New Bible Commentary

21st Century Edition

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INTER-VARSITY PRESS, LEICESTER, ENGLAND
INTERVARSITY PRESS, DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS, USA

INTER-VARSITY PRESS
38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP, England

INTERVARSITY PRESS
P. O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, Illinois 60515, USA

© Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, Leicester, England, 1953, 1954, 1970, 1994

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The New Bible Commentary first published December 1953
Second edition, November 1954 (nine impressions)
Third edition, completely revised and reset, April 1970 (twenty impressions)
Fourth edition, completely revised and reset, April 1994
Reprinted 1995

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

New Bible commentary: 21st century edition/consulting editors, D.A. Carson . . . [et al.]. — 4th ed.
p. cm.
Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary/edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-8308-1442-6
1. Bible—Commentaries. I. Carson, D.A, II. Guthrie, Donald
1916- New Bible commentary.
BS491.2.N45 1994
220.7—dc20 94—4076
CIP

UK ISBN 0-85110-648-X
USA ISBN 0-8308-1442-6

Set in 9½ point Ehrhardt
Typeset in Great Britain by Action Typesetting Ltd, Gloucester
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Inter-Varsity Press, England is the book-publishing division of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (formerly the Inter-Varsity Fellowship), a student movement linking Christian Unions in universities and colleges throughout the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and national activities write to UCCF, 38 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GP.

InterVarsity Press,® USA is the book-publishing division of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship,® a student movement active on campus at hundreds of universities, colleges and schools of nursing in the United States of America, and a member movement of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. For information about local and regional activities, write Public Relations Dept., InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 6400 Schroeder Rd., P.O. Box 7895, Madison, WI 53707-7895.

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Maps, diagrams and tables

A number of diagrams and tables in this Commentary are relevant only to the Bible passage which they illustrate (*e.g.* those illustrating the structure of the book of Numbers). Those listed below are capable of a wider use. In addition, cross-references are placed in the text where appropriate.

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Preface

Over three years it has been our privilege as editors to sit at the centre of a veritable hive of activity. Others have been labouring and we have entered into their labours. Blessed as indeed we are in those whom God has called to work with us in this great project, our first task is to thank them for their unstinting efforts and for the patience with which they have borne our suggestions, interferences, and our occasional invitations to undertake rewriting. We have been surrounded by a choice team of biblical scholars to whom we are deeply grateful.

As is always the case with those who achieve publication under the imprint of the Inter-Varsity Press, we have had superb professional backup. To mention by name Derek Wood as Organizing Editor and Sue Rebis as Co-ordinating Editor is the easiest way to convey our thanks to all at IVP who, directly or indirectly, served to bring this Commentary to birth. Surely they often wished that we would work more quickly, reply more promptly or write more crisply, but they have been patient with us. They have earned our gratitude and that of all who find it a pleasure as well as a help to use the Commentary.

A one-volume commentary on the whole Bible has to be a major exercise in compression, with rigorous discipline governing what is included and what omitted. We have chosen to concentrate on the 'flow' of books and passages, and in this way to make a fundamental contribution to understanding the Bible. Too often the Bible reader (and not only in the early years of Bible reading) is baffled for want of help to see the wood from the trees. We believe that when our Commentary is used with this end in mind it will bring its greatest benefits to the user. Nevertheless, as far as space allowed, we have tried not to overlook difficulties of detail. In any case, throughout, we have supplied lists of books for further reading and study. As a general rule the lists reflect an ascending scale in the demand they place on the reader. The books at the top of each list are designed to meet the initial needs of those who want to move forward from what the Commentary provides into a detailed acquaintance with Holy Scripture. This, indeed, constitutes our main motivation and conviction: the individual Christian and the whole professing church today has no deeper need than to know, love and submit to the Bible as the Word of God. It is this cause we long to serve and it is to this end that, with prayer, we send our Commentary on its way.

This is the second major revision of the *New Bible Commentary*, which was first published in 1953. As editors we have the privilege of standing in a very honoured tradition. We salute and revere the memories of Francis Davidson, Ernest Kevan, Alan Stibbs and Donald Guthrie, veritable masters of the Word of God who are now part of our treasure in heaven. We also recall with gratitude Donald Wiseman's consultative and contributory role in 1970 when the *New Bible Commentary Revised* made its appearance. Our affectionate respect for these men and their God-given gifts is shared, worldwide, by millions of grateful readers. In this further edition of the *New Bible Commentary* nothing remains from 1953 and little from 1970. We have moved from the Revised Standard Version to the New International Version as our English base, and God has called into being a new international team of writers. Even where an author may remain the same as in 1970, the article has been either rewritten or thoroughly revised.

But amid all this change there is the unchanging God and the unchanging power of his inspired Word. We do not dare to compare ourselves with the giants of the past, but we look up in expectant prayer that God will again make the *New Bible Commentary* a blessing to his people and something for his glory.

D. A. Carson
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Explanations

Order of articles. See the contents list. The commentaries appear in biblical order with the general explanatory articles inserted where appropriate.

Bible references are given in the generally accepted form: chapter : verse, other verse(s). For example, Is. 51:1–3, 10–12 means Isaiah chapter fifty-three, verses 1 to 3 and verses 10 to 12. For abbreviations of the Bible books see page xi.

Where a letter appears after the verse number, this usually indicates the beginning or ending of a verse (a or b). Occasionally, especially in poetic passages, such as the Psalms, the letter will refer to the respective line in the NIV text. Thus Ps. 49:14 cd refers to lines 3 and 4 of verse 14 in Psalm 49.

Further reading. Lists are provided with each article. They are graded so that the simpler books are listed first, with the more demanding at the end. No advanced technical works are included. A long dash indicates the same author as on the line above. For abbreviations used please see the list on page xi.

Dating. In a work as large as this, written by some 45 authors, there may well be some small discrepancies in dates. The dates of ancient history are by no means all agreed by all scholars. For instance, there is a continuing debate about the date of the exodus, which affects the dating of the conquest and the judges period. This question is discussed in the Commentary. See page 234 for a summary. We have made every effort, however, not to mislead the reader. A generally accepted time-chart of biblical history will be found on page 22.

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Abbreviations

Biblical books

Books of the Old Testament

Gn., Ex., Lv., Nu., Dt., Jos., Jdg., Ru., 1, 2 Sa., 1, 2 Ki., 1, 2 Ch., Ezr., Ne., Est., Jb., Ps. (Pss.), Pr., Ec., Song, Is., Je., La., Ezk., Dn., Ho., Joel, Am., Ob., Jon., Mi., Na., Hab., Zp., Hg., Zc., Mal.

Books of the New Testament

Mt., Mk., Lk., Jn., Acts, Rom., 1, 2 Cor., Gal., Eph., Phil., Col., 1, 2 Thes., 1, 2 Tim., Tit., Phm., Heb., Jas., 1, 2 Pet., 1, 2, 3 Jn., Jude, Rev.

General abbreviations and Bible versions

AV/KJV	Authorized (King James) version
c.	*circa*, about (with dates)
cf.	compare
Ecclus.	Ecclesiasticus (in Apocrypha)
f. (ff.)	and the following verse(s)
Gk.	Greek
GNB	Good News Bible
KJV	see AV
lit.	literally
(N)JB	(New) Jerusalem Bible
LXX	Septuagint (Gk. version of OT)
Macc.	Maccabees (in Apocrypha)
mg.	margin
MS/MSS	manuscript(s)
MT	Massoretic Text (of the OT)
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
N,S,E,W	North, South, East, West
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
1QH	Thanksgiving Hymns (from Qumran)
1QS	Rules of the Community (from Qumran)
REB	Revised English Bible
(N)RSV	(New) Revised Standard Version
RV	Revised Version
v/vs	verse(s)

Reference books and journals

AB	Anchor Bible
Ann.	*Annales* (Tacitus)
Ant.	*Antiquities of the Jews* (Josephus)
BAR	*British Archaeological Review*
BBC	Broadman Bible Commentary
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
CC	The Communicator's Commentary
DSB	Daily Study Bible
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ExpT	Expository Times
IBD	*The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*
ITC	International Theological Commentary
IVPNTC	IVP New Testament Commentary
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSNTS	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament (supplement)*
JSOTS	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament (supplement)*
NBD	*New Bible Dictionary*
NCB	New Century Bible
NIBC	*New International Bible Commentary*
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	The New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
OTL	Old Testament Library
QRBT	Quick Reference Bible Topics
TBC	Torch Bible Commentaries
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

APPROACHING THE BIBLE

What the Bible is

Revelation

Biblical theology forms an organic whole. This not only means that one can approach any part of the subject by beginning at any other point of the subject (though some vantage points are certainly more helpful than others), but that to treat some element of biblical theology as if it existed in splendid isolation seriously distorts the whole picture.

On few subjects is this more obviously true than with regard to one's doctrine of Scripture. In this sceptical age it is doubtful if an articulate and coherent understanding of the nature of Scripture and how to interpret it can long be sustained where there is not at the same time a grasp of the biblical view of God, of human beings, of sin, of redemption and of the rush of history towards its ultimate goal.

For instance, if it is true that the Bible tells us about God, not least what kind of God he is, it is no less true that unless God really is that sort of God it is impossible to appreciate the Bible for what it is. To approach the Bible correctly it is important to know something of the God who stands behind it.

God is both transcendent (*i.e.* he is 'above' space and time) and personal. He is the sovereign and all-powerful Creator to whom the entire universe owes its existence, yet he is the God who graciously condescends to interact with us human beings whom he has himself formed in his own image. Because we are locked in time and space, God meets us here; he is the personal God who interacts with other persons, persons he has made to glorify him and to enjoy him for ever.

In short, God has chosen to reveal himself to us, for otherwise we would know very little about him. True, his existence and power are disclosed in the created order, even though that order has been deeply scarred by human rebellion and its consequences (Gn. 3:18; Rom.8:19–22; see Ps. 19:1–2; Rom. 1:19–20). It is also true that rather a dim image of God's moral attributes is reflected in the human conscience (Rom. 2:14–16). But this knowledge is not sufficent to lead to salvation. Moreover, human sinfulness is so ingenious that not a little energy is devoted to explaining away even such revelation as this. But in his unmeasured grace God has actively intervened in the world he made in order to reveal himself to men and women in still more powerful ways.

This was true even before the fall. God assigned certain responsibilities to the creatures whom he made in his image (itself an act of revelation), and then met with them in the garden he had made for them. When God chose Abraham, he established a covenant with him, revealing himself as *his* God (Gn. 15; 17). When he redeemed Israel from slavery, God not only conversed with Moses but displayed himself in terrifying plagues and in the thunder and lightning of Sinai. Though the whole earth is his, he chose Israel as his covenant people and made them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex.19:5–6). To them he disclosed himself not only in spectacular displays of power but in his Torah (lit. 'instruction'), which included not only detailed prescriptions for daily life but entire structures of mandated religious observance (tabernacle/temple, sacrifices, priesthood).

Throughout the period covered by the OT, God revealed himself in providence (*e.g.* the arrangements that brought Joseph to Egypt, Gn. 37 – 50; 50:19–20; sleeplessness on a certain night in the life of Xerxes, Est.6:1 ff; the decrees of Cyrus and Darius that effected the return of some Hebrews to Jerusalem after the exile), in miraculous events (*e.g.* the burning bush, Ex.3; the fire at Mt. Carmel, 1 Ki. 18), in prophetic words (the 'word of the LORD' repeatedly 'comes' to the prophets), in poetry and songs (*e.g.* Psalms). But even while OT believers knew that God had disclosed himself to his covenant people, they were aware that he had promised more definitive revelation in the future. God promised a time when a new shoot would emerge from David's line (Is. 11), a man who would sit on David's throne but who would, nevertheless, be called the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace (Is. 9). God himself would come down and usher in a new heaven and a new earth (Is. 65). He would pour out his Spirit (Joel 2), introduce a new covenant (Je. 31; Ezk. 36), raise the dead (Ezk. 37), and much more.

The NT writers are convinced that the long-awaited self-disclosure of God and his salvation have been brought near in Jesus Christ, God's Son. In the past God had revealed himself primarily through the prophets, but now in

these last days he has revealed himself supremely and climactically in the Son (Heb. 1:2). The Son is the perfect image of the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3); all God's fulness dwells in him (Col. 1:19; 2:9). He is the incarnation of God's self-expression; he is God's Word made flesh (Jn. 1:1,14,18).

This Son-centred revelation is found not only in the person of Jesus but also in his deeds. Not only in his teaching, preaching and healing, but supremely in the cross and resurrection Jesus reveals God and accomplishes the divine plan of redemption. By the Spirit whom the exalted Christ has bequeathed (Jn. 14 – 16) God convicts the world (Jn. 16:7–11), assists believers in their witness (Jn. 15:27–28), and above all, manifests God to them, taking up residence in them (Jn. 14:19–26). Thus God reveals himself by the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee and downpayment of the promised inheritance (Eph. 1:13–14). One day the ultimate self-disclosure will occur, and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:11; *cf.* Rev. 19 – 22).

The point to emphasize is that a genuinely Christian understanding of the Bible presupposes the God of the Bible, a God who makes himself known in a wide diversity of ways so that human beings may know the purpose for which they were made – to know and love and worship God, and so delight in that relationship that God is glorified while they receive the matchless benefit of becoming all that God wants them to be. Any genuine knowledge human beings have of God depends on God first disclosing himself.

The word of God

What must not be overlooked is that this God is a talking God. Doubtless he reveals himself to us in many ways, but word is not the least of them.

In English 'revelation' can be understood actively or passively, *i.e.* as either the activity whereby God reveals himself, or the substance of that disclosure. When it refers to God's self-disclosure in speech, the active sense envisages God's making himself known in words, while the passive sense focuses on the words themselves insofar as they constitute the message God chooses to convey.

The importance of God's speech as a fundamental means of his self-disclosure cannot be overestimated. Creation itself is the product of God's speech: God speaks, and worlds leap into being (Gn.1). Many of God's most dramatic deeds of revelation would not have been understandable apart from God's accompanying speech. Moses views the burning bush as a curiosity until the voice tells him to remove his sandals and assigns him his new responsibilities. Abraham would have had no reason to leave Ur were it not for God's revelation in words. Again and again the prophets carry the burden of 'the word of the LORD' to the people. Verbal revelation is essential even in the case of the Lord Jesus: during the days of his flesh, he was, first of all, the teacher. Moreover, apart from the explanation of the significance of his death and resurrection, preserved both in the gospels and in the letters, even these momentous events would have been unbearably and tragically obscure. So central is God's speech to his own self-disclosure that when John the evangelist casts around for an encompassing way to refer to God's ultimate self-disclosure in his Son, he chooses to refer to him as 'the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . The Word became flesh' (Jn. 1:1,14). The horseman of Rev.19 is called 'Faithful and True . . . . He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God' (19:11,13).

Of course, to establish that God is a talking God, and that his words constitute a foundational element in his gracious manifestation of himself to us, does not itself demonstrate that the Bible is the product of that active revelation, and thus itself revelation in the passive sense. Indeed, the expression 'the word of God' in the Bible has a wide range of uses. All of them presuppose that God talks, that he is not simply an impersonal 'ground of all being' or a mysterious 'other'; but the variety of uses is noteworthy. For example, 'the word of God' or 'the word of the LORD' is frequently said to 'come' to one of his prophets (*e.g.* Je. 1:2; Ezk. 30:1; Ho. 1:1; Lk. 3:2). How this 'word' or 'message' comes is usually not explained. Clearly, however, even these instances are sufficient to demonstrate that in the Bible itself 'the word of God' is not necessarily identical with Scripture.

Some who make this observation go farther and argue that it is inappropriate to speak of Scripture as the word of God. Alternatively, they hold that if 'the word of God' is used to refer to the Bible, it must be in some vague sense: the Bible's message, what God has in general terms revealed to human witnesses, or the like. It must not be used to refer to the actual words of Scripture.

But this is surely to err on the other side. Jesus can reproach his opponents for setting their tradition above 'the word of God' (Mk. 7:13), and what he has in mind is the Scripture that has already been given. If some messages from God are cast in the most general terms, a very substantial number are cast as oracles,

utterances, from God himself. Thus the prophecy of Amos modestly begins, 'The words of Amos . . .', but oracle after oracle throughout the book is prefaced by some such expression as 'This is what the LORD says' (2:6) or 'this is what the Sovereign LORD says' (3:11). Jeremiah pictures God's revelation as coming in almost dictation fashion, so that when the initial manuscript is destroyed God graciously delivers the message again (Je.30:2; 36:27–32). David insists that 'the words [the Heb. means 'words' or 'utterances', not 'promises' as in the RSV] of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times' (Ps. 12:6). When we extend our inquiry into the NT, we find writer after writer saying that '*God* says' something that is found in one or another canonical book. While NT writers frequently refer to what Moses or Isaiah or someone else says (*e.g.* Rom. 9:29; 10:19), they can also refer to what God himself says when he addresses the writer of the OT book (*e.g.* Rom. 9:15,25). Moreover, they can say that 'God says' or 'the Holy Spirit' says even when quoting passages of Scripture where the OT writer is not in fact directly addressed by God (*e.g.* Heb. 7:21; 10:15). Sometimes a longer formula is used, *e.g.* 'what the Lord had said through the prophet' (Mt. 1:22); 'the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David' (Acts 1:16).

This very brief sketch of the evidence has tried to show that God has disclosed himself in many ways, but especially in verbal revelation. We have glimpsed evidence that this is tied to Scripture itself, but we have not yet probed very far in that direction. Before proceeding, there is one related element in the biblical revelation that must be briefly mentioned.

The word of human beings

Even a cursory reading of the Bible shows it is not the product of a flat divine dictation, still less something that has been handed down from heaven on golden plates. Despite its many claims to divine revelation and authority, the Bible is an astonishingly human document – or, more precisely, sixty-six astonishingly human documents. Later writers in the canon cite the earlier human authors by name, treating many of the documents as the products of well-known historical persons without for a moment hinting that this human dimension diminishes the documents' authority. Indeed, some of the allusions to OT Scripture are made with surprising informality, *e.g.* 'But there is a place where someone has testified' (Heb. 2:6). If we are to think clearly about how Christians should approach the Bible, then however much we affirm that the Scriptures constitute God's Word (a point still to be pressed) this decidedly human dimension must not be overlooked.

There are a number of important implications. The Bible did not come to us in one go, but across a period of about a millennium and a half, at the hands of many human beings, the identity of some being entirely unknown. The first implication, then, is that the Bible is deeply grounded in history. The various human authors represent concrete cultures, languages, historical events, assumptions, idioms. The obvious parallel, and one to which attention has often been drawn, is the incarnation. The eternal Son, the pre-existent Word, became incarnate. He is both God and man. The classic formulation is still the best: the eternal Son became incarnate in history, two natures, one person. Jesus Christ cannot be truly perceived and believed if either his deity or his humanity is disowned or diluted. Somewhat similarly, the Bible is both divine and human in origin. It is God's revelation, and it is a human record. The message, extending to the very words, is divine, originating with the eternal God, yet it is deeply human, written in history, one book with two natures. Of course, the analogy must not be pushed too far. Jesus Christ is himself both God and man, but no-one would affirm that the Bible is itself God and man; it is never more than an instrument in the hands of a self-disclosing God. Jesus Christ is to be worshipped; the Bible itself must not be worshipped. Nevertheless, the comparison, properly restrained, is helpful if it provides us with some categories to help us understand what the Bible is, and if it encourages us to be humble as we approach the Bible. In all our probing of Scripture, we must never discard the virtue of humility – humility before the God who has so graciously accommodated himself to our needs as to disclose himself powerfully both in the Word incarnate and in the word written.

The second implication is that the revelation preserved in the Bible is not an abstract system, whether philosophical or ethical or theological. Buddhism stands or falls as a sytem of thought: if it could be proved that Gautama the Buddha never lived, the religion named for him would not be jeopardized. Not so Christianity. Despite the immense literary diversity in the Bible, as a whole it tells a story, and that story takes place in time and space. Despite the best efforts of some scholars to argue that biblical faith must never be made hostage to historical research, there is a profound sense in which the nature of God's gracious self-manifestation, taking place in ordinary history (however spectacular or miraculous some elements of that revelation may be), ensures that there can be no escape from historical enquiry. If Jesus Christ never lived, Christianity is destroyed; if he never died

on the cross, Christianity is destroyed; if he never rose from the dead, Christianity is destroyed. However much the ultimate object of Christian faith is God, that faith is incoherent if it affirms faith in the God of the Bible but not in the God who according to the Bible discloses himself in history that is largely accessible and testable. In short, the elements of the large-scale biblical story are essential to the integrity of the Christian message.

Thirdly, because the Bible is so compellingly human, it includes not only God's gracious self-revelation to us, but also human witness to God. The book of Acts, for instance, relates many incidents in which the apostles boldly confronted the authorities who were trying to silence them, and the unshakable confidence of these first Christians is tied to the unassailability of their conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had seen him; indeed, according to Paul, more than five hundred witnesses had seen him (1 Cor. 15). Many of the Psalms offer moving testimony as to how those who believe in the living God react to the changing circumstances and storms of life. More broadly, many people described in Scripture or writing Scripture are deeply engaged with their contemporaries. They are not mere secretaries taking down dictation. One cannot read the passion of, say, Paul in 2 Cor. 10 – 13, or the moral indignation of Amos, or the deep hurt reflected in Lamentations or Habakkuk, or the concern of Jude in the face of theological drift, or the deeply committed witness of Matthew and John, or the transparent affection of Paul in Philippians, without recognizing that the Bible depicts and was written by real people. However much they are being used to convey God's truth to later generations, they also bear witness to their deep experience of God in their own.

These three implications come together in a fourth. The human authors of the Bible, we have seen, are deeply enmeshed in history; they tell their parts of the story; they bear witness. What we discover is that the later biblical writers not only assume the historicity of the major redemptive-historical events (such as the fall, the call of Abraham and God's covenant with him, the exodus and the giving of the law, the rise of the prophets, the onset of the Davidic monarchy, the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus), but even the biblical reports of relatively minor historical events are assumed to be trustworthy. The Queen of the South visited Solomon (Mt. 12:42; Lk. 11:31–32); David ate the consecrated bread (Mk. 2:25–26), Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert (Jn. 3:14); Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek (Heb. 7:2); eight people were saved in the ark (1 Pet. 3:20); Balaam's ass spoke (2 Pet. 2:16) – to provide but a few examples. One of the most intriguing examples is found on the lips of Jesus (Mt. 22:41–46; Mk. 12:35–37). Jesus cites Ps. 110, which, according to the superscription, is a Psalm of David. The important thing to observe is that the validity of Jesus' argument here depends utterly on the assumption that the superscription is accurate. If the psalm was not written by David, then David did not speak of the Messiah as his Lord, while still referring to the 'my Lord' to whom 'the Lord' spoke. If, say, a courtier had composed the psalm, then 'my Lord' could easily be understood to refer to David himself, or to one of the monarchs who succeeded him (as many modern critics suppose). But if, with Jesus, we take the superscription to be telling the truth, some form of Messianic interpretation of the psalm is almost inevitable. In short, the historical references are not only plentiful and interlocking, but whenever later Scripture refers back to earlier examples it never breeds a suspicion that the account is misleading, ahistorical, correct only at a theological level, or the like.

Finally, granted that the Bible was written by many people over many centuries, one cannot be surprised that it comprises many literary genres. Poetry and prose, narrative and discourse, oracle and lament, parable and fable, history and theology, genealogy and apocalyptic, proverb and psalm, gospel and letter, law and Wisdom Literature, missive and sermon, couplet and epic – the Bible is made up of all of these, and more. Covenantal patterns emerge with some likeness to Hittite treaties; tables of household duties are found with startling resemblances to codes of conduct in the Hellenistic world. And these realities, a by-product of the humanness of the Bible, necessarily affect how we must approach the Bible to interpret it aright.

Scripture and canon

If we grant that God is a talking God, that his self-disclosure includes verbal revelation, and that he has frequently used human beings as his mouthpieces, we must ask, first, how we jump from what seems to be primarily a personal and oral process to public, written Scripture (the subject of this section); and secondly, how we are to conceive of the relation between what God speaks and what his human agent speaks (the subject of the next).

It is obvious that although Scripture describes God speaking through human beings, the only access we have to such phenomena during the period of history embraced by Scripture, is found in Scripture. That is presupposed, for instance, by Jesus' rhetorical question: 'Have

you not read what God said . . .?' (Mt. 22:31). The resulting alternatives seem to be, then, that either Scripture is nothing more than a (fallible) witness to such divine verbal revelation, or nothing other than the product of such revelation. In the former case, the interpreter must sort out, to the best of his or her ability, what parts of Scripture constitute faithful witness to the God who reveals himself in deeds and words and what parts are unfaithful or unreliable witness – and to disclose the grounds on which such decisions are based. In the latter case, the Bible must be understood to be not only a faithful witness to God's gracious self-disclosure in words and deeds, but also the very embodiment of God's verbal revelation to humankind. These alternative visions as to what Scripture is will certainly affect the way we approach Scripture.

There ought to be little doubt about the way later Scripture refers to earlier Scripture; scores and scores of passages make it plain that for these writers, whatever Scripture says, God says. Such a formulation, of course, allows for Satan and all manner of evil persons to be recorded as speaking within Scripture; the contexts invariably make clear that the purpose of recording such utterances is to form part of a larger account in which God's perspective is implicitly or explicitly drawn. However, much care must be exercised to discern exactly what genre of literature is being deployed and exactly what message is being conveyed, the result is nothing other than God's mind on the matter.

Thus in Mt. 19:5, the words of Gn. 2:24, not attributed to God in the Genesis narrative, are nonetheless presented as what God 'said'. God himself spoke by the mouths of the holy prophets (*e.g.* Lk. 1:70). If the disciples are judged foolish for failing to believe 'all that the prophets have spoken' (Lk. 24:25), the substance of what the disciples should have grasped, and which Jesus then expounds to them, is 'what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself' (24:27). The gospel is nothing other than what God 'promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son' (Rom.1:2–3). The words of Scripture and the words of God are so equated that Paul can personify Scripture: 'For the Scripture says to Pharaoh' (Rom. 9:16); 'The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith' (Gal. 3:8); 'But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin' (Gal. 3:22). None of these clauses makes any sense unless Paul presupposes that what Scripture says, God says. The point comes to explicit formulation in 2 Tim. 3:16: 'All Scripture [*graphe*] is God-breathed and is useful . . .'. True, the reference in this context is to what we call OT Scripture (note the preceding verse: Timothy had known from infancy 'the holy Scriptures' [*hiera grammata*]); moreover, nothing in this passage declares the precise limits of Scripture, establishing an agreed canon. What the passage does do, however, is affirm that if a corpus of literature is included in 'Scripture', it must be judged to be 'God-breathed' (on which more below) and treated accordingly.

The same stance, according to the gospel writers, is presupposed by the Lord Jesus himself. He insisted that 'the Scripture cannot be broken' (Jn. 10:35). When he refers to Moses, Jesus is thinking of what Moses wrote, *i.e.* of Scripture: 'Your accuser is Moses [he said to some of his opponents], on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?' (Jn. 5:45–47). However difficult the interpretation of Mt. 5:17–20 may be, or how disputed the exact nature of the 'fulfilment', surely it is clear that when Jesus says, 'I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished' (Mt. 5:18), he assumes the truthfulness and reliability of 'the Law' (which in the context refers to all of Scripture: *cf.* 'the Law' and 'the Prophets' in 5:17; 7:12) *as it is enshrined in Scripture*. The divine authority that both Jesus and his first followers assign to Scripture constitutes the power that is presupposed by the frequently repeated formula introducing many Scripture quotations: 'It is written' (*e.g.* Mt. 4:4; Rom.9:33), they said – and that was enough.

Only a scant part of the evidence has been introduced here, but it is enough to show that for Jesus and the NT writers the Scripture already in existence was not perceived as merely written witness to God's revelation; rather, such Scripture was itself simultaneously the product of human authors and the revelation of the God who talks. What Scripture said, God said. However derived its authority, what the Bible says is stamped with God's authority, for its words are God's words.

The canon of Scripture

By itself, this discussion says nothing about the extent of Scripture. To agree on the nature of Scripture still leaves open the question as to what writings constitute Scripture. What makes up the canon of Scripture and how we know this to be the case is a complex subject on which much as been written. This briefest of summaries must suffice.

1. Many have argued that the OT Scriptures were canonized (*i.e.* recognized as a closed list of writings) in three stages: first, Torah (here understood to mean what we call the Pentateuch, the first five books); secondly, the Prophets; thirdly, the Writings. The last stage, it is often argued, was not reached until the end of the first century AD, at the Council of Jamnia. Increasingly, however, it has been recognized that, so far as the canon in concerned, Jamnia did nothing more than review arguments for two of the books in the Writings (Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs) – much as Luther would later review the arguments for James. In both cases, the inherited assumption was that the writings in question did indeed belong to the canon, and the point raised was whether or not this assumption could be sustained.

2. Indirect evidence concerning the status of OT books is derived from the NT. According to Lk. 24:44; Jesus himself referred to the Scripture as 'the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms' – traditional designation of the three divisions of the Hebrew canon, to which reference has just been made. More broadly, the NT quotes from every section and most books of the OT and treats such quotations as 'Scripture'. Not every ancient writing was thought of as Scripture, so to treat some books as Scripture and not others presupposes that those doing the quoting are operating with a list of 'Scripture' books in their minds. Thus, quotations from Cleanthes in Acts 17:28, Menander in 1 Cor. 15:33, Epimenides in Tit. 1:12, or 1 Enoch in Jude 14–15 are not introduced as Scripture. Interestingly enough, no allusion to books of the Apocrypha is treated as Scripture either. Although the copies of the Septuagint (the Greek translations of the OT) that have come down to us from the fourth and fifth centuries AD include most of the apocryphal books, it is widely recognized that these manuscripts provide little evidence of what first-century Jews in Palestine thought, and may not even provide any evidence for a larger Jewish canon maintained by Jews in, say, Alexandria.

3. Obviously one cannot approach the closing of the NT canon, *i.e.* the point at which it was universally agreed there were no more books to be added to a closed list of books of authoritative Scripture, in exactly the same way, since that would entail a still later corpus to authenticate it, and so on and on in an endless regression. Even so, it is worth noting how some later documents in the NT refer to some earlier ones as 'Scripture' (1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:16).

4. Most important, perhaps, are a number of passages where Christ himself is made the centre of what became the NT canon. In particular, the opening verses of Hebrews contrast how God 'spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways' with the manner in which 'in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son' (Heb. 1:1–2). The Son himself is the apex of revelation; to use the language of John, Jesus himself, as we have seen, is the ultimate 'Word', God's self-expression, the Word incarnate. Thus, any notion of a NT canon immediately becomes tied to its relation to him. Certainly Jesus prepared his small band of apostles for the increased measure of understanding that would come to them in the wake of his resurrection and the descent of the Spirit (Jn. 14:26; 16:12–15). Certainly, too, there is evidence that, although the twelve apostles and Paul could and did make mistakes (*e.g.* Gal. 2:11–14), they could on occasion be so conscious that what they were writing was nothing less than the Lord's command that even NT prophets who questioned them at that point were to be regarded as beyond the pale (1 Cor. 14:37–38).

5. Some have given the entirely false impression that the early church took an inordinately long time to recognize the authority of the NT documents. In fact it is vital to distinguish the recognition of the authority of these documents from a universal recognition as to the content of a closed list of NT documents. The NT books were circulating a long time before the latter happened, most of them accepted everywhere as divinely authoritative, and all of them accepted in at least large parts of the church. Most of the NT documents are cited as authorities very early indeed; this includes the four gospels, Acts, the thirteen Pauline letters, 1 Peter and 1 John. Most of the rest of the contours of the NT canon were well in place by the time of Eusebius, in the early fourth century.

6. The criteria by which the early church agreed that certain books were authoritative were basically three. First, the church Fathers looked for apostolicity, *i.e.* a document had to be written by an apostle or by someone in immediate contact with the apostles. Thus Mark was understood to have the witness of Peter behind him; Luke was connected with Paul. As soon as the Fathers discussed the possibility, they rejected any document under the suspicion of pseudonymity (written by someone other than the claimed author). Secondly, a basic requirement for canonicity was conformity to the 'rule of faith', *i.e.* to basic, orthodox Christianity recognized as normative in the churches. Thirdly, and scarcely less important, the document had to have enjoyed widespread and continuous usage by the churches. Incidentally, this criterion requires the passage of time to be useful, and helps to explain why so much time elapsed before the 'closing' of the canon (*i.e.*

before the church had almost universally agreed on the status of all twenty-seven NT documents). One of the reasons Hebrews was not accepted in the West as early as some letters was that it was anonymous (not pseudonymous!), and in fact it was more quickly accepted in the East where many (wrongly) thought it to have been written by Paul.

7. Perhaps the most important thing to recognize is that although there was no ecclesiastical machinery or hierarchy, akin to the medieval papacy, to enforce decisions, eventually almost all of the universal church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books. In other words, this was not so much 'official' recognition as the people of God in many different places coming to recognize what other believers elsewhere had also found to be true. The point must be constantly emphasized. 'The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level' (Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* [Harper & Row, 1969], p. 29).

The Church, then, did not confer a certain status on documents that would otherwise have lacked it, as if the church were an institution with authority independent of the Scriptures or in tandem to the Scriptures. Rather, the NT documents were Scripture because of what God had revealed; the church, providentially led, came to wide recognition of what God had done in his climactic self-disclosure in his Son and in the documents that bore witness to and gathered up the strands of the Son-revelation.

Inspiration and authority

If the Scriptures are simultaneously God's verbal revelation and the product of human hands, we must ask for at least some account of the relation between the two. For at least the past several hundred years, the term that has been most commonly used in this connection is 'inspiration'. Like 'Trinity', the word 'inspiration' is not a biblical word but summarizes some important facets of biblical truth. Inspiration is normally defined (at least in Protestant circles) as that supernatural work of God's Holy Spirit upon the human authors of Scripture such that what they wrote was precisely what God intended them to write in order to communicate his truth.

Some observations on this definition will clarify it, signal its usefulness and defend it against common misinterpretations.

1. The definition speaks both of God's action, by his Spirit, in the human author and of the nature of the resulting text. This double emphasis is an attempt to capture two elements demonstrably present in the Bible's summary of what is taking place. On the one hand, we are told that 'no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation' (presumably a private interpretation of the way things are); indeed, 'prophecy [clearly, in context, the prophecy that constitutes Scripture] never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit' (2 Pet. 1:20–21). On the other hand, not only are the human authors of Scripture 'carried along by the Holy Spirit', but the resulting Scripture is 'God-breathed' (2 Tim. 3:16). The Greek expression might well be rendered 'breathed out by God'. The striking point is that it is Scripture, the text, that is so described, not the human author. If we choose to use the word 'inspired' instead of 'God-breathed', then we must say (according to this passage) that it is the text that is inspired, not the human authors. Alternatively, if we attach the term 'inspired' to the fact that the human authors were 'carried along by the Holy Spirit', then the authors of Scripture were inspired. In any case, the wording of the definition is designed to embrace both the work of the Spirit in the human author and the resulting status of the text of Scripture.

2. There is nothing in the definition that lays down a particular mode of inspiration. Doubtless inspiration may operate through some abnormal state of the human mind, *e.g.* a vision, a trance-like dream, hearing voices and much else. But there is nothing in the definition that requires such phenomena; indeed, judging by the text of Scripture, it is far from clear that all of the biblical writers were always self-consciously aware that what they were writing was canonical Scripture. Nor is there any reason to depreciate Luke's description of his work, characterized by research and careful sifting of sources (Lk. 1:1–4). In fact, the term 'inspiration' is not much more than a convenient label to attach to the process whereby God has brought about the existence of the Scriptures as they have been described in the previous pages: verbal revelation and historical witness, words of human beings and words of God, the truth

that God chose to communicate and the particular forms of individual human authors.

3. It is important to distinguish this use of 'inspiration' from two other uses. The first springs from the contemporary world of art. We speak of composers, writers, painters, sculptors, musicians and others being 'inspired'. If we stop to think about this usage at all, we might suppose that these people have been 'inspired' by the Muse; the more theologically inclined might assign the 'inspiration' to God's 'common grace'. Apart from such reflection, we do not mean very much more than that their work is excellent, the elite from the first class. In consequence we might conclude that their work is 'inspiring', *i.e.* it makes those who gaze at it lift their horizons a little, or attempt something new, or otherwise find themselves ennobled. Such use is not normally taken to mean that the Sovereign God has thereby communicated his truth in permanent form to his covenant people.

The second use of inspiration' with which our definition must not be confused is that found in the usage of the church Fathers. It has often been noticed that 'inspiration' never functions among the Fathers as a criterion for canonicity. This is not because the Fathers do not think the Scriptures are inspired, for in fact they do; rather, it is because in their usage inspiration is not something that attaches exclusively to Scripture. Thus in a sermon Eusebius attributes to Emperor Constantine (whether or not this attribution is correct), the preacher begins, 'May the mighty inspiration of the Father and of his Son ... be with me in speaking these things'. In one of his letters to Jerome, Augustine goes so far as to say that Jerome writes under the dictation of the Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nyssa can use the same word translated 'God-breathed' ('inspired') in 2 Timothy to refer to his brother Basil's commentary on the six days of creation. In short, a number of Fathers use a variety of expressions, including 'inspiration', to lump together what many theologians today would separate into the two categories 'inspiration' and 'illumination'. The latter acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in the mind of countless believers, not least preachers, Christian writers and teachers, but denies to their thoughts and words and writings the kind of universal authority that is binding on all Christians everywhere and that is today connected with the word 'inspiration'. Implicitly, of course, the Fathers make the same sort of distinction (even if their categories are different) insofar as they recognize only certain documents as canonical, *i.e.* a closed list of Scriptures with binding authority on the entire church.

For our purposes, then, 'inspiration' will not be used as in the world of art, or as in the Fathers, but in the theological sense it has acquired during the past several centuries.

4. A number of writers attempt to weaken 'inspiration' as here defined by pointing out, rightly, that a passage such as 2 Tim. 3:16–17 tells us the purpose of such God-breathed Scripture: it is 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' If this is its purpose, they argue, then it is futile to link inspiration with truthfulness and authority. In fact, this is an error of categories. It is important to distinguish the *mode* of revelation (dream, vision, dictation *etc.*) from the *manner* of inspiration (the employment of various literary techniques and genres) from the *result* of inspiration (what Scripture says, God says) and the *purpose* of inspiration (to make us wise unto salvation).

5. Many attempt to weaken the authority of Scripture implicit in the account given here by one of several paths. Only a few can be mentioned. First, it has been argued that one must create a doctrine of Scripture not only out of passages where Scripture assesses Scripture, but out of the allegedly unyielding difficulties where Scripture actually cites Scripture in ways that on first reading are quite astonishing. Certainly the two approaches must go hand in hand. In practice, however, those who begin with the second usually do not take the first very seriously; those who begin with the first, if they are careful, usually uncover valid exegetical and theological reasons for the peculiar phenomena themselves. A variation on this argument insists that the Bible presents such different pictures of, say, God, that it is futile to speak of 'biblical' theology or 'biblical Christianity'. The Bible, according to this argument, embraces competing theologies and reflects different and mutually contradictory streams of Christianity. How can any book be said to be inspired and authoritative that forbids the wearing of clothes made from more than one kind of fabric (Lv. 19:19)? But such works, it must be gently said, while scoring well amongst popular audiences and convinced sceptics, simply do not engage with the best confessional literature. For example, the question about the different fabrics, not uncommon in the literature, is pressed forward as if no-one has ever thought seriously about the ways in which covenantal stipulations of the OT are to be applied to believers living under a new covenant.

Secondly, many argue that a necessary result of God's gracious accommodation of himself to human speech is the introduction of error. To err is human; the biblical documents are human, therefore they must prove as unreliable as

human beings are. But not only does such an assessment of Scripture fly in the face of the conviction of Jesus and of the NT writers, it depends on a fraying logic. Doubtless it is true that this side of the fall 'to err is human'; that does not mean that to be human is necessarily to err on every occasion and in every utterance. That the sovereign, transcendent God has graciously accommodated himself to human speech is a wonderful truth. But it is this accommodated speech which is then described as the word or words of God that are 'flawless' (Ps. 12:6) and treated by Jesus himself as the Scripture that cannot be broken.

Thirdly, traditional Roman Catholics, while holding to the inspiration and authority of the Bible, deny that the Bible is sufficient as a rule of faith and practice. Before the written word came the oral tradition, and this tradition continues alongside the written word in the magisterial office of the Roman Church. The effects are substantial; a doctrine such as the immaculate conception of Mary, not taught in Scripture, can be set forth as something that all loyal Catholics must believe. Conversely, doctrines that most non-Catholics find in the Scriptures may be set aside or trimmed on the church's authority. The issues are too complex to broach here.

Fourthly, in a manner that characteristically goes beyond anything that Karl Barth, the father of neo-orthodoxy, would have espoused, some neo-orthodox theologians insist that the Bible, so far as its form is concerned, is simply one more religious book, albeit an important one, and therefore not itself immune from errors large and small. It is not truth in the sense that what it says, God says. Rather, the Bible is truth insofar as God works through it to disclose himself to individuals. It becomes the word of God whenever the Holy Spirit illumines it to the individual. Thus inspiration and illumination are again confused; or, more exactly, the former is swallowed up by the latter. Certainly neo-orthodoxy was right to protest against a dead 'word' that neither transformed nor gave life to individuals. But its solution is too drastic and ends up denying what Jesus and the earliest believers understood the Scripture to be.

Fifthly, various forms of classic liberalism simply deny any special status to the Scripture. In its most virulent form, this view denies the existence of a personal/transcendent God who invades history. Supernaturalism is assumed to be impossible; God is reduced to the proportions of deism or pantheism. The religion of the Bible must be studied in the framework of discussion about any or all other religions, and in no other framework. A thoughtful response to this vision of reality would take us far beyond the scope of this article. What is clear, however, is that this vision quickly domesticates Scripture and ends up imposing some current ideas on the Bible. In the end, the dispute turns not simply on the nature of the Bible, but on the nature and character of God.

Finally, the rise of the 'new hermeneutic' has encouraged many thinkers simply to sidestep the debate over the locus of revelation and authority. But since this view is integrally tied to questions about how the Bible is to be interpreted, brief discussion can await the next section.

Final reflections

Some might object that this entire presentation is hopelessly circular. If we begin with our views of God, and from this perspective start to think our way towards the nature of the Bible, we must pause and admit that our views of God are (in the Christian perspective) drawn from the Bible. If we begin instead with, say, Jesus' assessment of the authority of Scripture, that assessment is itself drawn from Scripture. The entire project of constructing a doctrine of Scripture is deeply flawed.

This charge touches on some of the most complex questions about how we come to 'know' things, and whether they are 'true'. Although these questions cannot be probed very effectively here, a few comments may be helpful to some.

First, there is a profound sense in which all human thought (except perhaps that which is bounded by agreed rules of logic and built on defined values, like most branches of mathematics) is circular in some sense. We are finite creatures; without the faculty of omniscience we have no absolutely certain base on which to build. The Christian's claim is that God himself, who does enjoy perfect knowledge, provides that basis for us – but that, of course, means the basis itself must be taken (so far as finite creatures are concerned) on faith. In this view, 'faith' is not some subjectively constrained opinion to be put over against some other 'faith', but a God-given ability to perceive at least a little of God and his truth and to trust him accordingly. This is not to deny for a moment that all kinds of arguments can be advanced to justify Christian belief, including belief about God and the Bible. Rather, it is to admit that such arguments will not prove convincing to everyone.

Secondly, although we admit that the argument is in some measure circular, and insist that almost all human thought is in some measure circular, that is not to suggest that the circularity is intrinsically false. We do not turn to the Bible for certain proof about the nature of the Bible; rather, we turn to it for information. If

the Bible made no claims about the nature of the Bible, we would have less reason for holding to the doctrine of Scripture outlined here. To go further, informed Christians may want to argue for the utter truthfulness and reliability of Scripture, but they will not want to argue for the utter truthfulness and reliability of their doctrine of Scripture. Methodologically speaking, they proceed with the creation of a doctrine of Scripture exactly the same way they proceed with the creation of a doctrine of Christ. Both are subject to revision as more light breaks from God's gracious self-disclosure, as already given in the Scriptures.

Thirdly, thoughtful Christians will be the first to admit that there are unknowns and difficulties in the formulation of a responsible doctrine of Scripture. But this does not daunt us; the same could be said for almost any biblical doctrine: the nature of God, the heart of the atonement, the work of the Spirit, the resurrection from the dead. This does not mean that nothing true can be said about such matters; it means, rather, that since all of them have to do with a personal/transcendent God who cannot possibly be exhaustively known by finite and rebellious creatures, there will inevitably remain mysteries and areas of hiddenness.

Fourthly, we must not underestimate the impact of sin on our ability to think through these matters clearly. A substantial element in our original fall was the unbridled lust for self-sufficiency, for independent knowledge. We wanted to be the centre of the universe – and that is the heart of all idolatry. Jn. 8:45 reports Jesus addressing his opponents in these shocking words: 'Yet because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me!' If it is the truth itself that ensures our unbelief, how deep and tragic and abominable is our lostness. Small wonder, then, that God does not present himself to us in such a way that we may feel we can control him. Those who demand signs of Jesus are firmly rebuked, for he knows that to give in to such demands would be to submit to the agenda of others. He would quickly be domesticated, nothing more than a magical, spiritual genie.

For the same reason the wisdom of the world – systems of thought that provide nicely packaged explanations of everything – cannot possibly come to grips with the cross of Christ (1 Cor. 1:18–31). When God speaks from heaven, there will always be some who hear only thunder (Jn. 12:29). In the same way, God's gracious self-disclosure in Scripture can never be adequately assessed by those who insist on being independent knowers: for God to structure his revelation to accommodate such a desire would be to foster the sin from which the gospel frees us. God in his great mercy refuses to pander to our unlimited lust to be gods. He has ensured that his own self-disclosure should be abundantly clear to those who by grace have eyes to see and ears to hear, but can never be as rigorously self-evident as a mathematical theorem where human beings control all the definitions and the rules of the relationships.

We walk by faith, and not by sight.

How to interpret the Bible

The changing face of hermeneutics

When Paul tells Timothy to strive to be someone who 'correctly handles the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15), the assumption is that it is dangerously possible to be someone who does not correctly handle the word of truth. And that raises important questions about how to interpret the Bible. To approach the Bible wisely it is necessary not only to know what it is, but how to handle it.

'Hermeneutics' is the term that has traditionally been applied to the interpretation of texts. But hermeneutics itself has recently gone through such major changes that it is worth pausing to consider the ways in which the discipline of interpretation has changed. We may discern three stages (though all of them overlap towards the end).

First, hermeneutics was once understood to be the science and art of biblical interpretation: science, because there were some important rules and principles that could be applied to the task, and art, because there were many calls for mature judgment borne of experience and competence. The task of the interpreter was to understand what the text said, and it was assumed that if two interpreters of equal competence understood the rules of interpretation well enough, then in the overwhelming majority of cases their grasp of what a passage says would coincide. In this vision of hermeneutics, a great deal of attention is paid to grammar, parables and other literary genres, principles for studying words, how to relate biblical themes and the like.

Secondly, 'hermeneutics' was increasingly used to refer to the deployment of an array of literary-critical 'tools': source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism, and, more recently, various forms of narrative criticism. Although some gains were made by such approaches, there were also losses: much of the purpose of these techniques was to reconstruct the history and belief-structure of particular believing communities behind the

text, rather than to listen to the message of the text.

Both of these approaches have largely been eclipsed in importance by a third wave, the 'new hermeneutic'. Here the important insight that human beings bring their own biases and limitations to the interpretative task is raised to a controlling pitch in the discussion. At one level this observation is entirely salutary. We inevitably bring our own interpretative 'grids' with us; there is no such thing as a totally open mind. The new hermeneutic reminds us that the authority of Scripture must not be transferred to the authority of the interpreter, that we invariably fit new pieces of information into already established 'grids' in our minds (which are mixtures of sense and nonsense), that some of what we think is true doubtless needs to be modified or corrected or abandoned, that we have more to learn, that our frameworks of understanding are separated from the human writers of Scripture by barriers of time, geography, language and culture.

But at the same time, many proponents of the new hermeneutic overstep the mark. They argue that since each person's interpretation will differ in some measure from every other person's interpretation, we cannot legitimately speak of the meaning of the text (as if it were something objective). Meaning, they argue, resides not in the text but in the readers, the interpreters, of the text. If different interpretations are legitimate, then one cannot speak of the correct interpretation or the true interpretation; such expressions, they think, dissolve into affirmations of personal preference. If no single interpretation is right, then either all interpretations are equally meaningless (which leads to the hermeneutical nihilism known as 'deconstructionism') or all are equally 'right' – *i.e.* all are good or bad insofar as they are satisfying, or meet the needs of a particular person or community or culture, or meet certain arbitrary criteria. In this vein, these proponents of the new hermeneutic foster different 'readings' of Scripture: a sub-Saharan Black African reading, a liberation theology reading, a feminist reading, a white Anglo-Saxon male Protestant reading, a 'gay' reading, and so forth. Aligned with the powerful respect contemporary western culture assigns to pluralism, this new hermeneutic rules no interpretation invalid except that one which claims it is right and that others are invalid.

The issues surrounding the new hermeneutic are so complex that they cannot satisfactorily be handled here. It is important to recognize that this approach to understanding governs much of the agenda not only in contemporary biblical interpretation but also in the disciplines of history, literature, politics and much else beside. Despite its many valuable insights, the new hermeneutic must be challenged on many fronts. Intuitively, there is something weak about a theory that propounds the relativity of all knowledge gleaned from reading, while producing countless books that insist on the rightness of this view. To insist that all meaning lies with the knower and not with the text, and then to write texts to prove the point, is almost unimaginably self-contradictory. Worse, the theory in this form assumes that the author's intent is not reliably expressed in the text. It erects an impenetrable barrier between the author and the reader and calls it 'text'. The irony is that these ideas are written by authors who expect their readers to understand what they say, authors who write what they mean and hope that their readers will be persuaded by their reasoning. It is devoutly to be wished that such authors would extend the same courtesy to Moses, Isaiah and Paul.

Even if finite human beings may not attain an exhaustive knowledge of a text (or of anything else for that matter), it is difficult to see why they cannot gain true knowledge. Moreover, the fact of our differences is easier to absorb against the background of our common heritage; all of us have been made in the image of God, who alone enjoys perfect and exhaustive knowledge. To suppose that we can attain knowledge in every way like his would be idolatrous, but that is no reason to think that we cannot gain objective knowledge at all.

Indeed, there are ways of thinking about the acquisition of understanding from a text that help us see a little of how the process works. Doubtless a reader may be largely controlled by personal biases and rigid agendas when first approaching the Scriptures (the text that concerns us here), and thus 'find' in the text all kinds of things the author (and the Author) did not intend to place there; or, alternatively, he or she may not see many of the things that are in fact there. The total mental baggage of the reader, what moderns often call the reader's 'horizon of understanding', may be so far removed from the horizon of understanding of the author as expressed in the text that very great distortions occur. But it is possible that the reader will read and re-read the text, learn something of the language and culture of the authors, discover what elements of his or her own 'baggage' must be jettisoned, and gradually 'fuse' his or her horizon of understanding with that of the text (to use the current jargon). Others speak of the 'hermeneutical spiral': the interpreter 'spirals in' on the meaning of the text.

If the new hermeneutic is treated in this fashion, there are considerable gains that can

come to the church. It reminds us that God's verbal revelation to us in the Scripture not only comes to us clothed in the language and idiom of particular historical cultures, but that to improve our understanding of the objective truth that is there disclosed it is necessary to think our way back into those cultures, so far as this is possible, to minimize the dangers of interpretative distortion. It reminds us that even if an individual interpreter gains some real, objective understanding of the text, none will understand it exhaustively, and other interpreters may bring to light content that is genuinely there in the text and that we ourselves have missed. For instance, believers in Africa might be quicker to detect Pauline metaphors for the corporate character of the church, while many in the West will find it harder to see them owing to their heritage of individualism. Christians need each other; this is as true in the hermeneutical arena as elsewhere. Provided there is a shared deep commitment to submit to the authority of God's revelation, and not the passing fads and agendas (academic and otherwise) of those who want to pass judgment on Scripture, the recognition that none of us knows it all encourages humility and willingness to listen and learn.

Indeed, properly applied, some of the insights of the new hermeneutic remind us that human beings bring enormous cultural and conceptual baggage to the Scriptures they claim to interpret, and that this fact, allied with the Bible's insistence that our sin and idolatrous self-focus drive us away from the light (*e.g.* Jn. 3:19–20), may send us to our knees in the belated recognition that the interpretation of God's word is not merely an intellectual discipline, but turns also on moral and spiritual bearings. In the Bible's view of the relation between God and his people, we need the help of God's Holy Spirit to understand the truth as much as we need his help to do the truth. However that help may be mediated to us, the aim of thoughtful Christians, after all, is not so much to become masters of Scripture, but to be mastered by it, both for God's glory and his people's good.

Some introductory principles of biblical interpretation

What follows is a selection of principles of interpretation, for those who hold that a proper approach to the Bible includes not only some appreciation for what the Bible is, but some care in how to read it and understand it.

The priority of the original languages of the Bible

The original languages take precedence. This is a corollary of the fact that this revelation took place through specific individuals at concrete historical junctures in real and time-specific human languages. True, linguistics has amply demonstrated that anything that can be said in one language can be translated into any other language. But it has also demonstrated that not all of the meaning of the donor language can be conveyed at the same time and in the same amount of space. Moreover, all translation involves interpretation; translation is not a mechanical discipline. Thus to approach as closely as possible to the intention of the author as expressed in a text it is best to interpose as few intermediary interpretations as possible. Of course, if one does not know the original languages one will be grateful for the translations; moreover a poor interpreter who knows the original languages may make more interpretative errors than many translations, the best of which have been undertaken by competent people. But all things being equal, the point, though intuitively obvious, needs repeating.

For the busy preacher or Bible teacher, this observation has two practical implications. First, if the main point of a sermon or lesson turns on the peculiar mode of expression in just one translation, in most cases it is not the major point of the passage, and may not be justified at all. Secondly, the first priority in commentaries and other interpretative helps should be to reflect work in the original languages, even if the presentation (as in this one-volume commentary) is geared for readers who enjoy no technical expertise.

Some words on words

Word studies, important as they are in their own right, must be undertaken with some care, and never in isolation from larger questions about the way words are used in phrases, sentences, discourses, particular genres. Lexica (dictionaries written in English that treat the words of the original languages) can provide the range of meanings that various scholars have identified (insofar as those scholars are right!), but within certain limitations the most important factor in the determination of the meaning of a word is its use in a specific context. To plump for a meaning associated with the word's etymology is often misleading (just as it is entirely unhelpful to recognize that 'pineapple' comes from 'pine' and 'apple'); the only time when etymology becomes a cautious priority occurs when a word crops up so infrequently and in such ambiguous contexts that there is no other recourse. To try to build up an entire theology based on a single word and its use is a doubtful enterprise; to preach 'reverse etymology', where the meaning of a word is affirmed to be something like later developments of that

word or its cognates (such as the assertion that *dynamis*, 'power', properly calls to mind 'dynamite' – which had not been invented when the NT writers penned their books) is anachronistic at best, ridiculous at worst. Moreover, to try to import the word's entire semantic range into every occurrence (as in the Amplified Bible) is to fail to understand how language works.

Despite the warnings, careful exegesis will be much interested in how words are used by specific biblical authors, and in other biblical books. Just as the meaning of sentences and discourses shapes the meaning of words, so the meaning of words shapes the sentence and discourse; in language, everything holds together. It is valuable to try to find out what the underlying Hebrew and Greek words behind many words in our English Bibles mean, not least words that have traditionally borne a great deal of theological weight, *e.g.* atonement, Messiah (Christ), truth, apostle, sin, head, resurrection, spirit, flesh, law and countless more. Even if a person's study merely confirms what some secondary sources say, the discipline itself is valuable. It not only provides a degree of familiarity with the Scripture that cannot easily be gained otherwise, but it reminds the Christian that God himself has chosen to disclose himself in discourse, sentences and words.

The importance of becoming a good reader

It is essential to develop literary sensitivity – or, to put it another way, to become a good reader.

At the micro level, countless literary devices serve as pointers for the alert reader. 'Inclusions' begin and end a section with similar or even identical words in order to underline the importance of certain themes. Thus the beatitudes in Mt. 5:3–10 begin and end with the same reward ('for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'), thereby establishing that the beatitudes are setting forth the norms of the kingdom. The body of the Sermon on the Mount opens with the words, 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets' (Mt. 5:17), and ends with 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets' (Mt. 7:12). This 'inclusion' suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is, amongst other things, an exposition of the OT Scriptures ('the Law and the Prophets') in the light of Jesus' coming and ministry, his commitment to 'fulfil' them and what this will mean in the lives of his followers. Hebrew poetry is much less interested in rhyme and even in rhythm than in parallelism of various sorts. (See also the article Poetry in the Bible). In Ps.73:21–22:

> 'When my heart was grieved
> and my spirit embittered,
> I was senseless and ignorant;
> I was a brute beast before you',

the second line repeats the content of the first, if in other words; the fourth does the same for the third. These are instances of synonymous parallelism. Lines 3-4 take the thought on from lines 1-2; this is step parallelism. Elsewhere one finds antithetic parallelism, (as in Pr. 14:31.)

> He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker but whoever is kind to the poor honours God.

There are of course far more complex structures of parallelism. There are also chiasms, where two or more lines work into the centre and then work out again. These can be very elementary, or complex ones such as in Mt. 13:

1 the parable of the soils (13:3b–9)
  2 interlude (13:10–23)
    (a) on understanding parables (13:10–17)
    (b) interp. of the parables of the soils (13:18–23)
    3 the parable of the weeds (13:24–30)
      4 the parable of the mustard seed (13:31–32)
        5 the parable of the yeast (13:33)
        Pause (13:34–43)
        - parables as fulfilment of prophecy (13:34–35)
        - interp. of the parable of the weeds (13:36–43)
        5' parable of the hidden treasure (13:44)
      4' the parable of the expensive pearl (13:45–46)
    3' the parable of the net (13:47–48)
  2' interlude (13:49–51)
  (b') interpretation of the parable of the net (13:49–50)
  (a') on understanding parables (13:51)
1' the parable of the teacher of the law (13:52)

It must be conceded that chiasms are sometimes rather more in the eye of the beholder than in the text. If the elements become too complex, or the parallels decidedly forced, one may reasonably ask whether a chiasm is really present. On the other hand, some interpreters, burned by long lists of unconvincing chiasms, dismiss too easily chiasms that are really there. It has often been shown that those who spoke Semitic languages commonly framed chiasms as part of their speech patterns, so one should not become too sceptical. Certainly, there are many borderline cases; indeed, many expositors will be unpersuaded by the example just provided. So

perhaps it is worth venturing a slightly simpler example, this one based on Mt. 23:13–32:

1 First woe (13) – failing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah
  2 Second woe (15) – superficially zealous, yet doing more harm than good
    3 Third woe (16–22) – misguided use of Scripture
      4 Fourth woe (23–24) – fundamental failure to discern the thrust of Scripture
    3' Fifth woe (25–26) – misguided use of Scripture
  2' Sixth woe (27–28) – superficially zealous, yet doing more harm than good
1' Seventh woe (29–32) – heirs of those who failed to recognize the prophets.

What this chiasm accomplishes, of course, is to drive the reader's focus to the centre – the fundamental failure to discern the thrust of Scripture, a major theme in Matthew's gospel.

Still more important, perhaps, is the ability to understand how larger structures work, and especially the nature of literary genre. Wisdom Literature is not law; to read, say, Proverbs, as if it offered judgments in case law, is to make it ludicrous (compare Pr. 26:4 and 26:5). In the NT the word 'parable' can refer to a proverb (Lk. 4:23), a profound or obscure saying (Mk. 13:35), a nonverbal image or symbol (Heb. 9:9; 11:19), an illustrative or suggestive comparison, whether without the form of a story (Mt. 15:15; 24:32) or with a story (Mt. 13:3–9 – the so-called 'narrative' parables). Many treatments of parables think only of narrative parables, not least because they are so plentiful in the first three gospels, and draw up principles for the interpretation of (such) parables. Certainly all agree that in the case of narrative parables we need not ask if the story that is told really happened.

In the same way, we must ask how apocalyptic is to be understood, what a 'gospel' is, how letters functioned in the first century. Jehoash told a fable (2 Ki. 14:9); is the modern critic right when the book of Jonah is designated a 'fable'? No, this is a mistake of literary category. A fable tells a story of animals or other non-human, natural life-forms in order to draw a moral; it does not intermingle with human beings. The effort of Jehoash qualifies; the book of Jonah does not. With increased information we may ask what 'midrash' and other first-century literary categories meant. All Bible students will wrestle with the meaning of passages such as Gal. 4:24–31. The point is that truth is conveyed in different ways in different literary genres. The person who thinks Jeremiah is speaking literally in Je. 20:14–18 will have some very difficult things to explain. It would be better to hear the particular outrage of lament.

Above all, good reading goes with the flow. Although it is always worth meditating on individual words and phrases (especially in discourse), even so the meaning of those words is shaped by their context. Good readers will diligently strive to make sense of the flow of the argument. (The exception occurs when there are lists of, say, proverbs – but even many of these are thematically arranged.) This is no less true in narrative than in discourse. Many casual readers of the gospels think of them as more or less disjointed accounts. Closer reading discloses themes interwoven with other themes. One might ask, for example, how Lk. 10:38 – 11:13 is tied together. Re-reading shows that these verses gather up some analysis of why there is so little prayerfulness and what is today called spirituality: a distortion of priorities and values (10:38–42); a lack of knowledge and of good models (11:1–4); and a want of assurance and persistence (11:5–13). Similarly, this entire section of Luke makes its own contribution to the larger flow of his text.

Immediate and more distant contexts

Generally speaking the immediate context takes precedence over both the distant context and merely formal parallels. For instance, in Mt. 6:7 Jesus warns his followers not to 'keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words'; in Lk. 18:1–8 Jesus tells his disciples a parable 'to show them that they should always pray and not give up'. It will not do to reduce the impact of one of these passages by citing the other. The prohibition in Matthew makes good sense in its context; the saying confronts religion that is merely formal, or that thinks it can wrest advantages from God by trying harder. With his well-known interest in prayer, Luke reports far more of Jesus' prayer life, and in ch.18 reports some of his teaching designed to trim the sails of those whose piety is neither passionate nor persistent.

Of the many interpretations of Jn. 3:5, where Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born 'of water and the Spirit' if he is to inherit the kingdom of God, one of the most popular is achieved by bringing Tit. 3:5–6 to bear, which speaks of 'God our Saviour' saving us 'through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour'. That there are conceptual and verbal parallels no-one will deny. Still, Jn.3:5 was not only penned by another author, but attributed to Jesus during the days of his flesh. More importantly, in the immediate context Nicodemus is reproached for not understanding what Jesus is talking about (3:10), presumably on the grounds that, as a

revered teacher of Scripture, he should have known what Scripture said. A combination of these and other factors lead many commentators, rightly, to see a reference in Jn. 3:5 to the anticipated fulfilment of Ezk. 36:25–27. This is in line with the expectation that Jesus would perform Spirit-baptism, a point already articulated in this gospel (Jn.1:26–33).

Of course, any text is surrounded by expanding concentric circles of context. How large a context should be appealed to at any point is not a matter about which it is easy to legislate. Certainly word studies should begin within the text (how does Mark, say, use a term, before asking how Luke, Paul, the NT, and ultimately the Hellenistic world use the term).

Some contextual markers are important in moving from chapter to chapter. For example, although according to Matthew the opening words of ministry ascribed to John the Baptist and to Jesus respectively are identical ('Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'; Mt. 3:2; 4:17), their immediate contexts give the two sayings a quite different shade. The utterance of the Baptist is cast within the shadow of the words from Isaiah that show the Baptist was preparing the way for another; the words of Jesus are cast within the shadow of words from Isaiah that show Jesus was fulfilling the promise to bring light to the Gentiles. Thus John the Baptist is primarily announcing the impending arrival of the kingdom of heaven; Jesus is announcing its inauguration. That is consistent with themes throughout Matthew (and the synoptics, for that matter). At the same time, in other cases it is helpful to link themes and technical expressions to many different spots throughout the canon – but more of this below.

The role of the 'analogy of the faith'

The appeal to the 'analogy of the faith', though helpful, must be exercised with some caution. As used in Protestant theology, this appeal argues that, if any passage is ambiguous, it should be interpreted in line with the great 'givens' of biblical Christianity; it should never be interpreted in such a way as to jeopardize those givens. At one level this is surely sound advice, granted that God's mind ultimately stands behind all the Scriptures. Nevertheless, there are several dangers inherent in a thoughtless application of the analogy of the faith. First, the interpreter may succumb to anachronism. God did not provide his people with all of the Bible all at once. There is a progression to his revelation, and to read the whole back into some early part may seriously distort that part, so that its true significance in the flow of redemptive history is obscured. For example, to read a full-blown Pauline doctrine of the Holy Spirit into every passage where 'Spirit' occurs in, say, the Psalms, will certainly generate some interpretative blunders.

Secondly, the interpreter's theological grasp, his or her 'systematic theology' (for all of us who read and teach Scripture develop certain syntheses, whether we call them 'systematic theology' or not), may be faulty at many points, but it may be very difficult to spot the faults. The reason is that this synthesis, this systematic theology, itself becomes a controlling grid by which to interpret Scripture, under the guise of serving as the analogy of the faith.

Thirdly, many Christians develop favourite passages of Scripture, and these become a kind of 'canon within the canon' that serves as the touchstone by which to handle other passages. This inner canon becomes, for such Christians, the best summary of 'the faith'. This can lead, for instance, to some fairly bizarre reading of Jas. 2:14–26 on the ground that Paul in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3 apparently says something rather different, and Paul's perspective is given automatic priority.

The value of historical and archaeological background information

Because there are so many historical referents in the biblical text, it is entirely proper to seek relevant background information where such information would be shared by the human author and the first readers. This, too, is a function of the fact that the Bible is historically conditioned. When Isaiah writes, 'In the year that King Uzziah died . . .' it is very helpful to find out what Kings and Chronicles says about Uzziah, for it contributes to our understanding of what Isaiah is saying – and after all the same sort of information was presumably available (if not exactly in that form) to both Isaiah and his first readers. A fair bit of nonsense has been written about the exalted Christ's words to the Laodiceans: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!' (Rev. 3:15). Many have argued that this means God prefers people who are 'spiritually cold' above those who are 'spiritually lukewarm', even though his first preference is for those who are 'spiritually hot'. Ingenious explanations are then offered to defend the proposition that spiritual coldness is a superior state to spiritual lukewarmness.

All of this can comfortably be abandoned once responsible archaeology has made its contribution. Laodicea shared the Lycus valley with two other cities mentioned in the NT. Colosse was the only one that enjoyed fresh, cold, spring water; Hierapolis was known for its hot springs and became a place to which people would resort to enjoy these healing baths. By

contrast, Laodicea put up with water that was neither cold and useful, nor hot and useful; it was lukewarm, loaded with chemicals, and with an international reputation for being nauseating. That brings us to Jesus' assessment of the Christians there: they were not useful in any sense, they were simply disgusting, so nauseating he would vomit them away. The interpretation would be clear enough to anyone living in the Lycus valley in the first century; it takes a bit of background information to make the point clear today. Similarly, knowledge of certain ancient social patterns can shed a great deal of light on some passages, such as the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins (Mt. 25:1–13).

When interpreters and translators ask themselves how the first readers would have understood a passage, they are not asking a merely hypothetical question impossible to answer (since we have no access to their minds). Rather, this is simply a way of getting at a host of subsidiary questions: How would these words have been understood at the time? What issues and themes were of resounding importance? What kind of conceptual framework would the biblical text confront? To raise such question is not to affirm that we can always find perfect answers. Sometimes we can infer responsible answers by 'mirror-reading' the text itself. It is obvious, for instance, that Paul is opposing certain people in his letter to the Galatians, and some things about those opponents are reasonably clear. Sometimes the evidence is more difficult, but still worth pondering. For example, however powerfully 1 John may be applied to a modern congregation, in the first instance it was designed to offer assurance to believers at the end of the first century who were suffering various forms of doubt owing in part to the recent departure of some schismatic group (1 Jn. 2:19). If we conclude that this group embraced some form of proto-Gnosticism (about which we know a fair bit from extra-biblical sources), a number of other things in the letter become clear.

None of this endangers the Bible's sufficiency and clarity, for the main purposes of the Bible remain unaltered by such judgments. But because the Bible was graciously given to us by God *in a lengthy series of specific historical contexts*, significant light can be shed on a passage by patiently probing some of those contexts.

The importance of asking appropriate questions

It is important to ask many questions of a text, and also to learn what questions are inappropriate.

On the positive side, in narrative it is almost always worth asking the obvious elementary quetions: when, where, to whom, how, why, for how long, and so forth. Above all, it is important to ask what the theme and purpose are of the unit of text on which you are working, and how the various parts of the text make their contributions to that dominant theme and point. It is often worth asking what subsidiary themes are present. Sometimes one should ask questions related to an author's use of a particular word or expression, *e.g.* why did Paul use this word in this context when he might have used that one?

But it is easy to ask inappropriate questions. For instance, if one asks, 'What does this passage say about Christian assurance?' when it is at best remotely related to such a theme, one may 'find' answers that are not really there. One of the best signs of interpretative maturity is the kind of self-critical and reflective questioning of a biblical text that so 'listens' to what is being said that the questions themselves are progressively honed, discarded, sharpened, corrected. This is an extraordinarily important component in spiralling in on the meaning of a text.

Fitting the Bible together

It is important to locate a passage in its place in redemptive history. Of course, scholars who think all the biblical books should be treated separately, who do not perceive one mind behind the whole, are inclined to give this principle short shrift. For those who approach the Bible in the manner advocated here, however, this is merely responsible reading. This means more than organizing the historical material of the Bible into its chronological sequence, though it does not mean less. It means trying to understand the theological nature of the sequence.

One of the most useful avenues of study in this regard is how later Scripture writers refer to earlier ones. For example, one of the important titles assigned to Jesus in Matthew's gospel is 'Son of God'. At Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven declares, 'This is my Son . . .' (3:17). Immediately Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted. There he spends forty days and forty nights in a difficult fast. The first assault of the devil begins with the taunt, 'If you are the Son of God . . .' (4:3). Jesus replies with words from Dt.8 that first applied to Israel. At that point it is almost impossible not to remember that as early as Ex. 4 God refers to Israel as his son. As God's son, Israel spent forty years in the desert being taught but failing to learn that 'man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Dt. 8:3; Mt. 4:4); Jesus the true

Son now spends forty days in the desert and demonstrates that he has learned that lesson. Indeed, the entire passage is criss-crossed with themes drawn from the period of the exodus, and throughout Jesus is presented as the 'son' that Israel never was: obedient, persevering, submissive to God's word – in short, the locus of the true Israel. That becomes a major theme in Matthew's gospel.

In a similar way, Christian readers soon notice the way Paul handles the law, Hebrews refers to the sacrificial system, and the Apocalypse constantly alludes to Daniel and Ezekiel, to name but a few of the textual connections between the books of the old covenant and the books of the new. The perspective of redemptive history must constantly be borne in mind. Thus, while treating, say, Ex. 4 fairly within its own context, the Christian teacher and preacher will feel obliged to give some indication where the theme of 'Son of God' heads along the axis of God's gracious self-disclosure. Avoiding both anachronism (which reads the later material back into earlier material) and atomization (which refuses to consider canonical connections), this Christian will be eager to learn in what way, as John's gospel insists, the Scriptures speak of Christ.

At few points is this disciplined exercise more challenging than in the interpretation of the gospels. On their face, the gospels describe the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, before his ascension, the descent of the Spirit, and the formation of an international, multicultural and inter-racial church. On the other hand, the gospels were clearly written several decades after those events by committed Christians concerned not only to bear witness to those events but to meet the needs and questions of their own readers. There are many ways by which the four evangelists signal their concerns for both history and theology, for witness that avoids anachronism yet points the direction in which Jesus' teaching is taking his nascent church. In the fourth gospel, for example, John constantly draws attention to how much even the disciples did not understand at the time. Only after Jesus rose from the dead did some of his teachings, and their connection with Scripture, become clear (*e.g.* Jn. 2:19–22). That John should draw attention to this fact reflects his concern to be true both to what actually took place and to its meaning for later believers.

Handling the gospels sensitively means, among other things, that we cannot treat the first disciples' coming to full Christian faith exactly like the coming to faith of people today. In the case of the first disciples, for fully Christian faith they had to wait until the next major redemptive-historical event – the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus their steps in faith can never be exactly like ours, for we look back on those events while they had to wait for them. That means we must never teach and preach from the gospels as if they were written simply to provide psychological profiles in discipleship, or as if they were exemplary 'how-to' manuals for Christian living (though they certainly provide rich materials for such constructions). Rather, they are more like books that tell us how-we-got-from-there-to-here; above all they focus on who Jesus is, why he came, how and why he was so largely misunderstood, how his teaching and life led to the cross and resurrection, why he is worthy of all trust, the purpose of his mission and much more. And as we focus on Jesus Christ himself, we are called to trusting and faithful discipleship.

At stake, of course, is how the Bible fits together. This is not to suggest that these are easy topics. Entire schools of interpretation have built up around various schema in which a few irreducible principles have become the fulcrum on which the rest of the evidence has been made to turn. But that fact should call us, not to despair, but to the large-hearted recognition that the inner-biblical connections are many and nuanced, and that there is still more insight to emerge from the study of God's word.

Aiming for biblical balance

Theological synthesis is important, but shoddy synthesis is misleading and dangerous. It has often been observed that a large part of orthodoxy resides in properly relating passage with passage, truth with truth. That observation is both a call to careful work and a warning against reductionism. Biblical balance is an important goal. For a start, we will avoid all approaches to interpretation that seize on some esoteric point from an obscure and isolated passage (*e.g.* 1 Cor. 15:29) to establish the basic framework out of which we interpret Scripture. If the political mood of our age favours one-issue politics, and sometimes one-issue Christianity, serious readers of the Bible must think more comprehensively. They will want to stress what Scripture stresses, and focus on the largest and more certain themes of God's gracious self-disclosure.

Nowhere are warnings against shoddy synthesis more important than when the Bible addresses themes that frankly invoke mystery. We are not going to understand everything about God; if we could we would be God, and even the assumption that we have such a right betrays our lostness, our wretched self-focus. God is more interested in our loving and trusting obedience and adoration than in our I.Q.s. Thus

when we come across passages such as Jn. 5:16–30, which powerfully articulates the relationship of Jesus the Son of God with his Father, or Rom. 9, which unhesitatingly deploys strong predestinarian language, the importance of recognizing the limitations of the evidence and the even greater limitations of our understanding of it is an important component in the interpretative task.

For the sake of simplification, little has been said about the exploration of how these themes have been handled throughout the history of the church. In fact, it is enormously important to recognize that, just as the interpreter does not approach the Scripture in a vacuum and must therefore become aware of his or her own biases, so also is it true, ironically, that one of the greatest helps in freeing us from unwitting slavery to our biases is the careful reading of the history of interpretation. Such reading must never usurp the place of the reading of Scripture; it is possible to become so expert in secondary opinions that one never ponders the text of Scripture itself. But once the warning has been noted, it is important, so far as we are able, to understand how Christians before us have wrestled with Scripture, not least the most controversial themes and passages. Such discipline will induce humility, clear our minds of unwarranted assumptions, expose faulty interpretations that have long since (and rightly) been dismissed, and remind us that responsible interpretation of Scripture must never be a solitary task.

Determining the functions of biblical themes

Especially where biblical themes are complex and intertwined, it is important to observe the Bible's use of such themes, to determine their specific functions, and to resolve to follow such biblical patterns in our own theological reflection. For example, the Bible never infers that because he is sovereign God stands in the same way behind evil as he stands behind good, or that all human effort is irrelevant, or that fatalism is warranted. Far from it. From God's sovereignty it is inferred that grace must stand (Rom. 9), that God can be trusted even when we cannot see the way ahead (Rom. 8:28), and much more. From the fact that God made us, people often infer that God is the Father of us all, and we are all 'brothers and sisters'; doubtless in some sense that is true. Still, the fact remains that 'Father' language applied to God in the Bible is reserved for those who have entered into covenant relationship with him; under the new covenant, 'brothers' is applied to believers. If we start associating these terms with structures of thought widely at variance from their biblical usage, it will not be long before we import into Scripture things that are not there, even while we blind ourselves to things that are.

To take an example of a slightly different kind, the author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (13:8). Some zealous Christians have drawn inferences such as this: 'Jesus healed all who came to him in the days of his flesh; he is the same yesterday and today and for ever; therefore he will heal me if I come to him.' Jesus may or may not heal today, but in any case the reasoning is bad. Why not similarly say, 'Jesus walked on water in the days of his flesh; Jesus is the same yesterday, today and for ever; therefore he walks on water today'? The point is that the author of Hebrews was not uttering a principle that could be applied to every single facet of Jesus' life. The context of Heb. 13 shows to what purpose the author was putting this truth.

The distinction between interpretation and application

While approaching the Bible reverently, we must constantly distinguish responsible interpretation of Scripture from personal or corporate application. Of course, in hortatory passages the line between the two becomes thin; or, better put, it becomes easier to move from one to the other. But unless we preserve a principled distinction we are likely to succumb to many harmful interpretations.

For instance, we may so quickly pursue 'what the Bible means to me', greatly emphasizing 'to me', that we completely ignore the distance between ourselves and the text, and compromise the Bible's historical specificity and thus the nature of God's graciously given verbal revelation. Worse, the morbid person given to endless introspection will glumly focus on all the passages that establish human guilt; the triumphalistic extrovert will fasten on everything that shouts of victory; the self-seeking hedonist will find passages that speak of life and joy. It is far better for all Christians to read every part of the Scripture, think it through on its own terms, discern, so far as possible, its contribution to the whole of the canon, and then ask how such truth applies to themselves, and to the church and the society of which they are a part.

The importance of godliness

Because the Bible is God's word, it is vitally important to cultivate humility as we read, to foster a meditative prayerfulness as we reflect and study, to seek the help of the Holy Spirit as we try to understand and obey, to confess sin and pursue purity of heart and motive and

relationships as we grow in understanding. Failure in these areas may produce scholars, but not mature Christians.

Above all, we must remember that we will one day give an account to the one who says, 'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word' (Is. 66:2).

D.A. Carson

Further reading

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BIBLICAL HISTORY

Introduction

Biblical history may be defined for our purposes as the historical background to the events and ideas which we find in the Bible. This means covering a vast span from the dawn of history to the end of the NT period. For this, the Bible itself is, of course, a primary source. Yet we shall have to draw on other sources too, to supplement our knowledge of the ancient world, such as the discoveries of archaeology and written records handed down from peoples of biblical times. This is important because the Bible itself does not aim to write a history of its period as such. The biblical history books tell us much, but their authors do not tell us all that they could have done (were we able to ask them!), because their history-writing had specific religious aims.

It is important in this connection to be clear about the relationship between history and the Bible's authority. A good deal of the Bible tells of historical events, and it shows us that God is one who acts in history. To that extent, the truth of the Bible is bound up with its validity in its telling of history. It follows too that ordinary historical research is relevant to the truth-claims of the Bible. If historians could show that the major events reported in the Bible concerning God and his people were fictions, it would be hard to maintain any longer a 'biblical' doctrine of God.

On the other hand, there is a false sense in which the Bible can be put at the mercy of secular historical research. This is so because historical research is always changing, and the believing community cannot permanently await the decisions of historians. Belief and careful investigation go forward together therefore. The Bible's authority does not depend on its validation by independent research; indeed many of the most crucial things it tells us seem by their nature to be beyond the reach of such investigation. For this reason, a study of the Bible's history as defined above is an act of faith. It seeks not so much to 'prove' the Bible as to illuminate its world and its ideas and teachings, with a view to strengthening and edifying faith.

In what follows we shall try to sketch the history of the biblical period, showing at the same time how biblical religion developed.

The Old Testament period

Beginnings

The biblical story was played out in a part of the world where civilization itself began. The land which was to be occupied by God's chosen people lay at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, on a coastal route that led from Mesopotamia in the east to Egypt in the south-west. It was thus between the two areas where civilization was born. The Sumerians in Mesopotamia were organized in city-states by the fourth millennium BC and had developed agriculture, trade and writing. Egypt began to flower at about the same time. The later Sumerians and their successors the Babylonians developed sophisticated law-codes, notably that of King Hammurapi in the first half of the second millennium. International relations came to be regulated by treaties, whether between equals or between overlords and vassals. The Hittites from Anatolia (modern Turkey), who enjoyed some influence in Syria and Palestine for part of the second millennium, are noted for their treaties with subject peoples, as are the Assyrians in the early first millennium.

In all this cultural development religion played an enormous part. Religion and politics went hand in hand. The various aspects of life were held to be influenced by different gods, and kings consulted oracles and omens, controlled by priests, before embarking on any major endeavour. A fear of the gods dominated life. They must be served and could destroy, perhaps for no obvious reason. Religion was concerned with influencing these unpredictable powers by all available means.

The history first of Israel and later of the Jews and indeed the early Christian church cannot be separated from its setting in this environment. The geography of Israel made relations with the other nations quite inevitable. The land was fought over by the successive great powers of the day, and the people suffered in consequence – though they also benefited from its strategic position, as they did under Solomon. They were also part of their world in the sense of sharing many fundamental ideas and practices – the very belief in God (or gods), sacrificial worship, settled life and nomadism, treaty and war.

It is this world that is reflected in the first

chapters of the Bible (Gn. 1–11). Stories of creation and flood were important in the life and thought of ancient Israel's neighbours, and the close parallels between Genesis and the Babylonian accounts in particular are well known (see the article on Genesis). Indeed, the basic outline of early history is common to the Bible and other documents of the ancient world. It is a story of creation, followed by disruption in the relationship between God and human beings, and consequently a flood. (The two important Babylonian narratives which tell these stories are *Enuma Elish* [creation] and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* [flood].) There are some who survive the flood (Noah in the OT, Utnapishtim in *Gilgamesh*) and then a situation of competition among the nations of the world (represented in the Bible by the story of Babel in Gn. 11). The Babylonian story aims to establish the supremacy of Babylon over the whole world.

The Bible differs from the other ancient accounts in its understanding of these things. It knows one God, rather than many, and it knows that he has a purpose to redeem humanity from the ills brought upon itself by the sin of the first human beings. That purpose begins to be expressed in the covenant between God and Noah (Gn. 6:18; 9:1–17). The early history as portrayed by Genesis shows a world divided by language and race (Gn. 10 – 11) and beginning to develop its culture (Gn. 4:17–26). The culture of the world is tainted, however, by its impoverished knowledge of God. The statement in Gn. 4:26, 'At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD', merely suggests that knowledge of him was primitive. At the beginning of the story of Abraham (Gn. 12), the world's religion featured many gods.

