took passage on a Phoenician ship headed for Spain (Tarshish). The storm that

struck was completely out of season. The pagan sailors were too far out to simply row back, so they dumped their cargo to gain maximum buoyancy in the huge, high waves. They all prayed loudly and fervently to their various gods. Jonah was asleep when they demanded he join the prayers. God used their pagan ritual of casting lots over who was the target of this storm to indict Jonah. Knowing he would be guilty of their demise if he didn't act, Jonah convinced them to toss him overboard. When they finally did, the storm ceased immediately. No one knows what kind of fish could do this, but it swallowed Jonah and transported him back to the Palestinian coast to be tossed up on the dry shore. When the Word of God came again to direct him to Nineveh, he went.

The entire city-state was known by the name of its chief city, Nineveh. The city-state was the primary political division of the ancient valley since human memory. It would encompass the city walls and all the land around it necessary to provide food and other resources. It was the ancient equivalent of a fiefdom. Jonah wandered the entire district preaching his message for three days. If we could picture a similar modern parallel, Washington DC would compare favorably. In this case, the federal officials remain aloof, but the residents and local government react deeply. Just so, the governor of the district, not the emperor, declares a period of repentance and fasting, even draping domestic herds in sackcloth. God relented on the impending judgment. Jonah argued that this was exactly what he feared. While the obvious message is that Hebrews hating Gentiles simply for being Gentiles was wrong, since Israel was called to be a nation of priests to bring redemption to the Gentiles, there is more to it than that. It indicates beforehand the justice of God when Israel would be destroyed. If a pagan city-state can find God's mercy, surely His own people could. The army based in this Nineveh would become the instrument of God's judgment on Israel.

2 Kings 14:23-29 – Early in Uzziah's reign, Jeroboam II (793-753 BC) succeeded Joash on the throne of Israel. Already established in co-regency with his father, and having commanded the army in three victorious battles against Syria, Jeroboam II was an even better ruler than Uzziah in human terms. His fame eclipsed that of Uzziah and there is evidence Jeroboam influenced him somewhat. The army of Syria went home in defeat, which kingdom soon became a tributary of Israel. Assyria was busy on other fronts, having not yet fully recovered from the massive losses at Qarqar nearly 100 years earlier. The power vacuum allowed Jeroboam II a chance to regain mastery of everything once held by David and Solomon to his north. He ruled as far as the old Kingdom of Hamath. It appears he regained economic control of the entire East Bank of the Jordan down to Ammon. Jonah had prophesied all this. Archaeological digs in Samaria have uncovered the rich splendor of his reign. He doubled the wall around the city, decorated his palace with ivory inlays, and amassed exquisite art from all over. At the same time, he made the spiritual life of his kingdom exceedingly poor. He funded grand improvements to the paganized temples at Dan, Gilgal-ephraim and Bethel. He removed all restraints from the ruling class, creating a horrendous level of oppression on the common folk. Justice became a market commodity, sold to the highest bidder. Crushing and capricious taxation made the peasantry de facto slaves.

Assyria eventually finished business on her other borders and began planning a new invasion. A new class of emperors arises, starting with Tiglath-pileser III. A decade after Jeroboam II

passes Assyria returns with a vengeance. Time is about to run out on Israel.

9.18: Covenant Nadir

Jehovah keeps his promise that Jehu's sons would reign to the fourth generation. The last is promptly replaced, but the pattern continues for all but one of the last kings of Israel. The people continue ignoring the prophets and chaos descends on the nation, both kingdoms.

2 Kings 15:8-12 – In 753 BC, late in the year, Zechariah succeeds his father Jeroboam II on the throne of Israel. His reign is marked by a continuation of the sins of Jeroboam I. He keeps the temples at Dan, Gilgal-ephraim and Bethel active. As the last of four generations in Jehu's dynasty (ch. 10:30) he lived a short six months. He was assassinated publicly, which serves to indicate the nobles weren't upset with it. The obvious reason would be the complete lack of justice noted by the prophets.

15:13-14 – The usurper was named Shallum and he lasted a full month during the year 752 BC. Tradition says it was the general of his army, Menahem, who opposed him. Quartered with the troops in the old capital city of Tirzah, he mobilized the army as soon as he heard of Shallum's act. We have no record of a battle, but it's quite certain Shallum had the support of the Palace Guard, or he could not have seized the throne. At any rate, the throne of Israel had long been a military position. When the royal line dies out, succession went to the commander of the army, so Menahem was merely asserting his rights.

15:15-22 – In his first act as King, Menahem dealt with the only challenge to his rule, the city of Tiphshah, near Tirzah. Most likely, there was some grudge involved that was not recorded. They attempted to hold out against his demands; he destroyed the city and brutally murdered the inhabitants. His reign lasted a brief ten years. During that time, Assyria comes back under the command of Pul (Pulu, also known as Tiglath-pileser III). We know from records that Menahem led troops into battle around 743 BC, probably defending Israel's hold over Hamath far to the north. His ally, Rezin of Damascus, was not enough help, as they lost the battle. Menahem tried to escape but was captured and brought back to Samaria as a puppet ruler under Assyria.

15:23-26 – Apparently Menahem died of natural causes and was succeeded by his son Pekahiah in 742 BC. His two-year reign coincides with the last two years of Uzziah of Judah. He, too, followed the same hideous evil noted by the Prophet Hosea. Things are a little confused at this point, for we find that Menahem's adjutant and commander of the Royal Bodyguard, Pekah, was already serving with some sort of co-regency powers, under both Menahem and Pekahiah. Pekah's assassination of the King was a simple matter of ordering the bodyguard to remove the puppet heir. This serves only to highlight the complete lack of honor in that society.

15:27-31 – Pekah's reign was the longest of the last kings of Israel, twenty years (752-732 BC), claiming the years of his two predecessors. He was no better than any previous King of Israel. Thus, no one should be surprised that Tiglath-pileser came back. Since Israel was already a vassal kingdom, he was ready to complete his plans for domination.

Throughout his empire, he maintained the practice of displacement. Once a people were conquered, he would take as much tribute as they possessed. Then, in due time he came back with troops and wagons to move the most dangerous part of the population to some other place

in his empire. This served to dampen any enthusiasm folks might have to revolt. Most pagans divided their worship between gods of the land and gods of their nation. If these happened to be the same gods or were similar, it was a bonus for Assyria. For most pagan nations, it meant weakening their allegiance to their regional gods at least, forcing them to adopt the local gods of the place to where they were moved. In the process, every warrior of any value was drafted into the imperial service. The whole process was so demoralizing and unsettling that the empire never faced serious internal threat from conquests. The first wave of resettlement involved the northern half of Pekah's realm.

15:32-38 – Beginning with his father's retirement from public life because of leprosy, Jotham succeeded Uzziah on the throne of Judah in 750 BC. He obeyed the Law as had his father, without the error of trying to play priest. From the parallel passage in **2 Chronicles 27**, we learn that Jotham added a new gate to the Temple complex and reinforced the city walls extensively in Jerusalem. He also built new forts and repaired old ones throughout the realm. During his last three years he was taking tribute from Ammon. He had already placed his son Ahaz as co-regent and commander, probably mimicking Israel somewhat. When he died in 732 BC, his son had already led several battles.

16:1-9 – The reign of Ahaz is considered to have begun in 735 BC (paralleled in **2 Chronicles 28**). Assyria had not come down to relocate the population of Israel yet. We are told he was an evil king, walking in the most hideous acts of depraved pagan worship. He began early reviving the nasty cult of Molech, using the original site in the Valley of Hinnom below the Old City. He offered there at least one of his children on the heated bronze oven-altar to Molech. For his sins, he was delivered to his enemies. Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Damascus had allied together to face Assyria. They demanded Ahaz join them, but he refused. They both came down in force and laid siege to Jerusalem. They didn't have time to finish the siege before facing Assyria again. However, Syria sent troops down to Ezion-geber on the Gulf of Aqaba and drove out the troops and workers of Judah. This thrilled the Edomites, who promptly took over the facilities. Edom had already stopped paying tribute to Judah during her troubles. Ahaz sent a delegation to Assyria and requested help with the situation. This served to notify Assyria her two vassals were planning to revolt. She came down and destroyed Damascus first, shipping all the inhabitants out right away.

While they had managed to hold out until Assyria came, the land of Judah was ravaged by Israel and Damascus. Some 120,000 troops were killed, and a great company of people and spoil were taken from several cities. Having dragged the whole lot to Samaria, they were accosted by the prophet Obed. He warned that the army had over-stepped their bounds. The military loss alone was by the hand of Jehovah, punishing the sins of Ahaz and the people of Judah who followed him in it. Taking plunder was okay but making of their own nation captive slaves was going too far. He warned the punishment on Israel would be greater than that of Judah. A significant party of leaders demanded the warriors release the captives. From the spoil, any naked captives were clothed; any weak or lame were given a riding beast. The rest of the plunder stayed, but the captives were escorted to Jericho for repatriation.

16:10-16 – Traveling north to meet Tiglath-pileser, Ahaz met his troops at Damascus after the battle. He also asked for help with the revolting Edomites. Edom had invaded and taken

another bunch of captives to sell as slaves. On top of that, the Philistines took some of the lower cities on their border with Judah. Assyria declined to help with that. However, they made plans to come down and collect some more tribute from Judah. Meanwhile, Ahaz saw there a very large altar and other ceremonial trappings of Syria's chief god. We are told in the parallel passage he decided since the god of Damascus had given them victory over his troops (despite surviving the siege) he should switch his allegiance to that god. He created a schematic of the altar and sent it back by messenger to a priest in Jerusalem who constructed a copy, finished and ready before Ahaz returned. He had the altar of Jehovah moved aside and replaced it with his new altar. He ordered the priest to use that altar exclusively. Urijah's complicity in this matter indicates the depths to which the whole system had sunk so quickly.

16:17-20 – He stripped down the original furnishings of the Temple to meet the increased demands from the Assyrians who came back with him from Damascus. The priestly bath was dropped down onto the pavement. With no gold or silver left, Assyria's representatives settled for several tons of brass and bronze, all the cast work of Solomon's artisans. We also know that Isaiah prophesied of God's power and provision, but Ahaz ignored him. What was left of the Temple furnishings were stripped out for an ever-growing number of new pagan shrines. The Temple was sealed and neglected for quite some time. When Ahaz died in 716 BC, he was not buried in the royal tombs. His unfaithfulness was beyond measure.

9.19: Samaria Falls, Judah Rises

2 Kings 17:1-6 – Hoshea assassinated Pekah in a conspiracy, having first gained permission from Tiglath-pileser. The Emperor died a short time later in 727 BC, succeeded by Shalmaneser V. Taking advantage of the turmoil in this change over, Hoshea stopped sending tribute. Instead, he saved it up and sent it as a gift to Pharaoh So of Egypt. However, the latter was unable to send significant help, despite grand promises. Shalmaneser's troops rolled down across the land, hardly noticing any resisting forces along the way. Laying siege to Samaria, the old fortress city held out for three years. During that time, Shalmaneser died and was replaced by Sargon II. This emperor quickly brought the city to its knees. He imprisoned Hoshea upon surrender. The people of Israel, barring a few servants and some peasants, were deported to areas near the imperial capital, Nineveh. Starting just east of Charan, they were scattered across the hilly areas that fed into the upper Euphrates and were spread as far east as the mountainous areas of northern ancient Media, today known as northwestern Iran. The Fall of Samaria is pegged at 722 BC.

17:7-23 – The narrative offers a long recitation of the reasons God allowed the northern half of His nation taken away from the Promised Land. It reads like a specification of broken laws, charges read before a court. They took advantage of the national division and never returned to Jehovah.

17:24-41 – There is some debate over how soon the land was repopulated. There were enough peasants left for a third deportation sometime later under Esarhaddon (681-668 BC). If left with this minimal farming population, there need not be a quick replacement of the upper classes. That would mean roughly 40 years passed with this scattered rural peasantry kept raising a minimal tribute. Eventually, the emperor brought in an upper class with their own peasants.

Some of the replacements are identified as Elamites, as well as a swap with some of the people living where the Israelites were settled, along with Hamathites and folks from the Euphrates just above Babylon. Very few of the original Israelites were left, probably less than 5% of the repopulation.

By then, the cities had been empty quite some time. The folks moved in, followed by a seasonal migration of the lions to areas they were used to roaming unimpeded for several decades. The people's assumption was quite correct; the lions came because Jehovah was not honored. Syrian lions were usually not interested in populated places, so this was clearly an unnatural affliction. The new inhabitants sent an appeal to the Emperor for a priest of the god of the place. What they got was an apostate priest who knew *of* Jehovah and presented the new inhabitants with an edited Torah. It left out any mention of. The worship centers were now Bethel and Mt. Gerizim. While they did adopt the rituals of Jehovah's worship, they kept their tribal gods. Some were quite despicable.

18:1-8 – We aren't sure when Hezekiah succeeded his father Ahaz to the throne of Judah. To make the most sense of the narrative, we will assume the year is 716 BC. His long reign of 29 years (until 687 BC) reflects his righteousness. Indeed, many scholars call his reign a "revival" because he promptly destroyed every evil his father had built up. Indeed, he destroyed the old bronze serpent image Moses had raised on a pole in the wilderness below Edom (Numbers 21:9). The people had built a cult around it, calling it "the Bronze Thing." Hezekiah is compared favorably to his ancestor David, as Jehovah prospered him at every turn. Thus, God protected him in throwing off the yoke of Assyria according to the submission of Ahaz. He also subdued the Philistines again. However, for a fuller accounting of his return to Jehovah, we shift to **2 Chronicles 29**.

2 Chronicles 29:3-19 – His first act was to have the Temple doors unsealed. Then he called the Levites back from their scattered homes. While they gathered, he had the doors repaired and refinished. The Levites and a few priests assembled in the open court, which was on the east side of the Temple Mount. With the newly repaired doors standing open behind him, he basically preached a sermon about the serious neglect and ordered them to cleanse and sanctify the Temple afresh. How else to turn away the wrath of the Lord? He recounted some samples of that wrath. The leaders are selected, and the Levites set to work. It took a week to remove the clutter from the Temple, and then another 9 days to put everything back in place. The rubbish was dumped into the Kidron Valley, directly out in front of the Temple. Somewhere in all this, they had re-plated the door with gold, and trimmed the pillars as well. They announced it to their king.

29:20-36 – Hezekiah then called a sacred assembly of the elders. He brought out seven each of the sacrificial animals. Their blood was sprinkled on the sacred objects. Upon beginning to burn the carcasses, he had ordered the musicians to sing and play the Psalms of David and Asaph. Everyone was so delighted that they asked the musicians to keep playing after the offerings were consumed. The joyous worship that followed had not been seen for quite some time.

In this heady atmosphere, the worshippers were invited to bring the other kinds of freewill offerings. The Levites had been more serious about ritual purification and were ready to work from the first day of Hezekiah's orders to purify the Temple. The priests had been rather lax.

The sacrifices were too numerous to be handled by the few priests ready, so the Levites pitched in while a bunch of priests hurried to complete the purification rituals. There were enough food offerings and other kinds of gifts that the Temple management had a running start on keeping things going. There was plenty to feed the first rotation of priests and Levites, and sufficient money and materials to keep things in good shape. Folks were really thrilled God had made it possible, since the whole thing was thrown together rather abruptly.

We take a moment here to note a difference in quality between the priests and Levites. After Urijah's apostasy under Ahaz, they seem taken as a whole with a lack of seriousness about worship. This problem raises its ugly head at times over the following centuries until, in Jesus' day, they are the party of secularism. The Levites were regarded as lesser in rank for the humbleness of their task. Yet they are clearly more concerned with obedience to the letter and spirit of the Law.

30:1-12 – What follows would have been politically impossible at any time prior, since the division of the Nation. Hezekiah sent runners all over both kingdoms, described with the proverbial "from Dan to Beersheba," designating the extremes of north and south. This was after the Fall of Samaria, so the runners were allowed to pass by the few Assyrian guards, who saw it as one more chance to weaken the resolve of those remaining in Israel to resist. This looked to them like an invitation to rejoin the House of David, which was then a faithful vassal of the Empire under Ahaz. At that point, Hezekiah had shown no inclination to alter that situation. All Israel and Judah were invited to celebrate the Passover, which came at a later date that year. The standard Day of Passover had been missed because the priests had been too slow going through the purification rituals in sufficient numbers for the one day annually that required all of them on duty at once. It was delayed a full month. This delay was no different than when the Lord so instructed for an alternative date (Numbers 9:9ff).

The message was faithful and offered them some refuge, as well. The messengers told them that if they would humble themselves and forget politics, the Lord would preserve their relatives taken away after the siege and would reduce their own losses in the future last deportation. Most of the audience mocked, but a few humbled themselves and came down to Passover. Those few who cared about Jehovah were moved as one heart.

30:13-20 – As the nation gathered and prepared their hearts to celebrate the deliverance of God from Egyptian slavery, all the little shrines around Jerusalem were tossed into the Kidron with everything else that had fouled the Temple. They stayed on for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The narrative notes that many from the north had insufficient time to prepare themselves ceremonially. Thus, the Levites had to stand in for them, bringing the families' lambs for sanctification for the Passover Feast. And while they were also not ready to eat the Sacred Meal, Hezekiah interceded on their behalf with good effect. A pure heart could stand in for ritual purity.

30:21-27 – The whole event was described as a true celebration. The singing and playing was something sorely missed for many generations. The Levites who knew the Law also went among the people and taught it and the Psalms. Because of Hezekiah's generosity in personally providing a huge herd of cattle and sheep for food, the people agreed as a whole to keep the feast another week. The nobles also contributed a large number of animals. The scribe notes that

this period of worship and celebration had not been seen since the days of Solomon, some 200 years before. In like manner, Jehovah honored the priests' blessings of the people, which they gave according to the Law.