The patriarchs

The term 'patriarchs' refers to Abraham, his son Isaac, grandson Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons, who became the ancestors of the tribes of Israel. Their story is the subject of Gn. 12 – 50. They are usually dated to the first half of the second millennium BC (2000–1500), *i.e.* roughly what archaeologists call the Middle Bronze age. More precise dating depends on how one interprets certain evidence, both archaeological and biblical (especially the date of the exodus from Egypt; see below).

Broadly speaking, however, the period coincides with certain developments in ancient Near Eastern history which we have already noticed. It was the time of the first flowering of Babylonian culture, after the decline of the Sumerians in Mesopotamia. Abraham set out from 'Ur of the Chaldeans' (Gn. 11:31), usually identified as a city in southern Mesopotamia (modern southern Iraq), and went through northern Mesopotamia to Haran, and thence down into Palestine. He thus travelled round the so-called 'fertile crescent', that well-worn, heavily populated route from Mesopotamia to Egypt, to which we have referred. Scholars have tried to see his journey in the context of population movements at the time, *e.g.* the supposed westward spread of Amorite peoples into Palestine. This has not proved satisfactory, however, nor does it help to try to cast Abraham as a 'nomad', or some kind of merchant. What we can say is that he was called to leave a place which he knew, and where he may well have been prosperous, to go to a new life in a new place in response to God's call.

Archaeology does show, however, how much the Abraham we know from the Bible was part of his contemporary world. Texts discovered at Mesopotamian sites, especially Nuzi (a fifteenth-century Hurrian city), give evidence of social customs which resemble actions and events in the Genesis stories. For example, the practice of giving additional privileges to the firstborn son (Gn. 25:5–6, 32–34), which was widespread in the ancient Near East, and Abraham's adoption of his slave Eliezer (Gn. 15:2). It should be understood, however, that this sort of evidence gives only the broadest kind of background support to the picture of the patriarchs which we have in the OT. Abraham and his large household moved freely among the peoples of the land, as his dealings with the Hittites of Hebron show (Gn. 23) – a people possibly related to those of the powerful Anatolian empire to the north. He was treated by his contemporaries as a man of standing, even a 'prince' (Gn. 23:6). On one occasion he became involved militarily in the region (Gn. 14). His residence in Canaan, however, fell short of possession of the land, and was only a foretaste of what God had planned for the people of Israel in the future.

The religion of the patriarchs differs in important respects from later Israelite religion. Abraham himself came, with Terah his father, from Mesopotamia where many gods were worshipped (Gn. 11:31; *cf.* Jos. 24:2). Genesis tells us that he encountered the living God, but clearly the biblical narrative assumes that God had more of himself to reveal to later generations, particularly in the covenant with Israel under Moses at Sinai (see below; and *cf.* Ex. 6:3).

God was known to Abraham by a number of names, common to which was the element 'El', *e.g. El Elyon*, the God served by Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (Gn. 14:18–20). 'El' was in fact the name of the chief god of the Canaanites, at least until he was superseded by

Chronological outline: Old and New Testaments

The purpose of this chart is to set contemporary events alongside each other, not to show the development of nationhood or the progress of conquest. For alternative dates for the exodus and conquest see page 234.

All dates are best taken as '*about* BC', as the possible variation can run to a century or more in 2000 BC, down to a decade by 1000 BC. Most of the dates for the Hebrew monarchies are quoted in double form, *e.g.* Asa, 911/10–870/69 BC, because the Hebrew year does not coincide with the January to December of our civil year

For other Near Eastern rulers, space and scope forbid any explanation of the vast amount of documentation and reasoning which underlie the dates given in the tables below, but from *c.* 900 BC onward, Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian dates are nearly all very closely fixed.

Prophets are indicated by *

OLD TESTAMENT

Before 2000 BC Events of Gn. 1–11

PARTIARCHS

? 2000–1825 Abraham
? 1900–1720 Issac
? 1800–1700 Jacob
? 1750–1640 Joseph

ISRAEL IN EGYPT

? 1350–1230 Moses

ISRAEL IN CANAAN

? 1300–1190 Joshua
1280 (or 1260) approx. The exodus
1240 (or 1220) approx. Crossing of Jordan
1220 (or 1200)–1050 (or 1045) Period of the Judges
? 1125 Deborah and Barak
? 1115–1075 Eli's judgeship
? 1075–1035 Samuel, judge and prophet

UNITED MONARCHY

1050 (or 1045)–1011/10 Saul
1011/10–971/70 David
971/70–931/30 Solomon

DIVIDED MONARCHY

ISRAEL	JUDAH
931/30–910/09 Jeroboam I	931/30–913 Rehoboam
910/09–909/08 Nadab	925 Sheshonq invades Palestine
909/08–836/85 Baasha	913–911/10 Abijam
	911/10–870/69 Asa
886/85–885/84 Elah	
885/84 Zimri	
885/84 Tibni	
885/84–874/72 Omri	
874/73–853 Ahab	
Elijah*	870/69–848 Jehoshaphat (co-regent from 873/72)
853–852 Ahaziah	
852–841 Joram	
	848–841 Jehoram
841–814/13 Jehu	
Elisha*	848–841 Jehoram (co-regent from 853)
814/13–798 Jehoahaz	841 Ahaziah
	841–835 Athaliah
798–782/81 Jehoash	835–796 Joash
	c. 810–750 Joel*
782/81–753 Jeroboam II (co-regent from 793/92	796–767 Amaziah

EGYPT

Middle Kingdom
2134–1991 *11th Dynasty*

1991–1786 *12th Dynasty*

New Kingdom
? 1710–1540 Hyksos rule

1552–1305 (or–1294) *18th Dynasty*

1390–1353 (or 1394–1357) Amenophis III

1361–1345 (or 1365–1349) Amenophis IV/Akhenaten

1305–1198 (or 1294–1187) *19th Dynasty*
1305–1304 (or 1294–1293) Rameses I
1304–1290 (or 1293–1279) Sethos I

1290–1224 (or 1279–1213) Rameses II
1224–1214 (or 1213–1203) Merenptah
1220 (or 1209) 'Israel stele'

1198–1069 (or 1187–1069) *20th Dynasty*
i.e. Setnakht and Rameses III–XI

Late Period
1069–945 *21st Dynasty*

Psusennes I
Amenemope
Siamun
Psusennes II

945–715 *22nd Dynasty*
945–924 Sheshonq I (Shishak)
924–889 Osorkon I

889–874 Takeloth I

874–850 Osorkon II

MESOPOTAMIA

? 1894–1595: 1st Dynasty of Babylon

? 1792–1750 Hammurapi

Kassite Dynasty
1500 Burnaburiash I

1350 Kurigalzu I
1345–1329 Kurigalzu II

ASSYRIA

1274–1245 Shalmaneser I
1244–1208 Tukulti-Ninurta I
1224–1219 Adad-Shuma-iddina

1124–1103 Nebuchadnezzar I (Babylonia)
1115–1077 Tiglath-pileser I

933 Ashur-dan II

883–859 Ashurnasirpal II
859–824 Shalmaneser III
853 Battle of Qarqar

c. 760 Amos*
c. 760 Jonah*
c. 755–722 Hosea*
753–752 Zechariah
752 Shallum
752–742/41 Menahem
742/41–740/39 Pekahiah
740/39–732/31 Pekah
732/31–723/22 Hoshea
722 Fall of Samaria

767–740/39 Azariah (Uzziah) (co-regent from 791/90)
c. 742–687 Micah*
c. 740–700 Isaiah*
740/39–732/31 Jotham (co-regent from 750)
732/31–716/15 Ahaz (co-regent from 744/43; senior partner from 735)
716/15–687/86 Hezekiah

JUDAH

687/86–642/41 Manasseh (co-regent from 696/95)
c. 664–612 Nahum*
c. 640 Zephaniah*
642/41–640/39 Amon
640/39–609 Josiah
c. 621–580 Jeremiah*
609 Jehoahaz
609–597 Jehoiakim
605 Battle of Carchemish (Daniel and his friends are taken to Babylon)
c. 605 Habakkuk*
597 Jehoiachin
597 2 Adar (15/16 March) Jerusalem taken by Nebuchadnezzar II. Many Jews exiled including Jehoiachin and Ezekiel
597–587 Zedekiah
c. Obadiah*
587 Fall of Jerusalem. More Jews into exile

THE RETURNED EXILES

538 Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar and others return to Jerusalem
537 Rebuilding of the temple begun
c. 520 Haggai*
c. 520 Zechariah*
520 Temple-building resumed
516 Temple completed 3 Adar (10 March)
c. 460 Malachi*
458 Ezra goes to Jerusalem
445–433 Nehemiah at Jerusalem

Persian rule until 332

Alexander the Great 332–323

Egyptian rule 320–198

Syrian rule 198–63

EGYPT

767–730 Sheshonq V
730–715 Osorkon IV
716–664 *25th Dynasty*
716–702 Shabako ('Shabaka')
702–690 Shebitku ('Shabataka')
690–664 Taharqa ('Tirhakah')
664–525 *26th Dynasty*
664–656 Tanwetamani ('Tanutamen')
664–610 Psammeticus I
610–595 Neco II
595–589 Psammetichus II
589–570 Apries (Hophra)
570–526 Amasis (Ahmose II)
526–525 Psammetichus III

HELLENISTIC PERIOD

323/05–282 Ptolemy I Soter
320 Judea annexed by Ptolemy I
285/82–245 Ptolemy II Philadelphus
246–222 Ptolemy III Euergetes
222–205 Ptolemy IV Philopator
204–180 Ptomely V Epiphanes

ASSYRIA

745–727 Tiglath-pileser III
732 Fall of Damascus
727–722 Shalmaneser V
722–705 Sargon II
705–681 Sennacherib
681–669 Esarhaddon
669–627 Ashurbanipal
612 Fall of Nineveh
609–08 End of Assyria

BABYLON

626–605 Nabopolassar
605–562 Nebuchadnezzar II
c. 604–535 Daniel*
595–570 Ration-tablets of Jehoiachin at Babylon, 10th–35th years of Nebuchadnezzar II
c. 593–570 Ezekiel*
562–560 Amēl-Marduk (Evil-merodach)
562 Captive Jehoiachin favoured by Amēl-Marduk
560–556 Neriglissar
556 Labashi-Marduk
556–539 Nabonidus (Belshazzar usually acting in Babylon)
539 Fall of Babylon

PERSIAN EMPIRE

539–530 Cyrus
530–522 Cambyses
522–486 Darius I
486–465/64 Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)
464–423 Artaxerxes I
423–404 Darius II Nothus
404–359 Artaxerxes II Mnemon
359/58–338/37 Artaxerxes III Ochus
338/37–336/35 Arses
336/35–331 Darius III Codomanus
331–323 Alexander of Macedon

SYRIA

312–281 Seleucus I Nicator
281–261 Antiochus I Soter
261–246 Antiochus II Theos
246–226/25 Seleucus II
226/25 223 Seleucus III Soter
223–187 Antiochus III the Great
187–175 Seleucus IV

JUDEA		SYRIA
167 Mattathias inspires revolt at Modin 167–40 Maccabees/Hasmonaeans in Judea 166–161 Judas Maccabaeus 160–143 Jonathan Maccabaeus 150 BC–AD 70 General period of the Dead Sea Scrolls 143–135 Simon Maccabaeus 135–104 John Hyrcanus I 104/03 Aristobulus I 103–76 Alexander Jannaeus		175–163 Antiochus IV Epiphanes 163–162 Antiochus V 162–150 Demetrius I 139/8–129 Antiochus VII Sidetes
76–67 Queen Salome Alexandra and Hyrcanus II 67–40 Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II 63 Pompey establishes Roman protectorate		
40–4 Herod the Great, king of Judea	THE LIFE OF CHRIST AND THE APOSTOLIC AGE	ROME
4 BC–AD 6 Archelaus, ethnarch of Judea 4 BC–AD 39 Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee 4 BC–AD 34 Herod Philip, tetrarch of Ituraea 26–36 Pontius Pilate, Roman procurator	? 8/7 BC Birth of John the Baptist* Birth of Jesus ? 29 Baptism of Jesus Death of John the Baptist 30 (Passover) Jesus in Jerusalem (Jn.2:13)	27 BC–AD 14 Caesar Augustus 14–37 Tiberius
	30/31 (Dec./Jan.) Jesus in Samaria (Jn. 4:35) 31 Feast of Tabernacles) Jesus in Jerusalem (Jn. 5:1) 32 (Passover) Feeding of 5,000 (Jn.6:4) (Feast of Tabernacles) Jesus in Jerusalem (Jn.7:2) (Feast of Dedication) Jesus in Jerusalem (Jn. 10:22) 33 (Passover) Crucifixion and Resurrection, Pentecost 34 or 35 Paul's conversion	
41–44 Herod Agrippa I, king of Judea	37 or 38 Paul's first visit to Jerusalem 46–47 First missionary journey 48 Apostolic Council in Jerusalem	37–41 Caligula
50– *c.* 93 Herod Agrippa II, tetrarch of Northern Territory *c.* 52–*c.* 60 Felix, Roman procurator	48–51 Second missionary journey 50 Paul reaches Corinth 53 Third missionary journey begins 54–57 Paul's stay in Ephesus	41–54 Claudius
	57 Departure for Troas 58 Meeting with Titus in Europe 58–59 Paul in Macedonia and Achaia (and Illyria?) 59 Paul returns to Jerusalem	54–68 Nero
c. 60–62 Festus, Roman procurator	59–61 Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea 61 Appeal to Caesar and departure for Rome 62 Arrival at Rome 62–64 Imprisonment at Rome ? 62 Martyrdom of James, the Lord's brother	
	66 Jewish revolt 70 Fall of Jerusalem to Titus 74 Fall of Zealots at Masada 81–96 Persecutions under Domitian *c.* Death of John	68–69 Galba 69 Otho Vitellius 69–79 Vespasian 79–81 Titus 81–96 Domitian 96–98 Nerva 98–117 Trajan

Baal after the middle of the second millennium. A number of scholars have thought, for this reason, that the patriarchs worshipped that Canaanite god. The narratives make it plain, however, that even at this early stage the character of the biblical God was beginning to be marked off from that of other gods. The story of the 'sacrifice' of Isaac (Gn. 22) may be a rejection of the practice of child-sacrifice found in some Canaanite worship. There was not yet, however, that active hostility to Canaanite religion which we find later in Deuteronomy and then in the prophets. This may be because Baal had not yet come to pre-eminence in Canaanite religion, and that it is Baal worship that the OT finds most abominable.

The stories in Genesis show the patriarchs beginning to know this God who revealed himself to them in a personal relationship. This was expressed first in the promise made to Abraham and repeated to Isaac and Jacob (Gn. 12:1–3; 15:5; 26:3–5; 28:13–15) that their descendants would be a great nation and would live in the land of Canaan. The relationship took the shape of a covenant (Gn. 15:18; 17:2) and therefore paved the way for the future history of Israel, foreshadowing the life of Israel in Canaan. It was a new stage in the development of the covenant with Noah and would itself be further developed under Moses.

Abraham was the mediator of the covenant which God made with him and his household. As such, he needed no priest to make sacrifices on his behalf; he led the worship of his household himself, including sacrifice, tithing and prayer. This too was a function of this stage in the development of the story of God's people.

The patriarchs worshipped at a number of places throughout the land, setting up their own altars, *e.g.* at Mamre (Gn. 13:18) and Bethel (Gn. 35:6–7). That they set up their own altars distinguished them again from their neighbours; however, there was not yet the insistence on worship at a particular place, as there would be later with the Jerusalem temple. The absence of Jerusalem from the narratives (apart from its probable appearance in the form of Salem in Gn. 14) is an important argument for the antiquity of the patriarchal narratives. Jerusalem was not yet there.

The patriarchal period stretches from God's call to Abraham through the generations of Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's sons to the flight of Jacob's whole family into Egypt. From Egypt they would in due course emerge as a whole people into the land of Canaan. During this time, the foundations for Israel's later history were laid, and these would emerge more fully under its greatest leader, Moses.

Exodus and Sinai

As we have seen in our discussion of the patriarchal period, both relatively early and relatively late dates have been suggested for it (see chart on p. 234). Correspondingly, alternative early and late chronologies have been proposed for the time of Joseph and for the exodus, *e.g.* the nineteenth century BC and the later 'Hyksos' period (1700–1580), when the country was taken over by Semite peoples, who adopted the existing machinery of state and whose kings became Pharaohs. The latter dating would make the appointment of the Semite Joseph highly plausible but it cannot be certain.

The change in Israel's fortunes in Egypt is well known. The privileges of the land of Goshen were exchanged for the harsh life of slavery and the rebuilding of the store-cities of Pithom and Rameses (Ex. 1:8–11). In the biblical narrative this is the essential character of the period in Egypt, remembered ever after as the time of slavery (Dt. 4:20; 15:15). The suffering and terror of it is preserved in details of the early chapters of Exodus, *e.g.* the decree against Hebrew male children (Ex. 1:22) and the bitterness of the oppressed class which threatened even 'Prince' Moses (Ex. 2:14–15). The courage of the Hebrew midwives in this context (Ex. 1:15–21) is noteworthy, and shows incidentally a certain Hebrew penetration of Egyptian society (since they apparently attended Egyptian births as well as Hebrew); this may also be suggested by Ex. 12:35–36.

The large size of the Hebrew community in Egypt was one of the causes of the conflict between Pharaoh and the people in Exodus (Ex. 1:12). How large it became is not easy to determine. Several references point to a population of over 600,000 adult males (Ex. 38:26; Nu. 1:46; 26:51), but this is widely held to be impossibly large, and commentators seek ways of understanding the terms used other than at their face value. G. J. Wenham, in his discussion of the problem (*Numbers*, TOTC [IVP, 1981], pp. 60–66), leans towards an interpretation of the numbers in terms of astronomical symbolism. The point of the symbolism was that the promise to Abraham (Gn. 15:5) had been fulfilled; Israel was now indeed as numerous as the stars in heaven.

It is in this context that Moses was called to lead the people out of slavery into the land which God would give them (in fulfilment of part of the promise to Abraham). The call of Moses marked a crucial point in the relationship between God and the people he had chosen, for it was now that he made himself more fully known by revealing his personal name Yahweh (Ex. 3:14–15; 6:3). This was an important prelude to the covenant which was soon to be made at Sinai.

This was followed by Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh, the plagues on Egypt (sometimes seen as natural phenomena, though such a view does not contradict the sovereignty of God in the events), the Passover and the people's mass departure, known as the exodus. This culminated in the crossing of the Reed Sea, presumably a body of water in the Delta region (Ex. 7 – 15). The date of the exodus is to be put either in the reign of Thutmosis III (on the earlier chronology) or in that of Rameses II (on the later one). The people proceeded, under Moses' leadership, to Sinai (Ex. 16 – 18).

For the religion of the Bible, the exodus and the meeting with God at Sinai (sometimes also called Horeb; Ex. 3:1, and almost always in Deuteronomy) are extremely important. The exodus is always seen as the great and typical divine act of deliverance (Dt. 4:20; Ps. 106:6–12; Is. 43:16–17). And the Sinai encounter brought to a climax the story of covenant which had been introduced in Genesis. The basic narrative of the covenant-making is in Ex. 19 – 24, where the tribes gathered at Mt Sinai, and God descended before them on to the mountain. They formally entered into a relationship with him, in which he pointed to his past acts on their behalf and affirmed his commitment to them (Ex. 19:4–6), and they in turn affirmed their willingness to abide by the terms of the covenant (Ex. 19:8; 24:3, 7). Those terms are expressed fundamentally in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2–17) and then in a set of more detailed laws which follow (Ex. 21:1 – 23:33).

The Sinai covenant is set out again, more fully, in the book of Deuteronomy. (For the relationship between the various parts of the Pentateuch, see the article on the Pentateuch.) To be precise, the covenant in Deuteronomy was a renewal of the Sinai covenant which took place on the plains of Moab, just before the people entered the land of Canaan (Dt. 29:1). Here, however, the elements of the covenant appear most clearly (see the Introduction to the article on Deuteronomy), rehearsing the previous relations between God and Israel, setting out the terms of the future relationship, and solemnly recording the consequences of both covenant-keeping and covenant-breaking. As has often been pointed out, the structure of the covenant in Deuteronomy corresponds remarkably to that of many ancient Near Eastern treaties and is closest to the Hittite vassal-treaties of the second millennium. This point has often been used to argue for the authenticity of a second-millennium date for Deuteronomy.

More importantly, however, the idea of the covenant tells us much about the character of early Israel. It is important that the people had been released from slavery to a despotic tyranny to enter a relationship with God in which he, and not any earthly tyrant, was king. This is the point of the chief document of the Sinai covenant (Deuteronomy) being structured like a vassal-treaty – the aim of which was always to assert the rights of an overlord. God's kingship of Israel is explicitly stressed, furthermore, in Dt. 33:5. It was thus a freed people, subject only to God, which prepared to enter Canaan. This was a new factor on the historical map of the time.

Between the accounts of the covenant in Exodus and Deuteronomy comes the pentateuchal story of the wilderness wanderings and the people's long stay at Kadesh-barnea (Nu. 20:1). It was after this period that Israel stood on the borders of the land and heard the speeches of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy. (See the article on the Pentateuch and map on p. 104.)

Settlement in Canaan

The story of Israel's settlement in Canaan is told in the books of Joshua and Judges. It is presented as a conquest, which from one point of view can be described as quick and complete (Jos. 11:23; 21:45). On more careful inspection, however, it is clear that the biblical narrative knows that it was in fact long and difficult (Jos. 9; 11:22; 13:1; 15:63; 17:12–13; 19:47; Jdg. 1). The picture of complete conquest is by way of an assertion of the inevitable fulfilment of God's promises; yet this did not finally happen until the time of David (2 Sa. 7:1). In reality, therefore, Israel's initial occupation of the land was only partial, and for centuries the Israelites remained as merely one element of the population of the land.

Extra-biblical documents throw some shafts of light on Israel's earliest days in Canaan, *e.g.* the so-called Amarna letters. These were found at Amarna, the Egyptian capital from approximately 1385–1360 BC. The letters consist of complaints by local rulers in Canaan about various disturbances and may testify to a weakening of Egyptian control there at the time. There are references in the letters to a group known as the 'Apiru, who at one time were thought possibly to equate with the Hebrews. If this were the case, the letters would thus have furnished evidence of Israel's presence in the land in the early fourteenth century. This equation is not now usually made. However, the general picture given by the Amarna letters is not inconsistent with the Israelites being in Canaan at that time.

More evidence is provided by the Merenptah stele. This was erected by Pharaoh Merenptah following a campaign in Canaan, and it names peoples whom he subdued there, including

'Israel'. The date of the stele is 1207 BC, which shows that Israel was in the land at least as early as the Late Bronze age.

The significance of archaeological data like these is debated. Scholars vary widely on both the manner and date of Israel's arrival in the land, some even giving little credence to the idea of a 'conquest' at all.

The conquest of Canaan by the Israelites is usually dated in either the fifteenth or the thirteenth century BC. (This in turn has a knock-on effect on how one dates the patriarchs, as we have noted above.) The debate turns on the interpretation of both biblical and archaeological evidence. The OT actually provides dates for the period from the exodus to the building of King Solomon's temple (1 Ki. 6:1). As the latter event can be dated to 966 BC, this gives a date for the exodus of 1446. On the face of it, then, the OT favours the earlier date. However, it is common to suppose that the biblical chronology here (which corresponds with the aggregated figures in the book of Judges) is schematic, and that the forty-year periods of Judges may be partly concurrent, as happens sometimes in Egyptian and Mesopotamian records. The data in 1 Ki. 6:1 (*cf.* also Gn. 15:13; Ex. 12:40), therefore, cannot be decisive on their own.

Archaeology testifies to the destruction of certain cities in Canaan in the thirteenth century BC, including some which Joshua is said to have taken during his conquest (Bethel, Hazor, Debir, Lachish). This has led a number of scholars to conclude that the thirteenth or early twelfth century is the best period in which to date Joshua and the conquest. The problem with this view is that there is no such evidence in the case of other cities which Joshua took; and indeed in the famous case of Jericho, it seems not even to have been inhabited during the period in question. It is possible to account for this uneven evidence by recalling that archaeology can never provide a complete picture. Against this background it has been argued that the archaeological data fit better with the more traditional date of the exodus, *i.e.* the fifteenth century. And there is some evidence that all the cities subdued by Joshua for which archaeological data are available underwent a destruction in the late fifteenth century (see p. 234).

The tribal league

As we saw in describing Israel's entry to the land, the people lived there for some time alongside other peoples. The command to drive these other inhabitants out (Dt. 7:2) was initially only partly carried out, a failure which is portrayed in the biblical narrative as a lack of faith and obedience (Jdg. 2:2–3). Far from occupying the whole promised land, the Israelites were confined to the hill country running north to south, which is the 'spine' of the land (see Jdg. 1:34). The more fertile lowland, especially the coastal strip, was held by Canaanite peoples, of whom the Philistines in the south-west are the best known. Samson's skirmishes with the Philistines took place in territory that lies between the plain and the hill country proper (the Shephelah, or low hills). The stories about him (Jdg. 13 – 16) typify well the condition of the tribes for much of this period.

The organisation of Israel during this period is now generally described as a 'tribal league', a term which indicates a somewhat loose confederation of more or less independent groups. (See map on p. 230.) Israel was not yet the centralized state that it would become under David, and especially under Solomon. The best picture of its true character at this time comes from Jdg. 5, the so-called Song of Deborah, which celebrates the victory of Israel over the army of the king of Hazor, led by Sisera. It names a number of the tribes which had come together to meet the threat to the nation posed by this king. At the same time it castigates those which had not joined battle (Jdg. 5:17; notice how some regional names are used alongside tribal names here). It is the assumption that is telling, namely that the tribes, though generally independent, should come together in time of threat to the common interest. Judges, in fact, were 'deliverers'; this is both the natural meaning of the Hebrew word and the implication of the narratives.

How long this state of affairs continued depends on the view that is taken of the date of the exodus, *i.e.* it is either something over four hundred years (counting from the mid-fifteenth century to the accession of King David in about 1010 BC) or around two hundred (assuming a thirteenth-century exodus). The book of Judges itself does not easily resolve this issue. A straightforward reading gives the longer chronology, by adding up the periods for which 'judges' are said to have judged (*e.g.* Jdg. 3:11). In the view of some scholars, however, there may be some overlapping of these periods. However, we have noticed above the possibility that Israel was already in the land in the Amarna period (early fourteenth century BC). The war with Hazor (Jdg. 5) conforms, in general terms, to the picture given by the Amarna letters.

It is important to notice two things about Israel in this period – first its 'decentralization' and secondly its unity. The tribal nature of Israel is important in itself. It set it apart from other peoples, which had kings. Indeed, from time to time, Israelites felt the lack of a king, and there was pressure for change in this direction.

Thus Gideon had to decline an offer to make him king (Jdg. 8:23), and his son Abimelech tried to become one (Jdg. 9). Both Gideon's refusal of the kingship and Jotham's fable (Jdg. 9:7–15) testify to a strong belief in Israel that kingship on the model of the other nations was wrong for Israel; it offended against the principle of God's own kingship over his chosen people.

Israel's complex structure of family and tribe, with legal institutions located at those levels, was designed to promote the life and freedom of all God's people in their land (Ex. 18:24–27). Israel's possession of the land was tied to her covenant with God. It was not absolute possession; the land belonged to God (Lv. 25:23). Israel enjoyed it as an 'inheritance' (Dt. 4:21). The structure of Israel, furthermore, was designed to preserve and actualize this relationship between God, land and people.

The lowest level of organization within the tribe was the 'father's house', which was a kind of extended family and the basic economic unit. It was at this level that the land was 'owned' and cultivated. At the next level was the clan, a cluster of 'father's houses', which was both a kinship group and a territorial unit. As such, it was responsible for the protection of the land on behalf of its members. In every sphere of life – administration, warfare, marriage and inheritance – the clan was the effective context. (An example is the ruling given regarding the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad; Nu. 27:1–11; 36).

The social structure of Israel was thus based on the theology of covenant. In this decentralized society, no-one was king but Yahweh, the God of Israel. The method of land-holding enabled the covenantal ideas of brotherhood, the participation of every Israelite in the covenant, to be expressed. The institutions of debt-release, slave-release and jubilee (Lv. 25; Dt. 15:1–19) were designed to preserve equity in land use and thus enjoyment of covenant blessings. Proper land possession was a duty to God and to the next generation of the clan and family. It was for this reason that Naboth refused to sell his property to Ahab, and that Ahab's act in taking it by force was so reprehensible (1 Ki. 21:1–16).

An understanding of these ideas is important to an understanding of ancient Israel. Arguably, these features are what made Israel (or might have made it) most truly itself, and its relinquishment of some of them is important background to the heavy criticism of the prophets during the period of the monarchy. It was clear already in the time of the judges, of course, that Israel was not living up to its covenantal calling to be thoroughly different from the nations around. How far the jubilee, for example (Lv. 25), was ever practised in Israel is unknown. The same is true of the institutions of debt-release and slave-release.

Despite this decentralization, Israel was nevertheless a recognizable, coherent people. One aspect of this, as we have seen, was the need to unite for defence (Jdg. 5). At least as important, however, was unity at worship. The tribes had come together from Egypt, having made a covenant with God. The great symbol of this was the ark of the covenant, which now became the focus of Israel's worship life. The ark appears to have been stationed at different places during the period of the judges (including Bethel [Jdg. 20:26–27] and Shiloh [1 Sa. 3:3]). Shiloh, however, seems to have been for some time the recognized central place of worship of all Israel (Jos. 22:19, 29; 1 Sa. 1 – 3; *cf.* Je. 7:12). Israel's character as a confederation of tribes, therefore, was essentially religious. Their unity consisted in the fact that together they had entered into a covenant with God.

Like the basic social structure, the unity of Israel could also creak. The story of the transjordanian tribes' own altar (Jos. 22) betrays a certain tendency towards internal division as does the civil war between Benjamin and the other tribes recorded in Jdg. 20. Some of these divisions asserted themselves under the kings of Israel.

The kings of Israel and Judah: Saul, David and Solomon

The next stage in Israel's history after the judges was that of the kings. This period lasted from around 1050 BC, the accession of King Saul, to 586, when the kingdom of Judah was subdued by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and its people taken into exile. It contained both the most brilliant successes of Israel and its worst humiliations.

We have seen that there was a certain tendency in Israel to seek the apparently secure unity which a king provided. During the time of Samuel this tendency came to a head. At this time, Israel was at a low ebb both religiously and in its fortunes. The stories of Eli and his sons typify the poor religious conditions (1 Sa. 2:12 – 4:22); and the Philistines were harassing the people (1 Sa. 4 – 6). The demand for a king came to Samuel against this background (1 Sa. 8:5–7).

Samuel was a gigantic figure in Israel's history. He combined the features of judge, prophet and priest. As judge he led the people in battle against the Philistines (1 Sa. 7); in the same context he was found performing priestly duties (1 Sa. 7:10; *cf.* 1 Sa. 10:8). And in his confrontation with Israel over the issue of kingship

he was like a prophet (1 Sa. 8:10; 12:20–25). There is a hint, however, that his own exercise of the judgeship was not perfect, since against custom he made his own sons judges, and they proved to be unworthy and unpopular (1 Sa. 8:1–3).

Samuel, then, is a paradoxical figure, who in a sense testified to the degeneration of the system of judgeship as a way of leading Israel. Nevertheless, it is significant that the request for a king is presented as a rejection of God as the true king in Israel (1 Sa. 8:7). We have seen that Israel's tribal and clan structure was in harmony with the basic covenantal principles. The request for a king, with its inevitable ultimate consequence in a centralized state machinery, presented a challenge to the covenant and the character of Israel itself. Samuel's response to the request is probably an indication of a struggle within Israel over this issue. Despite the challenge to the covenant, Saul's acceptance by God was confirmed in a ceremony which was designed to draw the kingship into the existing covenantal scheme of things (1 Sa. 11:14).

Saul was in some ways like a judge, in that he led Israel chiefly on the battlefield (1 Sa. 14:47–48). His rule did not become dynastic, in that he was never succeeded by a son. Nor did he develop a machinery of state.

Saul's Israel did not greatly exceed the dimensions of that of the period of the judges; even at the height of his power, the people were still confined to the hill country, and there too there were important Canaanite enclaves in Jerusalem and Beth Shan. In the latter case, archaeology suggests Philistine occupation, perhaps under Egyptian control, in Saul's time, and this is the background to the story of the humiliation of Saul's body in 1 Sa. 31:8–13.

Not only could Saul not take the whole land, his tenure of the throne was always threatened by the popularity of David (1 Sa. 18:7). And the rivalry between David and Saul (which was fostered by Saul's adherents even after that king's death; 2 Sa. 3:1) probably also reflected internal divisions within Israel, such as we have already seen in the time of the judges (Saul was a Benjaminite and David a man of Judah).

When Saul lay dead on Mt Gilboa, finally defeated by the Philistines, Israel's position looked parlous. Yet its reversal was swift and dramatic. What Saul failed to do, David achieved brilliantly. With Egypt in decline and no other great power as yet in the ascendant in the region, the time was right for a general of genius to create a mini-empire in Palestine. David's achievement was twofold. First, he united Israel, even if a certain discontent smouldered among the supporters of Saul. The masterstroke in this regard was the taking of Jerusalem (2 Sa. 5:6–10). Archaeology has discovered certain expansions which he made to the Jebusite city. Now David could move his capital from Hebron, deep in the heart of Judah, to a position in the border country between Judah and Benjamin and hope to control Israelites north and south the more easily. With Jerusalem fulfilling this role, David effectively began to make Israel a 'state', with a developed machinery of government (2 Sa. 8:15–18). The full development of this is usually attributed to Solomon.

Secondly, David subdued the enemies of Israel on all sides, not only the Philistines to the west, but also the nations of Ammon, Moab and Edom to the east, and substantial territory in Syria to the north (2 Sa. 8, 10, 12:26–31). Under David, and Solomon after him, Israel reached its fullest territorial extent and occupied the borders which define the 'promised land' in Dt. 11:24. David's achievement was regarded as the fulfilment of the covenantal promise to Israel of 'rest' (2 Sa. 7:1; *cf.* Dt. 12:9). In God's promise that David would be the father of a great dynasty (2 Sa. 7:8–17) the history of Israel and of her covenant with God entered a decisive new phase.

David ruled in Israel from 1010 to 970 BC and was succeeded by Solomon, who reigned for a further forty-year period, to 930. Solomon enjoyed the fruits of David's victories. His time was one of peace and dominance in the area. His wealth came from tribute paid by subject nations, from trade and from taxes levied from trade. For the only time in its history, Israel benefited from its position on trade routes, because it was strong enough politically to do so. The visit of the Queen of Sheba (in Arabia) and her admiration of Solomon's remarkable wealth should be seen in the context of Solomon's commercial links with Mediterranean lands to the west and with the exotic south (1 Ki. 9:26 – 10:29). It was Solomon who could afford to build the phenomenally rich temple which his father could only dream of. (Chronicles tells us that David gave detailed plans for the temple to his son and made provision for its building; 1 Ch. 28:11 – 29:9.) His wealth was reflected too in extensive building activity throughout the land. In this regard, archaeology is more eloquent about Solomon's time than David's. Fortifications and storehouses at a range of sites (Megiddo, Gezer, Hazor, Beth-Shemesh, Lachish) are dated to his age.

The building of the temple was obviously one of the key points in Israel's history. It was regarded as such by the author of Kings, who described it at length (1 Ki. 5 – 8) and who seems to have seen it as a culmination, in some sense, of Israel's history in the land since the exodus (1 Ki. 6:1). The Chronicler too gives

prominence to it (2 Ch. 2 – 7). Apart from a break in the sixth century BC, a temple would stand in Jerusalem for more than a thousand years.

The permanence of both the location of the place of worship for Yahweh, and the type of building, was a major departure for Israel, and could be seen to compromise God's freedom (2 Sa. 7:5–7). Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple showed awareness of this and contained a response (1 Ki. 8:27). But a change came over Israel with this event. The passing of the tribal society was signalled not only by the accession of a king, but also by the focusing of worship in his capital. David had brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (2 Sa. 6). Solomon enshrined it there in a temple whose splendour was inseparable from his own name. Although Yahweh had allowed and superintended all of this, Israel now outwardly resembled her Canaanite neighbours much more than in the pre-state period.

With the temple came music. Though the book of Psalms was finally the product of a later period, many individual Psalms date from the monarchy, and many indeed are attributed to David himself. So too is the institution of worship, including arrangements for music (1 Ch. 25). A permanent organization of worship was required as soon as a permanent place of worship was established, and David's organization of it at Jerusalem has certain parallels in the second-millennium BC Canaanite city-state of Ugarit.

Solomon's age, finally, is often regarded as one of 'enlightenment'. This is mainly connected with his famous 'wisdom', well-known from the book of Proverbs (Pr. 1:1), in which he is said to have surpassed all the wise men of the east, and for which he was noted among the nations (1 Ki. 4:29–34). The interesting thing here is wisdom's international character. Many of the biblical Proverbs, for example, have close parallels in the literature of other peoples (see the Commentary on Proverbs). Indeed, Proverbs, with Job and Ecclesiastes, represents a stream of thought in the OT which sits broadly within the intellectual tradition of the ancient world – though in Israel the wisdom of the 'east' is certainly subordinated to the worship of the God of the covenant (Pr. 1:7). Solomon is thus often credited with an openness to culture and learning, and indeed, the royal court required a learned caste in Israel for administration and diplomacy.

It would not be true to say, however, that Solomon was the founder of education in Israel. It is clear that there was a popular wisdom tradition in the country before his time (2 Sa. 14:2; 20:18), with 'the wise' regarded as a third grouping among the leaders in Israel alongside prophets and priests (Je. 18:18). Furthermore, the ancient worship life of Israel had always put a premium on the teaching and learning of the Mosaic covenant (Dt. 31:9–13).

If Solomon marked Israel's zenith as a nation, he also marked a turning-point that was more sombre. His centralization of institutions posed a profound threat to Israel's way of life, which, as we have seen, was suited to the maintenance of the covenant. Samuel had warned that a king would deprive ordinary Israelites of their birthright of freedom (1 Sa. 8:8–17); the author of Kings makes it clear that Solomon did not actually enslave his own people, yet shows that they were indeed drawn into the service of the vast royal household (1 Ki. 20 – 22). Solomon's magnificent life-style, and especially his trade in horses with Egypt, sits in some conflict with Deuteronomy's ideal of a king (1 Ki. 10:26–29; *cf.* Dt. 17:14–17).

The author of Kings goes further and tells of Solomon's slide into outright apostasy. His enormous harem, and especially his marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, were condemned (1 Ki. 11:1–2); and these marriages were directly related to his institution of the worship of foreign gods in Jerusalem itself (1 Ki. 11:4–8; *cf.* 3:1; 9:24). Solomon's apostasy rapidly jeopardized all that his father David had gained (1 Ki. 11:14, 23). His worship of other gods struck a note which would become all too characteristic of his successors in Jerusalem.

The kings of Israel and Judah: from Rehoboam to the exile

Immediately after Solomon, the kingdom was split into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah). Jeroboam, the servant of Solomon (1 Ki. 11:26) who became Jeroboam I of Israel, was given 'ten tribes', and only one, Judah, was left to Solomon's son Rehoboam (1 Ki. 11:30–32). Behind the reduction of the original twelve tribes to eleven lies a complicated historical situation. Judah had by this stage absorbed the tribe of Simeon. Levi is not counted because it had no territory. On the other hand, Joseph had early become in effect two tribes in the north, Ephraim and Manasseh. Benjamin was probably divided in its loyalties; part belonging to Judah and part to the north, though it is actually accounted to Judah in 1 Ki. 12:21. All this is hard to match to the figures in 1 Ki. 11:31–32. The 'twelveness' of Israel in Ahijah's prophetic sign, therefore, may have something ideal about it. In any case, the division of Israel into two rather unequal parts quickly became a reality after Solomon, and would never be reversed.

This was partly because of the internal

tensions which we have already seen in Israel, going back to the time of the judges, and partly because of the huge changes in Israel which the powerful centralized monarchy had brought about. Jeroboam's question to his fellow-countrymen: 'What share have we in David?' (1 Ki. 12:16) was based on the older idea of a decentralized Israel and played too on northern hostility to rule from Judah. Because the king in Jerusalem (now Rehoboam) controlled the temple, a powerful symbol linking Israelites to their past, Jeroboam had to set up his own places of worship at Bethel and Dan (1 Ki. 12:26–29). These in their own way harked back to Israel's past, Bethel in particular being associated with the patriarchs (Gn. 28:17; 31:13).

The legacy of Solomon's rule, which was in the end the opposite of 'wise', was that the once powerful kingdom was transformed into two relatively weak and insignificant ones. Israel and Judah now took their place alongside other minor powers of the day, such as Syria, and their story is one of fluctuating fortunes in relation to these. Israel and Syria were often at war (1 Ki. 20), as were the two parts of the former united kingdom (1 Ki. 15:32), though they could on occasion make common cause (1 Ki. 22; 2 Ki. 3). Rehoboam very soon felt his new vulnerability, when his land was invaded by the Pharaoh Shishak (Sheshonq I; 1 Ki. 14:25–28). There is independent historical support for this event in the form of an inscription found at Megiddo bearing the Pharaoh's name and a relief in the temple of Amun at Thebes, naming Palestinian towns.

The northern kingdom, however, was able for a time to continue to exert control over some of its neighbours, such as Moab. King Omri, the greater father of the better known Ahab, founded the only real dynasty that the northern kingdom would know, and made his capital at Samaria. His relative power early in the ninth century BC is attested by the famous Moabite Stone, an inscription left by Mesha, king of Moab, in which he recalls Omri's subjugation of his country. Mesha went on, however, to celebrate his revolt against Ahab's son Jehoram later in the same century, a story also told in 2 Ki. 3:4–5. Jehoram's consequent war against Moab (2 Ki. 3), in which he was helped by Jehoshaphat of Judah, was successful only to an extent, and seems to have been overshadowed by moral failure. The ninth century, therefore, was one of contrasting fortunes.

The following century began with a long spell of peace and prosperity for both kingdoms, under Jeroboam II in the north (793–753 BC) and Uzziah (or Azariah) in the south (791–740 BC). Jeroboam was able to retake territory which had formerly been lost, because of the relative weakness of Syria, and incidentally in fulfilment of the prophecy of Jonah in 2 Ki. 14:25.

The period was, however, a calm before a storm. For in the latter half of the century, the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III began conquests in the region which would culminate in a great Assyrian Empire, lasting well into the next century. Samaria fell to King Shalameser V in 722, and the northern kingdom disappeared from history, its people exiled to other parts of the empire, never to return (2 Ki. 17:3–6, 24–28). A later expedition, by King Sennacherib in 701 BC, laid waste much of Judah (2 Ki. 18:13). Excavations at Lachish, together with reliefs found in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh have yielded evidence of the siege and capture of that important outpost on Judah's southern borders. Only Jerusalem held out against Sennacherib, because of a miraculous deliverance (2 Ki. 19:35–37). Sennacherib's own annals have a version of this story, in which he boasts that he 'shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage'. This, in a curious way, lends credence to the biblical account, since it obviously makes the best of the fact that Sennacherib could only besiege the city and not take it. Nevertheless, Judah would henceforth be no more than a vassal state. When Assyria fell to the new power in the region, Babylon, in 612 BC, the writing was on the wall for Judah, whose exile followed in 586.

The monarchy period is presented in both Kings and Chronicles as one of great failure. Jeroboam's secession from Jerusalem is seen as essentially idolatrous, a rejection of the covenant with Yahweh and the fountainhead of the persistent sins of the kings of the north (1 Ki. 12:28–33; *cf.* 16:26). Chronicles even omits the history of the northern kingdom as such, thus indicating that it had no legitimacy as a kingdom.

The kings of Israel and Judah: religion

The religious story of the period turns on worship and idolatry. Solomon's building of the temple was no guarantee of right worship, and it is clear that Israelites, both north and south, felt the pressure from the environment to turn to gods other than Yahweh. This was not new in the monarchy period (*cf.* Jdg. 8:27); nevertheless, the influence of other nations' religion now became strong. Under Ahab Baal religion enjoyed official status because of the king's Phoenician wife, Jezebel, who came to Samaria with her retinue of prophets (1 Ki. 18:19). The prophet Elijah had to oppose this institutionalized Baal worship at the risk of his life (1 Ki. 18; 19:1–3).

Elijah's victory at Carmel was evidently

short-lived, for a century later the prophet Hosea took up the theme of a people that had been unfaithful to its God. His prophecy exposed the adherence of Israelites to Canaanite fertility religion, with its many gods and its sexual rituals. It is clear from both Hosea and Amos that Israelites were worshipping at a variety of sanctuaries. They mention explicitly Bethel, Gilgal (Ho. 4:15; Am. 4:4) and Beersheba (Am. 5:5), which suggests that these were the most influential. There were many others, however. Archaeology has uncovered good examples of stone altars at Megiddo and Beersheba. These resemble the altar of burnt offering prescribed for Israel in that they possess 'horns' at the top corners (Ex. 27:2). However, they are made of cut stone, and were thus of a sort prohibited to Israel (Ex. 20:24–25). Altars like these were no doubt used in the corrupt cult criticized by Amos. Statuettes of the goddess Astarte found at Mizpah and dating from this period are among many other artefacts which confirm the truth of Hosea's criticism of his people.

Israel's idolatries did not stop there, nor were they confined to the north. In the seventh century, after the fall of the northern kingdom, King Manasseh, now a vassal of Assyria (his name appears on a clay 'prism' of King Esarhaddon among subject rulers who had to pay tribute) introduced religious practices to the Jerusalem temple itself which bore the hallmarks of Assyrian religion (2 Ki. 21). His legacy in Judah formed the background to the prophecy of Jeremiah.

This period of Israel's worst idolatries was also the time when her prophets flourished. It is perhaps not coincidental that they should have been contemporary with kings, as prophets in the ancient east typically addressed rulers. We have seen that this was true of Elijah, and so it was of Nathan (David), Isaiah (Ahaz), Amos (Jeroboam II) and Jeremiah (Jehoiakim and Zedekiah). The prophets' function may be summed up as calling the kings to proper leadership of the covenant people. Thus, though they could be influential people at court, as Isaiah appears to have been, they could be unpopular with the ruling authorities, and ran the risk of being marginalized too (as Jeremiah certainly was; Je. 26).

The prophets' attitude to the national institutions varied according to circumstances. It might be expected that they would criticize the northern kings on the grounds of their departure from worship at Jerusalem. Hosea and Amos did not appear to do this, however (more remarkable, perhaps, because Amos was actually from Judah). Rather, they were primarily concerned with idolatry and injustice as such. Indeed Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, warned that Jerusalem and the temple itself would be destroyed if the leadership in Judah did not mend its ways (Mi. 3:9–12). The possession of the temple was not the substance of true religion. Jeremiah later took up the same theme (Je. 26:2–6; *cf.* v 18). Nevertheless, the prophets do seem to have made a distinction between the southern kings, who took a basic legitimacy from David, and the northern ones, whose rule was established by force (contrast Is. 7:13 with Ho. 8:4).

There were those who believed that the way of salvation lay in a reform of the worship at Jerusalem, and the seventh century saw two major attempts at such reform, in the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Ki. 18 – 23). Hezekiah's reform had the consequence of a reprieve for Jerusalem from Sennacherib's terror in Judah, yet it could not stave off vassaldom. Josiah's reform, a key event in OT history, was more extensive.

Beginning in 628 BC (2 Ch. 34:3) and coinciding with the decline of Assyria as the major power in the area, Josiah's reform was able to re-establish Yahweh worship in Jerusalem (after the long reign of Manasseh, who had established the cult of other gods), and Josiah was even able to re-enter parts of the former northern kingdom, territory long subjugated by Assyria, and destroy foreign cults there (2 Ki. 23:15–20). Josiah's reform fulfilled, incidentally, a prophecy of old (1 Ki. 13:2). It was accelerated and given direction by the discovery of the 'Book of the Law' in the temple in 621 BC (2 Ki. 22:8). This book is widely identified as Deuteronomy, which generations before had been deposited beside the ark in the tabernacle, intended to be read on solemn occasions of covenant renewal (Dt. 31:9–13). It could easily have disappeared from use, and sight, during the reign of Manasseh. The emphases of the reform corresponded to aspects of the teaching of Deuteronomy, especially its hostility to false worship and its concern for the purity of the cult of Yahweh (Dt. 12:1–5). The author of Kings saw Josiah's reform as a renewal of the ancient covenant (2 Ki. 23:1–3).

Josiah's reform, however, had no lasting beneficial outcome. The king himself was killed in an ill-advised campaign at Megiddo, and his successors undid his work. Some have questioned the motives of Josiah, seeing his campaign in the north as nationalistic expansionism. This is probably unfair, since the possession of the land was an essential part of the old covenantal promises. Yet high idealism could always turn into something less noble (as the later adventure of the Maccabees shows). In any case, Jeremiah, the premier prophet of the time, scarcely mentioned the reform, evidently believing that it

could not reach the heart of the religious problem in Judah. He proclaimed judgment on the people at the hands of the new power in the area, Babylon, if they did not turn back to God. Nebuchadnezzar began to be active in Palestine in the last decade of the seventh century (Dn. 1:1), took numerous exiles in 597 BC and finally destroyed the city and temple in 586 BC, leaving the land thinly populated by only the poorest of the people (2 Ki. 24 – 25; Je. 37 – 44, 52).

The exile

The exile of the people of Judah in Babylon is normally counted from 597 BC, when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar first took captives. The prophet Ezekiel was among those deportees, and his message came first to those in exile who hoped that they might soon return (Ezk. 4 – 5). However, when Nebuchadnezzar put in his puppet-king Zedekiah in 597 BC, it did not materially alter Judah's status, as it had been a vassal-state since the time of Hezekiah anyway. The decisive blow was struck in 586, when the temple was destroyed. The news that this had happened was a key moment in Ezekiel's prophecy to his fellow-exiles (Ezk. 33:21), whose hope of a quick end to the exile was thus shattered. The exile, in fact, is perhaps best symbolized by the loss of the temple vessels and furnishings, with the implication that foreigners – and their gods – had shown their superiority to Yahweh (2 Ki. 25:13–18). It was King Belshazzar's desecration of these which drew God's wrath upon him (Dn. 5:1–4), and their return by King Cyrus is given some emphasis in the narrative of that king's permission to the exiles to return home (Ezr. 1:7–11).

The exile turned an important corner on the death of King Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC, when his successor Amel-Marduk (biblical Evil-Merodach) favoured the exiled King Jehoiachin, releasing him from prison and giving him a privileged position in Babylon (2 Ki. 25:27–30). The end of the exile came, however, only when Babylon was overthrown from within by a bloodless coup carried out by the Median King Cyrus in 539 BC while King Nabonidus, a religious eccentric, had secreted himself in remote Arabia. Cyrus's conquest was popular, because he restored the worship of Marduk in Babylon. Indeed, his policy of allowing peoples to worship their own gods was a key element in the end of the exile. He himself declared, in an inscription on a cylinder of baked clay, (the so-called 'Cyrus Cylinder'), 'I returned to their places [the gods who had been brought to Babylon] and housed them in lasting abodes. I gathered together all their inhabitants and restored [to them] their dwellings.' The Jewish exiles obviously benefited from this general policy, which is reflected in the statement of their release in Ezr. 1:2–4.

Babylon itself, the capital city of the land to which the exiles had been taken, was breathtaking in size and magnificence. The city covered a vast area, and was surrounded by a system of double walls. Entry was by eight gates, all named after gods of Babylon, the showpiece being the massive Ishtar gate. This opened on to a paved 985 yd (900 m) avenue, lined with enamelled brick walls, which led to the temple of Marduk, the Esagila, and temples to other gods. The 'temple tower' – the Tower of Babel – rose in the midst of the city. Royal palaces were also on the grand scale, the famous 'hanging gardens' a symbol of their lavishness.

It was to this city that the battered remnant of Judah, their own temple in ruins, had been taken. Everything about Babylon seemed to say that the traditions of Israel were dead; real power – and real gods – were here. It is hard to over-estimate the importance of the exile in the life and thought of the people of the OT. The loss of the land, temple and king – the centre of covenantal promises – was shattering.

The thinking of the period, however, tried to come to terms with this disaster. The dominant thought was one of judgment. The author of the books of Kings showed how the exile had been brought upon first Israel then Judah by the persistent idolatries of kings and people. Lamentations, mourning over the agonies of the destroyed city and people, knows that sin was a cause (La. 1:20, 22), yet is perplexed by the extremity of the suffering that God's anger had brought (La. 2:20). The question evidently was: Does the covenant still exist? Can God's ancient people expect further mercy from him?

In the long reaches of the exile, there could have been few certainties. The first task was to learn to live in the new place. The exiles seem to have been settled in undistinguished places around Babylon (the River Kebar, Ezk. 1:1, cannot be certainly located). The gathering of elders in Ezekiel's house (Ezk. 8) may be a hint of a new organization, perhaps even the beginnings of the synagogue. (It is proper from this time to refer to the exiles as 'Jews'.) Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (in the early days, before the fall of the temple) urged the people to start new lives, and no doubt many became prosperous in Babylon (Je. 29:4–7). We know, indeed, that many did not return to their homeland when the chance was offered, and that a Jewish community continued in Babylon for several centuries. Some Jews actually pushed further east, as the book of Esther shows. Others had gone to Egypt at the time of the last Babylonian invasion (Je. 40 – 44), and migrations there may have continued. (A Jewish colony lived for nearly two

centuries, from around 590–410 BC, on Elephantine, an island in the Nile, and even built a temple to Yahweh there.) It was not always plain sailing for the new 'diaspora', of course; the book of Daniel (and later Esther) records some of the hard choices that faced it and were implicit in allegiance to the one true God in an empire where many gods were worshipped.

In this context, the attempt to answer the basic question about the causes of the exile and the prospects for the future was carried on. Ezekiel's call to prophesy came with a vision of Yahweh, the God of Israel, enthroned over Babylon (Ezk. 1). Here was an affirmation that he was king of all the earth, that his kingship did not depend on his possession of a temple in Jerusalem and that the final word had not been spoken. In common with Jeremiah (Je. 30 – 31), Ezekiel spoke of a return to the land (Ezk. 34, 36) and even of a rebuilt temple (Ezk. 40 – 48). God would make a new covenant with his people (Je. 31:31–34; *cf.* Ezk. 11:19–20). The author of Kings too, recording the ancient prayer of Solomon (1 Ki. 8:46–53), knew that a new day of compassion would dawn.

Part of the book of Isaiah (chs. 40 – 55) relates unmistakably to this period. (Many scholars think that Is. 40 – 55 comes from an exilic writer. Whether or not these chapters come from such a writer or from Isaiah of Jerusalem, they were most relevant to the exilic community.) This part of the OT is largely a repudiation of the claims of the Babylonian gods to have overcome Yahweh. It was Yahweh alone who was powerful (Is. 40:18–20, 25–26), the God of creation and history (Is. 43:14–19); the exile occurred only because he chose to punish his people. The time of punishment was about to end (40:2). The magnificent gods of Babylon would be humbled before the true God (Is. 46:1); idols were but wood and metal (44:9–20). The people of Yahweh would return in triumph to their land (Is. 55). These promises would play a major part in the development of Jewish, and also Christian, hopes for the future.

The restoration

The return home began in 537 BC, with the edict of Cyrus (Ezr. 1:2–4). It seems to have happened gradually over the next decades; indeed, when Ezra went to Jerusalem almost a century after Cyrus's decree (in 458 BC) he brought a new group of migrants with him even at that late stage (Ezr. 7:6–7). Among the first leaders of the community, however, was Zerubbabel, a grandson of King Jehoiachin (Ezr. 3:2; Mt. 1:12), in whom some seem to have invested hopes of a renewed monarchy, which did not come to pass. With the priest Jeshua (or Joshua), Zerubbabel laid the foundation of the new temple (Ezr. 3). The building was not completed, however, until 516 BC, because of hostility from people already living in the land who could hardly have welcomed this influx of newcomers who laid claim to the territory. The task was completed thanks to encouragement from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezr. 5:1–2; 6:15).

Hostility to the new community was never far away. When the book of Ezra records the first opposition to the building of the temple, it inserts (out of chronological order) two similar interferences, one in the reign of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes; 486–465 BC), the other in that of Artaxerxes I (464–423 BC; Ezr. 4:6–23). This last seems to have been a separate incident from the opposition experienced by Nehemiah later in the same king's reign (Ne. 4, 6).

The return to Jerusalem and Judah did not bring the swift fulfilment of prophetic promise for which the exiles had no doubt hoped. When Ezra arrived in 458 BC, he found a community which had begun to lose its identity by intermarrying with non-Jewish people. Nehemiah's complementary mission, in 445 BC, was occasioned by the neglect of the walls of Jerusalem. Samaria, which had enjoyed control of Jerusalem prior to the return of the exiles, had had a setback with the appointment of a governor in Jerusalem by Cyrus, but constantly tried to reassert its claims. The condition of the community, therefore, was poor.

The twin mission of Ezra and Nehemiah was to establish the law of God among the people, and to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra's analysis of the poverty of the community's life (Ezr. 7 – 8), in contrast to prophetic expectation, attributed it to the people's own sin in having neglected the covenant, intermarriage with non-Jews being the chief sign of this. His reform culminated in a great covenant renewal, which had as its precondition the dissolution of all mixed marriages (Ezr. 10; Ne. 8). With the religious reform complete, and the walls rebuilt (Ne. 6:15), the life of the people was put on a new footing. Nevertheless, there was still a strong sense of 'enslavement' under imperial rule and a feeling that the great promises of restoration (such as Je. 30 – 31; Ezk. 34, 36) had yet to be fulfilled (Ne. 9:32–37).

The religious life of the returned community was quite different from that of its pre-exilic ancestors. Despite the re-establishment of the temple worship, the people's best leaders knew that the future depended on a new, more committed approach to covenant-faithfulness. In this, the teaching of 'Torah' (the books of the law) would play a major role. This was central to Ezra's mission (Ezr. 7:6), and his covenant-

renewal had at its heart a reading, and explanation, of the law (Ne. 8:1–8). The explanation, in fact, was a translation, because many of the people had ceased to be able to understand Hebrew during their Babylonian exile and had assumed the Aramaic vernacular of that land.

The seeds were here of what would become the religion of Judaism. The centrality of written Scriptures was the crucial feature. How much of our OT was recognized as Scripture by Ezra cannot be stated with precision, because the development of a 'canon' cannot be traced exactly. The strict meaning of 'Torah' in Judaism came to be the books which we know as the Pentateuch. Ezra's reading may well have simply been this. However, 'Torah' also has a wider meaning, equivalent to 'Scripture'. And the developing synagogue would also incorporate readings from the Prophets and other books (such as Psalms, Proverbs, Daniel). The Hebrew Bible would eventually consist of three sections: the Torah, Prophets and Writings. Books that had been in existence for some time, therefore, now had a new context, namely their regular reading and interpretation in worship. The book of Psalms illustrates this point well. Individual Psalms go back to the pre-exilic time, in some cases to the time of David. Yet the *book* of Psalms, with its subdivision into five 'books', was a creation of the post-exilic period, and represents a new tradition of public reading of, and perhaps private meditation on, the Psalms as Scripture.

The reading of Scripture also resulted in written interpretation of it in various forms. The targums, for example, are translations, often shading over to paraphrase (or midrash) of the biblical books in Aramaic. Written targums are known from the second century BC, and continued to be produced into the Christian era, mainly in Palestine. The springs of this stream of Jewish religious tradition are found here in Ezra.

The end of the Old Testament period

After Ezra and Nehemiah little is known about the Jewish people until the second century BC. Malachi may be roughly contemporary with this period; his prophecy gives a picture of general decline in religion, and perhaps of material poverty. The books of Chronicles are dated variously from about 400 BC to about 200 BC. Their interpretation of the history of Israel was intended to encourage the post-exilic community to be faithful to God and therefore know his blessing. The prominence given in Chronicles to David and Solomon may reflect hopes for a restoration of the monarchy and a new time of independence.

Interestingly, the Hebrew Bible closes with the books of Chronicles, expressing no doubt a Jewish kind of hope, namely for a return to independence as a nation. For Christians the canon closes with Malachi, thus opening on to the NT, with its hope for a new prophet. Each tradition is based on expectation. The story of the OT is one which points forward to a new chapter in world history.

The New Testament period

The intertestamental period

When our English Bibles allow the books of the NT to follow directly after those of the OT, they pass over the period which is often called 'inter-testamental'. Although this period (by definition) does not provide canonical biblical literature, it is very important background for an understanding of the NT. It covers the rule of three empires in the ancient Near East: the Persian (539–331 BC), the Greek (331–63 BC) and the Roman (under which NT history itself was played out).

After their return from exile the Jewish people live in straitened circumstances under Persian rule. Little is known of their fortunes in the fourth century BC, but it is possible that it was a turbulent time. The Persian Empire gave way in its turn to the Greek, established by all-conquering Alexander the Great in 331 BC. It may have been around the time of Alexander that the Samaritan sect had its roots, though the exact circumstances of its formation are not known. This was a group of worshippers of Yahweh which formed around the ancient biblical city of Shechem in the former northern Israelite territory. It is not known what precisely caused the split from the Jerusalem community, though we have seen that there were tensions in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah both within the community and between it and outsiders. (Some of the enemies of the returning exiles, incidentally, seem to have been in some sense 'Yahwist'; the name 'Tobiah' in Ne. 4:7 has a typically Yahwistic ending.) The sect built a temple on Mt Gerizim (overlooking Shechem), evidently a rival to that of Jerusalem, and claimed to be the true Israel. It even produced its own version of the Scriptures, narrowly defined as the Pentateuch. This 'Samaritan' version of the Pentateuch is still consulted by scholars of the Hebrew Bible as an important extra witness to the most ancient biblical text.

Alexander's empire divided on his death in

323 BC, and was governed by a number of his generals. It resolved itself finally into three parts, the Ptolemaic in Egypt, the Antigonid in Macedonia and the Seleucid in Asia, including Palestine. The culture of the three parts of the empire was still Greek, however, and the period which began after Alexander's conquests is known to history as Hellenistic. In it, the language, culture and thought of Greece became dominant throughout the civilized world. The subsequent conquest of the empire by Rome did not alter this, but rather gave it a new solidity, for the Greco-Roman culture of this time was essentially unified. The history of Judaism henceforth, and of early Christianity, both trades on and confronts this culture. Jews in Egyptian Alexandria soon felt the need for the Scriptures in the Greek language, which they had adopted, and beginning in the third century BC they made the translation known as the Septuagint (LXX). It is because Greek became the language of the educated throughout the empire in the Hellenistic and Roman periods that the NT too was written in that language.

During the third century BC Jerusalem and Judea were controlled more or less benignly by the Egyptian Ptolemies, even though the territory in general was contested between these and the Seleucids. At the beginning of the second century it was the Seleucids who gained control, and Jerusalem had to recognize a new master. The Seleucids, however, began a disastrous war against the Romans, and in their defeat had to pay enormous tribute. One of the ways in which they met this demand was by the plunder of temples under their control. Thus it was that in 168 BC the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes IV committed the unthinkable sacrilege and entered, and robbed, the temple at Jerusalem. The following year, thinking the city in rebellion, he dismantled its walls, amid great slaughter, and dedicated the temple to the worship of the Greek god, Zeus (1 Macc. 1; *cf.* 2 Macc. 6:1–2). These events, so traumatizing to faithful Jews, were the subject of the prophetic narrative in Dn. 11, where the 'abomination that causes desolation' (v 31) is a reference to the false god.

The pressure from the Seleucids on their religion led to different responses from Jewish people. The high priest in 200 BC was Simon II, son of Onias II, who became celebrated in Judaism for his faithfulness to traditional Jewish belief (Ecclus. 50:1–21). Other leading Jews, however, participated eagerly in the new cultural refinement which cosmopolitan Hellenism had brought. Some joined the service of the regime as tax-collectors – a feature which would continue into the Roman period. Soon, the high priesthood itself became available to the highest bidder, and in 174 BC Jason, the brother of Onias III, secured it illegally from the Seleucid king Antiochus III, and instituted Hellenistic practices, such as athletics, in Jerusalem. He in turn was ousted by one Menelaus, who, though not even of priestly lineage, bought the favour of Antiochus IV. Jason escaped, but Menelaus succeeded in having Onias III put to death. Menelaus, in time, even connived at Antiochus IV's first plundering of the temple.

Faithful Jews, outraged by their Hellenizing leaders, were known from the early part of the second century as Hasidim. Their resistance was a firm but patient one. Following Antiochus IV's dedication of the temple to Zeus (1 Macc. 2:29–38) and his insistence on religious conformity, this sort of dissent hardly seemed sufficient to many, and pious Jews took up arms. There followed the Maccabean (or Hasmonean) revolt, led by the priest Mattathiah and his sons. ('Maccabean' was a nickname, meaning 'hammerer', and applied to Mattathiah's son Judas in particular; the term 'Hasmonean' was derived from the family name Hasmon.) The revolt began in the town of Modin near Jerusalem in 167 BC with the murder of a Jew who was in the act of sacrificing to a pagan god, and the imperial officer who was supervising it (1 Macc. 2:15–28). It became an astonishingly successful military campaign, under Judas, which resulted in the Seleucids accepting Judas's terms for the re-establishment of Jewish worship in 164 BC. Judas then cleansed the temple of its idolatrous paraphernalia, and re-dedicated it. The Jewish feast of Hanukkah still commemorates this event.

The ending was not, however, entirely happy. The Seleucid king still insisted on appointing the high priest, and his candidate, a Hellenizer, blew open the old rift between traditional and Hellenizing Jews (as well as between the militant Hasmoneans and more peaceable Hasidim), effectively producing civil war. Seleucid armies again marched into Palestine as a consequence, and Judas died in battle in 161 BC. His mantle fell to his brother Jonathan, who conducted guerrilla campaigns with mixed success.

In 152, however, Jonathan came to terms with a pretender to the Seleucid throne, and as a result was himself offered, and accepted, the high priesthood. Both Jonathan and his brother Simon held this office, Simon effectively enjoying independence, under Roman guarantee, from 142. He himself was proclaimed both high priest and 'ethnarch' by the Jewish people. This was the beginning of what is known as the Hasmonean dynasty, for Simon and his

successors would enjoy virtually the status of kings (though the contentious title was not taken by Simon). Simon's successor John Hyrcanus I (134–104 BC) defeated the Idumeans to the south, forcing them to become Jewish, and expanded also in Transjordan and in the ancient northern territory, destroying the Samaritan temple on Mt Gerizim in the process. The title of king was first taken by John's successor, Aristobulus I (104–103 BC). And after him Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC), the most cruel of the Hasmoneans, continued the policy of military expansionism begun by John. There is irony in the degeneration of the Hasmoneans from their first idealism to the power-grubbing of their later years. Many Jews saw that their way was a false trail.

The Roman period

The Hasmonean dynasty continued into the Roman period, that is after the conquest by Pompey in 63 BC. Rome made its appearance in biblical history in the context of its expansion eastwards. As it spread its influence in this direction its tendency was to establish 'provinces', but often, at least at first, to keep existing structures in place. Thus, Pompey established the province of Syria in 64 BC, extending this to include Judea when he conquered that region in the following year. In Judea, however, the jurisdiction of the high priest (effectively a priest-king in the Hasmonean period) was recognized, not only in the area around Jerusalem, but also in Galilee and in Perea, east of the Jordan, places where there were concentrations of observant Jews. The Hasmoneans continued under Roman rule, therefore, until the last of them, Antigonus, fell foul of the overlords, and was executed in 38 BC.

The fall of the Hasmoneans left a vacuum, which was to be filled by the most famous ruler of Judea. Under Roman protection, Herod the Great, son of an Idumean Jew who had risen to high office under Rome, became king. He himself had been educated at Rome and married into the Hasmonean family (thus establishing a tenuous claim to legitimacy in Jewish eyes). He had distinguished himself in military administration in Galilee and actively connived at the overthrow of Antigonus.

Herod ruled until 4 BC, three years after the likely birthdate of Jesus. His reign formed the immediate background to Jesus' life. It also left enduring marks on the landscape, for he undertook phenomenal building works as part of a policy to establish Hellenistic culture. Among the most notable of these are the harbour at Caesarea and the temple itself. In the latter case, Herod greatly extended the ancient temple mount, or platform, and transformed the unimpressive temple which dated back to Zerubbabel into an extensive and magnificent centre-piece of Jerusalem. These two projects nicely illustrate the two ways in which Herod tried to face at once, namely towards Rome (in the harbour named after Caesar) and towards the Jewish people, who never quite accepted him because of his Idumean ancestry. He was never able to feel secure and lived in constant fear of threats to his throne and life. This no doubt underlay the terrible story of the 'slaughter of the innocents' in Mt. 2:16–18.

After Herod, his kingdom was broken up into tetrarchies, which were governed by his sons. Archelaus became ethnarch (not king) of Judea until 6 AD, when he was deposed. Judea was from this time governed directly by Roman procurators, and effectively became a 'province'. With the removal of Archelaus the pretence of local rule was more or less finally abandoned (though there was a brief revival of it under Herod Agrippa I [AD 41–44], who bore the name of king). Judea was thus integrated more than ever into the Roman Empire. The procurators included Pontius Pilate (AD 26–36), Antonius Felix (AD 52–60), and Festus Porcius (AD 60–62), the latter two known from the book of Acts (Acts 24). As a class they were known for their greed and cruelty. Pilate himself was remembered as a particular example of tyranny by the contemporary historian Josephus.

Local rule under Rome persisted longer in the other parts of the former territories of Herod the Great. Herod Antipas ruled as tetrarch of Galilee from 4 BC to AD 39, and Herod Philip was tetrarch of Iturea, east and north of the Sea of Galilee, from 4 BC to AD 34 (see Lk. 3:1). It was Herod Antipas in whose territory Jesus carried on his early ministry, who had John the Baptist executed (Mk. 6:14–28), and to whom Pilate sent Jesus for trial (Lk. 23:6–12).

The Roman presence in Judea affected daily life deeply. The taxation system is an obvious example. Roman provinces had to pay taxes to Caesar, and these were levied on property as well as on a variety of goods and transactions. The total tax burden on local people is not known, but the tendency was for it to become ever greater. Rights to levy taxes were sold to entrepreneurs, and while these were supervised by the procurators, abuses were common. With traditional temple dues an additional demand, Jews in the Roman period suffered under a huge burden.

The Roman army was another ever-present feature of life. The Antonia fortress in Jerusalem, a Herodian reconstruction of a Maccabean fort, overshadowed the temple. Soldiers therefore were a common sight in Judea and

could be used with cruel effect to put down unrest. In the eyes of ordinary people, their lives were dominated by an uneasy alliance of their own corrupt rulers and Roman force. It is not a surprise that Jesus' trial and crucifixion should have involved both these powers. The army presence could, however, on occasion, be benign (Lk. 7:2–5).

In Jesus' time, the memory of former triumphs over an imperial overlord (that is, Maccabean victories over the Seleucid Greeks) had not quite faded. This was the background to such hopes as there were that the Romans too might be driven from the ancient promised land. Glimpses of militant Jewish discontent are afforded by the gospels, as in the case of the insurgent Barabbas (Lk. 23:18–25). In fact, the rise of the Zealots dates from the appointment of the first procurator, when Judas the Galilean led a revolt against Rome in AD 6. His own sons did likewise thirty years later. During Jesus' life, simmering discontent was kept more or less suppressed. It boiled over in the decades following his death and resulted in the Jewish revolt of AD 66–73. This had its climax in the siege and fall of Jerusalem, in the most appalling circumstances, in AD 70, though Masada held out three years longer.

Judaism in Jesus' time

We have seen that Judaism had already become sharply divided in the early years of Seleucid rule in Palestine (about 200 BC) between those who welcomed Hellenistic influence and those who adhered rigorously to the laws and traditions of Judaism. Judaism was in fact becoming quite variegated, with a whole 'diaspora' (scattered people) culture developing in various parts of the ancient world outside the confines of Palestine. The synagogues of the diaspora played a part in the development of the early church. In Palestine itself, four groups are usually identified (following Josephus) in the first century AD: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.

The emergence of Sadducees and Pharisees may be traced to the rule of John Hyrcanus I (134–104 BC). Certain Hasidim opposed John's right to the high priesthood and said so, and thus began a tradition of Hasidic opposition to Hasmonean rule (though in the early days Hasidim and Maccabees had made common cause) which came to characterize the movement known as Pharisaic. (The name 'Pharisee' means 'separated one', though it is unclear in what precise sense this was meant, or indeed whether the grouping used it of themselves.) It was a lay movement which was popular with many ordinary people who disliked the Hasmoneans' high-handed ways. Under the tyrannical Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BC), many even died because of their open opposition to his self-aggrandizing rule. Although they enjoyed influence again in the reign of Salome Alexandra (76–67 BC), they were more generally out of political favour, acting as a kind of opposition party. The Pharisees stressed study of the Torah and careful attention to ritual cleanness. In theology, they laid some emphasis on the freedom of the will, which was no doubt related to their stress on law-keeping.

Their concern for the law embraced the oral law as well as the Torah itself, *i.e.* the body of interpretation of the law which was growing up from at least the second half of the first century BC (*cf.* Mt. 15:2; Mk. 7:3, 5), though it found its literary deposit in the Mishnah only in the second century AD. The Pharisees differed from the Sadducees in ascribing an authority to this oral law almost equal with that of the Torah itself. (The oral law was actually of two kinds: *halakah*, or moral law, which in the Pharisees' eyes was binding on all Jews, and *haggadah*, which was teaching and reflection, not binding in the same way.)

In recent times attention has often rightly been drawn to the high ideals, courage and real piety that inspired the Pharisaic movement, which makes Jesus' criticisms of it the more striking.

The Sadducees emerged as an identifiable group in the incident involving John Hyrcanus I, mentioned above, in which they supported him. They were a party of aristocrats in the Sanhedrin, or the ruling council which served the Hasmoneans, and with the Pharisees in disfavour, they normally dominated this. The party evidently embraced both priests and non-priests, and among the former it seems that several were high priests under Herod the Great and in the time of Jesus. They differed from the Pharisees in not allowing the special authority of the oral law and in denying the resurrection (Acts 4:1–2; 23:8).

The Essenes were a group which seems to have been more or less identical with the community of ascetic sectarians who lived in seclusion at Qumran, at the northern end of the Dead Sea, though there were apparently 'associate' members who lived more normal lives throughout the country of Judea. This was the community that produced the famous Dead Sea Scrolls. Their origin is not certainly known. Some see them as a derivative of the Maccabean Hasidim, a group which became disillusioned with the compromises of the new Jewish rulers, and who therefore chose the way of withdrawal. Others think that they originated in a group which returned to Palestine from Babylon in the second century, possibly via Damascus (one of

their writings is known as the *Damascus Document*) and, finding Jerusalem corrupt, opted for the ascetic life of protest.

Their specific stumbling-block may have been the Hasmonean acceptance of the high priesthood, since the latter's claims to be in legitimate descent from the ancient priestly line were at best questionable. The writings of the sect frequently named a Wicked Priest, presumably a high priest, to whom was opposed their own Teacher of Righteousness, the leader, perhaps founder, of the sect.

Whatever their origins, they are known to have been at Qumran from at least the late second century BC, perhaps earlier. They believed that, because of the corruption of Jerusalem, a day of judgment was near, in which they themselves would be found to be the righteous remnant.

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain texts of most books of the OT, as well as writings of the community itself. The latter include interpretations of biblical books, rules for the community's life and works about the end times.

The final important grouping was the Zealots. They took their inspiration from memories of the early Maccabean successes, and represented the grass-roots hatred of foreign, pagan rule in Israel. Their agitation culminated, as we have seen, in the Jewish revolt of AD 66–73, though that uprising was more broadly based within Judaism.

Theology and interpretation

Obviously, all groups within Judaism understood themselves to be somehow in line with the ancient traditions. The differences between them were to some extent, therefore, differences regarding the right interpretation of those traditions. That there was a vigorous debate about the true nature of the faith is evident from the large amount of literature that was generated in the last two centuries BC and the first century AD. In these centuries Judaism was defining itself. The literature gives evidence of a wide variety of ideas, which cannot be reduced to a coherent system. The difference between the Sadducees and Pharisees over the question of a resurrection (Acts 23:8) is just an example of this.

This literature took a variety of forms. We have already mentioned the 'oral law', which was in the process of becoming written, and which would in time become the Mishnah (second century AD) and finally the even more extensive Talmud (fifth century AD). This was associated primarily with the Pharisees, and with two rabbis in particular, Shammai and Hillel, who lived in the first century BC. Debates between Hillel and Shammai are recollected in the Mishnah, with rabbinic Judaism tending to favour the stricter approach of Hillel to the interpretation of the law. The character of rabbinic Judaism, which has come to be regarded as 'orthodox', is witness to the triumph of this kind of Pharisaism in the course of the first century AD.

There were other forms of biblical interpretation. At Qumran, the community made commentaries on biblical texts. The *pesher* (interpretation) on Hab. 1 – 2 is an example. In this, the prophesied events are taken to be fulfilled in the community. The Qumran *pesharim* may be regarded as an early form of the type of literature known as targum, which we have discussed above (in relation to Ezra).

Besides the literature of biblical interpretation there were many creative works, such as the books which we know as the Apocrypha. Among these is *Ecclesiasticus* (or the *Wisdom of Joshua ben Sira*), dating from 180 BC and in the tradition of the OT's book of Proverbs. It has been thought to hold together ideas which later passed either into Sadduceanism (no resurrection and an interest in the temple) or into Pharisaism (respect for the law and the need for people to overcome sin). Another 'Wisdom' book is the *Wisdom of Solomon*, which in contrast to *Ecclesiasticus*, tries to unite orthodox Judaism with the Greek philosophy current in Alexandria. The books of *Maccabees* (a major source for the Maccabean period) are not just history books, but reflect theological ideas. *1 Maccabees* has been considered Sadducean because of its lack of appeal to the idea of resurrection; *2 Maccabees*, in contrast, commends martyrdom for faithfulness to the law and expresses a belief in the resurrection of the righteous (2 Macc. 7:9), which puts it closer to Pharisaic beliefs.

Other apocryphal books are works of religious instruction in various forms. The most notable is perhaps *2 Esdras*. This is one of a number of books (including the canonical one) which bear the name of Ezra. *2 Esdras* is a Christian book in its present form, though it contains a Jewish apocalypse in chs. 3 – 14, in itself called, in some ancient versions, *4 Ezra*. This writing expresses the perplexity of faithful Jews following the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and asks how it can be that a righteous God can allow his people to suffer thus. In doing so it echoes a time-honoured religious theme, now cast in the strange and fantastic imagery of the form known as apocalyptic.

As well as the Apocrypha there is an extensive literature known as Pseudepigrapha, a collection of writings that have been falsely attributed to great figures from biblical and Jewish history. Many of these are in the form called apocalyptic. This essentially means a

'revelation' or 'disclosure'. The two biblical books which are generally put in this category are Daniel and Revelation, but there were many others. Apocalyptic works are characterized by special revelations, frequently by angels, and often in dreams and visions, to an individual. The visions typically use fantastic imagery and symbols, and claim to reveal God's plans for the future.

Apocalyptic is associated with times of great suffering. Daniel, of course, is set in the Babylonian exile. Other literature comes from the time of the Seleucid oppression on. The apocalyptic form is associated classically (as in *1 Enoch*) with an interest in resurrection and the last things (eschatology). Originally, this probably arose as a response to the suffering under the Seleucids. The literature, however, enshrines many different points of view. By the time of *2 Esdras*, it seems that the form of apocalyptic could accommodate thinking in which eschatological speculation was not primary; the interest of this book is closer to certain Wisdom Literature of the past. (See also the article on Apocrypha and Apocalyptic.)

The Messiah

It is plain from the NT that Messianic expectation was part of the Jewish hope for deliverance in Jesus' time. Yet it is impossible to reconstruct a coherent Messianic doctrine from the literature of the period. Not all works which speak about God's future salvation have a clear Messianic element. Where Messianic hopes do occur, they are related to several strands of OT teaching, such as the hope of a new Davidic king (Ezk. 34:23), the Suffering Servant (Is. 53) and the Son of Man in Daniel. They manifest themselves in different ways in the intertestamental literature.

The Essenes expected a Messiah, apparently to lead them in the final battle against evil. It seems, however, that they were actually looking for two Messiahs, a royal and a priestly one. The first century BC/AD *Psalms of Solomon* look to the coming of a Davidic warrior king who would gather the scattered people of Israel into their land and rule them in innocence and justice, subduing all other nations (*Psalms of Solomon* 17:21–46; 18). This figure does not appear to be divine. The Son of Man, on the other hand, the heavenly figure known from Dn. 7, appears again in *1 Enoch* 45–57. He is a supra-human, pre-existent individual, who rules the nations and will finally bring them into judgment. The Jews who knew Jesus, therefore, had a mix of ideas on which to draw in forming their idea of the Messiah. It seems from the gospels that it was the idea of a royal warrior that prevailed (Mt. 22:42; Jn. 6:15). Jesus himself seems to have used caution in applying Messianic ideas to himself (Mt. 9:30), but yet drew widely on the OT's promises in his self-understanding.

Jesus

Jesus' life must be understood in the context of the Jewish world whose features we have sketched. His early ministry in Galilee was centred in an area that was on the traditional side of the Jewish divide, rather than the Hellenizing. From here he drew his disciples. They were evidently exposed to the varieties of thought that were current. One had been a zealot (Lk. 6:15). Others too, no doubt, were influenced by the idea of the royal warrior Messiah and the kingdom which he would establish (Mk. 10:35–45; Acts 1:6). Matthew, of course, had been a tax-collector, in the pay of the Romans. One can imagine tensions among the Twelve in the early days!

Jesus' teaching addressed the crucial issues of the day: the interpretation of the law, the conduct of sacrificial worship, observation of the Sabbath, the relationship with Rome and the deliverance of 'Israel' – issues which, as we have seen, divided Jews. Obviously he also struck a chord with those who were looking for a Messiah. Yet he consistently resisted being cast into any mould, as his disciples discovered – perhaps this was why Judas's patience ran out. On Sabbath observance, he claimed a sovereign freedom (Mt. 12:8); on ritual observance in general, so dear to the Pharisees, he insisted on the priority of 'mercy' (Mt. 9:13; 12:12); on the law, he claimed to 'fulfil' it (Mt. 5:17), yet also condemned those who observed its finer points fastidiously while neglecting its heart (Mt. 23:23). His proclamation of the kingdom was not a promise of victory for national Israel, but carried a stern message of warning for the ancient chosen people (Mt. 13:1–51; Mk. 12:1–12). Even the temple was not sacrosanct. His attitude to it and the temple authorities seems ambiguous, for he evidently recognized their authority in daily life (Mt. 8:4); yet he also said of himself; 'one [or something] greater than the temple is here' (Mt. 12:6). In other texts he identified himself as the true 'temple' (Jn. 2:19–22; *cf.* Mk. 14:58).