The primary source of resistance to the Covenant in Samaria was gone. The events herald a new age of faithfulness under Hezekiah. This sets the starting place for the next section, wherein Judah stands alone.

10. Judah Alone: 722-586 BC

10.1: Hezekiah Renews the Covenant

Hezekiah has two goals: to restore Temple service in Covenant renewal and to bring Judah out from under pagan rule. While he did quite well on the first, he attempted the latter without the Lord's guidance. The parallel passage runs through **2 Kings 18** and **19**.

2 Chronicles 31:1-4 – The grand celebration of Passover gave way to a concerted effort to remove every shrine of the pagan devotion to Baal and Astarte, as well as the paganized high places. They did this not just in Judah and Benjamin, but also in the ravaged countryside of Israel. With most of the ruling classes gone, there were few to resist this cleansing of idols. Observing the Passover removed the stain of ritual disobedience, giving Hezekiah courage for re-instituting the full rotation of priests and offerings. He budgeted for the offering from his own personal herds and other resources. Further, he published a command that the residents of the royal capital should pitch in to keep the priests and Levites from having to do other work for a living.

31:5-21 – The command to support the Temple was not some harsh edict, but more of an announcement that the Temple was ready to receive the support commanded in the Law of Moses. This was circulated throughout the whole of Judah and the friendly portions of Israel. The timing was perfect, as it was about the wheat harvest (May). Over the next few months, the response was overwhelming. Four months later (September) was the fruit harvest. The amount of offerings in-kind is referred to as heaps and we are left with a picture of the Temple Mount resembling an agricultural storage area. The official records indicate the names of those deputized to manage all this stuff. New storage facilities were added to the Temple complex; a fresh census was made of those eligible for the Temple dole. There was a strict accounting, but the offerings brought were of such quantity the Chief Priest reported they could get fat very easily.

32:1-8 – This brief accounting jumps over quite a bit of history. It becomes necessary to weave in details from several other passages of the Bible to clear things up. The land was a hive of activity. Sargon was tied up dealing with Urartu (modern Armenia) to his north between 720-711 BC, while Egypt had just succumbed to Nubian invasion at about the time Hezekiah gets the Temple service back on track, 715 BC. Ashdod in Philistia revolted, allied with the new Nubian rulers of Egypt. At this same time, the Babylonians, far to the south of Nineveh, began having dreams of throwing off the Assyrian yoke. They sent encouragement to the Philistines,

hoping to keep the imperial troops tied up away from their area. Isaiah 20 mentions the Assyrian commander by his title, *Tartan*, coming to lay siege to Ashdod. Hezekiah knew his day to revolt was not yet and took no overt action, though he may have been secretly supporting Ashdod's rebellion. We know that Edom and Moab, also under Assyrian rule, were in revolt at the same time.

The Assyrian army finally finished matters in Urartu and came straight down to Ashdod, the apparent center of revolt. The city falls quickly, and Sargon installs an Assyrian governor. All this resistance kept Assyrian troops busy, so when Sargon dies in 705 BC, Hezekiah openly revolts. A change of rulers is always a good time for such things, because of the inherent political instability when the government officials must be tested for loyalty. There was always a portion that had to be replaced.

Meanwhile, Hezekiah made several major mistakes. A faction among his advisers favored Egypt and this party remained a force in royal politics until the Fall of Jerusalem much later. To the prophets, alliances with Egypt were seen as a repudiation of the Exodus. This was like poking a finger in God's eye. The event that gave birth to Israel, the ultimate symbols of her special status before Jehovah, was treated as a mistake. We see this addressed directly in Isaiah 30. Resisting the yoke of Assyria was no sin, but relying on mere human methods was. Hezekiah should have inquired of God, not his partisan advisers. At the same time, Merodoch-baladan of Babylon sent an envoy to see if Hezekiah is likely to resist better than the Philistines. In 1 Kings, this appears somewhat out of sequence in chapter 20, mentioned after the revolt Babylon was hoping to foment. Here again, Hezekiah is foolish, because he shows the Babylonian visitors all his wealth and preparations for the siege he knew was coming. Isaiah warned him these were the very people who would take his sons captive someday (**1 Kings 20:17-19**). Hezekiah was shortsighted enough to feel it wouldn't matter to him, since it was clearly after his lifetime.

Hezekiah continued preparations for the siege by securing the water supply. Recall the Spring of Gihon was outside the city wall, typical of ancient custom from when Jebusites built the city. The tunnel through which David's forces slipped into the city was still there, along with another that brought the water around the ridge to a pool on the lower west side. It allowed a rather low volume of water. Hezekiah's tunnel was much larger and longer, taking a route that was a bit flatter. He also enlarged the original pool at the low end of the ridge on which the old city was built. This tunnel is still there today, and modern engineers agree it was quite a feat to get it done so quickly. He had men digging from both ends, speeding up the work, which required precise surveying to meet at the exact same spot. At the same time, he filled the entrance to the spring from the Kidron Valley with a mass of packed rubble to prevent siege troops from having access to the water. His plaque just inside the lower opening of the new tunnel gave him grand credit, but Isaiah reminded him that he gave no credit to the Lord who made the pool (Isaiah 22:9-11). In that same passage, Isaiah berates Hezekiah for his utter failure to trust in Jehovah for success in a revolt He had commanded.

32:9-15 – Sargon's successor was named Sennacherib. Once the imperial bureaucracy was working, he immediately marched on Babylon in 703 BC. He placed an Assyrian governor over Babylon, then turned and made the long trek up the Valley to Charan, across the Upper

Euphrates, and down along the coast. He vanquished rebellions in Tyre, Acco, Joppa and Ashkelon. He began a siege on Lachish but was interrupted. The Nubians sent a force under Pharaoh Shabakah's brother, Tirhakah. These were quickly vanquished at Libnah, and the Assyrians returned to working on cities of Judah. While they were tied up again at Lachish, Hezekiah sent a message requesting terms to ward off a siege (**2 Kings 18:13-16**). Sennacherib demanded a huge tribute of silver and gold. Hezekiah stripped the Temple of the overlay he had so lavishly provided at the start of his reign. Jerusalem remained on alert while waiting the response. Sennacherib sent his chief officers for some psychological warfare, each identified by title: *Tartan*, the Commander in Chief; *Rabsaris*, the Chief of Staff; and *Rabshakeh*, who appears to be the Assyrian appointed to become the governor of Judah, once Hezekiah was captured (**2 Kings 18:17**). There was a large military escort with them, whose approach caused the city to close up.

These three presented themselves at the city's oldest gate, near the Spring of Gihon pool, which was now a dry cistern after Hezekiah's engineering of the water flow. They had a message from the Emperor. They called out to Hezekiah, who sent out his scribe, Eliakim. Apparently, the King was expecting the visitors to speak in Aramaic, a somewhat different Semitic tongue, because Eliakim could translate. Instead, the new governor appointee took care to speak in clear Hebrew, so that everyone manning the defenses could hear. First, he mentioned how foolish it was to have trusted in Egyptian troops. Then, if they were claiming to trust Jehovah, was that not His altars Hezekiah had destroyed throughout the land? It's not that the *Rabshakeh* didn't know the high places weren't valid altars to the Lord; it was an attempt to stir up those who resented Hezekiah's reforms – *they* thought the Baalist forms of worship were valid. He goes on to mention that their supply of horses was far greater than those of Egypt and bragged how one company of Assyrian soldiers could fight their way into Jerusalem alone. Indeed, it was Jehovah who had sent them!

Eliakim tried to remind *Rabshakeh* he was breaching protocol by not speaking in Aramaic, but in the language of the people (**2 Kings 18:26ff**). This was the business of rulers, not troops on the city wall. The reply was a continuation of unvarnished arrogance. He wanted to make sure the troops would remember his offer when the siege got nasty. Then he directed a long speech to the citizens, promising a wonderful future in another land if they would ignore Hezekiah and submit to Assyria. He compared Jehovah to the pagan gods of all the nations the Empire had vanquished, naming several that failed to deliver their people. Those people were already trickling in as advanced parties for the mass resettlement of folks into Israel to the north. These three officials came and went several times, returning to the Emperor when the siege of Lachish was lifted to face the Nubians, and then coming back to Jerusalem again.

32:16-19 – Hezekiah knew there was no hope. His strongest ally had failed – the Nubians – and every other ally was already prostrate at Sennacherib's feet. One of the strongest fortresses of Judah was now under attack and Jerusalem was next. Already, there was a substantial force outside the gates to keep them holed up and under strain. By the time the larger army appeared, the siege would be well advanced, with people inside dying. All his human wisdom brought nothing, and his actions had distanced him from Jehovah. Further, as the siege of Jerusalem started growing, the trio of messengers began blaspheming God and cursing

Hezekiah. Sennacherib sent letters from his main action at Lachish doing the same. The trio made regular speeches in Hebrew trying to spread fear in the defenders' ranks. They thought to incite a revolt.

32:20-23 – All this time Isaiah had been encouraging Hezekiah to stand fast in his trust in God. With the blasphemy and cursing, they had far stronger grounds for expecting a reaction from God for His own sake. Hezekiah humbled himself and began seeking the Lord. At one point he took one of Sennacherib's threatening letters and spread it out in the presence of the Lord at the Temple (**2 Kings 19:14**). The Lord spoke to Isaiah and sent his own message back to the Emperor (**2 Kings 19:22ff**). His promise to Hezekiah was that the Assyrian troops would not enter the city. However, the action was down in Lachish. One contemporary text mentions that the entire Assyrian army fell not far from the border of Egypt from a plague of mice that ate all the leather bindings on their weapons and equipment. If true, that would leave them nearly disarmed, since even swords had leather handles. Even then, it does not account for the loss of 185,000 men from causes other than battle. Perhaps the mice carried a horrific disease, too. It all sounds like bubonic plague. Either way, Sennacherib never took Lachish, much less Jerusalem, but returned in shame to Nineveh and covered up his loss by recording how glorious it was to have Hezekiah trapped inside Jerusalem. No mention of breaching the city walls, though, as was boasted of in the case of Lachish.

This utter failure on such an ostensibly simple mission left Sennacherib's war machine weak. He undertook no further military missions. Some twenty years later, while bowing in the temple to his god, Nisroc, two of his many sons executed him. They fled but were eventually executed themselves. Meanwhile, the heir to the Imperial throne was Esarhaddon. Back in Jerusalem, Hezekiah gained in fame and power from his now sure victory over the army that crushed all others.

32:24-33 – The summary of Hezekiah's final days goes back to pick up some loose ends. Sometime early in the siege, Hezekiah suffered some illness that was expected to be fatal. The account in **2 Kings 20** gives more detail, including a description of the miracle that God offered – the sun retreating back on his father's sundial – to show he would live a bit longer. However, Hezekiah did not keep his implied promise to give God the glory. Instead, he became arrogant again for a time. We aren't told what, but some disaster loomed over the kingdom and Hezekiah again turned back to the Lord. This brought the kingdom back to safety. This wavering back and forth did not help his son, Manasseh, learn faith in Jehovah. During Hezekiah's last decade, his son was co-regent, starting when the boy was but 12 (697 BC). We are given a quick look at his extraordinary personal wealth, the same wealth he showed off to the visiting Babylonians. In death, his resting place was among the most honored in the royal cemetery.

10.2: Manasseh and Amon

In yet another complete reversal from one king to the next, Manasseh returns to the sins of his grandfather Ahaz. In so doing, it was more than a reversal of Hezekiah's revival. Manasseh brought in his own new heathen perversions.

2 Chronicles 33:1-9 – Manasseh had the longest reign in the House of David, 55 years (696-642

BC). In the Temple courts he placed new shrines to the Canaanite Baals and Astarte. With a boldness not seen in any other fallen king, Manasseh installed altars to them inside the Temple itself, along with carved images. He even went so far as to resurrect the filthy cult of Molech in the Valley of Hinnom below the old Jebusite city of Ophel, off the lower end of the ridge of Jerusalem. He brought back the practices of consulting the dead, conjuring various spirits and just about everything God told Moses was forbidden. Finally, we have indications he brought back both male and female temple prostitution. The entire atmosphere of the city changed, affecting the rest of Judah as well. Ever ready to sin, we see hints of the nobles of Judah helping take the lead in all this. This loosed a reign of terror, as well. The City of Jerusalem was the home of tyranny, senseless murder and oppression of every stripe. One of the prophets warned it was worse than Samaria had ever been.

When Esarhaddon came down in 676 BC, bringing the new residents of Israel and removing the bulk of the remaining northern Tribes of Israel, Manasseh went out to meet him. The lesson of Assyrian defeat meant nothing to him. Instead, he sought to become a servant of the Empire. Imperial records point to his sending tribute. As a willing servant, he imported the gods of his master. Assyria practiced a version of the ancient Babylonian Astrology. This was the “hosts of heaven” mentioned in the text. More than just images of the various star-gods, this would require decorative seasonal markers based on the annual track of the sun’s angle and height. Similar markers were used at night to track the stars. Manasseh would celebrate the various festivals to the star-gods, which broke the rhythm of the Mosaic calendar. He placed these observatories in the Temple courts.

33:10-20 – As always, the Lord sent prophets. While we know Isaiah joined in the denunciations, he managed to survive. Many other prophets were murdered. Micah and Nahum were known to have been active during this time, though their writings indicate nothing about their possible confrontation of Manasseh. The former wrote of his ministry under Hezekiah, for the most part, while the latter addresses the eventual fall of Nineveh. The obvious point was that Assyria couldn’t be trusted to protect Judah. We can be sure there were plenty of prophets whose words were not recorded. They were all ignored, not just by the King, but by the people, as well.

In his dealings with Assyria, it appears at one point Manasseh considered an alliance with Egypt, too. Esarhaddon passed and two brothers fought to succeed him on the throne. It would seem Manasseh aligned himself with the losing brother, who had raised up a rebellion in Babylon. During the four-year war fought in Mesopotamia, Egypt had risen up to resist Assyrian policy. Recall that Egypt lost a major battle to Sennacherib during Hezekiah’s reign; defeated armies surrender their nation to the victorious rulers. Loyalty is assumed. Thus, having won that war in Babylon, Ashurbanipal in 648 BC passed through Palestine on his way to confront Egypt. Along the way, he had Manasseh arrested and deported to the prison in Babylon where the co-conspirators were held with Ashurbanipal’s brother. We aren’t quite certain what Assyrian nose-hooks looked like, but we can be sure it was exceedingly painful as a form of torture to be led by the nose.

It was most likely during the time Manasseh contemplated his doom after the failure of his ally in Babylon that he sacrificed a son on the altar to Molech. During his captivity, he repented of

his former sins. The Lord heard and restored him, allowing the King to return to Jerusalem. There, Manasseh set about correcting his mistakes, but too late. For more than 50 years he drove his people to idolatry. A mere two- or three-years' effort was not enough to change much in the minds of a whole generation raised in sin. Thus, his efforts to cleanse the Temple and city did little significant good. More useful, perhaps, was his rebuilding of the city wall, probably damaged or destroyed by Ashurbanipal. It's possible his project extended the wall out over the Central Valley of the city and took in some of the western ridge. It's referred to as the "Second Quarter" of Jerusalem.

33:21-25 – Upon his death, Manasseh passed the throne to Amon. This heir thought nothing of his father's repentance, but renewed the hideous practices of his upbringing. It's most likely the policy of continued submission to Assyria that provoked his death. Traditions of the time indicate an element of deep southern nobility who resented this submission. Such would be the perfect source of a plot to assassinate King Amon. It was reputed these same southern nobles also resented the pagan practices, but that was not the primary reason for the conspiracy. Either way, we know the Lords of Judah, based in Kiriath-jearim, rose up to execute all the known members of the conspiracy. They would have been concerned with a renewed attack from Assyria and hoped to appease the Imperial Court by this move.

The die had been cast. The end of Judah, and of the Nation of Israel, had been set.

10.3: Josiah's Reforms

Josiah was nothing like his father and grandfather. The prophets say he was more committed to serving Jehovah than any king before him. The parallel passage is in **2 Kings 22** and **23**.

2 Chronicles 34:1-7 – At the time his father, Amon, was assassinated in 640 BC, Josiah was a mere lad of eight. His early years on the throne would have been under some unnamed regent. This regent maintained the previous policy of placating Assyria, trying to draw as little attention as possible. At age 16 the boy king determined to serve the Lord. He would have spent time with the priests and Levites learning what the Law required. Then, at age 20 (628 BC), asserting his full royal authority for the first time, he began destroying the pagan shrines. All the awful things his father and grandfather had brought to Jerusalem were swept away.

To insure the people would not be tempted to sin again, he had the pagan priests slaughtered, then their bodies burned on their own altars, to the point of burning the bones long after the flesh was gone. This and other things were done to defile the pagan shrines so no worshiper would go near them. He then personally led troops out to do the same across Judah. Finally, he took the same fervor across the lands of the northern kingdom among the as yet unsettled new residents. The future Samaritans were still wrestling with their new religion of corrupted worship of Jehovah to worry much about largely abandoned pagan shrines from ancient Canaanite religions.

That Josiah was able to exercise such authority north of his border was the result of two salutary events. From 628-626 BC, the Scythians came down out of the north on horses and raided the northern reaches of the Assyrian Empire. Their raids ranged as far south as the upper Mesopotamian Valley itself. At the same time, Emperor Ashurbanipal died, leaving Assyria

with no strong ruler. A former tributary, Babylon, rose up in revolt and would eventually replace the Assyrian rule with their own. Nabopolassar led this revolt, with his son Nebuchadnezzar as commander of troops. Far away in the background, the Medes were beginning to take over swathes of the weakening Assyrian northeast. When the Scythian hordes began harassing the coastal plains west of Judah, they were stopped by Egypt. This left Judah as the strongest power standing in Palestine.