With teaching like this Jesus confronted the people of his day with a hard choice. His message implied nothing less than a reappraisal of every part of the nation's life and the ancient covenant between God and Israel. Henceforth, the people of God could know no national boundaries (Mt. 8:10–12). The teaching of the apostles, especially of Paul, takes up the same themes (Rom. 3:21–22 on the law; Rom. 9 – 11 on Israel; Gal. 3:27–29 on Jews and Gentiles; 1 Cor. 3:16, where the 'temple' idea is extended

to the church; *cf.* also Heb. 10:11–18, where Jesus is both high priest and sacrifice).

The church and Judaism

The disengagement of the church from the synagogue was not to be quick or easy. The attitude of the Jewish leaders was not uniform in the beginning. The first opposition to the church came from the Sadducees, who took exception to the preaching of the resurrection and no doubt its Messianic implications (Acts 4:1–3; 5:17–18). In this case, perhaps unexpectedly, a Pharisee called Gamaliel defended the disciples (5:33–39). This may have been because the disciples' earliest preaching did not overtly challenge the status of the temple and ceremonial law. When Stephen did precisely this, however, the Jewish leaders united in consigning him to execution (Acts 7:42–60). The Christians must therefore have been recognized as a separate group by the Jewish leaders from an early stage. A further persecution by Herod Agrippa I (king of Judea, AD 41–44) singled out the Christians, to the satisfaction of 'the Jews' (Acts 12:1–2). Relations worsened when Christians did not join the Jewish revolt of AD 66–73. Christians fell prey to reprisals, and the Jerusalem church fled to Pella in Transjordan. The decisive break between church and synagogue, however, may not have come till the Bar-Kochba revolt of AD 132–135.

The different effects of AD 70 on the two communities is revealing. The destruction of Jerusalem naturally provoked great soul-searching among Jews and awakened memories of past devastations at the hands of foreign overlords. (*2 Esdras* records some of these questionings.) The church, on the other hand, despite its own suffering at this time, could view the event as the fulfilment of words of Jesus (Mt. 24:1–2). The letter to the Hebrews, though its date and authorship are disputed, shows how the early church came to terms with the fact that the rituals of the temple (or 'tabernacle') were no longer relevant to those who were in Christ.

For all this, the status of the law and Jewish identity for Christians was a painful issue in these decades. There were clearly those in the Jerusalem church who were reluctant to give up their deeply ingrained Jewish traditions, as the presence of Pharisees in their number at the Council of Jerusalem shows (Acts 15:5). Defeated on that occasion by the pleading of Peter, their influence remained considerable. When Paul returned to Jerusalem from his third missionary journey, James, the brother of Jesus, who was by this time apparently the leader of the Jerusalem church, expressed the anxiety of a number of its members that Paul may have been discouraging the observance of the ceremonial law among his converts (Acts 21:20–26). Clearly the temptation to go back to Jewish customs was strong for the believers. Paul tells us that even Peter yielded to it in Antioch (Gal. 2:11–12). In Palestine, then, this was the greatest issue facing the early church. Those who were not so bound to the Jewish heritage may well have been driven out by pressure from the authorities. This, indeed, may have been the real beginning of the Gentile mission.

The Gentile mission

The chief impetus to the Gentile mission, however, came from the journeys of the apostle Paul. As a result of his missionary journeys to Asia Minor and Greece, the Christian church was soon flourishing in many places in the Mediterranean world. Cyprus and parts of Asia Minor were the destinations of his first journey; Macedonia was the second, and a more wide-ranging excusion into Asia Minor the third (see the maps in the commentary on Acts). The three journeys were completed by AD 58. In Rome, indeed, the church already existed and was apparently thriving when he wrote his letter to it about AD 57, even before he arrived there.

Paul's strategy was to go first to the synagogues. Yet the mission was certainly a 'Gentile' one, and the young church consisted of both Jews and Gentiles. Here too, however, the question as to the status of the ceremonial law was soon an issue. This no doubt arose partly because of Paul's tactic of going first to the synagogues. But there were those within the church who were zealous to promote a 'Jewish' understanding of the gospel. Paul opposed these vehemently in the letter to the Galatians (Gal. 3:1–5; 5:2–12). It is true that Paul had Timothy circumcised, as a tactical measure in his mission to Jews (Acts 16:3) – though he knew that circumcision was of no value in itself (1 Cor. 7:19). However, it was of the essence of his gospel that salvation was by grace through Christ, and not by the law. In the diaspora, as in Palestine, Jews recognized that this posed the most serious threat to their beliefs, and therefore, where they did not become converted, they often vigorously opposed the new faith (Acts 14:19).

Rome too was quick to understand that something different was here; the Emperor Nero could single out Christians from Jews in a persecution which made them scapegoats for the great fire of Rome in AD 64. This was a serious development for the church in general, because it meant that it could no longer enjoy the protection which was generally afforded to Judaism as a *religio licita* (permitted religion) of the Roman Empire. A further persecution occurred in the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96),

though this involved Jews as well. The cruelties of Rome's less enlightened emperors are reflected in the book of Revelation, where the empire is cast in the role of the old oppressor Babylon.

The hostility of Rome to the early church threw a different light on the issues that faced it. Already in parts of Palestine, and more so in the world beyond, the church faced deep-rooted paganism. Rome itself, indeed, had an official religion, involving the worship of the emperor, which it officially, if spasmodically, enforced, resulting in persecution. Paganism also went deep, however, in the culture of ordinary people. In this context Paul and Barnabas were mistaken for the gods Zeus and Hermes at Lystra (Acts 14:11–12). Paul confronted it again, albeit in a sophisticated form, in Athens (Acts 17). The need to persuade people from such backgrounds of the gospel was a different matter from the debates with fellow-Jews, and Acts contains the beginning of the remarkable story of the apostles' adaptation to it.

The books of the NT were written in this world of intersecting tensions. The Christian church was empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to proclaim the news of Jesus' resurrection. This it did in the gospels, the letters and the apocalypse of John, both opposing the claims of other religions and seeking to win their adherents for Christ. Each of the NT books has its own background and destination and faces particular issues. In that sense the NT has an exciting diversity. But its central commitment to the gospel of Christ is the note on which we can say that 'biblical history' ends, though the story of the church in the centuries to follow was only about to begin.

Gordon McConville

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THE PENTATEUCH

Within the OT the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy not only come first; they are first in importance. They describe the origins of Israel as a people and the revelation of God that created the nation in the first place, and through the law determined their whole way of life. These five books make up the first section of the Hebrew Bible, and in the NT (*e.g.* Lk. 24:44) they are simply referred to as 'The Law', a title still used by the Jews today. The Pentateuch, a Greek term, means (lit.) 'five scrolls'.

This article aims to explain the structure of the Pentateuch and its central theme; to outline the particular contribution of each book to the theme; and finally to examine the historical origin of the Pentateuch and the questions of sources, setting and authorship.

David Clines has aptly summed up the theme of the Pentateuch as 'the partial fulfilment – which implies also the partial non-fulfilment – of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs' (*The Theme of the Pentateuch* [JSOT Press; 1978], p. 29). The promises to the patriarchs, of land, descendants, a covenant relationship and blessing to the nations, are first announced in Gn. 12:1–3, when the Lord called Abraham to leave his family for a land that he would show him. The many subsequent divine messages in Genesis elaborate and enrich these promises. For example, it is gradually made clear that the land of Canaan was the land promised and that it would be the possession of Abraham's descendants for ever (*e.g.* Gn. 13: 14–17; 17:8). The promise of descendants is made more specific too, as it becomes clear that the first of these descendants was not Lot (ch. 13), nor Eliezer (ch. 15), nor Ishmael (ch. 17), but Isaac, the only son of Abraham's elderly wife Sarah.

It is not just the promises that relate to the theme of the Pentateuch. Every episode in the history or statute in the law contributes to the unfolding of the theme. For example, the urgent demand for holiness relates to two aspects of the promise, the gift of the land and the covenant relationship. Israel is commanded to be holy like God, for holiness is the essence of his character, and Israel as the Lord's covenant-partner must imitate her God (Lv. 11:45). Furthermore, the continued presence of God and Israel within the promised land depends on the latter's righteous behaviour. Heinous sins pollute the land making it impossible for the Lord to dwell there and prompting the land to vomit out its inhabitants (Lv. 18:25–28).

Although Gn. 1 reveals God as the almighty Creator who made and controls the whole world, the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham is never completed in the Pentateuch. His descendants totalled about seventy by the time his grandson Jacob left Canaan (Gn. 46:27), were enough to cause concern to the Pharaoh of Egypt some generations later (Ex. 1:10), but were still too few to populate the land of Canaan in the days of Moses according to Dt. 7:17–22. Similarly, although the whole land was promised to Abraham, all he managed to acquire was enough ground to bury Sarah (Gn. 23). Jacob purchased a little more (Gn. 33:19), but the Pentateuch ends with Moses viewing the whole land from a mountain top in Moab and the people poised to cross the Jordan to enter Canaan (Dt. 34). The promises are only partially fulfilled within the Pentateuch itself. The five books look to the future for the ultimate fulfilment of the promise. Running through them is the tension between the 'now' of present fulfilment and the 'not yet' of future complete fulfilment.

Gn. 1 – 2 portray creation as it came perfect from the Creator's hand. All human needs were provided for: man, woman and God lived together in perfect harmony. Each trusted the other and enjoyed each other's company, walking together in the verdant Garden of Eden in the cool of the day. This golden age was abruptly brought to an end by human disobedience when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Their expulsion from the garden signalled the end of an era, an era which human effort could never recover. Yet the Pentateuch looks for a partial restoration of this ideal age through God's initiative. The land of Canaan would be a place where the Lord would live with his people as he had lived in Eden: indeed in the tabernacle or temple he would 'walk' among them just as he walked there (Lv. 26:12; Nu. 35:34). The promise to Abraham that he would have a multitude of descendants is an assurance that by divine power he would fulfil the command given to the first couple, 'be fruitful and increase in number'. The archetypal marriage of Adam and Eve in Gn. 2 portrays the ideal of marriage presupposed in the laws of Lv. 18, 20; Dt. 22, 24, and is explicitly appealed to by Jesus and Paul as God's pattern for marriage and male-female relationships in the new age inaugurated by Christ's coming (Mt. 19:3–12; Eph. 5:22–33). That too was an era when God

walked on earth. But like the Pentateuch, the NT looks for a complete fulfilment in the new Jerusalem, when 'the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God' (Rev 21:3).

Content and theme of individual books

Having sketched the overarching theme of the Pentateuch, the partial fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs, we now turn to its outworking in the separate books from Genesis to Deuteronomy.

Genesis

Genesis ('Origin') explains the origins of the world and Israel's place in it. To appreciate the opening chapters, modern readers must put themselves in the shoes of someone living 3,000 years ago in the ancient Near East. Such a person would have been familiar with many stories of world origins from Babylon and Egypt. Reading Genesis for the first time an ancient Canaanite or Babylonian would have been surprised. For although in outline the plot of Gn. 1–11 has parallels with other ancient texts, the picture of the power and moral concern of the one almighty God who is revealed in Genesis would astonish anyone brought up to believe in a multitude of petty impotent gods and goddesses.

The major theme of Genesis and the following four books is the fulfilment of God's promises to the patriarchs. In 12:1–3 God promised Abraham that he would be given land, numerous descendants, a close relationship with God (a covenant) and that through him all nations would be blessed.

The rest of Genesis expands and elaborates these promises (see especially chs. 15, 17, 22, 28, 46). But more than that, Genesis shows these promises being fulfilled gradually and partially. After many years of waiting a son Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah (21:1–7). When Sarah died, Abraham used the opportunity to buy a small plot of land in Canaan to bury his wife (ch. 23). Through Abraham, Melchizedek and Abimelek received blessing (chs. 14; 20); and through Joseph, Egypt and many surrounding nations were saved from famine (chs. 42–47).

Above all, however, the Lord promised that he would be Abraham's God and would protect him. And this he did, despite the many occasions on which Abraham's faith failed and he acted foolishly (*e.g.* 12:10–20; 16; 20). Nevertheless, God was with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (*e.g.* 26 3; 28:15; 39:2, 21), protecting and prospering them.

Running through Genesis is the theme of grace, God's mercy despite human sin. The opening chapters of the book show God creating a perfect environment in the Garden of Eden. Human rebellion led to expulsion from the garden. Worse and more widespread sin led to the flood destroying all mankind. Yet God started again with a new race headed by righteous Noah. Unfortunately he slipped and his son Ham sinned too (9:20–27), and the process of sin engulfing mankind began again, culminating in the dispersal of the nations at Babel (11: 1–9).

God started again with Abraham, the forefather of Israel, and Genesis shows how God planned to restore the human race through him and his descendants. But the divine programme was obviously still incomplete by the end of Genesis, leading us to read further to discover how God's purposes were eventually fulfilled.

Exodus

Exodus ('Way Out') tells how the people of Israel went out from Egypt and travelled to Mt. Sinai. There the Lord appeared to them, made a covenant with them that he would be their God, and revealed the law.

The ancestors of Israel had entered Egypt at the invitation of Joseph in about 1700 BC. A change in the Egyptian dynasty led to the persecution and slavery of the Israelites. Under the leadership of Moses they escaped from Egypt in about 1300 BC, or maybe about a century earlier (the archaeological evidence is indecisive; see page 234). As with the other books of the Pentateuch, an understanding of Exodus must come mainly from reading it not from external sources.

Exodus develops the themes already broached in Genesis. It opens (1:7) by noting that the Israelites had become very numerous: they would soon become a great nation as Gn. 12 promised. Shortly afterwards God met Moses at the burning bush and assured him that he would bring Israel to the land of Canaan promised to Abraham. But the focus of Exodus is on the establishment of the covenant between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai: the first half of the book looks forward to this, and the second half looks back to it. Once again this is a confirmation of the promise to Abraham that the Lord would make an eternal covenant between himself and Abraham's descendants (Gn. 17:7). In so doing God did not just demonstrate faithfulness to his promise, but also his almighty power, his moral holiness and his forgiving love.

Chs. 1–15 pit God and Moses against the Pharaoh of Egypt, the superpower of the ancient Middle East. Moses, instructed by the

Lord, asked Pharaoh's permission to take the Israelites to worship on the holy mountain. Pharaoh kept on refusing despite a series of horrific disasters, the ten plagues. The last plague prompted Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, but then he changed his mind once again, only to pursue them into the Red Sea where the Egyptians were drowned, so demonstrating God's sovereign power over the strongest of men.

Chs. 19 – 24 focus on the awesome law-giving at Sinai. God's terrifying presence was symbolized by fire, smoke and thunder on the mountain, scaring the Israelites from approaching. So Moses was appointed as mediator to pass on the terms of the covenant, including the Ten Commandments (ch. 20) and many other laws (chs. 21 – 23). The people's acceptance of these terms (ch. 24) should have made possible the permanent living of God among them in the sacred tent or tabernacle (chs. 25 – 31).

Israel's total unworthiness for this honour was quickly demonstrated by their making and worshipping a golden calf (ch. 32), thus breaking the first two commandments. Such blatant disregard for the covenant merited national extinction. But Moses' passionate intercession, in which he reminded the Lord of his promises to the patriarchs, prompted him to relent. After a token slaughter of the covenant breakers by loyal Levites the covenant was restored. The book closes with the visible demonstration of God's mercy as his glory filled the newly erected tabernacle (40: 34–35).

Leviticus

Leviticus ('About Levites') is mainly concerned with how worship should be conducted by priests, Levites and laity in the tent shrine called the tabernacle. It essentially continues the narrative and laws set out in Exodus. All the events mentioned in Leviticus occurred soon after the nation arrived at Mt. Sinai.

Leviticus spends much time describing sacrifices and other ceremonies, which makes it a difficult book to understand and interpret. Because most modern readers have not seen a sacrifice, these chapters are often dismissed as obscure and irrelevant. But anthropologists insist that ritual is a key to understanding a society's deepest values. So Leviticus is a key to some of the most central theological ideas in the Bible, especially about sin and atonement. Those who want to bring the material in Leviticus alive and appreciate its ancient impact should not just read the text of the book, but try to act out its ceremonies.

Leviticus continues to demonstrate the fulfilment of God's promises to the patriarchs. Central to those promises was the assurance that the Lord would be Israel's God, and that they would be his people. This relationship had been jeopardized by their making the golden calf, and only Moses' intercession had ensured their reinstatement as the people of God. God's blessing was shown by his glory filling the tabernacle (Ex. 40) and by another display of God's glory when Aaron and his sons were ordained priests (Lv. 9:23). Ch. 26 paints a picture of overflowing blessing, great crops, peace and prosperity throughout the land. But more important than all these material benefits was the presence of God living in Israel's midst (26:11).

However, it is impossible for a holy God to live with sinners without destroying them. This is vividly illustrated by the sudden death of the newly ordained sons of Aaron in punishment for entering the sanctuary uninvited (ch. 10). So the laws of Leviticus make possible continued fellowship between the Lord and Israel despite the latter's sinfulness.

Leviticus begins by explaining five different types of sacrifice. Every sacrifice pictures the Israelite, symbolized in the animal offered, being brought into relationship with God, symbolized by the altar and its fire. So, for example, complete dedication to God is portrayed by the burnt offering in which the whole animal is given to God (ch. 1). Purification from, and forgiveness of, sin is achieved by the sin offering (ch. 4). In this way sacrifice made it possible for God to continue to live with Israel.

Israel for her part must aim to avoid sin, to be holy like God himself (*cf.* 11:45). It therefore contains many laws designed to ensure Israel's purity. Certain foodstuffs were prohibited, and certain diseases or conditions must be shunned by those who worship God (chs. 11 – 15). The exact thinking behind these regulations is difficult, but one central idea is that God is perfect life, whereas many of these unclean conditions suggest death, the opposite of life. Therefore, those who wish to be near God must keep away from them.

The closing chapters of Leviticus stress that being holy is not merely a question of don'ts, of avoiding ungodlike situations, it involves do's, of behaving like God. Chs. 18–25 therefore include a string of positive teachings, on looking after the poor who fall into debt (ch. 25), celebrating the great festivals (ch. 23), caring for immigrants, the blind, the deaf and the orphans, commands all summed up in 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (19:18). In so doing the Israelite reflects God's own love for the oppressed and underprivileged, for holiness means godlikeness.

Numbers

Numbers continues the story of Israel's migra-

tion from Egypt to Canaan (the land of Israel). It covers a period of roughly forty years from about 1290 to 1250 BC on the usual dating of the exodus. It is thus the sequel to the books of Exodus and Leviticus. Whereas Exodus focuses on the journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, Leviticus on the lawgiving at Sinai, Numbers is concerned with the journey from Sinai to Canaan.

Numbers divides this journey into three main phases. Chs. 1 – 14 deal with the first journey from Sinai and tell us about Israel's fateful lack of faith when they reached the borders of Canaan. Chs. 15 – 19 deal rather sketchily with the forty years of wanderings in the Sinai peninsula. These wanderings were a judgment on the people for their lack of faith. Finally, chs. 20 – 36 relate their successful approach to the back door of Canaan, via Transjordan. The book closes with Israel poised to enter the promised land and cross the River Jordan.

The book's subject matter links it closely with the theme of the Pentateuch, namely the partial fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs. Back in Gn. 12:1–3 God had promised to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation and to give them the land of Canaan. However the fulfilment of these promises had taken a long time. But in Numbers the promises seem to be on the verge of fulfilment. Israel had become a large and powerful people, who so frightened the king of Moab that he called the greatest prophet of the day, Balaam, to curse Israel. However, Balaam ended up blessing the nation, predicting even greater power for them in the future and victorious kings arising from their midst (chs. 22 – 24)

Even more significant is the land. Chs. 1 – 9 describe Israel being organized to march from Sinai to Canaan. They are counted; the censuses mentioned in chs. 1 and 26 give their name to the book. When the frontier was reached, twelve spies were sent out to survey all Canaan. They brought back a glowing account of the fertility of the land, but suggested it was impregnable owing to the strength of its inhabitants. This was an act of disobedient unbelief comparable to the golden calf incident in Ex. 32. Once again it was Moses' intercession that saved the nation from annihilation. But the conquest was delayed still further, and the rebels were forced to wander forty years in the wilderness rather than enter the land themselves (ch. 13 – 14).

Eventually, after several further rebellions against Moses' authority, they moved on. The peoples of Transjordan were defeated (chs. 21 – 31). Then all Israel was organized to cross the Jordan to capture its cities. The tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, who wanted to settle in Transjordan, were permitted to do so, as long as they sent troops to fight in the battle for Canaan (ch. 32). The book closes with a series of laws defining Canaan's borders and how the land was to be distributed among the secular tribes and the priestly tribe of Levi (chs. 34 – 35). Special attention is given to the establishment of cities of refuge for those guilty of manslaughter to escape to. The land was more than Israel's homeland; it was the land in which God had chosen to dwell. It was, therefore, a holy land and it must be kept pure, especially of the impurity caused by murder (ch. 35). It was, furthermore, to be Israel's land for ever, and the book closes with regulations designed to ensure that tribal lands were kept within the tribe (ch. 36).

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy ('The Second Law') is Moses' farewell to the nation of Israel. It consists of three sermons given by him before his death, two poems, and a short obituary notice. In some ways it sums up all that has gone before, hence its name 'second law'. Whereas Exodus to Numbers record God's laws as they were given to Israel, here in Deuteronomy we have Moses preaching about the law and applying it to the situation Israel was about to experience in the land of Canaan.

However it is more than a summary of the past, it is a look into the future. It is a prophetic book. It describes how Moses, the greatest of Israel's prophets, set out Israel's prospects in Canaan. He invited them to choose whether they would follow God's law, a way of prosperity and blessing, or their own whims and inclinations, a route to disaster.

Thematically Deuteronomy weaves a rich tapestry of theological ideas. First and foremost it emphasizes the gracious generosity of God. This is shown by the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Israel had been brought out of Egypt, had experienced God's presence in a vivid way at Mt. Sinai, and was now on the verge of the land flowing with milk and honey, full of good houses ready for them to inhabit. This was a land given them by God, not because they deserved it, but because God keeps his promises (chs. 7 – 8).

Secondly, Deuteronomy stresses Israel's unworthiness, indeed persistent sinfulness. They made the golden calf; they refused to enter the land when the spies discouraged them. They grumbled about food and water. Even Moses lost his temper, disobeyed the Lord, and forfeited his right to enter Canaan. And Moses feared that Israel would do this again; they would forsake the Lord and worship Canaanite gods. And if they did, they would be driven from the land, just as the Canaanites were (chs. 9 – 11).

So, thirdly, Israel must keep the covenant wholeheartedly. 'Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (6:5) sums up the whole message of Moses. This meant keeping the Ten Commandments given by God at Sinai (ch. 5). It meant applying the Commandments to every sphere of life. The second and longest sermon of Moses consists of a historical retrospect followed by an expansion and application of the commandments to every sphere of Israel's life in Canaan; the laws in chs. 12 – 25 roughly follow the order of the commandments and expand and comment on them. Israel must be as warm-hearted in her response to the law as the Lord had showed himself in giving her the land and the law itself.

Finally, Israel's future destiny depended on her response to the law. Obedience to the commandments would lead to immense prosperity in family, farm and nation, whereas disobedience would result in disaster, culminating in expulsion from the land (ch. 28). But if this happened, and Moses feared it would, it would not spell the end of Israel's relationship with God. Repentance would lead to renewal of the covenant blessings and national prosperity would be restored (chs. 29 – 30, 32).

The composition of the Pentateuch

While there is broad agreement among many scholars about the theme of the Pentateuch as sketched above, there are very deep differences of opinion about its composition. This has not always been the case; indeed, for nearly two millennia it was universally agreed that Moses was the principal author of the whole Pentateuch. It therefore seems best to tackle the issue of composition under three heads. First, the traditional theory of Mosaic authorship. Secondly, the consensus critical view, the documentary hypothesis, which reigned almost unchallenged from 1880 to 1980. Thirdly, modern theories.

The traditional view

From pre-Christian times to the beginning of the nineteenth century it was accepted by nearly everyone that Moses was the author of nearly all the Pentateuch. This is a natural conclusion to draw from a straightforward reading of Genesis to Deuteronomy. From Ex. 2 onwards Moses is the leading actor in the story. The Lord revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3); then Moses negotiated with Pharaoh for Israel's release and brought the people through the Red Sea to Sinai. There he personally received the Ten Commandments, other laws and the instructions for erecting the tabernacle. The narrative stresses that many of the laws were not announced publicly to the whole nation, for the Lord's appearance on the mountain was too terrifying. Instead they were made known to Moses alone (Ex. 20:19–21; Dt. 5:5), who then passed them on to the people.

Moses' role as a mediator is stressed throughout the Pentateuch. Time and again laws are introduced by the statement, 'Then the LORD said to Moses'. This implies a special intimacy with God, suggesting that if God is the ultimate source of the law, Moses was its channel, if not the human author of it. This impression is reinforced most strongly by the book of Deuteronomy, with Moses addressing the nation in his own words, explaining the laws given on Sinai and urging Israel to keep them when they enter the promised land.

Deuteronomy contains the last words of Moses to Israel before he died. Moses talks about himself in the first person, 'The idea seemed good to *me*' (1:23); and sometimes he identifies with Israel 'as the LORD *our* God commanded *us*, *we* set out' (1:19). At other times he sets himself over against them, '*I* told *you*, but *you* would not listen' (1:43). Chs. 1 – 11 describe most of the same events from the exodus to the conquest of Transjordan as the books of Exodus to Numbers do, but whereas these books recount it from the perspective of a narrator outside the situation, Deuteronomy describes the events as Moses experienced them. The claim that Moses is the speaker in Deuteronomy is inescapable.

If Deuteronomy ended at 31:8, it would be possible to suppose that Moses preached about the law, but someone else, perhaps much later, committed his ideas to writing. However 31:9, 'Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests', and 31:24, 'Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end', seem to exclude such a loose view of Mosaic authorship. If then Moses wrote Deuteronomy, it would seem likely that Exodus to Numbers were written by him earlier in his career, and that Genesis, the indispensable introduction to the other books, may well have been composed by him too.

These are the arguments that led early Jewish writers, the NT, and nearly everyone who studied the Bible until about 1800 to conclude that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. Consequently, Genesis was often called the first book of Moses, and so on. However in the nineteenth century this ancient consensus began to crumble, and to this change of approach we must now turn.

The 'documentary hypothesis'

It all began with an interesting book written by a French doctor, J. Astruc in 1753. Astruc

observed that in the early chapters of Genesis God is sometimes referred to as God and at others as 'the LORD'. This suggested to him that at least two sources had been drawn on by Moses in the writing of Genesis. This was supported by the observation that there was duplication of material in Genesis (*e.g.* two accounts of creation in chs. 1 and 2).

Astruc had no intention of denying the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch; he was simply exploring what sources Moses may have used. Yet his source analysis became a key ingredient of later criticism. In the course of the nineteenth century his analysis was refined, and some scholars argued that these sources were later than Moses.

About fifty years after Astruc a much more radical proposal was put forward by W. M. L. de Wette, who in his dissertation of 1805, and in another work (1806–7), argued that Deuteronomy was written in the time of Josiah (*i.e.* about seven centuries after Moses) and that the book of Chronicles gives a quite unreliable account of the history of Israel's worship. Both these ideas became central in the view of pentateuchal origins that emerged later in the century. So it is appropriate here to note how de Wette reached his conclusions, for they are fundamental to the new critical consensus often known as the documentary hypothesis.

De Wette noted that Chronicles has much more to say about worship than Kings does, although both deal with the same historical period. Hitherto scholars had regarded the details of Chronicles as an accurate supplement to the picture in Kings, but de Wette argued that since Chronicles was written after Kings, it could not be trusted. By dismissing the evidence of Chronicles in this way he could more easily argue that Deuteronomy too was a late work.

The language and atmosphere of Deuteronomy differ from the preceding books, but that hardly determines when it was written. What de Wette fastened on was Deuteronomy's insistence that all worship should be conducted at the place which the Lord would choose. Deuteronomy forbids worship at the country shrines, on the hilltop altars under every green tree, but insists that sacrifices, and especially the national feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, must be held at the central sanctuary chosen by the Lord (ch. 16). A reading of Samuel and Kings suggests that such strict rules were not introduced until the seventh century BC. Then in about 622 BC King Josiah abolished all the country shrines and required worship to take place only in Jerusalem (2 Ki. 22 – 23). If Deuteronomy's principles for worship were not enforced until Josiah's day, is it not easier to suppose the principles were invented then than to suppose that Deuteronomy's laws were a dead letter from the time of Moses? This argument of de Wette connecting Deuteronomy with the centralization of worship in Josiah's day was to become one of the main planks in the 'Wellhausen synthesis' at the end of the century.

Most of Wellhausen's ideas had been anticipated by others. But he transformed OT scholarship with a book published in 1878, sweeping away traditional views of the origin of the Pentateuch. If few of his ideas were new, the way they were presented by Wellhausen was brilliant and appealed very strongly in an era when the theory of evolution was new and believed by many to explain not just biological change but many other historical developments.

Wellhausen painted a picture of Israel's religious development that seemed natural and inevitable without the need for miracle or divine revelation. In the earliest stages, he argued, Israelite religion was relatively unregulated. People offered sacrifice when they liked and where they liked, without any priestly interference. This is the situation Wellhausen saw reflected in the books of Samuel and Kings. At the end of the monarchy period King Josiah intervened, limiting all worship to Jerusalem, thereby greatly enhancing the power of the priests, who were now able to control the details of worship. Once the priests had this power, they consolidated it, and during the exile (587–537 BC) they invented all sorts of rules and regulations about the details of worship, the status of the priests, their entitlement to tithes and sacrificial portions and so on.

Wellhausen then proceeded to show how this picture of Israel's religious evolution could be tied in with the sources of the Pentateuch, which had first been identified by Astruc. Wellhausen accepted that four main sources could be identified, which were designated by the letters J, E, P and D. J, the Yahwistic source, uses the divine name 'the LORD' (Yahweh). It comprises about half of Genesis and small parts of Exodus and Numbers. E, the Elohistic source, only uses the generic term 'God' (Elohim). It comprises about a third of Genesis and small parts of Exodus and Numbers. P, the priestly source, like E uses the generic term 'God'. It comprises about a sixth of Genesis (mainly chs.1, 17, 23 and various genealogies) and most of Ex. 25 – Nu. 36. D is the book of Deuteronomy.

Wellhausen argued that Deuteronomy (D) knows only the material found in J and E, but that P knows the material in J, E and D. This gives a relative ordering of the material in the Pentateuch; J→E→D→P. He then argued that the picture of worship in J and E matches the practice of worship in the monarchy period,

when lay people could worship where and when they liked. The picture of D[euteronomy] fits in with the aims of Josiah's centralizing reforms, while P's attention to the minute details of worship fits in with the dictatorship of the priestly class which Wellhausen surmised had developed in and after the exile. He therefore suggested that J should be dated *c.* 850 BC, E *c.* 750 BC, D *c.* 622 BC and P *c.* 500 BC. These sources, once they had been written down, were merged one after the other, so that eventually the current Pentateuch emerged in the time of Ezra (fifth century BC).

The implications of this approach to the Pentaeuch were far-reaching. If the earliest sources, J and E, were written about six centuries after Moses, they could hardly be relied on to give an accurate picture of that era, let alone the patriarchal era. And if J and E were untrustworthy, how much more so were the later sources D and P. Wellhausen himself was quite clear about the consequences of his critical position. J and E give us no historical information about the patriarchal period; instead they project the religious situation of the monarchy period into hoary antiquity like a 'glorified mirage'. Similarly, D and P reflect the concerns of the time in which they were composed, not the Mosaic era.

Wellhausen's negative judgment about the historical worth of the Pentateuch initially evoked a very hostile reaction. Nevertheless, his approach soon became widely accepted by critical Protestant scholarship. It took much longer for it to be embraced by Catholic or Jewish scholars.

The acceptance of this theory was aided by several factors. First, it was accepted and advocated by scholars like S. R. Driver, who, unlike Wellhausen, did believe in biblical inspiration and argued that the late dating of the pentateuchal sources did not affect their spiritual value. One could accept Wellhausen's critical theories without betraying the Christian faith and becoming an atheist.

Secondly, and probably more significant in the long run, were the modifications made to the documentary theory by the form-critical school of Gunkel, Alt, Noth and von Rad. By arguing that behind the relatively late sources (J, E, D, P) there were old traditions, (some indeed reaching back to, or even before Moses), this form-critical school restored trust in the historical value of the Pentateuch to some extent. It may after all tell us something about the periods to which it purports to relate; maybe not a lot, but certainly more than the nil returns of Wellhausen. For example, Gunkel in his commentary on Genesis (1901) suggests that the earliest form of the patriarchal stories came from before Israel's settlement in the land. Similarly H. Gressmann (1913) argued that a primitive form of the Ten Commandments came from the time of Moses.

More important for confirming the impression that acceptance of the documentary hypothesis did not mean saying good-bye to any knowledge of the patriarchal era was the work of A. Alt (1929). He argued that the picture of patriarchal religion in a few passages in Genesis (31:5, 29, 53; 46:3; 49:25) was true to their nomadic life-style, with the essential idea of a tribal god, who protected the tribe in its wanderings and blessed it with children. Although Alt relied on a very narrow range of texts, his picture of patriarchal religion resembles in outline the picture a more traditional reader might construct.

Similarly, by focusing on those elements common to both J and E, M. Noth (1930) was able to construct a picture of Israel before the monarchy that consisted of a league of tribes bound together by covenant, fighting holy wars and worshipping at a central shrine. Once again, though Noth was very far from finding much history in the Pentateuch itself, he was sketching an outline of Israel's religious constitution that was not dissimilar to an uncritical reading of Exodus to Judges. In a similar way G. von Rad (1938) argued that the earliest Bible creed in Dt. 26 gradually developed in the course of time into our present Pentateuch. By affirming a continuity between the oldest elements in the Pentateuch and the existing work and finding a slim historical kernel within it, these scholars helped to make the documentary hypothesis more palatable.

The archaeological approach of the American W. F. Albright and his school further enhanced the impression that the Pentateuch could be trusted, even if its constituent sources were very late. They argued that the names of the patriarchs were typical names of the early second millennium, that the migrations and seminomadic life-style of the patriarchs also fitted this period, and that many of the legal rites and family customs mentioned in Genesis (*e.g.* giving dowries) were also attested in old nonbiblical texts. This all showed the essential historical trustworthiness of Genesis. R. de Vaux's *The Early History of Israel* (1971) is probably the greatest monument to this approach, combining judiciously the insights of archaeology with the critical methods of Alt, Noth and Wellhausen to produce a quite positive view of Israel's historical development.

There was thus a consensus across the scholarly world that there were four main sources (J, E, D, P) in the Pentateuch, mostly written long after 1000 BC, which, despite their age, gave a good insight into the history of Israel

between 2000 and 1300 BC.

The collapse of the consensus

The 1970s saw the publication of several seminal works which initiated a period of great turmoil in pentateuchal studies. In 1974 T. L. Thompson presented a thorough examination of the oft-cited archaeological arguments for the historical character of the patriarchal narratives. He showed that many of the arguments proved much less than was often alleged, indeed that sometimes the Bible or the parallel non-biblical sources had been misinterpreted to bolster belief in Genesis There were some elements left that looked early, *e.g.* the names of the patriarchs, but if one believed that Genesis was written after 1000 BC, as Thompson did, these could be explained quite differently.

J. Van Seters (1975) went further in querying the critical consensus. He argued, not that the patriarchal stories were undatable as Thompson did, but that they actually fitted conditions and legal institutions of the sixth century BC. Furthermore, he queried the two-century old belief that the variation in the names of God ('the LORD'/'God') or that parallel stories (*cf.* Gn.12 /Gn. 20) were necessarily indicators of different writers or sources. In fact Van Seters went a long way to eliminating the E source in Gn.12 – 26, arguing that it was not a coherent entity, but just early elements incorporated by J, who was the major author of this part of Genesis.

R. Rendtorff (1977), like Van Seters, dispensed with many of the standard criteria for distinguishing sources and poured scorn on many of the arguments put forward by scholars favouring a documentary analysis. He argued that Genesis emerged in quite a different fashion. There was one group of stories about Abraham, another group about Jacob, another about Joseph. These grew independently for a long while until they were joined together by an editor who linked up the originally separate stories to form a coherent long narrative.

Finally, there was the great commentary on Genesis by C. Westermann, published in instalments from 1968 to 1982. Westermann is of similar vintage and outlook to de Vaux, whereas Thompson, Van Seters and Rendtorff are younger radicals, and his work is probably more significant than theirs. Yet Westermann, while holding fast to a tenth-century date for the J source (not the sixth century as Van Seters holds) does more or less dispense with the E source. The patriarchal stories tend to be viewed by Westermann as a substantial unity from the hand of J, with occasional inserts from the much later P source.

Another trend in biblical studies that began to make its mark in the 1970s has encouraged scholars to read the Pentateuch as a unity. The new literary criticism is primarily concerned with understanding works in their existing form not with the process of their composition. It is concerned with the arrangement of works as wholes, their theme, the use a narrator makes of devices such as repetition, mimesis (portrayal of reality), and dialogue; the depiction of character and motive within narrative. The old criticism, on the other hand, was preoccupied with authorship, the date of composition, sources, and the historical circumstances surrounding the writing of the text. The new literary criticism has led to a much greater appreciation of the techniques of the Hebrew writers and often, as a consequence, to a rejection of the criteria used to distinguish sources. For example, whereas repetition tended to be viewed by older critics as a mark of multiple sources, new critics tend to regard it as an important narrative device, which can be exploited by a single author for dramatic effect. There has been no frontal attack by new literary critics on the documentary hypothesis, but many asides from *e.g.* R. Alter (1981) and M. Sternberg (1985), who indicate their dissatisfaction with the standard source criticism. And the unified readings of the Pentateuch offered by Clines (see bibliography) and Whybray owe much to the new criticism.

These new directions in pentateuchal studies have broken the century-old critical consensus, but they have not established themselves as a new orthodoxy. They probably represent the views of a vocal minority, whereas a silent majority still hold a moderate form of the documentary hypothesis such as de Vaux defended.

We can perhaps set out the main critical options in a table:

Old documentary hypothesis			New critical view	
J	10th century	Contain authentic echoes of Moses and the patriarchs	6th century	Reflects late monarchy or exilic situation
E	8th century			Not really a distinct source
D	7th century		7th century	
P	6th century or later		6th century or later	

The new critical view retains the late dating of D and P of the old documentary hypothesis but rejects the distinction between J and E. It maintains that the enlarged J (roughly old J + E) does not give historical insight into the early periods (*i.e.* the patriarchs, Moses or the judges), but rather into the beliefs of the Jews in the exile.

Hitherto we have only looked at the views of mainline critical Christian scholars. Critical Jewish scholars have in recent years made the greatest contribution to the study of the ritual texts of the Pentateuch (*i.e.* Ex. 25 – Nu. 36), what is usually termed P. For example, Milgrom has argued that the exilic dating of P is mistaken. The laws on worship in Leviticus do not correspond to what was done in the temple when it was rebuilt after the exile, which they should do if the book was written then. The language of these books (P) is more archaic than that of Ezekiel, the priest-prophet who preached about 600 BC. The style of worship, the equipment used in worship, and the priests' duties as described in Exodus to Numbers have many similarities to what is known about worship in other parts of the ancient Near East of the second millennium BC. This suggests to these scholars that P (Ex. 25 – Nu. 36) is at least pre-exilic and describes what happened in the worship of the first temple, and maybe the tabernacle as well. However, few Christian scholars have paid much attention to these argument and most still seem to regard P as an exilic or post-exilic work.

A conservative response

Given the current critical confusion about the Pentateuch, what can be affirmed about its origins? Can it be trusted at all in what it says about the eras of Moses and the patriarchs? Or were the stories and laws just made up by the exiles to express their hopes for the future? Is the Pentateuch a substantial unity or is it composed of a variety of conflicting sources?

One response to the current debate about the Pentateuch might be: 'The critics are so divided among themselves that they cannot prove anything. So let us just go back to what the Pentateuch says about itself and accept that Moses was its main author.' However, such a response fails to do justice to the earnestness of the debate and the very real issues that have been raised. In attempting to set out a reasoned conservative reflection on the debate four issues need to be addressed. First, how many sources can be identified in the Pentateuch? Are the traditional criteria for distinguishing the sources valid? Secondly, does J date from the time of the exile (*c.* 550 BC), early monarchy (*c.* 950 BC) or Moses (*c.* 1250 BC)? In particular is there any history in the patriarchal stories, and when were the opening chapters of Genesis composed? Thirdly, how far can P and J be sharply defined? When was the priestly material composed? Finally, was Deuteronomy really composed to promote or justify Josiah's reforms in 622 BC? These issues are, of course, highly complex, taking up acres of print in many books, and it is possible here to outline just one direction of thought.

First, source analysis. It was Astruc who suggested that the alternation between 'God' and 'the LORD' (Elohim/Yahweh) marked different sources. Nowadays it is widely accepted that this criterion does not serve to distinguish the sources J and E very well, so that many conclude that there is no E source. However, the distinction between the P and J sources is often maintained on the strength of the divine-name criterion and the sources' alleged difference in style. On this basis the flood story (Gn. 6 – 9) is often split into J and P versions. Yet even here several recent writers have acknowledged that the case is not proven. Others have pointed out that other ancient texts also use a variety of names for the same God, so why should this phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible indicate multiple sources? Often in Genesis a theological reason is evident for the alternation. Where God is the universal Creator of the world, the God of foreigners as well as Israelites, 'God' (Elohim) is the preferred term. Where though he is the covenant partner, particularly of Israel, 'the LORD' (Yahweh) is frequently used.

Thus the divine name criterion is a doubtful pointer to different sources. This is not to say that Genesis is a total unity that sprang completely fresh from the mind of one author. It is certain that the writer used a variety of sources, genealogies, poems and narratives in creating his work, but the names of God are by themselves an unreliable guide to source division.

The second major issue is the extent and date of J. For simplicity the discussion here is confined to Genesis. The fragmentary nature of J in the later books makes its existence more problematic there. But in Genesis it comprises about 50% of the text according to the traditional documentary hypothesis; about 85% if, with modern writers, E is not recognized as distinct; and nearly 100% if the P material was written before J and has been worked into his composition.

The scope of J thus remains subject for debate and so does its date. The documentary hypothesis held that J reflects the ideals of the early monarchy, *e.g.* in the boundaries of the promised land (Gn. 15:18–21), the implied rise of the Davidic monarchy (Gn. 38; 49:10) and so

on. More recent radical critics like Van Seters have argued that J reflects the concerns of the exiles yearning to return to Canaan, hence Genesis' preoccupation with God's promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants. These observations about the interests of J certainly show its relevance to various epochs but do not necessarily prove that it originated in those times. In fact, each of the three main parts of Genesis, the 'proto-history' (chs. 1 – 11), the patriarchal story (chs. 12 – 35) and the Joseph story (chs. 37 – 50) could have originated early. The closest ancient Near Eastern parallels to Genesis 1 – 11, the Atrahasis epic, the Gilgamesh epic tablet 11, the Sumerian flood story, and the Sumerian king list all date from the early second millennium. Similarly, the portrait of patriarchal life and religion drawn in Genesis 12 – 25 is unlike that of the Mosaic and subsequent periods. Names, religious practices and legal customs attested in these chapters of Genesis find parallels in the second millennium. Finally there are features in the Joseph story that suggest that it probably originated in the Ramesside era, *i.e.* about the time of Moses.

However, there are enough hints sprinkled throughout Genesis to show that if the book originated earlier than the monarchy period, it was at least revised then. Terms like Dan (14:14), Chaldeans (15:7) or Philistines (21:32,34) and Joseph's title 'lord of his entire household' (45:8) look like modernizations to make the stories more easily intelligible to readers in monarchy times. Similarly, patriarchal religion is described from a later perspective. It was to Moses that the name Yahweh (the LORD) was first revealed: the patriarchs worshipped God as El Shaddai (God Almighty Ex. 3:13–14; 6:3). Yet Genesis, acknowledging that the God who spoke to Moses was the God whom the patriarchs knew, interchanges the terms. Speeches by God tend to use the old terms (El Shaddai, El or Elohim), whereas the narrator frequently speaks of God using later terminology as 'the LORD' (Yahweh).

The P source is dated by the old documentary hypothesis and the new radicals to the exilic era at the earliest. Here the notion that fragments of Genesis (*e.g.* chs. 17, 23) belong to P will not be examined; contrary to the critical consensus, these passages do appear to be some of the older parts of Genesis. The great bulk of the laws on worship between Ex. 25 and Nu. 36 are our concern here. The language and content of these sections show that the P material is much earlier than the exile. Indeed Milgrom believes it reflects worship in the first, *i.e.* Solomonic, temple. Haran has traced some elements to worship in the even earlier tabernacle. This would mean that Mosaic origin of the material is possible. Careful study of Deuteronomy by Milgrom and McConville has demonstrated that it knows P. Contrary to Wellhausen and his documentary hypothesis, Deuteronomy was written after P, as the order of the biblical books itself suggests.

This brings us to the final question, the date of Deuteronomy. For more than a century the date of Deuteronomy has been taken as the fixed point in critical debate; all the other parts of the Pentateuch are dated relative to Deuteronomy. Current critical discussion has hardly looked at this assumption. The source analysis is questioned by some, J and P may be redated by others, but that Deuteronomy is from the late seventh century is hardly questioned. It is simply accepted that the similarity of Deuteronomy's style to that of Jeremiah and the books of Kings and that it contains the programme for Josiah's reformation prove that it dates from that era.

Again these arguments cannot be properly dealt with here. But their uncertainty may be pointed out. First, similarity of Hebrew style does not prove a similar date for Deuteronomy, Jeremiah and Kings. Literary styles changed slowly in the ancient Near East. It is more likely that Jeremiah and Kings were quoting from or alluding to the earlier Deuteronomy to give credibility to their own message. Jeremiah appears to quote from all parts of Deuteronomy, but never from the so-called deuteronomic history (*i.e.* Joshua – 2 Kings). Secondly, Deuteronomy does not promote the aims of Josiah's reformation by limiting all worship to Jerusalem; rather it insists that an altar be built and sacrifices offered at what Josiah would have called 'a high place', namely Mt. Ebal (Dt. 27:5–7). This makes it inappropriate to regard Deuteronomy as a programme for, or a justification of, Josiah's reforms. Thirdly, Deuteronomy does not seem to be aware of the big religio-political issues of the late monarchy period. It is unaware of the division of the nation into two kingdoms. It gives no description of Baalism and Canaanite worship, just condemning it in general terms. On the other hand, it demands the extermination of the Canaanites, who by the seventh century had long since disappeared as an identifiable entity.

These observations undermine the case for a seventh-century date of Deuteronomy. There are features in the book which make an earlier date more probable. First, it appears to be quoted by the earliest writing prophets, Amos and Hosea, in the eighth century BC. Secondly, it is arranged like Hittite treaties of the sixteenth to thirteenth centuries BC and the older laws of Hammurabi (*c.* 1750 BC), not like first-millennium treaties. Thirdly, some of its laws on marriage seem closer to those of documents

of the second millennium than those of the first millennium. These points do not require Mosaic authorship, but they suggest that an early origin of Deuteronomy is possible.

Conclusion

'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit' is Judges' acid comment on the anarchy of that time. A similar lack of consensus is found today in the debates about the Pentateuch. Scholarly arguments are traded to and fro, but underlying the debate there are many undeclared assumptions. For example, should we expect texts to be coherent unities or collections of fragments? Is the Bible innocent until proved guilty or guilty until proved innocent? Does the teaching of Jesus and the apostles determine our view of the inspiration and authorship of these books? Different scholars answer these questions differently and their integrity must be respected.

Reasons have been given above for seeing much greater unity within the Pentateuch than is often alleged by source critics, and for accepting the basic historical trustworthiness of these books. But those who do not share a belief in the essential coherence of texts, or who start with an assumption of their guilt, may find little difficulty in sweeping aside these arguments. So doubtless the debates will continue for a long time. However Christian readers of the OT should remember that 'everything' (including the Pentateuch) 'was written to teach us', not about theories of authorship, but to give us 'hope' (Rom. 15:4), a hope disclosed first to Abraham, partially fulfilled in Moses' time, and ever more fully since. If we make the divine purpose of Scripture ('training in righteousness'; 2 Tim. 3:16) our paramount concern, we may keep critical debates in their proper perspective.

G.J. Wenham

Further reading

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GENESIS

Introduction

Title

The title Genesis comes from the Greek translation (the Septuagint) and means 'origin, source, creation', whereas the Hebrew title (taken from the book's opening words) is 'In the beginning'. Both titles aptly suggest the book's subject-matter, for it describes the origins of the universe, the world, mankind, human institutions (such as marriage), the nations and, above all, the people of Israel. God's creative work in bringing all these things into being is focused in Genesis.

Another title, now more rarely used, is 'The First Book of Moses'. This title highlights the fact that Genesis is the first part of a five-volume work, traditionally ascribed to Moses, otherwise called the Law or the Pentateuch. Genesis puts the lawgiving at Sinai (the subject-matter of Exodus to Deuteronomy) into historical perspective and provides a theological key to the interpretation of the laws and stories contained in those books.

Place and contents

Like the other books of the Bible, Genesis is primarily theological, *i.e.* it is concerned with describing who God is, how and why he acts and how he deals with mankind. Often the activity of God in human affairs is not obvious, either in our everyday life or even in some parts of the Bible (*e.g.* the book of Esther). But in Genesis, especially in the early chapters, God is the central actor. Here he constantly speaks and acts, displaying his power and character. Modern Christian readers, brought up to believe in one all-powerful holy God, may not be surprised by the religious content of Genesis. But ancient readers, coming to the book from a background of the many gods of paganism, would have been astonished by it.

The God of Genesis is not one of many localized gods of limited knowledge and power but the almighty Creator of the whole universe and Lord and Judge of all. It is this God who created mankind, cares for them and judges their misdeeds. It is this God who spoke to Abraham, prompting him to leave his homeland, settle in Canaan (the land of Israel) and bring up his family there. God promised Abraham that his descendants would dwell in Canaan, and Genesis records how, despite numerous mistakes, these promises gradually began to be realized. In the following biblical books a more complete fulfilment of these promises is described. It is this divine perspective that gives Genesis its unity and is central to the author's understanding, and it needs always to be borne in mind as we attempt to relate the stories of Genesis to history. Genesis is not interested in events for their own sake but for what they disclose about the nature of God and his purposes.

Genesis and history

Many individuals pass across the stage of world history in Genesis. Yet, for the most part, their recorded deeds concern their own private families, not national or international affairs. The concern with birth and death, family disputes, grazing and burial rights *etc.* that characterizes these stories makes it plain that for the writer of Genesis the characters he described were real historical individuals. They are not personifications of clans or the products of his imagination.

Yet can we be sure that the stories in Genesis are really historical? As yet, no patriarchal marriage document or evidence of, for example, Jacob's visit to Paddan Aram or Joseph's work as vizier of Egypt has been discovered outside the Bible. This is hardly surprising given the very small proportion of information committed to writing in ancient times and the small fraction of texts that have survived and been discovered by archaeologists. This makes the chances of demonstrating the reality of one of the patriarchs remote, apart from what we find in the Bible. But there are many pointers in Genesis to the antiquity of its traditions, and these make it unlikely that the stories were the creation of religious 'novelists' writing long after the era they profess to describe, as some scholars suggest.

First, the names of the patriarchs are names that were frequently used in the early second millennium BC but only very rarely later. Names like Jacob, Isaac and Ishmael were standard names among the early Amorites (*c.* 1800 BC) but went out of fashion later. Other names in the patriarchal narratives, *e.g.* Serug, Nahor and Terah, confirm that the patriarchs came from the area of Haran.

Secondly, the social customs of the patriarchs

fit those mentioned in ancient Near Eastern texts. Some of the practices (*e.g.* the custom of a man giving his daughter a dowry when she married) changed very little in two thousand years and so do not help us date the stories of the patriarchs exactly. They simply show the stories were true to life, whenever they were written. However, there are some customs which do seem to have changed with time, *e.g.* adopting a slave as an heir (Gn. 15) or calling the eldest boy *rab* (Gn. 25:23), and these place the biblical stories in an early period. Similarly, many features of the Joseph story find better parallels in second-millennium Egyptian texts than in later ones, and this again supports the antiquity of the stories about Joseph.

Thirdly, the religion and morality of the patriarchs appear to be earlier than what is found in other books of the Pentateuch. Sometimes the practice and beliefs of the patriarchs contradict the demands of the later law. For example, Abraham married his half-sister (Gn. 20:12; *cf.* Lv. 18:9), Jacob married two sisters (Gn. 29:21–30; *cf.* Lv. 18:18) and Jacob erected a stone pillar (Gn. 28:18); *cf.* Lv. 26:1; Dt. 16:21–22). In Genesis, God nearly always introduces himself as *El, e.g. El Shaddai* ('God Almighty'; Gn. 17:1), *El Elyon* ('God Most High'; Gn. 14:19). Later (after Ex. 6:3), Yahweh, 'the LORD, became the standard Israelite name for God.

These observations tend to confirm that the patriarchal stories are historical, though obviously we can never prove the details of particular incidents. But when we come to chapters 1 – 11 we are treading on different ground. Most of these stories deal with periods long before writing was invented, so they cannot be 'history' in the strict sense of the term or be verified by evidence from outside the Bible. However, Genesis does try to arrange the stories chronologically and explain things in terms of cause and effect. These are the hallmarks of history writing, so that T. Jacobsen has coined the term 'mytho-historical' to describe such literature (*JBL*, 100 (1981), p. 528). 'Myth' has negative overtones, so 'proto-history' is probably a better way to describe Genesis 1 – 11. In the present state of knowledge it is difficult to know how to relate these chapters to modern scientific discovery. It is more helpful (see below on the theology of Genesis and in the commentary) to read these chapters against the background of beliefs current in the ancient Near East. Then they will be seen to be offering a powerful critique of the belief in many gods. The writer of Genesis seems to assume the historicity of Adam, Eve and their descendants, for he links them all together in long family trees that end with Abraham. This shows that for him Adam was a real individual like Abraham or Isaac.

Authorship

The authorship of Genesis has been one of the most discussed issues in biblical studies, so for a fuller explanation of the issues the reader should look at the article on the Pentateuch. However, the major viewpoints and the stance taken in the commentary are as follows:

Traditionally, Moses (*c.* 1300 BC) was regarded as the main author of Genesis and the following four books. However, it was accepted that certain remarks (*e.g.* 12:6; 36:31) showed that some parts of the book had been added later. The text of Genesis does not claim Moses as its author, in any case.

From the nineteenth century onwards mainline critical scholarship minimized the role of Moses in the composition of the Pentateuch. Indeed, the most widely-accepted view came to be that Genesis was composed from three major sources J (tenth century BC), E (ninth century BC), and P (sixth century BC). Genesis, it was held, went through a series of modifications with new material being added with each new edition.

Since the 1970s there have been many questions raised about the J, E, P documentary theory, with some scholars contesting the dating of the sources and others doubting their very existence. So far, no theory has emerged to replace the old source-critical consensus, so it is still assumed in many textbooks and commentaries.

While this critical debate has continued, it has become widely accepted that the commentator's first job is to explain the present form of the text. Whether the author of Genesis used many sources or just one, what matters is the book as it stands. It is a beautifully constructed whole, full of vividly told stories, that convey a vision of God and his truth which is presupposed throughout the rest of the Bible. So what this commentary focuses on is the present final form of the text. This may well be considerably earlier than is often supposed (for fuller discussions see the article on the Pentateuch). Whoever wrote Genesis, in whatever period, was more interested in telling us about God than in giving us clues to his own identity.

Theology

The book of Genesis splits into two unequal parts. Chapters 1 – 11, the proto-history, focus on the origins of the human race, and chapters 12 – 50, the period of the patriarchs, focus on the origins of Israel. The much greater attention devoted to the patriarchs shows what was the chief concern of the author. So, in reviewing the

main theological themes of Genesis, chapters 12 – 50 will be dealt with first and then chapters 1 – 11, which give background to the choice of Abraham and his descendants.

Theology of Genesis 12 – 50

The key theological themes of Genesis 12 – 50, indeed of the whole Pentateuch, are set out in 12:1–3: 'The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."' Here God makes four promises to Abraham: that he will be given a 'land' (1); that he will become a 'great nation' (2); that he will enjoy a special (covenant) relationship with God (3); and that through him all the nations will be blessed (3). Whenever God addresses the patriarchs in Genesis he refers to these promises, very often amplifying or making them more specific. For example, a 'land' (12:1) becomes 'this land' (12:7), 'all the land you see ... for ever' (13:15) and 'the whole land of Canaan ... as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you' (17:8).

To grasp the importance of the promises in Genesis the reader should look at all God's speeches in the book noting the changes in wording between one passage and the next (12:1–3,7; 13:14–17; 15:1–7,13–21; 16:11–12; 17:1–21; 18:10–32; 21:12–13,17; 22:11–18; 25:23; 26:2–5,24; 28:13–15; 31:3; 32:27–29; 35:1,9–12; 46:3–4). These changes show that God makes the promises ever more specific and dogmatic as the patriarchs respond in faith and obedience. But even their misbehaviour does not nullify the promises; it serves only to slow their fulfilment.

Not only does God make promises, but the patriarchs often mention them, or their friends or foes unwittingly allude to them (15:2,8; 16:2; 17:17–18; 21:6–7; 24:7–8,35–40,60; 26:22, 28–29; 27:27–29; 28:2–4,20–22; 29:32 – 30:24,27; 31:5–16,29,42,49–50; 32:9–12; 33:5, 10–11; 34:10,21; 35:3; 41:52; 45:5–11; 48:3–22; 50:5,19–21,24–25). These quotations from, or allusions to, the promises indicate how important they were to the human actors in the story and to the writer of Genesis.

What is more, the episodes from the patriarchs' lives recorded in Genesis illustrate the fulfilment of the promises. Presumably, the author of Genesis (like the evangelist John; see 20:30–31) knew much more about the patriarchs than he chose to tell. He picked out those episodes that showed how the promises came true, albeit slowly. D. J. A. Clines in *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOT Press, 1979) has aptly defined the theme of the Pentateuch as the partial fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs. Thus, in reading Genesis we must ask about every incident: how does this contribute to the fulfilment of the promises of land, nationhood, covenant relationship and blessing to the nations?

Clearly, not every aspect of these promises is in focus in every episode. Nor does their fulfilment proceed straightforwardly – there are many hiccoughs and setbacks. Genesis is most obviously concerned with the promise of descendants, that Abraham's offspring will become a great nation. Yet, after the mention of Sarah's barrenness in 11:30, it is not till 21:1 (twenty-five years later) that the promised son, Isaac, is born. Similarly, Isaac's wife Rebekah conceived only after Isaac had prayed for a child for twenty years (25:20,26). Similarly, Rachel, Jacob's true love and only real wife in his eyes, was dismayed to find her rival Leah and Jacob's slave wives bearing child after child before she bore one (30:23), and then she died giving birth to a second (35:16–19). By the end of Genesis (46:27) Abraham's descendants numbered seventy, which is hardly a great nation. Although they increased dramatically during the period of Egyptian slavery, the promise of innumerable offspring still seems some way from complete fulfilment even in Exodus.

As for the land promise, all that Abraham acquired was a burial plot for his wife (23:1–20). Isaac gained permission to use some wells (26:22–23), and Jacob bought a shoulder of land near Shechem (33:19; *cf.* 48:22). At the end of Genesis none of Abraham's descendants was living in Canaan, the land of promise; they had all migrated to Egypt. Indeed, entry to the land, though it is the dominating concern of Exodus to Deuteronomy, was not secured till the book of Joshua.

Some of the slowness in the fulfilment of the promises may be ascribed to unbelief or disobedience by the patriarchs (*e.g.* 12:10–20; 16:1–14; 27:1–45). Whatever they did, however, one aspect of the promise repeatedly proved true: God was with the patriarchs, blessing those who blessed them and cursing those who cursed them (12:3). Thus, despite the mortal danger Abraham believed himself to be in Egypt and Gerar, and his faithless fear which placed his wife in jeopardy, both Abraham and Sarah emerged safely and indeed enriched financially from their stays in foreign parts (12:10–20; 20:1–15). Similarly, Isaac prospered despite the opposition of the Philistines (ch. 26). Jacob was conscious that God went with him as he fled for his life to Paddan Aram, and it was

through God's help that he was able to escape the clutches of his double-crossing father-in-law and return in peace to a reconciliation with the brother who had planned to murder him (28:20–21; 31:42; 33:11). Above all, the career of Joseph demonstrated that God was with him, as he rose from prison cell to Pharaoh's deputy (39:5,23; 41:39).

Yet even here the promise was only partially fulfilled. God did make a covenant with Abraham (15:18), confirm it (17:7) and guarantee it (22:15–18). But these general covenants were just preambles to, and a foretaste of, the great covenant of Sinai to be made with Abraham's descendants.

Finally, there was a partial fulfilment of the promise to the nations. Through Abraham's efforts, the king of Sodom was rescued (14:17), and through his prayers, the childless women of Gerar conceived (20:17). Most dramatically of all, Joseph was instrumental in saving many lives, not just his own family's but the Egyptians' and those of other nations too (41:57). He pointed out that this was part of God's plan (45:5–7; 50:20–21).

Theology of Genesis 1 – 11

Why was it necessary for God to choose Abraham, and who was the God who made these promises? How does Abraham fit into world history? It is these questions that Genesis 1 – 11 addresses.

Genesis 12 – 50 shows that the twelve tribes were the twelve sons or grandsons of Jacob (29:32 – 30:24; 35:18; 48:16). Israel's nearest neighbours were descended from Jacob's brother (Edom from Esau; 25:26; 36:1) or uncles (Ishmael; 25:12) or distant cousins (Moab and Ammon; 19:36–38). The table of nations in Genesis 10 shows how Israel was related to seventy other peoples known to the writer of Genesis. Israel, like the tribes of Syria and Arabia, was ultimately descended from Shem, one of Noah's sons (10:21–28). The most distant nations known to Israel, including the Medes, Greeks and other Mediterranean peoples, are traced to Japheth, another son of Noah (10:2–5). Ham, Noah's disgraced son, is said to have been the ancestor of Israel's inveterate enemies, including the Egyptians, Babylonians and Canaanites (10:6–20). Thus, through this table of nations, Israel's place among the nations of the ancient Near East is defined.

These opening chapters of Genesis also define Israel's view of God over against the prevailing beliefs in many gods in the ancient orient. That the biblical story of mankind from creation to flood finds parallels in other ancient literature (such as the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics and the Sumerian Flood Story) has often been noticed. But even more significant is the way that Genesis, by retelling what to the author's contemporaries were familiar stories, presents a new, indeed revolutionary, view of God and his relationship to the world and mankind.

Ancient orientals believed in a multitude of gods of limited power, knowledge and morality, so that religion was a dicey business. You could never be quite sure whether you had chosen the right deity, or whether he or she could bring you health and salvation. But the God of Genesis was unique and without equal. He was all-powerful, creating the whole universe (even the sun, moon and stars, often thought to be gods in their own right) by a simple command. He sent the flood and he stopped the flood. He saved Noah and his family because Noah was righteous, not because of favouritism. The God of Genesis was supremely concerned with human welfare. Unlike the Mesopotamian myths, which tell how the gods created mankind as an afterthought to provide themselves with food, Genesis declares that mankind was the goal of God's creation whom God provided with food (1:26–29).

Yet though the creation of mankind was God's crowning achievement he was, according to Genesis, totally flawed as 'every inclination of the thought of his [man's] heart was only evil all the time' (6:5). It was human sin, not human fertility (as in the Atrahasis epic), that provoked the flood. And this profound pessimism about human nature and society again distinguishes Genesis' theology from other ancient oriental beliefs. Mesopotamians (like many modern thinkers), for example, were believers in progress. They held that the Babylonian civilization was the most advanced and enlightened of all time. Genesis declares it was one of the most decadent (6:1–4; 11:1–9). Genesis traces an 'avalanche of sin', unleashed by Adam's disobedience, aggravated by Cain's murder and climaxed in the illicit marriages of 6:1–4, which eventually triggered off the flood. This great act of de-creation was followed by a new creation as the new earth emerged from the waters, and Noah, a sort of second Adam, stepped out to till the land. But like the first Adam he too fell; his son Ham acted even worse; and human sinfulness reached another peak as the men of Babel attempted to build a tower that reached heaven. This led to another act of universal judgment in the scattering of the nations across the globe.

But it was a man who came from Ur, the centre of this corrupt civilization, that God called to leave his homeland, move to a new one and build a new nation, so that all the nations of the

world should find blessing. For despite its gloom about human sin, Genesis is a fundamentally optimistic book. It declares that God's purpose for mankind, first intimated at his creation (chapters 1 – 2), will ultimately be achieved through the offspring of Abraham.

Further reading

F. D. Kidner, *Genesis*, TOTC (IVP, 1967).
D. Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1 –11*, BST (IVP, 1990).
J. G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12 – 50*, BST (IVP, 1986).
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The commentary has been structured according to the divisions suggested by the text itself; these do not always coincide with the medieval chapter divisions. Genesis is notable for dividing itself into ten major sections, each beginning, 'This is the account of' (2:4; 5:1; 6:9 *etc.*). These ten 'accounts' are prefaced by a prologue (1:1 – 2:3), describing God creating for six days and resting on the seventh. The accounts themselves alternate between quite long narratives (*e.g.* 6:9 – 9:29, 'the account of Noah') and briefer genealogies (*e.g.* 11:10–26, 'The account of Shem'). Within the fullest section of the book (the one dealing with the patriarchs descended from Abraham), the 'non-elect' line is summed up in a genealogy (*e.g.* Ishmael, 25:12–18; Esau, 36:1 – 37:1) before the chosen brother's family story is recounted in detail (*e.g.* Isaac, 25:19 – 35:29; Jacob, 37:2 – 50:26).

Commentary

1:1 – 2:3 Prologue: God creates the world

This opening section of Genesis stands outside the main frame of the book set by the ten headings, 'This is the account of' (2:4 *etc.*). This shows that it is a prologue to the rest of the book, setting out who God is and how he relates to the world. It thus provides a key to the interpretation of Genesis, if not the whole Bible. But this prologue is more than a statement of theology, it is a hymn of praise to the Creator through whom and for whom all things exist.

The prologue itself is carefully arranged. Ten divine commands result in eight acts of creation spread over six days, so that there is a correspondence between days one to three and days four to six. On day one, God created 'light' and on day four, 'lights' (sun, moon and stars); on day two, he created the sky and sea and on day five, the dwellers in the sky and sea (birds and fish); on day three, he created the land and vegetation and on day six, the dwellers in the land (animals and mankind), giving them plants to eat; finally, on the seventh day (the Sabbath), he rested.

The works of creation moved to a climax on day six when mankind was created in two sexes. That this is seen as the crowning feat of God's creation is emphasized by the lengthy comments on their creation and role (1:26–29), which are much fuller than those about any other creature. Indeed, the works of the five preceding days seem to focus on creating a home for mankind. Those aspects of creation that most affect human existence (*e.g.* plant and animal life and the sun and moon) are described more fully than the creation of light, land, or seas, which are less significant. God's concern for humanity is made explicit in the provision of plants for food.

It also seems likely that the emphasis on God creating for six days and then resting on the seventh is deliberate. God's mode of working was to be a model for human activity. People, who are made in the image of God, are expected throughout the Bible to imitate God. So, as God worked for six days and then rested on the seventh day, human beings are to work for six days and rest on the seventh (Ex. 20:8–11).

The concern with human life on earth, which is apparent in this narrative read by itself, is the more obvious when it is compared with other ancient oriental accounts of creation. Genesis is implicitly rejecting other views of the gods and their relationship with the world. Here we have no story of how gods fought, married and bore children; there is but one God, beyond time and sex, who was there in the beginning. He created all things, even the sun, moon and stars, which other peoples often held to be gods in their own right. He required no magic to do this; his word was sufficient by itself. According to the

Genesis account, there is one God, the sovereign Creator, to whom all the universe owes its being and whom it is expected to obey. Within that created universe, men and women have a place of honour, having been made in the divine image. We reflect God's nature and represent him on earth.

1:1–2 The beginning of creation

The NIV accepts the traditional understanding of these verses, namely that they describe the very first act of creation, when God created all matter (*the heavens and the earth*) out of nothing. But the earth immediately after creation was *formless and empty, i.e.* unproductive and uninhabited. So the narrative then proceeds to relate how in six days God organized this chaos into the well-ordered world we now see.

Some modern translations and commentators understand v 1 differently. Some (*e.g.* the NEB) take it simply to be defining the situation when God started to create, 'In the beginning when God created . . . the earth was formless . . .' Others simply regard v 1 as a summary title to the first chapter. But neither view is as likely as that adopted by the NIV. 'Create' is something that only God does (the verb is used only of God in the OT). He demonstrates his power by creating marvellous and unexpected things (Nu. 16:30), *e.g.* great sea creatures (21), men and women (27) and mountains (Am. 4:13).

V 2 pictures the world as dark and desolate, covered by water and with the mysterious *Spirit* (or 'wind') of God *hovering* above the ocean. The suggestion here of a power within the Godhead is developed further by Pr. 8:22–31 and Jn. 1:1–3, which speak of 'wisdom' and 'the Word' assisting in creation.

1:3–23 Creation continued

1:3–5 The creation of light. The dark world was lit up when God said, '*Let there be light*'. More precisely, day was distinguished from night by the creation of light. Light is a form of energy and may be produced in many different ways, not just by sun and stars (which were not created until the fourth day). Contemporary cosmologists say that the universe began with a hot big bang, which must have made a very bright light. Order began to appear and replace dark chaos. The refrain *God saw that* [it] *was good* (*cf.* vs 10,12,18,21,25,31) affirms the intrinsic goodness of the creation and its Creator.

Note. It is possible that the order of evening-morning in *And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day* (*cf.* vs 8,13,19,23,31) reflects the Hebrew concept of the day beginning with sunset and ending with the following sunset. What matters most to Genesis, however, is that God worked for six 'days' and then rested. In that these are days of God's activity not human work, it is unlikely that they are supposed to last twenty-four hours. Indeed, the Hebrew word for 'day' covers a variety of periods: the hours of daylight (Gn. 29:7), a twenty-four-hour day (Gn. 7:4) or an indefinite period (Gn. 35:3). That they were different from ordinary days is shown by the non-existence of the sun until the fourth day. Another hint that creation did not take six literal days is the mention of the creation of *the heavens and the earth, i.e.* the unorganized universe (1) before the six days were counted down. Finally, it should be noted that 1:1 – 2:3, unlike all other sections of Genesis, is not headed by the title 'This is the account of', which links the proto-history (2:4 – 11:26) to the patriarchal history (11:27 – 50:26). All these differences indicate that 1:1 – 2:3 serves as an overture to the rest of the book and that it may not be intended to be taken as literally as what follows. Nevertheless, that God worked for six days and rested on the seventh day (however long by human reckoning his 'days' were) is a pattern for mankind to follow.

1:6–8 The separation of the waters. God showed his power again by putting limits on the waters which had hitherto covered the globe (*cf.* Jb. 38:8–11). Some were confined to the seas, the rest to the sky. The upper waters were kept there by the 'expanse' or 'firmament' (AV). From earth the sky (firmament) appears to be a sort of dome that prevents the waters in the clouds falling to earth (*cf.* 7:11).

1:9–13 The creation of land and plants. Even more important for mankind was the provision, on the third day, of dry land, on which he could live, and plants to sustain life (*cf.* 1:29–30). The distinct varieties of plants (11–12) bear witness to God's organizing power, and these distinctions should not be blurred (see the rules against mixed breeding in Lv. 19:19; Dt. 22:9–11).

1:14–19 The creation of the heavenly lights. Even more powerful proof of God's creative power, and ever pertinent to human existence, are the sun, moon and stars. Pagan contemporaries of Genesis regarded these bodies as gods in their own right. To avoid any suspicion that the sun and moon were anything but created by God, Genesis calls them just *lights*. They were appointed to regulate the fundamental rhythms of human life by defining day and night and the seasons of the year.

1:20–23 The creation of birds and fish. The parallel between God's work on the first three days and the second three days now becomes clear. On day one, light was created, on day four, the heavenly lights; on day two, sky

and oceans, on day five, birds and fish. Once again, Genesis is stressing God's concern for order. 'The great sea creatures' were regarded as divine in some ancient myths; Genesis insists that they were merely some of God's creatures. Furthermore, God wanted the waters and air to be filled with his creatures, and his command and blessing guaranteed their fertility. No magic or fertility rites were needed to secure it.

1:24–31 The creation of animals and mankind

The creation account reaches its climax on the sixth day. Note how much fuller the description of God's work on this day is than for any of the preceding days and the parallels with the words of day three (land).

Here Genesis defines mankind's purpose and place in God's plan. God says *man* is to be made *in our image, in our likeness.* This means that mankind, both male and female, is God's representative on earth. Ancient oriental kings were often seen as bearing the image of their god, but Genesis affirms that every human being is made in God's image. The NT affirms that Christ is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15), 'the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Heb. 1:3). Such an understanding of the divine image was beyond the reach of the human author of Genesis, but he alludes to another dimension of it by the comment '*Let us make man in our image*' (26). Here God is pictured talking to the angels, the only allusion to other supernatural beings in this chapter. This remark implies that *man* is like both God and the angels. (Traditionally, Christians have seen *us* and *our* to allude to the other persons of the Trinity. While this is a quite legitimate fuller interpretation, it is not the words' primary meaning.)

Secondly, because human beings are created in God's image they are his representatives on earth and should '*rule . . . over all the earth*' (26). Ps. 8:4–8 offers a marvellous poetic comment on this idea. *Rule* implies lordship but not exploitation. Man, as God's representative, must rule his subjects, as God does, for their own good. While legitimizing human use of the world's resources, God gives no licence for our abuse of his creation.

Thirdly, God deliberately created humanity in two sexes to *be fruitful and increase in number.* He thereby blessed sexual intercourse and indicated its importance in his plan. Other ancient tales, hailing from urban Mesopotamia (which was worried by population growth), tell of the gods taking steps to curb human fertility by sending plagues, famine, flood and miscarriage. The God of Genesis repeatedly urged the first people to be fruitful (1:28; 8:17; 9:1,7) and promised the patriarchs that they would be successful in fathering innumerable children. Sex is thus seen as an important part of God's very good creation (31).

Fourthly, God provided food for mankind in the form of *seed-bearing* plants and fruit trees (29). Not until after the flood was meat-eating expressly sanctioned (9:1–3). Genesis, however, is not primarily interested in whether people were originally vegetarian but in the fact that God provided them with food. In Mesopotamian mythology the gods created man to provide themselves with food; Genesis affirms it was the other way round, that God feeds mankind (*cf.* Pss. 65; 50:7–15).

2:1–3 The holy seventh day

A dramatic change of pace and style highlights the distinctiveness of the Sabbath. The seventh day is not called the Sabbath here, but it is alluded to, for *he rested* could be paraphrased 'he Sabbathed'. Furthermore, the seventh day's importance is underlined by God blessing it and making it holy. The Sabbath is regularly called 'holy', but only in Ne. 8:9,11 is any other festival called 'holy'. Here, God is described as resting on the seventh day, but the narrator clearly implies that mankind, made in the divine image, is expected to copy his Creator. Indeed, the context implies that a weekly day of rest is as necessary for human survival as sex (1:27–28) or food (1:29). This is an emphasis that seems to have been forgotten today, even amongst Christians.

Note. Genesis 1 and science. Genesis and modern science are answering different questions. Genesis explains who God is and how he relates to the created world. Science elucidates the God-given laws that explain natural phenomena; and from these laws scientists can work backwards to trace the course of the universe's development. Science makes us aware of the infinite power and wisdom of the Creator, but it cannot explain God's purpose in creating the universe, or his character. Genesis is not dealing with the issues raised by twentieth-century science but with ideas current in the ancient orient over 3000 years ago. Over against the polytheistic world-view that held there were many gods and goddesses of varying wisdom and power, Genesis declares there is but one God of absolute power and holiness. Rejecting the ancient view that mankind was simply created as an afterthought which the gods later regretted, Genesis affirms that man was the goal of creation and that his welfare is God's supreme concern. These principles are reaffirmed repeatedly throughout Scripture, but they are set out with exemplary clarity in Genesis 1 and are central to what the

author was trying to say. Modern readers should concentrate on these original intentions of Genesis and not bring to the text scientific issues which are foreign to its purpose.

2:4 – 4:26 The account of the heavens and the earth

This section describes three stages in the degeneration of human society from its perfection portrayed in 1:31. The first defiance of God's commandment (3:6) is followed by the first murder (4:8) and finally by the seventy-sevenfold vengeance of Lamech (4:24). The sins are seen as both typical and unique. They are typical in that every sinful act has similar ingredients and consequences; they are unique in that, occurring at the beginning of history, they have had dire consequences for the whole human race.

2:4 – 3:24 The Garden of Eden

Why, if the world was created very good (1:31), is there so much pain and suffering, anger and hatred in it? This story explains the origin and effects of sin in a simple yet profound way. It starts by describing the idyllic existence of the first human couple, thereby outlining God's pattern for relations between the sexes. It then tells how one apparently minor act of disobedience upset everything and led to mankind's expulsion from paradise.

The LORD *God* (2:4) is a phrase common in chs. 2 – 3, but it is hardly used elsewhere in the OT. It sums up two ideas that are important in these chapters – that God is both mankind's Creator ('God' is the term used in ch. 1) and his friend or covenant partner (the LORD, or Yahweh, is God's personal name revealed only to Israel; Ex. 3:14; 6:3).

2:4–7 The creation of the first man. The writer flashes back to the situation before mankind was created on the sixth day (1:26–28) and describes a typical middle-eastern desert, which requires human effort to irrigate and make it bloom. It was from the clay of such an area that God, the great Potter, moulded the first man and breathed into him the breath of life. Through this traditional image Genesis implies that people are by nature more than material; they have a spiritual, God-breathed, element too.

2:8–17 God's garden for mankind. God's concern for human need, already mentioned in 1:29, is again underlined here. A delightful park full of fruit trees, rivers, gold and gemstones is prepared for human habitation in an area called Eden (*i.e.* 'delight'). Trees, water, gold and gems and cherubim also adorned the later tabernacle (Ex. 25:27) and temple (1 Ki. 7; Ezk. 41 – 47), and these symbols suggest what was most important about the garden: the presence of God. He used to walk there in the cool of the day having intimate conversation with Adam and Eve (3:8). *The tree of life* gives eternal life and *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* wisdom. The latter was forbidden for human consumption because the wisdom acquired through eating it leads to independence from God, whereas true wisdom begins with 'the fear of the LORD' (Pr. 1:7).

Note. 10–14. Two of the rivers of Eden are well known: the *Tigris* and the *Euphrates* flow through modern Iraq into the Persian Gulf. *Gihon* and *Pishon* are impossible to identify, and therefore attempts to locate Eden are doomed to failure. Mesopotamian mythology located a paradise island at the head of the Persian Gulf, and therefore the likeliest explanation is that Eden was supposed to be there. But this may be taking the story too literally, for 3:23–24 makes it plain that Eden cannot now be entered by human beings.

2:18–24 The creation of woman. Despite the idyllic environment there was something wrong. God said that '*It is not good for the man to be alone*' (18), and after his repeated observation that all he had created was good (*e.g.* 1:10,31) this comment is a shock and serves to highlight the next acts of creation.

First, animals were created as the man's companions. They were under human authority (the man named them in v 20), but it was intended that they should not be exploited (*cf.* on 1:24–31). Unfortunately, animals were not the perfect companions for the man. It was only the creation of woman that fully satisfied him.

The charming tale of God creating Eve out of Adam's rib and then presenting her to him as if at a wedding sums up beautifully many of the key biblical ideas about marriage. Here and in 1:27–28 we have God's standard for relations between the sexes set out. Whereas 1:28 emphasized the importance of procreation, 2:20–24 explores the nature of companionship within marriage. First, husband and wife complement each other. *Suitable helper* would be better be translated 'helper matching him', *i.e.* supplying what he lacks. She is his missing rib. Matthew Henry commented on God's choice of a rib to create Eve, 'Not made out of his head to top him, not out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.' Perhaps this reads a little too much into the rib, but it expresses well the biblical ideal of marriage.

Secondly, the union between man and wife should be permanent: a man is *united* (lit. 'sticks') *to his wife, and they will become one flesh.* Jesus (Mt. 19:5) and Paul (Eph. 5:31) quote this in decrying divorce.

Thirdly, a man must put his wife's interest above all others, even his parents. He *will leave his father and mother*, not by going to live elsewhere but by putting his very important duty to care for them (Ex. 20:12) second to his duty to look after his wife (*cf.* Eph. 5:25–29).

Fourthly, the wife is under the authority of her husband: he names her *woman* (23) and later Eve (3:20), just as earlier he had named the animals (19). This concept of the man's headship is taken for granted elsewhere in the Bible (*e.g.* 1 Cor. 11:3; 1 Pet. 3:1–6).

Finally, it may be noted that God created only one Eve for Adam, not several Eves or another Adam, thereby indicating divine disapproval of both polygamy (*cf.* Lv. 18:18; Dt. 17:17) and homosexual practice (Lv. 18:22; Rom. 1:26–27).

3:1–8 The fall. The innocent harmony of Eden was then ruined by the entry of sin. The mistakes of Adam and Eve are typical of all sins, but as they were the parents of the whole human race their deeds had the gravest consequences. Temptation was mediated by a serpent, later described as an unclean creature (Lv. 11:31) and, therefore, a fitting symbol of evil. The serpent begins by overemphasizing the strictness of the law (God had put only one tree out of bounds) and questioning God's goodwill towards human beings (something the narrative in ch. 2 had put beyond doubt). Eve rebuts his suggestion, though inexactly ('*you must not touch it*' was not part of the original prohibition (2:17). The serpent then challenged God's judgment by claiming '*you will not surely die*' and promised instead sophistication (that their *eyes will be opened*) and spiritual advancement (that they will be *like God*).

Lured by the prospect of instant pleasure (she *saw that the fruit was good for food*) and supposed maturity, Eve suddenly succumbed and persuaded her husband also to eat. In so doing he preferred the serpent's suggestions to God's command. (Throughout Scripture, the essence of sin is to put human judgment above divine command.) Immediately guilt and shame gripped them. Their opened eyes saw only their naked bodies, and they attempted to hide from each other and from God.