34:8-18 – Cleansing the land took several years. With that issue settled, the King – now 26 – called for refurbishing the Temple. The job was massive, due not only to 50-plus years of clutter and neglect, but all the pagan junk that defiled it. Contracts were let out to remodel and refurbish the structures. In the process, a copy of the Law was found. Consider that over a half-century had passed since anyone cared what Moses had written. Priests now dead had hidden the copy of the Torah within the structure itself. During Manasseh’s reign, with all the pagan altars moved into the Temple, both the Ark of the Covenant and the official copy of the Scroll of Moses had been moved around a bit. The scribe Shaphan read it through this book first. Then he brought it to the King, along with his report on the Temple repairs.

34:19-28 – Having lived under the thumb of Assyria for over a century, the common tongue of Mesopotamia – Aramaic – had largely displaced the older Hebrew language. The two are quite similar, with the writing more squared in Hebrew and the pronunciation was rather different to their ears. Thus, while the scribe would naturally be trained to handle older Hebrew documents, he might have read the Torah to the King by paraphrasing. At any rate, few of us today could imagine such a patient oral reading taking place in one session. During the long recitation, the King became increasingly alarmed.

When the reading was finished, Josiah tore his royal robes in sorrow at how deeply Judah had sinned. Having until now a mere oral account based on failing human memory from more than a half-century past, this fresh confrontation from the Law of Moses spoke of the nation’s doom. He ordered that someone inquire of Jehovah to verify the Book. This turned out to be a prophetess named Huldah. She was living in the western quarter of Jerusalem, across the central valley where Manasseh had stretched the walls of Jerusalem. She confirmed this book was the Word of God, that the curses were indeed upon them, and the Lord already prepared punishment. Her choice of phrase made it plain that, when the punishment came, it would be the permanent end of Judah, as she now existed. However, since the King sincerely cried out to Jehovah in public, the Lord promised he would allow Josiah to die before it happened.

34:29-33 – In response, Josiah called a solemn assembly of the elders of the Nation of Israel. He gathered them in the Temple courtyard and had the Torah read to them. Again, we can hardly envision the patience with which they listened in silence over several hours. In his ceremonial position next to one of the great pillars, in the presence of everyone in the city, the entire corps of priests and Levites and the ruling elders of the land, he swore a renewed oath to abide by the Covenant, requiring all present to join him. Having now a much more clear and precise understanding of the Law, all the remaining vestiges of pagan practices were ended. **2 Kings 23** lays out the details. Apparently the first cleansing was not so thorough, but only removed the most obvious transgressions. The second effort was a radical departure from all that anyone remembered. The phrasing “abominations of Israel” points to the paganized shrines of

Jeroboam in Bethel, Gilgal-ephrain and Dan. This brings us to about 622 BC.

35:1-19 – With this cleansing fresh on their hands, Josiah ordered the Passover be celebrated according to the Temple calendar, at the turning of the year in mid-month. To insure it went off properly, he provided for the visiting people lambs and goats from his own flocks so everyone would have a fit offering. The nobles took their cue from this and made sure none were left out. The priests were so busy that night fell before the altar work was done. The Levites set aside a portion for themselves in their own family preparations. The text tells us no previous king had been so careful in meeting the whole obligation of the Law.

Then Josiah ordered the priests and Levites to take roll and organize the annual rotation of Temple service. Along with this was enrolling the Temple food portions. All was proper and fit. However, the prophets writing the Book of Kings noted this did not turn away God's wrath. Indeed, it heralded a shortened reign for Josiah, for the divine punishment was on schedule and could not be held back. Josiah must die soon.

35:20-27 – As Assyria continued crumbling, her former vassal began pacifying the old empire under her own imperial power. The court of Pharaoh Necho of Egypt suddenly decided to support the old Assyrian Empire against the Babylonian uprising. In 608 BC Pharaoh rushed up the coast to battle at the head of the Euphrates. They would eventually meet the Babylonian army at Carchemish, a ways west of ancient Charan. On the way, their passage raised alarm in Judah. Josiah was sure he had the help of God in breaking the pagan influence of Assyria and saw Egypt's support for her as a threat. Pharaoh insisted he had no interest in Judah, but Josiah rushed troops to the Meggido Valley to cut him off. In the battle Josiah died while fighting in disguise, shot through with several arrows. No doubt his body's return to Jerusalem was a shock to all, for this had surely been God's man.

The full impact of their new subjection to Egypt would come later. For the time being, Pharaoh went on to meet Nebuchadnezzar and failed to do much good for Assyria. However, Egypt did claim Syria and Palestine. This is the beginning of the end for Judah.

10.4: Jeremiah and the End

Jeremiah – Jeremiah was born approximately the same time as Josiah. Of all the prophets whose words are recorded in Scripture, we know the most about Jeremiah the man. Born in Anathoth, just north of Jerusalem, we can be certain he was of the family of Abiathar, dismissed from service by Solomon for conspiracy with Adonijah's revolt. He supported Josiah's reforms, of course, and this earned him the ire of his relatives. His prophetic writings seem to apply most to the period after Josiah's death in 609 BC.

His celibacy was quite rare among Jews (Jeremiah 16:1ff). He was regarded by the ascendant party in the Court as a leader of the opposition. His message warns that Judah should serve Babylon willingly and trust in God to make that service light. He had several brushes with death and spent much time in confinement. At one point the priests ordered him placed in stocks, beaten (20:1-6) and left to die in a filthy mud pit (38:6-13). His escape, with that of his scribe, Baruch, was clearly the hand of God. Still, he was always up against the false prophecies from the professional prophets in the Temple.

We note several things about his unique character. First was a fathomless personal honesty. He willingly admitted he tried to avoid prophesying but could not remain silent. He wrestled often with God, saying things we might take as blasphemy if read with a shallow grasp. To his chagrin, many of his messages seemed foolish because the Lord didn't intend fulfillment until long after the message was forgotten.

Second, he never shrank from the duty to warn of God's judgment. One man's courage is another's hardheadedness, but Jeremiah had plenty of both. The persecution and punishment only seemed to make him more determined. That's because, third, he took national sin personally. So intense was his identification with the Lord's righteousness that he had plenty of harsh words and vengeful prayers for his enemies. He spent a lot of time haranguing about idolatry, oppression and false prophets.

Fourth, he was gripped by a fierce love for God's People. His zeal for their welfare gave him nightmares, knowing what was coming. His fiery call for purity was largely a result of his sure knowledge that the coming disasters were due directly to sin. He was fully capable of warm friendships with people who showed him kindness or were open to his message.

Finally, there was his undying hope that God was going to bring joy and peace in the end. There must be cleansing of sin *because* the Lord intended to bless the people and the land. So certain was he of the future blessings that he bought land in Anathoth during the final siege (32:6-15).

The book itself indicates that it was the shared labor of Jeremiah and Baruch. The first 25 chapters were dictated by Jeremiah to Baruch, burned by the King, and then dictated again from memory with no apparent loss. They are in the first person and loaded with verse and poetic imagery. The rest is in the third person and appears to be the records of Baruch appended to the prophet's original commission, written in simple prose. However, it would be a mistake to think of the book as being in any chronological order. One of his greatest contributions to Old Testament religion down through the ages is a clear statement that Jehovah was sovereign, and that no other god existed. The hand of the God of Israel guided the affairs of men and kingdoms worldwide.

The domination by Egypt after the death of Josiah at Megiddo was short lived. The primary objective was to maintain lines of communication between the Egyptian forces encamped at Carchemish and the homeland on the Nile. The army of Egypt remained in the field against Babylon for several years. As the dominant power on that long path, Judah received the bulk of Pharaoh's attention. The parallel passages are found in **2 Kings 23-25**.

2 Chronicles 36:1-4 – As soon as Josiah was buried, his son Jehoahaz was crowned. He was in the city as King three months, just long enough to attend to the essential ceremonial requirements and basic administrative tasks setting up his administration. As the first king serving under Necho's authority, he was required to go to his master in northern Syria. There, he was deposed and imprisoned by Necho. This most likely was to demonstrate Pharaoh's absolute mastery and to strike fear in Judah. From the King's entourage, Necho selected a brother of Jehoahaz, Eliakim, to replace him. He renamed him Jehoiakim. The right of renaming was but another grating reminder who was boss. Jehoahaz was dispatched to Egypt, where he

died in prison. The new King Jehoiakim returned with an edict to collect a huge tribute tax. The amount was crushing and impoverished the whole nation of Judah, because the King took it from the people, while retaining his royal luxury.

36:5-8 – Jehoiakim brought back many of Manasseh’s sins, all the while preaching complacency in God’s protection of the Temple. A willing servant of Pharaoh, he joined in a coalition with his neighbors to support Egypt in resisting Nebuchadnezzar’s advance into Syria. However, within a few years (605 BC) Necho lost in battle against Babylon. Jeremiah had warned this would happen and that capitulating to Babylon was the Lord’s will. This set the tone for a long-running battle of sorts in Jerusalem between Jeremiah and the Royal Court, but seemingly plenty of disputes between Jeremiah and the Lord. The long delay seemed to mock Jeremiah’s proclamations of judgment. To his chagrin, Nebuchadnezzar failed to follow up his victory at Carchemish, delayed by his father’s death back home in Babylon.

Still, the dark looming shadow of Babylon’s approach never lifted. It was during this period that the first scroll of Jeremiah’s prophecy was burned. In 603 BC, Jehoiakim was forced to pledge allegiance to the new Emperor of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. Babylon was once again on the move, passing through Judah on the way to face Egypt’s home, her only rival on the west. When the battle on the border of Egypt in 601 BC turned into a stalemate, Jehoiakim was foolish enough to believe it was a sign from God, despite Jeremiah’s warnings. The king made a bid for independence. Nebuchadnezzar’s first response was to send raiding bands of his own Chaldean troops, along with Ammonites, Moabites and Syrians. They were told to seize all the spoil they could. Finally, in 597 BC, he brought his own troops back to Palestine and laid siege to Jerusalem. The text says Jehoiakim was hauled away in fetters, but tradition says he was already sick and dying during the siege, thus his son was crowned. Jehoiakim is believed to have died on the journey to Babylon, still a young man.

36:9-10 – There is some confusion between 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles regarding the age of Jehoiachin at his coronation. The former says he was eighteen, which is more probable, but the latter says eight, perhaps confused with a predecessor. Either way, he was too young to be very independent. His court was still in the grip of the pro-Egypt party. It seems they tried to hold out and negotiate while Nebuchadnezzar’s troops lounged outside the walls of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar was still there three months later and prepared to renew efforts to breach the walls of Jerusalem. The royal household capitulated as a whole, which spared the life of this last in the line of David. He was taken away as hostage, along with the best noble warriors and artisans, to insure the good behavior of the Kingdom of Judah. Also taken were the treasures and furnishings of the Temple. By our reckoning, it was still 597 BC.

36:11-14 – In place of Jehoiachin was his uncle, Mattaniah, renamed Zedekiah by Nebuchadnezzar. This youngest son of Josiah was very much a puppet of Babylon. Not that he was so actively evil, but his reign was marked by a weakness that promoted evil. The rightful king was still alive in Babylon and the pro-Egypt party still had a large presence in the royal court. Most of the noble houses were in exile; there were few craftsmen left. Secretly, Zedekiah respected the prophet Jeremiah, if for no other reason than his prophecies came true about Babylon, but he didn’t always follow the prophet’s advice. There was a major conflict between Jeremiah and the Court prophets about the length of time for the Exile. Jeremiah advised

everyone in Babylon to get comfortable and wait about seventy years, while the false prophets insisted it was just a couple of years or so. When Necho in Egypt began building a new coalition to face Babylon yet again – drawing in Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon – Jeremiah warned the king not to be suckered again, but to remain faithful to Babylon and to God. This was the scene when the false prophet Hananiah tore the wooden yoke off Jeremiah, only to see it replaced by one of iron (Jeremiah 28:12-16). Hananiah died a short time later.

Meanwhile, the foolish Zedekiah cast his lot with Egypt, though not the abortive revolt in 593 BC. Records are scant, but there's no doubt the new Pharaoh was involved in encouraging Zedekiah to go along with his arrogant nobles. Judah managed to act in rebellion against her vow before Jehovah to serve Babylon. In due time, Nebuchadnezzar and his troops returned to Judah. The siege began in 588 BC. For two years, the king kept trying to convince the Lord to back his revolt; the nobles waited in vain for another deliverance as with Hezekiah. Even during the siege, Jeremiah showed his confidence in God's promises by going to lay claim to the land he bought in Anathoth. He was arrested on his return as a traitor, and it was here he was thrown in the pit. His rescue was hardly the end of his sorrows and only the success of the siege brought him relief, in 586 BC.

36:15-21 – Our text recounts the hideous brutality of the final battle as the direct punishment for treating God's prophets with spite, more than Jeremiah alone. The parallel passage in **Kings 25** describes how the wall was breached late one day. While the Babylonians waited until morning light to finish the job, the King and his soldiers slipped through the opening and escaped by night past the siege lines. They attempted to flee by taking the road past the Mount of Olives and down to the Jordan Valley. However, pursuing Babylonians caught them. The royal bodyguard was executed. Then Zedekiah and his family were hauled to Nebuchadnezzar's field office in Riblah of Hamath. There, Zedekiah was forced to watch his sons killed, the last thing he saw, before his eyes were put out. He was imprisoned in Babylon. We pick up the story in 2 Kings.

2 Kings 25:8-21 – The destruction of Jerusalem was mostly a matter of taking down the city wall completely, then destroying everything on the Temple Mount: the Temple, Palace, Royal Residence and of course any military buildings. In each, the wooden frame was burned, which also softened the stone blocks, so that it all collapsed in a pile of rubble. With only the brass and bronze Temple furnishings left, the large pieces were broken down into fragments easily moved and taken away to Babylon. The surviving Court officers in the city were taken to Riblah and executed. The city was de-populated, taken along with the surviving Hebrew throughout the rest of Judah. Only a few peasants were left to keep the farms and vineyards going. Everyone else was moved to Babylon. Jeremiah wrote Lamentations to describe the sense of loss. He was left alive by the conquering commanders and stayed with the handful of nobles considered trustworthy enough to manage the tribute harvest on behalf of the Empire. Judah was now nothing but an agricultural region dependent on Babylon.

25:22-26 – Of course, there would always be a few who evaded capture. They hid out in the wilderness places. Meanwhile, Babylon appointed Gedaliah as governor of Judah. He met with these escaped nobles at Mizpah, the new seat of government. On behalf of Babylon, he promised them amnesty and a peaceful life among the remnants in the land, encouraging them

to help rebuild enough of the ravaged land to keep it ready for the return of the nation someday. Between the breach of the city walls and the wicked assassination of Gedaliah was only two months. Fearing Babylon's response, the last few leaders of the nation still in the land took as many peasants as they could round up, along with Jeremiah, and fled to Egypt. Jeremiah died there in sorrow, but not before his scribe noted a very encouraging sign, taking a page from the official records.

25:27-29 – In about 562 BC, Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by Evil-merodach ("Man of Marduk"), who changed the policy of the Hebrew captives in Babylon. In his mid-50s now, Jehoiachin was released from prison and given a prominent place in the Imperial Court. Here, roughly halfway through the Exile, the light of God's forgiveness began to shine, and there was hope.

11. Exile and Restoration: 586-425 BC

11.1: The Exile

Precious little of the Exile is told in Scripture. We know of it chiefly through the secular history of the Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires, along with some Jewish traditional stories. Our focus will rest on the two Prophets of Exile, Ezekiel and Daniel.

Ezekiel – Ezekiel was removed in 597 BC, in the deportation of the noble classes with King Jehoiachin. He was a member of the Zadokite Priests and clearly familiar with the Temple and Jerusalem. We can safely estimate his age at departure as 25 years. He dates all his work from the date of the exile of King Jehoiachin. Thus, in the fifth year of that exile, he is called as a prophet at age 30. His work is so very dramatic and unusual that he has been accused of varying forms of mental illness. While that may well have been the case, his prophetic writing is clearly consistent with God's revelation through Hebrew culture.

We saw where Jeremiah made a strong case for seeing Jehovah as the God of all Creation, not just the national God of the Nation of Israel. Ezekiel carried that claim further. A major theme behind all his writing is pressing the case for seeing the Lord as truly the One and Only God of all mankind. He was Lord over the Babylonians regardless of their recognition or lack of it. Human plans had no hold on God, who would surely see His people return to their homeland. Meanwhile, there was plenty to condemn in the nations who dared lay hands on God's people. That the Lord cared for His People laid the ground for the lessons they must learn in captivity: they cannot disobey Him with impunity.

We know that Ezekiel had his own house on the canal known as Chebar. This places him in a region somewhat north of the Babylonian Imperial capital. Unlike the Assyrians, who virtually forced their subjects to intermarry and lose their national identities, Babylon was content to let subject nations live in their own enclaves near the seat of power and maintain their own habits of life and cultures. Those of Judah who took Jeremiah's advice to settle in for the long haul did rather well. They engaged in commerce, established synagogues to continue teaching the Law and lived a rather normal life. Indeed, most of them became too comfortable, making no

attempt to return to Jerusalem when the chance was offered later. Instead, they became the eastern anchor of Jewish scholarship, building up the influential Babylonian School, when Hebrew Old Testament religion began drifting toward what we now call Judaism.

Additionally, this was the period where we believe the bar-Mitzvah arose. With the sure knowledge their exile was a result in part of not knowing the Law, it became the requirement of every male to learn to read and memorize a significant portion of the Pentateuch, as a rite of passage toward manhood and responsible citizenship. There arose a dominant middle-class view of life. Being faithful meant settling in and making oneself better off. In time, it was more about rising from peasantry and becoming respectable. Exiled Jewish men were “men” only if they could make a decent living and obeyed the Law in detail.