3:9–20 Trial and sentence. Man, woman and serpent were then interrogated and sentenced by the divine inquisitor. God's questions were designed to elicit confessions, not information; he knew perfectly well what they had done.

The long-term effects of sin then started to appear. The serpent was condemned *to crawl* and to constant warfare with mankind, the woman's offspring (15). In that her offspring *will crush* the snake's *head*, the latter will come off worse in the long battle. Thus, though this was a judgment on the snake, it was at the same time a promise to man. It has, therefore, traditionally been seen by Jews and Christians, as the first hint of a saviour for mankind, and 3:15 is often called the '*protevangelion*' the 'first gospel'. Allusions to it in the NT include Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14; Rev. 12. Within Genesis the promise to Abraham that 'through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed' (22:18) starts to make the vague promise of 3:15 more specific. It is also notable that this first judgment on sin is tinged with hope, something that recurs throughout Scripture (*cf.* 6:5–8), as God's mercy outweighs his wrath (*cf.* Ex. 20:5–6).

The sentence on Eve blighted her calling as mother. To be a joyful mother of children was the hope of every OT woman (30:1; Ps. 113:9), but the pain of childbirth was a constant reminder of the first mother's sin. Furthermore, instead of marriage being a relationship of mutual care, tension was often to characterize it. *Your desire* may be a desire for sexual intercourse or for independence, but ultimately the husband's headship will prevail. *He will rule over you* may indicate harsh domination, but it may simply be reaffirming the chain of authority (God – man – woman) established at creation but reversed at the fall (6). The latter interpretation is more likely in view of the introduction to Adam's sentence of *Because you listened to your wife* (17). God then decreed that the man must suffer frustration in his work (gardeners and farmers face a running battle with weeds to produce food). Hard work would enable him to live, but eventually he would die. This is a hint that he was about to be expelled from Eden and deprived of access to the tree of life.

3:21–24 Judgment. Expulsion from the garden proved the hollowness of the serpent's promise that they would not die (4). For though Adam and Eve continued some sort of life outside the garden, it was a shadow of the fulness of life inside Eden, where they had enjoyed intimate fellowship with God. Now the full cost of sin is apparent. It is not just an unquiet conscience (7–8), squabbles with one's dearest spouse (12), pain (16) or the drudgery of daily toil (17–19) but separation from the presence of God and ultimately physical death (Rom. 6:23). *Cherubim* later decorated the ark, tabernacle and temple (Ex. 25:18–22; 26:31; 1 Ki. 6:23–28) and were winged lions with human heads (Ezk. 41:18).

4:1–26 The first human family

In sketching the story of Cain and his descendants, Genesis illustrates the increasing grip of sin on the human race.

4:1–16 Cain and Abel. Ch. 3 showed how

sin disrupts relations between God and human beings and between man and wife. Ch. 4 shows it destroying the bonds of brotherhood. Indeed, Cain is portrayed as a more hardened sinner than Adam. Killing one's brother is more wicked than eating a protected fruit. Adam had to be persuaded to sin; Cain could not be dissuaded from sinning, even by God himself (6–7). Sin is personified as an animal waiting to pounce (7; *cf.* 1 Pet. 5:8). When questioned by God about his sin, Adam, though rather petulant, at least told the truth; Cain lied and then made a joke about it (3:9–11 *cf.* 4:9). Adam accepted God's judgment in silence, but Cain protested fiercely (13–14) and was despatched even further from Eden (16).

Notes. 5 The reason for the rejection of Cain's sacrifice is not immediately obvious. The contrast between Cain's *some of the fruits* and Abel's *fat portions . . . of the firstborn of his flocks* probably gives the clue. Perhaps Abel brought the best parts of his flocks and Cain was not so particular. But sacrifice is only acceptable to God if it is perfect and costly (Lv. 22:20–22; 2 Sa. 24:24); he will not be satisfied with second best (Mal. 1:6–14; Rom. 12:1). 15 Whether *the mark* of Cain was a tattoo, his name Cain, a dog or something else is quite obscure. Like the clothing given to Adam and Eve in 3:21, the mark served a double function. It reminded Cain of his sin and assured him of God's protection against potential enemies. Thus, his protest prayer (13–14) did not go unheeded, for even hardened sinners like Cain may pray for mercy and receive it.

4:17–26 Cain's descendants. Several of Cain's descendants (his wife was presumably a daughter of Adam and Eve) are credited with significant cultural and technological advances: city-building (17), bedouin life (20), music (21) and metal-working (22). That these achievements are credited to Cain's descendants, rather than Seth's more holy line (ch. 5), suggests that all human progress is somehow tainted by sin.

Most attention is given to Lamech, who is portrayed in gory detail. A slave of passion, he married two lovely wives, *Adah* ('Jewel') and *Zillah* ('Melody'). Bigamy represents another regress from the monogamy God established in Eden. But more significant is Lamech's bloodthirsty lust for seventy-sevenfold vengeance, which shows a man who disregarded justice and was prepared to smash all who got in his way. Society was disintegrating and was ripe for judgment.

Vs. 25–26 anticipate the genealogy of Seth in ch. 5. Often at the end of a section in Genesis there is a trailer for what follows (*cf.* 6:5–8 anticipating 6:9 – 9:17; 9:18–27 anticipating ch. 10).

Call on the name of the LORD means that worship of God also began in this era.

5:1 – 6:8 The account of Adam's line

This consists of two parts. The first (5:1–32) lists the ten generations from Adam, through his third son Seth, to Noah. This was the beginning of the chosen line in Genesis, through which salvation for mankind would ultimately come (Noah's family was the only one to survive the flood). The second part (6:1–8) focuses on one of the worst sins of the pre-flood period – the marriages between the sons of God (see on 6:1–8) and the daughters of men, which prompted God to send a flood. It closes, however, with a hint that Noah will be saved (6:8).

5:1–32 Adam's family tree

This repetitive genealogy highlights four points about each patriarch: his age when his first son was born, his subsequent lifespan, the fact that he *had other sons and daughters* and his age at death. The mention of other children implies that these patriarchs fulfilled the command to 'be fruitful and increase in number' (1:28) and shows how mankind gradually populated the earth. The great ages of these men suggest that they lived a very long time ago, and that the degeneration caused by sin leading to a shortening of lifespan only gradually took effect.

It is hard to know how to understand the long lives of the men who lived before the flood. A comparable text, the Sumerian King List, lists eight kings who reigned before the flood for a total of 241,000 years. This makes the 1500 years covered by ch. 5 seem quite modest, but it still does not explain how, for example, Adam could have lived for 930 years. Various suggestions have been put forward. First, that their 'years' were much shorter than ours. But the chronology of the flood (7:11 – 8:14) shows that Genesis assumes about 360 days in a year. Secondly, that the years of the patriarch's life do not represent the length of his own life but of the clan he founded. In other words, many generations have been omitted. This is hard to prove since, at the beginning of the list, Seth is clearly Adam's immediate son and, at the end, Lamech – Noah – Shem, Ham and Japheth form a consecutive sequence. Thirdly, that the years are symbolic and represent periods of time known in astronomy, *e.g.* Enoch's 365 years correspond to the days of a solar year. Fourthly, that the numbers are symbolic and generated by the number system based on 60 used in Mesopotamia. Babylonian mathematics tables made much of the factors of 60 (30, 20, 15 *etc.*) and their squares and multiples. So many of the

numbers in ch. 5 and the Sumerian King List would have seemed familiar to these trained in this system, *e.g.* 930 (Adam's age) is $30^2 + 30$. However, not all the figures are explicable this way, nor can we explain why certain figures were attached to particular people if they were symbolic. At present, the best that can be said is that the size of the numbers suggests that these men lived a long time ago. Their precision suggests that these were real people who lived and died. For further discussion see G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Books, 1987) pp. 130–134.

Because of Enoch's piety (he *walked with God*) he probably did not die but was translated to heaven (*God took him away; cf.* Elijah, 2 Ki. 2:11–12).

6:1–8 Human-spirit marriages and their aftermath

In the ancient world, stories were often told of sexual intercourse between the gods and human beings; and the semi-divine offspring of such unions were held to have abnormal energy and other powers. In Mesopotamia and Canaan, divine-human marriage was celebrated in the sacred marriage rites that took place in the temples. These rites were supposed to ensure the fertility of the soil and ordinary marriages. They involved fathers dedicating their unmarried daughters for service in the temple. In practice these girls served as sacred prostitutes giving pleasure to priests and wealthy worshippers.

Vs 1–2,4 describe these practices. The *sons of God* refers to spirit beings (translated 'angels' in Jb. 1:6; 2:1, though they are not benevolent either here or in Job). Sometimes in the OT Israel (Dt. 14:1) or kings (2 Sa. 7:14) are called 'sons of God', but neither meaning is appropriate here. *The daughters of men* refers to ordinary human women. The *Nephilim* are the ancient supermen supposed to be the offspring of these spirit-human unions. Some Nephilim were in Canaan when Israel invaded (Nu. 13:33).

This practice of sacred prostitution is, according to Genesis, both unnecessary (men were already increasing in number, v 1) and an abomination to God (5). Consequently, the normal span of human life was reduced to 120 years (3) and the Lord announced a plan to wipe out mankind and other living creatures (7).

Sacred prostitution is viewed here as the culminating sin in a series that began with Adam's eating the forbidden fruit and was continued by Cain's murder of his brother and Lamech's unbridled vengeance. Looking at human beings God concluded that they were incorrigibly wicked and that every human thought was bent towards evil. V 5 spells out the doctrine of human depravity with frightening bluntness, but similar views are expressed by psalmists, prophets, Jesus and Paul (Ps. 51:3–6; Je. 17:9–10; Mk. 7:15; Rom. 1:18 – 3:20). What is more, human sinfulness provokes a fierce reaction in God, a bitter indignation (*his heart was filled with pain*) akin to that felt by brothers after their sister's rape (Gn. 34:7), or that of a father after his son's death in battle (2 Sa. 19:2). God, therefore, made a decision to destroy his creation. Nevertheless, as with earlier decrees of judgment (3:15; 4:15), there was a glimmer of hope – *Noah found favour in the eyes of the* LORD (8).

6:9 – 9:29 The account of Noah

Many ancient peoples around the world tell the story of a great flood from which only one man and his family escaped by building a boat. But, as might have been expected, the closest parallels to the biblical account come from Mesopotamia, in the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics. Both texts date from around 1600 BC. Like the biblical story, they tell of a man (Atrahasis or Utnapishtim) who was advised by his god to build an ark to escape the flood. He did so, loaded it with goods and animals, floated on the floodwaters for a short while, and sent out birds to see if the waters were abating. Eventually the ark grounded on a mountain top, the flood survivor emerged and offered sacrifices which greatly pleased the gods, who rewarded him with eternal life. The similarities between the biblical and Babylonian accounts of the flood show that it was a well-known story in the ancient Near East.

There are, however, various differences between the accounts, which show that they have not simply been borrowed from each other. There are differences of detail, *e.g.* about the size and shape of the ark, the duration of the flood and the types of birds that were sent out to inspect the floodwaters. But these are relatively trivial differences. Much more important are the theological differences between the accounts. These are so considerable that it seems likely that the author of the biblical account was deliberately trying to correct or refute the common oriental view of the flood. In particular, Genesis is trying to explain what God is really like and how he relates to the world.

In the Babylonian versions, the gods agreed on a flood to stop human population growth, but one dissented and tipped off his worshipper Atrahasis (the equivalent of Noah). When the flood was unleashed, the gods cowered before it like dogs unable to control it. After the flood the gods hurried to the sacrifice as they were hungry, since sacrifices had stopped during the flood. One of the top gods was surprised to find

a man had survived the flood (evidently this god was neither omnipotent nor omniscient).

The whole theological and ethical outlook of Genesis is different. First, the flood was sent not to curb human noise or fertility but because of human corruption and sinfulness (6:11–12). Secondly, Noah was saved not because he chanced to worship a god who disagreed with the flood decision but because he was *righteous . . . blameless among the peoples of his time*. Throughout the flood story Noah is portrayed as doing exactly what *God commanded him* (*e.g.* 6:22; 7:9; 8:18). Thirdly, the God of Genesis is all-powerful and all-knowing. He is always in total control of the flood and knows just what is happening. It was when *God remembered Noah* that the flood waters started to recede (8:1–2). The sacrifice after the flood did not quench God's appetite (unlike the Mesopotamian gods, he was not in need of human food) but appeased his wrath. Despite continuing human sinfulness (*cf.* 8:21 with 6:5), God promised that never again would the earth be destroyed in a flood. The rainbow was God's pledge that he would maintain and protect the whole earth (8:22 – 9:16). Finally, while the Atrahasis epic ends with the gods inventing miscarriage and female infertility to curb population growth, Noah is urged three times to '*Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth*' (9:1; *cf.* 8:17; 9:7). Despite sin, God is basically on our side and concerned for the welfare of the human race. This goodwill was secured by Noah's sacrifice and by the greater sacrifice of Christ.

6:9 – 8:22 The story of the flood

Genesis regards the flood as the great dividing point in world history. The flood was a great act of de-creation. It returned the earth to the situation of primeval watery chaos that existed before God started speaking in 1:3. Life was destroyed. Water covered everything, even the mountain tops, so that the planet looked as it did when God first created it (1:2). Then, when God remembered Noah, he sent a wind over the earth (*cf.* the hovering spirit/wind of God in 1:2) to begin the process of new creation. The world was born anew. Dry land and waters were separated, and Noah, the new head of the human race, emerged from the ark and, like Adam, was told to '*Be fruitful and increase in number*' (9:1, *cf.* 1:28). Noah is thus seen as a second-Adam figure.

This parallelism between the flood as the great act of de-creation and the re-creation after the flood is underlined in Genesis by the literary design of the story. It is written in a large mirror-image pattern ('extended chiasmus' or 'palistrophe') which emphasizes the symmetry of the story. Here just some of the most obvious features of this structure are noted. (For fuller discussion see Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* pp. 155–158).

A Noah's sons (6:10) A^1 Noah's sons (9:18–27)
B Enter the ark (7:1) B^1 Leave the ark (8:16)
C Seven days (7:4) C^1 Seven days (8:12)
D Seven days (7:10) D^1 Seven days (8:10)
E Forty days (7:17) E^1 Forty days (8:6)
F Mountains covered (7:20) F^1 Mountains uncovered (8:5)
G Flooding for 150 days (7:24) G^1 Water receding for 150 days (8:3)
H God remembered Noah (8:1)

This structure not only draws attention to the parallels between God's destructive work in sending the flood and his work of re-creation but also shows that the turning point was his remembering Noah. The God of Genesis was not impotent before the flood, like the gods of Babylon, but in total control, sovereign in judgment and mercy.

6:9–22 Command to build the ark. Those who construct pictures or models of the ark have to read into Genesis extra construction details, and how far these are valid may be questioned. Particularly obscure is the roof design in v 16. (See the larger commentaries on this.) What most concerns Genesis is the purpose of the ark, which was *to keep . . . alive* all species of living creatures. Hence, pairs had to be taken aboard to ensure their continued breeding.

7:1–5 Command to board the ark. Pairs sufficed of unclean (non-sacrificial, non-edible) animals to secure their survival, but seven (or seven pairs) specimens of clean (sacrificial/edible) animals had to be taken to allow sacrifice to be made after the flood without destroying the species.

7:6–24 Entry to the ark and the onset of the flood. Every stage in the flood is dated very precisely (*e.g.* 7:11; 8:13,14). This is appropriate in that the flood brought the old world to an end, and from it the new world was born.

Note on the date and extent of the flood. The Sumerian King List mentions the flood as taking place immediately before the early dynastic period, which could suggest the flood occurred about 3000 BC. Certainly, archaeologists have found plenty of evidence of local floods in Mesopotamia in this period but none suggesting the inundation of the whole area. Another possibility is that the flood coincided with the end of the last ice age (*c.* 10,000 BC). This involved heavy rain over normally dry regions, and the melting ice led to ocean levels rising 300 ft (100m) and swamping previously habitable land. (For further discussion see *IBD*, pp. 510–512.) With our modern geographical

knowledge, we automatically understand the story to be describing a total inundation of the globe, but if the story was being told from Noah's perspective (whose geographical horizons were limited), a somewhat smaller flood might have appeared universal.

8:1–22 The flood recedes. The new creation was prompted by God remembering (*i.e.* thinking which leads to action) Noah (1), and progressively land, vegetation, birds, animals and human beings reappeared on earth (*cf.* ch. 1). *Ararat* (4) is not specifically modern Mt Ararat but the territory of ancient Urartu, which is roughly modern Armenia and adjacent areas in Turkey and Iran. V 21 contains very similar language to 6:5. It is not God's attitude to Noah that was transformed by the sacrifice but his attitude to mankind in general. The sacrifices of the righteous Noah, the second Adam, secured the future of the human race from a judgment as catastrophic as the flood.

9:1–17 God's covenant with Noah

Although the new era after the flood was in some ways like that after the original creation, there were differences too. Noah, like Adam, was blessed and told to *'Be fruitful'* (1), but now for the first time eating meat was allowed (3). Though Abel (4:2) and Jabal (4:20) raised flocks, only the green plants were assigned to Adam for food (1:30). But now Noah was allowed to eat meat, provided the blood was drained out first as a mark of respect for the God-given life contained in it. This ban on consuming blood is one of the most important food laws in the OT (*cf.* Lv. 3:17; Dt. 12:16–25; 1 Sa. 14:32–34).

Pre-flood history was characterized by violence (6:11): Abel's murder went unavenged, whereas Lamech overreacted (4:23–24). Now a law of strict retribution was introduced: *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed* (6). The idea that punishment must match the crime is fundamental in OT law (Ex. 21:23–25) and modern notions of justice and fairness too. Though the death penalty for murder is a clear case of 'do-as-you-would-be-done-by', v 6 gives a special reason for its appropriateness. Every human being is made in God's image (*i.e.* represents God on earth), so to protect the unique status of human life the ultimate penalty must be exacted. It was God's purpose that the world should be filled with human and animal life (7–9), for the covenant symbolized by the rainbow was made with every living creature. Genesis does not suggest rainbows first appeared after the flood, only that it became a 'sign', *i.e.* a pledge of God's goodwill, then.

9:18–29 Ham's sin

Sadly, the righteous and blameless Noah succumbed to drink and exposed himself while sleeping. His relatively minor sin (*cf.* Adam in 3:6) was followed by the much graver sin of his younger son Ham (*cf.* Cain in 4:8). Once again by this sequence Genesis suggests history repeating itself. The new human race headed by Noah was, like the former one, on the slide.

Modern readers fail to see the gravity of Ham's sin and ask what is wrong with gossiping or joking to your brothers about your parents' failings? So attempts have been made to suggest Ham was guilty of incest or other sexual impropriety. But these notions are wrong and fail to appreciate how seriously the OT and other ancient cultures took filial duties. 'Honour your father and mother' comes next to the Godward commandments in Ex. 20, and striking or cursing your father or mother could be punished by death (Ex. 21:15,17; cited by Jesus, Mk. 7:10).

Noah's only words in Genesis (25–27) praise Shem and Japheth but curse Ham (or at least his offspring, Canaan). His words are akin to the death-bed prophetic blessings of Isaac (27:27–29) and Jacob (49:2–27), in which the future history of those mentioned is foreseen. Here Noah predicts the dominance of the descendants of Shem and Japheth (whose identity is clarified in ch. 10) and the subjugation of Canaan. These verses thus serve as a trailer for the next chapter (*cf.* 4:25–26; 6:1–8).

Why was Canaan cursed for the sin of Ham his father? There is no clear answer. Possibly he participated in his father's sin in some way. Possibly it was a mirroring punishment. As Ham, Noah's youngest son, sinned against his father, so Canaan, Ham's youngest son, was punished. Possibly, it was because Ham's sin foreshadowed that of the Canaanites, who were notorious for their immorality in the OT (Lv. 18:3).

10:1 – 11:9 The account of Shem, Ham and Japheth

This section comprises two sections: the Table of the Nations (10:1–32) and the Tower of Babel story (11:1–9) and serves three purposes. First, it defines Israel's relationship to the other nations. Secondly, it explains the diversity of languages. Thirdly, it shows the nations sinning yet further and provoking more divine judgment. It thus prepares for yet another divine attempt to rescue mankind through the call of Abraham.

10:1–32 The Table of Nations

This remarkable text sets Israel within the context of the world known to the OT writers. It

lists seventy nations (probably a symbolic round number; *cf.* the seventy sons of Jacob who went down to Egypt, 46:27), which represent all the peoples of the world, and is not an exhaustive list of all groups known in ancient Israel. It reads a bit like a family tree, but it may be that not all the relationships described are genealogical. In the ancient world, treaties and covenants led to people calling themselves brothers or sons of their treaty-partner. What the Table of Nations describes is the relationship between the different peoples, however they may have originated historically.

But this is not a lesson in historical geography. As always in Genesis, the list was included for a theological reason – to relate the chosen line of Shem to the other non-elect lines. The genealogy of the non-elect is always placed before the chosen line Cain before Seth (chs. 4–5), Ishmael before Isaac (ch. 25), Esau before Jacob (chs. 36–37). The choice of Shem and the rejection of Ham has already been intimated (9:25–27), and this is confirmed in this chapter. Among the Shemites are found the Arameans, with whom the patriarchs had very close relationships and from whom they sought wives for their sons. Among the Hamites are found not just all the Canaanite peoples but Israel's other great enemies, Egypt (Mizraim), Babylon and Assyria. The Japhethites comprise more distant peoples from the north-eastern Mediterranean seaboard, with whom Israel seems to have had few contacts, either hostile or friendly. It should be noted that the biblical classification into Semitic, Hamitic and Japhethite peoples does not coincide with the modern classification of people by languages. Some of the Hamites (*e.g.* the Canaanites) spoke Semitic languages, and among the Shemites is Elam, who spoke a non-Semitic language. The biblical divisions reflect much more the differences between those Israel felt were her allies and those who were her enemies.

10:2–5 The Japhethites. Not all these peoples can be identified, and only those which can be confidently identified are discussed here. But those that can be identified seem to represent those furthest from Israel geographically, either in the far north or the far west. For detailed discussion of their identities see *IBD* or the commentaries of Sarna or Wenham.

Gomer represents the Cimmerians; *Magog* was somewhere in the north (Ezk. 38:2); *Madai* represents the Medes in northern Iran, *Javan* the Ionian Greeks, and *Tubal, Meshech* and *Tiras* have been identified with Turkey. 3 *Ashkenaz* represents the Scythians, and *Togarmah* was a district north of Carchemish. 4 *Elishah* was probably in Crete. *Tarshish* was a Mediterranean city, possibly Carthage. *Kittim* is identified with Cyprus and *Rodanim* with Rhodes (the Dodanim, the alternative reading, may come from the Aegean).

V 5 anticipates the dispersal of the nations described in 11:1–9.

10:6–20 The Hamites. The length of this section indicates its importance. Among the descendants of Ham are some of Israel's closest neighbours and fiercest enemies.

6 *Cush* was the region south of Egypt. *Mizraim* is identified with Egypt, and *Put* with Libya. *Canaan* is defined further in vs 15–19. 7 *The sons of Cush* appears to refer to a region in southern Arabia.

8–12 Mesopotamian culture is traced back to Ham via Cush, which is not a flattering pedigree, but it anticipates the explicit criticism of Babylon's pretensions in 11:1–9. *Nimrod* cannot be definitely identified, but his interests in fighting and hunting were typical of great Mesopotamian kings. The cities he founded are nearly all well known in that region.

13–14 Few of these tribes or peoples can be surely identified. *Pathrusites* refers to the southern Egyptians. The *Philistines* were Israel's great rivals for control of Canaan (1 Sa. 4–31). The *Caphtorites* are Cretans.

15–19 Special attention is given to the inhabitants of Canaan whom Israel expected to displace. *Sidon* was the oldest Phoenician coastal city. The *Hittites* (*cf.* 23:2–20) are different from the well-known Hittites in Turkey. The *Jebusites* were the residents of Jerusalem. The *Amorites, Girgashites* and *Hivites* are often-mentioned Canaanite peoples. The *Arkites* . . . *Hamathites* were the inhabitants of well-known cities in Syria.

The borders of Canaan reached from Sidon in the north to Gaza in the south and Sodom (by the Dead Sea) in the east. A more precise definition of Canaan's borders is in Nu. 34:2–12.

10:21–31 The Shemites. Since Abraham was descended from Shem, Israel felt a special affinity for these peoples. However, few can be clearly identified, though many seem to be Aramean or Arabian tribes.

That Ham was Noah's youngest son is clear (9:24), but whether *Japheth* or *Shem* was the eldest depends on how this verse is translated (see the NIV mg.). *Elam* was in south-western Iran. Asshur, unlikely to be a reference to Assyria, was possibly a Sinaitic tribe (Nu. 24:22). The Arameans lived in Syria, and presumably the sub-groups listed here lived in that region. In so far as they can be identified *Joktan* and his descendants seem to have lived in southern Arabia.

11:1–9 The Tower of Babel

This short tale brings the history of the period before the patriarchs to a horrifying conclusion. The new start given to the human race by Noah had already been jeopardized by his drunkenness and Ham's indiscretion; and in the Table of the Nations the effects of the curse on Ham's descendants has already been hinted at. Indeed, 10:5, 18–20 and 31–32 have already anticipated the division by languages and the dispersal of the nations, but now Genesis deals with this explicitly. Human sinfulness now burst all limits as man tried to trespass on God's realm by building a skyscraping temple. This prompted another great judgment affecting the whole human race. Mankind was scattered across the face of the earth and linguistic diversity, which impedes co-operation between peoples, was introduced to prevent any further human efforts to storm heaven. Thus the stage was set for yet one more fresh start for mankind in the call of Abraham.

The tower of Babel, however, is not just another of the sin-and-judgment stories that make up chs. 1 – 11. All through these chapters we can see an implied critique of the polytheistic world-view of Israel's contemporaries. Genesis' retelling of the history of creation and the flood presents a completely different view of God and his relationship to the world from that found in ancient oriental mythology. But so far the critique of these ideas has been, by and large, implicit; here in ch. 11 it becomes explicit.

Babylon was famed for its temple tower or ziggurat, whose foundations were in the underworld and whose top was in the heavens. No, says Genesis, so far from reaching heaven, Babel's tower could hardly be seen from there – the Lord had to come down to see it (5). Babel means 'gate of god', and Babylon considered itself closer to god than anywhere else on earth. It regarded itself as the religious, intellectual and cultural capital of the ancient world, the showpiece of human civilization. 'Rubbish' says v 9, Babel does not mean 'gate of god' but 'confusion' or 'folly', and far from human wisdom, Babylon's ruined ziggurat, shows human impotence before the judgment of God. Put in modern terms the building of the city and tower may be seen as a human bid for self-achieved security on the basis of technological progress. 'Man proposes, but God disposes.'

11:10–26 The account of Shem

The brief genealogy of Shem is quite similar to that in ch. 5, though the patriarchs' ages are somewhat shorter, and it does not explicitly state the total length of life of each one. It serves to link the history of Abraham to world history and thus provides a bridge between the proto-history of chs. 1 – 11 and the patriarchal stories of 12 – 50. Though we know nothing more about the men listed here, Lk. 3:34–36 reminds us of their importance, for from them descended the offspring of Abraham in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

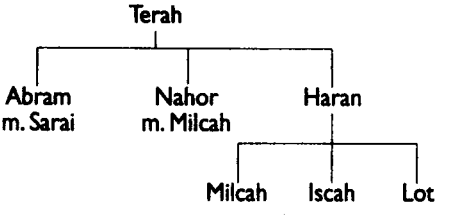
11:27 – 25:1 The account of Terah and the story of Abraham

Terah, Abraham's father, was alive for most of the events described in chs. 12 – 23, and thus he gives his name to this part of the book (*cf.* 25:19; 37:2). Its very length indicates its importance for the book. It is not just that Abraham was the ancestor of the Jews, but that he was the man through whom God's purposes of salvation started to be achieved. Adam's disobedience precipitated a deluge of sinful acts that ended in the flood. Noah, the new father of the human race, was 'blameless', but he also fell and that culminated in the overweening pride of Babel. This in turn was punished with a judgment affecting all mankind. Now with Abraham God started again, this time promising 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (12:3).

11:27 – 12:9 The call of Abram

This section briefly introduces Abram, his family and his homeland and describes his call in a way that summarizes his whole journey of faith.

11:27–30 The family in Ur. This section may be set out in a family tree.



The family of Terah and Abram.

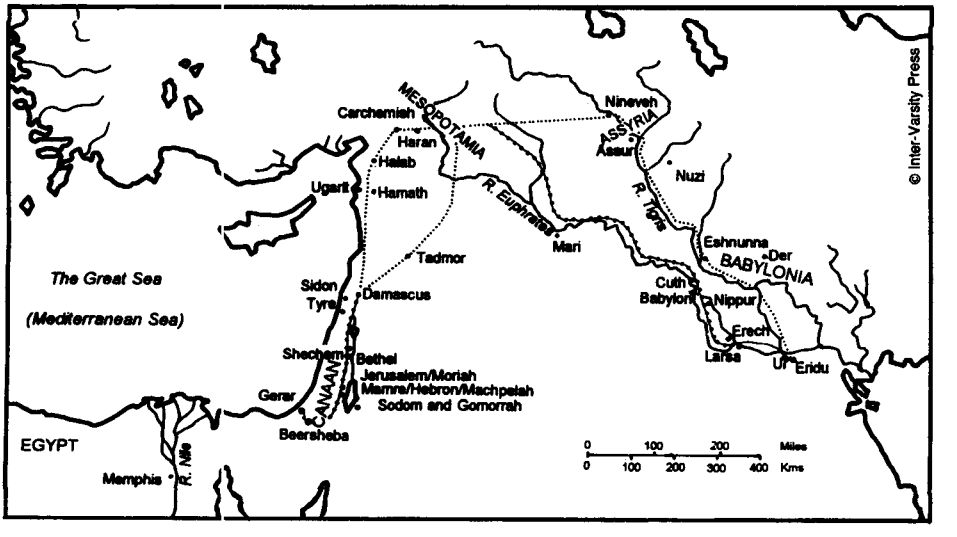
Two things are important to note. First, that Sarai was childless, a catastrophe for a woman in the ancient world. Secondly, that Lot was Abram's orphaned nephew, whom he seems to have adopted. He accompanied Abram, and it looks as though he would have been his heir if Sarai had not had a child.

11:31–32 From Ur to Haran. The whole family moved from Ur, an important centre of culture in southern Iraq, to Haran in eastern Syria. There Terah died at the age of 205, which made Abram 135 (*cf.* v 26). Abram must

have left his father Terah in Haran 60 years before he died (12:4).

12:1–9 From Haran to Canaan. Leaving homeland and family was a much greater decision in a traditional society than in today's mobile, individualistic culture. Abram risked everything he held most dear to obey God's call. Christ similarly challenges people to venture everything to follow him (Mt. 10:37–39; Phil. 3:8).

Vs 2–3 sum up the theology of Genesis and provide the key to its interpretation. (See the Introduction on the Theology of chs. 12 – 50.)



Possible routes for Abram's journey from Ur to Canaan (Gn. 11:31 – 12:6). The southern route to Haran (heavily dotted line) is the more likely.

V 4 suggests that God called Abram in Haran not Ur. *The Land of Canaan* comprised the territory currently (1993) held by Israel, Lebanon and part of southern Syria. Abram's obedience was rewarded by an enhancement of the promise, a *land that I will show you* (1) becomes *this land* (*cf.* the introduction on the theology of chs. 12–50). God's gracious promise prompted Abram to repeated acts of thankful worship, *he built an altar* (7,9).

12:10–20 Abram in Egypt

Abram's initial religious enthusiasm wilted as he faced famine in Canaan and was forced to migrate to Egypt. Here fear of man replaced trust in God as his guiding principle. Describing Sarai as his sister was a misleading half-truth (*cf.* 20:12) designed to fend off potential suitors (*cf.* 24:55). Perhaps Abram hoped to delay any proposed wedding and then leave Egypt before it could take place. But royal suits cannot be denied and Sarai found herself in Pharaoh's harem (15).

From the way the story is told (*cf.* v 19), it is clear that Abram's behaviour is not commended. Nevertheless, the Lord intervened and rescued him by sending plagues on Pharaoh so that Abram, like his descendants, escaped from Egypt greatly enriched (*cf.* Ex. 12:35–36). This mini-exodus from Egypt foreshadows its greater successors (*cf.* Ex. 12 – 14; Lk. 9:31). It shows God fulfilling his promise to protect Abram (12:3) despite his unbelief. God graciously overrules even the mistakes of those he has called, to their long-term benefit (*cf.* 45:5–8; Rom. 8:28).

13:1–18 Abram and Lot separate

Chastened by his experiences in Egypt, Abram returned to Bethel, where he had met God before, and prayed there again. Now a new problem arose. The blessing of affluence provoked a dispute between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot. This time, instead of trying to manipulate the situation to his own advantage, Abram appealed for harmony and set the tone himself by displaying exemplary generosity towards his nephew and allowing him the pick of the land.

But 'all that glisters is not gold'. The Jordan valley may have looked like Eden (10), but it was inhabited by wicked men, sinning greatly against God (13). Not for the only time, urban prosperity dazzled a simple countryman who failed to appreciate its underlying corruption.

Abram's generosity towards his nephew was

repaid with an even richer statement of the promises. *This land* (12:9) becomes *all the land*, and it was given to Abram's descendants *for ever* (15). His descendants would not be just a *great nation* (12:2) but become as numerous as *the dust of the earth* (16). Proposing a peaceable division of the land and giving Lot first choice, Abram showed the love of peace and a willingness to sacrifice self-interest that the Bible always applauds (*cf.* Ps. 133; Mt. 5:9; Phil. 2:1–15).

Note. 10 *Sodom, Gomorrah* and *Zoar*, three of the cities of the plain, cannot be surely located. Five sites on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, which were ruined shortly before 2000 BC, may be the towns concerned.

14:1–24 Abram rescues Lot

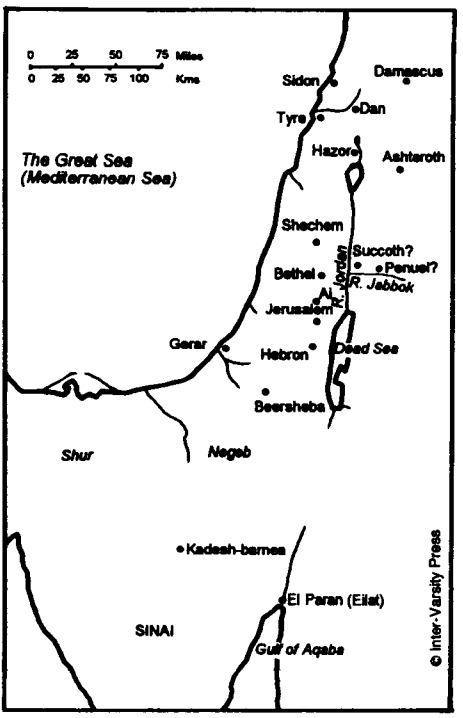
The comfortable affluence of Lot was disturbed by invasion. Four kings, led by Kedorlaomer of Elam (part of Iran), conquered the Jordan valley. Thirteen years later a rebellion by the cities of the plain led to another invasion by the same eastern coalition. The armies of Sodom and Gomorrah were defeated, the cities were sacked and Lot was taken captive.

But Abram, leading 318 men, was able to defeat these foreign armies, rescue all those taken captive and return their pillaged property. This was a striking demonstration that God was on Abram's side. But not everyone acknowledged it. The king of Sodom, who had most to be grateful for, offered no word of thanks but brusquely demanded the return of his people. Abram protested that he had no intention of profiting from Sodom's misfortune (21–24).

Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (probably Jerusalem), on the other hand, received Abram royally and laid on a banquet for him. Melchizedek then blessed Abram in the name of *God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.* Responding to this kindly reception, Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the booty he had taken (20).

The attitudes of Melchizedek and the king of Sodom are deliberately contrasted. They exemplify the two kinds of reaction to Abram predicted in 12:3. Melchizedek is one of those who bless Abram, whereas the king of Sodom clearly disdains (the NIV's *curse* is too strong) him. Consequently, Melchizedek could expect to be blessed by God, whereas the king of Sodom could look for a curse. Already (*cf.* 13:13) the fate of the city of Sodom (ch. 19) is being hinted at.

Genesis does not explain what blessing Melchizedek received as a reward for blessing Abram. However, Ps. 110:4 mentions God's oath to David 'You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek', implying that Melchizedek's memory had been venerated in Jerusalem as a forerunner of the Davidic line. The NT sees Melchizedek as a 'type' of Christ, a forerunner of the Messiah. His high status was acknowledged by Abram giving him a tenth of what he had taken (Heb. 5 – 7). Apart from these few verses, however, Melchizedek never appears again in Genesis. He stands simply as a reminder that all those who acknowledged God's hand at work in Abram would themselves experience blessing.



The Holy Land at the time Abram's military campaign.

Notes. The many archaic features of this chapter (see Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, pp. 318–20) show it is based on an old source, but they also make some of the details hard to understand. **1** The names of the kings (*Amraphel, Arioch, Kedorlaomer* and *Tidal*) have an authentic second-millennium ring, but current archaeological evidence does not allow us to identify them precisely. *Shinar* is Babylonia; *Ellasar* may be in eastern Turkey; *Elam* is in modern Iraq; and the *Goiim* may be a reference to the Hittites. **2** Little is known about the names of these towns and their kings. (On their location *cf.* the note on 13:10.) **3** *Siddim*, a term used only here and in vs 8,10 for the Dead Sea valley, may possibly be a reference to the southern end. **5–7** In so far as the places and

peoples can be identified, the eastern raiders seem to have swept south through modern Jordan from *Ashteroth* in the north to *El Paran* (possibly Eilat) at the head of the gulf of Aqaba. Then they turned north-west across the Sinai peninsula to Kadesh Barnea. **10** *Tar pits.* Petroleum oozes to the surface in the area south of the Dead Sea, and this can be dug out. **11** *Mamre* and *Eshcol*, the names of Abram's allies, were also places near Hebron. **14** *Dan* was the northernmost town in Israel and was settled by the Danites (Jdg. 18:29). **15** *Hobah* is of unknown location. *Damascus* is the capital of Syria. **17** *Valley of Shaveh* could be 'the King's Valley' just to the south of Jerusalem (2 Sa. 18:18).

15:1–21 The covenant promise

Abram's defeat of the eastern kings had left him no better off. Despite the promises, he did not as yet own any of the land nor had any children been born to him. His nephew Lot, whom he had hoped might succeed him, was living in Sodom, outside the land of promise. His most likely heir seemed to be his servant Eliezer.

God, therefore, addressed Abram's disappointment directly, '*Do not be afraid Abram. I am . . . your very great reward.* This prompted Abram to share with God his sense of disappointment and frustration. Far from provoking an angry response from God, Abram's honesty led to a reaffirmation and deepening of the original promises. He would father a son himself (4), and his descendants would be as countless as the stars (5).

Abram accepted God's reassurance, he *believed the LORD* (6). The verbal form suggests an ongoing activity, *i.e.* he kept believing the promise, he kept relying on the Lord. So God *credited it to him as righteousness.* Righteousness is that state of acceptance by God which comes from perfect obedience to the law. Abram's failure to fulfil the law's demands completely is obvious in Genesis, yet his faith in God's promise of a child is here said to count as righteousness. For Paul, this shows that faith, not works, is the prerequisite to acceptance by God (Gal. 3:6–14). Jas. 2:18–24 and Heb. 11:8–9 point out that Abraham's faith was proved genuine by his good works. This 'faith that works' is central to the Christian understanding of salvation and upright living.

Certainly, Abram's faith was anything but passive. He again asked for reassurance, '*. . . how can I know?*' Scripture nowhere condemns those asking hor est questions or sincerely seeking assurance. In this case, Abram was given a far-reaching vision of his descendants' future destiny in the land. First, he killed five sacrificial animals, which symbolized the people of Israel and then drove off birds of prey that would have eaten the carcasses. When the sun set he saw a smoking brazier and a blazing torch pass between the pieces. This symbolized the glory of God that would accompany Israel, as they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan, in the pillar of fire and cloud (Ex. 14:24). This interpretation of the animal rite is confirmed by vs 13–16, which predict the period of slavery in Egypt and the subsequent exodus. Now for the first time it became apparent that God's timescale for the fulfilment of his promises was a long one. Abram was losing patience that little had happened in the ten years (*cf.* 12:4; 16:16) that had elapsed since the promise was first made, but God was thinking in terms of 400 years (13). Christian believers are warned in 2 Pet. 3:3–10 not to be surprised if other promises take longer to be fulfilled than they expect.

Notes. 2 *One who will inherit . . . Damascus* is a difficult phrase, but the NIV's translation is as good as any. **16** Here *the Amorites* covers all the inhabitants of Canaan. Israel's conquest could not take place until the Amorites' sins warranted judgment. To have given the land to Abram would have involved an injustice. The promise could only be fulfilled when it coincided with perfect justice (*cf.* Lv. 18:24–27; Dt. 9:4–5). **19–21** This is the longest list of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan, only some of whom can be identified (*cf.* the comment on 10:15–19).

16:1–16 The birth of Ishmael

Abram may have been willing to wait for God to fulfil his promise of a child but Sarai was not. She was hopelessly infertile, so she decided to resort to surrogate marriage, which was a perfectly respectable practice in the other cultures of the ancient Near East. A child born to a slave-girl could be regarded as the wife's own child, if she had no children of her own.

Many in ancient times saw nothing wrong in surrogate marriage, and surrogate motherhood is still an issue in contemporary society. Genesis, however, clearly does not agree with the practice. Sarai blamed God for her infertility, which suggests her motives were defective. Vs 3–4 echo the description of the fall (*cf.* 3:6), implying sin, and finally, the conceitedness of Hagar and the anger of Sarai show this scheme was not of God.

Yet divine mercy brings good out of human folly. On the run from her mistress, Hagar met *the angel of the LORD*, God in human form who most often appears in dire personal crises to bring assurance of salvation. Hagar was assured that her descendants would be too numerous to count, just as Abram had been told earlier (13:16). Her child's name would be Ishmael

('God has heard') and he would adopt a bedouin-like life-style, which was typical of the later Ishmaelites (11–12). Urged to return to Sarai, Hagar did so and in due course gave birth to a son. But though Sarai had hoped that the child would count as her child, vs 15–16 makes it quite clear that Ishmael was the son of Hagar and Abram and not Sarai's child. Her scheme had failed to produce a child for her. But was Ishmael Abram's promised son? We are left to wonder, but 17:18 shows that Abram at least had concluded Ishmael was the child God had promised.

Notes. 7 The location of *Shur* is disputed, but the *road to Shur* is one of the routes to Egypt through the Sinai peninsula. Hagar was on her way back to Egypt, her home (1). 13 The Hebrew behind '*I have now seen the One who sees me*' (*i.e.* 'looks after me') is difficult and has led to many emendations and translations. The NIV's rendering is as apt as any. It is an expression of thankful amazement that God cares for people in the most unexpected situations (*cf.* Ps. 139:1–12). 14 On *Kadesh cf.* 14:7, but Bered's location is unknown.

17:1–27 The covenant of circumcision

This chapter is a watershed in the Abraham story. It marks a most significant turning point. The author does all in his power to highlight its importance. For one thing, it is very precisely dated. A cluster of dates (16:16; 17:1,17,24) mark this section out as special, just as the flood story is marked. Also striking here is the change of name for Abram and Sarai to the more familiar Abraham and Sarah. Five long divine speeches (1–2, 4–8, 9–14, 15–16, 19–21), arranged in a A-B-C-B-A pattern and devoted to a detailed exposition of the covenant promises, make this chapter unique in the Abraham story. Thereafter divine speeches become much rarer in the book. But these speeches do not just amplify the covenant promises, they speak of establishing or ratifying the covenant (7,19) and introduce the sign of circumcision as a mark of the covenant's ineradicable nature (9–14).

The section begins with a reminder of the lapse of time since the birth of Ishmael, some 13 years (*cf.* 16:16 and 17:1). During this period Sarai had lost all hope of motherhood (*cf.* 18:11), and Abram had accepted the idea that Ishmael was his promised son (18). Almost immediately, however, God started to enlarge the promises. Abram was not simply to become a 'great nation' (12:2) but *father of many nations* (5). As a pledge of this, his name was slightly changed from 'Abram' meaning 'the father is exalted' to a variant pronunciation, 'Abraham'. Though no word *raham* meaning 'multitude' is known, such a word must have existed in Semitic to explain the play on his name here.

He is further promised that the covenant will be eternal and that his descendants will possess *the whole land of Canaan* (8). This is the first time such a precise definition of the promised land has been given (*cf.* 12:5). Here too the essence of the covenant is most clearly defined, *I will . . . be your God.* Abraham and his descendants were in a unique relationship with God. The inclusion of Abraham's descendants within the covenant is yet another innovation of this chapter.

Circumcision, involving the removal of the male foreskin, was the mark of this covenant. All males in Abraham's household, whether freemen or slaves, had to be circumcised. Those who refused circumcision would be *cut off* (14), *i.e.* would die prematurely and mysteriously. Circumcision was a fairly common practice in the ancient Near East, but only the OT invested it with such significance, making it a mark of Israel's covenant status.

These promises were remarkable, but now they become astonishing. Sarai's name was changed to Sarah (both words mean 'princess') heralding the announcement that she would bear a child in her old age. (Even if Abraham and Sarah's ages (100 and 90 years respectively) are not to be taken literally, at least they indicate an age well beyond normal parenthood; *cf.* 18:11). Incredulous Abraham pleaded that Ishmael should be the child of promise, but God insisted that the chosen child would be born of Sarah and be called Isaac. Ishmael, however, would not be overlooked.

Eventually, after this unprecedented disclosure of God's purposes, Abraham reacted and promptly circumcised himself, Ishmael and all the men of his household. Here (as in 12:4–9) he completely obeyed God's call despite the pain it involved. One more painful act of obedience would be required of him to seal the covenant once and for all (*cf.* ch. 22).

Notes. 1 *God Almighty* (Heb. *El Shaddai*) is, like 'God Most High' (Heb. *El Elyon*; 14:9) one of the old pre-Mosaic names of God in Genesis. Its precise meaning is uncertain, but it is always associated with God's promises of children (28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3). 19 Isaac means 'he [*i.e.* God] laughs/smiles' (*cf.* 17:17, 'he laughed'). The name expresses the parents' pleasure at the birth of a son. Like Ishmael and Jacob, Isaac is an old name typical of the early second millennium.

18:1 – 19:38 The overthrow of Sodom

No other twenty-four-hour period in Abraham's life is described more fully than this one. This indicates the importance of this episode for the narrator, yet on the face of it the

destruction of Sodom has little to do with the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham. Admittedly, it opens with angels coming to visit Abraham and Sarah and announcing to her, albeit indirectly, that she would have a son. The rest of the story, however, apparently adds nothing to the promise theme.

Much more obvious are the parallels with the flood story. In both stories one righteous man and his family are saved from a universal destruction through God's intervention. Both stories have a short appendix in which the drunken father is disgraced by his children (9:20–27; 19:30–38). Both stories are structured as lengthy 'palistrophes' or 'mirror-images' (*cf.* comments on 6:9 – 9:29).

A Abraham looks towards Sodom (18:16) A^1 Abraham looks towards Sodom (19:27–28)
B God's reflections on Sodom (18:17–21) B^1 Sodom destroyed (19:23–26)
C Abraham's plea for Sodom (18:22–33) C^1 Lot's plea for Zoar (19:17–22)
D Angels arrive in Sodom (19:1–3) D^1 Departure from Sodom (19:15–16)
E Assault on Lot and angels (19:4–11) E^1 Lot's sons-in-law reject appeal (19:14)
F Sodom's destruction announced (19:12–13)

So how does the story of Sodom's overthrow relate to the main theme of Genesis, the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham? First, it shows Abraham's intimacy with God. It was the Lord who let Abraham know what he was thinking of doing to Sodom, and this prompted Abraham's long intercession for the righteous of the city. The Lord accepted his plea that if he could find ten righteous people there he would spare the whole city Unfortunately, the only righteous man in Sodom was Lot. The wickedness of all the others is demonstrated by the concerted attack of all men of the city – young and old – on Lot's house (19:4). Nevertheless, the Lord heard Abraham's prayer and rescued Lot from the city for his sake (19:29). Potentially then, the city of Sodom could have been blessed through Abraham (*cf.* 12:3); it was their own misconduct that cut them off from divine mercy.

Secondly, the fate of Sodom was already hinted at in 14:21. There the king's disdain for Abraham boded ill for the future, for 12:3 warned that he who disdained Abraham would be cursed. Failure to acknowledge God's work in choosing Abraham was disastrous (*cf.* Mk. 3:22–30). Although Lot was saved from the fiery destruction of Sodom thanks to Abraham's prayers, his end was a sad one, the ultimate conclusion of his decision to part from Abraham and identify with the glitzy life of Sodom. In this way Genesis portrays the awful consequences of choosing the path of self-indulgence instead of identifying oneself wholeheartedly with God and his chosen servants.

Finally, the destruction of Sodom was a warning of what was to happen to the Canaanites as a whole if they persisted in their sinful ways. The OT insists that it was because of their wickedness that the Canaanites were conquered and displaced by Israel (15:16; Lv. 18:24–28; 20:22–24). Thus, the destruction of Sodom was a pledge of the conquest of Canaan and the fulfilment of the land promise to Abraham. But the NT views the destruction of Sodom, like the flood story, as of universal significance. Jesus warned that towns that failed to respond to his teaching (Mt. 11:20–24) would suffer worse than Sodom, and Revelation draws heavily on the imagery of Gn. 19 to describe God's judgment on all cities and nations who set themselves against Christ (*e.g.* Rev. 11:8).

18:1–15 Isaac's birth announced to Sarah. The repetition of the promise of Isaac's birth is not redundant. In 17:19 only Abraham had been told; now Sarah had to be informed (10), for evidently Abraham had not mentioned it to her. The doubling of the message, like the doubling of dreams (41:32), indicates its prompt and certain fulfilment, *at the appointed time next year.*

Notes. 1 *Mamre*, near Hebron, was about 20 miles (32 km) south of Jerusalem. **2–8** Abraham's concern for his guests is a model of oriental hospitality, a trait expected of all God's people (Heb. 13:2). Angels are usually taken for *men* in the Bible until their words or deeds prove them otherwise. Here one of the angels seems to be the angel of God, *i.e. the* LORD himself (22), whereas the other two, who went on to visit Sodom (19:1), are his attendants.

18:16–33 Abraham's plea for Sodom. It was God's choice of Abraham that led him to disclose his plans (17–20). Abraham is here portrayed as a great prophet, one who was privy to God's secrets and turned his knowledge into prayers for his people (*cf.* 1 Sa. 12:23; Am. 3:7). But Abraham prayed not just for his own people but for the town which had treated him so unkindly (*cf.* Mt. 5:44).

Notes. 21 The visit of the angels to Sodom (19:1–13) would confirm its wicked reputation.

19:1–26 Lot's family rescued from Sodom. 1–3 Lot greeted his visitors just as warmly as Abraham (18:2–8), though his hospitality is described more briefly. That Lot was alone and no-one else greeted the visitors is ominous though.

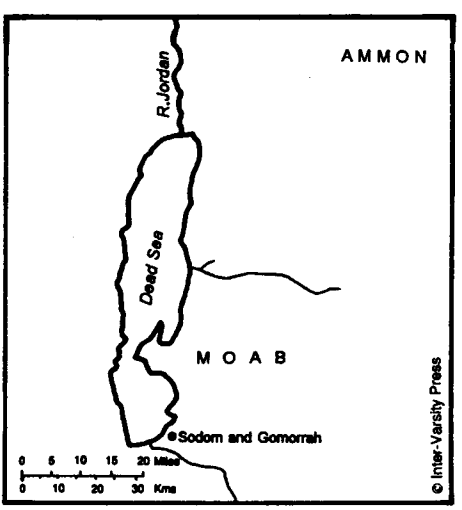
4–11 The reputation of Sodom for wickedness is soon confirmed. Instead of welcoming their visitors, the Sodomites (note *all the men* of the city were involved) demanded to rape their visitors. No greater flouting of

oriental conventions of hospitality can be imagined than to make guests submit to homosexual rape. Ancient societies often condoned homosexuality between consenting adults, but rape, especially of guests, was always regarded as wrong. Lot's commitment to his guests was total, as the offer of his daughters demonstrates. Happily, this unfortunate offer was rejected by the attackers, and the angels struck them with temporary blindness.

14 As the NIV makes plain, it is not clear whether the Heb. *sons-in-law* means the men were already married to his daughters or just betrothed. Once again the Sodomites had only themselves to blame for their destruction, as they rejected Lot's invitation to escape.

16–26 Even Lot and his family failed to appreciate the urgency of the situation, and the angels had to drag them out of the city. The Dead Sea region still reeks of sulphur, and the strange rock formations there recall the fate of Lot's wife, who was even more attached to Sodom than he was (Lk. 17:32).

19:30–38 Lot's daughters. These verses portray the pathetic end of a righteous man who had compromised with the world. Putting their desire for children above principle (for their deeds breach both incest rules and filial duty), Lot's daughters contrived to have intercourse with him. This was the origin of the Moabites and Ammonites, two of Israel's nearest neighbours. The Ammonites lived east of the Jordan and the Moabites north-east of the Dead Sea (*cf.* Nu. 21:24).



The Dead Sea region when Lot lived in Sodom.

20:1–18 Sarah and Abimelech

The contrast between Abraham's saintly deeds in ch. 18 and his deceitful cowardice here shocks every reader. If his fear in Egypt (12:10–20) was understandable though not justified, what can be said for his repeating the same misleading story about his wife in Gerar, a small town in the south-eastern corner of Canaan (*cf.* 10:19)? After enjoying such intimacy with God in ch. 18 why had he apparently abandoned faith in divine protection and relied on his cunning? On the other hand, the men of Gerar are shown to be very different from the Sodomites. Abimelech protested the purity of his motives and his desire to please God. So we learn that Abraham was not as saintly as ch. 18 perhaps suggested, nor were all the Canaanites as wicked as Sodom. Real life is often a mixture of contradictions – the totally pure or completely evil exist only in fiction.

Nevertheless, despite Abraham's failings, God did protect him and Sarah and enrich them and grant grazing rights (15). Moreover, he heard Abraham's prayers for Abimelech and his wives and healed their temporary infertility (17–18). Despite Abraham's failings, the promises were still being fulfilled. But if God could answer Abraham's prayers for Abimelech's infertile wife, what about Sarah? Was she not going to have the child as promised?

Notes. 1 *From there, i.e.* from Mamre (*cf.* 18:1). On *Kadesh* see 14:7, and on *Shur* see 16:7. **3** Throughout the ancient orient, adultery warranted the death penalty (*cf.* Lv. 20:10; Dt. 22:22). **5** A leader's sins have dire consequences for his people (*cf.* 2 Sa. 24). **12** Later biblical law forbade marriage with half or full sisters (Lv. 18:9,11).

21:1–21 Isaac and Ishmael part

The birth of Isaac is described surprisingly briefly in view of the space devoted to Sarah's lack of a child in the story so far. However, the triple reminder that *the LORD . . . did what he had promised* in vs 1–2 underlines the significance of the birth. Without a son, none of the long-term promises to Abraham of land, numerous descendants or blessing to the nations could be fulfilled. Isaac's birth to an incredibly old couple proves the reliability of God's promises and that nothing is *too hard for the LORD* (18:14). As instructed (17:12), Abraham circumcised Isaac on the eighth day after birth.

Sarah's laughter expressed her jubilation at Isaac's birth and shows the appropriateness of his name ('Isaac' means 'he laughs'; *cf.* 17:19). Unfortunately, her joy turned sour when she saw Ishmael mocking (lit. 'Isaacing') Isaac.

Quite what the older boy was doing is unclear. (Ishmael must have been at least fifteen years old by this stage, for weaning in Bible times often did not take place till children were two or three.) However, it seems likely that Ishmael was making fun of Isaac's status as Abraham's heir. He was therefore guilty of 'disdaining' Abraham and his heir, and, as the story has already illustrated with the king of Sodom, this was a serious matter (12:3; 14:21). So God endorsed Sarah's petulant demand for Ishmael's expulsion (10–12). Abraham, however, was very fond of Ishmael (*cf.* 17:18), and he exploded in anger (the NIV's *very distressed* understates his feelings) at Sarah's proposal (12). Only God's reassurance that Ishmael would himself become a great nation persuaded Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, with as much food and water as they could carry.

Soon supplies were exhausted, and they were lost and near to death. Ishmael started to pray, perhaps regretting his behaviour that had led to their expulsion. His prayer was heard, and an angel of God (*cf.* 16:7–11) called to Hagar, repeating the promises (18) and pointing out a well. As a result, their lives were saved. Yet again the aptness of Ishmael's name ('God hears') is demonstrated, and so is God's willingness to answer the prayers of those whose folly lands them in dire straits, if they turn to him in penitence. At the same time, the status of Isaac as the only child through whom the promises can be fulfilled became inescapable.

Notes. 14 *Beersheba* is about 50 miles (80 km) south of Jerusalem. **21** *The Desert of Paran*, the largest wilderness south of Canaan, covers much of the Sinai peninsula, Negev and Arabah.

21:22–34 Treaty with Abimelech

This treaty with Abimelech (*cf.* ch. 20) marked another small but decisive step towards the fulfilment of the promises. Under the treaty Abraham secured legal rights to a well near Beersheba. For a herdsman totally dependent on guaranteed access to water for his flocks this was a most important provision. This was the first foothold that Abraham secured in the land of Canaan. As a mark of his thankfulness to God Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and worshipped (33).

Notes. 22 It is not clear whether this incident immediately follows 20:18, 21:7 or 21:21. **23** Abimelech proposed a treaty with Abraham, and then (25–30) Abraham exploited the opportunity to secure permanent rights to the well his herdsman had dug. **31** *Beersheba*, as the NIV mg. points out, means 'well of seven' or 'well of the oath'.

22:1–24 The sacrifice of Isaac

This is at once one of the most dramatic and most theologically significant episodes in Genesis. The cruel command to sacrifice Isaac, the pathos of the solitary ascent by Abraham and his son to the place of sacrifice, the painful process of binding him and laying him on the altar and the last-minute intervention from heaven makes this one of the best-told stories in world literature. But it is more than that. It is the last great test of Abraham's faith, comparable to the original call to leave his home and family (*cf.* v 2 with 12:1). Although we are told it was a test (1), for Abraham God's command was totally real. It was appalling emotionally and theologically, for on Isaac all the promises of blessing depended for fulfilment. Torn between love for his child and obedience to God, Abraham faced agonizing choices. Step by step, faith and hope triumphed over fear and doubt until the knife was raised to slay his son. In this way he showed he was willing to put God's call above every other commitment and emotional attachment, and at that moment the test ended. He had passed with flying colours. A ram was sacrificed in place of Isaac, and the angel declared that Abraham's act of obedience changed the status of the promises. They became sworn guarantees of innumerable descendants, the capture of land and blessing on him and, through him, on all the nations of the world.

Vs 16–18 are the last words spoken by God to Abraham in Genesis, and their significance should not be underestimated. From now on there is no doubt about the fulfilment of the promise. Abraham's obedience prompted God to guarantee his promises with an oath.

For the NT, however, there is more to the sacrifice of Isaac than the supreme example of someone committing himself to obey God completely (Heb. 11:17–19); it is a picture of God's sacrificial love. Just as Abraham gave his only son as a sacrifice, so the Father 'did not spare his own Son' for the world (Rom. 8:32; Jn. 3:16). In Isaac's ready submission to Abraham's will we see an image of the Son who said 'Father . . . not my will, but yours be done' (Lk. 22:42).

20–24 With Isaac's future guaranteed (17), the narrative now looks ahead briefly to show us the pedigreee of his future bride, Rebekah. As ch. 24 makes plain, God had everything arranged. This little genealogy shows how God provides for our needs before we even recognize them (Mt. 6:25–34).

Notes. 1 God tests people to uncover their true character (*cf.* Dt. 8:2,16). **2** *Moriah* is usually identified with the mountain in Jerusalem where the temple was erected (2 Ch. 3:1). Thus, Abraham's sacrifice of the ram

foreshadowed the subsequent animal sacrifices in the temple, as well as the supreme 'Lamb of God' (Jn. 1:29). As Abraham subsequently discovered, *Moriah* means *The LORD Will Provide* (22:8,14). The name of the place where his son was to die would prove to be the place of God's provision. Human sacrifice is not part of God's will for his people. A *burnt offering* was a common type of sacrifice, in which the whole victim was burnt upon the altar (*cf.* Lv. 1). **9** It was usual to bind animals before sacrifice. Binding is mentioned only here in the OT and underlines Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed.

23:1–20 The burial of Sarah

Sarah, the grandmother of the nation of Israel, deserved a worthy tomb. But there was more to the purchase of a proper burial plot than that. Abraham was determined to own a piece of the promised land before he died and to bury his wife there. The lengthy negotiations described here show him using his need for a grave for Sarah to establish ownership of land.

The courteous but tough negotiations proceeded in three stages. First, Abraham asked the Hittites to give him (the NIV's *sell* is too precise) some land for a burial plot. They immediately offered him any of their graves (perhaps 'caves') to inter Sarah (3–6). Secondly, their kindly response prompted Abraham to request that Ephron sell him the *cave of Machpelah*. Ephron then offered to *give* Abraham the cave and the field (7–11). But a gift does not secure ownership as firmly as purchase, so finally Abraham insisted on buying the field and the land. Eventually he persuaded Ephron to name his price. Maybe the price was high for the land in question, 400 shekels would buy a large plot, but Abraham did not quibble (12–16). Now the land with its cave was unquestionably his, and he buried Sarah in it. Thus, before he died, Abraham had become a legal owner of part of Canaan, and yet another aspect of the promises had been partially fulfilled.

Notes. 1 *Hebron* was near Mamre (*cf.* 18:1), where Abraham had received many of the promises (13:8; 18:1). **3** The *Hittites* Semitic names make it unlikely that they had any connection with the Hittites of Asia Minor. They were just another ethnic group among many in Canaan (*cf.* 15:19–21). **9** The present-day mosque in Hebron has first-century BC foundations, which shows that the claim that it covers the tombs of the partriarchs is old.

24:1–67 Rebekah's call to marriage

Sarah's death and burial was followed immediately by Abraham's. At least, that is the perspective of ch. 24; 25:7 implies a much longer gap between the two deaths. In v 1 Abraham appears to be on his deathbed, and by the time the servant returns with Rebekah, Isaac is alone and head of the household (65).

As befits a man who had given his life to fulfilling promises, Abraham's last words expressed his concern that this should also be the family's priority after he had gone. He made his servant swear to find Isaac a wife, a prerequisite if the promise of numerous descendants was to be realized. She must not be a Canaanite but come from Abraham's relatives and, like Abraham, be willing to settle in Canaan (5–9).

The servant was a model of loyalty and persuasive speech, who commended his master's interests by word and deed. His speeches were finely judged to persuade Rebekah's family to give her in marriage to the unknown Isaac (34–49). Then, when next day they stalled about letting her go immediately, he refused to take no for an answer and insisted that they depart (54–58). But despite all his natural gifts, the servant was a man of prayer. He relied on God, not on chance or his own ability. Arriving at the well he prayed '*O LORD . . . give me success today*', and, as is often the case, his prayers were answered more quickly (*before he had finished praying*) and more fully (*a daughter of Bethuel . . . and very beautiful*) than he had anticipated (*cf.* Is. 65:24; Eph. 3:20).

Rebekah herself not only exceeded the servant's expectations, she was shown to be the perfect wife for Isaac (*cf.* Pr. 31:10–31). She was energetic (running to draw water for ten camels; v 20), hospitable (eager to welcome the servant to her home; v 28) and, above all, a woman of faith (ready like Abraham to leave home and family for the land of promise; v 57, *cf.* Mt. 19:29).

Notes. 10 *Aram Naharaim* is an area now in northern Syria, east of the Euphrates. *The town of Nahor* is probably Haran (*cf.* 11:31) or a city nearby. **15** For a fuller genealogy see 22:20–24. **53** These gifts to the family, elsewhere called the bride-price or marriage present (RSV, Ex. 22:16–17), sealed the betrothal agreement. **62** On Beer Lahai Roi see 16:14.

25:1–11 The last days of Abraham

A modern reader automatically assumes that this section describes Abraham marrying again after the death of Sarah, but there is nothing here to justify this assumption. It seems more likely that he had married Keturah earlier, perhaps after divorcing Hagar.

The genealogy in vs 2–4 links Israel (via Abraham) with various tribes and peoples that live on the fringes of Canaan (*e.g.* Midian was a group of traders [37:28,36] who lived in the deserts of Sinai [Ex. 3:1] and Transjordan [Nu.

25; Jdg. 7–8]). The genealogy expresses Israel's affinity with these peoples and shows how the promise that Abraham would father many nations (17:4–6) was partially fulfilled.

Notes. 8 *Gathered to his people* means not just that Abraham's body rested with his relatives in the family grave, but that his soul was reunited with theirs in the afterlife. **9** On *Machpelah* see ch. 23.

25:12–18 The account of Ishmael

Genesis tells the history of Israel's ancestors by interspersing long accounts of the main chosen line of Abraham (chs. 12 – 25), Isaac (chs. 25 – 35) and Jacob (chs. 37 – 50) with very short summary accounts of the side lines of Ishmael (25:12–18) and Esau (36:1 – 37:1). Ishmael was Abraham's eldest son and was the ancestor of the Ishmaelites, a group of twelve tribes who inhabited the deserts to the south and east of Israel. Many of the names in vs 13–14 seem to be places or tribes in Arabia or Sinai.

Genesis is not, however, just interested in history and geography. Ishmael's mother Hagar was told 'he will live in hostility towards all his brothers' (16:12). His father Abraham was assured he would father twelve rulers. This account shows how both predictions came true (16,18). If the Lord fulfilled these fairly minor promises, how much more surely would he fulfil the much greater promises made to Isaac, Abraham's chosen son.

25:19 – 35:29 The account of Isaac and the stories of Jacob and Esau

Just as the account of Terah is largely concerned with Terah's son Abraham, so the account of Isaac tells the story of Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau. It begins with two boys fighting each other in the womb and continues with Jacob cheating Esau out of his birthright and his blessing. Then, in danger of his life, Jacob fled from home, settled with his cousins and eventually returned to Canaan to make peace with his brother. Like the Terah account, this long section of Genesis is concerned with tracing the relationship between Israel (Jacob) and neighbouring peoples (Esau represents Edom) and with the fulfilment of the great promises of land, blessing and descendants. This section also has minor themes of its own, including Jacob's triumph over Esau and God's protective presence with Jacob. It is a story of a family broken by feuding, whose members meet God in their distress and eventually achieve reconciliation.

25:19–35 First encounters of Jacob and Esau

Two short sketches introduce us to Jacob and Esau. After twenty years of childlessness (25:20,26, *cf.* Sarah), Rebekah at last conceived, and she had a horrible twin pregnancy. The babies smashed each other (the NIV's *jostled* is too gentle) inside their mother's womb. Their antenatal battle foreshadowed the life-long struggle between them.

In her distress Rebekah turned to a prophet who cryptically interpreted her condition: '*Two nations are in your womb, . . . the older will serve the younger*'. Even as they were born, there was no let up in the struggle between them; Jacob came out second, clutching his brother's heel. *Esau* was red (*admoni*) and hairy (*sear*), and this anticipated his future homeland known as Edom and Seir. Similarly, Jacob's name was interpreted in terms of his behaviour at birth. Jacob is an old second-millennium name (as are Ishmael and Isaac), which scholars suggest meant '[God] rewards or protects'. But here, as often in the OT, a traditional name is given a new meaning. Jacob is linked with the word 'heel' (*eqeb*) and is probably understood to mean, 'he clutches at the heel' (*i.e.* the grasping, cheating competitor).

Though twins, their characters developed quite differently. Jacob became a cool, calculating stay-at-home, whereas Esau became an impetuous, active countryman. One day Jacob exploited his brother's hunger to exchange some lentil stew for his birthright, *i.e.* the privileges assigned to the firstborn son of the family. The narrator neither explicitly commends Jacob for his unbrotherliness nor Esau for disdaining his birthright, but the incident does show the prophecy of the older serving the younger was already being fulfilled.

Note. 20 Paddan Aram is in northern Mesopotamia near Haran.

26:1–33 Isaac and the Philistines

Isaac was overshadowed by his father and his sons. Outside this chapter there is not much about him. Here we have a collection of snapshots from his life, illustrating how, despite his timidity and moral shortcomings, Isaac received extraordinary promises and experienced extraordinary blessing that in some respects outshone even Abraham's.

The comparison with Abraham's career is clear in v 1 by the reference to *the earlier famine of Abraham's time* (see 12:10). The promises made to Isaac exceed even those given to Abraham in 22:16–18, when the promises became guarantees. Here the promises are made to Isaac and his *descendants* and *all these lands*, not just Canaan, are given to him.

Like his father Abraham, Isaac pretended his wife was his sister. Happily, Rebekah, unlike Sarah, never joined the royal harem. But Isaac's

misleading comments were just as blameworthy as his father's (10–11). Nevertheless, like Abraham, Isaac enjoyed extraordinary prosperity with his crops yielding a hundredfold (12).

His prosperity provoked jealousy, and the Philistines prevented him from using the wells dug by Abraham. (The legal right to these wells was the first one that Abraham acquired in Canaan; *cf.* 21:22–34). Indeed, Isaac allowed himself to be pushed around by the Philistines. Genesis does not make clear whether this happened because he was prompted by cowardice or because he was a peacemaker.

The LORD, however, reassured him, '*Do not be afraid, for I am with you*,' and the promise of children was reaffirmed. As if to confirm these promises a delegation from Gerar arrived asking Isaac to make a security pact with them, because '*We saw clearly that the LORD was with you*.' Now at last Isaac enjoyed peace and secure water supplies in the land of promise.

Thus, through this collection of incidents we see how God's promises made initially to Abraham were even more abundantly fulfilled in the life of Isaac. Once again, this was not always the result of his virtue but happened despite his mistakes. The timid can experience divine blessings as much as those who respond to God's call with greater confidence. Indeed, God's grace is more evident in weaker vessels (1 Cor. 1:27–31; 2 Cor. 4:7).

Notes. 1 The *Philistines* of Genesis are different from those in Judges, who arrived in Canaan *c.* 1200 BC. The later Philistines came from Asia Minor and the Aegean, and these earlier groups may have come from the same area. **7–11** Perhaps this incident preceded the birth of Jacob and Esau in 25:26. **26** *His personal adviser* is better translated 'his chief of shepherds'. He was the man responsible for supervising grazing rights with a 'police force' to enforce his decisions, a sort of police chief. **33** Another explanation of the name of *Beersheba* is given (*cf.* 21:30–31).

26:34 – 28:9 Jacob cheats Esau of his blessing

This is one of the most gripping stories in Genesis. Will Jacob's disguise deceive his father? Will he receive the blessing before Esau returns? But it also poses moral and theological problems. Does God approve of Jacob's cheating? Will he endorse a blessing gained under false pretences?

On first reading we tend to see Rebekah and Jacob just as rogues who exploited the blindness of Isaac to do down Esau. In fact the situation is not so black and white. Esau had married *two* wives, which was a bad step in itself (*cf.* Lamech, 4:19–24). Moreover, they were Hittites, *i.e.* Canaanites (see 23:3). Abraham had been most concerned that Isaac should not marry a Canaanite girl (24:3); why had not Isaac insisted on, or even arranged, a suitable match for Esau? Worse still, Isaac on his deathbed flouted convention and showed total bias towards Esau. When patriarchs knew their death was near, they were expected to summon all their sons and give them each a blessing (*cf.* chs. 48 – 50). Now, lamely pretending he does not know the day of his death (2), Isaac summoned only his favourite, Esau. No wonder Rebekah, who had long preferred Jacob (25:28), was incensed.

It is not clear how far Jacob approved of Rebekah's scheme to outwit Isaac and obtain the blessing. His reluctance to co-operate may have been prompted as much by fear of being caught out as by moral scruple (11–12). Nor is the narrator's evaluation immediately obvious. Isaac was clear that his blessing was irrevocable: that since it was pronounced over Jacob it belonged to him (37).

Yet in the longer term it is apparent that Jacob's deceit caught up with him and Rebekah. Esau's anger at Jacob's deed forced the latter to leave home, so that despite Rebekah's hope that he would only be away a few days (*a while*, v 44) she never saw him again. Jacob, who cheated his father, would soon be cheated by his father-in-law Laban, who would force him to marry Leah as well as Rachel. This would be a cause of perpetual distress to Jacob for the rest of his days. In their turn, Leah's sons would deceive Jacob with a kid about Joseph's fate, just as Jacob deceived his father with a kid (37:31–35; 27:9,16). Later too, Jacob acknowledged his fault. When he returned to Canaan, he gave flocks and herds to Esau and invited him to accept them with the words 'Please accept my blessing [the NIV's 'the present' is inexact] that was brought to you' (33:11). With this gesture he was trying to give back the blessing he had cheated Esau out of.

Nevertheless, despite the underhand way in which Jacob obtained the blessing, it was still valid. Isaac's last words predicted the future relationship between Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom). The nation of Israel would usually dominate Edom. Israel would enjoy a settled agricultural existence, whereas Edom would be more of a nomadic people in the dry wilderness areas (28–29,39–40). Furthermore, the promises made first to Abraham and repeated to Isaac, would now be fulfilled through Jacob (28:3–4).

Here, as often in Genesis, this new step forward in the history of salvation is set against the backdrop of unscrupulous behaviour by the patriarchs involved. Once again, it is God's

mercy, not human merit, that is the ultimate hope of redemption (*cf.* Rom. 9:10–18).

Notes. 28:2 On *Paddan Aram cf.* 25:20.

28:10–22 Jacob meets God at Bethel

Personal crisis is often the occasion for deep spiritual experience. So it was for Jacob. Running away from home to a foreign country, he lay down and dreamed under the stars. In his dream the Lord himself reiterated the promises of land, descendants and blessing to the nations made first to Abraham and repeated to Isaac. But a fresh element was added, '*I am with you . . . and will bring you back to this land*' (15). The promise of God's accompanying presence was to be made to many leaders of Israel (*cf.* Ex. 3:12; Jos. 1:5; Jdg. 6:16), indeed, it is Christ's promise to all his followers (Mt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5–6). But unlike many, Jacob was privileged to see his guardian angels (*cf.* Mt. 18:10; 26:53).

Waking up next morning, he set up the stone as a sacred pillar, that is, as a symbol of God's presence. He poured oil over it to consecrate it, and then he made a vow pledging that he would tithe all his income if God brought him back in peace. Vows like this were, and are, commonly made by people in distress (*cf.* 1 Sa. 1:11) and, as long as the votary performs his vow, the OT does not discourage them (*cf.* Dt. 23:21–23; Ec. 5:4–6). Vows are not necessarily bargaining with God, rather they can express our dependence on him. Nor was Jacob's vow here an expression of unbelief in the promises just made to him (15), for all petitionary prayer is based on God's promises to provide for our needs (*cf.* Mt. 6:11 with 6:25–34).

Notes. 19 *Bethel* ('house of God') was about 12 miles (19 km) north of Jerusalem.

29:1–30 Jacob marries Rachel and Leah

God's promised protection of Jacob soon proved itself. Jacob, like Abraham's servant years earlier (ch. 24), journeyed to northern Syria and there met his future bride at a well. And, like the servant, he stayed in the home of his cousins. But whereas the servant came laden with Abraham's wealth, Jacob brought nothing and was not half so attractive to the money-oriented Laban.

He had, however, fallen in love with Rachel (this is one of the few romantic marriages of the OT.) and, prompted by Laban, he asked if he could marry her. Normally betrothal was sealed by the payment of the bride-price (marriage present), given by the man's family to the bride's family (*cf.* the note on 24:53). Jacob, without any family support, could not make the usual payments, so he offered to work seven years for Rachel's hand.

When the years were up, Laban seemed reluctant to go ahead with the wedding, and Jacob had to push him (21). Little is known of wedding procedures in Bible times except what can be inferred from this passage and Jdg. 14. A seven-day party for friends and relations was the main event, but doubtless vows and pledges were exchanged too (*cf.* Ho. 2:2,16). On the first evening the veiled bride was brought to her husband. Doubtless the veil, darkness and alcohol all prevented Jacob from realizing Leah had been substituted for Rachel.

Jacob's indignation is only briefly touched on in v 25 (see comments on 29:31–30:24 below). Despite human sin, however, God's plans were forwarded, for from Leah six of the tribes of Israel, including Judah, were descended. Laban did make one concession to Jacob, he allowed him to marry Rachel immediately, but he cruelly demanded an extra seven years' service for Leah. Those did not pass as quickly as the first seven (20; *cf.* 29:30ff.).

Note. 24 It was the universal custom in the orient for the bride to be given a large present by her father when she married. This was called the dowry. Usually it is not mentioned, but here it is, for Leah's exceptional dowry included a maid-servant called *Zilpah*. Zilpah and Bilhah (29) also became mothers of Israelite tribes (30:3–13).

29:31 – 30:24 The birth of Jacob's sons

God never intended bigamy to be practised, for he gave Adam only one wife, and 4:19–24 gives a glimpse of how brutal bigamists can be. Here, however, we view the tragedy from the wives' side. Having been tricked into marrying Leah, Jacob never really loved her or her children. Indeed, he does not ever seem to have regarded her as his wife. But she was desperate for his affection, as the names she gave to each of her children indicate. Her deepest desire was that '*my husband will love me now*' (32; *cf.* vs 33–35; 30:18–20). But her efforts to achieve this never worked. Rachel, on the other hand, was consumed with jealousy because Leah had succeeded in bearing children whereas she remained childless. Jacob may have loved her, but what she wanted was a baby. She pleaded with him, '*Give me children, or I'll die*' (30:1).

The desperation of both wives is further illustrated in vs 3–16. First, Rachel resorted to surrogate marriage through her slave-girl Bilhah (a practice already criticized in ch. 16, when Sarah encouraged Hagar to become pregnant on her behalf). The unhappy repercussions of that former decision rumbled on to ch. 21. Here, Leah responded to Rachel's use of surrogacy by putting forward her maid-servant Zilpah as a second surrogate wife. This, however, was not the end of their struggle, for

Reuben (Leah's eldest son) found some mandrakes, an ancient fertility drug. There followed a bizarre negotiation in which Rachel offered to trade a few nights in Jacob's bed for the mandrakes. Through their deal Leah hoped to gain Jacob's love and Rachel hoped to become fertile.

The result was another three children being born to Leah but no success for Rachel. It was only when *God remembered Rachel* that *she became pregnant* (22–23). Grace, not drugs, had met her need. It was in this unhappiest of biblical marriages that the twelve forefathers of the Israelite tribes were born, for Reuben, Simeon, Levi and so on are the names of the tribes. (For the meaning of the names see the NIV mg. Most of the meanings given here are plays on the words, not historical etymologies.) The promises to Abraham had taken an important step nearer fulfilment with the birth of these boys. Once again, it is on divine mercy, not human effort, that the hope of the world's salvation rests.

14 *Mandrakes* were famed in ancient times for increasing sexual desire and enhancing fertility (*cf.* Song 7:13). **21** Girls are rarely mentioned in genealogies, but in ch. 34 Dinah will occupy a central role (*cf.* Rebekah in 22:23). **24** Rachel's prayer was eventually answered, but she died giving birth to Benjamin (35:16–20).

30:25 – 31:1 Jacob outwits Laban

The ancient readers of Genesis read this section with great pleasure, for it tells how Laban, the mean old crook, was outwitted in a freely negotiated deal with his nephew Jacob.

It was the birth of a boy to Rachel that was the signal to Jacob that he must return home. Now that his wife had borne a child he had to go back to the land of promise. So he asked Laban for permission to leave. Laban cloaked his refusal in pious terms, claiming he could not afford to let Jacob go as he enjoyed so much blessing (27). So Jacob made a proposal that would cost Laban nothing. Sheep were normally white and goats normally black. Jacob said, 'Take away all the bicoloured animals, and I shall look after the monochrome sheep and goats. If any of these breed bicoloured offspring, they shall be mine.' Laban judged the chance of white sheep producing bicoloured lambs or black goats producing bicoloured kids to be small, so he agreed.

At mating time Jacob put bicoloured (*peeled*) branches in front of the stronger animals and by this means led them to bear bicoloured lambs and kids. Scientifically this is inexplicable, unless we suppose that the stronger animals owed their strength to being hybrids and this was the reason they produced bicoloured offspring. But such an explanation is beyond the horizon of Genesis. It sees Jacob's success as proof of his cunning and that God was with him (28:15). The episode demonstrates God intervening to help Jacob, so that he became *exceedingly prosperous* (43). Although Laban's sons felt Jacob had cheated them (31:1), the story makes it plain that Jacob had done well by keeping strictly to the agreement he had made with Laban.

Note. 27 'I have become rich' (NIV mg.) is preferable to '*I have learned by divination*'.

31:2 – 32:2 Jacob leaves Laban

Another family crisis was brewing. It was not his brother plotting to kill Jacob, but his brothers-in-law, who were causing trouble this time. Once again, at Jacob's low point God spoke to him and told him to return home, again reassuring him, '*I will be with you*' (3; *cf.* 28:13–15).

But it was more difficult escaping Laban's clutches than Esau's, for now Jacob was married with four wives, thirteen children and large flocks and herds. He was now part of Laban's clan, and disengagement was not easy. This chapter tells how he at last made the break and started for home.

First, he had to persuade his wives to leave their father. Note how he omitted to mention aspects of the situation that might have deterred them (*e.g.* Esau's hatred, their unhappy marriage) but emphasized how God had helped him through all the difficulties (4–16). Secondly, Jacob picked a time when Laban was away from home busy sheep-shearing, and this allowed him a three-day start over his father-in-law (19,22).

Eventually Laban caught up with Jacob, and there was an almighty row. Indeed, if God had not appeared to Laban in a dream, warning him not to touch Jacob, there could have been war (24). This again demonstrates that God was with Jacob, fulfilling the promise to bring him back to the land of Canaan (28:15). But after charge and counter-charge, they eventually agreed to make a covenant and they parted amicably. Finally, as Jacob neared Canaan and the encounter with his brother he saw again the angels reminding him how they had guarded him on all his journeys (*cf.* 28:12).

Notes. 10 The dream is not mentioned in 30:31–43. **21** *The River* is the Euphrates. *Gilead* is the hilly region east of the Jordan, between the sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. **32–34** It is not clear why Rachel wanted the *household gods*, which were some sort of images (*cf.* 2 Sa. 19:13,16). It is often supposed that their possession conveyed inheritance rights, but it is more likely that Rachel viewed them as a sort of charm, protecting her on her journey to a foreign land. **39** Normally shepherds did not have to foot the bill for loss from their flocks when it was caused by wild animals (Ex. 22:13),

but Jacob had. Laban had enjoyed much better service from Jacob than would normally have been expected. **50** It is ironic that Laban should insist that Jacob take no extra wives, when he had imposed bigamy on him! **32:2** *Mahanaim* was somewhere north of the River Jabbok.

32:3 – 33:20 Jacob and Esau are reconciled

Here we come to where we began. Jacob's return home meant he must meet Esau again. Despite the divine encouragements, such a reunion seemed very dangerous. Had Esau forgiven him? Would he seize the chance to kill Jacob? These were the anxieties uppermost in Jacob's mind as he returned. All his actions were designed to soften the great encounter. He sent a delegation to make contact (3–5), and they returned with the alarming news that Esau was on his way with 400 men. They did not say whether the men were hostile or not, but Jacob feared the worst.

This drove him to pray. It is a model prayer, in which he first referred to God's command to return (9) and then to God's generosity in fulfilling past promises to him (10), before he mentioned his present plight and asked for God to deliver him and his family to ensure the fulfilment of the promises. Here Jacob based his plea on God's faithfulness to his promises. Earnest prayer, however, is no excuse for doing nothing practical. Jacob divided up his flocks and servants and sent a series of generous presents to Esau in the hope that *perhaps he will receive me* (20).

Action continued throughout the night as Jacob ferried his family over the Jabbok River. Then, unexpectedly, Jacob found himself wrestling with a man. He refused to say who he was, but it became clear to Jacob that the man was God. With a mere touch he put Jacob's hip out of joint, and he changed Jacob's name to '*Israel, because you have struggled with God and with me and have overcome*' (28). The whole incident is shrouded with mystery. Not only did it take place at night, but what was God doing attacking Jacob and yet being unable or unwilling to defeat him? Here the paradox of the human condition is vividly summed up. On the one hand, God allows, even puts his people into, difficult or impossible situations, but it is the same God who delivers us from them. We pray, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'. This experience of Jacob at the Jabbok summed up his career. It was God who had brought him to this crisis situation, confronting Esau, but it was the same God who would bring him through victoriously. His successful struggle at the Jabbok was a pledge that his confrontation with Esau would also have a happy outcome. He was a new man as his new name 'Israel' indicated, the victor over God and man.

Next day Jacob limped out confidently to meet Esau, going ahead of all his wives and children (33:1–3). Esau suddenly appeared and *ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him* (4). This total forgiveness overwhelmed Jacob, who could not quite believe it. Indeed he compared his brother's forgiveness to God's (10). (It is likely that Jesus drew on this story in his portrayal of the father of the prodigal son in Lk. 15:20.) Jacob sought to return the blessing (11) from which he had cheated Esau. Esau reluctantly accepted and then urged Jacob to come and live with him in Edom. Jacob politely declined (was it loyalty to God's command or lurking doubts about Esau's sincerity?), and they went their separate ways. Jacob entered Canaan and purchased a piece of land there. This was the second piece of real estate in Canaan acquired by the patriarchs. Slowly but surely the promises were being fulfilled. This prompted Jacob to worship God (20).

Notes. 3 Seir was the mountainous region south-east of the Dead Sea. **22** The Jabbok (*ez-Zerqa*) is a tributary of the Jordan, joining it 25 miles (40 km) north of the Dead Sea. **26** To keep his identity secret, *the man* asked to leave before daybreak. **28** Jacob's old name recalled his grubby past (27:36). His new name, Israel, was a promise of future triumph. **32** *The tendon attached to the socket of the hip* is a reference to the sciatic nerve, which looks like a tendon. The custom of not eating this nerve is mentioned only here in the OT. **33:3** *Bowed down* probably signified more than an act of deference. Jacob was symbolically trying to act out the blessing as Isaac intended, 'may the sons of your mother bow down to you' (27:29). **17** *Succoth* was somewhere in the Jordan valley (*cf.* Jdg. 8:5–6). **18** 'He arrived at Shalem, a city of Shechem' (NIV mg.) is preferable to *he arrived safely at the city of Shechem.*

34:1–31 Dinah avenged by her brothers

The happy coexistence of Jacob with the sons of Hamor (33:19) was shattered by this appalling incident. Jacob had survived twenty hard years in Paddan Aram, and had escaped Laban's clutches only with difficulty. Then an unexpectedly happy reunion with Esau had brought him at last to Canaan, the land of promise, where he was happily settling down. Now his future there was placed in the direst danger by his sons' savagery (30).

But who was to blame for this situation? Was it just Jacob's sons? Whom does Genesis regard as responsible? How were God's purposes expressed or the promises forwarded by this

episode? As Genesis sees it, the situation was complicated and the guilt widely shared. Dinah should not have been so familiar with the women of the land; socializing with Canaanites could lead to intermarriage (28:7–8). But that was trivial compared with Shechem's fault. Premarital intercourse is always wrong according to the OT and NT, and here the offence was further aggravated by it being forcible rape. Nevertheless, Shechem was not totally black, his lust turned into love, though Jacob and his sons doubtless did not realize this, for Dinah stayed willingly or unwillingly in Shechem's house (26).

Surprisingly, Jacob seemed unconcerned at Dinah's fate, but after all she was only Leah's daughter, and her children did not count in his eyes! But her brothers were appalled, not simply at Dinah's plight but by their father's unconcern. 'If our father will not stick up for his daughter, we must' was their reaction.

So there followed the elaborate negotiations. The deceit on the brothers' side is patent, but a close comparison of what Hamor and Shechem said to Jacob's sons (8–12) with what they said to the inhabitants of their town (21–23) shows that they too were a bit devious. But even so, the attack of Jacob's sons went beyond what was just, and we must agree with Jacob's criticism of their action here and later (49:5–7). Yet that is not all there is to be said. Here Jacob merely criticised their action for endangering his own skin (30). But moral values can never be upheld if people are not prepared to antagonize others occasionally. Shechem had treated Dinah *like a prostitute*, and by being willing to be paid off by Shechem for his action, Jacob too was treating her in the same way. Indirectly his sons were calling him a pimp!

Thus, none of the actors in this story appear with credit. Yet despite their deplorable behaviour, Jacob and his family were greatly enriched. The assault on the Shechemites foreshadowed the conquest. The Canaanites were doomed because of their sexual immorality (Lv. 18:24–25). But does that imply Israel deserved the land they conquered? No, according to Deuteronomy, 'It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations . . . to accomplish what he [the LORD] swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Dt. 9:5). The sins of God's chosen people may delay, but they do not ultimately frustrate, the fulfilment of his promises.

Notes. 2 Hivites were often found in northern Canaan (*cf.* 10:17). **12** In cases of premarital intercourse, OT law insists on payment of the marriage present (bride-price), usually equivalent to several years' wages, to the girl's father. He could then allow the marriage to proceed if he wanted to (Ex. 22:16–17; Dt. 22:28–29; *cf.* Gn. 24:53).

35:1–29 Journey's end for Jacob and Isaac

Paralysed by fear of a potential Canaanite attack, Jacob was roused by God's command to go on to Bethel, which was where he had made a vow when he was running away from home (28:10–22). Bethel ('house of God') was a holy place, and those polluted by war (*cf.* Nu. 31) and idolatry had to purify themselves before proceeding. Then they set out, and remarkably no-one attacked them, for a terror inspired by God had fallen on the Canaanites (*cf.* Ex. 23:27). Yet again the promise 'I am with you and will watch over you' (28:15) had been fulfilled.

Just as Abraham's three-day pilgrimage to Mt Moriah was crowned with the richest statement of the promises he ever experienced (22:16–18), so was Jacob's pilgrimage to Bethel. The promises given here (11–12) sum up and exceed all those previously made to him: he would be a father of nations, kings would be descended from him, and his descendants would inherit the land promised to his father and grandfather. Only the promise of God's presence with him is not repeated, for that had obviously been fulfilled by his safe arrival in Bethel.

Spiritual elation was followed, however, by domestic tragedy. Rachel, Jacob's favourite wife, died giving birth to her longed-for second son (*cf.* 30:24). Then his eldest son had intercourse with Bilhah, perhaps in an attempt to prevent her replacing Rachel as Jacob's favourite wife and to claim leadership of the family. Such an act of incest warranted the death penalty according to Lv. 20:11 (*cf.* Lv. 18:8). Jacob did not comment until later (49:3–4), but there is no doubt that the incident further undermined relations between Leah's sons and their father. Their mutual antagonism was very evident in ch. 34 (Dinah, Simeon and Levi were Leah's children) and was to ruin Jacob's closing years related in chs. 37ff. But as the short list of all Jacob's sons reminds us, they were all born in fulfilment of God's promise. Jacob's failure to accept them did not affect their status. At least the hostility between Jacob and Esau appears to have been laid to rest as they joined together to inter their father in the family grave at Machpelah (*cf.* 49:31).

Notes. 8 This is the only mention of Deborah. **10** This is a reminder of the significant new name given to Jacob in 32:28. **16** *Still some distance from Ephrath* should be translated 'about two hours' distance from Ephrath', *i.e.*

about 7 miles (11 km) north of Ephrath, the district in which Bethlehem is located (Mi. 5:2). This suggests Rachel was buried north of Jerusalem, somewhere near Ramah (Je. 31:15), not at the relatively modern tomb which bears her name near Bethlehem. **21** *Migdal Eder* was perhaps near the pools of Solomon, 3 miles (5 km) south-west of Bethlehem.

36:1 – 37:1 The account of Esau

As already noted, Genesis alternates accounts of the non-elect patriarchs, Ishmael and Esau, with accounts of the chosen line – Terah and Abraham (chs. 12 – 25), Isaac (chs. 25 – 35) and Jacob (chs. 37 – 50). As in Ishmael's case, the account of Esau does not contain much apart from genealogical information (*cf.* vs 1–8 with 25:12–18).

The opening summary of Esau's career notes that, like Lot, he migrated out of Canaan for economic reasons (6–8; *cf.* 13:5–12).

Analogy with 25:12–18 leads us to expect a short summary of Esau's family, but instead we find a second title in v 9, followed by a list of his sons (10–14), chiefs descended from him (15–19), sons of Seir (20–28), Horite chiefs (29–30), Edomite kings (31–39) and more chiefs (40–43). There is much overlap between the lists; many of the names appear in more than one list. C. Westermann (*Genesis 12–36* [SPCK, 1986]) has suggested that perhaps these lists in vs 10–43 were derived from Edomite archives which were brought to Jerusalem after David conquered Edom (2 Sa. 8:13–14). This is speculative, but it could account for the reduplication apparent in this chapter.

Once again, this section shows how the promises were being fulfilled. Esau's migration left Canaan to Jacob (37:1). Rebekah had been told that two nations were in her womb and that 'the older will serve the younger' (25:23). The emergence of Edom as a kingdom, recorded here, and its later subjection to Israel fulfilled these ancient predictions. If these relatively minor predictions came true, how much more certain is the fulfilment of the central promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Notes. 12 *Amalek* was one of Israel's bitterest foes (*cf.* Ex. 17:8–15). **20** For the relationship between *Seir*, the name of a region (32:3) and its earliest inhabitants, and its later inhabitants, the Edomites, *cf.* Dt. 2:12. **31** The kings of Edom do not seem to have constituted a centralized dynasty. More like the judges of Israel, these kings ruled in different centres at different times.

37:2 – 50:26 The account of Jacob

The account of Jacob often inaccurately called 'the Joseph story', tells the story of Jacob's extended family, of which he was the head. Thus, like the accounts of Terah (chs. 12 – 25) and Isaac (chs. 25 – 35), it is mostly concerned with the actions of the sons of the patriarch in question. Thus, *the account of Jacob* deals with all Jacob's sons, not just Joseph. It traces the relationship between Joseph and his brothers, particularly Judah. Next to Joseph and Jacob, Judah is the most important character in the story.

The account of Jacob tells how his sons fell out with each other. The sons of Leah and the concubine-wives, like their mothers, were not loved by Jacob. He had eyes only for Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of his beloved Rachel. Already in chs. 34 – 35 we saw tension between Leah's children and Jacob; now the family snapped. Leah's sons sold Joseph into Egypt; and when they told their father that he had been killed it broke his heart. Meanwhile Joseph, through slavery and imprisonment, rose to become the Pharaoh's righthand man, and the broken family was eventually reconciled.

The account of Jacob is, however, more than a story of a broken family restored. It shows how God uses the deeds of sinful people to save the world, for as Joseph said to his brothers, 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish . . . the saving of many lives' (50:20). The account of Jacob traces more steps on the path to the fulfilment of the promises. Jacob's family was fruitful and multiplied; and at the end of Genesis he had seventy descendants. Jacob and his sons enjoyed God's protection and blessing. Through Joseph's provision for the famine many 'peoples are blessed'. The only aspect of the promises that does not seem to have been advanced by these chapters is that of the land, for Jacob's whole family abandoned Canaan for Egypt. However, both Jacob and Joseph insisted before they died that they must be buried in the family tomb at Machpelah, for 'God will surely . . . take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (50:24).

37:2–36 Joseph's brothers sell him into Egypt

Paternal favouritism and Joseph's youthful impudence were too much for his brothers. The first episode traces the gradual disintegration of Jacob's family. First through Joseph telling tales on his brothers (2), then by Jacob giving him a special robe as a mark of his love, and finally by God sending two dreams that predicted that Joseph would one day rule over his brothers.

According to 41:32, duplicate dreams were thought to indicate they would certainly and promptly be fulfilled. Joseph's brothers, however, determined to prove the dreams

wrong. They decided to kill him, and only the chance to make a quick profit made them change their minds. *Twenty shekels* (three years' wages for a shepherd) was a useful bonus. So Joseph was sold to traders, who then sold him as a slave to an Egyptian official. When the news of Joseph's apparent death reached his father, he was heartbroken. His children's efforts to comfort him proved fruitless, and he declared he would remain in mourning till his dying day. So the divided family was shattered and all seemed hopeless. Yet the dreams still stood, and Genesis expects its readers to view them as setting out God's agenda and to keep wondering how the discrepancy between Joseph's situation as a slave and what the dreams predicted will be resolved.

Notes. **3** The *robe* was the basic outer garment, a long 'tee-shirt' reaching the knees or ankles. **10** The reference to *your mother* need not imply that Rachel was still alive. **12** On Shechem see 12:6. **14** On Hebron see 23:1; 18:1. **17** Dothan was 14 miles (22 km) north of Shechem. **20** Cisterns were cut out of the limestone and used to store water in the dry season. **25** The *Ishmaelites* are also referred to as Midianites (28,36; *cf.* 39:1). The terms seem to be used interchangeably here and in Jdg. 8:24. Either 'Ishmaelite' means nomadic trader, and 'Midianite' is the tribe involved, or the Midianites were a subtribe in a group of tribes named the Ishmaelites. **29** Reuben had evidently wandered off when the Ishmaelites arrived and bought Joseph. **31** Note the divine justice catching up on Jacob, who when he was young had deceived his father with a kid (27:9–16).

38:1–30 Tamar humbles Judah

By this unexpected interruption of the story of Joseph, Genesis keeps us in suspense. We must wait a little longer to discover what became of him in Egypt. But the story of Tamar and Judah is not irrelevant to the main course of the narrative. In many ways it relates to the rest of chs. 37 – 50 in themes and phraseology. It is concerned with how the promise of descendants for the patriarchs should be fulfilled. It shows how the hard-hearted Judah was stopped in his tracks, and prepares us for the new compassionate Judah of ch. 44. It tells of yet another twin birth in which the younger overtook the older (38:27–30).

The modern reader is, however, most perplexed by the sexual antics of those involved. Does the narrator really approve of Tamar's behaviour? Why did Judah and his sons behave as they did? Was there enough time for the events in ch. 38 to occur between 37:36 and 39:2? Given that people usually married soon after puberty in Bible times, it would be possible to suppose that everything in ch. 38 occurred within the space of about twenty years. According to 37:2, 41:46–47 and 45:6 twenty-two years elapsed between Joseph's sale into Egypt and his brothers' discovery of him there.

In many societies, ancient and modern, the custom of Levirate marriage is known. According to the OT variety, the brother-in-law of a childless widow was expected to marry her to produce children for his dead brother. Dt. 25:5–10 regards such a marriage as desirable but not compulsory. However, in the earlier time of Judah and Tamar the brother had an absolute duty to marry his widowed sister-in-law, and the father-in-law was expected to see this duty fulfilled.

Judah and his sons were reluctant to do their duty, and Onan practised a kind of contraception. This contravened the spirit of 1:28, the letter of the Levirate custom and the promise to the patriarchs, who had been assured they would have numberless descendants. So Onan died (10) because he had resisted God's declared will. Judah, who should have been concerned to see his next son Shelah fulfil his legal duty and ensure the promise's fulfilment, did nothing.

Tamar, a widow, had no legal redress against her father-in-law's injustice. So she contrived to trap him. She outwitted him and obtained her rights under the Levirate law and two sons for the household of Jacob. Indeed, one of her sons was the ancestor of David and Jesus. In the process she made a fool of Judah and showed up his hypocrisy, so that ultimately he was forced to confess, '*She is more righteous than I*' (26). This is not to say that sleeping with one's father-in-law is approved of; '*And he did not sleep with her again*' (26) *cf.* Lv. 18:15) shows it was not. Tamar's irregular behaviour was, however, in this instance, warranted because of her father-in-law's much greater negligence of morality and theology. It was her offbeat act that brought Judah to his senses.

Notes. **1–5** *Adullam* and *Kezib* were both near Hebron. **12** *Timnah* was about 4 miles (6 km) west of Beth Shemesh. **13** Sheep-shearing was a busy, lively festival (*cf.* 31:19; 1 Sa. 25:2–37). **18** Seals were carried on a cord threaded through the middle. **24** *Prostitution* is too precise a translation: 'illicit sexual intercourse' would be more apt. Probably, Judah regarded Tamar as guilty of adultery in that she was supposedly betrothed to Shelah. The death penalty could be demanded in this case, but not death by burning, which was reserved for even worse offences (Dt. 22:21; Lv. 21:9). **29** Perez's genealogy is in Ru. 4:18–22.

39:1 – 47:31 Joseph in Egypt

After a short digression about Judah, the nar-

rative resumes the record of Joseph's doings. Three periods in his life in Egypt are described: in Potiphar's house (39:1–20); in prison (39:21 – 40:23); and in the palace (41:1–57). The first two periods begin with the comment that *the LORD was with Joseph* (2,23) and end with Joseph's downfall, showing him thrown into prison (20) or forgotten there (40:23). The third period is a complete contrast: it begins with Joseph in prison and closes with him as vizier of Egypt.

These three episodes focus on Joseph alone, and there then follows the account of how he was reunited with his family. This too is described in three panels describing the three visits of Joseph's family to Egypt (42:1–38; 43:1 – 45:28; 46:1 – 47:31). On each journey more of Joseph's relatives went down to Egypt, and the last journey involved the whole family.

39:1–20 Joseph in Potiphar's house. Joseph landed on his feet in Egypt, having been bought by Potiphar, a high-ranking Egyptian official, described as *captain of the guard.* This post entailed him being in charge of the prison for royal prisoners (*cf.* 40:3–4). He may also have been in charge of catering at the palace.

Joseph quickly rose from being an ordinary slave working outdoors to working indoors, *in the house of his . . . master* (2). Then he was appointed as Potiphar's personal attendant (4), and finally he was put in charge of the whole household (4–5). Joseph's success was not merely a reflection on his ability but on the fact that *the LORD was with him*, and that through him Potiphar enjoyed God's blessing (5).

Joseph's loyalty to his master was supremely demonstrated when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. He fiercely repudiated the very idea of an affair, saying '*How . . . could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?*' (9). This is a sentiment every part of Scripture agrees with (*cf.* Pr. 5 – 7; Mt. 5 27–32). But the desperate woman eventually had her revenge. She caught Joseph alone in the house and pulled off one of his garments. (The NIV's *cloak* suggests an outer garment, but more probably it was his undertunic or shorts.) She then brandished this before the other slaves and later her husband, claiming that Joseph had tried to rape her. Her accusations were a travesty of the facts (*cf.* vs 11–13 with vs 14–15 and 17–18), but they were sufficient to convince Potiphar. Or were they? He did not execute Joseph, as would normally have happened in rape cases, so perhaps he had his doubts about his wife's tale. But to be incarcerated in a royal prison on a false charge was a tragic fate for such a loyal servant as Joseph, though he was not the last to suffer for righteousness' sake (*cf.* Mt. 5:10–12; 1 Pet. 2:21–25). Joseph is often regarded as a 'type' of Christ, the perfect servant who was unfairly condemned, and those who follow Christ may well find themselves walking in the footsteps of Joseph and Jesus.

Notes. 6 The only other person in the OT to be described as *well-built and handsome* is Rachel (*cf.* 29:17). Therefore, it was a case of like mother, like son. *Well-built* may convey the wrong idea. 'A fine figure' would be more accurate as it is uncertain whether big muscularity was the OT's ideal body.

39:21 – 40:23 Joseph in prison. To have hopes raised and then dashed is a familiar human experience, but there was a particular poignancy about Joseph's situation as both his sale into slavery and his imprisonment were quite unjust (40:15). After having given advice to the royal cupbearer he thought he might have been rewarded by being released, but yet again he was disappointed.

His experiences in the royal prison echo those in Potiphar's house. He was rapidly promoted and became the personal attendant of the royal cupbearer and baker. These men were not just in charge of the royal cellar and bakery but were also advisers to the Pharaoh. Joseph had good reason to hope that the cupbearer would recognize the injustice done to him, but once he was released the man forgot. Once again the discrepancy between the narrator's observation that *the LORD was with Joseph* (39:23) and Joseph's being left to languish in prison is blatant. Joseph's skill in interpreting dreams was one indication that God was still with him (*cf.* 40:8), but deliverance was the ultimate proof of God's support and presence, and that eluded Joseph. That his sufferings were the pathway to glory was yet to be revealed (*cf.* Phil. 2:5–11).

Notes. 19 The NIV's *hang you on a tree* is more exactly (as the mg.) 'impale you on a pole'. Joseph was predicting an aggravated form of death penalty for the baker: execution followed by exposure. Exposure was designed to prevent the soul resting in the afterlife (*cf.* Dt. 21:22).

41:1–57 Joseph in the palace. Thirteen years of slavery and imprisonment came to an abrupt end. Joseph was whipped out of prison and into the Pharaoh's presence. It was not just the surroundings, however, that had changed. The once brash teenager who so riled his family had become the essence of tact and wisdom. The vale of tears had proved to be the valley of soul-making, and at last it starts to become apparent why Joseph had been allowed to suffer in this way. God's control of events became evident in his sending the smug Pharaoh two disconcerting dreams. It became plainer still when the cupbearer suggested that Pharaoh should ask Joseph to interpret them and he said, '*God will give Pharaoh the answer*' (16). Then

finally Pharaoh appointed Joseph his deputy, with the words, '*Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?*' (38).

Joseph thus epitomized the gifts of prophet and wise ruler. He had divine insight into the future and governed Egypt with the Spirit of God, so that Egypt and the surrounding countries were saved from famine (*cf.* Ps. 72:16; Is. 11:2). In this he is once again a 'type' of Christ, the greatest prophet and king; the Suffering Servant through whom the world is saved and to whom every knee must bow (Phil. 2:10, *cf.* Gn. 41:43). Christ's experience of suffering followed by glory is a path all Christians must be ready to follow (1 Pet. 5:6).

Within the horizons of Genesis this episode raises questions. Twice in consecutive episodes Joseph had interpreted two dreams, and here he observed that the reason for paired dreams *is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon* (32). What then about his own pair of dreams (37:5–11)? Were they going to be fulfilled? Do not the names Manasseh and Ephraim that he gave to his sons really imply that there was still something missing, that he had not forgotten his father's household? These are hints that Joseph's appointment to the supreme office in Egypt is not the climax of the story; there is still more of God's purpose to be revealed.

Notes. 17–24 *Cf.* Pharaoh's retelling of the dreams with the original account (1–7) to see the impression they had left on him. **33–36** Note how knowledge of God's purpose is a spur to human action, not an excuse for doing nothing. **39–43** Joseph's job description and the description of his installation show he was being appointed vizier of Egypt. **43** *Make way* is probably better translated 'bow down' (see the NIV mg.). **57** *In all the world, i.e.* all the countries near Egypt.

42:1–38 Joseph's brothers' first visit to Egypt. The first visit of Joseph's brothers to Egypt is told in seven scenes, which are echoed in the description of the second visit: Jacob's sons sent to Egypt (1–4; *cf.* 43:1–14); they arrive in Egypt (5; *cf.* 43:15–25); they have their first audience with Joseph (6–16; *cf.* 43:26–34); they are kept in custody (17; *cf.* 44:1–13); they have a second audience with Joseph (18–24; *cf.* 44:14 – 45:15); they leave Egypt (25–28; *cf.* 45:16–24); and report to Jacob (29–38; *cf.* 45:25–28).

No sooner had Joseph said, 'God has made me forget . . . all my father's household' (41:51) than his brothers turned up in Egypt. And what was more surprising, considering the many visitors who came to Egypt at that time, Joseph saw them there. He recognized them but, of course, they failed to recognize him.

This is the first of three journeys to Egypt by Joseph's brothers, and each is more momentous than the previous one. When Joseph saw his brothers he remembered his dreams (9; *cf.* 37:5–11). Ten brothers bowed down to him in Egypt, but the dreams had shown eleven brothers and his parents honouring him. Where were the missing brother and father? This discrepancy between the prediction and the reality, as well as intense curiosity, prompted Joseph to question his brothers harshly.

He also contrived to replicate the situation when they had abandoned him to Egypt and returned home without him. He held Simeon hostage to see whether they would trade food for him, as they had exchanged Joseph for cash. The brothers sensed the analogy, and their guilty consciences prompted them to see divine judgment in their predicament and to describe details of their sin, which had not been mentioned previously (21–22).

These first hints of contrition were reinforced when they found money in one of their sacks (28). They continued to relive the events of twenty years earlier when they arrived home. Once again, they had to explain why they had lost one of Jacob's sons. The demand that they take Benjamin down to Egypt to secure Simeon's release was totally unacceptable to Jacob, for Benjamin had replaced Joseph in his affection. Jacob had his suspicions about his sons' tale, and then they were terribly confirmed. As they emptied their sacks, all the money tumbled out. They must have sold Simeon, Jacob thought. He made his accusation indirectly by saying, '*You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more*' (36), and then he declared, '*My son Benjamin will not go down with you*' (38). All the bitterness and sorrow of the last twenty years had come to the surface. How will this torn family ever come together again? How will Joseph's dreams be fulfilled? The first visit to Egypt has left many questions unanswered in the reader's mind.

Note. 30–34 Note how the brothers omitted to tell Jacob of the worst aspects of their Egyptian experience, *e.g.* their imprisonment or the death threat (17,20). Even so Jacob was not persuaded!

43:1 – 45:28 The second visit to Egypt. Throughout this account of the second visit comparisons are being made with the previous one, and to appreciate the full flavour of the account the two visits need to be carefully compared with each other. This visit does not merely look backwards, however, it also foreshadows the third journey, when all the family moved to Egypt for good.

Jacob was still head of the family, and until he withdrew his opposition to another visit his sons

could not leave. At last, hunger and Judah's promise to stand surety for Benjamin made Jacob relent. Just as he had faced the tricky reunion with Esau, so now Jacob put his trust in a present for *the man* in Egypt and prayer (*cf.* 32:7–21). Jacob's prayer shows the feebleness of his faith, yet God's mercy far outruns Jacob's expectations. He prayed that '*he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back*' (14). By the *other brother* Jacob meant Simeon, but he was reunited with Joseph as well.

Jacob was full of apprehension about Benjamin's safety, and his sons were worried about heaven catching up on their sin. Whenever anything unexpected occurred, panic overtook them (18,23; *cf.* v 33). Their uneasy consciences interpreted every development as a sign of judgment.

When he met them again, Joseph was all kindness, enquiring gently about '*your aged father*', blessing Benjamin ('*God be gracious to you, my son*') and finally treating them to a generous banquet. The contrast with the previous harsh questioning that they had endured at his hands (*cf.* 42:6–16) must have further disoriented them. And how did this Egyptian vizier know *the order of their ages* (33)? Yet they accepted it at face value and *feasted and drank freely with him*.

Next morning, just as they were congratulating themselves on being able to leave Egypt safely with Simeon, Benjamin and food supplies, their world fell in. Benjamin, of all people, was arrested for stealing the silver cup, and they all had to return to Joseph's palace. It was the collapse of a world built on hatred, lies and deception, and it revealed their true characters. In particular, the hard-hearted Judah, who had proposed the sale of Joseph into slavery and demanded that his daughter-in-law be burnt (37:27; 38:24), showed himself a changed man. In the longest speech in Genesis, he pleaded eloquently for Benjamin's release, touchingly describing the effects that Benjamin's non-return would have on their aged father, and finally offering to take his brother's place himself. Now at last, it was clear that the age-old animosity between the sons of Leah (*e.g.* Judah) and the sons of Rachel (Joseph and Benjamin) was over. Even though Jacob might regard only Rachel and her sons as his real family, his other sons would have preferred Egyptian slavery to breaking their father's heart (44:33–34).

Judah's readiness to sacrifice himself for his brother and father allowed Joseph to reveal his own identity and the divine purpose behind his own suffering. God used his brothers' evil deeds to save lives (*cf.* 45:7). 'It was not you who sent me here but God' (45:8) sums up the whole purpose of the Joseph story. God overrules human deeds, whether good or evil, to achieve his saving purposes. The LORD declared to Abraham that through his 'offspring all nations on earth will be blessed' (22:18). Through Joseph and his famine relief programme this promise was partially fulfilled.

In insisting that God sovereignly controls human affairs, Genesis does not deny people full moral responsibility for their deeds. It affirms both truths simultaneously by emphasizing the deep hurt caused by the brothers' actions, Jacob's unquenchable grief, Joseph's slavery and unjust imprisonment, and the brothers' own guilty consciences. It is this belief in human guilt and responsibility that lies behind Joseph's harsh treatment of his brothers both here in vs 14–15 and ch. 42. Not until Judah confessed their guilt (16; '*God has uncovered your servants' guilt*' refers to their sin of selling Joseph) and showed true repentance by offering to take Benjamin's place is forgiveness and reconciliation possible. As soon as that point is reached, however, Joseph's generosity knew no bounds and he made every provision for his family's homeward journey.

When they finally reached home, Jacob was *stunned* by the news and did not believe what his sons told him. Eventually, however, he was persuaded, and after twenty years of mourning he at last expressed hope again, '*My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.*'

Notes. 43:26 This is still only a partial fulfilment of Joseph's dream (*cf.* 37:9–10; 42:6). **32** The Egyptian dislike of eating with foreigners is often mentioned in classical writers. **44:5** Whether true or false, the claim that the cup was used for *divination* served to make the charge of theft more threatening. **28** For the first time Joseph learned how his father had reacted to his disappearance (*cf.* 37:33). **45:8** *Father to Pharaoh*, i.e. his chief adviser. **45:10** *Goshen* was in the eastern Nile delta.

46:1 – 47:31 Jacob goes to Egypt. When compared with the last two sections this one seems rather subdued, with long lists and the gloom of Jacob's impending death. But this is the third and most decisive journey to Egypt, in which Jacob left Canaan, the land of promise, for Egypt, the land of future slavery. Was this a big mistake? No. Jacob's migration was not prompted just by Joseph's invitation; it was divinely authorized. 46:3–4 records the only divine vision in the Joseph story, and in it Jacob is told '*to go down to Egypt*' and is assured that '*I will go down . . . with you, and I will surely bring you back again*' (*cf.* 28:15). The stay in Egypt was to be only temporary; it was indeed part of the divine purpose (*cf.* 15:13–14). The section ends with Jacob enjoining Joseph to bury him

with his fathers in Canaan (47:29–30). God's promises were to be fulfilled.

Indeed, the promises were already well on their way to fulfilment, for Jacob's family now numbered seventy, a sacred number (*cf.* the seventy nations of 10:2–31). Israel was on the way to becoming the 'great nation' promised to Abraham (12:2) and reaffirmed to Jacob (46:3). Most of these listed here were the ancestors of tribes and clans in ancient Israel, and early readers would have immediately realized how the promises were fulfilled.

The story quickly refocuses on the human drama. Joseph in his glory 'appeared', as though in a vision to Jacob. But as he threw his arms around him, Jacob realized that Joseph was real and alive. This encounter with his son whom he had believed dead transformed Jacob's attitude to death. He was ready now to depart in peace (*cf.* Lk. 2:29), just as the resurrection of a 'greater Joseph' has allowed many to die in hope (1 Pet. 1:3).

If reunion with Joseph was the height of Jacob's desires, Joseph looked further ahead. He was the one sent to save life, and he had to secure his brothers' survival in Egypt. He therefore coached them as to what to say to Pharaoh, *i.e.* that they were not looking for jobs or food, that they were herdsmen who had brought their livestock with them and just needed some grazing land, and that they would not be a burden to Egypt. 47:1–6 This approach succeeded brilliantly. Pharaoh was glad to give them the best grazing land in Egypt and invited them to become royal stockmen too. Once again, we are expected to recognize the unseen hand of God at work (*cf.* 39:3,21; 41:37–38).

Then Joseph introduced his father to Pharaoh. The elderly Jacob was carried into court and helped to stand before Pharaoh (this is the literal meaning of 47:7). Jacob was a pathetic figure, but Pharaoh showed great respect to him, asking about his great age, and was twice blessed by him. For despite the many sad episodes in his life (47:9), Jacob was preeminently the man of blessing through whom 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' (28:14).

Divine blessing on Egypt was immediately apparent through Joseph supplying the Egyptians with grain during the famine. Modern readers of this section tend to view Joseph's approach to the hungry Egyptians as cruel exploitation. Why did he not just give them food instead of demanding they exchanged their herds, land and freedom for grain? This is not the way the OT views the situation. Lv. 25:14–43 shows that it was regarded as a great act of charity to buy the land of the destitute and to take them on as your employees ('slaves'). Indeed such 'slavery' under a good employer was regarded by some as preferable to the risks of freedom (self-employment), and when offered freedom, some slaves refused to take it (Ex. 21:5–6; Dt. 15:16–17). Slavery in OT times was very different from the harsh exploitation that was involved in the Atlantic slave trade of more recent centuries. OT slavery at its best meant a job for life with a benevolent employer. Certainly this was how the Egyptians viewed Joseph's actions, for they declare '*You have saved our lives . . . we will be in bondage to Pharaoh*' (47:25).

The section closes with a glimpse of the promise being fulfilled as the Israelites *were fruitful and increased greatly in number* (*cf.* 17:2,6; 28:3). It also contains a glance forward to the next section, the death and burial of Jacob (chs. 48 – 50). 'Trailers' anticipating the contents of the next section often occur in Genesis at the end of a preceding section (*e.g.* 6:5–8; 9:18–27; 37:36; 39:20; 41:57; 45:28).

Notes. 46:1 On *Beersheba cf.* 21:14. **4** *Joseph's own hand will close your eyes* is a promise that Jacob would die in peace. **12** *Hezron* and *Hamul*, the sons of Perez (38:29), were presumably, like Joseph's sons (46:27), born in Egypt. Benjamin's sons were also probably Egyptian-born (46:21). **34** *Shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians* probably reflects a common distrust of nomadic peoples by urban dwellers (*cf.* attitudes to gypsies and 'travellers' in modern society). **47:11** *The district of Rameses, i.e.* near the city of Rameses (Ex. 1:14; 12:37), was apparently another title for Goshen.

48:1 – 50:26 The last days of Jacob and Joseph

The extended description of Jacob's death and burial looks like morbid melodrama. It is, in fact, a celebration of the fulfilment of the promises. At Bethel (Luz) God had promised Jacob that he would make him fruitful and give him the land (*cf.* 35:11–12). Now Jacob reflected on how far these promises had come true. He had never expected to see Joseph again, but he had seen his grandsons as well (48:11). He also owned land in Canaan: a burial ground at Mamre (50:29–32) and a ridge of land captured from the Amorites (48:21–22).

These, however, were just a foretaste of future fulfilment. Jacob's adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh as his own children presaged their future role as two of the largest tribes of Israel, on a par with the tribes descended from Jacob's sons Simeon and Reuben (48:5). But in ch. 49 Jacob looked further ahead and he foresaw all his sons becoming tribes and settling in different parts of Canaan. Judah would be famed for wine growing, Zebulun for seafaring,

Asher for its rich harvests (49:11,13,20). Then, having painted a picture of Israel's glorious future in Canaan and again insisted that he was to be buried there, Jacob died. Chapter 49 is called the blessing of Jacob, though not all his sentiments are blessings (*e.g.* vs 3–7), and is one of the oldest poems in the OT. In that many of the comments relate to incidents in Genesis, it seems to have been composed as a unit and is not just a collection of originally independent sayings. In it Jacob reflects on the past and future achievements of his sons, roughly in order of their birth. It is, therefore, one of the earliest prophetic texts in the OT. But as often in prophetic poetry, some of the words are obscure and their translation difficult.

After a grand Egyptian funeral, Jacob's corpse was taken in solemn procession to Canaan. This was not simply his sons carrying out his last wishes but an acted prophecy of the exodus, when all his descendants would leave Egypt and return to the promised land. Even the unusual route taken by the funeral cortege, skirting the Dead Sea and entering Canaan from the east, seems to foreshadow the path taken by the Israelites led by Moses and Joshua. Similarly, when Joseph died, he made them swear to 'carry my bones up from this place' (50:25). Thus, Genesis ends on a note of expectation, indeed of certainty, that the promises first made to Abraham, then repeated to his son and grandson, will be fulfilled.

Possession of the land is, however, only one aspect of the promises made to Abraham, and these final chapters are also concerned with other issues. Jacob's death raised again the question of relations between Joseph and his brothers, who wondered if he would use the opportunity to wreak his revenge. Shocked by the suggestion, Joseph reiterated his view of the situation, '*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish . . . the saving of many lives*' (50:20; *cf.* 45:5–8). It was through Abraham's descendants that all nations would find blessing, and this was partially fulfilled in Joseph's career as famine relief organizer. But the blessing of Jacob looked yet further ahead. From Judah would come a ruler of the nations, whose era would prove so prosperous that *He will tether his donkey to a vine* and *wash his garments in wine* (49 11). In a preliminary way, this prophecy was fulfilled in the prosperity of David and Solomon but in a fuller way by our Lord at his first coming. It will be fulfilled completely at his second advent (see also note below). Thus, Jacob and Joseph died in hope – 'They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance . . . they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one' (Heb. 11:13,16, 40). Indeed, one that all who trust in God will share with them.

Notes. 48:5–6 Adopting grandsons, thereby putting them on a par with sons, is known elsewhere in the ancient Near East. **8** Jacob's question '*Who are these?*' may have been prompted by his blindness, or be a legal requirement in an adoption rite. **11** Jacob's plaintive prayer (43:14) had been answered beyond all he expected (*cf.* Eph. 3:20). **13–20** The right-hand side was the place of honour and blessing in Bible times (*cf.* Dt. 11:29; Mt. 25:33). Jacob deliberately promoted the younger Ephraim over the firstborn Manasseh, a frequent pattern in Genesis (*cf.* 4:1–8; 38:27–30; ch. 27). **22** This seems to be a reference to the conquest of the city of Shechem by Jacob's sons (34:25–29). Jacob had bought land nearby (33:18–19), and Joseph was subsequently buried in this area (Jos. 24:32).

49:3–4 Like other older sons (Cain, Ishmael and Esau), Reuben lost his privileged position because of his sin (see 35:22). **5–7** These verses refer to the attacks of 34:24–29. **6** In Canaanite literature, leaders are sometimes referred to as 'bulls', so hamstringing oxen may refer to the killing of the leaders, Hamor and Shechem, or be a way of describing the inconvenience Jacob suffered as a result of the attack (*cf.* 34:30). **7** The Levites were given no territory of their own, just forty-eight levitical cities. The tribe of Simeon was absorbed by Judah (Jos. 19:1–9; 21). **8–12** Though the general sense of this blessing is clear (it predicts Judah's supremacy among the tribes), many details are uncertain. **8** '*Your hand will be on your enemies*', *i.e.* you will defeat them. **9** Judah would be as dangerous to challenge as a lion guarding its prey. This is the origin of the phrase 'The Lion of Judah'. **10** Judah would always have a descendant (*from between his feet*) who would rule the nation (*sceptre* and *staff* were symbols of authority). A slight emendation of *until he comes to whom it belongs* would give 'until tribute is brought to him' (*cf.* the NIV mg.). The exact interpretation of this line is very difficult, but nearly every suggestion amounts to regarding it as a prediction of the Davidic Empire, in which many nations would obey the king from Judah (Ps. 72:8–11). This king was to be a forerunner of the son of David to whom all nations would submit (*cf.* Phil. 2:10–11). **11** The grape harvest would be so abundant in those days that the Davidic king would not worry about his donkey eating the grapes when tethered to the choicest vine. *He will wash his garments in wine* is another image of wine in plenty (*cf.* Lv. 26:5). **12** This is probably an image of the leader's beauty. **13** The tribe of Zebulun was allotted territory in inland Galilee, and we do not know when or how long they

lived on the coast. **14–15** These verses seem to reflect a stage in Isaachar's history when they were enslaved to the Canaanites. **16–17** These verses look forward to the military successes of the tribe of Dan, which benefited the nation of Israel (*cf.* Samson's exploits, Jdg. 13 – 16; and the conquest of Laish, 18:27). **18** Despite the minor successes described in the book of Judges, the period after the conquest was to be difficult for the nation, so Jacob prayed for them. **19** Gad was a frontier tribe and often involved in war. **20** Asher's fertile land produced food fit for kings. **21** This is perhaps a picture of Naphtali gradually settling down in Canaan. **22** The image, whether that of a wild ass (NIV mg.) or (less likely) a fruitful vine, expresses the tribe's vigour and strength. **23–24** These verses probably refer to the opposition Joseph faced throughout his career. But his opponents were eventually silenced by God. **25–26** Note the mention of 'bless'/'blessing' six times in these verses. This is one of the key words in Genesis. Here divine blessing is especially manifested in abundant water supplies, *i.e.* rain ('the heavens'), springs ('the deep'), in many children ('breast and womb') and in fertile hilltops. **27** This verse probably refers to the military exploits of Benjaminite warriors (Jdg. 3:15–30; 5:14) and possibly Saul (1 Sa. 10–14). **31** This is the only mention of the burials of Rebekah and Leah (*cf.* 23:19; 25:9; 35:29).

50:2–3 Mummification shows Jacob's high status in Egypt. **10** *The threshing-floor of Atad* was somewhere near Canaan's border, perhaps near Gaza or Jericho. If the latter, it would imply the funeral procession took a similar route to the Israelites in the exodus. **15–17** It is usually supposed that Joseph's brothers made up this last message of Jacob, but we cannot be sure.

G.J. Wenham

EXODUS

Introduction

Title

The title 'Exodus' is derived from the name which the ancient Greek translators gave to the book, *Exodos*, meaning 'the going out', 'exit'. The name reflects the book's particular interest in the departure of the Israelites from Egypt.

Literary nature

As the second book of the Bible, Exodus forms part of a larger narrative which begins in Genesis and continues at least as far as the book of Deuteronomy. This material has traditionally been viewed as a unit, the Pentateuch (see article on the Pentateuch). Exodus is an integral part of this larger work, depending upon the book of Genesis for important background material (*e.g.* God's covenant with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the divine guarantee that their descendants would possess the land of Canaan; and an explanation as to how the family of Jacob came to be in Egypt), and anticipating events which are recorded in Leviticus (*e.g.* the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests). While Exodus has much in common with Genesis and Leviticus, it does have, as we shall see below, a number of its own distinctive themes.

Although Exodus may appear at first sight to be a collection of separate incidents, it has been carefully composed. The narrative is a skilful blend of different types of material (*e.g.* prose, poetry, genealogy, speeches, regulations, laws) which have been brought together to produce a unified work. The narrator makes no attempt to give a comprehensive picture of all that took place in the period covered by the book; on the contrary his account is quite selective. Consequently, the text often omits information which the narrator did not believe to be important for his purpose in writing (*e.g.* a detailed record of Moses' time in Midian).

The book of Exodus is composed of blocks of material which usually have clearly marked beginnings and ends. The present chapter divisions are a poor guide to these narrative units and are best ignored. The different episodes are rarely self-contained. They assume a knowledge of earlier material and anticipate later events. To understand Exodus it is important to follow the flow of the narrative and see how the various episodes relate to each other (*e.g.* the account of the Israelites' meeting with God at Sinai in ch. 19 has close parallels with Moses' first encounter with God at Horeb/Sinai in ch. 3).

Main themes

The author of Exodus is primarily interested in theology; that is, he writes in order to highlight particular ideas and concepts about God. To appreciate this and see how each section of the book contributes to this overall purpose, it is important to recognize the book's main themes; other minor themes are noted in the commentary.

Exodus is essentially a book about knowing God through personal experience. The plot centres on the relationship which develops between God and the Israelites, from the dramatic meeting with Moses at the burning bush (3:1 – 4:17) to the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle (40:34–38). In all of this Moses acts as a mediator, the one who first makes the Lord known to the people and who subsequently plays an important role in establishing the covenant relationship which enables the Lord to dwell in the midst of the Israelites. Significantly, it is always God who takes the initiative, revealing himself not only through words, but also through wonders and signs. In Exodus God both speaks and acts; moreover, what he says happens.

The first half of the book is dominated by the theme of coming to know God. At the outset Moses met with God at the burning bush, and in the ensuing conversation discovered much about God's nature, including his divine name, 'the LORD' (3:1 – 4:17). The theme reappears when Pharaoh expressed his ignorance about the Lord: 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go' (5:2). As the different signs unfold, the Egyptians gradually came to acknowledge the Lord's sovereign power. Ultimately, God lured Pharaoh and his army to their death in the Sea of Reeds in order that 'the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD' (14:4, 18). With the defeat of Pharaoh the Israelites worshipped God in a dynamic song of celebration praise: 'Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?' (15:11).

The second half of Exodus develops further the theme of knowing God by focusing on the

establishment of a close and lasting relationship between the Lord and the Israelites. To this end the narrative concentrates on two topics which receive extensive coverage, the making of the covenant and the construction of the tabernacle. The former of these, like the signing of a contract or the taking of marriage vows, sets out the conditions under which the Israelites must live in order to enjoy an ongoing relationship with God; these are recorded in the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant. The people are obliged to follow God's standards if they wish to know his continued blessing and presence. Considerable attention is given not only to the making of the initial covenant agreement (chs. 19 – 24), but also to the events concerning the golden calf which almost brought the relationship to an early and abrupt conclusion (chs. 32 – 34). The building of the tabernacle forms a natural sequel to the making of the divine covenant. Built according to divine instruction, the tabernacle became the focal point of the Lord's presence in the midst of the people, and reminded them, through its materials and structure, of God's sovereign, holy nature. Significantly, Exodus ends by noting how the Lord, following the erection of the tent, took up residence in the middle of the Israelite camp (40:34–38).

Closely associated with the theme of knowing the Lord is that of obedience. Exodus stresses throughout the importance of obeying the Lord. In the early chapters we observe both Moses' reluctance and Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to comply with God's demands. Later, to achieve their safe deliverance from Egypt, the Israelites had to follow exactly the Lord's instructions regarding the Passover. Finally, after throwing off the yoke of Egyptian slavery, the Israelites had to learn obedience to their new sovereign. Significantly, obedience to God lies at the heart of the covenant relationship (*cf.* 19:8; 24:3, 7). Exodus emphasizes, however, that since God is the one who acts first, human obedience does not create this special covenant relationship, it merely helps maintain it. When the Israelites later made and worshipped the golden calf they were punished for their disobedience and the covenant relationship with God was broken.

Another important theme is that of holiness. On the one hand, Exodus reveals that God alone is innately holy and that human beings, because of their sinful nature, can come into his presence only in certain circumstances. When Moses encountered God at the burning bush he had to remove his sandals because the ground was holy (3:5), and later the Israelites were prevented from ascending Mt Sinai lest they should die as a result of seeing God (19:12–13, 21–24; *cf.* Heb. 12:14). Because of the incompatibility of divine holiness and human sinfulness specific measures had to be taken before the Lord could reside among the Israelites. A specially designed tent was constructed, incorporating features made necessary by the holiness of God (*e.g.* the curtains which formed a protective shield between God and the people).

On the other hand, Exodus stresses that the Israelites should share God's holy nature; they are to be 'a holy nation' (19:6). To this end the instructions and laws of the Decalogue and Book of the Covenant indicate those qualities associated with God's holy nature. Here holiness is primarily linked with moral purity and exemplary behaviour. However, since such perfection of character is beyond human attainment, Exodus underlines the importance of sacrifices which can both atone for sin and purify that which is unclean. This is displayed in various ways. We see it in the sacrifices associated with the Passover and the making of the covenant at Sinai. Similarly, sacrifices are an integral part of the procedure for consecrating the priests (29:1–46). Moreover, to symbolize the fact that God may be approached only through the offering of acceptable sacrifices the large bronze altar was placed between the entrance to the tabernacle courtyard and the Holy Place.

Special attention is also drawn to the divine qualities of compassion and justice. They are very evident in the first half of the book when God acts out of real concern for the Israelites and punishes the Egyptians because of their unjust treatment of the Israelites. Both qualities are prominent in the laws and moral imperatives which form an important part of the Sinai covenant. Not only must the Israelites maintain a particular standard of justice, but they must also act with compassion towards the more vulnerable members of society. Finally, they reappear in the events concerning the golden calf. God's justice is displayed in his punishment of the Israelites for their rebellious actions, but, because of his compassion, the covenant is subsequently renewed when Moses intercedes on behalf of the people.

Date and authorship

Exodus does not mention the person responsible for giving the book its present shape. The fact that certain sections were recorded by Moses (17:14; 24:4; 34:27) accounts for the traditional view that Moses wrote the entire book (*e.g.* Mk. 12:26). While there is little internal evidence to indicate when the book was written, there is no compelling reason to believe that it must have been penned long after the events described, as many scholars suppose. The only comment which may provide some

indication as to when the book was composed is the reference to the Israelites eating manna for forty years until they arrived in the land of Canaan (16:35).

For over a century scholars have discussed at length the origin of the material found in Exodus. Recent studies have highlighted major weaknesses in the theory that the Pentateuch is composed of four distinctive documents, generally known by the labels J, E, D and P (see article on the Pentateuch). Because it is exceptionally difficult to recover with any degree of certainty the sources underlying the present text, the commentary which follows focuses exclusively on the text as we now have it.

Historical setting

Several factors make it difficult to determine accurately the historical setting of the events described in Exodus First, we are dealing with events relating to the second millennium BC. According to 1 Ki. 6:1, the exodus occurred 480 years before 'the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel'. On this reckoning the Israelites departed from Egypt in about 1446 BC. While some scholars reject this date, placing the exodus in the latter half of the 13th century BC (see below), we are dealing, on either reckoning, with a period of history about which our knowledge is limited and incomplete.

Secondly, one of the noteworthy features of the book of Exodus is its lack of historical references. For example, the Egyptian kings are designated merely by their title, Pharaoh, and not by name. This is probably intentional, in order to contrast the unnamed kings of Egypt with the sovereign God of Israel whose name, the Lord (or Yahweh), was revealed to Moses and the Israelites. As a result, it is difficult to locate the exodus to a precise period of Egyptian history. A clue may be found in the name of one of the store cities, Rameses, which may have originated during the reign of Rameses II (13th century BC). However, it is possible that the place-name dates from an earlier period and was already in use when the Israelites first settled in Egypt (*cf.* Gn. 47:11). Alternatively, the name may belong to an earlier period and its use in Gn. 47:11 and Ex. 1:11 may be the result of editorial updating.

Thirdly, no document, apart from the Bible, has been discovered relating specifically to the Israelites' time in Egypt. Given the antiquity of the period and the nature of the events, this is not surprising. It is unlikely that Egyptian annalists would have recorded detailed descriptions of events which included the defeat of their king and the destruction of the Egyptian army. Even if they had initially noted these events, there would have been little enthusiasm for ensuring that such texts survived intact.

Fourthly, although the author of Exodus was keenly interested in these events, he wrote primarily as a theologian and not as a historian. He focused on the God encountered through these events, rather than on the events themselves. Finally, given the importance and prominence of the exodus tradition in Israelite thinking, it seems reasonable to suppose that it derives from real events. While we cannot confirm the accuracy of what is recorded in the book of Exodus, there is no reason to dismiss it as little more than mere fiction. Scholars who deny the historicity of the events underlying the book of Exodus do so without making adequate allowance for these factors.

The route of Exodus

If problems exist in determining the historical setting of Exodus, it is hardly surprising that similar difficulties arise in reconstructing accurately the route of the Israelites' journey from Egypt. Apart from a handful of place-names, the narrative sheds little light on the direction taken by those fleeing from Egypt, apart from the fact that they did not take a direct route to Canaan. Moreover, opinions differ on the reliability and identity of the places named. While many scholars favour a route which took the Israelites through the southern half of the Sinai peninsula, recent research tends to support a route further to the north. See p. 104.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 – 2:25 The Israelites in Egypt

The opening two chapters of Exodus (covering several centuries) provide an indispensable introduction to the plot which unfolds in the rest of the book. At the outset we learn of Israel's presence in Egypt (1 – 6) and the fear created by their remarkable growth (7 – 22). Amid the inhumane measures adopted to repress the Israelites, we are introduced to Moses, the leading human protagonist in the story (2:1 – 22). In spite of Pharaoh's attempts to destroy all the male Hebrew children at birth, Moses was preserved through the cunning of his mother. By an ironic twist of events, he grew up in the Egyptian court. Years later, after killing an Egyptian whom he observed beating an Israelite, he was forced to flee for his life and live in exile in the land of Midian (11 – 22). The introduction concludes with a short comment about God's concern for Israel (23 – 25) which provides an important link to the next part of the book.

1:1–6 The Israelites' arrival in Egypt. Exodus begins in an undramatic way by listing briefly the names of the twelve sons of Israel, also known as Jacob (*cf.* Gn. 32:28), and noting that on their arrival in Egypt the whole family numbered seventy individuals. This information forms an important bridge between Exodus and the preceding book of Genesis, and probably presupposes that the reader is already

familiar with the more detailed account in Gn. 46:1–27 of those who emigrated to Egypt (the order of the names, however, follows Gn. 35:23–26). The reference to the death of Joseph in v 6 alludes back to Gn. 50:22–26.

Note. 5 Acts 7 14 gives the number of Jacob's descendants as 75, following an early Greek translation (see commentary on Gn. 46:27).

1:7 – 2:10 The Egyptian oppression of the Israelites. The rapid increase in the number of the descendants of Israel is emphasized in the Hebrew text through the repetition in v 7 of four verbs associated with growth (which the RSV translates, 'were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong'), and by the comment that *the land was filled with them.* This remarkable growth partially fulfilled various divine promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (*cf.* Gn. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:2,6; 22:17; 26:4; 28:14; 35:11; 46:3; 48:4) and is clear evidence of God's blessing upon the Israelites.

The enthronement of a new king, who had no knowledge of Joseph, anticipates developments which will have important consequences for both the Israelites and the Egyptians. The new Pharaoh viewed the fruitfulness of the Israelites as a major threat to the continued security of his kingdom. The Egyptians had to act shrewdly and in unison against this potential danger (9–10). Consequently, the Israelites were forced to labour in the construction of store cities for Pharaoh (11). Pharaoh's actions are a chilling reminder of how one nation may seek to dominate and exploit another. Paradoxically, the more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more the Israelites increased in number (12). God's intention to make Israel a great nation would not be thwarted by callous, human efforts.

Faced with the continued growth of the Israelite population, Pharaoh looked for another method of birth control: under his orders the Hebrew midwives, *Shiphrah* and *Puah*, were to kill all new-born boys (16). When they disobeyed out of reverence for God, they themselves were rewarded by the birth of children (21). God still rewards those who put him first.

Determined to pursue his policy against the Israelites, Pharaoh commanded his own people to cast every new-born Hebrew boy into the Nile (22). The scene was set for the birth of Moses and his remarkable deliverance. Ironically, he was not only rescued from the river by Pharaoh's own daughter (2:5–6), but he also grew up under the protection of the one who had threatened his very existence (9 – 10).

Notes. 8 The book of Exodus does not identify any of the Egyptian kings (Pharaohs) mentioned. In spite of their influential position they are portrayed as nobodies. This is in keeping with the contrast which Exodus draws between the Lord and the Egyptian kings. 11 The precise locations of *Pithom* and *Rameses* is disputed. The name Rameses is often associated with the great Pharaoh Rameses II (1290–1224 BC). However, the place-name could either date from an earlier period or result from an editorial updating (*cf.* Gn. 47:11). 11 *Pharaoh* is a royal title rather than a personal name. 19 In view of the remarkable increase of the Israelite population, Pharaoh may well have accepted the comment about the ability of the Hebrew women to give birth prior to the arrival of the midwives.

2:11–22 Moses' flight to Midian. The narrative jumps rapidly forward in v 11 to the time when Moses was an adult; according to later tradition he was forty years old at the time (*cf.* Acts 7:23). Three incidents occurred which are closely connected. First, Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew (11–12). Next, he intervened in a fight between two Hebrews and reprimanded the one in the wrong (13–14). Finally, following his flight from Egypt, he came to the rescue of the daughters of Reuel (16–19). In each of these incidents Moses is portrayed as the defender of the weaker party. Ironies abound. In spite of Moses' attempts to avoid detection before and after killing the Egyptian, his actions were soon widely known (12–13). The response of the aggressive Hebrew, '*Who made you ruler and judge over us?*' (14) unwittingly anticipated later developments in the book when Moses became leader and judge over Israel (*cf.* 18:13–26). After fleeing from Egypt because of his stance against Egyptian aggression, Moses was designated an Egyptian by the daughters of Reuel (19). Although his actions reveal a positive concern for the weak and oppressed, Moses did not yet qualify for the role of national deliverer. Rather he was forced to abandon membership of the Egyptian royal court and become *an alien in a foreign land* (22). Similarly, in a world full of injustice, Christians must, even in the face of opposition, be constantly active on behalf of the poor and helpless.

Note. 15 Moses fled eastwards to Midian, the region around the Gulf of Aqabah. This area may have been called after one of Abraham's younger sons (*cf.* Gn. 25:2).

2:23–25 God's concern for the Israelites. The report of Pharaoh's death introduces a brief but highly significant paragraph which focuses on the continuing plight of the Israelites in Egypt. Thematically it is linked to the preceding section; God, like Moses, cares for the oppressed. Although there have been brief allusions to

God's concern for his people, only now does the narrative reveal in detail his awareness of the Israelites' suffering: God hears, remembers, sees and knows (24–25). The reference to the divine covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is especially important. At the heart of this covenant is the promise that the patriarchs' descendants will possess the land of Canaan (*cf.* Gn. 17:8; 26:3; 28:13; 48:4). Abraham had received an even more specific promise: 'Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions' (Gn. 15:13–14). The time had now come for the deliverance of Abraham's descendants from bondage and oppression in Egypt.

3:1 – 15:21 Deliverance from Egypt

3:1 – 4:23 Moses in Midian

In contrast to the initial two chapters, which span a long period of time, the pace of the narrative in this section slows down significantly. Here, God reveals what action he intends to take on behalf of the oppressed Israelites: Moses is commissioned as the one who will lead the people out of Egypt. Because of its importance, the encounter between God and Moses is recorded in considerable detail with much attention being focused on their conversation. Clearly, the entire event had a profound effect upon Moses.

Several elements of the meeting between God and Moses are noteworthy. First, Moses encounters God in a burning bush. Throughout the exodus story the divine presence is frequently symbolized by fire and smoke (Ex. 13:21–22; 19:18; 24:17; 40:38; *cf.* Lv. 9:24; 10:2; Nu. 11:1–3; Dt. 9:3; 18:16). Secondly, because of his awesome nature, God had to be approached with caution. Moses acknowledged God's holiness by removing his sandals. The concept of divine holiness reappears in Exodus as a major theme. Having led his father-in-law's flock through the desert to *Horeb* (1), Moses will later lead the Israelites to the same location (*cf.* 3:12; 19:1–2), where they also will confront God's holy presence revealed through fire (see ch. 19).

Although the background details are noteworthy, the narrative focuses most attention on the ensuing dialogue between God and Moses. From the outset it was essential that Moses should know the identity of the one who spoke to him: '*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*' (6). Next, God revealed to Moses what the reader already knows; he was passionately concerned about the suffering of his people in Egypt (7 – 9; *cf.* 2:23–25). Now was the time for action. Through Moses, he intended to rescue them from Egypt, a land of oppression, and bring them to Canaan, a land of opportunity. Moses' response was hardly surprising: '*Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*' (11). What qualifications had Moses for this task? How could a fugitive from Egypt possibly confront Pharaoh? God's response was direct: '*I will be with you*' (12). This was accompanied with the promise of a sign. However, God did not promise an instant miracle; Moses had to exercise trust first before seeing it fulfilled.

Moses raised a further difficulty. How would he convince the Israelites that God had sent him to them? Vs 13 – 15, which focus on God's identity, are difficult to interpret. Moses' request for God's name is important because the Israelites believed that the name reflected an individual's essence. In Genesis, different aspects of God's nature are highlighted by the names used to designate him: *El Elyon* (God Most High; Gn. 14:18–20), *El Roi* (God who sees me; Gn. 16:13), *El Shaddai* (God Almighty; Gn. 17:1), *El Olam* (the Eternal God; Gn. 21:33). Here God introduced himself by the personl name 'Yahweh', translated in most English versions as *the* LORD (15). The Hebrew divine name 'Yahweh' is closely related to the phrase in v 14 which may be translated in a variety of ways: *I AM WHO I AM*, 'I will be who I will be', 'I will be what I was'. An abbreviated form of this phrase comes in the statement, '*I AM has sent me to you*'. Unlike previous names, 'Yahweh' does not limit God's nature to any particular characteristic: he is what he is. Furthermore, his nature does not change. He is the God worshipped by earlier generations (*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*) and generations yet to come (*this is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation*).

On his return to Egypt, Moses was to assemble the elders of Israel. Together they were to ask permission from Pharaoh to take the Israelites on a short three-day journey into the desert in order that they might worship their God (18). Pharaoh's reaction to this relatively minor demand would reveal his strong antagonism towards the Israelites. He would refuse to accommodate them, not because their request was excessive, but probably because he suspects that if he allows them to go they will leave for good. The narrative in chs. 7–15 reinforces this initial observation. Pharaoh would not change his mind *unless a mighty hand compels him* (19). The influence of God's hand upon the

Egyptians would be such that they would readily give of their possessions in order to see the Israelites leave Egypt. These gifts would compensate the Israelites for the suffering they had already endured.

In spite of these divine assurances, Moses continued to drag his feet by raising another problem. What if the Israelites did not believe him? How would he convince them that God had indeed appeared to him? In response God provided three signs which involved miraculous transformations for Moses to show to the people: his staff would become a snake (2–4); his hand would become leprous (6–7); and Nile water would become blood (9). Moses witnessed for himself the first two of these signs. The third, at this stage, had to be accepted by faith. Later, when all three were shown to the Israelites they were convinced that God had indeed sent Moses (30–31).

Moses still hesitated. He offered another excuse for not accepting God's call: he was not *eloquent* (10). With a series of rhetorical questions God revealed that his power could overcome any inability which Moses might have felt. When Moses asked that someone else should be sent, God, understandably, became angry (13). How could Moses continue to refuse? As a final gesture of divine patience God promised him the assistance of his brother Aaron. With this, Moses resigned himself to returning to Egypt. The fact that Moses did not reveal to his father-in-law the true reason for his departure to Egypt possibly suggests that he remained unconvinced of God's ability to accomplish his plans. God's call of Moses is a vivid reminder of how we are all called to serve the living God. Moses' hesitant response has a familiar ring to it!

Among the possessions taken by Moses on his journey to Egypt special attention is focused on *the staff of God* (20) As is revealed later, this staff was used by Moses when he performed before Pharaoh *all the wonders* God had given him (*e.g.* 7:10, 20; 8:5,17; 9:23; 10:13). Moses as God's ambassador was empowered to exercise divine authority (*cf.* 3:20). The staff was a symbol of this authority, not a magic wand. However, he was warned that Pharaoh would stubbornly refuse to let the Israelites leave. As a result, God would punish the Egyptians through the death of their firstborn, a response which parallels Egypt's dealings with Israel, God's *firstborn son* (22). This prediction is fulfilled in 11:1 – 12:30.

Notes. 3:1 *Jethro* is also known as Reuel (2:18). *Horeb, the mountain of God* is also known as Sinai (for its location, see the Introduction and map). 8. *A land flowing with milk and honey* is a proverbial way of describing the fertility of the land of Canaan. 15. The English translation, *the* LORD, fails to convey the idea that the Hebrew *Yahweh* is a personal name. In the past it has been wrongly transliterated as Jehovah.

4:24–31 Moses meets Aaron

24–26 The narrative moves location to *a lodging place on the way.* Here we have a brief and enigmatic report of God's attempt to kill Moses (24–26). His life was spared only after his wife Zipporah intervened by circumcising their son Gershom (*cf.* 2:22). This unusual incident possibly centres on Moses' continued lack of faith regarding his mission. Although God had assured him that he would deliver the Israelites out of Egypt because of his covenant with Abraham, Moses had failed to circumcise his own son as required by God under that very covenant (*cf.* Gn. 17:10–14). The incident serves as a reminder of the danger of failing to take God seriously.

With a minimum of detail the narrative records Moses' encounter with Aaron and the elders of Israel. The brief description of these events stands in sharp contrast to the prolonged discussion which Moses had with God.

Contrary to what he expected, Moses received a most favourable welcome. When they learned of God's concern for them, the Israelite leaders bowed down and worshipped. As his earlier conversation with God reveals, Moses never anticipated a scenario like this. Everything looked set for a successful mission.

Note. 25 The precise meaning of *a bridegroom of blood* is uncertain.

5:1 – 15:21 Judgments and deliverance

5:1 – 6:13 Moses' first encounter with Pharaoh

1–23 With this initial success to encourage them, Moses and Aaron proceeded to meet Pharaoh. He, however, displayed absolute contempt towards Moses, Aaron and especially towards God: *Who is the* LORD, *that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the* LORD *and I will not let Israel go* (2). Although Pharaoh had no personal knowledge of God at present, this would soon change dramatically. Significantly, the theme of knowing 'the LORD' recurs frequently throughout the following chapters (*cf. e.g.* 6:7; 9:14, 16, 29; 10:2). Having already revealed himself to Moses, Aaron and the Israelite elders, God would now reveal himself powerfully to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

As instructed by God (3:18), Moses and Aaron asked Pharaoh that the Israelites be permitted to make a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to their God.

Interestingly, Moses drew attention to the fact that failure to obey might cause God to strike the Israelites with plagues or the sword (3). Implicit in this was a warning to Pharaoh that God should be treated with respect. Pharaoh's response to their request appears excessive. He gave orders that the Israelites' task of making bricks should be made more difficult; they were no longer to be provided with the straw necessary for making them (*cf.* 1:14). To the Hebrew foremen it appeared as if Moses and Aaron had provided Pharaoh with an ideal opportunity to extend his campaign of genocide against the Israelites. As a result, they viewed Moses and Aaron with utter loathing. In the face of this rejection Moses turned in despair to God. Why had he permitted things to develop like this?

6:1–13 God's purpose was now revealed: Pharaoh would be forced to submit before the mighty hand of God (1). To reassure Moses, God reminded him of the promises which were part of the covenant previously established with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (2–8). Through their deliverance from Egypt the Israelites will know that 'the LORD' is indeed their God and that they are his people (7). The three-fold repetition of the phrase '*I am the LORD*' in vs 2, 6 and 8 emphasizes that it is *the LORD* who will achieve this. Nevertheless, when Moses communicated God's response to the Israelites, they did not listen (9). Pharaoh's power over them seemed unshakeable. Consequently, even Moses started to believe that it was futile to ask for the release of the Israelites (12).

Note. 3 This verse raises an important question: was the name 'Yahweh' known prior to the time of Moses? Scholars are divided in their response to this question. Some point to the frequent use of the term in Genesis. Others suggest that the occurrences of the term in Genesis are later additions. While it is possible to demonstrate that in certain places in Genesis the term 'Yahweh' may have replaced an earlier divine title (*e.g.* 16:11, 13), this is not always possible (*e.g.* 15:7; 22:14). It is apparent, however, that other divine names, and in particular *El Shaddai* (God Almighty), were popular among the patriarchs. The correct interpretation of 6:3 remains something of an enigma.

6:14–27 Genealogy of Moses and Aaron

At this point the plot is interrupted by a genealogy which focuses attention on the family of Levi, to which Aaron and Moses belong (14–25). The genealogy follows the order of the sons of Jacob as recorded in 1:2: Reuben (14), Simeon (15), Levi (16). At this point, however, it concentrates on the descendants of Levi, rather than mentioning the remaining sons of Jacob. The genealogy serves two functions. First, it provides details, recorded nowhere else in Exodus, about the family of Moses and Aaron. Secondly, by interrupting the plot at a crucial stage, it keeps the reader waiting in suspense to see what will happen next.

6:28 – 7:7 Divine reassurance for Moses

The story is resumed in vs 28–30 through the repetition of comments already made in vs 10–13. If the Israelites would not believe Moses, what likelihood was there that Pharaoh would? In response, God reassured Moses of his ability to overcome Pharaoh and lead the people out of Egypt. He even stated that Moses would be *like a God to Pharaoh*, and Aaron would be his prophet (7:1–2). With such assurances Moses should remain confident of success. The divine speech also anticipates the *miraculous signs and wonders* which are to dominate chs. 7–14. Furthermore, mention is made of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and of the *mighty acts of judgment* by which God will lead Israel out of Egypt. As a result, *the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD* (5). Thus the scene is set for the cycle of episodes which comprise 7:8 – 11:10.

7:8 – 11:10 Signs and wonders in Egypt

The Exodus narrative devotes considerable space to the account of the signs and wonders performed in Egypt. Although they are often described as 'the ten plagues', this is not an entirely satisfactory designation. First, although the biblical text refers to a few of them individually as plagues (9:3, 14–15; 11:1; *cf.* 8:2), as a whole they are more frequently called 'signs' (7:3; 8:23; 10:1–2) or 'wonders' (4:21; 7:3; 11:9–10; *cf.* 'miracle' in 7:9). Secondly, there are in fact *eleven* miraculous signs recorded in chs. 7–12. The first of these, the episode of the staff becoming a snake (7:8–13), is generally not included in the list of 'plagues'. Significantly, this was also the first sign which God gave Moses in order to convince the Israelites that 'the LORD' had indeed appeared to him (4:2–5). The next sign which Moses performed before Pharaoh, turning water into blood (7:14–25) was also used by Moses to demonstrate his divine calling to the Israelites (4:8–9). Yet, whereas the Israelites believed Moses on account of these signs (4:30–31), Pharaoh paid no attention to them; his own magicians were able to perform the same kind of wonders (7:11, 13, 22).

The individual accounts of the miraculous signs tend to follow the same pattern, but with some variation to avoid monotony. Several noteworthy features are common to all eleven episodes. First, the report of each miraculous

sign begins with the phrase, 'the LORD said to Moses'. The initiative for each sign rested with God, with every stage in the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh being divinely controlled. Secondly, each episode, echoing the predictions given in 4:21 and 7:3–4, concludes with an explicit reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Significantly, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart stands in sharp contrast to other developments which occur in the narrative. Although the Egyptian magicians could initially duplicate the miraculous signs of Moses and Aaron, they soon reached the limit of their power and told Pharaoh, '*This is the finger of God*' (8:19). Later, it is specifically noted that they *could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them* (9:11). Similarly, even Pharaoh's own officials were gradually persuaded of God's power. When Moses predicted the *worst hailstorm that has even fallen on Egypt* (9:18), some of them took precautions against his threat (9:20). When Moses next warned of a plague of locusts, the officials urged Pharaoh to let the Israelites go (10:7; *cf.* 11:3). Yet, although those around him gradually conceded to God's power, Pharaoh remained stubbornly resistant to Moses' demands.

The numerous references to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart underline the importance of this theme. Significantly, the narrative describes this hardening in two ways. Although in the initial stages it is reported that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, later it is stated that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, as predicted in 4:21 and 7:3. By describing the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in these ways, the narrative emphasizes both the guilt of Pharaoh and the sovereignty of God.

It has been suggested that the plagues described in Exodus can be related to a series of natural phenomena which may have occurred in ancient Egypt. Thus, for example, the turning of the Nile waters to blood can be accounted for as an unusually high flooding of the river during the months of July and August. The river became 'blood-like' due to the presence of red earth carried in suspension from the basins of the Blue Nile and Atbara. Such an explanation, however, does not account for the presence of such 'blood' in wooden buckets and stone jars everywhere in Egypt (7:19). Nor does it explain either the earlier sign which Moses performed before the Israelites (4:30), or the activities of the Egyptian magicians (7:22). Furthermore, the text emphasizes the divine source of these events. This is indicated, for example, by the many references to Moses or Aaron stretching out their hands, or a staff, in order to bring about the sign. Although some of the signs may be associated with natural phenomena, their occurrence is clearly attributed to divine intervention.

Although the eleven episodes which comprise 7:8 – 11:10 follow the same basic pattern, by comparing them it is possible to observe certain interesting developments within the plot. We have already noted this regarding the magicians who are portrayed as becoming increasingly powerless before Moses and Aaron. In a similar way, the attitude of Pharaoh's officials gradually changes. A similar change can be observed by noting Pharaoh's reaction. Initially, he agreed to let the people go on the condition that Moses prayed for the removal of the frogs (8:8). Next, while he would have preferred the Israelites to stay within Egypt, he was persuaded to let them go a little way into the desert (8:25–28). Although he actually stated, after the hail, that the people might go (9:28), this never happened. When Moses threatened an invasion of locusts, Pharaoh was prepared to allow the Israelite men, but not the women and children, to go and *worship the LORD* (10:8–11). Finally, he conceded that men, women and children might go, but not their flocks and herds (10:24). In spite of his apparent willingness to give way to Moses and Aaron in the face of further divine signs and wonders, Pharaoh continued to refuse to let the people go.

As well as the subtle changes which can be observed between episodes, certain aspects of the story are highlighted by repetition. Two features are worth noting. First, a clear distinction was drawn between the Israelites and the Egyptians (*cf.* 8:22–23; 9:4, 26; 10:23; 11:7). Secondly, Pharaoh entreated Moses on a number of occasions to pray for him (*cf.* 8:8–12, 28–30; 9:28–29, 33; 10:17–18). The portrayal of Moses as one who could mediate with God on behalf of others is a theme which reappears later in Exodus.

While the eleven episodes in 7:8 – 11:10 have the same basic form, each one contributes something distinctive to the overall story.

7:8–13 The staff becomes a snake. Interestingly, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh begins with the Egyptian king demanding a *miracle* (9); the same Hebrew word is translated 'wonders' in 4:21; 7:3; 11:9–10. Obviously, Pharaoh was convinced that in a show of strength he had the power, through his sorcerers, to defeat Moses. Yet, while they were powerful enough to duplicate Aaron's staff becoming a snake, their power was less; *Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs* (12).

7:14–25 The water becomes blood. Through a fourfold repetition of the details associated with the water becoming blood, the narrative highlights the extent and seriousness of the wonder performed jointly by Moses and Aaron: *Blood was everywhere in Egypt* (21).

8:1–15 The plague of frogs. Pharaoh's request that Moses should *Pray to the LORD to take the frogs away from me and my people* introduces into this section a theme which occurs in a number of the episodes. Pharaoh acknowledged the ability of Moses to mediate with God for the restoration of normal conditions within Egypt (*cf.* 8:28–31; 9:28–29, 33; 10:17–18).

8:16–19 The dust becomes gnats. By abbreviating the form of presentation found in other episodes, this brief section focuses on the reaction of the Egyptian magicians to the plague of gnats. Unable to copy the actions of Moses, they admitted to Pharaoh that *this is the finger of God* (19).

8:20–32 The plague of flies. In this episode detailed attention is given to the bargaining between Pharaoh and Moses over where the Israelites may sacrifice to their God. The narrative highlights the deceitfulness of Pharaoh in that once Moses had prayed on his behalf he refused to let the people go. Similar deceitfulness is revealed in 9:34 and 10:16–17.

9:1–7 The death of the livestock. The characteristic feature of this section is the distinction which was drawn between the Israelites and the Egyptians. The plague which came upon the livestock brought death only to the animals of the Egyptians: *not even one of the animals of the Israelites had died* (7).

9:8–12 The plague of boils. This short episode resembles closely 8:16–19. It comes to a climax in the comment that the Egyptian magicians could no longer stand before Moses. Although they had been able initially to challenge Moses and Aaron, the magicians now found themselves weak and helpless in the face of these miraculous wonders.

9:13–35 The plague of hail. In contrast to the previous episode this one is much more detailed. Through repeated references to 'the LORD', the narrative focuses on his divine power. We are reminded that Moses was merely God's agent and that the purpose of the various wonders was to demonstrate God's sovereign power.

10:1–20 The plague of locusts. The most notable feature in this episode is the stance of Pharaoh's officials. After Moses announced the sending of locusts, they immediately tried to persuade Pharaoh to reconsider his position. By this stage the officials were convinced of the folly of trying to stop the Israelites from going and worshipping their God. Pharaoh, however, was only prepared to let the men go; the women and children had to remain behind. Apart from a brief comment in 9:20–21, this is the first indication of a difference in attitude between Pharaoh and his officials towards the Israelites.

10:21–29 The plague of darkness. The most distinctive feature of this episode is its conclusion. A reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart indicates the end of almost all the other episodes, but not this one. Several verses are added which draw attention to a new development in the plot. Whereas the other episodes conclude with Moses having already left Pharaoh, the command that Moses should leave (28) reveals that he was still in the king's presence. The narrative also highlights, as occurs nowhere else, the depth of Pharaoh's hatred for Moses; if Moses appeared before him again, he would surely die. With this climax, the scene is set for the final episode in the series.

11:1–10 The death of the firstborn announced. While still in Pharaoh's presence, Moses received a further revelation from God. There would be one last plague which would cause Pharaoh to let the people go. Immediately, Moses announced the plague to Pharaoh: *Every firstborn son in Egypt will die* (5). With this final pronouncement, Moses left Pharaoh's presence in anger. As a result of Pharaoh's unwillingness to listen, Egypt would experience one further terrible example of God's power. After this the Israelites would leave. Although v 10 marks the end of the cycle of episodes which commenced in 7:8, further developments in the plot are anticipated by this final episode.

12:1–41 The Passover

As we have noted above, the previous cycle of episodes ends with the dramatic announcement that *every firstborn son in Egypt will die* (11:5). Considerable attention is now focused on the fulfilment of this pronouncement. The unique way in which the Israelite firstborn were protected from death led to this remarkable event being called the Passover (*cf.* vs 11, 23, 27). Significantly, later generations would remember it in three ways. First, they would celebrate each year the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread (14–20; 13:3–10). Several other references underline the close association between unleavened bread and the Passover (34, 39). Given their swift departure from Egypt, it was not possible for the Israelites to observe this feast until the first anniversary of their departure (*cf.* Nu. 9:1–14). Secondly, in conjunction with the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Israelites would commemorate the Passover by eating a year-old lamb or kid (24–27). Celebrated on the evening of the 14th day of the first month, the Passover marks the start of the Feast of Unleavened Bread which continues until the 21st day of the month (*cf.* v 18). Thirdly, to commemorate the survival of their firstborn sons, the Israelites would give to God all future firstborn male animals from their livestock (13:11–16). These various activities would be a

continual testimony to the fact that God had brought them out of Egypt with his mighty hand (*cf.* 13:3, 9, 16).

At the heart of the first Passover ritual was the slaying of a lamb or kid, the smearing of its blood on the door-frames, and the eating of its meat. The details of the ritual parallel closely those relating to sacrifices, and this is confirmed by the comment in v 27, *It is the Passover sacrifice to the* LORD. Yet, while resembling other sacrifices, the Passover ceremony is unique, reflecting its peculiar historical setting. Because the Aaronic priesthood had not yet been established (Lv. 8:1 – 9:24), Moses commanded *all the elders of Israel* to slaughter the Passover victims (21). Similarly, there is no reference to the central sanctuary or altar which were first instituted after the exodus at Sinai (20:24–26; 24:4; 27:1–8). Whereas other sacrifices were normally offered up during daylight, the Passover animal was sacrificed at *twilight* as this was the only convenient time because of the long hours the Israelites were forced to work. Finally, the timing of the Passover to the 14th day of the month coincides with the full moon, the most suitable night in the month for the exodus from Egypt.

Special attention is focused on the use made of the animal's blood: it was smeared on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses (7, 22). Some scholars emphasize that this action was designed to protect those within from outside hostile powers (*cf.* vs 13, 23). Other scholars suggest that the blood was used to purify the Israelite houses, a proposal supported by the reference to the use of *hyssop* (22) which is elsewhere associated with ritual purification (*e.g.* Lv. 14:4; Nu. 19:6, 18). However, as we shall observe below, the sprinkled blood probably formed part of a consecration ritual.

An equally important part of the Passover rite was the eating of the animal. Everyone in the Israelite community was to participate (47), and for each animal slaughtered there had to be an adequate number of people to eat all the meat. Special instructions were given concerning the cooking of the meat: the entire animal was to be roasted, not boiled (9); the meat had to be eaten indoors and the animal's bones must not be broken (46). Any meat which remained to the morning had to be burnt (10).

Significantly, the description of the Passover meal parallels closely elements of the account of the consecration of the Aaronic priests in Ex. 29 and Lv. 8. Here, the slaughter of a ram together with the sprinkling of its blood and the eating of its meat form the main elements of a consecration ritual. Although there are differences of detail, these same elements underlie the Passover ritual. By participating in the Passover the Israelites set themselves apart as holy. The sacrifice of the animal atoned for the sin of the people, the blood smeared on the door-frames purified those within, and the eating of the sacrificial meat consecrated those who consumed it. By participating in the Passover ritual the people sanctified themselves as a nation holy to God (*cf.* 19:6).

12:1–28 Instructions for the Passover. This section consists of two speeches containing instructions. Although placed side by side the speeches were given days apart. The first speech (1–20) was delivered by God to Moses some time before the Israelites kept the first Passover; v 3 refers to the selection of the Passover lamb or kid four days before the Passover was to be observed. In the second speech (21–27), Moses addressed the elders of Israel on the day of the Passover. Through these two speeches the narrator highlights the events leading up to the striking down of the Egyptian firstborn at midnight on the 14th day of the month (29). Interestingly, both speeches end with comments drawing attention to future commemorations of the Passover (14–20; 24–27). Moreover, the second speech complements the first, providing additional information on various aspects of the Passover celebration. Since the reader is able to picture what took place from the content of the two speeches, the author refrains from describing the fulfilment of the instructions; he merely comments, *the Israelites did just what the* LORD *commanded Moses and Aaron* (28).