While the details of all this are somewhat fuzzy, a picture of daily life can be drawn with what we do know. It’s hard for us today to picture the strong divisions in society based on birth into privilege. While they were permitted a modicum of self-government under Babylon, it was nothing like living under the Davidic Monarchy. In the old days, there was a fairly clear distinction between wealthy nobles and princes on one hand, and the priests and Levites on the other. While the latter might indeed rise to wealth and prestige, their power was limited to what they could leverage via the nobles and the Royal Court. In exile, this division appeared to fade. By the time of Christ, the priesthood had risen to noble status, with the Levites somewhere close behind, and all of them rather equal in status to the remaining nobility. Either way, to rule in Jesus’ day was to be active in Jewish religion. Thus, during the Exile it seems the whole of self-government, such as it was, passed into the hands of the religious leaders.

Some writings from or about that time indicate the priests rightly took over government of the Nation, seeing the nobles and princes had gotten them into trouble in the first place. This is lent some credence by observing how quickly the nobles of Judah, especially those based in Kiriath-jearim, turned to pagan practices when permitted. On the other hand, the demise of the clear separation between elders (nobles) and priests violated the fundamental design of Covenant life. The priests didn’t seem to understand their ancient role included helping the nobility get back on course. Instead, they took over.

Meanwhile, the peasants hardly rate notice. We see them seldom mentioned except in the abstract, with a few bit parts here and there in the main narrative of the Old Testament. We have a rather poor picture of their situation specifically in Israel and Judah, but a rather better picture for their class in that part of the world in general. It did not appear Hebrew peasants served in feudal misery, but remained rather free, until much later. Many did indeed depend on great land-holding nobles but had their own homes and were somewhat protected by custom and by the Law. Many simply performed day labor, as is seen by stories of hiring workers for the harvest. A primary difference between the classes was food supply. While everyone had access to grains and produce outside of droughts, and most had some limited access to dairy and fish, it’s doubtful eating other meats was quite so democratic. Those born to wealth and power would naturally have access to superior nutrition. Noblemen and royalty were generally taller and heavier than peasants for this reason alone.

Along with that better nutrition came better education, simply because they had leisure to pursue it. While the peasants were born to labor early in life, the upper classes worked only as

training for taking their place in leadership. More often, a young noble supervised peasants on behalf of some householder. They also had access to weapons training, not to mention an array of privately owned weapons. At times in Israeli history, everyman might have a small sword. Even after iron was available, swords were seldom as much as 18 inches (46cm) long. A peasant might have a sling for stones, maybe even a bow and some arrows, or perhaps a spear, but seldom all at once. Upper classes had plenty of weapons, along with armor and access to horses. They had plenty of time to learn the use of all these and the better skilled often served as full-time soldiers and commanders. Beyond this, all could read, a few could write; most knew geography, history, law, foreign languages, architecture and so forth.

There was also a class of skilled workmen and artisans whose abilities were too precious to waste on agriculture. These formed a relatively slender middle-class. They clustered in cities and towns for the obvious reason of the job market. Everyone else was just a peasant, one of “the people of the land.” In common thinking, that whole class of folks were bigger, tougher and smarter was assumed to be a matter of one’s blood – that is, a superiority of birth. Thus, big folks were presumed noble, smarter and more useful by virtue of birth. Aside from any moral evil they chose, they were thought of as simply “better.”

We mentioned previously how wise monarchs retained a personal bodyguard of foreign-born men. Their loyalty would be to the person of the ruler, or at least his household, and would generally avoid the internal politics of the nation. They were not easy targets for political intrigue by ambitious claimants to the throne born locally. As royal courts grew in size and complexity, this same rule applied to the numerous royal servants. At the imperial level, rulers hardly knew half the people in their court and might expect all manner of political maneuvering. Having servants born outside the imperial homeland would help to prevent full-scale uprisings within the palace, since everyone spied on everyone else. Bitter rivalries might be annoying but were reassuring in terms of the ruler’s personal safety. Fostering this internal competition was considered wise. No surprise, then, that Nebuchadnezzar chose some noble Hebrew teenagers to serve in his court.

Daniel – Daniel was carried off to Babylon in the first deportation when Nebuchadnezzar humbled King Jehoiakim in 605 BC. We can’t be certain of his age, but it seems Daniel would be no more than 16. This would make him a couple of years younger than Ezekiel. At this point, the name “Israel” again is applied to all Hebrews; during the exile the term somewhat displaced the more precise term “Judah.” Thus, Nebuchadnezzar followed previous policy in selecting court servants from the “Children of Israel” but left the task to the chief eunuch. While we cannot be certain whether the term “eunuch” is meant literally, it would not be out of the question that Daniel and his friends were castrated as part of their induction into the imperial court. Ceremonially disqualified from the priesthood did not mean morally disqualified from serving as prophets.

It would seem from the boys available, only these four were chosen for imperial court service after the final cut was made in Babylon. We can only imagine what sort of testing they went through to meet Babylonian requirements. Upon selection for the training, the fellows were given Babylonian names. Daniel, “God’s Prince” became *Belteshazzar*, “Bel’s Prince” – a reference to a chief pagan god in Babylon. Hananiah, “Mercy of God” becomes *Shadrach*, “Voice

of Aku," a pagan moon-god. Mishael, "Who is like God?" is given *Meshach*, "Who is like Aku?" while Azariah, "Whom Jehovah helps" is changed to *Abed-nego*, "Servant of Nebo," yet another pagan deity. Aside from the different meanings of the names, they were a different language.

Language was among the many subjects these boys would learn in their new jobs. Three years for what is outlined is harder than any college education done today in four. Consider the boys probably knew some Aramaic already, the language of commerce and diplomacy. Babylonian scholars would surely have to learn it better, plus the ceremonial language of Akkadian (Abraham's native tongue), plus a few others. This was to enable learning the whole of Babylonian literature, which is now known to be quite extensive. It covered astronomy (the basis for the old Babylonian astrology), mathematics, Chaldean law, economics, and even some heathen ceremonial magic.

There's nothing in the text to indicate the royal table was inherently bad food. The entire imperial court consumed the same stuff produced by the imperial kitchen and most of it was quite delectable. However, it surely included meat forbidden by Moses. Whether any of it was produced under pagan ritual was a moot point by now, since the boys would perforce be immersed in pagan ritual for the rest of their lives. Much like the life of Joseph in Egypt, which required a great deal of pagan ritual, we can assume the Lord looked past that in favor of a plan of greater importance. We are left with Daniel and his friends simply doing what little is possible to show devotion to Jehovah. They were sure the Lord would see it turn out alright.

As we know, it did indeed, as they became prominent figures in the rather short-lived revival of the Babylonian Empire. Daniel served honorably until at least age 75, when the Medes and Persians marched in as the new rulers. They did this by damming the canals flowing under the city walls, and then marching in via the muddy conduits in 539 BC. The new regime simply adopted the bureaucracy of the Babylonian courts at first, until there was time to reorganize things. Thus, a couple of years later, Daniel is one of three ministers to whom all the Medo-Persian satraps (regional rulers in the empire) must report. They surely knew of his prophecy of their victory over Babylon and regarded him a worthy servant, since he had a lifetime acquainted with the details of Babylonian government over her territories.

Daniel's prophecies are the earliest example of *apocalypse*, meaning dark and hidden things revealed. Obviously, there's plenty of his work that cannot be taken literally, as he clearly meant it symbolically. Piercing the symbolism can make it seem mysterious enough, but the underlying assumptions about reality are truly alien to us today. While it's clear he prophesied to two imperial courts, he remained a prophet to his fellow Hebrews. His visions concern things far beyond his own time, but the point was to reinforce the doctrine that Jehovah was God Almighty, the one real and universal deity. He was Lord of all events in Babylon and everything that happened in Medo-Persia. He would continue to be Lord over all the nations and empires to follow. At some point far distant to come, He would assert His rule over all mankind via a very different King. Inherent in his message was the idea one owed loyalty to Jehovah first, but simple compliance with whatever human government ruled.

11.2: Exiles Return

The short-lived Babylonian Empire was finished by 539 BC. Conquered by Cyrus, ruler of

Medo-Persian Empire, it was his policy to allow all captive nations to return to their homelands. With Daniel serving in the Imperial Court, you can be sure Cyrus looked with extra favor on the Hebrews. Our study will take Ezra and Nehemiah as the text. A word of warning: There is apparent confusion about the various rulers of the Medo-Persian Empire. We get the feeling names like Xerxes, Artaxerxes, Darius and Cyrus were titles, not proper personal names. All of them may well have been interchangeable in the imperial records. We make no attempt here to unravel the tangle, simply use what appears to be a reasonable translation of the names given in our text and stick with the narrative.

Ezra is given credit for a tremendous amount of work, but we should keep in mind that he probably finished projects many others started. He is viewed as the quintessential Priestly Rabbi. For all we can tell, he may have been the final editor of the Chronicles, for his own book starts off with much the same tone. Indeed, it seems he and his servants were the final editors of the Ezra-Nehemiah scroll, as it appears a single book in most Hebrew collections. His work shows the new seriousness given to observing the Law of Moses.

Ezra 1 – The decree from Cyrus includes permission to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The decree was published, and willing Hebrews began gathering to make ready for the move. The Imperial Treasurer delivered all the Temple articles, taken by Nebuchadnezzar, into their custody. Quite likely all the larger furnishings, including the Ark of Covenant, were destroyed with the Temple. The appointed governor of the resettled Hebrews was named Sheshbazzar. This name was a holdover from the Babylonian language and the man probably held a similar position under Babylonian rule. As nearly as we can guess, he was the fourth son of Jehoiachin and uncle to the next governor, Zerubbabel. Most imperial rulers appointed members of their subject nations' indigenous royal families as governors. If these two men are thus related, we can safely assume their time in office would overlap, much as kings would grant co-regency to their successors. Thus, we read in the text that both are referred to as having charge of the Returnees.

2 – The actual departure took place roughly a year after the decree. Records indicate they arrived in the area of Jerusalem after another two years of travel. The census in this chapter amounts to roughly 50,000 people. Obviously, this group is a minority of the Jews living in Babylon. Indeed, at one point it was alleged the soil of Mesopotamia was more holy than that of Jerusalem, since the greatest number of Mosaic scholars stayed behind. We also have indications some few families of the Northern Tribes managed to reconnect with their nation. However, there is great dispute as to whether it was a tiny trickle or a significant portion. Research seems to favor the former. While thousands of priests opted to return, a mere handful of Levites came willingly. There seems no explanation for their reluctance. The folks called Nethinim were most likely the Temple servants from the treaty with the old Gibeonite Confederacy (Joshua 9). They were grouped with Servants of Solomon, described as the combined contingent of his war captives and hostages, hereditary servants of the Royal Household. The families of undetermined lineage (v. 62) went along in hope of a priest arising who could settle the issue with the holy lots (Urim and Thummim); sadly, it never came about. The Shekinah Glory departed for the last time from the Temple in 593 BC (Ezekiel 8) and there could be no such word from God.

3 – When the escaped nobles murdered the Babylonian governor, Gedaliah, their flight to Egypt included a number of the peasants left behind for agricultural work. Thus, quite a bit of Judah was simply vacant. We learn elsewhere there was a small community at Bethel. At some point, the Edomites and some other nations took up residence in some of the vacant cities in the south. The rising kingdom of Nabateans had pushed the Edomites out their ancestral lands at some point. However, there were still plenty of places for the Returnees to live. It was all but impossible to resettle them all in Jerusalem. Besides, they would need people outside the city raising crops and animals. The western ridge of the city was completely unsalvageable for quite some time, so the restored Jerusalem was only slightly larger than what Solomon had: Ophel, the old Jebusite city on the lower ridge; Zion, the upper ridge occupied by the Temple, palaces, fortress and court; and some of the upper area of the Central Valley. Most of the lower Central Valley was filled with rubble from the Babylonian destruction.

At the Feast of Trumpets (seventh month), the scene was a badly ravaged once-grand city. The Temple Plaza and royal courts were piles of rubble at best. Tradition indicates parts of Ophel still stood, as did sections of the eastern wall. Tents would be visible over usable ruins and people were beginning to clear space for rebuilding. The court before the Temple had been cleared and the bronze altar had been replaced with a new one. Thus, when the nation appeared for the feast, a place stood ready for burnt offerings. It was at this point the sacrifices were restored to their proper cycle according to Moses. The collected free-will offerings were used to pay laborers to begin clearing and rebuilding the foundation of the Temple. Agricultural produce was sent to Tyre and Sidon in exchange for cedar beams, which would arrive sometime later. Folks stayed around the city a few weeks until the Feast of Tabernacles mid-month.

Just over two years after their return, in 535 BC the Temple foundation was laid. To celebrate, the Temple orchestra and choir put on a mass performance. The crowd drawn to see the foundation was torn. The eldest, who might remember the glory of Solomon's Temple, wept for the much smaller size of the new one. The rest of the crowd was joyful to see the progress. Observers could not tell which group was the loudest, only that the noise was deafening.

4:1-5 – We recall that Esarhaddon had brought in a large group of people from across the Assyrian Empire to replace the Hebrews of the Kingdom of Israel, sometime around 680 BC. In response to their appeal for priests of the local religion, Assyria found only a few backslidden priests. They produced an edited version of the Torah, but left out all the other documents, and revived the paganized worship at Bethel. Under several kings of Judah, there were attempts to correct some of the corruptions, but seldom for long. After some fifty years of Judean Exile, they had lapsed into a very impure worship of someone they claimed was Jehovah. Upon seeing the Temple reconstruction under way, these Samaritans sent a delegation to Jerusalem. They asked how they might get involved and observed they had been worshiping the same God all along. The biggest change in Judeans during the Exile was taking the Law of Moses very seriously, completely reshaping the culture to emphasize the necessity of knowing the Law and obeying it in detail. Thus, they rejected the Samaritan overtures. The confrontation established a permanent wall of bitterness between the two nations. The Hebrews referred to Samaritans as filthy heathens, while Samaritans said Hebrews were arrogant snobs deserving contempt. Samaritans eventually built their own temple on Mount Gerizim. By this time, Daniel was gone

and there was no strong protector of Jewish interests in the Imperial Court.

4:6-24 – While not in keeping with the chronology of the story, we are given a sample of Samaritan behavior. The Samaritans learned to bribe the court officials to give them an edge in how to petition the Emperor to harass the Jews. During the next 15 years, under two more Emperors, they kept the Jews in check on the Temple. While things turned for the better under Darius the Great, his successor Xerxes I believed the Samaritan lies. The next Emperor, Artaxerxes I, also believed them. During his reign, the Jews made some effort to start work on the city walls but were forcefully stopped by troops sent direct from the Imperial Court. The damage to the city from this attack is what brings tears to Nehemiah. This section closes by bringing us back to the main story line, noting the Temple rebuilding was stopped until the second year of Darius (520 BC).

While the text is silent on contemporary events, we note Cyrus is replaced by Cambyses (530-522 BC), who passed by on his way to conquer Egypt in 525 BC. On his death, a usurper named Gaumata tried to seize the throne, but was executed by Darius I (“the Great”). For the next two years, Darius is busy putting down a widespread revolt. His warfare brought the Medo-Persian Empire to its greatest size and most stable period. It was when things settled down that the Jews were able to get the Emperor’s ear.

11.3: Rebuilding the Temple

Having put down the pervasive rebellion, Darius I (the Great) set about raising the Medo-Persian Empire to its greatest power and most extensive borders. Sensing their chance, the Judeans begin anew to build their Temple. We are told in Ezra 5:1 that it was primarily the stirring of the leaders by two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah that saw renewed activity. Note that Sheshbazzar has passed on and Zerubbabel is now fully in charge as governor.

Haggai – The man’s name denotes a birth during some unidentified festival and can be translated “Celebration.” He was probably not yet a legal adult during the Return under Cyrus. Little else is known of him. His prophecy is divided into four messages, each precisely dated. On 29 August 520 BC, he noted the Jews had been suffering from poor harvests and a depressed economy. This was because they lacked the will to obey God’s command to rebuild the Temple. They kept saying it was not yet time, though they had time to finish building sumptuous houses for themselves. About a month later the work on the Temple resumed.

During the next month there was a lot of grousing how this Second Temple was so poor compared to the First. On 17 October the same year, Haggai warned them the glory of either building compared poorly to that of Jehovah’s presence. If they would apply themselves to the task and obey, they should expect His very presence to make it all worthwhile. In the process, Haggai tosses out something Messianic, a vision of something yet to come. It is altogether natural that the people should misunderstand. He speaks of events that will shake the Heavens – that is, the Spirit Realm – with repercussions on the earth. However, they miss the point and assume he refers to a worldly future kingdom.

This time was the birth of the Messianic Expectations regarding a great and mighty earthly Kingdom of Israel that would exceed the previous glories of David and Solomon. Under such

thinking, the people began to assume their hands were made holy by handling the Temple stones during the construction. On 18 December that same year, Haggai makes a show of querying the priests in public on what the Law of Moses says about such things. The answer is clear: when it comes to ritual purity, holiness is not contagious, defilement is. In terms of Mosaic ritual purity, it was the sins of the people making the Temple defiled. Unspoken was the obvious reference to Samuel's words to Saul – "The Lord has more regard for the sacrifice of obedience than the burnt flesh of animals." However, to show His mercy on their sins, He promised from that day forward, they should expect all future crops to yield abundance, especially if they obey the command to build the Temple.

On that same day, Haggai had a message to Zerubbabel. His message seems to nominate the Governor as the Messiah. In the context of other prophecy, we know this was not meant literally. While Zerubbabel did play a critical role, it was his royal bloodline to which Haggai was speaking. Zerubbabel was the symbol of the Lord's plans to redeem the whole world through the House of David. Nonetheless, there was a group of Judeans in those days who regarded this prophecy literally.

We note here that the rise of sects within Hebrew religious life becomes most notable from this time. There is a large community of Jews in Egypt still; later they would rise to challenge the spiritual leadership of the Babylonian Synagogue. Within the small group of returnees, we find evidence that Messianic Judaism begins here, and then splits into several factions. People learn to see every major change in the political and economic situation through the various lenses of these sects.

Keep in mind that this false mythology about a promised Messiah is more or less the birth of Judaism as a departure from Old Testament religion. The Messiah was promised in Scripture, but the false expectations about Him were the problem. There is no single moment we can point to for the birth of Judaism or the death of genuine Old Testament religion, but it all stems from this time. It is at this point we can begin referring to the people as "Jew" – an abbreviation of Judean – to mark that shift.

Zechariah – If Haggai stirred up a bit of mystery, Zechariah brought in a tsunami of it. First, we must note his name is rather common to that time and he is one of probably 37 fellows in Judah then by that name. Second, his prophetic material is rather unique among prophecies. He speaks of night visions and loads his messages with imagery that brings a wide variation in interpretation. So, too, his work did more to fan the fire of sectarian Messianic Judaism than almost all other Old Testament literature combined.

It is impossible to summarize the meaning of his writings here. The obvious point is that the impact these messages had on the Judeans during the second attempt to build the Temple. With beatific visions of how Jehovah was preparing to work through this very building, how could they delay? Until the Temple was finished, God was not going to address any other order of business. All the joys and wonders of what the Lord desired to pour out on them were waiting their obedience. That they took this all too literally is now clear, for we have drawn from this low rumble of excitement a great mass of literature describing all manner of material blessings for the Jews under the coming rule of the Messiah. Many books published during the next 400 years of Jewish history are loaded with the stuff. It's the primary reason they failed to recognize

Jesus as the Messiah, because they were so certain they knew what His rule would be – quite other than His teaching.

There is a great deal of criticism for this prophetic book because of this. Obvious to readers, there is a distinct break between the first eight chapters and the rest. Up through Chapter 8, the visions are dated. Beginning with Chapter 9, the writing seems to be from a different man. The simplest explanation is that Zechariah's book was published near or after his death. The first half was the result of his work during the years the Second Temple was being built, working alongside Haggai. The rest appears to come much later in his life, for the perspective is rather different, and not tied to any historical events. While various historical enemies of Israel are discussed, they are best seen as symbols of a larger message. Whatever view one takes, it is clear how this material, in the confused minds of the returnees, could lead to the birth of an industry in False Messianic Expectations.

Ezra 5 – Under constant prodding of these two prophets, the work on the Second Temple progressed rather quickly. The activity could not possibly go unnoticed. It's quite obvious the previous troublemakers were no longer in power, and the Samaritans had not yet found any new agents to bribe in the Imperial Court. Still, it's quite certain they reported this "rebellion" to the satrap. The satrap appointed over the Syrian Province, which included Judah, came down and asked Zerubbabel what was going on. Under the assumption such activity was probably illegal, this satrap, Tattenai, tried to stop the work. However, the Jews resisted his interference. The explanation the Hebrews gave him mentioned the decree of Cyrus, so he used no force to stop them. Instead, he sent a letter to Darius asking for confirmation of the decree, and instructions.

Ezra 6 – The archives in Babylon held no clue, but the older library at Ecbatana, the ancient capital of the old Median Empire, produced an accurate record of the decree. Keep in mind that Medo-Persian law forbade countermanding any previous decree. Darius, a strong law-and-order ruler, was rather forceful in keeping this custom. Given his requirement to abide by the decree of Cyrus, he ordered the satrap and all others to stay away from Jerusalem and let the building proceed. Further, Darius ordered the satrap to provide from the Imperial treasury there anything the Judeans requested for the Temple, including for the worship and sacrifices. Given the penchant Darius had for appointing incorruptible servants, the decree was obeyed in full. Tattenai acted as if it was his joy to support the project.

On 12 March 515 BC, the Temple was completed. There was a great celebration for the dedication service. Then the priests and Levites were assigned their service rotations in the Temple. The next month, on 21 April, Passover was celebrated. This time the priests were ready ahead of time and the sacrifices proceeded in good order. Even if not fully recognized as Jewish, anyone who had begun seeking Jehovah was invited to join this and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

During the next few decades, we find Darius initiating the long contest with Greece. His attacks failed but helped to stir the growing power of the Greeks. Darius dies in 486 BC, leaving the contest to his successors.

11.4: Esther

The Book of Esther bears a strong hint of Ezra's hand as the final editor. While widely condemned for mentioning neither God nor the Law, it was clearly regarded by Jews as part of their canon, preserved largely as the basis for the Feast of Purim. The feast has little spiritual significance but is more of a civil-historical celebration filled with symbolism. For example, the feast ends with the admonition that celebrants drink themselves into a stupor, celebrating their continued existence as a people long after the Medo-Persian Empire faded away, against the drunken celebration of Xerxes that nearly ended their existence as a nation. Only the hand of God could explain the result of this tale. We have no reason to doubt it actually happened. It offers powerful enlightenment on what shaped the character of the Jewish nation.

Esther – Xerxes came to power in 486 BC, rising from the ranks of the Persian half of the empire. From his predecessor, Darius the Mede, he inherited a desire to spread the empire into Greece. However, he was a weaker man in many ways. There were three imperial palaces: Ecbatana was the original capital in Media and Persepolis the newer capital farther south in modern Iran. While the old, captured Babylon was used at times, the later Medo-Persian Emperors favored Susa (or Shushan), in the old Elamite territory. It was this latter palace that Xerxes had decorated extravagantly, with jewels inlaid in the floor, gold and silver furniture, and so forth.

In his third year on the throne (483 BC), Xerxes was ready to try Greece again. He called for his officials to gather for 180 days of strategy meetings, which was climaxed by a wine party. Rather than the usual minimum requirement, everyone was permitted to drink as much or as little as they wished. As we might expect, most spent the seven days roaring drunk. Xerxes was a man more concerned with his reputation than with actual accomplishment. Already overly proud when sober, Xerxes in his inebriated state ordered his ranking consort, Vashti, to come prance before his drunken mob. Her physical perfection was legendary, and he wished to show off his trophy woman as icing on the cake. No one would ever forget his greatness, at least during his lifetime. We note as an aside his official wife was some other woman, by whom his heir would be born. Wives were a matter of law and treaty; actual pleasure was taken via any number of consorts and concubines.

The seven eunuchs reported back Vashti's refusal. Vashti was taken with the same pride as her husband and feared losing her own reputation. It was fashionable at that time for women to push their own agenda and the ruling noblemen and princes resented it. There were probably some partisan politics involved, but the parties can't be easily identified. Xerxes consulted his advisers, who took advantage of the situation to stroke his ego and get him to enact some social legislation. They insisted he make Vashti's retirement an imperial decree, thus permanent. This meant she would remain with the harem, but in isolation, losing the very public status she sought to preserve in refusing to parade before the drunks. It would also be irrevocable, insuring she would not be in a position to take revenge on the advisers. Delivering the decree throughout an empire that stretched from the Indus River to Ethiopia was pretty efficient by a sort of pony express. It was the translation into the hundreds of languages that would take up the most time. Thus, the primary focal point of this decree was the language spoken in any home – it must be that of the man who owned it. In a world where men took multiple wives from various national backgrounds to show off, conspiring wives might resort to their native

tongue to keep their husbands out of their competing agenda. The decree was fundamentally anti-feminist in its own context, and the author seems to approve.

Xerxes went off to war with Greece from 481-479 BC. While he beat the Spartans and occupied Athens, he lost a naval battle off Salamis and was driven out. It was during these bad times Xerxes began longing for the most beautiful of his harem, Vashti. This brought fear to his advisers. Not only would a restored Vashti threaten them, but any replacement normally taken from among the upper noble families would be in complete sympathy with her, seeking ways to nullify the edict that took away their social influence. They thus proposed a beauty pageant from the foreigners and lesser nobles of the empire. Once rounded up, the eunuchs proceeded making them ready. Every candidate spent a year in what amounted to a beauty spa in the harem facility. This included a lot of what we might call charm-school training to prepare for a life as imperial consort. This harem was separate from the palace. The palace was a very public place, while the harem was isolated from the rest of the world.

We are introduced to Mordecai, a Benjamite of Saul's clan, Kish. This man had been employed in some capacity in the imperial court owing to his position as a nobleman of Judah (former royal family). He shrewdly sought means to influence events on behalf of his nation. He had raised a younger cousin as his own daughter, since she was orphaned. She is described as having not only a grand physical beauty, but a singular feminine grace that stole everyone's heart. The round up had been indiscriminate of nationality, so Mordecai instructed Esther not to mention being Hebrew. When her turn came to visit with Xerxes, she won his heart and was given the place of honor vacated by Vashti. Reading between the lines, we see the wisdom of Mordecai plotting an end to the long years of harassment from the enemies of Judah. His tactics and weapons were Esther's promotion to Queen-Consort.

In order to start things off with a bang, Mordecai took advantage of his inside knowledge of the palace. The disgrace of Vashti surely stirred considerable controversy, along with the decree of household languages. Quite likely, the two doorkeepers were related in some way to Vashti and took advantage of the parade of virgins to plot their revenge. The selection of Esther doomed any hope of Vashti's return to power. Overhearing this conspiracy to assassinate Xerxes, Mordecai passed word through the palace servants to Esther, who revealed it to her husband on Mordecai's behalf. An investigation confirmed the report, and the assassins were executed in the favored method of hanging from public gallows.

Mordecai's constant proximity to the palace set the stage for trouble. Some four years later (474 BC), a man named Haman had gained the Emperor's favor, and was promoted to Viceroy – second in the Empire. He was even more vain than Xerxes and a slimy manipulator, too. It was common in that part of the world for subjects to bow before their rulers. There were degrees of bowing depending on the relative position of each. Persian rulers demanded all bow to them as to a deity in a supplication posture. It was this sort of bowing Mordecai, along with all other Hebrews, refused to do. Their refusal had long been tolerated, as Hebrews were known to be peculiar in many ways. Mordecai probably bowed to Haman as to any mortal king, which infuriated the arrogant Viceroy. Indeed, he was too arrogant to summarily execute the older man alone, but decided to exterminate his kind. Upon learning it was a matter of Hebrew ways, he convinced Xerxes to prepare a day to massacre the whole race. It was at the beginning of

their year (April). Conferring with astrologers over the best day, along with casting of lots (*pur* in the old Persian tongue), Haman chose a time almost a full year later. The Samaritans, Edomites and many others in the land near Judah were salivating at the prospect. Haman lied about the extent of Judean oddities and promised a huge windfall from confiscation of their property, easily worth ten times the annual tribute from the empire. This was probably accurate, given the Hebrews' newfound love of trade and banking. While Solomon had learned banking and finance the Sidonians, it was never so prevalent among Jews as it was in Babylon. They had become quite wealthy as a nation.

Xerxes seemed indifferent to the fate of these people he hardly knew about and gave Haman his signet ring. He also offered to pay the initial expenses of expediting the messengers outside the routine imperial traffic, along with preparations for the slaughter. Mostly mercenaries, given a warrant to execute for a cut of the plunder, would carry out such a major action. These would be mustered with an initial payment and/or delivery of weapons. Their commission would require they return a set percentage of the plunder back to the throne. The rest they could keep. Most of Judah's enemies needed no such enticement, however. Plenty of them simply despised what they considered Hebrew arrogance. Meanwhile, the entire capital city was abuzz with such an unusual decree.

Throughout the Empire, Hebrews joined in fasting and praying, mourning in sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai managed to get a copy of the decree, plus details of the deal Haman made with Xerxes. It was forbidden to show unhappiness before the Emperor unless he wanted it that way. Thus, Mordecai could not enter the palace grounds, but stood at the gate demonstrating his distress. Esther sent Mordecai garments that would allow him to cover the sackcloth and enter the gates, probably to find out from him what was afoot, but he refused. Thus, their conversation was by way of an intermediary eunuch. Mordecai revealed the full details of the cause of his sorrow. Esther replied she would be of little help. Xerxes was not planning to see her for some time and simply going in to see him was forbidden by ancient custom. Everyone who came before the Emperor must be summoned first. Mordecai warned her it didn't matter; she had nothing to lose. She could risk dying by breaking the custom or die for sure when the edict of extermination was carried out. Entering unbidden at least offered some hope of saving her people. Her final response was to request a covenant of fasting and praying with her three days for this specific issue, seeking God's favor, and then she would attempt to enter the throne room.

The one exception to this rule of entering the court unbidden was if the Emperor extended his scepter in a sign of pardon for disturbing him. In this Esther succeeded. Whatever had distracted him for the past month that he had not seen her was swept aside upon sight of her. Clearly, it was the wisdom of Jehovah guiding her, as she proposed a private banquet to honor Xerxes and Haman. This was quite the opposite of Vashti, who disdained merely being seen at his official banquet. Esther, at great risk, wanted to offer him a banquet she prepared to honor him and his viceroy. He jumped at the chance to take a break and ordered Haman to appear immediately.

At the banquet, Xerxes made an extravagant offer. Sensing she had not yet gained enough leverage, she repeated the offer of a banquet the next evening. Each time, Haman passed

through the gate, with Mordecai's intransigence over bowing gnawing at him. It contrasted starkly with the Queen's signal honors. He called his wife and friends to advise him. When he recounted all his good fortune, yet incomplete with this one nagging imperfection of honor, they suggested he prepare a gallows 75 feet high (23 meters) in his own courtyard. This would be visible all over the city, even from the Imperial Palace. It could be finished overnight, and then he could ask the Emperor permission to hang Mordecai on it the next day.

Suffering a sleepless night by the hand of God, Xerxes ordered his official records read to him. It appears he was afflicted with a conscience. Perhaps he had forgotten to render proper honor somewhere? Indeed, there was Mordecai, who had saved the Emperor's life by revealing an assassination plot. Finding nothing had been done to reward the man, Xerxes needed to consult an adviser, according to custom, to rectify matters. By now it was morning, and the only adviser present was the Viceroy. Haman had come quite early to request Mordecai's execution. Before he could present his request, Xerxes had a query about honoring someone. In his arrogance, Haman thought it merely a ploy to see what would make his day. So, he told Xerxes what he wanted for himself, each a signal honor in itself by the standards of that day. He described these honors only to learn it was intended for his enemy, Mordecai. Worse, he had cut his own throat by suggesting this honor come at the hand of a high-ranking prince. Haman was the only prince at hand to carry out his own public humiliation. It took most of the day. Mordecai resumed his place at the gate; it was Haman's turn to mourn.

Conferring afresh with his family at home, Haman was warned. If things had turned around so abruptly, it was the hand of the Hebrew God. Jehovah was feared superstitiously. They presumed He acted rarely, but swiftly and completely, regardless of other gods. Before Haman could contemplate his doom, the imperial eunuchs arrived to hustle him off to Esther's banquet.

At the banquet, with the final course of wine served, Xerxes again pledged to answer any request she could make. By offering up to half his empire, we note it was all he could do. While he ruled the whole of the Medes and Persians, he couldn't obligate the Medes to just anything without consultation, only his own Persian people. Thus, he offered everything within his real power. Her response was clearly no small matter – her entire nation had been sentenced to death. She explained it in terms of greed. In reality, this extermination would cost the Empire a great deal in economic terms. Judeans were likely the most productive people in the Empire and their economic activity spilled over to bless everyone. Simply confiscating their property – making them slaves – would bring the imperial treasury a great deal of wealth and preserve their productive presence. Killing them would diminish the wealth of the Empire.

Xerxes still did not connect this to his decree against the Hebrews. When he asked who would do such a horrible thing, she fingered Haman. It hit Xerxes all at once how Haman had been manipulating him. It seemed almost as if Haman was a member of the party supporting Vashti, using the cover of this complaint about Judean customs and wealth to get rid of Esther and pave the way for Vashti's return. Xerxes went out into the private garden, in the cool night air, to compose himself. Meanwhile, Haman begged Esther for his life. She had remained in a relaxed pose on a couch. So animated was Haman he prostrated himself on the end of her couch, at which moment Xerxes came back into the room. In his stormy mood, he took in the scene and assumed the worst – Haman was attempting to assault Esther in Xerxes' very presence.

Whatever came next, the exclamation from Xerxes was a death warrant for Haman, so the attending servants covered his face, according to custom for condemned men. One of the servants present was a eunuch who had been sent to fetch Haman for the banquet. He pointed out how appropriate it would be to hang Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. So it was ordered.

Further justice was to allow Esther, the potential victim, to dispose of the guilty man's assets. Upon revealing Mordecai, the man recently honored, was her next of kin, Xerxes had him replace Haman in court. With yet one piece of unfinished business, Esther again went through the risky process of gaining official audience with Xerxes, and tearfully pleaded for her nation's survival. While there was no means to rescind the decree against the Hebrews, there was one way they might survive. Xerxes told Esther to confer with her uncle, now the Viceroy with the signet ring, and they could do as they liked. Their plan was to decree the Hebrews should be allowed to muster for their own defense and could legally kill their enemies once fighting started. The message carried by the imperial mail riders two months after Haman's decree was a cause for celebration throughout the Empire.

When the fateful day arrived, 7 March 473 BC, things had completely reversed. Mordecai was more famous than Haman had dreamed. His influence was sufficient to find the Hebrews reinforced with imperial troops. Those who had harassed the Judeans all this time were arrested, and many were executed. The few who dared attempt going after them were slaughtered. Xerxes was pleased and told Esther to make another request. She asked for a second day of this activity in Susa alone, since the decree could hardly be relayed across the Empire so quickly. It was granted, so the sons of Haman were killed, and many more enemies were arrested. However, the Hebrews were careful not to plunder the property. This was to make clear there was no intent to profit from blood, but only to obtain justice for hostile acts against them.

The aftermath was a day of celebration, which they called *Purim*, the plural of the word for lots cast in fortune telling. Because the residents of Susa had a second day, there was some variance in celebration. Mordecai decreed both days would be celebrated. A few years later, he added a decree to observe the tense days before their victory with fasting and praying. It would be a long time before anyone rose to oppress the Judeans again. Xerxes died in 465 BC. In just a few years, Ezra would lead another group returning to their home in Judah.