The Passover figures prominently in the NT understanding of the death of Jesus Christ. According to Matthew, Mark and Luke, the Last Supper, which was to be subsequently commemorated as the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–33), was a Passover meal (Mt. 26:17; Mk. 14:12; Lk. 22:7–8). By highlighting Jesus' unbroken bones John alludes to the fact that the death of Jesus resembled that of the Passover sacrifice (Jn. 19:36). 1 Cor. 5:7 makes explicit this connection: 'For Christ, our Passover lamb (lit. our Passover), has been sacrificed' and 1 Pet. 1:18–19 probably also refers to the Passover sacrifice.

Notes. 3 The Hebrew word *śeh* denotes either a lamb or a goat. 15 *Bread made without yeast* is also described as unleavened bread. The fact that the bread was without leaven indicates a lack of time to prepare it properly (39; *cf.* v 11). 18 *From the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day* refers to the period of time covered by both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. To make sense of this statement it must be assumed that the day was reckoned as beginning at sunrise, and not at sunset. From the sixth century BC

onwards the Jews reckoned the day as beginning at sunset. **23** The precise nature of *the destroyer* is not revealed in Exodus. According to Ps. 78:49 this may refer to a 'band of destroying angels'.

12:29–36 The death of the Egyptian firstborn. Various predictions made in 11:1–10 are fulfilled in this section. God struck down all the Egyptian firstborn at midnight, causing the people to wail loudly (29–30; *cf.* 11:4–6). After summoning Moses and Aaron for the final time, Pharaoh permitted the Israelites to leave unconditionally (31–32; *cf.* 11:1). As instructed (11:2), the Israelites asked for and received from the Egyptians *articles of silver and gold* and *clothing* (35). Because *the LORD had made the Egyptians favourably disposed towards the people . . . they gave them what they asked for* (36; *cf.* 11:3). The 'plundering' of Egypt is viewed as retribution for the way in which the Egyptians had treated the Israelites as slaves (*cf.* Gn. 15:14).

12:37–41 The exodus begins. With Pharaoh's permission the Israelites began their journey to freedom, travelling from Rameses to Succoth. The haste of their departure is marked by the fact that they only had time to prepare bread made without yeast. At last, after 430 years, the people were enabled to leave Egypt as a result of the mighty wonders performed by God.

Note. 40 Gn. 15:13 refers to the descendants of Abraham being enslaved and ill-treated for 400 years (*cf.* Acts 7:6). The larger figure here of 430 years probably includes the period of peace which they enjoyed after first arriving in Egypt.

12:42–50 Regulations governing the Passover

The account of the departure of the Israelites is interrupted by this section which records *regulations for the Passover.* Clearly, these regulations applied to both the first Passover and later commemorations (42). The section ends by noting the obedience of the Israelites, with v 50 corresponding closely with v 28, possibly indicating that the instructions belong there chronologically. By ordering the material as he does, the narrator brings together in 12:42 – 13:16 the three ways in which the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt was to be celebrated: by re-enacting the Passover (43–49); by keeping the feast of Unleavened Bread (13:3–10); and by consecrating every firstborn male (13:11–16).

12:51 – 13:16 Further instructions for commemorating the Passover

The narrative picks up in v 51 where it left off in v 41 by repeating various details (*e.g. on that very day, divisions*; the NIV obscures somewhat the similarity between the two verses in the Hebrew text). On the day following the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn God announced to Moses that the Israelites must set apart as special *the first offspring of every womb . . . whether man or animal* (v 2). Moses in turn expanded this directive as he conveyed it to the people (11–16). It is preceded, however, by instructions regarding the celebration of the feast of Unleavened Bread (3–10). Although Moses and Aaron had been informed about this feast earlier (12:14–20), it was only now that the people learned of it. Moses' speech to the people falls neatly into two halves, which parallel each other closely. Both begin with references to the people taking possession of the land of Canaan in fulfilment of God's oath to their forefathers (5, 11). Next come instructions regarding the commemoration of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt (6–7, 12–13), and the explanation of these activities to the children (8, 14–15). Finally, both halves are marked by similar endings, concluding with the comment that *the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand* (9; *cf.* v 16).

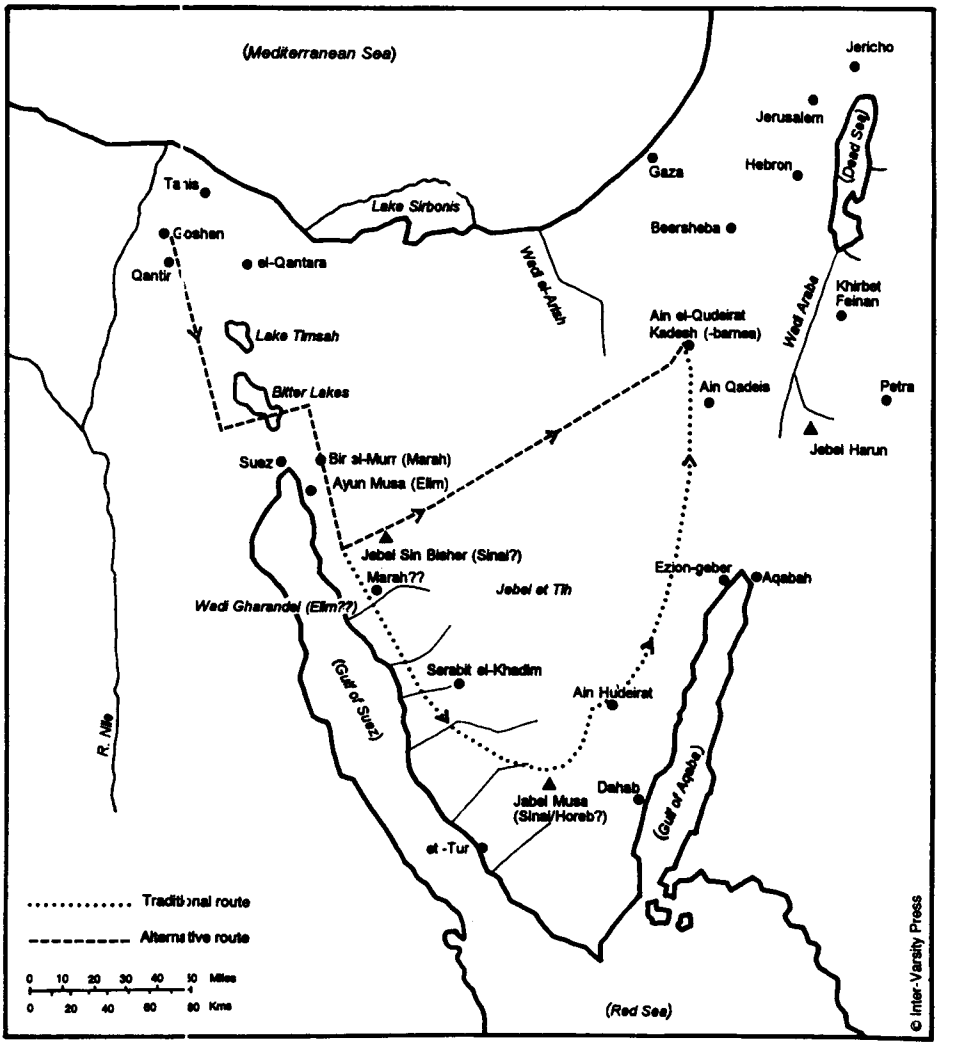
13:17–22 First stage of the journey out of Egypt

Having announced his intention to bring the Israelites back to the land of Canaan, God proceeded to lead them in that direction. However, out of concern for their security, he piloted them by a longer, safer route, taking them *around by the desert road towards the Red Sea.* In fulfilment of the oath made by the sons of Israel to Joseph (Gn. 50:24–25), Moses took with him Joseph's embalmed remains. The narrator draws special attention to God's continual presence with the people, marked by a *pillar of cloud* by day and a *pillar of fire* by night. As the ensuing narrative reveals, God remained in close proximity to the Israelites, indicating his special relationship with them.

Note. 18 *Red Sea* (Heb. *yam sûp*; lit. 'Sea of reeds') probably denotes the northern part of the Red Sea that is, the Gulf of Aqabah (the north-eastern branch) and the Gulf of Suez (the north-western branch) including the region now known as the Bitter Lakes (in antiquity this latter region may have been directly connected to the Red Sea). The exact location of the crossing is uncertain; most scholars, however, favour the region of the Bitter Lakes. For the possible route of the Israelite exodus, see map.

14:1–31 The destruction of the Egyptian army

The present passage has much in common with



Possible routes for the exodus.

the cycle of episodes leading up to the Passover. We encounter again some familiar themes: the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (4, 17); the stretching out of the staff in Moses' hand (16; *cf.* vs 21, 26–27); and the distinction which God made between the Egyptians and the Israelites (19–20, 28–29). As we read of the departure of the Israelites and the destruction of Pharaoh and the Egyptian army we come towards the climax of the first half of the book of Exodus.

Although Pharaoh permitted the Israelites to leave Egypt after the death of the firstborn, there was to be one final demonstration of God's power. Consequently, God delayed the Israelites' departure for Canaan, and they remained in Egypt on the western side of the Red Sea (*cf.* 13:18; 15:4). When Pharaoh and his army encountered their former slaves, the Israelites, believing themselves trapped, were terrified (10–12). However, by stretching out his staff Moses provided a safe escape route for the people through the divided waters of the sea. When the Egyptians followed, Moses again stretched out his hand over the sea, this time with tragic consequences for Pharaoh and his soldiers: *not one of them survived* (28). Through repetition vs 4 and 18 draw attention to God's prime motive in destroying the Egyptian army: *the Egyptians will know that I am the* LORD. Earlier Pharaoh had dismissively rejected

Moses' request to let the people go by stating, '*Who is the* LORD*, that I should obey him and let Israel go?*' (5:2). Now he discovered why 'the LORD' should be obeyed. The narrative also highlights the changing attitude of the Israelites, from unbelief and fear in the face of the Egyptian threat (13:10–12) to faith and trust in the light of God's deliverance (13:31).

15:1–21 The Israelites' celebration of God's power

As a fitting conclusion to the preceding account of the divine deliverance of the enslaved Israelites from Egyptian control, Moses and the people celebrated in song the majesty and power of 'the LORD' (1–18). Significantly, the narrative switches from prose to poetry. The exalted language of the poetry conveys better than prose the thoughts and feelings of the Israelites as they worshipped the one who had taken pity upon them and rescued them from the tyrant's power. By going over again what has already been recorded in prose, the reader too is encouraged to participate in the celebrations of the Israelites. As the people responded in adoration and praise for what God had already done, they looked forward with confidence to the future. Thus their song concludes by focusing on what God has yet to accomplish on their behalf (13–18). In the light of past events and future expectations it is hardly surprising that at the end of this section we read of Miriam and all the women playing tambourines and dancing with joy.

Note. 21 This verse probably records only the opening part of Miriam's song, which repeats almost word for word the start of Moses' song in v 1; together these verses frame this section, marking its beginning and conclusion.

15:22 – 18:27 The Israelites under divine rule

15:22 – 17:7 The people grumble for food and water

In spite of their miraculous deliverance from slavery, life in Egypt still held an attraction for the Israelites. There follow a number of incidents in which they grumbled about the shortcomings of their new situation, revealing their remarkable unwillingness to trust and obey God (*cf.* 15:24; 16:2–12; 17:1–7). All three incidents focus on a lack of food or water. Nevertheless, God remained committed to his people.

15:22–27 The waters of Marah. The short account of Moses making the bitter water sweet provides a suitable transition from the situation which confronted the Israelites in Egypt to that following the exodus. The incident illustrates the change which Israel had experienced between the 'bitter' life in Egypt and the newly found freedom which they now enjoyed. The passage also stresses the benefits which belong to Israel if they remain loyal to God. Obedience to the Lord's commands and decrees is a theme which reappears frequently in the rest of Exodus, especially in connection with the covenant made at Sinai. A related theme is how God tested the people in order to ascertain the extent of their obedience (25; *cf.* 16:4; 17:2, 7; 20:20).

16:1–36 The people grumble for food. As they journeyed through the desert region to the south-east of the Bitter Lakes, the cruelty and suffering of Egypt was quickly forgotten when the people became hungry. They even suggested that it would have been better for them to have died *by the* LORD*'s hand in Egypt*, rather than starve in the desert (3–4). In response God graciously sent quails in the evening (13) and a bread-like substance in the morning; the latter was called *manna* because the people said, *What [Heb. man] is it?* (31; *cf.* v 15). God tested the Israelites by issuing certain stipulations concerning the collection and storage of the manna (4–5, 16, 23). To demonstrate their faith in God's provision, the people were not supposed to keep any of the manna from one day to the next (19). However, on the sixth day of the week, Friday, double the quantity of manna was to be collected and prepared, for the next day (the Sabbath) was to be a day of rest. These instructions were not heeded by some of the people (20, 28). Although they had been delivered from the Egyptians by remarkable displays of God's power, some still lacked total commitment and loyalty to him. As the exodus story reveals, the Israelites frequently displayed their obstinacy towards God. Nevertheless, such is the constancy of God that he provides manna for the next forty years; only when the people settled in the land of Canaan did the manna cease (35–36). As a testimony to future generations an omer of manna was preserved in a jar (33).

In the NT Jesus compares himself with the manna divinely provided in the wilderness: 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world' (Jn. 6:51; *cf.* 6:48–58).

17:1–7 The people grumble for water. A further dispute between the Israelites and Moses occurred at Rephidim because of lack of water. The conflict was settled when Moses, following divine instructions, used his staff to produce water from a rock (6). Whereas in the previous episode God had tested the Israelites (16:4), now they tested him by their lack of trust

(2, 7). Because of their actions the place was called *Massah and Meribah*, 'testing and quarrelling' (7; *cf.* v 2). Paul refers to this incident in 1 Cor. 10:3–4, suggesting that the pre-existent Christ was the one who sustained the people with food and water.

17:8–16 The defeat of the Amalekites

An attack by the Amalekites led to a battle between them and the Israelites. Once again *the staff of God* in the hands of Moses played a symbolic role in giving the Israelites victory. When Moses held it aloft, Joshua and the Israelite army were successful in overcoming the Amalekites. Through the incidents which occurred immediately following their escape from Egypt, God proved himself more than capable of meeting the needs of the Israelites.

18:1–27 The visit of Jethro

Two factors may indicate that the events recorded in this chapter may have taken place at a later date. First, the reference to *the mountain of God* in v 5 suggests that the Israelites had already arrived at Sinai (*cf.* 19:1–2). Secondly, the account of Jethro encouraging Moses to appoint judges may presuppose that God's laws and decrees had already been entrusted to the people (*cf.* Dt. 1:9–18). However, these arguments are not conclusive and the events of ch. 18 could have occurred prior to the arrival of the Israelites at Mt Sinai.

In either case, the narrative is linked thematically to the surrounding chapters. First, the visit of Jethro contrasts sharply with the previous account of the attack by the Amalekites. Jethro as representative of the Midianites, adopted a positive approach towards the Israelites, and acknowledged God's sovereign power (10–11). Secondly, this episode prepares for the following chapters by focusing on (i) the marvellous way in which God delivered the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt and, (ii) the importance of God's decrees and laws. Whereas the latter anticipates the legal material given in chs. 21–23, the former emphasizes the basis of the covenant relationship established in chs. 19–24 (*cf.* 19:4–6; 20:2). The divine rescue of the Israelites is highlighted directly by the remarks of Jethro, and indirectly by the comment concerning the name of Moses' second son, Eliezer, *for he said 'My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh'* (4).

The latter part of the chapter portrays Moses judging the disputes which arose among the Israelites. Jethro's advice to Moses, on the need to delegate authority, led to the establishment of a hierarchical structure for the resolution of conflicts (25–26). The example of Moses delegating authority to others is a fitting reminder that within the life of the church we need to share tasks so that no single individual is unduly burdened. Those in positions of leadership should also be prepared to entrust others with meaningful responsibilities.

19:1 – 24:11 The establishment of the covenant

19:1–15 Preparations for the covenant

When God first called Moses to go to Pharaoh, one of the promises which he made to him was that the people would 'worship God on this mountain' (3:12). Their arrival at Mt Sinai is noted in 19:2. From the fourth century AD there has been a strong tradition locating Mt Sinai in the southern part of the Sinai peninsula and identifying it with Jebel Musa (Mt Moses). This identification is not without difficulty, and an alternative possibility has been suggested, locating Sinai further to the north, in Wadi Sudr. Mt Sinai is then identified with Jebel Sin Bisher.

A major new development occurs in chs. 19–24 with the making of a covenant between God and the Israelites. The basic form of this agreement is found in vs 4–6. If Israel, in the light of her divine deliverance from Egypt, would obey 'the LORD', then she would be his *treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.* The expression *a kingdom of priests* can also be translated 'priestly kings', suggesting that the Israelites were to enjoy the privilege of being both priests and kings in relation to other peoples. This indicates the important role which Israel was to play in God's future plans. However, their special status was conditional upon their obedience to God. The idea of a 'royal priesthood' reappears in the NT with reference to the status of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

The events which anticipate the making of the covenant are clearly intended to underline the serious nature of the agreement about to be established. The people were to prepare themselves for the third day (10–11, 14–15). The mountain was placed out of bounds, under threat of death to anyone who should venture to ascend it (12–13). As in Moses' earlier encounter with God at Sinai, the mountain was declared holy (23; *cf.* 3:5). Linked to this was the instruction that Moses should *consecrate* (or 'make holy') the people (10, 14).

19:16–25 God appears before the Israelites on Mt Sinai

The third day was marked by the dramatic appearance of a cloud over the mountain, with thunder and lightning issuing from it. As God

descended upon the mountain, smoke rose from it (18). Once more the divine presence is symbolized by fire (*cf.* 3:2; 24:17). God's arrival was also announced through the sounding of a long trumpet blast, which grew louder and louder (16, 19).

Note. 22 The *priests* mentioned here, and in v 24, are those who performed priestly functions prior to the appointment of Aaron and his sons (*cf.* 28:1).

20:1–21 God addresses the people directly

20:1–2 Introduction. As the people stood in awe before the mountain, they heard the very voice of God introducing himself to them: *I am the* LORD *your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery* (2; *cf.* Dt. 4:12–13; 5:4). There then follows a list of stipulations which were to form the basis of Israel's covenant relationship with God (3–17). These were later termed 'the ten words' (34:28; Dt. 4:13; 10:4), from which we derive the designation Decalogue or Ten Commandments. Their importance was further emphasized when they were eventually inscribed by God on two stone tablets (24:12; 31:18; 34:1, 28; see below).

The stipulations outlined by God were to govern Israel's relationship with him. These represent the principal requirements which God placed upon the people of Israel for the establishment and maintenance of the covenant relationship between them. The people were to be single-minded in their devotion to the one who had delivered them from Egypt. They were to worship him alone (3). Furthermore, their social behaviour was to follow a pattern which placed a high priority on the rights of the individual as regards life, marriage and possessions. They were to obey these commands out of love for God (6).

Strictly speaking, the Decalogue is not a collection of laws. Various factors set it apart from the other legal collections of the Pentateuch. First it was spoken directly by God to the people; Moses did not act as an intermediary (1, 19; *cf.* Dt. 4:12–13; 5:4–5, 22–27). Secondly, it alone was inscribed on stone tablets by the 'finger of God' (31:18; *cf.* 24:12, 32:15–16; 34:1, 28). All other regulations and instructions were written down by Moses (24:4; 34:27–28, see note on 34:28). Thirdly, the Ten Commandments are hardly detailed precepts, since no punishments are listed. Although the second and fifth commandments appear to contain penalties, these are really 'motivation clauses' designed to promote the observance of the divine instructions. Finally, what human law court could begin to enforce the prohibition against coveting described in the tenth commandment?

The covenant stipulations in ch. 20 are listed in order of descending priority and focus on the Israelites' relationship to God and other people. Jesus summarized this twofold division as love for God and love for one's neighbour (Mt. 22:37–39; Mk. 12:29–31). Love for God must come first, but it can never to be divorced from love for one's neighbour; the former leads automatically to the latter.

20:3 First commandment. Sole allegiance to 'the LORD' lies at the very heart of the covenant relationship. It is the foundation upon which everything else rests. The people were in practice to be monotheistic, worshipping only God. As is made clear elsewhere in the Pentateuch, the worship of other deities was punishable by death (Nu. 25:1–18; Dt. 13:1–18).

20:4–6 Second commandment. Unlike contemporary peoples, the Israelites were not to make or worship visual representations of their God. In both Egypt and Canaan, human and animal forms played an important function in depicting the attributes of a deity. Any attempt on the part of the Israelites to represent God using such images would produce a distorted picture of his true nature. The incident of the golden calf (ch. 32) reveals both the necessity of this prohibition in the light of the people's desire to have some visual image of 'the LORD', and the serious consequences of disregarding this commandment.

20:7 Third commandment. Whereas the second commandment prohibits visual representations of God, the third focuses on verbal representations. As a sign of their respect for God, the people were to exercise the greatest caution when talking about him or invoking his name. They were to say nothing which might detract from a true appreciation of his nature and character.

20:8–11 Fourth commandment. The people were to refrain from work on the seventh day, the Sabbath. According to 31:12–18 the Sabbath was the sign of the covenant relationship inaugurated at Sinai; as such it functioned like the earlier covenant sign of circumcision (Gn. 17:9–14). Anyone failing to observe the Sabbath showed their disdain for the special relationship established between God and Israel. As a result of the new covenant inaugurated by Christ the Sabbath (Saturday) was replaced by the Lord's day (Sunday). The strict observance of the Sabbath, like circumcision, is no longer binding upon Christians.

20:12 Fifth commandment. The concept of honouring is usually associated with God or his representatives, prophets and kings. In all likelihood parents were envisaged as representing God to their children; the family unit being

a miniature of the nation. The seriousness of this commandment is reflected in the fact that the death penalty was required for children who wilfully disrespected their parents (Ex. 21:15, 17). If parents, as authority figures within the home, are respected by children, then respect for authority figures within society at large will also follow.

20:13 Sixth commandment. This commandment, by prohibiting murder or manslaughter, demonstrates the high priority which God places upon human life. No human being has the right to take another's life because each person is made in God's image (*cf.* Gn. 1:27; 9:6). In the Pentateuch, the punishment for taking another's life is death itself. The commandment, however, does not include judicial executions for capital offences or legitimate deaths resulting from war, and it should also be noted that the OT laws draw a careful distinction between premeditated and accidental deaths (see on 21:1 – 22:20, the section entitled 'The sanctity of life').

20:14 Seventh commandment. In God's order of priority, the sanctity of human life is followed by the importance of the marriage relationship. Adultery here means sexual relations between a married woman and a man who is not her husband. Those caught in adultery could be executed (Lv. 20:10; Dt. 22:22). Relations between a married man and an unmarried woman do not qualify as adultery. Hence polygamy is not automatically excluded by this commandment, although in practice it was rare in OT times. Similarly, divorce was permitted, but not encouraged. The NT teaching on marriage is, in certain respects, more demanding, reflecting more closely God's ideal for human marriage as expressed in Gn. 2:24; polygamy, a husband's adultery and possibly remarriage are all prohibited (*cf.* Mt. 19:3–12; Mk. 10:2–12; Lk. 16:18). As a whole, the Bible reveals that God desires the establishment of harmonious marital relationships and that neither partner should do anything to undermine this.

20:15 Eighth commandment. The next principle to govern the Israelites' relationship with God is respect for the property of others. Any individual found guilty of dispossessing another was to be punished in accordance with the value of what they had stolen and the injured party was to be suitably compensated. While other Ancient Near Eastern cultures sometimes invoked the death penalty for theft, the OT consistently rejects such a position, indicating clearly that God values human life and the marital relationship above property.

20:16 Ninth commandment. In the final two commandments we proceed from prohibitions involving actions to prohibitions involving words and thoughts respectively. This concludes the downward progression of priorities which we have observed. The ninth commandment emphasizes the importance of truthfulness. While the prohibition against false testimony was primarily intended for a court of law, it may be extended to include any situation in which untrue words are used to harm another individual.

20:17 Tenth commandment. The final commandment forbids an individual to covet what belongs to another. Unlike all the other commands, it addresses inner feelings and thoughts such as envy or greed. If the Israelites were to enjoy a harmonious covenant relationship with God, every aspect of their lives must conform to his will. Outward adherence is insufficient; their inner selves must be patterned according to the divine principles of morality found in the Ten Commandments. As Jesus reminds us, to interpret the commandments as requiring only outward obedience is to misunderstand their purpose (Mt. 5:17–48).

20:18–21 The people's initial reaction. As a result of God's appearance, the people were filled with alarm. Even before God addressed them, they were terrified (19:16), and as God spoke, their fear increased (18–19). Moses, however, observed that they were being tested *so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning* (20). Still afraid, the people requested Moses to act as mediator between them and God (21).

20:22–26 Instructions for the offering of sacrifices

This is the first section of a long speech by 'the LORD' which Moses heard alone, and subsequently recorded. As we shall see below, the contents of God's speech relate closely to the account of the ratification of the covenant in 24:3–11.

Although many commentators view this first section as part of the detailed legislation which comprises the Book of the Covenant, there are grounds for treating it as distinctive. Apart from the obvious difficulty of explaining why detailed laws would have been inserted before the heading in 21:1, the form of presentation does not conform to the patterns used throughout 21:1 – 22:20. These features can best be accounted for by the fact that 20:22–26 records instructions, not detailed legislation, for the building of an altar and the offering of sacrifices. These activities form an essential part of the covenant ratification ceremony described in 24:4–8. The mention of *burnt offerings and fellowship offerings* in both contexts, reinforces the connection. Nevertheless, although they

relate in the first instance to the events of ch. 24, the instructions on building an altar were applicable to other occasions.

Notes. 26 Later, God instructed Moses to make linen undergarments for Aaron and his sons in order that they might not expose their nakedness in God's presence (to do so would have led to death; 28:42–43).

21:1 – 23:33 The Book of the Covenant

According to 24:4, Moses recorded everything that God said in a document known appropriately as the Book of the Covenant (24:7). Possibly most, if not all, of this document is preserved in 21:1 – 23:33. It falls into four sections. First, there is a long list of laws dealing with various aspects of everyday life (21:1 – 22:20). The next part consists of moral imperatives which highlight the exemplary behaviour God expects of his people, especially towards the underprivileged (22:21 – 23:9). Thirdly, instructions were given regarding the observance of the Sabbath and religious festivals (23:10–19). Finally, God outlined how he would act on behalf of the Israelites, enabling them to take possession of the land of Canaan (23:20–33).

In a book which underlines God's passionate concern for justice through his rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, it is hardly surprising that a similar concern for justice should dominate the covenant which he established with the Israelites. This is most apparent in the detailed legislation and moral imperatives which form the first two sections of the Book of the Covenant.

21:1 – 22:20 Detailed legislation. The material which comprises this section represents only some of the statutes which formed part of ancient Israel's law. In all likelihood many of the laws included here have been selected because they corresponded closely with God's actions in rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. At the very outset the principle was established that slaves had the right to be set free after a fixed period of time (1–4); this implied that the Egyptians acted illegally by enslaving the Israelites for such a long period of time. In contrast, the statutes concerning a slave who loves his master (5–6), and the treatment of female salves (7–11) were intended to highlight various aspects of Israel's covenant relationship with 'the LORD': the Israelites would serve him because they loved him; having chosen Israel God would remain faithful to them. A further group of laws draws attention to the principle of compensation for those who have been physically injured (18–27). In particular, any slave who suffered serious injury at the hand of his or her master was to be released immediately (26–27). In the light of Israel's harsh treatment in Egypt (*cf.* Ex. 2:11; 5:14–16) these laws justify indirectly God's action in freeing the Israelites. Another set of laws focuses on the concept of restitution (22:1–15). Here also it is possible to see a connection with earlier comments about how the Israelites demanded articles of silver and gold and clothing from the Egyptians (3:21–22; 11:2; 12:35–36). These items compensated the Israelites for the way in which they had been exploited in Egypt.

Apart from their relevance in justifying prior events in the book of Exodus, the laws in this section are also significant because of the ideals and values which permeate them. The following are the most noteworthy.

(i) *Moral symmetry.* The biblical laws were based on the principle that the punishment should match the crime. This is stated most clearly in the well known, but generally misunderstood, 'law of talion': *life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise* (21:23–25; *cf.* Lv. 24:17–21; Dt. 19:21). At first sight, the law of talion appears to be a rather barbaric way of ensuring justice. Yet, within the development of law in the Ancient Near East it represented an important advance. In the earliest known collections of laws monetary fines were imposed in cases of assault and bodily injury. The weakness of such fines was that they failed to take into account an individual's ability to pay. (For an unemployed labourer a fine of a thousand pounds imposes great hardship; to a millionaire it is a mere trifle.) The law of talion removed all such discrepancies by ensuring that the punishment should be no less, or no more, than the crime demanded.

The law of talion, however, was not always applied literally. In the Book of the Covenant it is preceded by a case of wounding, the punishment for which was the cost of medical expenses and compensation for lost wages (21:18–19). Similarly, it is followed by a law in which a servant was granted release as compensation for the loss of an eye or a tooth (21:26–27). Clearly, there was no literal application of the law of talion in these instances.

(ii) *The sanctity of life.* Many modern readers of the biblical laws are likely to be disturbed by the use of capital punishment for a variety of crimes, including murder, kidnapping, physical or verbal assaults against parents, sorcery, bestiality and idolatry (21:12–17; 22:18–20). Against modern standards of justice this punishment appears extremely harsh. Nevertheless, it reflects the value which the Israelites placed upon individual human life; the hierarchical structure within the family; and the purity of worship. In the case of murder the death

penalty was invoked, not out of indifference for human life, but rather because each human life is of tremendous value (*cf.* Gn. 9:6). A life for a life does not express vengefulness, but rather the idea that the only payment which can be made for the taking of a human life is a human life itself. This even applies to animals responsible for a human death (21:28).

The distinctiveness of the biblical laws is apparent when one compares them with other Ancient Near Eastern laws. In the earlier Laws of Hammurabi, a murderer was required to make only financial compensation to the victim's family. This contrasts sharply with the biblical insistence of a life for a life. On the other hand, the non-biblical laws apply the death penalty to breaking and entering, looting at a fire, and theft. These examples reveal that in other cultures financial loss was sometimes treated more seriously than loss of life. The biblical laws consistently emphasize that human life is of greater value than material possessions.

In the light of these observations, it might appear that Christians ought to support the death penalty for crimes like murder. However, other factors must also be considered. First, the ancient Israelites did not have the option of sentencing a murderer to life imprisonment; there were no facilities to imprison someone for a long period of time. Remarkably, imprisonment was never used as a means of punishment for any crime. Obviously this greatly restricted their choice of punishment. Secondly, it is likely that the death penalty was rarely utilized. This probably ensured that its use did not have the effect of devaluing human life. To make frequent recourse to capital punishment might suggest that human life is of little esteem, thus negating the very reason for adopting it. Whatever form of punishment we endorse, as Christians we must always ensure that it does not undermine the sanctity of human life.

(iii) *Preventing abuse of the legal system.* Safeguards were built into the legislation to prevent its abuse or misuse. In any society there is always the danger that the law may be used by an unscrupulous individual against an innocent party. This probably explains the different judgments concerning the death of a burglar (22:2–3). If he was killed at night, the owner of the house was innocent of any wrongdoing. If the incident occurred during daylight, the householder was guilty of bloodshed. The different judgments seem to be aimed at preventing someone from murdering another person and then claiming that the victim was a thief. Without such safeguards the law would actually work in favour of the guilty party. This judgment also indicates that even a thief was offered some protection by the law.

Note. 21:6 *Before the judges* is lit. 'before God' (see also, 22:8–9 and 22:28). The judgment passed in 22:8–9 may be based on the use of the Urim and Thummim (see 28:15–30).

22:21 – 23:9 Moral imperatives. The material in this passage is usually taken to be detailed statutes. However, a number of factors suggest that it should be distinguished from the precepts found in 21:1 – 22:20. First, this section is marked off from the surrounding material by the frame formed by 22:21 and 23:9. Both verses not only prohibit the mistreatment of aliens, but they also underline this by reminding the Israelites that they were once aliens in Egypt. Secondly, the way in which the material is presented does not correspond with the two distinctive forms used in the previous section; rather, it is reminiscent of the form adopted in the Decalogue. Thirdly, apart from the general comment in v 24, *I will kill you with the sword*, no penalties enforceable by a human court are stipulated for breaking the rules outlined here. Fourthly, the subject matter of this section is distinctive. It encourages both a caring attitude towards the weak and vulnerable members of society (*i.e.* aliens, widows, orphans, the needy, the poor) and a concern that the legal system be totally impartial. Those involved in disputes are to favour neither the rich, by accepting a bribe (23:8), nor the poor (23:3). Everyone, irrespective of their class, is to be treated equally (23:6, 9). A witness must not be swayed by social pressure (23:2), and should ensure that his or her testimony is truthful (23:1, 7). These observations suggest that we are dealing with moral imperatives rather than detailed laws.

The commands found here seek to encourage a standard of behaviour which goes beyond the letter of the law. A human court is unlikely to prosecute someone for failing to return his enemy's straying animal; nevertheless, God demands that his people should overcome evil with good (23:4–5; *cf.* Mt. 5:43–48; Rom. 12:19–21). In the light of the special relationship being established between God and the people it is surely significant that in the middle of this section is the command, *you are to be my holy people* (22:31). We see here how God's holy people should live.

23:10–19 Instructions concerning the Sabbath and religious festivals. The material in this section is carefully structured, falling into two halves centred around v 13, with each half subdivided into two parts. The first half deals with the seventh year (23:10–11) and the seventh day (23:12). Vs 14–19 are concerned with the three main festivals which the Israelites celebrated annually: Unleavened Bread, Harvest and Ingathering. The instructions in 23:17–19 correspond with the three

feasts outlined in vs 14–16 (note in particular how v 17 parallels v 14).

Three features are worth noting. First, almost all the material in this section anticipated the Israelites enjoying a settled agricultural existence in the land of Canaan. To a fugitive slave these instructions must have implied prosperous times ahead. Secondly, the observance of the Sabbath was exceptionally important because it was the sign of the covenant which was established between God and Israel (31:12–17). Anyone desecrating the Sabbath was guilty of renouncing this special relationship with God; the consequence was death (31:14–15). Thirdly, the Israelites were reminded of their obligation to worship God alone: *Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips* (23:13). Such worship lies at the heart of the three annual festivals which celebrate God's benevolence towards Israel.

Notes. 15 The *Feast of Unleavened Bread* was celebrated at the beginning of the barley harvest (about mid-May to mid-June) to commemorate the Passover (see 12:14–20). **16** The *Feast of Harvest* was also known as the 'Feast of Weeks' because it was celebrated seven weeks after the Feast of Unleavened Bread. In NT times it was known as 'Pentecost' (lit. 'fifty') because it came fifty days after Unleavened Bread (*cf.* Acts 2:1; 20:16; 1 Cor. 16:8). The *Feast of Ingathering* was also known as the 'Feast of Tabernacles' or 'Booths'. **19** The prohibition, *do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk* is the basis of the Jewish practice of not eating dairy and meat produce at the same time. Originally it was probably related to the Feast of Ingathering and may have been intended to distinguish the celebrations of the Israelites from those of their neighbours. Alternatively, it may reflect the principle that what is designed to give life should not become a means of death.

23:20–33 Divine promises and warnings concerning the land of Canaan. The final part of the Book of the Covenant highlights the reciprocal nature of the covenant which was established between God and Israel. If the Israelites obeyed the LORD their God, then they would take possession of the land of Canaan (22–23). Furthermore, God's blessing would ensure their future comfort (25–26) and security (27–28). As a consequence of their relationship with God, the Israelites must distance themselves from the worship of other gods by destroying all pagan images and places of worship (24). For similar reasons, they must not enter into any treaty with the inhabitants of Canaan lest this caused them to compromise their exclusive allegiance to God (32–33). Such a warning was necessary because although God promised to remove from the land the nations already living there, they would be expelled only gradually to avoid the land becoming desolate (29–30).

24:1–2 God's invitation to ascend the mountain

The chapter division unfortunately implies that God's invitation to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel to ascend the mountain is quite separate from the divine speech in chs. 21–23. However, the Hebrew text indicates that this is a continuation of the divine speech; the only difference being that God now gives specific instructions for Moses alone, and not all the Israelites (*cf.* 20:22).

24:3–11 The ratification of the covenant

After his descent from the mountain, Moses relayed God's words to the people. Once more they expressed their willingness to do all that God commanded (3; *cf.* 19:8). There follows a brief account of the ceremony by which the covenant between *the* LORD and Israel was ratified (4–11). Interestingly, the activities outlined here reflect the three main sections of God's speech to Moses (20:24 – 24:2). The building of an altar and the offering of sacrifices parallel the instructions given in 20:24–26. Moses then read to the people *the Book of the Covenant* (24:7), that is the main middle section of the divine speech (21:1 – 23:33). Thus Moses reminded them of how they should live as God's holy people, and the reciprocal nature of the covenant itself. After the Israelites again acknowledged their willingness to obey God (7), the covenant was sealed through the sprinkling of blood on the people (8). Finally, God's invitation to Moses and the elders to come up the mountain was accepted, and this resulted in a remarkable vision of the divine glory (9–11). Only those invited by God could approach his holy presence; for others to have done so would have meant death (*cf.* 19:21–22, 24).

24:12 – 31:18 Instructions for the building of a sanctuary

The next major section of Exodus is introduced by the divine command that Moses should ascend Mt Sinai to receive stone tablets inscribed *with the law and commands I have written for their instruction* (24:12); this refers back to the Decalogue, and not to the Book of the Covenant. The handing over of the two stone tablets to Moses (31:18) marks the conclusion of this section by forming a frame with 24:12.

Apart from a brief introduction and conclusion this section is dominated by a long divine speech outlining the preparations necessary for

the construction of a special sanctuary and the appointment of priests (25:1 – 31:17). The importance of this sanctuary is highlighted by the space devoted to recording both God's description of how the tent and its furnishing should be manufactured, and the subsequent construction (35:4 – 39:43). Altogether, excluding the details relating to the consecration of the priests, approximately one-fifth of Exodus is given over to describing the construction of God's dwelling place. Yet, in spite of this, the present account does not provide all the information necessary to reconstruct fully the original tent or *tabernacle*, as it is commonly known. The plan of the tabernacle was similar to that adopted for the temple of Solomon and its post-exilic replacement; their dimensions, however, are twice those of the tabernacle. For an account of how the early church associated the death of Jesus with the tabernacle and its ritual, see Heb. 9:1 – 10:18.

24:12–18 Moses is summoned into God's presence

Although Moses had previously ascended the mountain to converse with God, there is no indication that he stayed for any length of time. On this occasion, however, he was invited to stay on the mountain and did so for a period of *forty days and forty nights* (18). In anticipation of this, Moses delegated to Aaron and Hur responsibility for settling any disputes which might arise among the people. No explanation is given as to why Moses had to wait seven days before being summoned into God's presence. It indicates, however, the difficulty which even Moses faced in approaching God.

25:1 – 27:21 Specific details relating to the tabernacle

25:1–9 Offerings for the construction of the tabernacle. After the ratification of the covenant, God instructed Moses that the Israelites should make an offering in recognition of God's sovereignty over them (1–7). Moses was to accept voluntary gifts on God's behalf; each person was to give as his *heart prompts him* (2). God then announced his intention to dwell among the people (8; *cf.* 29:45–46). This is an important theme in the final part of Exodus and considerable attention is given to the preparations necessary for this to be accomplished. God would live, like his people, in a tent. However, the inventory of precious metals and blue-coloured fabric indicates that this was no common tent; it was for royal use.

Note. 5 It is uncertain what material the *hides of sea cows* was. There are good grounds for believing that it was derived from the dugong, a large sea mammal which grows up to 3 m long and which used to be fairly plentiful in the Gulf of Aqabah.

25:10–22 Instructions for the ark. At the outset Moses was instructed to make three items of furniture for inside the tent. The first of these was a rectangular wooden chest or box, covered *with pure gold, both inside and out* (10–11). For ease of transportation the chest, or *ark* as it is traditionally known, was to be constructed with gold rings and poles (12–15). Inside this container Moses would later place the stone tablets which were the *Testimony*, or 'terms of agreement', to the covenant between God and Israel (16, 21; Dt. 10:8 refers to the chest as the 'ark of the covenant'). The lid of the ark, made of pure gold, was designated an *atonement cover* (17; *cf.* Heb. 9:5, 'place of atonement'). Lv. 16:1–34 (esp. vs 11–17) describes the annual ritual which took place when the high priest sprinkled blood on the ark's lid to make atonement for 'the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been' (Lv. 16:16). Two golden cherubim (or cherubs) were to be attached to the ends of the lid, facing each other with outspread wings. Here, between the cherubim, God would later meet with Moses in order to communicate his instructions to the people (22; 30:36; *cf.* Lv. 16:2). Thus, apart from being a container, the ark also functioned as a seat (sometimes referred to as 'the mercy seat'), or more specifically as a throne protected by guardian cherubs (*cf.* 1 Sa. 4:4; 2 Sa. 6:2; 2 Ki. 19:15; Pss. 80:2; 99:1; Is. 37:16). Because of its importance as God's throne, the building of the ark was outlined first.

Note. 18 *Cherubim* were the traditional guardians of holy places in the Ancient Near East. Apart from the two described here, others were woven into the curtains which surrounded the tabernacle and which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place (26:1, 31). Cherubim are not to be confused with the 'cherubic' children often found in more recent art.

25:23–40 Instructions for the table and the lampstand. The second piece of furniture was a wooden table, overlaid with gold, and fitted with rings and poles (23–28). Plates, dishes and other utensils, all of gold, were also provided, and on the table was at all times the *bread of the Presence* (29–30). The third main fixture to be constructed was a gold lampstand with seven lamps (31–40). The lampstand was made in the pattern of a growing tree, decorated with *flower-like cups, buds and blossoms* (31). Three branches extended to either side of the central stem; the tops of the stem and branches were designed to hold lamps. There is no explanation why the lampstand should resemble a tree. Possibly it was to be reminiscent of the tree of life in Gn. 3:22, symbolizing the life-giving

power of God. A table and lampstand, together with a chest/seat, comprised the main items of furniture in a home. As such they indicated clearly that God lived within the tent. The abundant use of gold emphasizes the importance of the occupant. The provision of bread (25:30) and light (27:21) are symbolic reminders that God was there at all times, both day and night.

Note. 30 For more on *the bread of the Presence* see the commentary on Lv. 24:5–9.

26:1–37 Instructions for the tabernacle. Detailed instructions are provided next for the construction of the actual tent or tabernacle. Some uncertainty exists over how the various curtains and wooden frames fitted together. Since the entire structure was designed to be portable, its construction was probably similar to that used for other tents. The bluish fabrics and gold fittings were indicative of royalty. The rectangular structure was to be divided by a curtain into two rooms, one probably being twice the size of the other (31–33). In the smaller of these rooms (the western half of the tabernacle) would be placed the ark of the Testimony. Because God was thought to be seated there, enthroned between the cherubim, this part was called the *Most Holy Place* or Holy of Holies (34). The larger room (to the east) was designated the *Holy Place*; it would be furnished with the golden table and lampstand (35). The curtain separating the two rooms contained woven figures of cherubim as a reminder that the way into the immediate presence of God was barred to sinful man (*cf.* Gn. 3:24). (For a fuller discussion of the problems involved in reconstructing the tabernacle, see 'Tabernacle' in *IBD*, pp. 1506–1511.)

Notes. 11 Whereas gold clasps were used for the inner curtain, bronze clasps were sufficient for the outer curtain. **33** *The curtain which will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place* was the final barrier between the Israelites and God. Mt. 27:51 records that when Jesus died a similar curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom. By his death on the cross Christ removed the spiritual barrier which exists between God and humankind.

27:1–19 Instructions for the altar and courtyard. Around the tabernacle Moses was to construct a courtyard by erecting a curtain fence. Before the construction of this fence is outlined in detail (27:9–19), directions are given for the production of a portable bronze-plated altar, which was to be situated in the courtyard near the entrance to the tabernacle (1–8). From its dimensions, this altar must have dominated the area in front of the tabernacle; it was 2.5 m wide (half the width of the tabernacle) and 1.5 m high. It consisted of a square hollow framework made of acacia wood overlaid with bronze. To create a draught for the incineration of the animal sacrifices the lower part of each side was made of a grating of bronze network. Its position between the courtyard entrance and the tabernacle indicated that the worshipper could only approach God after offering a sacrifice to atone for sin. Lv. 1:1 – 7:38 details the various sacrifices which individuals were expected to offer.

The courtyard, a rectangular shape twice as long as it was broad, measured approximately 50 m by 25 m and was surrounded by a curtain about 2.5 m high. The shorter sides were to the east and west. A worshipper entering through the gateway on the eastern side encountered first the large bronze altar before approaching the tabernacle which stood in the western part of the courtyard. The fence which surrounded the courtyard, along with the curtain which hung across the entrance, prevented those outside from looking into the courtyard. Separated from the rest of the Israelite encampment, the courtyard was set apart as a holy area; only the tabernacle, in which God dwelt, was considered to be more sacred. This distinction between the holiness of the courtyard and the tabernacle is reflected in the value of the materials used in their construction. Whereas gold was regularly used within the tabernacle, the main metals used in the courtyard were silver and bronze. Just as the people were prevented from coming up Mt Sinai into the divine presence (19:12–13, 21–24), so too the courtyard fence prevented them from approaching God inadvertently. As Exodus regularly emphasizes, only those who are holy can live in God's presence; to approach God otherwise has fatal consequences. Without the courtyard functioning as a kind of 'buffer zone', it would have been impossible for the Israelites to dwell in safety close to God. (See p. 173).

27:20–21 The provision of olive oil. The instructions concerning the building of the tabernacle and courtyard are followed by a brief edict that the Israelites should provide olive oil for the lampstand within the tabernacle. Responsibility for keeping the lamps burning each night was assigned to Aaron and his sons (21). Mention of them provides a link with the next set of directives concerning the consecration of the priests for service within the sanctuary (28:1).

Note. 21 From the context the *Tent of Meeting* obviously refers to the tabernacle, and this is what the expression normally denotes. However, in 33:7 it refers to a quite different tent which was used for meetings between God and Moses prior to the construction and erection of the tabernacle.

28:1 – 29:46 Specific details relating to the priesthood

28:1–43 The high priest's clothing. Since the area within the courtyard was holy ground, those assigned to serve there must also be holy. To indicate this, Aaron and his sons were provided with *sacred garments.* The materials used in their production, *gold, and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and fine linen* (5), not only highlight the dignity and honour bestowed upon Aaron and his sons, but also clearly associate them with the tabernacle which was made of similar materials. To distinguish Aaron as high priest he was to have a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban and a sash (4). His sons were to be given tunics, sashes and headbands (40). The lack of reference to footwear might indicate that the priests served barefooted (when God appeared in the burning bush, Moses was commanded to remove his sandals because the ground was holy; Ex. 3:5). Most attention is focused on the special items worn by the high priest, especially the *ephod* and *breastpiece.*

6–14 Because the biblical text is too brief, it is hard to picture the ephod, but it was something like a waistcoat worn over the other vestments (4). Special mention is made of the two precious stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Mounted *in gold filigree settings* (11), they were fastened *on the shoulder pieces of the ephod as memorial stones for the sons of Israel* (12). They were a reminder that Aaron served God as high priest, not on his own behalf, but on behalf of all the Israelites.

15–30 The next item, the *breastpiece*, appears from its description to have been a square pouch which the high priest wore over his chest. The pouch was made of similar materials to the ephod and was attached to it. On the outside of the pouch were four rows of precious stones, with three stones in each row; each stone represented an Israelite tribe. Although Aaron came from the tribe of Levi, as high priest wearing the names of the twelve tribes on his chest, he ministered on behalf of all the people. The use of precious stones symbolized the value which God places upon his people Israel. Finally, instructions are given that *the Urim and the Thummim* should be placed in the pouch (30). The precise form of the Urim and Thummim remains uncertain but they were used to determine God's judgment (*cf.* 22:8–9). For a brief description and picture of a reconstruction of the breastpiece see *IBD*, p. 207.

31–43 The blue robe, adorned with embroidered pomegranates and golden bells, was presumably worn under the ephod and breastpiece. The tinkling of the bells would serve to identify the one entering or leaving the Holy of Holies, enabling the high priest to come close to God in safety; anyone else venturing into God's presence would die (*cf.* 19:12–13, 21–22, 24). As a further reminder of the sacred nature of priestly service, the front of Aaron's turban had a gold plate engraved with the words, *HOLY TO THE LORD* (36). Because he would be set apart as holy, Aaron as high priest was able to mediate on behalf on the Israelites, ensuring that their sacrifies were acceptable to God (38). Apart from the items already mentioned, Aaron was also to wear a tunic, turban and sash (39). (The tunic appears to have been worn under the robe of the ephod; *cf.* 29:5.) Because they do not relate directly to the 'dignity and honour' (2) of the priests, the instructions concerning underwear are given separately. The priests were to wear *linen undergarments* to prevent them from inadvertently exposing their genitalia in the Holy Place (*cf.* 20:26). Such nakedness was clearly inappropriate in the presence of God (*cf.* Gn. 3:7, 10, 21). Moreover, since only the priests could enter the tabernacle, the command that they should wear undergarments would reassure those outside that nothing unseemly occurred within the tabernacle.

Note. 41 The Hebrew term translated 'ordain' in the NIV literally means 'you will fill their hands.' This does not refer to 'ordination', but rather to the supplying of the priests' needs (*cf.* 29:22–28).

29:1–46 The consecration of the priests. The instructions concerning the consecration of Aaron and his sons forms a natural sequel to the preceding chapter. For the priests to minister in God's holy presence they too must be holy. Since, as the book of Exodus reveals on different occasions, only God has an innate holy nature, various measures must be taken if a human being is to become holy. The present account reflects the stages mentioned in 28:41 which lead up to the consecration of the priests: clothe, anoint, 'fill the hands' and consecrate.

After assembling the necessary items (1–3), Moses was to clothe Aaron and his sons in their priestly garments (5–9). Next he had to offer up three different sacrifices, involving a bull and two rams. The first (10–14 best understood as a purification offering) involved the bull, and followed closely the instructions given later in Lv. 4:3–12 concerning the unintentional sin of an anointed priest. In this instance, however, the blood was probably placed on the horns of the large bronze altar in the courtyard and not on the gold incense altar within the tabernacle (12; *cf.* Lv. 4:7). The blood purified the altar which had become defiled through contact with individuals who were considered unclean.

The next sacrifice (a whole burnt offering, vs 15–18) followed exactly the instructions given later in Lv. 1:10–13 for the offering of a ram. The whole burnt offering atoned for the sins of Aaron and his sons. The total destruction of the animal was a vivid reminder that sinful man could not approach a holy God. The animal died as a substitute for those who were identified with it by the laying of their hands on its head. The third sacrifice (19–34) resembled closely a fellowship or peace offering, made as an expression of thankfulness (*cf.* Lv. 3:6–11; 7:12–15).

However, despite its similarities to the regular offerings, the ritual described here has distinctive features, appropriate for this unique occasion. First, Aaron, his sons and their garments were to be consecrated by sacrificial blood (19–21); whatever the blood touched became holy. 'The priest must have consecrated ears ever to listen to God's holy voice; consecrated hands at all times to do holy deeds; and consecrated feet to walk evermore in holy ways' (A. Dillmann, *Exodus und Leviticus*, 2nd edn [Hirzel, 1880], p. 465). Secondly, vs 22–35 focus on the remuneration which Aaron and his sons were to receive as priests. The NIV wrongly refers to this as *the ram for the ordination* (22; *cf.* 29:26, 27, 31, 34). It is lit. 'the ram of [the] filling'. This 'filling' refers to the portion which the priests received into their hands after offering up different sacrifices (*cf.* Lv. 6:14–18, 25–29; 7:1–38). The ritual which Moses was to perform consecrated the right thigh and breast of the sacrificial animal for priestly consumption. A distinction was drawn between the *breast*, which was *waved*, and the *thigh*, which was *presented* (27). In this instance, the breast was given to Moses as his reward for offering the sacrifice (26) and the thigh was burnt on the altar, along with some bread (25). On future occasions, after the priests had been consecrated, the breast of the fellowship sacrifice was to be presented to all the priests, and the thigh given to the priest who officiated (Lv. 7:28–36). Apart from the breast, thigh, and various fatty portions, the rest of the ram was cooked and eaten, together with the remaining bread, at the entrance to the tabernacle. Only the priests were allowed to eat this holy food.

The ritual outlined in vs 1–34 was essential for the consecration of the priests. Most commentators believe, on the basis of v 35, that this ritual was to be repeated every day for seven days. Alternatively, the sacrifices outlined in vs 36–41 may have been offered during the next six days, with Aaron and his sons under strict instruction to remain within the courtyard of the tabernacle (*cf.* Lv. 8:33–35). In either case, the process of consecration or sanctification required time.

Moses was next instructed about the consecration of the altar (36–37). The sacrifice of the bull as a *sin offering* resembled the sacrifice mentioned in vs 10–14. The death of the animal purified the altar by making atonement; the anointing of the altar with blood made it holy (36). This was to be repeated for seven days. Finally, instructions were given concerning the daily sacrific of two lambs as whole burnt offerings; one animal was to be sacrificed in the morning, the other at twilight. These were to be regular offerings, continuing daily after the priests and altar had been fully consecrated. Vs 42–43 highlight the purpose of these instructions: the establishment of the sacrificial ritual was a necessary requirement before God could meet with the Israelites. As God affirmed, '*there . . . I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory*' (43). As v 46 makes clear, the ultimate purpose of God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt was so that he *might dwell among them.* The fulfilment of the instructions regarding the consecration of Aaron and his sons is recorded in Lv. 8:1–36.

Notes. 4 Purity and cleanliness were closely associated with being holy (*cf.* 19:10, 14). 14 The *sin offering* is best understood as a purification offering (see Lv. 4:1 – 5:13; 6:24–30).

30:1 – 31:18 Additional instructions regarding the tabernacle and the Sabbath

30:1–38 Additional instructions for equipping the tabernacle. One further item of furniture was to be made for inside the tabernacle, an incense altar (1–10). Made of acacia wood and plated with pure gold, it was to be set in the Holy Place alongside the golden table and lampstand. Twice daily Aaron was to burn fragrant incense upon it (7–8), and once a year (probably on the Day of Atonement; *cf.* Lv. 16:15–19) he was to make atonement on its horns (10). Precise instructions were given regarding its use; it was not to be used for any other purpose except the twice-daily burning of incense.

The mention of atonement in v 10 provides a link to the next directive given to Moses. He was to count the people and collect from every Israelite, twenty years old or more, a half-shekel offering as atonement money (11–16). Through this payment the Israelites ransomed, or redeemed, their lives from punishment by plague (12). Interestingly, no distinction was drawn between the rich and the poor; all were equal in their need of atonement.

Moses was then told to make a bronze basin. This was placed between the tabernacle and the bronze altar so that Aaron and his sons might wash their hands and feet when serving within

the tabernacle and courtyard (17–21). The requirement that the priests should wash symbolized their need to remain holy and pure (*cf.* 19:14; 29:4).

Special oil was to be made for the anointing of the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the priests who served there (22–30). Since everything touched by this particular oil became holy, restrictions were placed upon its production and use (31–33). Similar instructions were given for the making and use of the incense which was to be burned within the tabernacle (34–38).

31:1–11 The divinely gifted craftsmen. Having outlined the furnishing for the tabernacle and courtyard, God informed Moses that he had chosen and equipped certain men with the skills necessary to produce these items (1–11). Singled out for special mention were Bezalel and Oholiab. The special ability which these men possessed was attributed to the fact that they had been filled with the Spirit of God (3). This possibly provides an early example of spiritual gifts, a concept developed more fully in the NT (*cf.* Rom. 12:4–8; 1 Cor. 12:1–31; Eph. 4:7–13).

31:12–18 Instructions regarding the Sabbath. Having listed the preparations necessary for the construction of the tabernacle and the consecration of the priests, God then underlined the importance of the Sabbath. The concept of holiness, prominent in the preceding material, is also important in this section. As the sign of the covenant between God and Israel, the Sabbath was to remind the people that it was *the* LORD who made them holy (13). Because the Sabbath was *holy to the* LORD, all work was prohibited (*cf.* 20:8–11); anyone who worked on the Sabbath desecrated it, and must be put to death. By observing the Sabbath the Israelites affirmed and maintained their special relationship with God to be his holy people.

32:1 – 34:35 The covenant broken and renewed

32:1 – 33:6 Rebellion in the camp

An important condition of the covenant between God and the Israelites was complete obedience (24:3, 7). The present account, however, focuses on the people's rebellious actions which angered God, jeopardizing the covenant relationship which had just been established. Their sin was so serious that Moses could not atone for it, even after three thousand of the people had been put to death. When God expressed concern about the consequences of living among the people, the actual building of the tabernacle was placed in jeopardy.

32:1–6 The making of the golden calf. Moses' long absence (*forty days and forty nights*; 24:18) created an atmosphere of uncertainty in the Israelite camp. Perhaps fearful of what God might have done to Moses (*cf.* 20:19), the Israelites sought reassurance through the construction of an image which would represent God's presence in their midst. Turning to Aaron, the people asked him to make *gods* (or better 'a god', so the NIV mg.) who would go before them (1). Several factors indicate that the image of the golden calf was meant to represent 'the LORD'. First, according to the latter part of v 4, the calf represented the god who had delivered the people from Egypt; it was no new deity. Secondly, the festival, enthusiastically celebrated by the people (6), was described by Aaron as *to the* LORD (5). Moreover, the festal activities resemble those recorded in ch. 24 regarding the ratification of the covenant between God and the Israelites. Although the Israelites did not consciously reject 'the LORD' as their God, their attempt to portray him as a golden calf was a major breach of the covenant stipulations which they had earlier accepted (*cf.* 20:4–6; 20:23). Such an obvious violation of God's instructions invited fierce condemnation (*cf.* 32:7–10). Even the narrator hints at this indirectly through his use of the Hebrew term *'elōhîm* ('god/gods') in vs 1, 4 and 8. When used, as here, with plural verbs *'elōhîm* normally refers to pagan gods; when used with singular verbs it normally refers to 'the LORD'.

In the light of the preceding chapters, it is ironic that the people should desire to have a symbol of God's presence. Moses had just received instructions for the construction of a tent within which God would dwell in the midst of his people. Yet, whereas the tabernacle with its golden furnishings, portrayed God as a royal personage, the golden calf, in marked contrast, represented him as a mere beast. Although the people offered appropriate sacrifices, their worship of the calf degraded the one who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Worship, to be true, must be based on a right perception of God. The book of Exodus emphasizes the importance of knowing God as he truly is, and not as we imagine him to be.

Notes. 2 Aaron's instruction to the people to '*Take off the gold ear-rings*' is probably to be interpreted literally (*cf* v 3); the golden calf was fashioned from the golden ear-rings which the people were actually wearing. Undoubtedly the people possessed other ear-rings which they were not wearing. Later these were used in the construction of the tabernacle (35:22). 4 The *calf* is more precisely a young bull. Images of bulls were widely used in Ancient Near Eastern worship.

32:7–14 Moses intercedes for the people. Disgusted by what had taken place, God

ordered Moses to return to the camp (7). God's anger was roused by the fact that the Israelites had so quickly turned away from his commands, and this in spite of repeated affirmations that they would do everything that he had said (19:8; 24:3, 7). Such disrespect for God merits the harshest of punishments, death. In contrast to the people, Moses was assured that he would become *a great nation*, echoing God's earlier promise to Abraham (Gn. 12:3). Surprisingly perhaps, Moses intervened and pleaded on behalf of the people for mercy, recalling God's marvellous deliverance of them from Egypt and his much earlier covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (11–13). His petition was based throughout on the character and honour of God. Moreover, he made no attempt to excuse the people's sinful behaviour. So compelling was his intercession that God relented from the immediate destruction of the people (14). Nevertheless, as the narrative subsequently reveals, the people did not go unpunished (28, 35).

32:15–29 Moses returns to the camp. When Moses eventually saw what had been happening in the camp, he too became enraged. By deliberately breaking the divinely inscribed stone tablets containing the terms of agreement, Moses indicated that the covenant relationship between God and the Israelites was now ended. After burning the golden calf, Moses received from Aaron a less than satisfactory explanation of what had happened. Finally, to restore order in the camp, Moses summoned to himself those who were *for the* LORD (26). The seriousness of the situation is reflected in the drastic action demanded by Moses: '*Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbour*' (27). For their display of loyalty to God, the Levites were rewarded.

Notes. 21 The expression *great sin* (see also vs 30–31) probably relates to the breaking of an agreement or covenant (*cf.* Gn. 20:9; 2 Ki. 17:21). **27** The death of about three thousand Israelites at the hands of the Levites was a grim indication of the seriousness of the golden calf incident and must be viewed as one of the ways in which the people were punished. **29** *You have been set apart to the* LORD is literally 'fill your hands today for the LORD'.

32:30–35 Moses intercedes again for the people. Although some of the people had been punished, their death did not atone for the sins of the others. Conscious of the enormity of the Israelites' sin, Moses sought to make atonement before God (30). His request was refused; each individual would bear the punishment of his or her own sin. To underline this truth, v 35 records that *the* LORD *struck the people with a plague.* Yet, in spite of God's determination to punish the people, Moses was assured that their journey would continue. This provides a link to the next passage.

Note. 31 The expression *gods of gold* is reminiscent of 20:23.

33:1–6 God refuses to go with the people. A further consequence of the people's unfaithfulness is developed in these verses. Although God instructed Moses to lead the Israelites into Canaan, and promised to fulfil his prior commitment to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he would not go with them. He feared that further acts of rebellion might cause him to destroy the people on the way. When Moses reported this to the people, they were deeply grieved. As a further mark of God's disapproval of their actions, they were commanded to remove the ornaments which they had received at the time of their departure from Egypt (*cf.* 3:22; 11:2; 12:35) and which by this stage had undoubtedly become a vivid reminder of how God had blessed them. Their removal, like the discarding of an engagement or wedding ring, symbolized the broken relationship which now existed between God and the people.

Notes. 2 '*I will send an angel before you*' was the promise of divine help to overcome the inhabitants of Canaan and echoes 23:23. However, it did not necessarily imply that God would dwell in the midst of the people. **3** On a *land flowing with milk and honey* see 3:8.

33:7 – 34:35 Moses mediates on behalf of the people

This section is framed by two brief passages (33:7–11 and 34:34–35) which are written in a way which indicates that they describe activities which took place over a period of time and were not restricted to one particular occasion. The material relates to the period of approximately ten months between the arrival of the Israelites at Sinai and the pitching of the tabernacle (*cf.* 19:1; 40:1). In contrast, the main passage records the next major development in the plot, the renewal of the covenant between God and the Israelites.

Whereas the preceding chapter is dominated by the rebellion of the Israelites and God's punishment of the people, attention now switches to Moses, the faithful servant, and his remarkable friendship with God. Moses' unique relationship with God provided the opportunity for him to intercede on behalf of the people and as a result the covenant was renewed. This was attributed not to some dramatic change of heart on the part of the people but to God's compassion and mercy.

33:7–11 The tent of meeting. This passage records how Moses used to pitch a tent at

some distance from the main encampment in order to meet with God. Given its specific function, the tent was known as the *tent of meeting* (7). It should not be confused with the tabernacle, also known as the 'Tent of Meeting' (*e.g.* 40:2, 6), which was constructed later (36:8–38) and which was pitched within the Israelite encampment (Nu. 1:53; 2:2, 17), not *outside the camp some distance away* (7). Here Moses enjoyed a unique and personal relationship with God: *The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend* (11). This intimacy enabled Moses to ask God to renew his covenant relationship with the Israelites. Although they were in close proximity to one another, even Moses the faithful servant was not permitted to look directly upon God; v 9 implies that the tent curtain shielded Moses who was inside from God who was outside. This is a further reminder of the barrier which exists between the divine and the human.

33:12 – 34:33 The renewal of the covenant. The conversation recorded at the beginning of this section took place at the tent of meeting. It focuses on a number of important themes. First, Moses sought reassurance that God, in spite of his earlier comments to the contrary (*cf.* 33:3, 5), would indeed go with the people on their journey into the promised land. Behind this request is the fear that if God did not go up with the people, Moses would no longer be able to meet with him face to face. While God promised that '*My Presence will go with you* (singular)', Moses persisted with his plea that this promise should include the rest of the people. God finally agreed to this because he was pleased with Moses.

Moses then asked to see God's glory (18). From God's response it is clear that he equates his glory with *all my goodness* (19). To assure Moses of his identity, God would proclaim his personal name, *the LORD*. When God had previously revealed his name to Moses, 'Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God' (3:6). Now, because of his subsequent experiences, he displayed a greater confidence. Although Moses was granted the opportunity to see God as no-one else had done, even he could not look upon the divine face with immunity (20).

Before witnessing the *glory* of *the LORD*, Moses was instructed to bring up the mountain two stone tablets to replace those previously broken (34:1). When God revealed himself to Moses on top of the mountain, he stressed not only his mercy and compassion, *forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin* (7; *cf.* 33:19), but also his justice, *he does not leave the guilty unpunished* (7; *cf.* 32:34). The revelation of these divine characteristics to Moses was so significant that this passage is echoed on six other occasions in the OT (Ne. 9:17; Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2). Here, in a dramatic setting, we have stated verbally two of the most important characteristics of God's nature. These are the same qualities which have already been revealed through God's actions on the Israelites' behalf in delivering them from Egypt. Moreover, they lie at the very heart of the NT understanding of Christ's death and resurrection; we experience God's forgiveness because Christ has borne the punishment for our sins.

Responding to this unique revelation of God's nature, Moses requested that God should accompany the people, forgive their sin, and take them as his inheritance (9). In reply God re-established his covenant relationship with the people. The terms of the covenant (outlined in 34:11–26) parallel closely those found in the last two sections of the 'Book of the Covenant' (23:14–33), except that their order is reversed. Once more Moses wrote down the covenant obligations (27; *cf.* 24:4). Finally, God inscribed on the stone tablets the 'ten words' or Decalogue (28; *cf.* 20:3–17).

When Moses returned from his mountain-top encounter with God, his face was radiant (29). Such was the alarm of the Israelites that Moses had to speak reassuringly to them, first to the elders and then to the entire community. Finally, after giving them God's commands, he veiled his face (33).

Notes. 34:9 This is the first occasion on which the Israelites are referred to directly as God's *inheritance*. **28** Although the subject of the verb 'wrote' is not clearly stated, it may be deduced from 34:1 that the tablets were inscribed by God (*cf.* 32:16). It is not unusual in Hebrew narrative for the subject of the verb to change without this being clearly indicated.

34:34 – 35 Moses veils his face. These verses are closely linked to 34:30 – 33. They describe what normally happened each time Moses communed with God. After coming out from the divine presence, Moses communicated God's word to the people and then covered his face with a veil. His radiant face was a sign to the people that he had indeed met with God.

35:1 – 40:38 The construction and erection of the tabernacle

35:1 – 36:7 Preparation for the building of the tabernacle

Following the renewal of the covenant, the people were summoned together and Moses reminded them of the importance of observing the Sabbath (2–3; *cf.* 31:15). As the sign of the covenant betwen them and God, it was vital that the Israelites refrained from doing any work on

the seventh day of the week. Moses was now able to carry out the directions which he had previously received concerning the construction of the tabernacle and the appointment of priests.

Next Moses asked the people to make an offering to Yahweh in order to provide the materials required for the construction of the tabernacle and related items (4–9); this fulfilled the instructions given to Moses by God (25:1–7). There then came a request for craftsmen to carry out the work (10), followed by a summary of the various items which had to be constructed (11–19). 35:20–29 records the generous response of the people to Moses' appeal for materials (*cf.* 35:4–9). Note the special attention given to the work of the women in spinning the yarn (25–26); their natural abilities and skills were devoted to serving God. All of the people responded so generously that later they had to be restrained from giving too much (36:3–7).

In obedience to God's earlier instructions (31:1–6), Bezalel and Oholiab, due to their special knowledge and skill, were placed in charge of the work (35:30 – 36:2). Not only were they gifted as craftsmen, but they also had the aptitude to teach others (35:34).

36:8 – 39:31 The completion of the tabernacle and the priestly garments

Most of this section parallels very closely earlier passages in Exodus. We find here an almost word-for-word record of the fulfilment of the instructions given by God to Moses during his first stay on the mountain (25:1 – 31:18; see table below). The similarity between the instructions and their fulfilment indicates that the people obeyed God 'to the letter'. Everything was made just as Moses had been instructed. Occasionally the divine instruction (but rarely the fulfilment), contains additional material relating to the use of a particular object (*e.g.* 30:6–10, 30:18–21).

Apart from showing that everything was made according to God's instructions, the repetition of these details highlights the importance of the tabernacle as God's dwelling place. Repetition, which to some readers may seem boring, was the ancient author's way of drawing attention to important matters.

Object	Instructions	Fulfilment
Tabernacle	26:1–11, 14–29, 31–32, 36–37	36:8–38
Ark	25:10–14, 17–20	37:1–9
Table	25:23–29	37:10–16
Lampstand	25:31–39	37:17–24
Incense altar	30:1–5	37:25–28
Anointing oil	30:25	37:29
Bronze altar	27:1–8	38:1–7
Bronze basin	30:18	38:8
Courtyard	27:9–19	38:9–20
Ephod	28:6–12	39:2–7
Breastpiece	28:15–28	39:8–21
Robe	28:31–34	39:22–26
Tunic, turban, sash	28:39	39:27–29
Gold plate	28:36–37	39:30–31

The order in which the items are here listed differs slightly from that followed when God first delivered his instructions to Moses (chs. 25–30). The earlier order tends to list the more important objects first, whereas here the arrangement reflects the order in which the items were assembled when the tabernacle was erected (*cf.* 40:2–8, 12–14; 40:17–33). In the inventory of precious metals which follows, the quantities involved appear very large (approximately one ton of gold, four tons of silver and two-and-a-half tons of bronze). This was, however, not unusual when compared with contemporary practices in the ancient world.

39:32–43 Moses inspects the work

Once the work was completed all the different items were brought to Moses for inspection. The list of items recorded here resembles those found in 31:7–11 and 35:11–19. When Moses saw that everything had been made just as God commanded, he blessed the people (43). All was now ready for Moses to assemble the tabernacle.

40:1–33 The erection of the tabernacle

God gave Moses final instructions concerning the erection and consecration of the tabernacle and its furnishings (1–11) and the appointment of Aaron and his sons as priests (12–15). The narrative records that Moses complied with the first half of these directions immediately. (For the account of the actual consecration of the priests we must look to Lv. 8:1–36.) Moses'

obedience is highlighted through the repeated use of the expression, *as the* LORD commanded him (16, 19, 21, 23, 25, 29, 32). The tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month in the second year (17), just in time for the people to celebrate the first anniversary of their deliverance from Egypt (*cf.* Nu. 9:1–5).

40:34–38 The glory of the LORD *fills the tabernacle*

When everything had been completed, a cloud covered the tabernacle, and the glory of *the* LORD filled it (34). God now lived among the people. The tabernacle became the *Tent of Meeting* (35), replacing the tent used earlier by Moses (*cf.* 33:7–11). It differed, however, in that God lived within the tent and Moses had to stay outside (35), whereas previously Moses had gone inside the tent and God had remained outside (33:9). God's presence was visible to everyone through the cloud and fire which settled upon the tabernacle. From here he guided them on their journeys (36–38). Thus Exodus comes to a fitting conclusion by noting the glorious presence of the sovereign God in the midst of his people Israel.

T.D. Alexander

LEVITICUS

Introduction

Title

The name of the book in the Hebrew Bible is its opening word, *wayyiqrā'*, 'and he [the LORD] called'. The name Leviticus is derived from the ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Hebrew Scriptures. It was given to the book doubtless because it contains many instructions relating to the work of the levitical priests. However, it is not entirely appropriate for two reasons. First, because not all the tribe of Levites were actually priests but only those of a particular family within the tribe. And secondly, because a lot of the book is directed at the ordinary Israelites, not merely the priests, addressing issues of their lives in relation to worship, family morality, social and community living, economic dealings *etc.* The book was as important for the 'laity' as for the 'clergy'.

Authorship and date

The book is set out as a record of part of God's revelation to Moses while Israel were camped at Mt Sinai, shortly after their exodus from Egypt. It is not explicitly stated that Moses wrote the book himself (*cf.* the way that some parts of the Pentateuch are attributed to him, *e.g.* Ex. 24:4, 7, Nu. 33:2). However, those who would maintain the traditional dating would argue that if it was not actually written by Moses, it must have been edited by someone close to him. It certainly bears the mark of careful and intelligent organization.

For a long time, however, critical biblical scholarship has argued that the book comes from priestly circles and represents their prescription for the Second Temple of the post-exilic period. Along with other parts of the Pentateuch, it is thus assigned to the material referred to as P, *i.e.* the latest of the hypothetical sources of the Pentateuch. Those who broadly adopt this view, however, recognize that P includes a variety of material which may in its origins be very much earlier than the exile. The date of the final editing of a text is no sure indicator of the date of origin of its contents. Furthermore, some of the reasons for the late dating of the so-called priestly material no longer seem so cogent. Detailed and elaborate rules for sacrificial worship and descriptions of sanctuaries are known from ancient Near Eastern societies much older than the Mosaic period and need not, therefore, be assigned to a later development in Israel. And comparison of laws in Leviticus with related laws in Deuteronomy and other parts of the OT often indicate the likelihood of the levitical text being earlier. If Leviticus were written almost a thousand years later than its literary setting, it has succeeded to a remarkable degree in avoiding anachronisms, and instead has some aspects of terminology which were no longer current in the later period. For these and other reasons, some scholars regard the material in Leviticus as much earlier in origin than the exile, but not necessarily Mosaic.

Structure

The fact that Leviticus is a carefully ordered document can be instantly seen from the outline of contents below. There is a definite sense of logical progress. The end of the book of Exodus has described the setting up of the tabernacle and all that was necessary for the sacrificial worship of Israel to take place. So Leviticus opens with a virtual handbook of sacrifices, explaining first in layman's terms what parts in the proceedings were to be played by all involved, what kind of animals were appropriate for which purpose and what was to be done with them *etc.* It then gives some extra rules for the priests' benefit. That section is then followed by a narrative of the ordination of the priesthood who would perform these sacrifices. But the priests had other duties, primarily the responsibility to teach ordinary Israelites the distinctions between what was holy and what was common, and between the clean and unclean. So the next section deals with that. Life for the Israelites under the covenant involved much more than proper worship and ritual purity, so the remainder of the book goes on to set out a wide variety of personal, family, social and economic responsibilities, all designed to enable Israel to maintain that national distinctiveness (holiness) for which God had created them. The economic realm of land and property becomes a major focus towards the end of the book, thus giving it a forward look as the reader moves on to Numbers and Deuteronomy and follows the progress of Israel towards the promised land. The book thus has a literary balance of its own, as well as a well-sculpted fit into its place in the grand theme of the Pentateuch as a whole.

The balance of the book can be seen from another perspective. In Ex. 19:4–6 God had given to Israel, even before making the covenant and giving the law, an identity and role in the midst of the nations. They were to be a priestly people and a holy nation. It could be said that Leviticus falls into two halves reflecting each of these. Chs. 1 – 17 are mainly to do with areas of priestly responsibility, whereas chs. 18 – 27 are saturated with the call for Israel to be holy in every practical area of life (so much so that 17 – 26 has been given the name 'the Holiness Code', or H, in critical terminology). Others have suggested that these two halves of the book reflect the double commandment to love God and to love your neighbour. The first half of the book leads up to the great climax of the Day of Atonement (ch. 16), on which right relationships were restored between the nation and God. The second half reaches its climax with the Year of Jubilee (ch. 25), when right relationships were to be restored among the people. Each half also has a historical object lesson about treating God with contempt (chs. 10, 24).

Theology and relevance

God made a promise to Abraham which included three particular points and one universal goal (Gn. 12:1–3, 15). He promised Abraham a people, a relationship of covenant blessing and a land. The ultimate purpose was the blessing of all nations. Leviticus touches all of these, but is particularly focused on the second of the three specific promises. The first part was already in the process of fulfilment; Israel had indeed become a great nation (Ex. 1:7). The third, possession of the land, still lay ahead, and is the focus of Numbers and Deuteronomy. The important issue for Leviticus is how to maintain that relationship between God and Israel which had been established through the exodus and the making of the covenant (Ex. 24). And the answer is that God himself provides the means, by his grace. The relationship which had been established by God's redeeming grace (in the exodus) could only be sustained by God's forgiving grace (as Israel had known since the golden calf incident, Ex. 32 – 34). The sacrificial system was not a means of *buying* favours, but of receiving grace. And the practical obedience to the law in the later chapters was not a matter of *achieving* holiness, but of living out the distinctiveness which God had already conferred on the nation. Only by appropriate response to God's grace could Israel continue to enjoy their greatest blessing, which was the presence of God in their midst, symbolically localized in the tabernacle but felt in every area of everyday life. Anything that threatened that presence of God or polluted his dwelling place was to be rigorously dealt with. We should remember this positive aim behind the atmosphere of severity in some sections.

For the Christian, the grace which Leviticus offered through the sacrificial system is now found wholly in Jesus Christ, and the sacrifices provided the NT authors with a rich imagery for interpreting the significance of the cross. Likewise, the demand for holiness, in Leviticus a badge of Israel's separation from the nations, is transformed in the NT into the call to Christian distinctiveness from the world. But the moral challenge of Leviticus, as of the whole OT law, cannot be confined to the church. God created Israel to be a light to the nations. Their distinctiveness was to enable them to model the ethical standards and direction of life that God ultimately wants for all. The book thus has important lessons for the understanding of our salvation, our personal sanctification and our social ethics. Leviticus is a part of those Scriptures which, according to Paul, are able to make us wise for salvation and are profitable for teaching us how to live (2 Tim. 3:15–17).

Further reading

G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1979).

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J. E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC (Word, 1992).

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Commentary

1:1 – 7:38 Regulations for sacrifices

1:1–2 Introduction

The instructions for sacrifice given in Leviticus come within the context of the narrative of the rest of the Pentateuch. They were given, by God's initiative, to a people who had already experienced the grace of his redemption in the exodus. They were not human attempts to placate deity, achieve salvation or buy favours. Rather, they were for the purpose of maintaining the relationship already established by God's redemptive action, by providing an ongoing means of dealing with sin and restoring fellowship. What they taught was consistent with wider human instinct about sacrifice – that forgiveness and fellowship were not cheap.

The word *offering* (*qorbān*) is the most general word for gifts and offerings that people may bring to God (*cf.* Mk. 7:11). It covers all the varieties of sacrifices listed below. The preliminary specification here is that sacrificial animals must be taken from the domestic herds and flocks, *i.e.* wild animals were not acceptable. There may have been two reasons for this. First, wild animals did not belong to anyone and so could not have that sense of identification with the offerer that a domestic animal from his own flock or herd would have. Secondly, only the sacrifice of a domestic animal represented any actual cost to the offerer. As David realized, a sacrifice which cost nothing was no sacrifice at all (2 Sa. 24:24). On the other hand, we discover that it was possible for the very poor to offer a bird. So the matter of cost was not primary in the efficacy of the sacrifice.

The expression *when any of you brings* is indefinite because the frequency of such offerings for ordinary Israelite families is not stated, and they were in any case voluntary (at least the first three were). Sin offerings and guilt offerings were compulsory in certain defined circumstances, but burnt, cereal and fellowship offerings were normally brought voluntarily as and when the offerer was inclined to do so. Clearly, therefore, it was not the material value of the sacrifice that mattered primarily to God, but the motivation of the worshipper.

This is a perspective reinforced in many other places in the OT itself and then underlined by Jesus. While God took the initiative in giving the Israelites instructions as to how they were to bring their offerings to him, there were more important things that he was looking for in his relationship with them, especially those qualities of moral life, obedience and social justice that were built into the covenant law in exodus before the tabernacle was even built or the sacrifices prescribed in Leviticus (*cf.* 1 Sa. 15:22, Ps. 50:13, Ho. 6:6, Am. 5:21–24, Mt. 5:23f., Mk. 12:33). The content of Leviticus should, therefore, be set in the wider context of

its surrounding narrative and the whole biblical revelation.

The instructions that follow were given by God to Moses to give to all *the Israelites*. This indicates another feature of these first seven chapters. The instructions regarding sacrifice were given, first of all, for the benefit of the worshippers themselves, *i.e.* the 'lay' people. They were the ones who would bring the animals for sacrifice, kill them and then receive words of atonement and restored fellowship with God. This is the focus of 1:1 – 6:7, which is then followed by a shorter section, in which the same sacrifices are listed again, but with the emphasis on the duties and benefits of the priests, who received certain portions of different sacrifices as their main means of support (6:8 – 7:38).

1:3–17 The burnt offering

The burnt offering heads the list of sacrifices, probably because it was the commonest. The priests were instructed in Nu. 28 that there should be daily burnt offerings, morning and evening. It was also the most total sacrifice, in that the whole animal was burnt (except the hide, which was given to the priest, 7:8). In the other sacrifices some portions of the meat were available to be eaten by the priests, or the worshippers, or both.

The name of the sacrifice (*'ōlâ*) probably means 'that which ascends', *i.e.* the whole offering 'goes up' in smoke to the Lord. The offering was to be a *male without defect*. Male animals were of greater sacrificial value, though in farming reality they are more expendable since it is the females that produce milk and new generations of animals. The animal was to be unblemished. Only the best was to be good enough for God. The sacrifice, therefore, was to be a matter of value and quality, even if that were relative to the circumstances of the worshipper. To offer poor quality animals was an insult, not because God *needed* animals for their own sake, but because of the attitude it betrayed in the heart of the worshipper – casual indifference and lack of gratitude or commitment to God, as if he were not worth anything better. This is what Malachi complained of (Mal. 1:6–14).

The instructions for the burnt offering are divided into three sections, for cattle (the herd) (3–9), sheep or goats (the flock) (10–13) and birds (14–17). However, each section ends with exactly the same phrase, describing the offering as *an aroma pleasing to the LORD*. The point is being made again that the material value of the sacrifice is not what counts primarily in God's sight. He would be as pleased with the poor man's bird as with the rich man's bull. Not even multiplying expensive sacrifices would increase their intrinsic value to God. He is impressed not by arithmetic but by obedience (*cf.* Mi. 6:6–8, Ho. 5:6).