11.5: Ezra Comes to Jerusalem

It had been 57 years since the Second Temple was finished. Aside from the story of Esther, and a brief mention of interference from the Samaritans and other old enemies of Israel, little is known of this period. However, it seems plain that the Jews had become rather cozy with the locals. By the time Ezra arrives, the first issue he faces is the intermarriage with local heathens. While it appears that Ezra wasn't aware of this specific problem before he arrived in Jerusalem, it's quite likely he knew something wasn't right and this unknown trouble required investigation. His commission from Artaxerxes makes mention of a need to appoint judges under the Law of Moses. He was a reformer from the start.

Ezra 7-8 – Artaxerxes I ruled from 465-424 BC, a rather long 40-year reign. During his first six

years or so on the throne, he struggled with rebellion in his empire, particularly Egypt. Rebellion in any empire is most common at the change of rulers. There was also the continuing warfare with Greece. After settling a treaty with these two, Artaxerxes turned back to internal matters. Part of this was the matter of Judah. In his seventh year, 458 BC, he issued a decree to the Syrian Province. We can be rather certain Ezra was in some position of influence with the Imperial Court and managed to obtain this decree backing the very work he was determined to do for Jehovah.

Ezra the man is identified as a priest, but not in the line of High Priestly descent. He refers to himself as a Scribe. In ancient times, reading alone was hardly as universal as in modern times. Writing was far more demanding, and Ezra belonged to the class of priests who had dedicated themselves to this skill for the very purpose of making copies of the Law. After a decade or two of copying Moses, they were exceptionally well versed in the minutiae of the Law; they were asked to teach, argue as a lawyer in court cases and eventually to serve as priestly judges. We note it is wholly in character for him to make much of genealogies. As the best candidate for final editor of the Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, we see this stamp of his work throughout them.

As part of his commission, Ezra was given a tremendous load of gold, silver and other precious materials for the sake of the Temple. He delivered this into the care of some priests and Levites who accompanied him. There was also a huge collection of mixed items sent as offerings from the community remaining in Babylon. After nine days of travel from Babylon, just a short distance up the Euphrates Valley, the entourage stopped outside a community of Levites and Nethinim – the latter a class of servants attached to the Levites arising from the old treaty with the Gibeonites as “hewers of wood and carriers of water” for the Temple. While there, Ezra requested the community leadership find men of known lineage to go with him and serve in the Temple. While some 4,000 priests came back in the original return party with Zerubbabel, only a handful of Levites came, so Ezra was hoping to balance that workload. While there, Ezra also proclaimed a three-day fast and prayer asking God’s protection. All that treasure and there was no armed escort. Roving bands of raiders were known to work the open portions of the road between cities. After all his boasting in his God, he felt it would diminish that testimony to ask the Emperor for soldiers.

Having received a good word from God on their request, the caravan set out on 8 April 457 BC. They arrived in Jerusalem on 24 July the same year, making 900 miles (1450 km) in four months at an average of seven miles (11 km) per day. This was fairly fast for large civilian groups with families, wagons and such. Ezra testifies the Lord protected and prospered their journey. They delivered the offerings and published the decree with the authorities throughout the Syrian Satrapy. For three days they camped near the city of Jerusalem and celebrated joyously the opportunity to stand in the Temple of Jehovah before His altar.

9 – The mood of celebration was short-lived, however. No doubt Ezra spoke in terms of strict adherence to the Law of Moses. In the months that followed his arrival, it’s hard to imagine he didn’t begin to review compliance with the Law as he prepared to commission judges and teachers. In this context, the local rulers mentioned the intermarriage with pagans among the Jews. Were this a matter of Gentiles converting to be married, we’d not hear about it. Rather, the

marriages involved the pagans bringing their idols and ritual items into Jewish homes with them. Jewish girls were married off to pagan householders. This was in December of that same year.

Fully knowing how unfaithfulness had led to the destruction of the Holy City and the exile of his people, Ezra made it clear this was no minor issue. Tearing the garment was bad enough, but to pull out hair signals wrath bearing impending destruction. He spent the rest of the day in stunned horror at how quickly the nation had returned to such a major violation. Jehovah was not just any old household deity. He had granted a new anchor for Jewish identity, but in just 80 years they had forsaken the Covenant. The rulers trembled at the thought of renewed wrath from God. After the evening sacrifice, Ezra went to the Temple and prayed with his face to the pavement; this is how leaders handle major moral failures. Everyone who cared in the least joined him.

10 – While Ezra and the others were praying thus, the leaders got to work and agreed to propose a renewal of the Covenant. They asked Ezra to take charge and do what seemed best to him as they were behind him completely. Ezra rose up and took counsel with them. First, he extracted an oath from them that they would obey the Law, plain and simple. When that was done, he had them publish a decree that all Israel must assemble in Jerusalem within three days or risk severe punishment. During the wait, Ezra stayed in seclusion in the High Priest's chambers in the Temple, fasting and mourning.

It was 8 December 457 BC. The full assembly of Judah and Benjamin was more than the city could hold. While the leadership huddled in the Temple Plaza, the masses were forced to stand outside the city in the Kidron Valley. It was the season for rain, but the cold was not their only reason for shivering; they feared the wrath of God. It was the turn of the elders from the outlying areas to speak, asking that the crowd be released on a declaration to obey in advance. It was noted this problem of pagan intermarriage was widespread and could not be resolved in short time. Having the full assembly continue standing in the open was cruel and unnecessary. They got the message already. They arranged to send their leaders by district, one at a time, allowing Ezra to investigate and rule on each case.

So it was done, and Ezra painstakingly listed each of the offending families. He also recorded the few who rejected the whole idea, including a couple of Levites. The narrative ends here, but we may safely assume similar efforts to recover holiness were maintained for quite some time.

11.6: Nehemiah Comes to Help

Between the end of Ezra in 457 BC, and the beginning of Nehemiah in 445 BC, it's not as if nothing happened. For Ezra to break up marriages with pagan families could not have won the admiration of the local pagans. Just when they were beginning to get some leverage with the Jews, it's broken all at once. We can't forget that, for these people, religion is politics and vice versa. The primary enemies of Judah in Samaria and Edom would be looking for a way to take revenge.

It appears Ezra gave it to them. Their renewed hostility called for defensive measures. Ezra probably felt sure his commission included protecting the City of Jerusalem as best he could, to

include rebuilding the ancient walls. The Samaritans and Edomites had also seen a copy of the commission and were betting Ezra was wrong. As soon as the walls were started, they sent word to someone in the Imperial Court with a bribe. The result was soldiers dispatched to destroy the wall and burn the gates (Ezra 4:6-23). Apparently, Artaxerxes didn't consider his decree to include a wall, either. The damage to the city and resulting despair were communicated to the Judean community back in Babylon.

Nehemiah 1 – When the news of this came to Nehemiah, he was residing at the palace in Susa, serving Artaxerxes as Wine Taster. Essentially, it is a ceremonial job of taking the first sip of every cup of wine the Emperor drinks. The idea being that, if it is poisoned, the wine taster will sicken and die first, while the ruler is spared. It was an ancient custom to have a wine taster, but hardly necessary in Artaxerxes' time, so it was merely ceremonial. However, the position had gained tremendous power and prestige over the centuries before this. Nehemiah was a big shot. It's obvious he had influence in the Court of Heaven, as well. His prayer is very persuasive. The news came to him in December 445 BC. Over the next four months he prayed and fasted.

2:1-10 – Servants of the Emperor were not permitted to display sadness or sorrow in his presence without specific orders. Four months of intense prayer had given him a dreary countenance and the Emperor noticed. He was rather patient with Nehemiah, sensing it was some deep sorrow of the heart, not something frivolous. It wasn't merely fear of offending Artaxerxes, but of making a request contrary to the emperor's previous actions regarding Jerusalem. He renewed his prayer silently, and then spoke of his sadness over the city and his people. The Emperor's question was of the nature, "So, what do you want to do about it?"

Nehemiah's answer was that the latter decree regarding Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21) would include sending him to do just that: rebuild the wall of the city. When asked for a return time, Nehemiah provided an estimate. He also requested the decree include a letter of safe passage and an order of timber from the Imperial Forester. This was all granted. With an armed guard he arrived at the Satrap's office in Syria, announcing his intentions. The primary enemies are named: Sanballat of Beth Horon and Tobiah the Ammonite. Tobiah was an Ammonite nobleman serving the Satrap of Syria. Sanballat is known to have been the governor of Samaria.

2:11-20 – Apparently the bulk of the soldiers who escorted Nehemiah had orders to return when he arrived at Jerusalem. Likely he kept only a small contingent of Persian bodyguard. The enemies had been tipped off but were not fully aware of all the plans. Waiting three days, Nehemiah took a few trusted escorts with him to inspect the walls of the city during the night. Any spies within the city were unlikely to know what was up. His description is a little obscure. Our best guess is he went out of the Old City at a western gate, rode down along the wall to the Pool of Siloam, but could not pass further. Dropping down into the valley, he circled around and rode up the Kidron a bit. Then he turned and came back in the same gate where he started.

Next day, he revealed his plans to the leadership in the city. With an imperial decree behind him, they were ready to try again. An Arab nobleman named Geshem joined the two enemies. When these troublemakers ridiculed the idea, they subtly threatened to report the city was in revolt. Nehemiah warned them they really had no say in the matter.

3: – The city by this time was probably rather broad across the northern half where the ridge is

flatter, and narrowed down to the steep-sided hump of the old City of David. Nehemiah lists the households and the portion of wall they worked. His description starts with the gate nearest the northeast corner of the Temple Mount. From there, his list runs along the northern line to the west. There are two towers that guard the northern side, which is the easiest approach to the city. Near the northwest corner is mentioned the residence for the Satrap of Syria ("Region Beyond the River" from the perspective of the Mesopotamian Valley). Not that he would live there full time, it was his to use if he ever came. On the western wall was a long section leading to the Tower of Ovens, which was near the baker's district. This was near the Valley Gate, which was connected to the lower west wall running down past the Pool of Siloam to the Refuse or Dung Gate. This was the lowest point of the wall, letting down into the Hinnom Valley where it joined the Kidron. Running north up the east side was a double wall for a distance. The outer wall was down nearer the valley floor. Both walls were completely rebuilt, along with a couple more towers. We believe the double walls rejoined near the lower east corner of the newer city and Temple Plaza. From there up to the northeast corner again were priests, Levites, Nethinim and goldsmiths repairing the walls nearest their homes and shops. This description locates the people and the areas they worked, but the job hardly progressed in a simple manner.

11.7: The Wall Is Built

Nehemiah 4:1-5 – Nehemiah's enemies expressed their opposition in several ways. First, they tried public ridicule. This would be a theatrical display of standing near the wall, discussing loudly in the hearing of the builders. In the process, they ridiculed Jehovah, asking rhetorically if sacrificing to Him was of any use. The wall was being built largely of the limestone rubble of previous walls and buildings torn down repeatedly, starting with Nebuchadnezzar. Part of Sanballat's criticism notes that limestone blocks, when exposed to fire, are softened to the point of crumbling easily. Tobiah chimed in how easily the wall could be toppled if so much as a small animal should jump on top of it.

4:6-12 – At this time, Arab tribes were living south of Jerusalem. The Ammonites held the southern end of Gilead, just over the northern end of the Dead Sea from Jerusalem. Ashdod was then the chief city of Philistia. The Samaritan troops were at Sanballat's call. Thus, we see the enemies of Judah were active on all sides. When the wall reached half its planned height, these forces counseled together secretly to attack without warning. This was no major military exercise they were planning, but a sizable raiding party from each group, large enough to threaten, but small enough to move quickly and without much notice. It was necessary to avoid official involvement due to Artaxerxes' decree. However, this was not a very well-kept secret, for the cities across Judah called for their workmen to return so they might defend against the planned raid. This, on top of the monumental pile of rubble that must be removed from the city, was enough to discourage the wall building. It was exactly what the proposed raids were supposed to accomplish one way or another.

4:13-23 – Rather than send defenders to the outlying towns, Nehemiah called the families in to camp in and around Jerusalem. Then guard pickets were set around the whole perimeter. Half of the able-bodied posted guard, fully armed and armored, while the other half built the wall.

Further, the workmen wore a sword, with some of the exterior guards holding extra weapons. Thus, any attack would meet an instant and concerted defense of fully armed troops. Because of the distance involved between work parties, it was planned to reinforce any point of attack with workman from inside the wall, running quickly to face the threat. Professional soldiers (nobles and leaders) were scattered throughout the city. Scouts from the raiding parties saw this and canceled their attack. Nehemiah reports he did not enjoy any special comforts but joined in the hardships. They slept fully dressed, disrobing only to wash quickly and change clothes. They also slept with weapons beside them.

5 – A particular problem arose during this tense period but was not fully addressed until later. Building the wall of Jerusalem was a sacrifice not only of labor, but labor that could not be given over to normal trade and harvest activities. The building took place during part of the summer fruit harvest and the olive harvest, not to mention the Jewish New Year. Food became scarce for those living close to the earth. The peasants and lower households were in a bind, for the habit of the wealthy was to charge high interest rates, contrary to the Law. The situation had gotten so bad many were already serving as bond-slaves. The seventh-year release was not being honored (Exodus 21:2-11), or was not offered as an option, so some had been sold off to pagans.

As the food situation became tight, Nehemiah was presented with complaints of this bad business. In the mad rush to finish the wall, Nehemiah pondered how to deal with this mess. In the short term, he rebuked the guilty nobles and priests, and the practices were suspended. Later on, he called a solemn assembly, something not possible during the wall building. This made the changes permanent. Further, Nehemiah set the example by refusing to live at the expense of the people. Instead of collecting the governor's tax, he and his bodyguard lived out of Nehemiah's own pockets. He would have also been required to feed any visiting dignitaries, yet did so at his own expense. This provided immense relief during his twelve years as governor. Previous men in that office were likely Persian appointees who weren't always Jewish.

6:1-4 – The wall itself was completed. While the gates had not yet been hung, the city was fairly secure from attack by raiding parties. The prior guard force could be greatly reduced to gate squads and a company or two in reserve inside the city. The only hope of the enemies was to draw Nehemiah out. Northwest of Jerusalem some 20 miles (32km), at the southern end of the Plain of Sharon, was the city of Ono. Sanballat and friends offered to host a conference in that area at the town of Nehemiah's choosing. Nehemiah was no fool. He wasn't lying when he said there was too much work to do; hanging gates was labor intensive and slow compared to stacking rocks already in abundance. The wood had to be brought in, trimmed and cut into posts and planks, then assembled in frames and doors. He rejected that message four times.

6:5-9 – Failing that ploy, Sanballat made a public accusation. He had read in everyone's hearing a letter accusing Nehemiah of planning to declare himself King of Judah, in rebellion against Persia. Further, while there were surely prophets at this time speaking about the Messiah, the enemies twisted this to mean Nehemiah had hired false prophets to declare him this Anointed One of God. The objective was to compel Nehemiah's appearance before a court of his peers to face these charges. This, too, failed to impress Nehemiah.

6:10-14 – The final trick was to hire a false prophet of their own. Sanballat commissioned

Shemaiah to give Nehemiah “a word from God.” The prophecy was that Shemaiah had learned from God that Sanballat and friends had sent assassins. They would come that very night and the only hope was to hide in the Temple. The suggestion itself exposed its falsity. No layman was allowed in the Temple, so it was not a word from God. Besides, such cowardice was the last thing the people needed to see. Nehemiah notes that other prophets who had been used by Sanballat for similar chicanery.

6:15-19 – The wall was begun 1 August 444 BC and finished 21 September the same year, 52 days. While we note the walls were not completely gone, but required closing breaches and adding gates, it was a great task still. This feat was clearly nothing less than a miracle from Jehovah. As if external enemies weren’t enough, Nehemiah reveals Tobiah was allied by marriage to a couple of powerful Jewish noble houses. Further, his name is Hebrew, suggesting he may have descended from one of the few northern Israelis left by the Assyrian deportation two hundred years earlier. Altogether, his influence far outweighed his legitimate power in Judah. There was constant verbal sparring between him and Nehemiah via numerous letters. Nehemiah also received countless letters from Jews supporting Tobiah.

7:1-4 – Nehemiah passed civil rule over the city to his brother, Hanani, and military security passed to Hananiah, commander of the fortress on the wall north of the Temple. This same building, in one form or another, was still used as a fort by Roman soldiers during Jesus’ time. Most Returnees avoided the city, living in outlying towns and cities. Only during feasts, festivals and assemblies was the city fully populated. Thus, keeping it secure was hard work. Nehemiah arranged for in-depth defense of the city. He tasked the Levites to help guard the upper city. Gate policy was to use smaller doorways until the heat of day, when the main gates could be opened. At night, guards were posted atop the wall, as well as sector guards within the city posted before the gate of each major household. The city secured, Nehemiah was free to devote time to actually ruling Judah and instituting reforms.

11.8: Final Covenant Renewal

We come to the end of our historical narrative from Scripture. The final passage of Nehemiah is loaded with the sort of minutiae and facts typical of Ezra. For this reason, scholars tend to support the notion that Nehemiah’s memoirs were incorporated into a final text edited by Ezra.

Nehemiah 7:5-73 – Nehemiah made plans to repopulate the City of Jerusalem. After the last Persian destruction, folks were skittish about living in the city for both its lack of a protective wall and for the negative attention it had received. Before everyone was dismissed, Nehemiah dug out the scroll of returnees who came back with Zerubbabel almost a century before. The idea was to insure only pure Jews would be invited. The text includes a fresh copy of the census Ezra recorded early in his book. The final verse is a comment about the problem as Nehemiah saw it: Everyone lived outside the Holy City. There were only a few princes of Judah and some of the Temple staff.