The worshipper was to bring his animals to *the entrance to the Tent of Meeting*. This was the structure inside and at the western end of the court of the tabernacle, where the ark of the covenant and other items of sacred furniture were placed and where the presence of God was particularly localized. The entrance probably means anywhere within the court outside it, near the great altar. The worshipper would bring his animal to a priest and there would be a little ceremony of declaring his intended sacrifice acceptable to the Lord. The offerer was to *lay his hand on the head* of the animal (4). This was not just a light tap, but a significant gesture of pressing or leaning. We are not told what if anything was said along with the gesture. It may have included confession of sin (as required in 5:5, and 16:21) or, in view of v 4b, a prayer requesting that atonement be made. Or it might have been at this moment that the worshipper would declare to the priest, and to any others present, the reason for his sacrifice, such as we find in some of the Psalms (*e.g.* Ps. 116).

We are not told what the gesture meant. It probably had a double meaning, in the light of the context and other occasions where the action is explained. First of all, it would be an action declaring ownership and identification. It is worth remembering that the tabernacle area must have been a scene of considerable noise and confusion, with many animals and worshippers mingling together. When the worshipper, probably along with his whole family, eventually got the attention of an available priest, they needed to identify clearly what animal they were offering and for what purpose. Laying hands on its head was a way of saying, 'This is our animal, and we offer it for our own particular reasons – for forgiveness of sin, or thanksgiving, or consecration. We claim the benefits and blessings of this sacrifice for ourselves and ask that it be accepted.'

Secondly, in view of the fact that v4 specifies that the animal will be *accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him*, it is likely that the laying on of hands on the head of the animal had an element of representation and substitution, *i.e.* the animal was being offered in the worshipper's place. He was laying his sins on its head so that its death would remove and cleanse them from him, the worshipper. The animal would bear the person's sins, and die in his place. In that way it would make atonement for him. This meaning was clearly expressed in the great national Day of Atonement ceremony, when the sins of the people were laid on the head of one of

the goats. In that case, the goat was not killed but was driven away to 'carry away' the sins of the people (Lv. 16:20–22).

After the ceremony of laying on of hands and the declaration of acceptance, the rest of the procedure was divided between the offerer and the priest who was attending to him. The offerer had most of the work to do. It was his job to slaughter the animal (5) in such a way that the blood could be drained out; to skin it (6, the hide was then given to the priest, 7:8); to chop the carcass into pieces (6); and to wash those parts of the animal which were dirty (9), *i.e.* covered with mud or excrement, so that the priest would not be defiled in handling the carcass. The priest had the task of taking the blood and throwing it against the sides of the altar. As is explained later in Leviticus, this was to offer the life of the animal to God himself, for the blood represented its life, a life now given up in death (17:10–12). Finally, the priest took the pieces of the animal from the hands of the worshipper as he chopped it up, and arranged them on the altar, where the worshipper and his family watched them burn until all was consumed.

The whole combined action of worshipper and priest is then said to produce *an aroma pleasing to the* LORD. This phrase captures the literal sense of the smoke and its aroma rising to heaven, but is of course intended symbolically. The language is anthropomorphic (*i.e.* describing God's response in human terms, as though the actual smell pleased him), but the point is theological. The sacrifice pleased God and therefore achieved its desired purpose, which was to make atonement (4).

To make atonement (*kipper*) is the major point of the rites involving blood (*cf.* 17:11). *Kipper* can have two main meanings. It can mean 'to wipe something clean, to cleanse and purify', and it can mean 'to pay a ransom' so that a penalty can be avoided or a heavier penalty reduced (*e.g.* Ex. 21:30, 2 Ch. 29:24, Pr. 6:35, Nu. 35:31–33 [negatively]). The first meaning seems more in view in the blood rites of the sin offering, by which certain parts of the sanctuary and its furnishings were cleansed from pollution (ch. 4). In some cases a sin offering and a burnt offering were combined for the purpose of cleansing atonement (14:19f.). But it is more likely that the sense of ransom is what was primarily involved in the burnt offering. It achieved the effect of averting or reducing God's anger so that the worshipper would be spared the penalty of his sin. This is supported by several OT examples where the offering of burnt sacrifices was effective in averting or soothing God's anger (Gn. 8:21, Jdg. 13:23, 1 Sa. 7:9, 2 Sa. 24:25, 2 Ch. 29:7–8, Jb. 1:5; 42:8).

The atoning purpose of the burnt offering must be seen as primary, though it is clear that it was associated with other forms of response to God, particularly thanksgiving for specific blessings or deliverances (*e.g.* Ezk. 8:35), and vows of obedience. These are sometimes the focus of Psalms where burnt offerings are mentioned (*e.g.* Pss. 50:8–15, 66:13–15). However, the psalmists were well aware that thanksgiving and obedience could be offered only on the basis of God's prior grace and forgiveness.

The burnt offering was symbolic of covenant commitment in Ex. 24:3–8, but it is quite clear that what is at the heart of the covenant from the people's point of view is their commitment to obedience, not their performance of sacrifice (a priority which is clearly expressed in Ps. 40:6 and 1 Sa. 15:22). It is significant that the only two direct references to burnt offerings in the NT are quotations of these two verses, which explicitly value obedience above sacrifice (Mk. 12:33, Heb. 10:6–8). Other NT uses of the sacrificial symbolism will be considered at the end of this section.

2:1–16 The grain offering

This offering is called simply a gift (*minḥâ*). The word is used commonly of gifts which may be expressions of reverence or homage (Gn. 32:14, 43:11, Jdg. 6:19, 1 Sa. 10:27), gratitude (Ps. 96:8), or allegiance (2 Sa. 8:2, 2 Ch. 17:11). Here it clearly refers to a specific offering of cereal or grain. The grain offering was frequently offered along with other sacrifices, particularly the burnt offering (*e.g.* Nu. 15:1–16, 28:1–10, which also specify drink offerings of wine, which are not mentioned in Leviticus), but it could be offered alone, as an alternative to animal sacrifices for poor people. In this case it could have the same representative and substitutionary meaning as an animal sacrifice.

Only when the offering was of firstfruits (14–16) were whole grains of cereal to be offered. Otherwise, the grain was to be 'worked', at least into the form of flour. What was being offered to God, therefore, was a combination of what he had first created and provided (the cereal itself) and what human labour had made of it. It signified, therefore, the consecration of the gifts of creation and the products of human work to God.

The chapter has three sections: vs 1–3 deal with offerings of uncooked flour; vs 4–10 deal with cooked offerings; and vs 11–16 add further general instructions. The main ingredients in each case were *flour* and *oil*. *Incense*, which was symbolic of the holiness and presence of God and devotion to him (Ps. 141:2), or simply of the joy of worship (Pr. 27:9), was added to the small portion that was burnt on the altar (2). Oil was sometimes symbolic of the Spirit of God in the

OT (as in anointing ceremonies, *e.g.* 1 Sa. 16:13), but there is no specific indication that this is meant here. Oil also speaks of joy and blessing in life (Ps. 45:7, Ec. 9:7f., Pss. 104:15, 23:5), and it is probable that the oil and incense combined to give a sense of value, joy and sacred meaning to the offering.

Only a small portion (*a handful*, v2) of the grain offering was actually burnt on the altar. This is called the *memorial portion* (*'azkārâ*), which means (lit.) 'reminder', but it is not clear who was reminding whom. Some take it as meaning that the offerer was reminded that the small portion that was burnt was only a token of the fact that he owed all that he had to God (*cf.* 1 Ch. 29:14). Others take it as a reminder to God of his covenant promise to bless and protect his people including, of course, the person making this particular offering. The second meaning might fit better with the end of v2, where this offering, like the burnt offering, is said to be *an aroma pleasing to the* LORD.

After this small portion was offered by fire, the rest of the cereal belonged to the priests, whether uncooked flour, or loaves and cakes of various kinds (10). The cereal offerings were thus a major source of support for the priests, who did not own land and, therefore, had no means of growing their own crops. *It is a most holy part* because it was set aside for the priests. In other words, it was still just ordinary flour or bread, but it was set aside to be different from the everyday food of one's family. It was for the LORD's servants. 'Holiness' did not mean something magical or merely religious; it meant that which was set aside to be different. This meaning will become clearer, especially in its moral and practical sense, later in the book. The flour might be cooked in several ways before being offered (4–10). It could be baked in an oven (4), or on a griddle (5), or cooked in a pan (7). Doubtless the priests would enjoy the variety!

Finally, there are some instructions about prohibited and prescribed ingredients. The grain offering was to be made *without yeast or honey* (11), but it must always include *salt* (13). The text does not explain the reasons for this, so again we must be cautious in our own speculation. Both yeast and honey could be offered to God as firstfruits (Lv. 23:17, 2 Ch. 31:5), so the prohibition in this case cannot be because they were regarded as unclean in themselves. It may be that both yeast and honey were used in processes of fermentation and thus were symbolic of corruption. This view is strengthened by the command to add *salt*, since salt was certainly a preservative agent in the ancient world. Salt was symbolic not only of the stemming of corruption, but also of permanence. It is associated with convenantal promises in Nu. 18:19 and 2 Ch. 13:5. Since it is here linked with the offering of the fruits of harvest, it may be that there is an echo of the covenant with Noah and God's unending faithfulness to his creation (Gn. 8:20–22). For further Christian relevance of the grain offering, see the end of this section.

3:1–17 The fellowship offering

The Hebrew name for this sacrifice (*šelāmîm*) is derived from the root *šalēm*, which means 'to be complete, or whole', and is related, therefore, to *šālôm*, the word for wholeness, welfare and peace. Its precise meaning as the name for this specific sacrifice is not known with certainty. 'Peace offering' (RSV) is still widely used, and suggests that the purpose was to establish or maintain peace, *i.e.* good relations, between the worshipper and God. *Fellowship offering* (NIV, GNB; *cf.* 'shared- offering' NEB) points more in the direction of healthy relationships among those who offer it, and is based on the fact that this particular offering was the occasion of a family party enjoying the infrequent treat of a feast of meat.

Personal reasons for bringing a fellowship offering are listed in 7:11–18 and included thanksgiving, the fulfilment of a vow, or just any occasion for a freewill offering (*e.g.* 1 Sa. 1). Public reasons included the making or renewal of the covenant (Ex. 24:5, Dt. 27:7), the appointing of a king (1 Sa. 11:15) and the dedication of the temple (1 Ki. 8:63–66). In the last case, the number of animals used by Solomon was not a matter of impressing God, but of providing an abundance of free meat for the people to celebrate the joy of the occasion.

The chapter is divided into three sections, according to the kind of animal brought for sacrifice: cattle (1–5), sheep (6–11), or goats (12–17). The practical part of the ritual was the same as for the burnt offering (see on 1:3–17). The main differences from the burnt offering were first, female as well as male animals (*without defect*) were acceptable and secondly, only the fatty parts of the animal were burnt on the altar (*i.e.* the fat, the kidneys, the fat covering the liver, and the fat of the sheep's tail, 3f., 9f., 15).

The meat was divided between the priest, who got the breast and the right thigh joint (7:28–34), and the worshipper's family, who got the rest. So for the priests the fellowship offerings were a major source of protein in their diets. For the worshipper it was the opportunity for a joyful festive meal in God's presence, which was to be socially inclusive (Dt. 12:7, 12, 19). The fact that the fellowship offering led on to a shared meal may be the reason why no provision was made for the offering of a bird since no bird known to Israelites would have been big

enough for a family meal. One may assume, though it is not stated here (but implied in Dt. 12), that those who were too poor to lay on a fellowship offering meal of their own would have been invited to share in those of others in the community.

The prohibition on eating the fat (17), which was instead to be offered by fire to God, is not given any explanation, as is done for blood (17:10–12). However, fat was symbolic of what was best and richest (Gn. 45:18; Ps. 81:16, where the NIV's 'wheat' is lit. 'fat' in Hebrew; Ps. 63:5, where the NIV's 'richest of foods' is lit. 'marrow and fat' in Hebrew), and the point may therefore be that the very best part of the animal must be offered to God. Modern dietary considerations, which would approve of v17 for health reasons, would not, of course, have been known to Israel. But, inasmuch as they were not unknown to the God who made our bodies, we may be impressed with them at that level also if we choose.

4:1 – 5:13 The sin offering

The next two sacrifices are different from the preceding three. From the worshipper's point of view, the previous offerings were voluntary and, certainly in the case of the fellowship offering, fairly occasional, but the bringing of a sin offering or guilt offering was compulsory in the prescribed circumstances. A second difference is that, whereas the burnt and fellowship offerings were described according to the kind of animal offered, the sin offering is arranged according to the status or degree of guilt of those who were required to bring it.

The main division of ch. 4 relates to the place where the blood of the sacrifice was to be sprinkled. It was sprinkled *inside* the holy place in the Tent of Meeting when the sin involved the high priest (3–12) or the whole congregation (13–21). It was sprinkled on the main altar of sacrifice *outside* the Tent of Meeting when the sin involved a tribal leader (22–26) or an ordinary person (27–35). 5:1–4 then gives some illustrations of the kind of inadvertent sins (or sins of omission) that a person might feel guilty about and bring a sin offering for. Finally, 5:5–13 provides alternative sacrifices that enabled even the poorest person to have access to the cleansing power of the sin offering.

4:1–2 The purpose of the sin offering. *When anyone sins unintentionally* (1) introduces two important words that govern the rest of the chapter. First, the word for 'sin' here (*ḥaṭā'*) means 'to miss the mark, to fail or err'. The particular sacrifice described in this chapter has a name derived from an intensive form of this verb which has the sense, 'to de-sin, to cleanse from sin'. It is called the *ḥaṭṭā't*). This is usually translated 'sin offering'. But its purpose was not so much to deal with sin itself (though it did have an atoning dimension, like all the blood sacrifices) as to cleanse away the effects of sin, *i.e.* the pollution or defilement it causes. Whereas the burnt offering was the primary sacrifice for atonement through its propitiation of God's anger, this offering was primarily for purification of the holy place and the altar, so that God could continue to live in the midst of his people. God cannot dwell in uncleanness, so this sacrifice cleansed his dwelling place. Hence some scholars translate it, 'purification offering'.

Secondly, *unintentionally* (*bišegāgâ*) comes from a root which means 'to wander off', like sheep. So it is used throughout this chapter to cover sins which do not come from a wilful act of rebellion and defiance of God but rather from the weakness and failures of our daily lives. It can mean inadvertent, accidental, unintended. Hebrew law very carefully distinguished between accidental and deliberate actions. It used the expression 'sinning with a high hand' to describe actions which were premeditated and wilful acts of wickedness. In law, these had to be dealt with very severely (the best example of the distinction is in the law of homicide in Nu. 35), and in the sacrificial system there was no sacrifice for such kinds of sin (Nu. 15:27–31).

The sin offering was also used to cleanse a person who was ritually unclean but not in any sense sinful, *e.g.* a woman after childbirth (12:6–8) or someone with a skin disease (14:19) or bodily discharge (15:15). It was, in general, the offering which effected cleansing as distinct from, though linked with, forgiveness (15:31).

4:3–12 For the sin of a high priest. *The anointed priest* almost certainly signifies the high priest in this context (*cf.* Nu. 35:25). Because of his representative function, when he sinned the whole people became tainted with his guilt. He had a role of great seriousness and, therefore, the purification offering for his sin was the costliest of all – a young bull. And since he lived and worked in the presence of God and in his sanctuary, his sin brought defilement right into the dwelling place of God. So cleansing must be effected *inside the Tent of Meeting.*

When the bull was brought, the priest was to *lay his hands on its head* (4), just as ordinary worshippers did when they brought their animals to a priest for sacrifice. The meaning was the same. The bull would carry his sins. It would die in his place. Bull's blood would be shed for the priest's life, would cleanse the place where he served, and would remove the threat from the people he represented.

The action with the blood at this point (5–7) differs from what is done in the other sacrifices.

In the burnt and fellowship offerings the blood was thrown against the altar to make atonement for the worshipper's sin. Here, some of the blood was collected in a vessel and carried *into the Tent of Meeting* but not right into the *sanctuary* (that happened only on the Day of Atonement, Lv. 16). There some of it was sprinkled on *the curtain* that divided the tent in two and concealed the most holy presence of God (Ex. 26:31–37) and some was sprinkled on *the horns of the altar* where incense was constantly burning (Ex. 30:1–10). The horns were vertical projections on the top four corners of the altar. The rest of the blood was then poured away at the foot of the main altar of sacrifice outside. The fat portions of the animal were burned on the altar (like the fellowship offering, 8–10), but all the rest of the carcass was burned *outside the camp* (11–12). Since the sacrifice was for the sin of the high priest, and thus indirectly for the people as a whole, none of its meat was to be eaten by priest or people.

4:13–21 For a sin of the whole people. Two different words are used for the community. The first, *'ēḏâ*, may mean the representative body of elders as the legal or social authorities. The second, *qāhāl*, may mean the wider community gathered for worship. The precise definition of the terms cannot be certain. But what is envisaged here is that when some mistake has been made (perhaps in a legal judgment or some other community decision) which only later comes to light, then as soon as the worshipping community becomes aware of it, and thus feels guilt because of it, they are to bring a sin offering. The expression *they are guilty, he is guilty* (13, 22, 27) would thus probably be better translated 'feel guilty'. Obviously, anyone who *does what is forbidden of the* LORD*'s commands is* guilty. The point is that they are initially unaware of it. So only when they become aware of their mistake and then feel guilt are they required to come forward with a sin offering. *The elders* (15) were the community representatives at every level of Israel's life (*cf.* Ex. 24:1, 9; Nu. 11:16f.).

The rites are identical for the whole community as for the high priest. On the one hand, this confirms that the priest represented the whole people, as we saw above. On the other, it shows that Israel itself as a whole was treated as a priesthood. Thus holiness and cleanness were required of them also, and their sin, even unwitting sin, defiled God's dwelling place. Part of the seriousness of sin among the people of God, ancient or modern, is that it destroys their witness to the living God in the midst of the world. If the whole church goes astray then where can the dwelling place of God be seen among the nations?

In the next two cases, which were relatively less serious, the blood was not sprinkled inside the Tent of Meeting but *on the horns of the altar* of sacrifice outside in the court. The sacrificial animals were also less valuable than the bull required for the high priest or the whole community. The other major difference between the first two cases and the second two is that the whole carcass of the animal was not burnt outside the camp. After the fatty parts had been sacrificed, the rest of the meat could be eaten by the priests (6:24–30), but not by the worshippers.

4:22–26 For a sin of a leader. *Leader* (*nāśî'*) was a term commonly used for the authorities in Israel before they had kings. It referred to heads of clans or tribes. It was a position of honour and responsibility and was protected by stringent laws (*cf.* Ex. 22:28). The sacrificial animal in this case was a male goat.

4:27 – 5:13 For sins of ordinary people. In these cases the standard sacrificial animals were female goats or female lambs. For poorer people, birds and cereal offerings were acceptable in either case.

Since the meat of the sin offerings of ordinary people was eaten by the priests exclusively, these offerings were the major source of meat for them, just as the cereal offerings were their major source of bread. This is what lies behind the accusation of Hosea that the priests of his day were feeding 'on the sins of my people' (Ho. 4:8). As the word for sin and sin offering was the same, the priests' perverted view was, 'the more sin, the more meat for us'.

5:1–4 Typical offences. These verses list three kinds of typical offences for which a person should bring a sin offering. First, failure *to testify* in a case where one has material evidence to give (1). Israelite law attached great importance to the integrity of the judicial system, and thus placed a very high premium on truthful witness, to the extent of including it in the ten commandments (Ex. 20:16; *cf.* Ex. 23:1–9, Pr. 12:17, 14:5, 24:28). Deliberate perjury was a serious crime treated most severely (Dt. 19:15–21).

Secondly, accidental *uncleanness* (3). The OT distinction between the clean and the unclean will be discussed later. We should note that although the NT has neutralized the distinction as regards physical things (Mk. 7:1–23; Acts 10:9–16), the apostles were no less serious in urging Christians to strive for cleanness of life and to avoid moral and spiritual pollution (*cf.* Jas. 1:27).

Thirdly, a *rash oath* which a person fails to fulfil (4). *Good or evil* is probably an inclusive expression meaning 'anything at all' (*cf.* Is. 41:23). Words matter, even words spoken carelessly. So

a careless promise unfulfilled is a sin in need of cleansing also, especially if an oath had been used, since that involved God's name. The wise teachers of Israel warned a lot about the misuse of words (Pr. 6:1–5; 12:18; 15:2; Ec. 5:2–7), and both Jesus and James taught that our words should reflect straightforward truth and, therefore, have no need of supporting oaths (Mt. 5:34–36; Jas. 3:5–6).

He must confess (5). Even sins of failure, neglect, ignorance or carelessness are still sins and need to be confessed in order to be cleansed and atoned for. For most of us, probably the greatest number of our typical daily sins fall into these categories. We may not set out deliberately to rebel against God and commit sin, but in the pressures of life and in the weakness of our nature we find at the end of a day that we have to admit, as the confession prayer in the Book of Common Prayer expresses it, that 'We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have left undone those things that we ought to have done and we have done those things that we ought not to have done'.

This is exactly the kind of behaviour envisaged in the definition of the sin offering. How important it is, then, that these daily failures should not accumulate into a cloud of depressing and debilitating feelings of guilt but should be confessed and forgiven. And how reassuring it is to know that the declaration of atonement and forgiveness (5:6, 10, 13) is even more sure for us through the sacrifice of Christ than it was for the Israelite through his priest's ministry at the altar.

5:7–13 If he cannot afford .... These verses give alternative sacrifices for the poorer people in the community. The grain offering that could substitute for the sin offering (11–13) was a very small quantity. A *tenth of an ephah* was probably about a litre of flour, though exact equivalents are unknown. It did not include the oil and incense of the normal cereal offering, to make its distinctive purpose clear (11). Rather, it was to be mixed with the animal sacrifices already burning on the altar, to show that it stood for and counted as a blood sacrifice: *It is a sin offering* (12).

The existence of these alternative sacrifices is a clear indication that what God most dearly wanted was not that people should come with lavish sacrifices, but that they should simply come, to avail themselves of *his* lavish forgiveness, no matter how little they could afford. The assurance of atonement and forgiveness was undiminished (10, 13), because God looks on the heart and because ultimately all forgiveness is based on the eternal sacrifice of Christ, not on the relative values of any sacrifice that human sinners could make. A person who knew he could come to God with nothing more than a cupful of flour and confession of his sin, and still receive forgiveness was learning something fundamental about the grace of his God. Taught by such grace, even the most powerful in the land knew that God was not impressed by the most lavish sacrifices, when it was a matter of deliberate high-handed sin. The only hope in such circumstances was to run to that same grace with a broken and contrite heart and plead for cleansing on the grounds of God's own character of love and compassion (Ps. 51:1–2, 16–17).

5:14 – 6:7 The guilt offering

Traditionally this offering, the *'āšām*, is called the guilt offering in many translations. However, all the blood sacrifices were related to the removal of guilt, with the burnt offering especially performing that function. What is distinctive about the offering described in these verses is that it was related to *restitution*, or compensation, that had to be paid because of some misappropriation of property or failure in regard to material things. So some scholars call it the 'restitution offering'. Like the fellowship offering, it takes account of the horizontal effects of sin. Certain kinds of wrongdoing cause loss to one's neighbour, and the worshipper must make amends for such things as well as seeking forgiveness from God himself.

Another Hebrew word for sin (*ma'al*) is used here, and translated *violation* (5:15) and *unfaithfulness* (6:2). It means a breach of trust, and thus is appropriate to the kinds of sin listed here, where the offender is guilty of some lack of integrity or honesty in his dealings with either the priests or his neighbours. Three types of offence are listed.

First, offences in relation to *the holy things* (5:14–16). This term refers to sacred property in the general sense of anything that had been consecrated to God or the service of the priests and the sanctuary. It included all the offerings and, therefore, all the food that the priests received from them, as well as the houses and other property of the priests and the tithes that were due to them (*cf.* Lv. 27). So the offence, which is expressed in vague terms, could include taking and eating food that belonged to the priests, or failure to pay due offerings and tithes (*e.g. cf.* Ex. 30:11–16, 2 Ki. 12:16). What was required was both the sacrifice of *a ram* and the payment of *restitution*, calculated at the value of whatever had been misappropriated plus *a fifth of the value*.

The second offence (5:17–19) is expressed in even more vague terms. In the context, it

probably means any offence that a person may have committed in relation to the sanctuary and sacred objects or persons. The point is that the person concerned *does not know it*, but nevertheless feels *guilty*. If someone has an uneasy conscience and suspects they may have offended against the holy things but cannot specify exactly how, they may bring a guilt offering, without the 120% compensation, and put their minds at rest with the assurance of forgiveness (18).

The third category (6:1–7), moves from the world of holy things to ordinary human relationships and provides for offences that involve some breakdown of trust between people over property. Four examples are given (6:2–3): deception over deposited property, theft, oppression and lying about lost property one has found. A similar range of disputes is covered in the law in Ex. 22:7–15. There, the restitution required was double the value of the object, not one fifth extra as here. Perhaps the reason was that the Exodus law deals with cases where the guilty party has been brought to court and his guilt proved by the evidence, whereas this text is dealing with voluntary confession of guilt with appropriate sacrifice. The lesser penalty in this case would thus encourage people to 'own up' rather than wait to be caught or accused and proved guilty.

It is noticeable that full restitution, plus the added fifth, must be made before the sacrifice is brought. There was no point trying to get God's forgiveness until proper amends had been made to the injured party. The horizontal aspect of the offence must be attended to before its vertical aspect could be dealt with. Both these dimensions of this kind of sin are expressed right at the beginning of the chapter: a person guilty of *deceiving his neighbour* is simultaneously guilty of being *unfaithful to the* LORD (6:2). Jesus was by no means the first to see the connection between what he called the first and second great commandments in the law (*cf.* Lv. 19:13, 18 , Mt. 5:23f., 43f.; 19:19; Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8).

The guilt offering thus completes the list of sacrifices that were to be brought by Israelites and their families. It is worth pausing to consider the range of symbolism expressed. The vocabulary of sin in the OT is very comprehensive, as was needed to convey the depth and variety of its understanding of the human predicament. The four blood sacrifices portray four distinct, though obviously related and overlapping, models of sin, and offer remedies that apply to those different dimensions. The burnt offering sees sin as objective guilt before God, and it functioned as the major atoning sacrifice, providing the ransom by which God's anger was soothed and kept back from venting its full force on the sinner. The fellowship offering sees that sin produces brokenness and barriers between people and, while still providing atonement in relation to God, emphasizes the need and blessing of restored relationships and shared joy. The sin offering sees sin as dirt and pollution, which inevitably offends the presence of the holy God, and thus offers the means of cleansing and purification so that God can continue to dwell among his people. The guilt offering sees sin as a wrong or a debt which has to be repaid and, therefore, demands full restitution as well as sacrifice. All of these are truths which the NT affirms in different ways and which continue to have a great theological weight long after the last animal was sacrificed on Israel's altars.

6:8 – 7:38 Instructions for the priests

At first sight it seems that this whole section is mere repetition of the preceding chapters. But the difference lies in the opening words, '*Give Aaron and his sons this command*' (6:8). What follows are instructions meant mainly for the priests, regarding their particular duties for each sacrifice, and also what parts of the sacrifices they were entitled to. The preceding chapters were mainly for the guidance of ordinary people.

6:8–13 The burnt offering. Two main things are laid down here. First, the requirement that *the fire* on the main altar of sacrifice *must not go out*. This is stressed repeatedly (9, 12, 13). Apart from burnt offerings brought by the people, we are told elsewhere that the priests were always to offer a morning and evening burnt offering (Ex. 29:38–42). The latter was the final sacrifice of the day, and so it was the responsibility of the priests on 'night shift' to make sure that the fire was kept burning (*cf.* 1 Ch. 9:33; Ps. 134:1).

We are not told the reason for this, so our explanation must be cautious. Fire was certainly associated with the presence of God, both as a protecting guide (Ex. 13:21f.), and also as consuming sin and sinners (*cf.* Lv. 10:1–3). The permanence of the altar fire, therefore, may have suggested the perpetual presence of God, or the perpetual need for atonement for sin and consecration of life, or both.

Secondly, even for the menial physical work of clearing out the ashes, the priest on duty was to wear appropriate clothes. These were the *linen clothes* unique to priests (10). But when he took the pile of ashes from beside the altar *outside the camp*, he was to change into ordinary clothes (11). OT law was constantly concerned to keep the holy and the common separate from each other. The distinctiveness of everything to

do with the priests and the sanctuary was a continuous object lesson in the intended distinctiveness of Israel herself, as a holy nation in the midst of the world. In a memorable piece of acted symbolism, Jeremiah pointed out that God had wanted to 'wear' Israel like the linen priestly garment, to display his own glory. But by their idolatries they had become soiled and unwearable (Je. 13:1–11). A people of compromised holiness had lost their priestly mission in the world and, like Jeremiah's linen sash, had become 'completely useless' to God.

6:14–23 The grain offering. All priests were entitled to eat the grain offerings brought by the people, after *the memorial portion* was burnt, but they must do so within the court of the tabernacle. The words, *it is most holy*, mean that it could be eaten only by priests. This feature applied also to the sin and guilt offerings (6:25, 7:6) and distinguished all three from the fellowship offering, which was shared among the worshipper's family and friends. The priests themselves were required to bring a daily grain offering (19–23) from the day of their ordination (20), and this was to be *burned completely*, not eaten. The author of Hebrews makes this a point of contrast with the single, final, sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:27).

6:24–30 The sin offering. Holiness had a 'contagious' quality. Anything or anyone that came in contact with what was holy was affected by it, and needed to be treated accordingly (*cf.* 6:18). It brought the person or object into a proximity to God which could be dangerous, and so such things had to be either washed (27) or destroyed (28).

7:1–10 The guilt offering. This section provides the details of the ritual of the guilt offering which were not included in the previous section on it. They are similar to the sin offering. It also specifies that priests were entitled to the skins of animals used for burnt offerings (8), as well as the variety of grain offerings (9–10).

7:11–36 The fellowship offering. Vs 12–18 distinguish three kinds of occasion when a person might bring a fellowship offering: *as an expression of thanksgiving* (12); as *the result of a vow*; or as *a freewill offering* (16). There are separate regulations for the first (12–15), but the last two are dealt with together (16–18).

The expression *he must be cut off*, which is used more frequently later in the book, is much debated. It probably does not mean that a person said to be *cut off* was executed by the community (another formula was used for the death penalty). Some think it may refer to a form of excommunication, *i.e.* of cutting off from the worshipping community. But that might seem a lenient penalty for some of the offences mentioned (*e.g.* in ch. 20). The most likely interpretation is that it was a form of divine curse. The person who offended in certain ways, many of which by their nature would be unlikely to come to the public notice of the courts, would be exposing him or herself to God's direct punitive action. That might well mean death, but could include other forms of judgment. In ch. 20, for example, it is stated that even if the human community failed to bring certain offenders to justice, God himself would 'cut them off', implying his direct intervention.

Vs 28–36 specify the parts of the fellowship offering that belonged to the priest – *the breast* (30) and the *right thigh* (33; whether foreleg or hindleg is not stated, but the foreleg, or shoulder, is more probable). The breast is described as a *wave offering*, which may mean that the meat was waved in a lateral movement before the altar, perhaps this was symbolic of presenting it to God and receiving it back. The thigh is described as a *contribution* that is *presented* (34). This is an uncertain word that ancient Jewish commentators interpreted to mean 'heaving' (*cf.* KJV), *i.e.* perhaps a vertical movement. However, the precise actions involved and their significance are no longer clear. What mattered was that these cuts of meat belonged to the priests as their 'anointed portion' (35), *i.e.* their share by right of their ordination (anointing, v36).

Having come to the end of the manual on sacrifices for worshippers and priests, it may seem terribly complicated and ritualistic. However, that would be a false impression, probably owing mainly to the strangeness of the whole thing to us. In fact, in comparison with the known sacrificial rituals of other ancient cultures, the Israelite system was relatively simple and straightforward. The laws we have studied were concerned to preserve some dignity and meaningful symbolism in what could easily have degenerated into noisy chaos, by giving both laity and priests clear and simple rules about what to do. The need for decency and order applies to Christian worship also, as Paul points out (1 Cor. 11 – 14).

The distinctiveness of Israel's sacrificial system can also be noticed negatively. There was no place for augury, *i.e.* the attempt to derive omens, good or bad, from the entrails of sacrificial animals. God provided better ways to know his will (*cf.* Dt. 18:9–20). There was no place for human sacrifice, or even self-mutilation and the use of human blood. Sexual and fertility rituals are entirely absent, as are sacrifices for the dead or any other occult manipulation.

The single gift that sacrifices gained from God was the declaration of forgiveness. There was no sense that other favours could be won or

bribed out of the deity. Sacrifices for other reasons were brought in *response* to God's blessing or protection, not in order to 'buy' it. There was no grading of sacrifices in terms of quantity in favour of the wealthy or powerful. On the contrary, provision was made for the poorest, who received 'just as much' forgiveness as any other sinner. Indeed, Israel's system was unique in having no special sacrifices reserved for royalty. Like so much else in Israel, it was geared to the needs of ordinary people. And it has been pointed out by socio- economic studies that Israel's sacrificial ritual would not have made an excessive demand on the resources of average families. They were expected to give the best when they did bring sacrifices, but they were not expected to impoverish themselves under a heavy religious burden, or to enrich a powerful religious elite.

Note. Levitical sacrifices, the NT and the Christian. We have already noted how the combination of sacrifices presents a comprehensive picture of the effects of sin and also of the different dimensions of God's remedy. When we turn to the NT, we find that the individual sacrifices are only rarely mentioned by name, but the theme of sacrifice is as rich and varied as in the OT, whether applied to the work of Christ himself, or to our response as believers and worshippers. All the major dimensions noted above have their NT echoes.

The burnt offering was the primary sacrifice that provided atonement and dealt with the guilt of sin. The NT presents the death of Jesus as such a sacrifice, an interpretation which goes back to Jesus himself (Mk. 10:45; *cf.* Rom. 3:25; Eph. 5:2; 1 Pet. 1:18f.; 1 Jn. 2:1f.). The author of Hebrews emphasizes that Christ's sacrificial death was once for all and thus stands both in fulfilment of, and contrast with, the repeated daily sacrifices of the OT (Heb. 10:1–18). Believers in Christ, therefore, have no need to bring any sacrifice related to atonement, for he has offered that final sacrifice of himself on the cross.

The sin offering dealt with the dirt and pollution of sin by using the sacrificial blood to cleanse the dwelling place of God. The NT likewise stresses the cleansing power of the blood of Christ. It not only removes the guilt of sin, but also purges away its pollution. Hebrews points this out in relation to the heavenly dwelling place of God (Heb. 10:23ff.) and also applies it to the cleansing of the believer's conscience, so that he or she may approach God with confidence (Heb. 9:11–14; 10:19–22). 1 John emphasizes this truth also. The death of Jesus (his blood) was once and final, but its cleansing power is something that is to be applied regularly to our lives through confession (1 Jn. 1:6 – 2:2).

The guilt offering insisted that wrongs done to fellow human beings must be put right by appropriate restitution as part of the process of being put right with God. This holds for Christian believers also, as we saw above. 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors' was probably intended by Jesus to have a concrete application, and not merely to refer to feelings or attitudes. The importance of it is highlighted by his terrible warning and related parable (Mt. 6:12–15; 18:21–35). But the very nature of the guilt offering, as primarily a matter of restitution or reparation, also suggested a view of sin itself as a kind of debt in relation to God. Sin has to be paid for. The metaphor runs deep in human thinking about wrongdoing and wickedness. We still talk about making criminals 'pay for' their crimes. This when properly controlled and understood within the framework of society's legal structures, is quite different from personal vengeance which declares 'I'll pay you back for that'. The *'āšām* provided a way of 'paying back' to God the restitution due for sin, parallel to the restitution made to the wronged party for the material loss incurred.

In Is. 53 the death of the Servant of the Lord is presented in sacrificial terms. He is the one who will suffer and die in the place of others, 'like a lamb led to the slaughter' (Is. 53:5–7). In v10 his death is described specifically as an *'āšām*, *i.e.* as a guilt offering, making restitution for the wrongs of others so that they may be counted righteous (11). The poetry of Is. 53 was deeply influential on the theology of the NT in relation to Christ's death (*cf.* Mt. 8:17; Lk. 22:37; 1 Pet. 2:24–25). The sacrificial death of Christ was not only a ransom for our guilt, and a cleansing of our dirt, but also a payment of our debt. There is, of course, a metaphorical dimension to the language, and the analogy cannot be pushed into asking how or to whom such 'payment' was made. The Bible, in both testaments, simply uses these different models to explore the unfathomable depths of our salvation. Our task, ultimately, is not to rationalize but to enter into the blessing of it by faith.

The fellowship offering was a sacrifice that led into a shared meal. It thus embodied both a vertical dimension (since it had the same atoning blood rites as the burnt offering) and a horizontal dimension (since it cemented human relationships). So it was most appropriate as an expression of the heart of Israel's covenant relationship with God. It was, in a sense, a sacramental meal, with similar features to the central meal of the new covenant, the Lord's Supper. Jesus spoke of that meal as 'the new covenant in my blood', which recalls Ex. 24:8, where fellowship offerings were included in the sacrifices which ratified the Sinai covenant.

Christian worship, especially the Holy Communion service, ought to be joyful and socially caring. It may, therefore, have been the fellowship offering which the author of Hebrews had in mind when he urged Christians not to forget 'to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased' (Heb. 13:16). It is noticeable too that Paul insists both on personal worthiness in preparation for the Lord's supper (just as ritual cleanness was required of Israelites who participated in the fellowship offering meal; 1 Cor. 11:27–31; *cf.* Lv. 7:20) and also on social harmony and consideration for poorer members of the community (1 Cor. 11:18–22).

The grain offering represented a consecration of God's gifts and human work to God. It seems probable that grain offerings (and perhaps also drink offerings) accompanied the other sacrifices. There was thus a two-way movement in the whole ritual: the atonement and forgiveness that came *from* God in response to the shed blood of the animal sacrifices, and the offering of life and work, praise, thanksgiving and worship *to* God by the worshipper and his family. Likewise in the NT, although the primary sacrifice is the self-offering of Jesus on the cross as the final and sufficient basis for our reconciliation with God, the language of sacrifice is also applied to the believer's response to God. Our bodies, our minds, our praises and our material giving are included among the appropriate kinds of sacrifice that we can offer to him (Rom. 12:1–2; Phil. 4:18; Heb. 13:15–16).

Finally, one other aspect of the OT sacrificial system which has its NT counterpart is the material support of those who minister to God's people. A substantial proportion of the income for the priests came from the parts of the sacrifices that were given to them, the grain offerings, the breast and thigh of the fellowship offerings and the accompanying loaves, all the meat of sin and guilt offerings, the skin of burnt offerings, and possibly money equivalents for some guilt offerings. It may sound a lot, but it was very necessary since the tribe of Levi were allotted no land and so had no other means of income. They were dependent on the people's faithfulness, as were other classes of vulnerable people (Dt. 14:28–29; 18:1–8).

In the NT, ministers are never called priests, but the principle that those who serve God and his people as their primary occupation should be properly paid and cared for is certainly endorsed. Jesus said so (Lk. 10:7), and Paul taught it very pointedly (1 Cor. 9). Unfortunately, Paul is sometimes used to support the view that Christian workers must somehow live by faith, or by their own labours. This can then be used by some Christians, who are themselves relatively well provided for in their secular jobs, to justify the scandalous poverty of some pastors, evangelists and other workers. But Paul's whole point in 1 Cor. 9 is that he himself is *an exception* to his own teaching that Christian workers have *the right* to be supported by the churches, for living expenses and with extra for a wife (4–5). He argues this from analogy with secular jobs (7), by extension of an OT law about working animals (8–10; *cf.* Dt. 25:4), from the balance of spiritual and material blessings (11), from natural justice (12), from these same levitical provisions for priests (13) and from the direct command of Jesus (14). He could hardly have built a stronger case! So the fact that he personally chose to waive his rights for his own reasons (15–18) must be seen as what it is – exceptional, not normative. Paul underlines the same point elsewhere (Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17–16).

8:1 – 10:20 The institution of the priesthood

These three chapters return to the narrative of events at Mt Sinai which were being described at the end of Exodus but were interrupted by the instructions regarding the sacrifices in chs. 1–7. They recount the actual events by which the instructions of Ex. 28 – 29 were carried out. That is why the opening verses speak of *the* garments, oil, animals and basket. These objects are specific because they have already been described in detail in Exodus.

The overarching purpose behind the complex ceremonies described in these chapters, which should be borne in mind while reading them, is given in Ex. 29:44–46. It was that God, who had redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt, should be known by them in an intimate covenant relationship as he lived among them. God's presence in the midst of his people was the primary blessing of being Israel. Without it, they had no distinctiveness and might as well stay in the wilderness (Ex. 33:14–16). That presence would be visible in the splendour of the priestly garments on the one hand, and in the visible glory of God in the tabernacle on the other (Ex. 40:34ff.; Lv. 9:23–24).

The three chapters, which should be read together, first describe Moses' action in preparing Aaron and his sons for entering on their priestly ministry (8) and then how they did so, culminating in blessing, fire and glory (9). Finally, they show how the event was marred by tragic disobedience and judgment (10). They thus stand along with other biblical narratives which stress the importance of obedience, the danger of disobedience, and how even the most joyful or solemn occasions in the life of God's

people are never immune from human rebellion or sheer folly (*e.g.* Ex 32 – 34; Jos. 7; 1 Sa. 15:17–23; 2 Sa. 6:1–7; 2 Ch. 26:16–20; Acts 5:1–11).

8:1–36 The ordination of Aaron and his sons

8:1–5 The preparation. All the materials, already prescribed, were assembled, along with *the entire assembly*, which probably means the representative elders who would witness the events in the tabernacle court on behalf of the whole community (*cf.* 9:1) (though doubtless there were as many spectators as could find a viewing point). The phrase *as the LORD commanded* (4–5) echoes all the way through chs. 8 and 9, emphasizing the precise obedience to God's word that Moses and Aaron displayed, and thus sharpening the shock of 10:1.

8:6–9 Aaron's priestly clothes. After ceremonial washing, Aaron was clothed in the special garments that had been made for his role as high priest. There was a tunic (or coat), a sash (or broad belt), an ephod (a cape with shoulder straps), a breastpiece containing the Urim and Thummim (some kind of sacred 'dice' or lots, used for making decisions in response to enquiries) and a turban with a golden brooch on the front, with the words 'Holy to the LORD' inscribed on it. The full description of these items is in Ex. 28, where it will be seen that they were very richly coloured, embroidered and decorated. If there was any special symbolic significance for each item, it is no longer known and not recorded in the text (with the exception of the breastpiece, which bore the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and so clearly pointed to the priest's representative role; see Ex. 28:21, 29). It is, therefore, pointless to speculate. The overall impression, however, was of great beauty and glory. This not only highlighted the authority and dignity of the office that Aaron and his successors bore, but also reflected the visible distinctiveness that should speak of moral and spiritual sanctity.

8:10–13 The anointing. As prescribed in Ex. 40:9–11, Moses anointed with oil all the objects and persons that would be involved in the worship of God. Anointing was symbolic of being set aside, consecrated to specific tasks for God. Kings were anointed (*cf.* 1 Sa. 10:1ff.; 16:13), and some prophets were anointed, though the meaning could be metaphorical as much as literal in their case (1 Ki. 19:16; *cf.* Is. 61:1). All three (priest, king and prophet) were combined in the NT understanding of Jesus as the 'Christ', 'the anointed one'.

8:14–30 The offerings. Three sacrifices followed, precisely as prescribed in Ex. 29:10–34. First of all, *a bull for the sin offering* (14–17) was killed so that its blood could be used to cleanse the altar and thus prevent polluted offerings, which were a serious matter (*cf.* Mal. 1:7). Then *a ram for the burnt offering* (18–21), and finally *the other ram, the ram for ordination*, in what was in fact a fellowship offering (22–30). From this last offering, some blood was smeared on Aaron's *right ear*, *right thumb*, and *right big toe*, and on the same parts of his sons (23–24). The meaning may have been that the priests, being as sinful as any other person, needed complete cleansing, from head to toe, as it were. This would be supported by the fact that in each of these sacrifices Aaron and his sons had to lay their hands on the heads of the animals, which was symbolic of the confession and transference of sin. Or, if the blood was here primarily for consecration (as in v30), then it would symbolize the complete consecration of the priests to hear God's word and obey it, to do the tasks assigned, and to walk in his ways (ears, hands and feet). In both respects, Christ as our high priest surpasses the levitical priests. He had no need to sacrifice for his own sin, and his obedience was perfect (Heb. 4:14 – 5:9; 7:27; 10:5–10).

8:31–36 The ordination. The whole procedure of ordination took *seven days*, during which time Aaron and his sons were not to leave the sanctuary. The chapter ends with a final emphasis on obedience, *so you will not die* (35–36), another grim warning of the shock to come at 10:2.

9:1–24 Aaron and his sons begin their ministry

The pattern of this chapter is very similar to ch. 8. The main difference is that, whereas in ch. 8 Moses performs the function of priest (as well as prophet, since all God's commands come through him) while Aaron and his sons play the part of lay worshippers, in ch. 9 Aaron takes over the priestly role by right of his completed ordination, and the people are involved in their own right.

9:1–7 The preparation. There may be some intentional irony in the fact that Aaron was commanded to bring a *bull calf* for his very first sin offering as high priest, since the last time Aaron played any significant part in the story was when he went along with the people's apostasy, while Moses was up the mountain, and fashioned the golden bull calf (Ex. 32). Indeed, it was only because of God's mercy that Aaron was even alive on this day, let alone entering on the privilege of high priesthood. Many others had died for their sin on that occasion. Perhaps it was the freshness of that memory that left him so dumbstruck at the fate of his own sons.

God's *glory* (4,6) meant his felt and visible presence, elsewhere manifested in smoke and flame. Experiencing this was the whole purpose of the day, and indeed of the ongoing sacrificial worship of Israel. The ritual was not an end in itself but a means towards the experience of God's presence in glory and the joyful worship that responds to it (24). The rituals of Christian worship may seem worlds away from Israel's altar of burnt offering, but the end purpose is the same (*cf.* Heb. 12:28–29).

Again, it is worth recalling the parallels between the work of Israel's priests in relation to the rest of Israel and the role that Israel, as God's priesthood, were meant to perform in relation to the rest of the nations. The ministry of Israel's priests enabled God's glory to be seen and responded to. Similarly, God intended that through his people his glory would be seen in the world. That, according to the prophets, was the very reason for their creation and calling (Is. 43:7, 21; 49:3). Priestliness has an outgoing, missionary significance through its relation to God's glory, which will one day fill the whole earth (Hab. 2:14).

9:8–21 The offerings. These fell into two groups. First, a sin offering and a burnt offering on behalf of the priests themselves (8–14); then, a sin offering, burnt offering, grain offering and fellowship offering for the people (15–21), *i.e.* the representative elders who would have eaten it on behalf of the whole people (*cf.* Ex. 24:10–11). The order of the last group was significant in pointing to the right priorities in worship: cleansing, atonement, consecration and fellowship. Finishing with the shared meal of the fellowship offering would have given a joyful conclusion to the whole solemn week and a fitting atmosphere for what followed.

9:22–24 Blessing, glory, fire and worship. Whether he spoke them on this occasion or not, the words of Aaron's blessing are recorded in Nu. 6:23–27. On *glory* see on vs 4, 6 and Ex. 40:34. The *fire* that came and consumed the sacrifices may have been something like a bolt of lightning. It did not ignite the sacrifices, which were already burning from the day's offerings, but rather consumed the remains instantly (*cf.* Jdg. 13:15–21; 1 Ki. 18:38; according to 2 Ch. 7:1, a similar event crowned the dedication of the temple that replaced the tabernacle). The people's response to God's presence and favour was the shout of joy and prostration of worship (*cf.* Heb. 12:28–29).

10:1–20 The judgment on Nadab and Abihu

10:1–7 Fire from the LORD. The abruptness of the opening verses of this chapter captures the suddenness of the change from joy to horror. All through chs. 8–9 it was repeated that everything was being done 'as the LORD commanded', but here Nadab and Abihu, the two eldest sons of Aaron, are suddenly doing what God had *not* commanded. Disobedience stalks the stage. *Unauthorised fire* (1) is unexplained. The Hebrew (*zārâ*) means 'strange', 'from outside'. Perhaps they took fire from outside the sanctuary instead of from the altar (*cf.* 16:12), as if to say, 'Any fire will do'. Such fire would be unholy, unclean, 'illicit' (NEB), and therefore, in the context of all that had gone on so meticulously up to this point, wantonly offensive. Their action with it was also usurping the role of the high priest, and therefore included presumption, or perhaps jealous impatience. Their behaviour was not just an accidental slip in a minor detail of ritual, but a cavalier disregard for the most serious meaning of the events they were part of. It is as if a Christian minister in the middle of celebrating the Holy Communion were to inject rites or objects associated with the occult.

God answered their false fire with the real fire of his holy anger. Again, it was probably something like a bolt of lightning rather than a conflagration, since their priestly clothes were not destroyed but turned to shrouds (5). V2 deliberately echoes 9:24. Instead of the fire of blessing that produced a shout of joy, there came the fire of judgment that produced shocked silence. Aaron was 'dumbfounded' (NEB). Moses alone could speak into that silence, with words that ought to have made priests cautious and diligent for ever after, but sadly did not (3). *I will show myself holy* would be better translated, 'I must be treated as holy' (NEB). The closer a person is to God, the more careful they need to be about his holiness. Otherwise they bring dishonour on God among the rest of the people (3b). It is bad enough to treat the things of God with contempt oneself; it is far worse to cause others to do so (*cf.* 1 Sa. 2:12–17, 29–30; 3:13; Lk. 17:1–2).

The severity of God's judgment here, which still shocks us, is also related to the position of privilege and responsibility that Nathan and Abihu held. Their judgment had an exemplary, warning purpose. It is a recurring principle in the Bible that greater privilege exposes a person to severer discipline. Moses himself never saw the promised land because of an act similarly described as failure to respect God's holiness (Nu. 20:12). It also applied to the nation as a whole; they would be punished precisely because of their unique covenant relationship with God (Am. 3:2). If we find this OT story of summary judgment uncomfortable, we should remember that the NT has some equally severe things to say about the responsibility of having

witnessed the works of God or being in positions of leadership (Lk. 10:12–15; *cf.* 12:48; Heb 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 1 Pet. 4:17; Jas. 3:1).

10:8–11 Priests' responsibilities. First, priests were *not to drink* alcohol before going on duty in the sanctuary (9). It has long been suggested that this command, coming in its present context, was given because Nadab and Abihu's sin was committed in a drunken state. This is possible, but the text does not say so. The reason more probably lies in the following verses about the duties of the priests, which needed a clear head. Wine, in the OT, is one of God's gifts and blessings in creation, suitable for celebration (Ps. 104:15) and also effective in dulling pain (*e.g.* of bereavement; *cf.* Pr. 31:7). In excess, however, it confuses and debauches (Pr. 23:20–21, 29–35), and so it is to be avoided by those who need unclouded judgment to exercise serious responsibilities (Pr. 31:4–5). Priests were not required to refrain from wine at all times (that was part of the voluntary Nazirite vow, which was normally temporary; see Nu. 6:1–20; *cf.* Am. 2:12) but only while on duty. Habitual drunkenness among the priests was particularly condemned by the prophets, precisely because it destroyed their teaching ability, and thus left the people with no moral guidance or knowledge of God (Is. 28:7–10; Ho. 4, esp. v11). In the NT the same duty of moderation and soberness is laid on Christians and especially on those who teach and exercise pastoral oversight (Eph. 5:18; 1 Tim. 3:2–3, 8; Tit. 2:2–3).

Secondly, priests were to know and keep clear the essential distinctions that underlay the whole of Israel's life, namely between the *holy and the common, the unclean and the clean* (10). On the significance of these terms see the commentary on ch. 11.

Thirdly, the priests were the teachers of Israel (11). This side of the priests' duties is often overlooked, since we tend to focus on their sacrificial role. But it was a vital part of the priesthood. It was through the priest that God's law, and thereby his character, values, priorities and will, would be made known to ordinary people in the community. This is emphasized elsewhere, both positively and, when they failed, negatively (Dt. 17:9–13; 33:8–10; Ho. 4; Mal. 2:1–9). Priests and Levites were prominent in the educational side of major reforms in the history of Israel (2 Ch. 17:7–9; 19:4–11; Ne. 8:7–8). This role of the priests in teaching Israel has its counterpart in Israel as a whole being God's vehicle for teaching the nations his law (Is. 2:3; 42:1–7; 51:4).

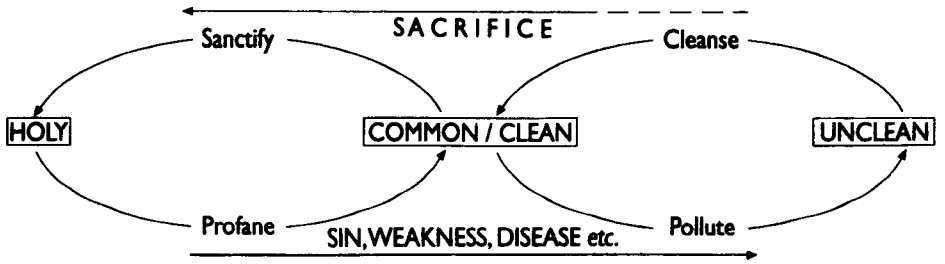
10:12–20 Conclusion. After the disruption caused by sin and its punishment, the story returns to its pattern, as the remaining rituals and clearing up are seen to. The inability of Aaron and his two remaining sons to eat the meat of the sin offering on the day of their bereavement is accepted by Moses (19–20), and so the section ends with the same positive note that had concluded chs. 8 and 9.

11:1 – 17:16 The diagnosis and treatment of uncleanness

This section of the book follows up the instruction to the priests in 10:10 by giving detailed distinctions between the clean and the unclean, and setting out the methods of dealing with uncleanness. It deals with uncleanness in relation to food and contact with animals (ch. 11), childbirth (ch. 12), skin diseases and fungal infections (chs. 13 – 14) and bodily discharges (ch. 15). It leads up to the great Day of Atonement (ch. 16), which had the purpose of cleansing the sanctuary and the nation fully before God. The section closes with a postscript on sacred and 'secular' meat (ch. 17).

At this point we need to clarify the meaning of these categories which were so fundamental to the Israelite world-view, but so foreign to our own. 10:10 sets out two pairs of contrasts: *the holy and the common*; *the clean and the unclean*. The second pair is really a subdivision of the common. Reality for the Israelite was divided into the holy (*i.e.* God himself and everything that was set apart for him or closely associated with him) and the common (*i.e.* everything else). It is important to note that the opposite of holy was not 'sinful', but *common*. The word (sometimes translated 'profane', which has a misleading flavour in modern English) basically means, ordinary, everyday, the normal state of things in the world we live in. This latter category was then made up of what was clean and unclean. The normal state was that people and things were common and clean, but pollution of all sorts could make them unclean. Some things and states were unclean by definition and could never be cleansed (*e.g.* some animals, death), but usually that which was or had become unclean could be restored to 'normality' (*i.e.* the state of being clean and common) by appropriate rituals.

Similarly, only God is holy by definition, but certain people and things could be made holy (sanctified) by appropriate rituals. Conversely, wrong actions or contacts could de-sanctify (profane) the holy. In general, sin, weakness and various abnormalities profaned the holy and polluted the clean. In the opposite direction, it was the primary job of the blood of sacrifices to cleanse the unclean and to sanctify the common. The state of being common/clean was normal, while holiness and uncleanness were the 'abnormal' states in opposite directions.



The one thing that must not be allowed to happen, and which so many of the levitical rules were designed to prevent, was for the holy to come in contact with the unclean. That produced a kind of theological and spiritual short-circuit, and the shock could be fatal, as Nadab and Abihu were neither the first nor the last to discover. Ultimately, it was on the cross, when the unthinkable took place – namely, that the utterly holy gave himself up to the utterly unclean (death) – that the only truly effective sacrificial blood of Christ himself enabled an unclean world and humanity to be reconciled to their holy Creator God. To paraphrase Paul somewhat: he, the holy one, became unclean, so that through his blood we who are unclean might be both cleansed and sanctified to share in his holiness.

It was the task of the priests to teach and maintain these distinctions, so that ordinary people would be enabled to stay in a state of normal cleanness, or be quickly restored to it when they became unclean through the events of everyday life in the home or on the farm. This overall purpose is succinctly expressed at the end of the whole section (15:31). It fits in with what we have seen to be the primary concern of Leviticus as a whole, namely that God may continue to dwell in the midst of a people who are clean. The laws that follow must be seen as a means to that end, not as an end in themselves.

11:1–47 Clean and unclean food and animals

The chapter falls into two broad sections: vs 1–23 deal with animals which may or may not be eaten as *food*, and vs 24–25 deal with uncleanness caused by *contact* with certain animals. It should be noted that many of the species named in this chapter cannot be identified with certainty, hence the variation in translations and commentaries.

11:1–23 Questions relating to food. The animal kingdom is further subdivided into the three primary spheres of the creation story: land (2–8), water (9–12) and the air (13–23). In each case, general guidelines are given as to what could be eaten and what was to be treated as unclean or *detestable* (the word is a technical term in relation to diet here, not a judgment on the animal itself). Of land animals, only those which had divided hooves and chewed their food thoroughly (either ruminants or those that appeared to be) could be eaten. This would be primarily domesticated animals. Animals which failed either or both criteria were not to be eaten. Of water creatures, only those with fins and scales were allowed. Certain birds, most of which seem to be birds of prey or carrion (*i.e.* that eat dead animals), were not to be eaten; neither were swarming insects, except those that clearly have legs for hopping.

11:24–45 Questions relating to contact. Human contact with animals in rural, agricultural life is frequent and unavoidable. Guidelines are here given as to the kinds of contact that made a person ritually unclean. Perhaps because of its frequency and unavoidable nature, the uncleanness contracted this way was relatively minor, lasting only for the day on which it occurred and requiring only ordinary washing, not sacrifice, to be remedied. It is notable that contact with living animals, even ones that were unclean and therefore not to be eaten, was not polluting. You could ride camels or asses and stay clean (ritually speaking!). Only the carcasses of dead animals polluted the person who touched or carried them, or utensils that they fell in or on. And that was true for clean animals, except when sacrificed (39–40), as well as unclean ones (24–28). Death was always unclean. The other major category of animal that caused pollution when the carcass came in contact with people or things people use, is described as 'swarming' (29–42). *Moves about the ground* (NIV) is too vague. The word seems to refer to creatures whose movements are slithery or rapid or otherwise abnormal (from a human point of view!).

The chapter ends (44–47) with a reminder of the purpose behind the rules and of the historical motivation for keeping them, namely that the Israelites were the people whom God had redeemed out of Egypt and, therefore, they were to be distinctive (holy). *Be holy, because I am holy*, is almost a motto in Leviticus (*cf.* 19:2; 20:26). Addressed to the whole nation, the requirement of holiness did not mean that they should all be like the priests, but rather that just as their priests were to the mass of the people,

so they as a nation should be to the rest of the nations. This demand for national distinctiveness (*cf.* 18:3; 20:24, 26) gives us a first clue to understanding the meaning of the clean-unclean distinctions in this chapter.

Four questions may be asked in relation to these laws:

1. *Is there a rationale behind the categories?* Many attempts have been made to explain why certain species were clean and others unclean. Some regard the distinctions as purely arbitrary and intended, therefore, as a test of pure obedience. Some suggest that animals associated with pagan cults were unclean, but this does not hold in many cases, *e.g.* bulls were sacred in Canaanite Baal worship. A popular view regards hygiene and health as a major factor. It is true that some of the unclean animals (*e.g.* pigs and carrion birds) have a greater likelihood of conveying contaminations and parasites. It is also true that many of the precautions in relation to dead flesh (especially thorough washing) make good sense (as do many of the public health requirements in chs. 13 – 15). However, while we may honour the wisdom of the Creator in such details, this theory is far from explaining many of the distinctions and is not even hinted at in the text itself.

The best recent explanation, from the perspective of anthropology, takes note of the three primary classifications (land, water, air) and the references to forms of movement in each element. There is a preference for what is regarded as 'normal' in broad terms. The Israelite priestly understanding of holiness and cleanness was strongly based on a concern to preserve the wholeness or integrity of things and to avoid the mixing or confusion of categories. This reflects the event of creation itself, which was a matter of careful distinctions between light and darkness, heaven and earth, land and sea *etc.* This was carried over into the classification of animals that conformed to a simple picture of what was 'standard' for each sphere. Hooved ruminants were 'standard' domestic land animals, suitable for sacrifice. Fins and scales were the 'standard' equipment of sea creatures. Birds of prey and carrion eaters obviously ate flesh with its blood and, therefore, behaved in an 'unclean' way. Creatures that moved in a mixture of ways and thus disturbed the boundaries, or whose movements were wily and unpredictable, were also 'abnormal'. These categories were general and from the perspective of the average human being as a cook, not a biologist. All that was at stake was the question of whether a particular animal was suitable for eating. Uncleanness for that purpose was not a rejection of the creature itself or a denial of its place within the wonders of God's praiseworthy creation, as the Psalmists and others so often declare.

2. *Why did God make such restrictions on food?* We have already noted the importance of 11:44–47 in its call for community holiness. The distinct food laws of Israel were to be a mark or symbol of their distinctiveness as a nation (*cf.* Dt. 14:2, 21). Just as God had limited his choice among the nations of the earth to Israel alone, so they must limit their choice among the animals. The distinction between unclean and clean animals thus mirrored symbolically the distinction between the rest of the nations and Israel. The food laws, therefore, acted as a constant reminder to Israel of the importance of holiness and the call to be different. It was not a matter of superiority (any more than clean animals were 'superior' to the rest), but because of God's redemptive work in Israel's history and redemptive purpose for their future. And since the food laws were only a part of the whole law, which, even in Leviticus, included the whole range of moral and spiritual, personal and social requirements, they were like a badge or uniform which makes a statement about the wearer and commits him or her to certain expected standards of behaviour. Holiness was thus woven into everyday life. Every meal and every encounter with the ordinary world of work reminded the Israelite family of God's redemption of his people and the moral values they were committed to.

3. *Are the food laws still binding on Christians?* The simple answer is No, but it is important to understand why. Jesus explicitly abrogated the validity of the distinction between clean and unclean food by declaring that it was the *moral* distinction, which the law signified, that really counted. Thus, 'cleanness' and 'uncleanness' are no longer a matter of what goes into the stomach, but of what comes out of the heart (Mk. 7:14–23). The greater importance of the moral over the merely ritual was, of course, something that the OT itself taught, so it was not merely that perception which led to the abrogation of the food laws in the NT.

Immediately after this saying about 'clean' and 'unclean' Jesus went to Tyre, encountered a Gentile woman and healed her daughter. This points to the major reason for the removal of the distinction between clean and unclean food, namely the removal of the distinction between Jew and Gentile, which Jesus' action (an exception to his normal practice in his lifetime) prefigured. This meaning is sealed in Acts 10, where Peter's vision, by which he was taught that the division of the animal kingdom was no longer valid, was to prepare him for his visit to the Gentile Cornelius. The epoch-making abolition of the barrier between Jew and Gentile

through Christ meant that the distinctive badge of Jewish separateness had no further theological significance in the new, multi-racial people of God (Gal. 3:26–29; Eph. 2:11–22). The division of the animal kingdom that had mirrored it was, therefore, also abolished.

4. *What can Christians learn from these laws?* First, the importance of the distinctiveness of being the people of God in the midst of the world. Even for OT Israel, ritual cleanness, from the kitchen to the sanctuary, was meant to symbolize God's greater requirement of moral integrity, social justice and covenant loyalty. In fact, as the prophets (and Jesus) vigorously pointed out, if these latter things were lacking, then ritual cleanness of the most scrupulous kind at every level was worthless. If Christians were as serious about moral distinctiveness as Israel was about ritual cleanness, then our 'salt' and 'light' might have greater power in the world.

Secondly, that food is still a matter of moral importance. What, how, where and with whom you eat are all still significant parts of our wider cultural customs. As such, along with all factors in any given culture, they can be open to dispute, offence and misunderstanding. Thus, Paul's detailed discussions of questions related to food (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8), though primarily in a Jew- Gentile context, have powerful moral force on the whole range of issues over which Christians disagree. The abolition of the *law* about food does not abolish the need for love, acceptance and sensitivity. While a Christian *may* eat anything, there are circumstances where he *should not* eat some things (Rom. 14:14–21). Is a Christian bound by the law of Leviticus about food? Yes! Not by the law of ch. 11, but rather by 19:18, 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (*cf.* Rom. 13:9–10).

12:1–8 Uncleanness due to childbirth

Ch. 11 dealt with uncleanness caused by external factors – eating or contact with animals. Chs. 12–15 deal primarily with uncleanness caused by functions or conditions of the human body (except for the sections on infections in houses or fabrics). It is important to realize that the concept of ritual uncleanness does not necessarily imply or presume moral sinfulness. All acts of sin made a person unclean, but not all forms of uncleanness were due to sin or a matter of moral blame. There is nothing inherently sinful about the animals that were declared unclean in ch. 11. Nor is there anything morally sinful about menstruation or ulcers. However, in the priestly thinking, discharges from the body, particularly involving blood, were a form of unwholeness. Blood was life, and so loss of it in any form was a rupture of normal health and potentially a cause of death. Such discharges, therefore, made a person temporarily unfit to participate in sanctuary worship in the presence of holy things and people. The unclean must not encounter the holy. Uncleanness was a state of ceremonial or religious quarantine, not a state of moral sin (except in so far as all were sinners, the clean and unclean alike).

This point is particularly relevant in ch. 12. It is impossible, in view of the way the OT presents childbearing as a command of God (Gn. 1:28), one of his best gifts (Pss. 127:3; 128:3–6) and one of the highest human joys, to imagine that the uncleanness associated with childbirth here somehow implies that it was sinful in itself. Nor, in view of Gn. 2:24, not to mention the Song of Solomon, was it because sexual intercourse between husband and wife was regarded as sinful. David's remark in Ps. 51:5 is not a comment on either his mother's morality or the act which conceived him, but a profound awareness of the depth of *his own* sinfulness, *i.e.* there had never been a time when he was 'innocent'. The reason for the uncleanness given in the text itself is the discharge of blood which accompanies the birth, and then continues in reducing amounts for a period of two to six weeks afterwards (technically known as *lochia*). The period of uncleanness thus lasted longer than for normal menstruation (15:19–24). No reason is given as to why the total period for a male child was forty days, whereas for a female child it was eighty days, though some suggest it may be in view of the girl's future expectation of menstruation.

The law, though framed in a category unfamiliar to us, namely ritual uncleanness, had a socially beneficial effect in giving to the mother a period of postnatal seclusion and privacy.

At the end of the period of uncleanness, normal social and religious intercourse was resumed, after sacrifices which effected both atonement and cleansing. The atonement was for the general sinfulness that any worshipper must be forgiven for when coming to God, not, as we have noted, because of any sin attaching to childbirth in itself. Luke records how these ceremonies were carried out after the birth of Jesus, accompanied by prophetic words and greetings (Lk. 2:21–39).

Note. 3 On circumcision see the commentary on Gn. 17.

13:1 – 14:57 Uncleanness due to infections

The priests were busy people in OT Israel! On top of their duties in the sanctuary and their responsibility as teachers of the law, they also functioned as public health inspectors. These three chapters deal with the detection and

diagnosis of infections of the skin, 'infections' in fabrics and 'infections' in buildings, along with prescribed action in each case. Though obviously technically different, the outward appearance of the three categories had enough similarities to be grouped together as causing uncleanness and warranting careful treatment. The chapters divide into three major sections, as indicated by the heading *The LORD said to Moses* and the concluding *These are the regulations for ...* : diagnosis and action in cases of human skin disease and contaminated fabrics (13:1–59); ritual cleansing for people who had recovered from skin diseases (14:1–32); and diagnosis, action and cleansing in cases of 'infections' in houses (14:33–57).

The Hebrew word that applies to all three conditions is *ṣāra'aṯ*. It used to be translated 'leprosy', but it is now questioned whether the symptoms described correspond to leprosy proper (Hansen's disease), and, in any case, that term can hardly be used of fabrics or buildings. It seems that it covers a range of conditions where swelling, discoloration, scaliness, flakiness or mouldiness are present.

13:1–59 Infectious skin diseases and contaminated clothing. It is not possible to be certain about the clinical identification of the variety of diseases referred to here by their symptoms. It has been suggested that they include psoriasis (2–17), favus (a form of ringworm; 29–37) and leucoderma (38–40), as well as lesions in scars caused by boils (18–23) and burns (24–28). The descriptions may also include eczema, herpes and some forms of leprosy. The instructions gave the priest simple guidelines for an initial examination, followed by subsequent checks after specified periods of confinement, to determine whether the condition was static or healing (and thus ritually clean) or spreading and infectious (and thus ritually unclean). The priest had the duty of distinguishing serious skin disease from minor complaints (such as a simple rash) that would heal quickly. The main criteria for skin diseases were that the infection had to be *chronic* (11) or shown to be lasting more than a week or two (4–8, 26–28, 33–34) and be *more than skin deep* (3, 20, 25, 30). *Raw flesh* or discoloured *hair* in an infected area were other indications of uncleanness (10, 14–15, 20, 24–25, 30–37). In the case of fabrics, it had to last more than a week (50–58) and be more than could simply be removed by washing (55).

Isolation of the sufferer, first during the initial diagnosis period and then more permanently if it turned out to be a serious disease, may be regarded as sound practice to prevent cross infection in the community. Its prime purpose from the levitical perspective, however, was to remove the unclean from possible contact with the holy. In other words, the determining factor was religious, even though it had a beneficial hygienic contribution to public health. The same point holds for the actions applied to contaminated fabrics (47–58). It was obviously sensible, from a health point of view, to destroy (and especially to burn) fabrics with fungal or other infections, but the main reason was to prevent them polluting those who wore or used them, since they would then be at risk, and put others at risk, if they went unclean to worship.

The unfortunate person pronounced unclean by the priest because of a serious skin disease was required to do several things which were tantamount to mourning rites, involving *torn clothes*, *unkempt hair* and a *covered lower face* (45–46). In a sense he or she was virtually counted 'dead', since the disease had allowed death to invade a still living body, and was condemned to a life of separation from both the community and the place of worship (*cf.* 2 Ch. 26:21). The sufferer had to live *outside the camp*, *i.e.* away from the homes of the community, which in later Israel meant outside the walls or gates of the village or city (*cf.* 2 Ki. 7:3–11). It was a tragic condition. Once again, we need to remember that this uncleanness was not technically a matter of personal sin. But in OT thinking, disease and sin were linked, not strictly in the sense that sick people were regarded as paying for their own sin (though the book of Job shows that such popular misapprehension did exist and needed to be corrected), but rather in the fact that the universal human fate of death was the result of universal human sin (Gn. 3), and any form of disease was advance warning of death and could mark its imminence.

In a general sense, disease, along with other natural misfortunes, could be part of the effects of God's judgment on the nation for covenant unfaithfulness (*cf.* Lv. 26:16), and there were exceptional cases where physical illness was a sign of God's punishment of an individual (*e.g.* Nu. 12:10–15; 2 Ch. 26:16–23). However, the persons suffering from the skin diseases described in this chapter were isolated from the community because of the visible, infectious nature of their uncleanness, not because they were regarded as sinners simply by being sick. Other kinds of sickness were not treated in this way. The blind and the deaf, for example, were not excluded from the worshipping community (which makes it more ironic that the blind man whom Jesus healed was driven out of the synagogue, in a context of misunderstanding about the link between illness and sin, *after* he had been healed; Jn. 9). This is significant inasmuch as both blindness and deafness were used as metaphors for the spiritual and moral

effects of sin in a way that 'leprosy' never was in the OT. Hence, it is unlikely that 'leprosy' was particularly linked with sin.

Whether or not 'leprosy' was seen as indicative or symbolic of sin, its consequences were socially and religiously disastrous. This is what makes the stories of Jesus' compassionate approach to such sufferers all the more remarkable. He not only ignored their social ostracism by approaching them (as he did for other marginalized people), but he very pointedly touched them as well (Mk. 4:40–45), thus rejecting that source of uncleanness as decisively as he rejected the idea of unclean food. Just as he threw open the door of the kingdom of God to 'sinners', so also he drew the sick, the disfigured and the lost back into communion with the saving, healing God. Christian medical mission and compassionate ministry among the sick (including especially those whose sickness has been socially devastating, such as leprosy sufferers, and more recently AIDS sufferers) have always been powerful signs of the reign of God, precisely because they manifest the reign of one who himself was 'despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering . . . one from whom men hide their faces' (Is. 53:3).

14:1–32 Cleansing rituals for those healed of skin diseases. The rituals prescribed in this chapter were for the purpose of admitting back into the community one who had been excluded because of the uncleanness of serious skin disease, but who had subsequently recovered from it. The rituals, therefore, were not an attempt to achieve healing, but followed the recognition that healing had already taken place (3; hence, Jesus' instruction to the ten lepers to present themselves to a priest called for an act of faith; they were healed *en route*, Lk. 17:11–19).

The priests in Israel were not 'medicine men' with secret powers. The instructions, actions and rituals all through these chapters were open to the lay person who, in a sense, could verify the diagnosis of the priest. They were not the possession of a religious élite, incomprehensible to anyone else. It is notable that in all these regulations there is no attempt to manipulate a cure by magical or occult means, nor is there any mention of demonic causes. This is not because disease was fatalistically regarded as incurable but because all healing was in the hands of God, and the appropriate recourse was to prayer and his word (Dt. 32:39, Nu. 12:13; 2 Ki. 5, 20). We may note in passing that the assumption in these chapters that some individuals among God's people would become sick, not as a result of disobedience or blatant sin, and might or might not be healed, rules out the interpretation sometimes made of Ex. 15:26 and Dt. 7:15 that God has removed the curse of sickness from his people and will always heal them.

The cleansing rituals were lengthy, significant and public. They provided not only subjective assurance to the sufferer that all was now well, but also objective social legitimation of his or her return to the community, and especially to its worship. They amounted to the celebration of new life as the person was restored from virtual death to the land of the living and to communion with God. Once again, we should remember that the offering of the required sacrifices related to the sin and guilt which are common to all, and were not designed to win forgiveness for whatever sin was thought to have 'caused' the illness. Doubtless, if sufferers, now healed, considered that their affliction had been caused by divine anger against particular sin, then the healing combined with these sacrifices, would subjectively assure them that they were forgiven as well as ritually clean. But the atonement declared here is technically related to the cleansing away of pollution (not necessarily of specific personal sin), as was the case with the woman after childbirth (12:8) and certainly with the infected house after its cleansing, when the same form of words is used (14:53).

14:33–53 Treatment of infected houses. The conditions described here under the same general term, *ṣāra'aṯ*, probably included fungal growths, mildew, dry rot or termite infestation. The treatment is similar to what was to be done for persons or fabrics. After initial inspection and a week's delay, the infected parts were to be removed and replaced with good materials (36–42). If that failed to stop the rot, the whole building was to be destroyed (43–47). Some kinds of rot would make it dangerous to live in anyway. If, however, the 'surgery' was successful, then the house could be cleansed by an identical ritual as for the cleansing of a person, except for the omission of the sacrifices at the altar (48–53).

A house had to be clean, but it had no personal communion with God. Nevertheless, apart from the strictly personal and moral factor just mentioned, it is interesting that similar rituals were prescribed for buildings as for humans. The OT concept of wholeness included the environment as well as the person. God's desire is for clean people in a clean world. The rituals of Leviticus sought to achieve that within the limited span of Israel. Only the redemptive work of God in Christ will finally achieve it for his whole creation when God will dwell with his people in a cleansed earth (Rev. 21:1–8, 27).

15:1–33 Uncleanness due to bodily discharges

This chapter describes uncleanness that resulted from emissions from the male and female reproductive organs. It distinguishes between chronic and abnormal discharges on the one hand and intermittent, normal discharges on the other. Both kinds, however, caused ritual uncleanness. Here, as throughout these chapters on various kinds of uncleanness, we must keep in mind that uncleanness was not *in itself* a matter of sin, though it could be associated with sinful acts. This chapter includes forms of uncleanness that arose from perfectly legitimate actions or natural functions. Uncleanness simply prevented a person from participating in worship. Except in cases of serious skin disease (ch. 13) it did not unduly isolate a person from the community, but imposed restrictions on his or her physical contacts.

15:1–18 Male discharges. The word *bodily* (2) is lit. 'from the flesh', a word which in some contexts can mean the genital organ. In this chapter, since all the other cases involve the sexual organs, it is most likely that it is referring to the penis and not to anal discharges, such as haemorrhoids.

Vs 2–15 deal with chronic discharges. The condition described is probably gonorrhea, which causes infected secretions and may last several months. The uncleanness affects not only the patient, but also anything likely to have come in contact with his infected organ. The hygienic precautions against secondary infection are notable, particularly regarding droplet and sputum infection (8), but again the primary concern was religious, since similar rules applied to contact with menstrual discharge, where there was no risk of catching an infectious disease. After such discharge had cleared up the cleansing rites were comparatively simple and cheap compared to those for serious skin disease (13–15).

Vs 16–18 deal with intermittent discharges. The normal ejaculation of semen, whether in intercourse (18) or by spontaneous nocturnal emission (*cf.* Dt. 23:10), also made a man unclean for a day. Simple washing effected cleansing.

15:19–30 Female discharges. These are dealt with in reverse order from the man's, producing a 'mirror' arrangement that shows the balance and equivalence of the two sections.

Intermittent discharges are dealt with first (19–24). The discharge from normal menstruation lasts about a week, and so during that period a woman was ritually unclean. Direct or indirect contact with her made another person unclean for a day, except for intercourse, which made the man unclean for seven days. This last prescription (24) probably deals with unintentional contact, where a man has intercourse with his wife just as her period is beginning and finds himself stained with blood. Once menstruation was apparent, intercourse was prohibited (18:19). Like male emission of semen, female menstruation required no sacrificial cleansing, but just simple washing.

Then chronic discharges are dealt with. Various clinical factors can prolong menstrual bleeding and such conditions made the sufferer unclean as long as the bleeding lasted. Although the law specifies only the woman's bedding as 'infected' with uncleanness, there would have been caution about anything or anyone she touched. This is what made the action of the woman suffering precisely this condition all the more courageous when she risked the hostility of a crowd in order to touch Jesus (Mk. 5:24–34). The cleansing sacrifices are exactly the same as for a chronic male disorder (28–30).

V31 is an important verse and summarizes the reasons for the regulations in this chapter, and indeed for the laws regarding the distinctions between cleanness and uncleanness in chs. 11–15. Uncleanness defiled the *dwelling place* of God in the midst of Israel. It therefore not only put at risk the persons concerned (who, like Nadab and Abihu, might die for their disregard for God's holiness) but also the whole community, if God were to be so offended by the pollution of his dwelling place that he might abandon it altogether.

While the modern mind finds such regulations fussy and restrictive, a number of positive aspects can be pointed out. First, there is an interesting equality of male and female in the chapter. Sexual intercourse makes both partners ritually unclean (18), and the cleansing rites after abnormal discharges are the same for both men and women.

Secondly, anthropologists point out that in many traditional societies menstrual restrictions provide a measure of social relief and privacy for womenfolk during their periods. Certainly the prohibition on intercourse then inculcates sensitivity. The Creator knew about the effects of hormones before humans knew about their existence.

Thirdly, while it would be wrong to think that the laws in this chapter indicate that sexuality, sexual intercourse, or the physical organs related to it, were considered somehow sinful, they do put certain restraints on sexual activity. In any culture, there are some things which are good and right in themselves but inappropriate and offensive in some contexts (*e.g.* wearing casual clothes at a formal occasion or telling

jokes at a funeral service). In Israel, sexual intercourse in marriage was good and wholesome, but out of place in the seriousness of war (1 Sa. 21:4–5; 2 Sa. 11:11) or worship (Ex. 19:14–15). The most significant practical effect of 15:18, therefore, was to make it impossible for sexual rites and 'sacred prostitution' to be part of the worship of Yahweh. Fertility cults, in which intercourse was given a sacred, ritual significance, were excluded. Similarly, prostitutes, because of their more or less permanent state of uncleanness (quite apart from the morality of the practice), could never legitimately function in relation to Israel's worship.

16:1–34 The Day of Atonement

This chapter is like a hinge for the whole book of Leviticus. It brings to a climax all the preceding chapters about priestly duties in relation to sacrifice and to the diagnosis and treatment of uncleanness. The Day of Atonement (*yôm kippûrîm*; the name is given to the day in 23:26–27) provided an annual opportunity to 'wipe the slate clean' by cleansing both the sanctuary and the people of all the defilements that had not been noticed and dealt with routinely. Fixed in the annual calendar exactly six months after the spring Passover, which celebrated the unique historical event of Israel's redemption, it provided the ongoing means of cleansing God's redeemed people so that he could continue to dwell among them.

On initial reading the chapter seems confused by repetition. However, it becomes clearer once we recognize the characteristic Hebrew structure of presenting an introduction and summary of main points before filling in the details. The chapter begins with a narrative introduction (1–2), lists the basic requirements for the day's ritual (3–5), briefly summarizes the most important actions (6–10) and then describes the stages of the ritual in detail (11–22). This is followed by the 'winding down' rites to cleanse the participants (23–28), instructions for the people (29–31) and a concluding summary (32–34).

16:1–2 Introduction. These verses link the institution of the day to the events of the ordination of the priests and the deaths of Nadab and Abihu (chs. 8–10), reminding us once again of the basic narrative framework in which Leviticus is set. The presence of God was most powerfully localized in the inner sanctuary, the *Most Holy Place* (lit. 'holy of holies'), which was *behind the curtain* that divided the Tent of Meeting in two (see diagram of the tabernacle on p.173). There stood the *ark* (see Ex. 25:10–22) with its *atonement cover*. This last item (*kappōreṯ*) was the lid of the ark, on which there were two golden cherubim. An older translation, 'mercy seat' (KJV, RSV), is misleading in that it was not a seat, except perhaps metaphorically (*cf.* Ps. 99:1). It does preserve the idea that it was a place of infinite holiness and yet also infinite mercy, inasmuch as God would meet Moses there (Ex. 25:22). The word probably is related to *kipper* ('to atone'), hence the NIV translation. Because of the intense holiness of the presence of God there, no-one, not even Aaron, was to penetrate the curtain except on this day and in the prescribed manner.

16:3–5 Required animals and clothing. Five animals were required: one bull, two goats and two rams. The high priest's clothes for this day were remarkably simple. When he represented God before the people, he was attired in robes of sumptuous colour and glory. When he represented the people before God, he wore little more than a slave would: linen tunic, shorts, belt and turban.