8 – The first day of the seventh month was 27 September 444 by modern reckoning, a week after the wall was finished. This was the Feast of Trumpets. While the celebrants crowded into the city for the celebration, the leaders built a wooden platform, asking Ezra to stand on it and read the Law. He read from the old Hebrew version, no longer spoken by the common folk. Thus, a

dozen or so priests and Levites stood by to render the readings into the Aramaic now spoken by everyone. The common language of Babylon was the Semitic tongue similar to the Hebrew spoken by Aramaeans (also called Chaldeans), and it had quickly displaced the more archaic Hebrew. While they would have understood some of the words and phrases, it would be approximately as hard to follow as the King's English today would be for an American high school student. The practice of paraphrasing became common from that time, and the product was called *targum*. A written body of such paraphrasing bears that name today.

Reading in this fashion the first time took at least six hours and the congregation was probably quite shaken by the warnings in Deuteronomy regarding their sins. However, there was one day set aside for sorrow, the Day of Atonement, which was not for another week or so. While such sensitivity itself was a good thing, this particular holy day was for celebrating the joy of the Lord. This powerful fresh rendering of the Law had a lingering effect, prompting the leaders to gather the next day to study how they should celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, which came somewhat later. While this had been celebrated in the past, the point that all Jews should spend some time in a makeshift shelter had been neglected. Thus, it had not been faithfully observed since the time of Joshua just after the Conquest.

9 – Most of the seventh month (latter September through early October) was a series of celebrations. On the first day was Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23f), sort of a start of the agricultural cycle. The last harvest (olives) was past, there was a break for holy days, and then plowing would start. Trumpets was treated as a Sabbath, regardless of where it fell in the week. On the tenth day of that month was the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26ff). On the 15th through 21st of that same month was Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33ff). During this time the reading of the Law was repeated over the whole week in shorter sessions.

On the 24th day of that month, while it was not a regular holy day, the nation assembled again in mourning. The repeated exposure to the Law was having its effect. After about a three-hour reading of the Law again (translators had time to practice on difficult passages), the Levites stood up and led the nation through a prolonged confession of their sins, as well as the mercy and patience of Jehovah. At the end, they all agreed to compose a binding ordinance to renew the Covenant.

10 – The chapter begins with a list of those who affix their personal seal to this document renewing the Covenant. The points of emphasis are three: (1) no mixed marriages with pagans, (2) no trade on the Sabbath, and (3) reinforcement of the Sabbatical Year of Release. There was also set in place an extensive organization of the offering system, to include reinstating the Temple Tax.

11-12 – Finally, this extended stay around Jerusalem was topped off with a sort of tithe on the people to move into the Holy City. Lots were drawn and one family in ten was chosen to boost the population of pure Jewish inhabitants. The names of families are listed. The next chapter is a census of priests and Levites. It is noted that under Darius II (423-404 BC) another census was done. Then the dedication ceremony for the city wall is described. Many Levites, particularly the singers, were brought into town. They and a large company of priests and nobles were divided into two large groups that paraded around opposite sides of the wall until they met at the Temple. Beginning with that period, Nehemiah began organizing the offices within the

Temple to manage offerings and storage. It was established that the Levites would receive tithes from the people, and then present a tithe of that to the priests. Performance of ritual purity became highly regulated.

13 – In some places, the figures of speech for noting the timing of events are hard to follow. Near as we can figure, on the day the wall was dedicated, there was a rereading of the section of Law demanding a high degree of separation between the Jews and pagans. Those of the Moabite and Ammonite races who lived among the Jews must wait ten generations (Leviticus 23:3f) before they are treated as equals and allowed to worship as Jews. Their extreme efforts to block the Conquest were especially heinous. Meanwhile, Edomites and Egyptians must wait only three generations (Leviticus 23:7f). This is background material for what follows.

In 432 BC, Nehemiah returned to his duties at the Imperial Court. During his absence, the High Priest, Eliashib, had forged an alliance with Tobiah. This Ammonite was given a suite in the Temple complex for those times he visited the Jerusalem. This, not so long after having been warned: If ordinary Jewish laymen couldn't enter the Temple building, how much more wrong for a pagan, particularly an Ammonite! Upon his return sometime later, Nehemiah wasted no time tossing all Tobiah's stuff out on the street and having the rooms ritually cleansed. This was just a sample of how quickly things had gone downhill in Nehemiah's absence. The nation had also dropped off bringing offerings, so the Levites had to return to their private farms just to survive. None but the wealthiest were able to stay and serve in the Temple. This was forcefully rectified, too. Further, during a tour across Judah, Nehemiah noticed large numbers of people doing business on the Sabbath. He dealt severely with the nobles over this. It seemed worst in Jerusalem itself and Nehemiah himself shouted at the people crowding around the gates, after he personally saw to it the gates remained locked on the Sabbath.

Finally, adding insult to injury, he noticed on his tour how many Jewish men were still marrying heathen wives without any effort to convert them. Worse, they were letting their children grow up speaking the mother's native tongue. We note this was actually a violation of Imperial decrees (Xerxes in the story of Esther), as well as a violation of Mosaic Law. Nehemiah dealt with this sternly and harshly, mentioning how it destroyed King Solomon. Even priests were violating the Law regarding mixed marriages, so Nehemiah makes special mention of a son of the very High Priest who had accommodated Tobiah in the Temple. This priest was defrocked and banished from Judah.

The final Old Testament historical passage ends with Nehemiah's refrain asking Jehovah to take note and not forget the zeal and work of Nehemiah in the cause of promoting His holiness. Thus, the final date is sometime during the reign of Darius II, which ended 404 BC.

11.9: Malachi

The very name Malachi has long been a symbol of closure. However, it is not the closure of release, but of imprisonment. We find Malachi's writing difficult to date. It is clear the Second Temple is already old again, yet Judea is clearly still under Persian rule. Given a large number of factors, we would do well to place him publishing this prophecy around 425 BC. After him is a long period of silence from the prophets, and we can safely assume from God, as well.

Malachi – We see the numerous streams of moral failure converging into a flood in Malachi’s words. We have previously mentioned how banking and finance became a major occupation for Jews in Babylon. Under the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah, there was evidence of a hideous level of greed among the powerful and wealthy. Nehemiah struggled mightily with politics in the priesthood, but it was just getting started.

Malachi begins by reminding his readers that they are deeply loved by Jehovah, quite unlike the descendants of Esau. Edom would eventually be forgotten in history, but not Israel. He then goes on to list how they have defied the commands of their God. A primary failing is in the priesthood. Under Persian rule, the returnees living in Judea were under a governor, but to our knowledge, the only Jewish governor they had was Nehemiah. He was rather independent of the regional governor appointed by the Syrian Satrap. Once gone, the priesthood gained the political upper hand. Primarily, it was the High Priest who served as the Persian proxy in Jerusalem and Judea. Politics raised their influence, but also opened the door to deep compromise and corruption.

So deeply enamored were they of their political power that the priests became more perfunctory in performance of their duties in the Temple. They came to see their calling as shepherding the Jews in a secular sense, jealously guarding their unique Jewish privileges. In the long run, they became so very good at pleasing their Persian masters that they forgot to please God. The Law was no longer obeyed, but was mined for ways to maintain their power. The Law was clearly known, since Ezra had established the custom of public reading. However, the custom of *targum* became deeply corrupted. The Law was used as a club to keep the people in subjection.

The net result was a shallow ritual observance that offended Jehovah. People could see clearly the hypocrisy of the priesthood, making them cynical of observances. The stratification of society became rigid, and the status quo became god. It seems obvious the warnings of Malachi went unheeded. His was the last word from God in the Old Testament. It’s unlikely there were no other prophets following him, but we find evidence of very few, and then none.

Jewish prosperity in Babylon was already assured. It was the prosperity of Jews in Judea that weakened Babylonian spiritual and scholarly dominance over the faith. For a time, the center of learning for Jewish faith remained in Babylon. They could not be bothered to leave their power and comfort in Mesopotamia and return to the Promised Land. Instead, they declared the soil around Babylon more sanctified by the density of their scholars, by the massive synagogues, and the arrogance of having first declared as doctrine that there was no God but Jehovah. This grated on Judean nerves, so they viewed with bitterness memories of Ezra and Nehemiah coming from Babylon to straighten them out. Judeans were seeking an excuse to break the sway of the blueblood Eastern Elders. It came a century later.

12. Inter-Testamental Period: 425-4 BC

12.1: Greek Empire

With the closure of the Old Testament canon, we have some 400 years before Christ and the

beginning of the New Testament. The details can be found in books too numerous to name. A couple of books published during this period add some useful insight, particularly those named for the Maccabees, but they were found by the Early Churches lacking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we do not include them in our Bible. And while they provide some interesting accounts from those four centuries, they miss the whole story by focusing on a narrow selection of events. Our purpose here is to provide sufficient outline of the events to lay the foundation for understanding much of what Jesus said and did, and the situation in which it happened.

Here is a rough outline:

- The Persian Empire gave way to Greece under Alexander the Great.
- Alexander conquered much, then promptly died, leaving his new empire to four of his generals. They divided things up by regions.
- The dynasty of the one who took Syria fought with the dynasty that took Egypt, and Judea changed hands between them a couple of times.
- When the Syrian dynasty finally won out, a man who felt compelled to force the whole of Greek culture on the Jews ruled it. He defiled the Temple, among other things.
- While he was enforcing his numerous anti-Mosaic laws, a priestly family in the country rose in revolt. They led a guerrilla war that managed to free Judea for a time.
- Politicking and partisan warfare within Judea brought Rome in, which had been conquering Greece's empire anyway. Rome simply took over.
- Eventually Rome decided the Jews were too rebellious and destroyed Jerusalem, driving out the Jews one last time.

In the midst of all that came the central event in human history: The Savior came and taught, died, and rose again. The stability and fast internal communication system of the Roman Empire was a convenient means to spread His story. We will examine some of the important details within this rough outline.

From the time of Malachi, around 400 BC, life in Judea was uneventful for at about 50 years. Egypt grew restive under the Persian yoke and warfare ensued for a time. During the reign of Artaxerxes III, a large number of Jews were found offering treasonous support to Egypt and were exiled either to Babylon or to the shores of the Caspian Sea. Things were tense between Judea and Persia for quite some time. Meanwhile, the office of High Priest became equivalent to governor of the kingdom. The political maneuvering and petty rivalry involving that office easily matched that of any secular king. Legitimacy under the Law of Moses was seldom of any concern.

During this same time, far away in a land still called Macedonia by some, a petty king named Phillip managed to unite his noble friends and break the power of the Greek City States. Just as the whole thing came together, Phillip died and passed it all to his brilliant son, Alexander. This young king managed to gather a mighty army and inspired them to conquer the known world. As their power grew, the Jews were torn between an old but shattered loyalty to Persia versus

the promise of better things under a strong conqueror from Greece. As it was, Alexander destroyed the Persian armies. He first drove down to Egypt. On the way, his genius and tenacity became legend. When Tyre, off the coast on her island fortress, refused to capitulate, Alexander went to the trouble of building a causeway out to her from the coast by having his men bring stones and toss them into the sea. The causeway still stands today.

It was around 333 BC when the Jews gladly capitulated to Alexander, and he dealt kindly with them. After defeating the Egyptian armies, he founded a new city, one of several named after himself: Alexandria. This one in Egypt was by far the most famous of the lot. The Greek culture was already ancient at this point, referred to as Hellenic, taken from the supposed object of the ancient wars between Athens and Troy, Helen of Troy. Wherever he went, Alexander promoted his native Hellenic culture, but with friendship and enthusiasm. It was beguiling and drew many under its sway. It didn't hurt that he donated so very much wealth to libraries and cultural centers as he conquered. He went on to break the Persians completely, marching his troops to very banks of the Indus River in India before dying.

The Jewish community already in Egypt, which fled the Babylonian conquest, was drawn to the new City of Alexandria, if for no other reason than commerce. They established a major presence such that a full quarter of the city was Jewish. The wealth of trade brought by the Greek Empire created the ancient equivalent of millionaires among the Alexandrian Jews.

Upon Alexander's death, his empire was divided between his four senior generals. From each of them arose a dynasty. While the general who based himself in modern Turkey was given Judea, he didn't keep it long. The general based in Egypt seized Jerusalem from him. The dynasty in Egypt we call the Ptolemies. They continued Alexander's favorable policies toward Jews. Taxes were suspended during sabbatical years, Jews were granted the same status as native Greek citizens in the capital of Alexandria, and so forth. There were even more incentives offered to bring the Jewish banking and cultural wealth to the city. It was the Ptolemies who sponsored the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures we now call the Septuagint. The legends impute this translation with an inspired accuracy, but later examination by scholars showed that false. Still, it was the favorite translation quoted in the New Testament.

But here indeed was the great opportunity to break away from the orthodoxy of the crusty old Eastern Synagogue of Babylon. The intellectual ferment of Greek culture, with its long history of grand philosophical inquiry, provided the roots for a particularly Western flavor to rabbinical studies. It was the age-old rivalry between the ancient blue bloods and the up-and-coming *nouveau riche* and found expression in Jewish religion. The radical departure here cannot be understated. The ancient Mosaic Law, under-girded by a wealth of study by generations of rabbis in the Eastern culture of Babylon, remained essentially faithful to Moses. Despite their arrogance, the Babylonian Great Synagogue viewed things through eyes not significantly different from those of Abraham.

The centuries-old traditions of Greek philosophy, built from pagan Greek polytheistic religion, were wholly foreign to Mosaic tradition. In their haste to break away from the now far distant Great Synagogue in Babylon, the Alexandrian Jews found Western ways more than just new and fashionable. They were thrilled by the intellectual newness of Greek philosophy. The rules of inquiry were applied fastidiously to the Torah and the written teachings derived from it, and

whole new meanings were found. It should come as no surprise that these meanings often became an excuse to ignore the burdens of ancient Semitic customs. Greed and self-interest became, in measure, companions of holiness in this new understanding. Before it was over, rabbis were saying the traditions built up over a couple of centuries, a book of interpretation called the Talmud, took precedence over the actual Law of Moses. They called one the written, the other the oral Law of Moses. On top of this, Alexandrian rabbis placed a Western spin on everything. Thus, “the traditions of men” were an excuse to dismiss the original intent of God in His revelation to Moses.

This new Alexandrian Rabbinical School became, quite naturally, the favorite of the ruling Ptolemies. It quickly formed the dominant philosophical strain in Judea. This did not entirely break the link to the Great Synagogue in Babylon. Rather, while always grateful to the Babylon-based scholars for re-introducing the Torah when lost, and for the earliest Talmudic teachings, these were always read through Alexandrian eyes. Sadly, even Babylonian Judaism was drained of life and possessed of no real fervor beyond fussy exactitude over the details of the Law. The Eastern School found few friends in Judean politics. There remained for a time an Orthodox party in Judea, at times alone and extreme like the Essenes. Often it was compromised by alliance with the Pharisees. At the same time, there arose a truly secular Hellenistic party, going far beyond the Alexandrian Jewish departures. Eventually, the old Babylonian Orthodox had become a tiny forgotten minority, while the Alexandrian rabbis were regarded as conservative compared to the secular Hellenists.

Meanwhile, the Syrian quarter of Alexander’s empire was ruled by a dynasty we call the Seleucids. In 198 BC, Antiochus III took Judea from the Ptolemies of Egypt. The new ruler’s seat was in Antioch, a city on the River Orontes, north of old Hamath. It was quite close to the pocket of the Mediterranean coast where the eastern shore meets the southern shore of modern Turkey. For a while, things went pretty much the same for the Jews in Judea. However, an ugly fracas arose between the older Orthodox Jews and the Hellenists under Alexandrian influence. The Seleucids had taken Alexander’s loving promotion of Greek culture and made it an obsession. They forced Hellenism onto the Jews at every opportunity. Naturally, the new Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV (*Epiphanes* – claiming to be a divine manifestation) took the side of the Hellenist Jews. He appointed a new High Priest to his liking and the two of them conspired to destroy orthodox worship in the Temple. That priest was deposed a couple years later, replaced with another Hellenist. Things got confusing and the former and current priest between them brought Jerusalem to complete chaos.

Antiochus IV had had enough. He brought his troops into the city in 170 BC, executed countless Jewish residents, plundered the Temple and placed an idol to Zeus inside it. There he sacrificed to Zeus a pig on the altar, and then proceeded to outlaw the most characteristic observances of Mosaic Law. Daily sacrifices were stopped, Sabbath-keeping was outlawed, residents were forced to eat pork and all copies of the Torah found were confiscated and burned. The nickname *Epiphanes* became secretly mocked as *Epimanes* (“madman”) in typical Jewish fashion.

The Jews, long noted as a stiff-necked people by their own prophets, were not long in responding violently.

12.2: Maccabean Period

Antiochus was intent on invading Egypt and ending his rivalry with the Ptolemies once and for all. Roman troops stopped him. Having been denied his victory prize in Egypt by the Roman Senate, Antiochus returned home. Passing through Judea on the way, he vented his frustration on them in declaring their religion and customs illegal. He sent soldiers to destroy the City of Jerusalem. Men were killed; women and children were sold into slavery. Greek-speakers were imported to rebuild the city and make it completely Hellenist. Only Jews who could pass for Greeks were allowed back. The internal conflict within the ruling class in Judea in the midst of oppression from Antioch served to paralyze their response. Further, the seductive call of Hellenism had already subverted many. One of Antiochus' appointed High Priests had a gymnasium built near the Temple and Jewish boys were pressured to train there – naked, by Greek custom. This exposure was the impetus for many to drop circumcision, to avoid being distinctive from the fashionable Greeks. It was the violent reaction to these actions that brought the wrath of Antiochus. The attack came on a Sabbath, when resistance was most unlikely.

It took an outsider to find the resolve to lead against this evil. Northwest of Jerusalem stood the ancient twin cities of Upper and Lower Beth-horon. Both occupied the south bank above the same wadi. Farther down that valley stood the tiny village of Modin. In 168 BC, officers dispatched by Antiochus fanned out across Judea and began forcing all to submit to worship of the god Zeus. In each place, the people were called together. The decree against Judaism would be read. An altar would be constructed, and a pig sacrificed to Zeus. Then the residents would be forced to cook and eat its flesh. Aside from a few heroic examples, there was no significant resistance.

The decree required the village leadership to lead off in this sacrifice. If there was a priest, he would be required to conduct the ritual. In Modin, there lived an aging priest who vociferously refused to take part. This was despite of offers of power and wealth. When the village elder stepped up to do it, the old priest snatched the ceremonial knife from him and stabbed the man. He then turned and killed the Syrian officer sent from Antiochus. The old priest was named Mattathias.

Naturally, this was an act of rebellion that warranted execution. The old man fled with his family into the Judean Highlands. This had been David's refuge fleeing from Saul. From this base, they went about destroying the other altars, sending collaborators fleeing and circumcising Jewish boys, among other things. As with David, many malcontents chose to join the rebel force. Before long the old priest died, but he passed on his passion and vision to his sons. The third was named Judas, who organized an armed resistance. They conducted guerrilla raids on the Syrian soldiers of Antiochus. The hit and run raids gained him the nickname of "Hammer" – in Hebrew *maqqaba*, now usually spelled "Maccabees." In a complete under-estimation of Jewish resolve, Antiochus sent a rather small force to counter this armed revolt. This force was quickly slaughtered, so he sent a much larger unit. This army, too, was defeated. The combat leadership of Judas Maccabees was legendary.

Within seven years, the rebels had completely delivered Jerusalem. The Temple was cleansed in 164 BC, giving birth to the celebration today known as Hanukkah. The candles symbolize the dramatic entrance into the temple of the light of God's presence returning, three years to the

day from its profaning. The battles continued for some time. During the next two decades, Antiochus IV died. When a contest broke out over succession to the Seleucid throne, the current leader of the brothers, Jonathan, took the opportunity to favor one of the claimants sufficiently to win. This was Demetrius, who in exchange gave in to Judean demands in 142 BC. By that time, the leadership had passed through the five sons of Mattathias to Simon, as each of the others had died in battle. His main problem was driving out the supporters of an opponent of Demetrius still vying for the throne.

Simon's success against that opponent brought universal acclaim from the Jews. Having made Judea essentially independent under Seleucid protection, he was proclaimed both ruler and High Priest around 140 BC. We refer to this dynasty as the Hasmoneans, a name derived from the Hebrew phrase for "following Mattathias." From here on out, things get rather muddy and complicated. Another Seleucid rose up with no respect for the Hasmoneans and there is more war. Simon is murdered and his adult sons are assassinated. The surviving third son is the next to hold the office of High Priest. His name was John Hyrcanus.

As the political fortunes of the Syrians ebbed and flowed, this John Hyrcanus managed to conquer much of David's old realm. He destroyed the rival Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim. When he had humbled the Idumaeans (formerly called Edomites), he forced them to accept circumcision. This turned out to be the path of doom for Judea's independence. Also during his reign, we see the rise of the Pharisees and Sadducees. John favored the latter before he died in 105 BC. His son was even more ignoble. John had split his office, giving his wife civil control and his son Aristobulus the high priesthood. This son seized the civil control and had his mother and brothers thrown in prison. He assumed the actual title of King. His life ended a short year later. His eldest surviving brother, Alexander Jannaeus, became High Priest. Alexander expanded the territory in spite of his incompetence in battle. His feuding with the Pharisees saw bloodshed and he died in 78 BC.

Following a previous pattern, but with more success this time, Alexander left his wife Salome in charge of civil government. She ruled by the advice of the Pharisees her husband had hated. Her son Hyrcanus II was High Priest; after her death in 69 BC, he fought with his brother, Aristobulus II. The civil war continued until 63 BC, when it brought Rome's attention. By now Judea was within the Roman Empire. The Seleucid realm had been divided up between petty rulers, clients of Rome. In keeping with their pattern of conquest, Rome drafted soldiers from Syria. These Syrian conscripts were the bulk of Roman troops in Judea from that time. Their appearance in Jerusalem to keep the peace was the end of Judean independence. The first Roman commander favored Aristobulus, but the next – Pompey – favored Hyrcanus. In 63 BC, the Roman troops marched into the city, as the Hyrcanus faction held the gates open. However, it took three months to break through the fortified Temple Mount where Aristobulus holed up. Many defenders died. In the process, the Idumaeans, still circumcised, were brought in on the party. By struggling so hard to gain their own position, the brothers jeopardized the future of Judea by involving foreigners. The Hasmonean Household was whittled down through assassinations, executions and battle with these resurgent Idumeans. Herod was their king, and beginning around 37 BC, he committed most of the murders, even forcibly marrying into the dynasty to enable a more or less legitimate claim to the throne as the surviving relative. Having

murdered his wife, he later murdered his own sons by that marriage. By 7 BC, no more Hasmoneans lived.

Note that Herod wisely renovated the Temple for the Jews, but inside the fortress on the north wall, now staffed by mostly Syrian conscripts of Rome, he lavished great expense on a shrine to emperor worship. He hardly winced at the idea of murdering huge numbers of his subjects, which happened at least once during his reign. He died in 4 BC.

12.3: Messianic Expectations

There were a wide-ranging variety of ideas about what Messiah would be and do. We might discover this or that group held some common view, even as significant members saw things differently. In some cases, there were those who professed no expectations at all. However, we can expect the common Israelite living in Judea or Galilee during the First Century of either BC or AD would have heard and embraced a recognizable body of understanding regarding the Anointed One, however fuzzy that picture may have been.

We have already discussed the longing of the Jews driven from their homeland by Babylon. In Exile, they made certain characteristic changes in their previous habits, hoping to persuade Jehovah to restore what was taken from them. When the day of Return finally came, they found themselves in an adverse situation, surrounded by enemies no longer subdued. Their spirit was crushed yet again. While some did turn again to Jehovah for relief, many despaired. It was the prodding of the prophets, expressed in Messianic visions of a future refreshing of faith and freedom that help inspire the rebuilding of the Temple, and eventually the city walls of Jerusalem. When the day came, they were struggling again under the harsh yoke of the Seleucids, followed by Rome, it had become manifestly obvious that the golden age had not yet arrived. So it was, at all levels of Jewish society, there was at least some vague longing for redemption and a belief that the Lord had promised it.

Very early there seemed at least two distinct visions promoted by the teachers and writers of Messianic Expectations. One was the obvious political redemption embodied in the term "Son of David." This was the hope the Lord would send a son of the royal family who combined the military and political prowess of David (and to some degree Solomon) with the Mosaic righteousness exceeding the founders of that royal house. This Righteous King would restore, at a minimum, the fullest extent of the land promised in the Torah. With an element of a miracle-wielding super-human, many extended that to a beatific vision of world dominion. Not simply a return to political independence for the nation, this was the idea no nation would ever be capable of rising against them to oppress them. An extreme variant of this idea was that all Gentiles living would voluntarily and joyfully render themselves servants and slaves of the Jews. Furthermore, all the Jews previously dispersed would return to their former homeland.

Naturally, this level of dominance should bring a literal golden age of wealth. This would be more than mere economic dominance, but the miraculous wealth of stones turned to bread, streets paved with gold and jewels as common as pebbles on the ground. Every field yielded more abundance than could be imagined, every tree laden with edible fruit. There would be no more disease or injury that could not be quickly healed by materials at hand. Any dream that one might have was not too extravagant. Thus, every Jew would become a petty king, and

nothing would be denied their every whim in the Day of Lord. This of course was to stand the concept of That Day on its head. In the Old Testament, the Day of the Lord was any day of judgment on sin. The arrogant assumption of many Jews was that their sins were rather small, since they were so surely God's Own People. Thus, the judgment of sin would surely bring them release and quell their enemies.

On the other hand, the power to do all this rested on a distinct righteousness of obeying the Law of Moses. Thus, a second set of expectations gave rise in some minds to a second Messiah. This was the Son of God, a High Priest like no other. This was inherent in the alternate title, Son of Man, first used by Daniel (7:13-14), ostensibly meaning a mere human. This was the Messiah of the Law, of righteousness, who would cleanse the Jews of sin by exerting a powerful teaching and enforcement ministry. Either as another duty, or as a separate Messiah, was the idea he would be the greatest prophet of all. All the best and more powerful expressions of God's word and will in the men of the Old Testament were images of this Messiah: Moses, Aaron, Elijah, Isaiah, etc. Many had no trouble seeing this as just an extension of a single royal Messiah, but Mosaic Law called for a distinction between the one who inherited the throne, from the Tribe of Judah, and he who could be High Priest, from the Tribe of Levi, of the Clan of Aaron. The average Jewish peasant probably made no such distinction.

Part of the difficulty for many was in determining just what a superior righteousness would look like. Given the dominance of the Alexandrian Rabbinical School, this was far different from the orthodox view found in the Old Testament. Indeed, a Messiah true to the original Old Testament theology would be a heretic among the religious leaders of the First Century. There would be some convergence and overlap, of course, but it was in the everyday application of the Law where the difference was so obvious. Rituals had been modified some, precisely scripted down to the finest detail and not entirely a reflection of ancient traditions. Further, empty ritual itself was regarded as holiness. To speak of observing the spirit of the Law was seeking room for sin. In the case of the "liberal" Sadducees, this might be true, as they were thoroughly Hellenized in the sense of secularized, and cared little about the ancient Jehovah, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With the now forgotten Babylonian Orthodoxy, weak as it was, the same idea meant God was able to see the heart and count it righteousness if a man were willing to obey, but could not in the precise letter of the Law. The noted Essenes, as well as other minority sects, were a reflection of this older standard of righteousness from the mystic depths of the soul.

Meanwhile, the Pharisees denied being Hellenized, in that they rejected the loose morals of the culture. However, they were deeply enamored of the Hellenistic reasoning. The rise of great human reasoning was such a thrill to their fleshly minds that they could not resist. This was how legalism was born. It applied semantic and rationalist rules to an ancient mystical Scripture. It bred an arrogant smarty-pants kind of intellect that they insisted God admired.

Buried somewhere in all the various Messianic threads is the concept of a Messiah who suffers. This is widely ignored, appearing seldom in any popular source of Messianic teaching. Only among the better scholars was Isaiah 52 and 53 recognized as describing the Messiah. Indeed, the majority view expected a Conquering Messiah, Son of David. Miracles and holiness, yes, but suffering had no part in the picture, except for the enemies of Israel, thus enemies of God. The

Messiah would most certainly crush Rome, not be crushed by Rome.

Addenda: Biblical Body Counts

What makes the claims of the Hebrew Bible more worthy of acceptance than the scriptures of any other ancient people or religion? All we can offer here is an answer for those who already believe.

There are plenty of examples in pagan cultures where some written record ascribes exceeding great glory to their rulers and the fine people he ruled. They might claim he was three times normal size, lived at least 2000 years, sired several thousand children, etc. Then we find his body, shorter than most modern humans. We test his DNA to find he died at age 60. Digging for his subjects finds most of them slightly smaller and dying on average at 40. So, for us it seems a matter of exaggeration. If we find enough graves containing the right DNA, we can discuss his progeny, too.

Another legendary record will speak to us of a city of ten million inhabitants, but digging down to solid rock, we find a rather smallish town. Even if everyone in the town stood shoulder-to-shoulder, there wouldn't be room for more than ten thousand. Could we blame a bad translation? Maybe, but more likely what we call "pious fraud." They really meant well, wanted folks to think highly of them, or maybe just had to deal with a master who was a megalomaniac and thought he was a god.

So, if the story of Moses tells us the census returned a body count of two million men, plus uncounted women, children and old folks, how is that any different? Pagan records are clearly lying and the stories they tell aren't supported by any evidence, or simply are too improbable. The Babylonian version of The Flood describes a square boat, which we know wouldn't work. It's been tried – repeatedly. Noah's Ark was described in more realistic fashion. This is a trend we can point out, should someone ask. Archaeology keeps proving the accuracy of the Bible in at least some parts. So, the part about two of every species in Noah's Ark must also be true enough, if we take the time to understand it properly from the Hebrew mystical intellect of those who wrote it. For those of us who believe, it's true because the story comes from the One True God.

To someone who believes in no god, that sounds like more pious fraud. Without the Holy Spirit to convince them, the Bible is just another ancient tale full of outlandish claims, most of which have no archaeological support. Yet we believe. We have enough trouble convincing our own fellow Christians to leave behind their Western rational assumptions to see the Bible as it was given, but with non-believers, we have the added problem that they lack any motivation to listen at all. For the latter, we want to offer at least some evidence that our belief is reasonable within the context of our own acknowledged assumptions. We realize that maybe we just don't understand what the author meant, or maybe there were simple little scribal mistakes when making copies over the centuries.

We don't have room here to chase all the details of how the Bible came to us over the many centuries. In short, people in ancient times wrote on fragile materials in ancient languages using entirely different conceptions about the world. Someone decided some of these records were

worth keeping, so they made new copies. But the language had changed some, so they wrote differently and had to change a few words to make sense to readers of their day, especially in place names. Since it was the Word of God, we Christians assume He kept watch over things to insure nothing really important was lost. Yet it's all too obvious that the copies we have left today just don't agree 100% on some details. So, we do our best to decide how to weed out the obvious scribal errors, but some things just can't be settled. Thus, we have a story in 2 Samuel 24 where David takes a census of all the men in Israel eligible for military service. The same story appears in 1 Chronicles 21. When the count is given, we have from the first 800,000 in the North, and 500,000 in the South. In the latter account it is 1.1 million and 470,000. Which is wrong? Could it be both? This is the Word of God! It's not supposed to be like this.

Let's consider for a moment what we know of that time and place from other records, or at least can guess. It seems that other nations of similar culture to the Hebrews also conducted a census from time to time. They also counted only fighting men. They did it by noting that some men were average Joes who worked for a living but might have their own weapons for defense against robbers and wild animals. During the slow season when not much work was done, they might get together and practice a little. Men of wealth and power, who had all the time in the world to do nothing but train and collect weapons, would naturally aid these average Joes in their training. Being richer, they had a better diet and were physically larger than the average Joe. These men were professional warriors, as was almost every ancient nobleman. They had skill and experience and attitude to match. They would lead in battle. Based on their experience and skill, they would lead varying sizes of groups, usually made of the average Joes who had been conscripted.

As near as we can tell, these professional warriors were counted separately from the conscripts. The census would probably come back with a count of warriors and a count of conscripts. Our problem is that in Hebrew, the common word for a "professional warrior" was the same as the word for 1000 men. That's probably because the average warrior could lead that many and might be as useful in battle as that many, for all we know. By David's time, they might have begun assigning men a rank name based on their leadership ability, instead of our modern captains, colonels, and such.

So, in a particular village, we have 32 professional soldiers and 420 conscripts. Of that cadre of 32, four are competent to lead large formations of 1000, and the rest can handle up to 100. The count might look like this: 4 "thousands," 28 "hundreds" and 420. Somewhere down through the years, a scribe looks at this and tries to make sense of it. In his day, the nomenclature had changed. He decides this is just a body count and doesn't know why it's like this but decides to clean it up. It looks to him like $4,000 + 3200 + 420$. That adds up to 7,620. So, an actual 452 bodies of mixed skill become a much larger number.

Did it happen that way? Nobody knows for sure, but things we *do* know point that way. Given what we also know of all the other details of life, we might wonder about an army of over one million being available to David. Even with modern technology, it's hard to cram bodies into a city with small land-space. Best we can tell, most cities of David's time in Palestine weren't too big. There also weren't too awful many of them. They seem never to have had more than two floors in their buildings, and while they might live in tighter quarters than we could tolerate

today, it still doesn't add up. There might have been that many humans total, but not that many soldiers.

Will it change our standing with God either way? I can't imagine how it will affect anyone's personal salvation. Jesus' death, burial and resurrection didn't depend on whether David had one million or just 100,000. We know he had enough to keep every nation on his border scared for the most part. So, when we hear that Moses left Egypt with 2 million men and we compare that with what we know about Egypt – Egypt *never* had an army larger than 20,000 – why didn't that many men just turn and overwhelm Pharaoh's troops? Maybe it's another case of errors in transmission. Surely, God could have empowered Moses to lead that many and God could rain enough manna to feed that many. Even if we account for God's miracle protection on their population growth during their 480 years in Egypt, it doesn't square with even the most exceptional birth and survival rate. Given the confusion of the Hebrew words for "soldier" and "thousand," we can offer the guess that 250,000 marched out of Egypt. That might give us 100,000 men of fighting age and maybe as many as one in ten a professional. That means a mere 10,000 professional soldiers (or less) and a large herd of untrained ex-slaves to face up to 20,000 trained Egyptian warriors with chariots and *without* conscripts.

Of course, there is a class of Christian that will charge blasphemy, as if God is bound by their Western obsession with precision and absolutism. Even worse is the crazy assumption that an English translation is more inspired by God than the manuscripts from which it was translated. The blasphemy is in their attitude, which was never a part of God's revelation. As far as we can tell, these Christians worship the Bible, not the God who gave it. Our salvation depends in part on recognizing that Israel took some laps around Mount Sinai, not on how many there were doing it. There were not enough to fight Egypt's army, but after living in the desert forty years, they were numerous and tough enough to knock out poorly organized tribal nations in Canaan and others along the way. We still can't decide if it was the Reed Sea or Red Sea, and we don't know for sure whether the modern Mount Sinai is the same one in the Bible. We can't even identify half the other places named in the Exodus.

So, when a certain king is listed as being crowned at eight years of age in one place and eighteen in another, we don't need to fret. Of all the details in Hebrew writing, numbers are probably the weak spot in transmission. They simply didn't care about that sort of precision, and there's nothing wrong with their approach. Only rarely is the count of something too obviously correct, so we need not enslave our minds to such obsessions. In a culture that didn't bother to write the vowel sounds of their language, we have enough to worry about getting more critical details clear. If we believe that Our Lord protected the keeping of His Word, we have to believe that discrepancies only appear in things that don't really matter.