16:6–10 Summary. The day's core proceedings are listed. The sacrifice of the bull as the priests' sin offering was followed by the selection by lot of one of the goats to be sacrificed as the people's sin offering and the other to be driven off into the wilderness.

16:11–22 Main rituals in detail. There were four main movements in the ritual drama, the first three of which involved the sprinkling of blood, the primary means of ritual cleansing.

First, the bull was sacrificed as a sin offering for the priests, including the high priest himself (11–14). Nobody was exempt from the need of cleansing. The high priest then made this first entry into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain, wafting ahead of him a cloud of incense that would hide the ark from direct view. He then sprinkled the cleansing blood in front of the atonement cover of the ark.

Secondly, emerging from the Tent of Meeting (doubtless to the relief of the watching people), the high priest then sacrificed the goat selected for the people's sin offering, returned with its blood into the Most Holy Place and repeated the sprinkling. The purpose was to cleanse the sanctuary from whatever *uncleanness*, *rebellion* and *sins* of the people had defiled it during the past year (16). The instruction that he should *do the same for the Tent of Meeting* (16b), probably means that all the other objects in the Tent were similarly cleansed by sprinkling (*cf.* Heb. 9:21–22). In all this, the high priest acted alone (17). The point that there was only one mediator was picked up in the NT and related to Christ (1 Tim. 2:5).

Thirdly, emerging the second time from the Tent, the high priest performed a similar cleansing rite on the altar, using a mixture of the blood of the bull and the goat. This indicated that the priests as well as the people could have

been agents of contaminating it with inadvertent uncleanness.

Finally, the climax of the ceremonies, and from the people's point of view, the most visible part, was the driving off of the *scapegoat*. This is probably the best translation for what was lit. called 'the goat for *azāzēl*' (8, 10, 26). The meaning of *azāzēl* is unknown. In view of 17:7 it was almost certainly not the name of some demon or spirit of the wilderness to whom the live goat was sent. The NEB's translation 'the Precipice' reflects the fact that in later Jewish tradition, the goat was driven to a cliff in the wilderness and pushed over. Some see that meaning also in the expression *a solitary place* (22), which is lit. 'a place of cutting off'. These are guesses. What is certain is the significance of the ritual, because the text explains it with unusual clarity and emphasis in vs 21–22. *All the sins* of the people were symbolically laid on the goat, which then carried them far away. God not only forgave sin and cleansed away its defilement, he even removed it out of sight and memory (*cf.* Ps. 103:12. Mi. 7:19).

16:23–28 Concluding rituals. When the central drama was over there remained the 'tidying up'. The high priest was to wash and put back on his normal clothes, and then offer the two rams (3,5) as burnt offerings for the priests and for the people. Other helpers were similarly to go through rites of cleansing after contact with the sin-laden goat or the sacrificial carcasses.

16:29–34 Instructions for the people. The annual date is given. The seventh (lunar) month falls in late September and early October. The day was one of utter solemnity and, therefore, not merely treated as a Sabbath, but also as a day of 'affliction'. The command to *deny* oneself probably meant penitence and fasting (*cf.* Is. 58:3, 5, Ps. 35:13).

Note. The Day of Atonement imagery in the letter to the Hebrews. We have already seen that the NT in general uses sacrificial imagery to explain the death of Christ, but it is the writer of Hebrews who makes most detailed use of the specific rites of the Day of Atonement in relation to the crucifixion. In Heb. 9:1 – 10:22 especially he points out both the comparisons and the contrasts. His climactic point is that the tearing of the curtain that separated off the Most Holy Place at the time of Christ's death (Lk. 23:45) symbolically demonstrated the spiritual truth that Christ has opened the way into the very presence of God by his blood. His sacrifice was not for his own sake, need never be repeated and has eternal efficacy. Every believer, therefore, not only may but should come frequently and with confidence to the place where the high priest could go only once a year (Heb. 10:19–22). The scapegoat is never explicitly used in the NT itself as a picture of Christ, though early Christian writings did make the connection. However, the double imagery that Christ was both 'made sin' for us (2 Cor. 5:21) and that he 'carried our sins' (1 Pet. 2:24) matches the role of both goats on the Day of Atonement – the one sacrificed as a sin offering and the one that carried off the confessed sins of the people. For in his death, 'the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Is. 53:6).

17:1–16 Supplementary regulations on sacrifices and meat

This chapter concludes the first half of the book by adding some supplementary rules regarding sacrifices and meat-eating in order to clarify some possible areas of confusion among ordinary people. Because it is concerned with the guidance of the people rather than the ritual of the priests, some attach the chapter to the second part of the book. But it seems much more naturally linked to chs. 1 – 16, whereas 18:1–5 clearly and emphatically introduces a new section.

3–7 Domestic animals that were fit for sacrifice (*ox*, *lamb* and *goat*) were not to be killed for meat outside the tabernacle. If a family wished to have a meat meal, they must first offer the animal at the tabernacle as a *fellowship offering* (5), after which they would get the bulk of the meat back for cooking (7:12–18). This rule applied while Israel was a compact community in the wilderness. It was revoked when they settled in the land, when it would have been impracticable (Dt. 12:15, 20–22). The purpose of the law is explained in vs 5–7, which show that it was not simply to preserve the privilege of the tabernacle or the perks of the priests (or to encourage vegetarianism), but rather for the very serious purpose of eradicating idolatry (7). *Goat idols* may refer to spirits or demons of the countryside, which were visualized in he-goat form ('satyrs'). He-goat worship was part of Egyptian religion, and it seems that Egyptian idolatries survived among the Israelites for some time (*cf.* Jos. 24:14; Ezk. 20:7; 23:ff.). The phrase *to whom they prostitute themselves* was used metaphorically of idolatry (Ex. 34:15–16; Lv. 20:5–6), but could imply literal acts of ritual prostitution or copulation with animals (*cf.* Ex. 22:19–20; Lv. 18:23; 20:15–16; Ho. 4:10–14). To prevent people carrying on such idolatrous rites, under the guise of having a family party, all animal slaughter was to take place at the tabernacle.

8–9 Probably for the same reason (*i.e.* to prevent idolatrous misuse) no sacrifice was to be offered except at the tabernacle, where it would

be clearly *to the LORD, i.e.* to Yahweh, God of Israel. This rule (and the following ones) applied to the *alien living among them* as well as to the Israelites. Such aliens were accorded significant rights and consideration in OT law, but were not allowed to carry on sacrifices and rituals that would lead Israel into idolatry. On the identity of 'aliens', see the commentary on ch. 25.

10–12 The prohibition on eating blood (*i.e.* eating meat from which the blood had not been properly drained out) had already been stated (3:17; 7:26–27), but here it is explained, with repetition for added emphasis (*cf.* v 14, *The life of every creature is its blood*). The physiological facts that blood carries 'life' to all parts of the animate body and that death quickly follows serious loss of blood is here raised to a matter of moral and spiritual principle as well. The shed blood of an animal meant its life had been given up in death and thus, in the context of sacrifice, its life had ransomed and cleansed (made *atonement for*) the life of the sinful human being on whose behalf it had been slain. The primary reason for the ban on eating blood, therefore, was its sacredness as the major element in the sacrificial rituals. A secondary reason may have been that it inculcated a basic respect for life, which was not to be frivolously destroyed or treated with contempt. This was a very ancient principle in Israel, related to the covenant with Noah (Gn. 9:4–6).

13–14 These verses deal with non-sacrificial animals, game animals that were clean (*i.e.* fit to eat). They could be killed and eaten without being brought to the tabernacle for sacrifice, but the blood was to be *drained out* and 'buried'. Blood was still sacred and to be respected as 'life', even when not presented at the altar.

15–16 An animal *found dead, i.e.* one which had been neither sacrificed nor hunted and killed, was *de facto* unclean as a carcass (apart from being hygienically suspect as well). Eating such meat therefore made a person unclean. Other laws actually prohibited Israelites from deliberately eating such meat. It could be given to dogs (Ex. 22:31) or to non-Israelites (Dt. 14:21). These verses may, therefore, refer to someone who unwittingly ate meat which he discovered had not been killed and drained. His uncleanness could be simply cleansed, otherwise it became culpable (16).

In some cultures still, Christians prohibit the eating or drinking of blood because of its contextual association with idolatrous rituals. This seems a legitimate precaution in line with the primary intention of this chapter. Some Christians feel it right to avoid even relatively innocuous forms of gambling because of the association with the more serious sin of 'covetousness which is idolatry'. It is a principle which can be extended in several ways, but caution must be exercised lest it lead to the bondage of legalism or judgmental attitudes. The Council of Jerusalem, which ruled that the new Gentile converts need not be bound by circumcision and keeping the whole Mosaic law, nevertheless requested them to observe the essentials of this chapter, perhaps out of respect for the sensitivities of Jewish Christians. This was a principle which Paul lived by (see Acts 15:29 and the commentary there; *cf.* Rom. 14:14–23; 1 Cor. 9:19–23).

18:1 – 27:34 Practical holiness in all of life

Whereas the first half of the book was primarily concerned with the duties of priests, most of this last major section is directed to the rest of the people. Even those chapters which do apply to priests (21–22) deal more with issues that relate to their lives as families in the community than with their duties in the tabernacle. These chapters seem at first sight to be full of very miscellaneous laws. But there is a thread running through them, which is the requirement that God's people should be *holy*, and thereby reflect *his* holiness. Holiness, as we have seen, means distinctiveness, and so the opening verses of this section state that distinctiveness in very clear terms (18:1–3). The people of Israel were to be different from the pagan nations around them. This fundamental requirement sometimes explains rules which seem otherwise inexplicable. Holiness in the realm of marriage, family life and sexual relations comes first (ch. 18 and most of ch. 20). Then comes a wide variety of laws governing very practical social life (ch. 19). Holiness made special demands on the priests and their families (ch. 21 – 22) and was woven into the annual calendar (ch. 23). The seriousness of these laws is highlighted by a historical example (24:10–23), which parallels the case of Nadab and Abihu in the first half of the book. Holiness claimed time itself, as the sabbatical principle was extended to the sabbatical and jubilee years, and thus impacted the whole economic realm (ch. 25). The year of jubilee (which was to begin on the Day of Atonement) brings this part of the book to a climax that corresponds to the way the Day of Atonement is the climax of the first part. This is followed by a characteristic listing of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (ch. 26), and finally a supplementary postscript on vows and dedication (ch. 27), which parallels the way ch. 17 supplemented the preceding material.

18:1–29 Regulating sexual relations

18:1–5 A different people. The expression

I am the LORD your God echoes repeatedly throughout the following chapters, distinguishing them from the preceding section of the book, where it occurred only in 11:44–45. It was a powerful summary of the covenant relationship. It pointed to God's initiative of grace in the exodus redemption (11:45) and the corresponding requirement on Israel to fulfil their distinct role in the world as a holy nation (*cf.* Ex 19:3–6).

That distinctiveness here has a backward and a forward look. Israel must imitate neither Egypt nor Canaan. The idolatries and perversions of Egyptian and Canaanite culture and religion are well documented archaeologically and form the background to many of the prohibitions that follow. The need for God's people to be clearly different from the sinful and idolatrous dimensions of surrounding cultures is as powerfully taught in the NT and required of Christians as it was for OT Israel (*cf.*, *e.g.* Mt. 5:13–16; Lk. 22:24–26; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; Eph. 4:17–24; 1 Pet. 2:11–12). Indeed, the primary moral significance of Israel as a society is that they were created precisely to be a model of such distinctiveness within the contemporary cultural context of the ancient world. As we observe those differences, and the reasons for them, we are able to formulate ethical priorities and objectives for Christian living in the modern world.

V5 should not be regarded as teaching salvation by keeping the law. In the OT, to *live* in the fullest sense meant the full enjoyment of the blessings and wellbeing of the covenant relationship with God which was already established by his redeeming action (3). Such life came through obedience to the law of the God, which was the response to salvation; it did not achieve or earn it.

18:6–18 Sexual boundaries. The basic principle of what follows is summarized in v6. *Sexual relations* covers both casual sexual intercourse and marriage. *Close relatives* includes not only those whom we would call blood relatives (*e.g.* a biological parent or sibling), but also blood relatives of those related by marriage (in-laws and step-relatives). These prohibitions are, therefore, somewhat wider than a strict definition of incest and are designed to protect the integrity of relationships within the extended family structure that was characteristic of Israel's social system.

The Israelite household was much larger than the modern nuclear two-generational family unit. It included up to three or four generations descended from a single living male head, (*i.e.* his sons and their wives, families and servants), all living in fairly close proximity. But the extended family was not a commune of casual relationships. These laws protected the integrity and boundaries of the constituent marriages and nuclear families. The genetic benefits of such limits (like the hygienic benefits of the uncleanness rules) may be observed and admired but would have been unknown in their technical sense in Israel. A more contextually relevant effect would have been to outlaw in Israel the kind of incestuous sexual relations that were practised in Egyptian and Mesopotamian royal houses. Some degrees of incest were prohibited in ancient Near Eastern law codes, but not to the extent or with the severity of OT law. The story of Tamar and Amnon (2 Sa. 13, esp. vs 12–13) illustrates the probable rarity, and corresponding social shock, of these laws being violated. Another effect, characteristic of OT law in other places, is to protect women from sexual exploitation of their vulnerable place in a close-knit community. The relevance in principle of such protection is not hard to see in modern society, shocked by the extent of the sexual abuse of children by parents and in Children's Homes and of the sexual harassment of women at work.

18:19–23 Other prohibitions. The sacrifice of children (21; *Molech* was the name of a god known in Canaan and elsewhere), genito-anal intercourse between men (22) and both male and female intercourse with animals (23) are all known to have been part of pagan worship in Egypt, Canaan and elsewhere. That is probably the reason why they are grouped together here. But the additional phrases at the end of each verse indicate that a more basic immorality was involved than pagan associations alone. The actions are described respectively as *profaning the name of your God* (that is, bringing disgrace on the reputation of Yahweh among the nations), *detestable* (a term of strong disapproval in the OT, used for things which God hates or deplores), and *perversion* (lit. 'confusion'; *i.e.* the unnatural mixing of what God created and intended to be separate).

18:24–30 Warnings and object lessons. The call to be different is here sanctioned by the threat that if the Israelites followed the ways of the Canaanites they would share the fate of the Canaanites. The land itself would *vomit them out*. The vivid imagery matches the revulsion of God himself. These verses are important for putting the conquest of Canaan in proper perspective. The destruction of the Canaanites was not a matter of arbitrary divine favouritism, but of explicit moral judgment on a society which is described in the Bible, and confirmed by archaeology, as degraded, perverted and oppressive. Furthermore, God showed his moral consistency by not only threatening Israel with the same judgment for the same sins, but also actually carrying it out in their history. The

NT uses the history of Israel with the same warning purpose that the OT here uses the history of the Canaanites. Christians too must beware of complacency and pride in the face of persistent sin (1 Cor. 10:1–12; 2 Tim. 2:11–19; Heb. 10:26–31).

19:1–37 Israel's social charter

This great chapter stands among the richest seams of OT ethics, along with passages like Dt. 23 – 25; Ps. 15; Am. 5; Mi. 6:6–8; Jb. 31; Ezk. 18; and Is. 58. It will richly reward close study using a cross-reference Bible, since many of its laws are expanded further in Deuteronomy and echoed in the Psalms, Proverbs and Prophets. It includes and expands all of the Ten Commandments in one way or another, and also condenses them into what Jesus called the second great commandment in the law and Paul regarded as its very essence: *Love your neighbour as yourself* (18:*cf.* Mt. 22:37–40; Rom. 13:8–10). With its definitive opening (2), sweeping conclusion (37) and pithy, memorable style, it probably functioned as an easily taught and learned catechism of familial and social responsibilities. It is a chapter which strongly influenced the moral priorities of Jesus' teaching and also lies behind some of the letter of James.

2 The chapter is headed with the motto of this half of Leviticus: *Be holy because I, the* LORD *your God, am holy*. The rest of the chapter dispels any idea that holiness in the OT was merely a matter of ritual purity. It was to be displayed in every corner of practical life – from the corners of your beard to the corners of your fields. Holiness, therefore, was not something that you pursued by retreating from everyday life into some religious sanctum. Holiness meant transforming everyday life by the quality of behaviour that was utterly different from the surrounding ways of the world.

3–4 These verses combine the fifth, fourth and second commandments. The central place of the family in Israel's social life is indicated in the priority given to parental respect (notice incidentally how the mother is not only included but put first). The same scale of values is seen in Dt. 27:15–16. The inclusion of the Sabbath law alongside children's duty to parents (3), and then again alongside parents' responsibility to their children (29–30) reflects the benefits for family life in general that the Sabbath law conferred. It was not just a religious observation but a very important social and economic protective institution. Contempt or neglect of the principle of a day of rest and cessation of economic activity was linked with greed and exploitation of the poor (Am 8:4–6; Is. 58), which were particularly destructive of families (Mi. 2:1–2, 9). Such social evils go hand in hand with idolatry (4), whether Canaanite Baalism or modern consumerism.

5–8 This looks like a piece of sacrificial law 'lost' from its proper context earlier in the book. The reason, however, for its repetition here in the midst of a chapter primarily devoted to social concerns is probably that the *fellowship offering* was the most social of all the sacrifices. The meat had to be eaten within two days, and so would have been shared with family, friends and neighbours. It thus inculcated a spirit of generous sharing in the community which matches the immediately following law.

9–10 Gleaning rights (*cf.* 23:22; Dt. 24:19–22) were part of Israel's system of welfare provision for the poor (*i.e.* those who lacked the normal security of a family, *e.g.* widows and orphans) and those who had no land and so had to live by selling their labour or skills (aliens, Levites, hired workmen). As well as this annual help, they had the benefit of the triennial tithe on produce, which was stored as a food reserve for distribution to the needy (Dt. 14:28–29), and the free use of the produce of the land in the sabbatical (seventh) year (Ex. 23:10–11).

The relief of poverty in Israel, therefore, was built into economic and legal structures, not left as a matter of private charity. This law, typically of OT law, addresses the issue not from the angle of rights but of responsibilities. That is, it assumes the right of gleaning, but commands the landowner to make sure there is something to be gleaned. Boaz was a model of this in practice (Ru. 2).

Those who possessed land (and other productive resources) may not have been responsible *for* the plight of the poor (though the prophets keenly observed that their greed and exploitation may have contributed to it), but they were responsible *to* God to alleviate it. This law thus sets possession of resources in a framework of duty to God and others, and rejects the idea that private property is an absolute right, giving one freedom to extract every last drop of income or profit from one's assets. It would be facetious to think that in a modern agricultural economy this law prohibited the efficiency of combine harvesters. Its point is that, whatever the economic system, there must be adequate provision for the poor. Ownership confers responsibilities, not just privileges. And this is the practical meaning of holiness.

11–18 Responsibility to God in respect of one's neighbour is the theme of these verses also. They cover a wide range of social contexts, but are bound together by the repeated 'I am the LORD' (12, 14, 16, 18). This shows with great clarity that the 'second great commandment', to love your neighbour (18) is an inescapable reflex

of the first, to love and fear God. 1 Jn. 4:20–21 captures very precisely the thrust of these verses.

It was not just Jesus who showed the deeper relevance of the law. The eighth, ninth and third commandments are compressed into vs 11–12, and then shown to be relevant to all forms of cheating or deception in general, and to employment relations in particular. 6:2–7 has already deemed all such behaviour 'unfaithful to the LORD'. Oaths involving God's name in Israel were used to seal contracts and other commitments. Failure to honour such arrangements therefore dishonoured God as well as defrauding the other party. To take a man's labour and then fail to pay him adequately or promptly was also tantamount to robbery (13; *cf.* Je. 22:13).

In many parts of the world, day-labourers are still the most vulnerable and exploited part of the economy. The application of even minimal legislation like v13b, which at least allows the worker to buy his evening meal and so not go to bed hungry, would transform the lives of millions. Dt. 24:14–15 insists also that the law should apply to immigrant, 'guest-workers', a most exploited group in the ancient as in the modern world. Jesus used the plight of such people to illustrate an even higher standard of generosity that went beyond the legal requirement (Mt. 20:1–16). Again, the OT typically enshrines rights (in this case workers' rights) in the form of responsibilities. Similarly, the human rights of the disabled are expressed in the command not to mock or take advantage of them (*cf.* Dt. 27:18; Pr. 17:5). This too is holiness.

Holiness demands justice in the local community (15–18). In ancient Israel, the administration of justice was in the hands of the elders in each neighbourhood. So it was vital that their integrity should not be marred either by inappropriate sympathy or undue deference (15), or by evil intent and false witness among the general public (16). The NIV's *Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life* is sound advice but not quite what the Hebrew meant. The phrase actually refers to court action that threatened an other party with a capital charge. So the harmony of a community depended not just on 'the professionals', but on the positive behaviour of all in avoiding slander, hatred, vengeance and even grudges. (V17a should dispel any misconceptions that OT law was only concerned with externals and that Christ was the first to condemn sin in the heart). It is typical of modern society that we blame all its ills on the failure of the courts, or the police, or social workers, while turning a blind eye to the real roots of any society's malaise. The context of the second great commandment, therefore, shows us that to *love your neighbour as yourself* is not a matter of private feelings or inter-personal generosity only, but of practical social ethics in the public arena, including the legal process. This too is holiness.

19 The holiness which took such distinctive shape in the social realm was to have its symbolic reflection also. We have already seen in the laws on clean and unclean animals that it was a priestly priority to avoid all forms of unnatural mixing of categories. The three rules in this verse arise from the same concern. The religious separation of Israel was mirrored in observing some practical separations in ordinary life. The validity of such rules lapsed for Christians at the same point as the food laws, *i.e.* when the distinction between Jew and Gentile was abolished in Christ (see above on ch. 11).

20–22 Adultery in Israel was technically sexual intercourse by a man with a married or betrothed woman (Dt. 22:22–24). If the betrothed woman was a slave not yet redeemed (*i.e.* freed), then she was technically still the property of her master, not yet having the full status of wife or betrothed free woman. So the offence was not adultery under the law. However, the moral evil of the act was underlined by the requirement of a guilt offering, which by definition would have also demanded restitution to the injured parties. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of the offence are thus both recognized.

23–25 Holiness required the complete consecration of all one's life, possessions, resources and actions to God. In material things, this included the tithe on produce, the offering of the firstfruits to God (Ex. 23:19; Dt. 26:1–15) and the consecration of firstborn animals (Ex. 34:19–20; Dt. 15:19–23). This law extended the principle to fruit trees, which take a few years to reach worthwhile fruitbearing potential. The fruit of the fourth year was to be treated as 'firstfruit'.

26–31 The main focus of most of this section is to exclude rites and practices associated with pagan, Canaanite religion, particularly those which were physically or morally disfiguring. Abuse of the body in the name of religion is a widespread human aberration. The OT, with its high view of the goodness of the body as part of God's creation, disallowed it. The NT reinforces the principle with the assertion that the Christian's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

32 *Respect for the elderly* is characteristic of OT law's concern for categories of people who could be vulnerable to poor treatment by society, *e.g.* children (*cf.* v29), the immigrant or alien (32–33), the disabled (14) and the homeless

(widows and orphans). A society which loses any respect for God (32b) quickly loses that deep and sacred respect for human life that protects those (such as the unborn, the very young and the very old) who are otherwise expendable. Part of the ironic tragedy of Job was that he, who had been meticulous in his defence of such people, himself became the victim of exclusion and mockery because of his illness (*cf.* Jb. 29:7–17 with 30:1, 9–10).

33–34 The same principle applies to this far-reaching law. The OT is so often maligned because of its exclusive and negative attitude to foreign nations external to Israel and its insistence on Israel's separation that we easily overlook the astonishing emphasis in Israel's law on just and compassionate treatment for aliens who lived in Israel's midst. This law is one of many (Ex. 12:48f., 22:21, 23:9, Dt. 10:18f., 14:29, 24:14, 17, 27:19, *cf.* Ps. 146:9; Jb. 29:16). Equality before the law was a principle that included both inclusion in the benefits of the sacrificial system (Nu. 15:15f., 26) and of the annual festivals (Dt. 16:11, 14), but also accountability for wrongdoing (24:16, 22, Nu. 15:27–31).

It is remarkable to find this explicit legal equality for aliens in the law of ancient Israel in view of its absence, until comparatively recently, in the legislation of modern countries. And even where legislation for racial equality does exist, the actual practice of society and officialdom can be very far short of it. This law has a powerful moral relevance to the pressing issues of the rights and treatment of ethnic minorities, refugees, migrant labourers, asylum seekers *etc.* In fact, its moral force is on the same level as the second greatest commandment in the law, since the command to *love the alien as yourself* (34) is phrased almost identically to v 18. It comes with a similar sanction (*I am the* LORD) and the added motivation of Israel's own experience of oppression and deliverance. And this too is holiness.

35–36 Finally, holiness is to govern the world of trade and the market-place. God's concern for economic justice and commercial honesty matches his concern for integrity and impartiality in the legal system. The two concerns go closely together, of course, since in Israel (as still in many parts of the world) those who corner the market-place can also corrupt the courts. Those who most successfully cheat in business are those who can buy the connivance of authority – whether the local corrupt policeman or the respected financial or legal establishment. All forms of dishonesty, from the market stall to international trade, are *detestable* to God (*cf.* Dt. 25:13–15), the same word as applies to sexual perversion and abuse of children (*cf.* also Am. 8:5; Mi. 6:10; Je. 5:1; Pr. 20:10, 23). It is with this perspective that Christians should be concerned about the unjust imbalance of world economics and Third World debt.

The chapter is remarkable for its breadth and depth of moral insight. It touches on the thoughts of the heart and the actions of the body, private and public behaviour and almost every major area of social life in a community. The application of some of its legislation would transform the lives of millions in today's world. And the deeper one reflects on it, the more it seems that many Christians come nowhere near the standards it presented centuries before Christ (let alone Christ's own development of it in the Sermon on the Mount).

20:1–27 Serious offences and penalties

Most of the contents of this chapter are repeated from ch. 18. The difference is that here specific penalties are linked to the offences. There is a double emphasis on sins that are against God and pure worship of him on the one hand (2–6, 25–27), and those that are destructive of the authority and integrity of the family on the other (9–21). In this respect we can see the influence of the two tables of the Ten Commandments. It is this fundamental nature of the offences (*i.e.* that they are against God and the family) that also explains the severe nature of the penalties.

Israel as a society was founded on the covenant with Yahweh, and therefore offences which threatened that covenant relationship were tantamount to crimes, punishable in the name of the highest authority in the state, *i.e.* God. The family played a central role in the experience, preservation and transmission of that covenant relationship, and therefore actions which threatened the family, either by serious and flagrant disregard for parental authority, or by sexual deviation and disruption, by their very nature also threatened the covenantal foundation of the social system. The application of the death penalty to such offences, therefore, was not a matter of primitive vengeance, but an indication of how seriously Israel was to take the covenant (*cf.* C. J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land* [Paternoster Press, 1990]). In the NT the covenant is no longer the foundation of a nation state, and therefore the nature of crime and the rationale for penalties are no longer bound to Israel's legislation. However, although adultery, incest and dishonouring parents are no longer capital offences in a secular society, the NT still regards them as serious moral evils (*cf.* Mt. 15:4; Rom. 1:29–32; 1 Cor. 5).

The penalties in this chapter are divided between those which were to be carried out by society (judicial execution); those which were

left in the hands of God ('cutting off', which probably meant that God himself was expected to intervene in judgment against the offender, where the offence, by its very nature, may never have come to light in the court; see 7:25); and childlessness for two kinds of incest. If we are inclined to think these punishments inexplicably severe, we should remember the limited range of offences to which they applied. It is probable that the penalties were expressed in maximum form, and offenders may have often received lesser penalties. The fact that in the case of deliberate murder it was stipulated that there was to be *no* reduction of the death penalty to any other form of penalty (such as monetary compensation; Nu. 35:31) may mean that in other cases such conversion of penalties may have been allowed. It is also worth saying that in most other respects the law of Israel was decidedly humane when compared with the brutality of punishments found in the law codes of contemporary ancient societies. For a fuller discussion of the principles of the Israelite penal system, see G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 281ff.

The motivation behind this, as with every aspect of Israel's law, was that the people should manifest their distinctiveness from the nations. The fundamental demand for holiness is twice repeated (7–8, 25–26), and in both cases God is the subject: *I am the* LORD, *who makes you holy ... I have set you apart.* Holiness is not something to be achieved by our own strenuous efforts. It is a state already created and given by God. The people of God are called on to maintain the holiness he has already conferred on them through his grace in promise and redemption (24). The thrust of these verses is, 'Live differently, because I have made you different. Be what you are.'

21:1 – 22:31 The demands of holiness for priests

The same expression, *I am the* LORD *who makes you holy* (20:7), occurs six times in these chapters and functions as a section divider (21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32). All the people of Israel were called to be holy, *i.e.* different from the nations, but the priests were called to be holy in a unique internal sense, *i.e.* to be different from the rest of the people of Israel. Israel was set apart among the nations; the priests were set apart among Israel. So, just as Israel was called to higher standards than the nations, so the priests had to observe more stringent requirements than the ordinary people.

21:1–15 Restrictions were placed on priests' involvement in *mourning* (because of the danger of uncleanness through contact with death) and on their *marriage* options. The section subdivides into rules for ordinary priests (1–9) and even stricter ones for the high priest (10–15).

16–24 In the world of Israelite symbolism, spiritual and moral integrity was expressed in physical wholeness, so men who belonged to the priestly families but who had some physical *defect* were not allowed to perform the sacrifices at the altar. They were not, however, excluded from the material income and support of the priests, and they could eat the *holy food* that was the priests' share.

22:1–9 If, however, a priest became *unclean* for any reason, he was prohibited from eating the holy food, because of the vital principal that the holy and the unclean must be kept separate (see above on ch. 11). This could be as minor as ritual uncleanness for a day, caused by certain contacts, or as major as the uncleanness of serious *skin disease* which lasted as long as the disease remained uncured.

10–15 These verses define who counted as a member of a *priest's family* for the purpose of permission to eat the holy food.

17–33 We have already seen in ch. 11 that the distinction between clean and unclean animals mirrored that between Israel and other nations. This was taken a step further. Just as Israel was divided into priests and ordinary people so the range of clean animals was further divided into those that were to be used for sacrifice and those that were to be eaten. The parallel symbolism was thus: priests/sacrificial animals : other Israelites/other clean animals : Gentiles/unclean animals. It is this pattern which explains the similarity of vocabulary in 21:17–21 and 22:18–24. Just as defects and deformities barred a man from priestly service, so they barred an animal from sacrifice.

In the NT all these distinctions were removed. Not only is there no longer Jew and Gentile in Christ, but one new humanity reconciled to God and each other through him, but also, since Christ has fulfilled the sacrificial function of priesthood, there is no continuing separate order of priests in the Christian church in the same sense as in Israel. The temple curtain was torn. Access to God is open to all through the sacrificial blood of Christ (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:19), and his high priestly ministry is now eternally carried on for his people in the presence of God. The whole people of God in Christ is thus now called his holy priesthood, and the invitation to this community is extended explicitly to the lame, the blind, the leper, and all others who would previously have been excluded from priesthood (*cf.* Lk. 14:13–21). Even the eunuch (excluded in 21–20) is assured that he may not only approach God's sanctuary, but that his sacrifices will be accepted (Is. 56:3–8).

However, although those who exercise moral

and spiritual oversight in the church are never called priests in the NT, their responsibilities include the teaching function that also belonged to OT priests. Because of this, the NT requires high standards of personal and family life in those who are called to such responsibility. There are echoes of these two chapters, therefore (though in a rather different tone), in the lists of qualifications for elders, overseers and deacons (1 Tim 3:1–13; Tit. 1:5–9; *cf.* Jas. 3:1).

23:1–44 The appointed festivals and assemblies

The holiness that was demanded in every aspect of social and economic life was also woven into the very passage of time. This chapter lists the sequence of annual festivals by which Israel not only marked the seasons of the agricultural year but also celebrated the history of their redemption. The weekly Sabbath heads the list (3), partly because the other festivals involved additional Sabbaths, and partly because all the festivals participated in the sabbatical principle of the dedication of time and labour to God. This chapter, like Dt. 16, is a layperson's calendar. Full details of the sacrificial rituals that the priest would need are given in Nu. 28 – 29. Similarly, the full ritual of the Passover is given in Ex. 12 – 13.

23:4–22 Spring festivals. *Passover* and the *Feast of Unleavened Bread* were technically two separate feasts, but they merged together, since the one followed immediately after the other (4–8). This great twin festival, of course, celebrated the exodus. It was, and still is, the primary festival of Israel in its recalling of that great redemptive event at the very outset of their history as a nation. *The first month* of the Israelite (lunar) calendar was from mid-March to mid-April. This came towards the end of the winter rainy season and coincided with the start of the harvest season, which began with barley, the earliest crop to ripen. The offering of *firstfruits* (9–14) was thus linked to Passover and Unleavened Bread and was not a separate festival, as the paragraph and subheading of the NIV misleadingly suggest. In fact, the offering of fruit, grain or firstling livestock formed part of each of the three feasts that marked the agricultural year – Passover and Unleavened Bread, Weeks and Tabernacles (*cf.* Ex. 23:15; 34:18–20).

The Feast of Weeks (15–21), otherwise known as Pentecost, ('fiftieth'), fell fifty days after the end of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the offering of the firstfruits. It thus came at the joyful conclusion of the grain harvesting.

V 22 is not simply a superfluous repetition of 19:9–10. It reminded Israel that in the midst of their festivity and feasting they were not to neglect the needy in the community at harvest time. The grain and fellowship offerings provided food for the priests. Gleaning rights helped provide food for the poor. This compassionate and socially inclusive nature of Israel's religious life is spelt out more emphatically in Dt. 16:11, 14.

23:23–44 Autumn festivals. *The seventh month* (approximately mid-September to mid-October) came at the end of the whole agricultural year, with the ingathering of olives and grapes. It thus completed the vital trio of grain, oil and wine and counterbalanced the great spring festivals. The importance of the month (and perhaps simply acknowledging its symbolic sacredness as the *seventh*) was marked by a special sacred assembly on the *first day*, summoned by *trumpet blasts* (23–25). (Hence the NIV heading 'Feast of Trumpets', though it is not explicitly given that name in the text.)

The full details of the ritual for the Day of Atonement were given in ch. 16. All that was needed in this calendar was to remind the people of the importance of spiritual preparation for the day, especially the call to *deny yourselves*, which probably included fasting and other abstinence.

Just as the solemnity of the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent in the Christian year gives way to the joyful celebration of Christmas and Easter, so in Israel's calendar, the Day of Atonement was soon followed by the crowning celebration of the year, the Feast of Tabernacles. It came at the end of the olive and grape harvests and thus marked the completion of the annual agricultural cycle. Christian harvest festivals fall at roughly the same time of year, but are only a pale reflection of the depth of historical meaning that Israel invested in this feast. The people were to make temporary shelters out of branches (hence the name 'tabernacles', or 'booths') and live in them for a week. This was to recall the apparent physical insecurity of the Israelites when they left Egypt for their journey through the wilderness, and so to remind them of that total dependence on God which remains even when we think ourselves settled and secure (*cf.* Dt. 6:10–11; 8:10–18; 26:1–11).

The Christian year takes its basic shape from the ancient feasts of Israel. Jesus was crucified at the time of Passover, and Paul uses both that and the associated Feast of Unleavened Bread in 1 Cor. 5:7–8. Holy Week then climaxes on Easter Day, and Paul associates the resurrection of Christ with the firstfruits in 1 Cor. 15:20–23. It was on the day of Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks) that the Holy Spirit came in power on the disciples (Acts 2:1), and this is celebrated on

Whitsunday. Thus far, it can be seen that the Christian faith follows the OT in linking its primary festivals, not merely with the cycle of the seasons, but with unique historical events. The historical dimension of the Feast of Tabernacles, however, has not been preserved in Christian harvest festivals. In any case, they are soon overshadowed by the additional festival of Christmas celebrating the historical birth of Christ.

24:1–9 The care of the tabernacle

In *the holy place* (*i.e.* the outer room of the tabernacle; see the diagram on p. 173) there were three items of furniture: the altar of incense, the golden lampstand and a small golden table. The lampstand is fully described in Ex. 25:31–39; 27:20–21; 40:25–26. The priests were to make sure that the lamps were constantly trimmed and kept burning (*cf.* 1 Sa 3:3). There was a practical purpose to this since the room would otherwise have been completely dark, but also probably a symbolic meaning related to the light of God's presence and salvation (*cf.* Ps. 27:1) and perhaps to Israel's role as a light to the nations (*cf.* Zc. 4; Lk. 2:32). On the table, twelve large loaves of bread were placed, in two stacks of six. A fresh batch was arranged on each Sabbath day and the priests ate what was removed. The twelve loaves probably represented the twelve tribes. It was this holy bread that the priest Ahimelech allowed David to eat because of his urgent need, a story which was used to powerful effect by Jesus (1 Sa. 21:1–6; Mt. 12:3–4).

24:10–23 The death of a blasphemer

This incident underlines the seriousness of the surrounding laws (*cf.* ch. 10). The surprising number of details about the man's identity show that this was not just a vague story, but a well-remembered event. His offence was that he *blasphemed the Name* (*i.e.* the personal name of God, Yahweh) *with a curse* (11). Misuse of the divine name and cursing God were strictly forbidden and were among the most serious offences against the very covenant itself (Ex. 20:7; 22:28). The preceding chapters show us that the offence was not merely a matter of casual foul language, such as thoughtlessly sprinkles everyday speech nowadays in public and on the media. The name of Yahweh had been repeated in almost every paragraph of the laws. It was his character that shaped the whole social system of Israel and his authority that stamped their covenant law. Thus, to blaspheme and curse him was in effect to repudiate his authority and to reject his law. It was a crime against the whole community who depended on God's continued protection under the covenant, and therefore set the offender outside that community. The death penalty in a sense sealed the offender's own decision.

The legal case gives the opportunity to express a legal principle, namely the so called *lex talionis* (16b–22) or law of retribution. The expression *an eye for an eye* has come to be used popularly for the supposed primitive, bloodthirsty nature of OT ethics. It is a most unfortunate caricature, since this was a very considerable advance in legal history, namely the removal of unlimited private vengeance and feuding in favour of a law limiting the penalty for any offence to strict and equivalent retribution. Serious offences (such as murder) were not to be punished lightly (*e.g.* if the offender were wealthy and influential), and comparatively trivial offences were not to be punished exorbitantly. And furthermore, as we have already seen, race or pedigree were not to make any difference (16, 22). All members of the community were to be treated equally by the same standard of justice. It is most likely that the phrases of v 20 were intended as a statement of principle through graphic illustration, rather than literally. Punishment and compensation were to fit the crime. Other laws show that some personal injuries were dealt with by compensation (*e.g.* Ex. 21:18–19), while in the case of a slave, bodily injury was remedied by giving the slave freedom – a quite unique law in the ancient world (Ex. 21:26–27).

While this law, applying strictly to the world of public legal action, prescribed careful attention to appropriate and equivalent punishment for offences (a concern that is permanently relevant in any society), Leviticus had already made it clear that holiness in the community means that people should not wantonly seek revenge for every wrong done (19:17–18; *cf.* Dt. 32:35; Pr. 25:21–22). It was, therefore, quite consistent with this when Jesus ruled that the law which governed court proceedings should not be the measure of personal behaviour among his followers (Mt. 5:38–42; *cf.* Rom. 12:17–21). His saying should not be misunderstood (as it often is) to be a criticism and rejection of OT moral standards as a whole, but rather a criticism of making minimum legal rights the criterion for relationships, even with those classed as enemies. In this, as in so many matters, Jesus restored the authentic voice, intention and balance of OT law (*cf.* C. J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* [Marshall Pickering, 1992], ch. 5).

25:1–54 The sabbatical and jubilee years

After ch. 19, this has probably been the most influential chapter in Leviticus, through its concern for economic and social justice, its

influence on prophecy of the end times and on Jesus, and its use by certain strands of Christian social ethics. As much as ch. 19, it reminds us forcefully that Israel's passion for holiness was not confined to ritual and religious matters, but permeated the whole economic structure of life. It is a complex chapter, in which three distinct economic practices have been thrown closely together, along with parenthetical sections and exceptive clauses. These were: the sabbatical (seventh) year; the jubilee year (fiftieth); and redemption procedures (at any time).

25:1–7 The sabbatical year. This is an expansion of the fallow year law of Ex. 23:10–11. The land was to be allowed 'rest', like human beings with their weekly Sabbath, in the seventh year. The humanitarian motive given in Exodus has been expanded by the annual gleaning rights already prescribed in Leviticus (19:9–10; 23:22). The sabbatical year was further developed in Dt. 15:1–2 into a year in which debts (or more probably the pledges given for loans) were to be released. (On the relation between the sabbatical laws, see Wright, *God's People in God's Land*, pp. 141–151, 249–259.)

25:8–55 The jubilee. This is introduced as the fiftieth year to follow the seventh sabbatical year, though some scholars believe it was the forty-ninth year itself. It has also been suggested that it was a short 'year' of forty-nine days, inserted into the seventh month of the forty-ninth year, to bring Israel's lunar calendar back into line with the solar year. (See Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 302, 319.) V 10 presents the twin concepts that are fundamental to the whole institution, namely *liberty* and *return*. Those who had incurred debts were released from what remained unrepaid (OT law assumes that every effort should be made to honour debts) and from any bondage which their debt had required. They were thus able to 'return' to full ownership of any land that the family had been forced to surrender to a creditor as guarantee for loans. The law had the effect, therefore, of reuniting the family on its ancestral land, not later than a generation after the original debts were incurred. It was these two components of the jubilee, freedom and restoration, that coloured the use of the idea of jubilee in prophetic and later NT thought.

13–17 The financial implications of a recurring jubilee are spelt out in these verses. Sale of a piece of land really amounted to a sale of only the use of the land. So an approaching jubilee diminished the cost for the purchaser, inasmuch as he was buying the number of harvests until the jubilee restored the land to its original owner. *Do not take advantage of each other* shows that the deal is actually between a creditor and one seeking a loan on the basis of selling some land as guarantor for it. The amount of the loan was thus governed by the number of years over which it could be repaid, up to the next jubilee. The creditor would schedule the loan in such a way as to recover all or most of it before the jubilee. Any outstanding debt would then be cancelled and the land returned to the owner and borrower. This arrangement made it in the interests of both lender and borrower to be cautious over the amount borrowed and would have made unscrupulous over-lending unprofitable.

18–22 This encouragement to observe the sabbatical regulations promises special *blessing* in the preceding year, in answer to a very natural question (20). The theological principle was that obedience to the economic legislation of Israel would require faith in the ability of Yahweh to provide through his control of nature as well as history.

23–24 These central verses in the chapter constitute a heading to the remaining paragraphs, which are primarily concerned with the economic redemption of land and persons, interwoven with the jubilee. Two vitally important principles are expressed in v23. First, the theology of the land. As the divine landlord, God dictated how the land should be divided and used, which meant that Israel's system of land tenure had two marked features: fair distribution and inalienability. In Canaan the land had been owned by kings and their nobles, with the bulk of the population as tax-paying tenant farmers. In Israel the initial division of the land was explicitly to the clans and households within the tribes, in such a way that each received land according to size and need (Nu. 26:52–56; Jos. 13 – 21). The intention was that the land should be distributed throughout the whole kinship system as widely as possible. In order to protect this system of kinship distribution, family land could not be bought and sold as a commercial asset. It was to remain, as far as possible, within the extended family, or at least within the circle of families in the clan. It was this principle which lay behind Naboth's refusal to sell his patrimony to Ahab (1 Ki. 21).

The second principle of v 23 is the status of the Israelites as *aliens and my tenants*. These terms ('strangers and sojourners'; RSV), describe a class of people who resided among the Israelites in Canaan but were not ethnic Israelites (*cf.* Eph. 2:19). They did not own land themselves but survived by hiring out their services as residential employees (labourers, craftsmen *etc.*) for Israelite landowning households. Provided the household remained economically viable, its resident alien employees enjoyed both protection and security. But otherwise their

position could be perilous. Hence Israel's law frequently requires fair and generous treatment for them.

The Israelites were to regard their status before God as analogous to that of their own residential dependents to themselves. Thus, they had no ultimate title to the land – it was owned by God. Nevertheless, they could enjoy secure benefits of it under his protection and in dependence on him. So the terms are not (as they might sound in English, especially with the unwarranted insertion of *but* in the NIV) a denial of rights, but rather an affirmation of a relationship of protected dependency. The practical effect of this model for Israel's relationship with God is seen in vs 35, 40 and 53. If all Israelites share this same status before God, then the impoverished or indebted brother is to be regarded and treated in the same way as God regards and treats all Israel, *i.e.* with generosity and redemptive action.

25–55 These verses contain the practical details of redemption and jubilee. There are three descending stages of poverty with required responses, each introduced by the phrase *if one of your countrymen becomes poor* (25–28, 35–38, 39–43 + 47–53). These are interrupted by sections dealing with houses in cities and Levite properties (29–34) and non-Israelite slaves (44–46).

The first response was redemption (25–28). Initially, the Israelite landowner who was in economic difficulties, would sell, or offer to sell, some of his land. To keep it within the family, it was first of all the duty of the nearest kinsman either to buy it (if it was still on offer, *e.g.* Je. 32) or to redeem it (if it had been sold, *e.g.* Ru. 4). Secondly, the seller retained the right to redeem it for himself, if he later recovered the means to do so. Thirdly, and in any case, the property, whether sold or redeemed by a kinsman, reverted to the original family in the year of jubilee. Houses in cities were exempt from normal redemption and jubilee rules, since they were not part of the economic productive base for a family. This exception did not apply to the property of Levites, since they had no tribal lands (29–34).

If the poorer brother's plight worsened, presumably even after several such sales of land, it then became the duty of the kinsman to maintain him as a dependent labourer, by means of interest-free loans (35–38).

In the event of a total economic collapse, such that the poorer kinsman had no more land left to sell or pledge for loans, he and his whole family could sell themselves to the wealthier kinsman, *i.e.* enter into bonded service to him. The debtor Israelite was not to be treated like a slave, but rather as a resident employee. This undesirable state of affairs was to continue only until the next jubilee, *i.e.* not more than one more generation. Then the debtor and/or his children (the original debtor may have died, but the next generation were to benefit from the jubilee; 41, 54) were to recover their original patrimony of land and be enabled to make a fresh start. This law was intended to preserve the viability of Israelite landowning households, and so did not apply to foreign slaves, who were not part of the land-tenure system (44–46). The OT had many other laws to protect the interests of such slaves.

If a man had entered this debt-bondage *outside* the clan, then an obligation lay on the whole clan (48–49) to prevent this loss of a whole family by exercising their duty to redeem him. They also had the duty to see that a non-Israelite creditor behaved as an Israelite should towards an Israelite debtor, and that the jubilee provisions were applied eventually.

Thus, the main aim of redemption was the preservation of the land and persons of the clan; whereas the main beneficiary of the jubilee was the extended family, or 'father's house'. The jubilee was thus a mechanism to prevent the accumulation of land in the hands of fewer and wealthier Israelites, and to preserve the socio-economic fabric of multiple household land tenure with the comparative equality and independent viability of the smallest family-plus-land units. The wisdom of all this in a day of take-overs, bigger and bigger conglomerates and monopolistic multi-national business seems very obvious.

The theological and ethical development of the jubilee

In the Old Testament. Although it is not known whether the jubilee was put into practice in ancient Israel (there is no record of it in the narratives, but equally there is no record of any observance of the Day of Atonement), the two main thrusts of the jubilee, liberty and restoration, were both easily transferred from the strictly economic provision of the jubilee itself to a wider metaphorical application. The idea of redemption and return are combined in the future vision of Is. 35, and put alongside a transformation of nature itself. The mission of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah has strong elements of the restorative plan of God for his people, aimed specifically at the weak and oppressed (Is. 42:1–7). Is. 58 is an attack on cultic observance without social justice and calls for liberation of the oppressed (v 6), specifically focusing on one's own kinship obligations (v 7). Most clearly of all, Is.61 uses jubilee images to portray the one anointed as the herald of Yahweh to 'evangelize' the poor, to proclaim

liberty to the captives, and to announce the year of Yahweh's favour – almost certainly an allusion to a jubilee year. Thus, within the Old Testament itself, the jubilee attracted a future imagery, but without losing its ethical challenge for justice to the oppressed in contemporary history.

In the New Testament. Jesus announced the inbreaking of the reign of God, in his own ministry. The 'Nazareth manifesto' (Lk. 4:16–30) is the clearest, programmatic statement of this, and quotes directly from Is. 61, which was strongly influenced by jubilee concepts. Almost certainly Jesus did not call for a literal jubilee in his own day, but there are also echoes of jubilee imagery, *e.g.* in the beatitudes, the response to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:2–6), the parable of the banquet (Lk. 14:12–24) and episodes of forgiveness and teaching on debts (Mt. 18:21–35). In Acts, the jubilee concept of final restoration is found in Acts 1:6 and 3:21. Significantly, the early church responded to this hope at the level of economic mutual help (Acts 4:34; *cf.* Dt.15:4).

Contemporary application. The jubilee still remains a powerful model in formulating Christian biblical ethics. Its primary assumptions and objectives can be used as a guide and critique for our own ethical agenda in the modern world.

Economically, the jubilee existed to protect a form of land tenure that was based on a fair and widespread distribution of the land, and to prevent the accumulation of ownership in the hands of a wealthy few. This echoes the creation principle that the whole earth is given by God to all humanity, who act as co-stewards of its resources. There is a parallel between the affirmation of Lv. 25:23, in respect of Israel, that 'the land is mine', and the affirmation of Ps. 24:1 in respect of humanity as a whole, that 'The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it'. The moral principles of the jubilee are, therefore, meant to apply to all on the basis of the moral consistency of God. What he required of Israel reflects what, in principle, he desires for humanity – broadly equitable distribution of the resources of the earth (especially land) and a curb on the tendency to accumulation with its inevitable oppression and alienation. The jubilee thus stands as a critique not only of massive private accumulation of land and related wealth, but also of large-scale forms of collectivism or nationalization, which destroy any meaningful sense of personal or family ownership.

Socially, the jubilee embodied a practical concern for the family unit. In Israel's case, this meant the extended family, the 'father's house', which was a sizeable group of related nuclear families descended in the male line from a living progenitor, including up to three or four generations. This was the smallest unit in Israel's kinship structure, and it was the focus of identity, status, responsibility and security for the individual Israelite. It was this that the jubilee aimed to protect and periodically to restore if necessary. Notably, it did so not by merely 'moral' means (*i.e.* appealing for greater family cohesion or admonishing parents and children), but by legislating for specific structural mechanisms to regulate the economic effects of debt. Family morality was meaningless if families were being split up and dispossessed by economic forces that rendered them powerless (*cf.* Ne. 5:1–5). The jubilee aimed to restore social dignity and participation to families through maintaining or restoring their economic viability. The economic collapse of a family in one generation was not to condemn all future generations to the bondage of perpetual indebtedness. Such principles and objectives are certainly not irrelevant to welfare legislation, or indeed any legislation with socio-economic implications.

Theologically, the jubilee was based upon several central affirmations of Israel's faith, and the importance of these should not be overlooked when assessing its relevance to Christian ethic and mission. Like the rest of the sabbatical provisions, the jubilee proclaimed the sovereignty of God over time and nature, and obedience to it would require submission to that sovereignty, hence the year is dubbed 'holy', to be observed out of the 'fear of Yahweh' (12, 17). Furthermore, observing the fallow year dimension would also require faith in God's providence as the one who could command blessing in the natural order (18–22). Additional motivation for the law is provided by repeated appeals to the knowledge of God's historical act of redemption in the exodus and all it had meant for Israel (38, 42, 55).

To this historical dimension was added the recurring experience of forgiveness, for the jubilee was proclaimed on the Day of Atonement (9). To know yourself forgiven by God was to issue in practical remission of debts and bondages for fellow-Israelites. And, as we have seen, the inbuilt future hope of the literal jubilee, blended with an eschatological hope of God's final restoration of humanity and nature to his original purpose. To apply the jubilee model, then, requires that people face the sovereignty of God, trust his providence, know his redemptive action, experience his atonement, practise his justice and hope in his promise. The wholeness of the model embraces the church's evangelistic mission, its personal and social ethics and its future hope.

26:1–46 Blessings, curses and promises

It was standard practice in the ancient world to conclude major legal documents, such as international treaties, with lists of the benefits that would flow from keeping them, and the invoking of curses on those who broke them. This common format is found here and in Dt. 28. After an introduction which reminds Israel of essential demands of the law (1–2), the chapter goes on to speak of the blessing that will accompany obedience (3–13), the disasters that will be the result of disobedience (14–39), and the long-term prospect of restoration even after judgment (40–45).

26:3–13 Obedience and blessing. It would be a mistake to think that the blessings and curses in this chapter were 'equal and opposite' matters of reward or punishment (as the NIV headings suggest). It is not the case that blessing would be 'earned' as a reward for good behaviour, in the same way that the disasters would be deserved as judgment. God's blessing did not have to be earned by Israel. It was already there, promised and intrinsic to the covenant relationship – in Israel's title deeds, so to speak – since God's covenant with Abraham. But that blessing could be experienced in its fulness only as Israel lived in accordance with the covenant. Otherwise it would be withdrawn, and the withholding of God's blessing would expose Israel to the hazards of a cursed earth and human wickedness.

Four elements make up the promised blessing: *rain* and good *harvests* (3–5); *peace* and security (6–8); numerical *increase* (9); and the *dwelling place* of God in their midst (11–13). These are really the same as the blessings of the covenant with Abraham (Gn. 12:1–3), with some extra local colour. God had promised Abraham that he would have a multitude of descendants; that they would have a land (but that would be futile without rain, harvests and security); and above all, that they would enjoy a possessive relationship of blessing with God. These verses not only echo the Abraham covenant, but also the covenant with Noah (Gn. 8:21 – 9:17) and even recall the garden of Eden. *I will walk among you*, uses the same, unusual form of the word used to describe God walking companionably with Adam and Eve (Gn. 3:8; *cf.* 5:22, 24; 6:9; 17:1). It was for the restoration of such intimacy with God, for the joy of living with God in God's good earth, that God had redeemed them in the great exodus event, which was itself a proof of his covenant faithfulness (13).

26:14–39 Disobedience and curses. As was customary in such documents, the list of curses is longer. It is substantially a description of the reversal or withdrawal of God's blessing, with disastrous results. The sequence of horrors was well known in the ancient world: disease (16), defeat (17), drought (18–20), wild animals (21–22), war, plague and famine (23–31), devastation, scattering and deportation (27–39). Such things are common in the world of natural and humanly inflicted disasters. But in this context of Israel's covenant with God, they were the vehicle of God's punishment (*cf.* v 25). It was on this basis that the prophets could interpret events of their day which fitted such a pattern as evidence of a broken covenant and God's wrath. But the prophets also realized that the purpose of such punishment was ultimately to draw Israel back to God in repentance (*cf.* Am. 4:6–12), and that hope also they drew from such a text as this.

26:40–45 Repentance and restoration. Biblical 'but ifs' are often rich in significance, and this is one of the most far-reaching. In spite of sin, judgment and exile, the future was not closed off (*cf.* Dt. 30:1–10). Israel's only hope, as they had known ever since the incident of the golden calf (Ex. 32 – 34), lay in God's faithfulness to his own covenant, even as they stood among the ruins of their own treachery and failure. God had a future and a hope for them, which the prophets at the time of the exile drew from deeply (*cf.* Je. 29:10–14; 30 – 31; Ezk. 34:25–31; 36:24–38; 37:24–28). The reason for this, not expressed here directly but implicit in the reference to the Abrahamic covenant, was that Israel was the vehicle of God's redemptive purpose of blessing all humanity. His commitment to Israel was because of his commitment to all nations. He would not utterly destroy *them* because he would not abandon his mission of saving the *world*. It is that connection between God's faithfulness to Israel and the extension of salvation to the Gentile nations that led Paul to reflect deeply on this and other passages of restoration (especially Dt. 32) in Rom. 9 – 11. It is also in that wider context that we need to interpret the threefold promise of God that he would *remember* his covenant with Abraham (42), *the land* (42b–43) and the Sinai covenant (45). Not that God had 'forgotten' them. But just as he remembered Abraham and then took action to save Israel from Egypt (Ex. 2:24), so he would again act to save his people. Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, turned such thoughts into a hymn of praise as he stood on the brink of the climax of all God's saving action (Lk. 1:67–79).

27:1–34 The valuation of vows and dedicated items

OT law nowhere *commands* the making of vows

or the dedication of people or things to God (apart from the regular tithe and firstfruits and consecration of the firstborn sons). Special vows were entirely voluntary. What the law did insist on, however, was that people should not make rash vows or commitments and then fail to keep them. God should not be trifled with, and promises made to him must be treated as seriously as promises made to any human person. The principle is well summarized in Dt. 23:21–23. There was no blame in not making a vow; but to make a vow and not fulfil it was to incur guilt (*cf.* Ec. 5:2–7; Pr. 20:25).

This chapter, recognizing that people committed to holiness and striving to live according to the preceding chapters may be tempted to make over-enthusiastic or unrealistic 'offers' to God, tempers such enthusiasm with cool realism. Vows must be entered into only in full awareness of their costliness. It was possible to *redeem* a vow, *i.e.* literally buy yourself out of its consequences, but these regulations show that this was an expensive option. In some cases, a change of mind incurred a 20% surcharge on the value of the originally dedicated item.

The chapter deals with vows involving persons (2–8), animals (9–13), houses (14–15), fields (16–25) and then finishes with a few related rules (26–33). The basic effect of a vow or dedication was that the person or object was given over to God, which would normally mean that he, she or it was at the disposal of the priests and the sanctuary. Thus, a person who dedicated themselves, or a member of their family, would perhaps assist priests in those aspects of their duties which would not involve direct contact with the holy sacrifices. Animals, houses or fields would become part of the priestly income, especially if they were converted into their cash evaluation. The child Samuel was probably an example of this, and an illustration of the kind of circumstances that might induce such a vow (1 Sa. 1 – 2). If the person so dedicated did not wish to serve in such a way, he or she could be redeemed by paying a sum of money to the priests in lieu. The figures in vs 3–7 are substantial, not all just token values. They probably reflect the current market values that were put on the working capacity of slaves. That is, we should not imagine that human beings were given a cash value in themselves, but rather that the valuation was an estimate of the useful work they could have done. Characteristically, as in the sacrifice laws, provision was made for the poor (8).

In the case of land (16–25), a person could dedicate some of their own property to God, and if they did not later redeem it, it would pass permanently to the priests in the year of jubilee. God was, in any case, the real landowner. But a person could not permanently devote to God the land bought from another person (probably as a guarantee for a loan), since, by the laws of ch. 25, it did not ultimately belong to the purchaser. In the jubilee it must revert to its original human owner.

Although this chapter seems somewhat of an appendix, after the great climax of ch. 26, its concern with vows, dedication and devotion is not entirely out of place. Special or exceptional acts of dedication presuppose a general life of commitment of God. Vows do not make a person any more holy, but they may represent a specific commitment, a seriousness of response to the God whose character, demands and blessings have been so clearly presented in the rest of the book. In a Christian context, such commitment may take very different forms, but it can certainly include persons, possessions, property and land. There is no compulsion, but where promises or declarations are made, then God takes no pleasure in those who cheat (Acts 4:32 – 5:11; *cf.* 2 Cor. 9:7). Ultimately, any particular vow or dedication we may make flows from that total consecration of the whole of life to the service of God, which is the mark of every true disciple of Christ (Rom. 12:1–2).

Take my life and let it be
  Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days;
  Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

(Frances Ridley Havergal)

Christopher J. H. Wright

NUMBERS

Introduction

Title

English Bibles, following earlier Latin and Greek versions, call this book Numbers. This title was known from the second century AD and perhaps earlier. It indicates that the book begins and ends with a census of Israel and its priests (chs. 1 – 4, 26). Jewish tradition used other titles, taken from the opening words of the Hebrew text. These were, 'In the desert' (referring to the fact that the forty years of this history were spent in the desert); 'And he spoke' (some early Christian Fathers favoured this title as it emphasized that the whole book is about the word of God, Israel's refusal to believe that word and God's faithfulness to it); and 'The fourth book of Moses' (part of the Pentateuch, from Genesis to Deuteronomy).

Outline of the book

Numbers falls into three parts.

Preparation to go to the promised land (chs. 1 – 10). In this section Moses prepares Israel. The tribes are numbered, organized and purified, the priesthood is established, the tabernacle is consecrated and the Passover is celebrated. Every detail of this preparation is commanded by God's word. Two aims are in view: to make Israel fit for the Lord's presence and to prepare them to possess the land promised as their inheritance in God's sworn covenant with Abraham. At the end of this thorough preparation, the people set out for Canaan, led by God's presence in the pillar of cloud and fire over the ark of the covenant.

Journeying to the promised land (chs. 11 – 25). What should have been a joyful pilgrimage became a trail of discontent. As they journeyed the people began to grumble. When they saw the powerful nations of Canaan they refused to enter. In unbelief, they rejected God's promise. Consequently, they had to remain in the desert and die there. Towards the end of forty years, they advanced towards Canaan again.

New preparation for inheritance in the promised land (chs. 26 – 36). After forty years, they reached the plains of Moab. The focus in this section is on the inheritance. The new generation was numbered and commanded how to allot the land and what offerings to make there. Thus they were made ready to inherit the promised land. The final preparations included the command that the land allotted to each tribe must never pass out of its possession; in this way the inheritance was guaranteed. Despite Israel's unbelief, God was faithful to the purpose of his covenant.

Table 1. Outline structure

Text	Narrative	Theology	Geography
I. 1–10	Preparation to go to Canaan to inherit the land	Promise (Land) The word of the Lord confirms the promise.	Sinai 1:1–10:10
II. 11–25	Journey to Canaan Failure to enter	Unbelief (Desert) Israel will not believe. They lose what is promised.	Journey to Paran Desert 10:11–12:16 Events there 13:1–19:22
	(Gap of 38 years between Nu.19 and 20)	Death in the desert.	Gap of 38 years (summarized in Nu.33:19–35)
	Year 40: the end of the pilgrimage		Year 40 journey to Moab 20:1–21:35
III. 26–36	New Preparation to inherit the land	Promise (Land) The word of the Lord reaffirms the promise.	On the plains of Moab 22:1–36:13

Table 2. The relationship between the narrative framework and the laws

Narrative Framework		Laws	
I.	Preparation		
1–2	The tribes are counted and the camp is set in order.	{4:4–33}	Regulations for the service of the Levitical priests.
3–4	The Levites are counted and set in order as priests.	5:5–6:21	Laws for removing causes of defilement: in society (stolen property); in marriage (adultery); in life (Nazirite vows).
5:1–4	The unclean are sent away: removal of causes of defilement.		
7:1–8:5	Anointing and setting apart tabernacle and altar; setting up the lampstand.	8:6–26	Laws for Levitical service at the tabernacle.
9:1–11a	The Passover is kept.	9:11b–14	Passover law.
9:15–23	The cloud covers the tabernacle and will lead Israel on its journey.	10:1–10	Silver trumpets to call assemblies and for setting out on the journey.
10:11–36	Israel sets out on its journey.		
II.	Journeying		
11–14	Israel journeys to Canaan, murmuring on the way, finally refusing to enter. The oath: they will never enter because of their deliberate rebellion.	15	Offerings commanded for the time when Israel does enter the land. Distinction between deliberate and unintentional sins.
16–17	Korah's rebellion against Aaron's high priesthood. The Lord confirms his choice of Aaron.	18–19	Laws confirming Aaron's high priesthood over the Levites; Aaron's house must cleanse Israel from uncleanness (water for cleansing).
20–25	The end of the journey and events in the plains of Moab. Balaam's blessing and Israel's sin with the Midianites.		
III.	New Preparation to inherit the Promised Land		
26–27	The tribes are counted: as a basis for possessing and allotting the land.	{27:8–10}	Inheritance law.
		28–30	Offerings and vows, the calendar of feasts to be observed in the land.
31–32	Revenge on Midian. Settlement in Transjordan.	34–35	Boundaries of the land; allotting the inheritance; Levitical towns and cities of refuge for keeping the land pure.
(33	Moses' record of the journey)		
		{36:7–10}	Inheritance law: no inheritance may pass from tribe to tribe.
36:1–13	Marriage of Zelophehad's daughters and their inheritance.		

Type of literature

It is important to know what kind of writing Numbers is. Indeed, this is a principle of interpretation: we must identify the type of literature of biblical books and their contents. The books of the Bible are not all the same. They consist of different types of literature: law, history, psalm, gospel, letter and so on. The different kinds cannot be read in the same way. For example, history is different from doctrine. Acts (history)

records that Paul circumcised Timothy 'because of the Jews' (Acts 16:3). Yet by letter (doctrine), Paul teaches that circumcision is no longer required (Gal. 2:3; 5:2; 6:12–16). The distinction is important because we must obey doctrine and not necessarily follow the example of history.

In the book of Numbers we can see four main types of writing: narrative, law, administration records and speeches. If we extracted the *narrative* sections, we would have a continuous story of the events which happened. For example, we could leave out the details of the census and the laws about offerings and feasts and be left with an account of what happened to Israel at Sinai, in the desert and on the plains of Moab. This is the *framework* of the book (see Table 2). The main subjects of the *laws* are the priesthood (4:4–33; 8:6–26; 18:1 – 19:22), purification (5:5 – 6:21), offerings and feasts (9:11b–14; 10:1–10; 15:1–41; 28:1 – 30:16) and commandments concerned with the inheritance of the land of Canaan (27:8–11; 31:21–24; 34:1 – 35:34; 36:7–10). The *administration records* include lists of leaders (1:5–16; 13:4–16; 34:19–29), genealogies and censuses (1:20–46; 3:1–4, 17–29; 4:34–49; 26:4–51, 57–62), camp-site records (2:3–33; 33:1–49), lists of tribal offerings and tribute (7:12–88; 31:32–40, 42–47), diplomatic correspondence (20:14–20; 22:5–6, 16–17) and land boundary records (34:3–12). The *speeches* which are quoted include prayer (10:35–36), blessings (6:24–27), oracles (23:7–10, 18–24; 24:3–9, 15–24), vows (21:2), oaths (5:19–22; 14:20–25, 28–35), poems, songs and ancient sayings (21:14–15, 17–18, 27–30). Often these speeches bring out the significance of the events recorded in the narrative and can, therefore, be crucial in their setting.

Narrative framework

The laws, administration records and speeches all fit into the narrative which supplies a framework. The administration records form a natural part of the narrative. For example, the messages sent between Edom and Israel (20:14–20) help to tell the story of how Edom refused to let Israel cross its territory into Canaan. In fact, the administration records help to create the special character of Numbers' narrative.

It is less obvious how the laws fit into the narrative. Many readers have been puzzled why the laws are placed where they are. Nevertheless, there is a link and unless it is seen the book cannot be properly understood. Two examples of this can be given. First, the narrative of the Levite Korah's rebellion against Aaron (chs. 16 – 17) is immediately followed by laws reinforcing Aaron's high priesthood over the Levites (chs. 18 – 19). Secondly, the narrative of Israel's failure to enter Canaan because of their unbelief and God's oath that that generation will never enter (chs. 13 – 14) is followed immediately with laws which imply that Israel will one day possess the land (ch. 15). Those laws begin 'After you enter the land . . .', and the offerings required are of flour, oil and wine, *i.e.* they are from the produce of the land. Thus, these laws show God's grace despite Israel's sin. The relationship between narrative and law is shown more fully in Table 2.

The narrative focuses on *key speeches.* Hebrew narrative tends to quote the words of the leading characters. Frequently, the climax of a story is expressed in a very significant speech. For example, the account of Abraham's trial of faith (when he was commanded to sacrifice Isaac) reaches its climax in the oath of God (Gn. 22:15–18). Such key speeches express the main point of the account. Numbers, like Genesis, quotes key speeches at crucial points in the narrative. These are shown in Table 3.

Important characteristics of the narrative

Much can be learned from the style and character of the narrative.

The narrative is not perfectly chronological

Numbers is broadly chronological. In places, however, the historical order is not followed. This is true particularly of chs. 1 – 10 which record the events of the first two months of the second year after the exodus. If we rearranged the text, the chronological order would be as follows: on the first day, the tabernacle was set up (9:15–23); for twelve days the tribes brought their offerings for its consecration (7:1 – 8:26); on the fourteenth day the Passover was kept (9:1–14); two weeks later, on the first day of the second month, the census was taken and the camp was purified (1:1 – 6:27); on the twentieth day Israel set out for Canaan (10:1–36). Numbers is not the only book in the Bible where the chronological order has been set aside for another arrangement. It seems to be the case in some of the gospels, for example. In such cases, there is a reason why the historical order has not been followed. If we can discover that reason, it will shed light on the author's purpose.

In chs. 1 – 10 the author seems to follow *the plan of the camp.* The camp was arranged in two circles: in the outer circle were the tribes and in the inner circle were the priests with the tabernacle in the centre (see on 2:1–34). This layout taught Israel that God should be the centre of

Table 3. Key speeches in the narrative

Part	Reference	Key speech
I. 1–10	6:24–27	The priestly blessing. This is given only after the camp has been ordered, the priesthood established and the camp purified.
	10:35–36	Moses' prayer. *Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you* and *Return, O LORD*, to the countless thousands of Israel. This prayer of invocation sums up the point of 1–10. God is present among the hosts of Israel and he leads them forward to the promised inheritance in the land of Canaan.
II. 11–25	14:20–25, 28–35	The Lord's oath. Israel's unbelief in God's promise and their refusal to enter the land leads to this divine oath with all its terrible finality: *not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers.*
	23:7–10, 18–24; 24:3–9, 15–19, 20–24	Blessings on Israel. Though in Balaam's mouth, the text makes it clear that these blessings are spoken by the command of God. They cannot be changed, nor revoked. These are extremely significant because Israel is on the verge of entering Canaan.
	25:12–13	Covenant of eternal priesthood. This is extremely important: Israel has overcome its enemies and yet it falls by its own sinfulness. In the grace of God, the means of overcoming sin is guaranteed: *i.e.* the priesthood.
III. 26–36	26:52–56; 33:50–56; 34:2, (3–12), 29	Repeated commands that the land must be allotted to Israel as their inheritance.
	36:7, 9; (27:7–11)	A final commandment: *No inheritance in Israel is to pass from tribe to tribe, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal land inherited from his forefathers.* This commandment embodies the purpose of God: *All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever* (Gn. 13:15) The promise of God to Abraham thus leads to the inalienable right of inheritance.

their thoughts and lives. Above all else, Israel needed God to dwell among them (Ex. 33:3–16). They were to desire his presence more than anything (Ps. 42:1–3). By following the order, tribal camp (outer circle), priests' camp and tabernacle (inner circle centre), the author leads the reader into the centre. He does this three times. First, with the numbering of the tribes (chs. 1 – 2) and then the Levites (chs. 3 – 4) and secondly, with the consecration of the camp (chs. 5 – 6) and then the tabernacle and priesthood (chs. 7 – 8). Finally, approaching the time of setting out, first Israel keeps the Passover throughout the camp (9:1–14), then the cloud appears over the tabernacle (9:15–23) and then Israel sets out. The most important event, the manifestation of God's presence which actually took place before all the other events, is thus reserved till last. This delay creates a sense of climax and points out what is most important. Israel's desire is withheld until the last moment then, at last, the cloud descends and God's abiding presence is displayed to his people (9:15–23). Only then can they go up to Canaan (ch. 10).

It is interesting to compare Exodus and Numbers (Ex. 40 is parallel to Nu. 9:15–23). Exodus takes us from slavery in Egypt to Sinai and the glory of God's presence in the tabernacle and the cloud (Ex. 40). The climax is God's dwelling among his people as he promised to Abraham (Gn. 17:7). Numbers goes beyond that point to a new focus of interest, the inheritance in the land of Canaan. God leads Israel to the land promised in the covenant with Abraham (Nu. 10:29). The rest of Numbers is concerned with the inheritance lost by one generation but preserved for the next.

The narrative leaves much out

Numbers covers a period of about forty years. However, it does not record everything that happened in those forty years. There is a thirty-eight year gap between chs. 19 and 20 (Dt. 2:14;

Nu. 21:12). The record concentrates on a few months of the second year and the fortieth year at the end; in between is an almost total silence.

Moses made a list of the camp sites (ch. 33). The narrative mentions only a few places on the journey (*e.g.* 1:1; 9:1; 12:16; 20:1, 22–23; 33:50; 36:13). Comparison with Moses' list confirms the gap in the narrative. Two episodes might have occurred in the intervening desert years: the stoning of the Sabbath-breaker (15:32–36) and Korah's rebellion (16:1–50). The former occurred 'in the desert', but this seems to mean the desert of Paran (15:32). The latter is not dated but it appears to result from the failure to possess the land (16:14), and we may reasonably conclude that this followed fairly swiftly (note 16:41 for instance). Israel remained at Kadesh for many days, enough time for these things to take place (Dt. 1:46). Even if they did occur later on the journey, the author is not concerned to tell us; on the contrary, he attaches them to the rebellion. Thus there is no record of the journey from Rithmah to Kadesh (33:19, 36).

The point is that the author focuses on three crucial phases: the preparation (chs. 1 – 10); the rebellion (chs. 13 – 19); and the end of the journey and new preparation (chs. 20 – 25, 26 – 36). Furthermore, his silence about the period spent in the desert is eloquent testimony that these were wasted years. Clearly the author has been highly selective, choosing carefully what to include. He wants us to attend to what he has recorded and ignore all else.

The narrative alternates between the word of God and the words of men

A stark contrast is drawn between the two. God gives his word, and obedience brings great progress. When Israel speaks for itself, however, we hear grumbling, complaining and rebellion, and this provokes the judgment of God.

In chs. 1 – 10, the directing factor is the word of God. Repeatedly we read 'The LORD spoke' (1:1; 2:1; 3:1; *etc.*). The Hebrew word 'spoke' as it is used here carries the sense of giving commandment, *i.e.* all was done 'at the LORD's command' (3:39, 42; 9:18–23). The result was progress and peace. Throughout the book we should notice statements that 'The LORD said'; these refer to the directing word of God.

In chs. 11 – 25 the picture changes completely. When the people start to speak, they complain against God. Murmuring characterizes the journey and repeatedly we read that 'the people complained'. They grumbled about hardships (11:1), the lack of meat (11:4) and about the prospects awaiting them in Canaan (14:1–4). Miriam and Aaron opposed Moses (12:1); Korah and his followers opposed Moses and Aaron (16:2–3), soon followed by the whole community (16:41–42). Many years later they were still complaining, this time about water (20:2–3); and only six months before the end of forty years (21:4f) they were still complaining. Throughout the central section of Numbers (chs. 11 – 25), the word of God comes in response to the evil-speaking of Israel. We read that 'the LORD heard' (11:1, 18; 12:2). Although judgment fell, God's word reaffirmed his will and provided for continued blessing.

In chs. 26 – 36 the word of God directs Israel and confirms the inheritance.

This alternating structure reveals a fundamental element in the theology of Numbers: God remains true to his covenantal purpose despite Israel's repeated failure. Those who provoke him lose their inheritance. They lose their lives. Yet God remains faithful and his word constantly confirms that his purposes are unchangeable. We meet this throughout Scripture. Paul writes, 'if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself' (2 Tim. 2:13; RSV), and, 'What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar' (Rom. 3:3–4).

Geographical information

Numbers contains information about Israel's route as they travelled from Sinai to Moab (ch. 33). Consequently, many commentaries divide the book according to its geography, *i.e.* according to three main locations: Sinai, the desert and Moab (see Table 1 and map on p.104). However, the geography does not determine the structure of the book. We have already seen that most of the journey is ignored. If we attach too much weight to the geography, the result may obscure the theological structure of the text.

Nevertheless, the geography does support the theology. Sinai was the mount of revelation (and the word of God directs, chs. 1 – 10). The desert wastes outside the promised inheritance are the setting for wasted years of spiritual barrenness and death (chs. 11 – 25). Moab was at Canaan's border, where Israel prepared again to receive the inheritance. However, Numbers is not a collection of isolated episodes, brought together because they happened on the same journey, or in the same place. Rather, the book presents a clear theology which the geographical information is designed to support.

Notice also that towards the end of the book Israel's camp sites are mentioned more often. This conveys the sense of rapid advance to that goal for which Israel has waited for so long. Their progress accelerates because the forty

Table 4. Alternating word of God and contrary words of men

I.	Word of God		Response of Moses
1–10	The Lord speaks to Moses commanding Israel to prepare to set out for the land.		Moses does all according to the command of the Lord. Preparation is made.
II.	Contrary word of people (unbelieving)		Response: word of God (faithful)
11–12	Complaints on the journey. They prefer Egypt.	13	Command to spy out the land, ready to enter it.
	(Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses.)	(12:6–8	The word of God concerning Moses.)
14	Complaint for bringing them to the land; they prefer the desert.	{14:20–35 15	Oath denying them entrance} Command: offerings in the land for unintentional sin and blue tassels reminding Israel not to sin. (God's purpose continues.)
16	Korah opposes Moses and Aaron	17–19	Commands confirming the Aaronic priesthood.
20–21	Striving against Moses and impatience in face of opposition from enemies.	22–24	God's irrevocable blessing commanded even in the mouth of an enemy, Balaam.
25	Israel sins with Moab (open rebellion).	25:10–18	The continuity of the Aaronic priesthood, the means of dealing with sin, guaranteed by covenant.
III.	Word of God		Response of Moses
26–36	New preparation including allotting and guaranteeing the inheritance, a calendar and other orders for the land.		Moses does what the Lord commands, even recording the stages of the journey.

years' wandering is coming to an end. Every camp site is one step nearer the land. Excitement mounts as Canaan is approached (20: 1 – 22:1; 33:1–50).

Place in the Pentateuch

Numbers is an integral part of the Pentateuch. It is united to the other books in two crucial ways. First, there is continuity in the history. Numbers follows Exodus and leads on to Deuteronomy. Exodus moves from Egypt to the first year at Sinai; Numbers covers the next forty years, moving from Sinai to Moab (surveyed in Dt. 1:6 – 3:29); Deuteronomy deals with the renewal of the covenant on the plains of Moab. There is continuity and development of laws and institutions. Exodus records the making of the tabernacle (Ex. 25 – 40); Numbers overlaps Exodus on the setting up of the tabernacle and contains additional instructions on transporting it (4:4–33). Other common subjects include the priesthood, offerings, feasts, vows and purification.

Secondly, there is unity of theology. The main unifying factor is God's covenant made with Abraham (Gn. 11 – 22). This is the foundation provided in Genesis and shared by Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This is why God delivers Israel from Egypt, meets them at Sinai and takes them through the desert to the plains of Moab. This is why there is a tabernacle and a priesthood. These fundamentals are now to be explored in a study of the theology of Numbers and its leading doctrines.

Theology and leading doctrines

There is one fundamental doctrine in the book of Numbers: the Abrahamic covenant. It undergirds the entire book. There are other leading doctrines, in particular, the word of God, faith and apostasy and holiness and priesthood. These are held together by the Abrahamic covenant which provides the organizing principle.

The Abrahamic covenant

God's promises to Abraham were framed in

a covenant and confirmed with an oath (Gn. 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17;15:1–16; 17:1–21; 22:15–18). Such was the force of this oath that it is impossible for God to forsake his covenant promises (Heb. 6:13–18). This sworn covenant is firmer than the heavens and earth (Ne. 9:6–7; Is. 40:8; Je. 31:36–37; 33:25–26; Mt. 24:35; 1 Pet. 1:23–25). The same covenant was renewed with Isaac and Jacob (Gn. 26:3–5; 28:13–15). As the covenant is repeated a formula emerges containing four main promises.

1. The relationship with God. 'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you' (Gn. 17:7; *cf.* Gn. 15:1; 26:3; 28:13, 15). God drew Abraham and his descendants into a relationship with him by an everlasting covenant (Lk. 20:37–38; Rom. 8:35–39). That relationship is given many names in Scripture: fellowship, sonship, being the people of God and eternal life (1 Jn. 1:3, 6–10; Rom. 9:4–6; 1 Pet. 2:9–10). God is our heavenly Father. The relationship is the fundamental goal of all redemptive history; it is the fundamental concern of the entire Bible.

2. The land. 'Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you' (Gn. 13:17). Sometimes the borders of Canaan are marked out (Gn. 15:18–21), and at other times the land is described more generally as 'the land I will show you' (Gn. 12:1) or 'the gate of their enemies' (Gn. 22:17; RSV). There is no doubt that Canaan is specifically intended. Jacob and Joseph left instructions that they should be buried there (Gn. 50:5, 12–14, 24–25). Thus, the last words of Genesis refer to the promise of Canaan. But will Canaan be big enough for Abraham's descendants who will cover the face of the earth like the dust of the earth (Gn. 13:14–17)? The NT indicates that the promise was wider: 'Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world' (Rom. 4:13). Genesis supports this. In the creation, God gave mankind dominion over the earth. Because of the fall, dominion was lost through the curse and death. God's covenant was his plan to redeem the creation (Rom. 8:18–23) and Canaan was but the firstfruits. The prophets and apostles spoke of a new earth and new Jerusalem descending to that new earth. Thus Abraham 'was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (Heb. 11:10), and the OT saints 'were longing for a better country' (Heb. 11:16; *cf.* Jn. 14:1–4; Heb. 4:1–6).

3. The people. Abraham's descendants will become a countless multitude. 'I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth' (Gn. 13:16), 'I will make you into a great nation' (Gn. 12:2), 'I will . . . make your descendants as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore' (Gn. 22:17). This countless multitude signifies the redeemed drawn from all mankind (Gn. 17:4). John saw that this would be fulfilled at the end of time, exactly as promised to Abraham: 'and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb' (Rev. 7:9). Again, the covenant has a universal scope, concerning every nation, though not every individual.

4. The nations blessed in Abraham's seed. The Hebrew word 'seed' ('offspring', Gn. 22:18 but see the NIV mg.), can refer both to all descendants and to just one offspring. All nations will share the blessings promised to Abraham; his seed will bring this about. Here is the promise of Christ Jesus, Abraham's seed and the light of the world (Jn. 1:9; 9:5; Gal. 3:16). His earthly life and work were the means of drawing men to God (Jn. 3:14–16; 12:32). But further, all Abraham's children, who are Christ's brethren, must share his work; they become the means of blessing others from the nations. This is what Christ meant by 'You are the light of the world' and 'You are the salt of the earth' (Mt. 5:13–16).

The whole book is essentially concerned with the first and second promises above: that God might be with his people and that they might enter the land of Canaan. Chs. 1 – 10 is concerned first with God's presence with his people. This is Moses' prayer ('Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel'; 10:36) and Aaron's blessing (6:22–27). The people prepared for this by ordering and cleansing the camp. God cannot dwell with anything unclean (Ps. 15; Rev. 21:27). The priesthood was established in its ranks so that Israel might serve God. The tabernacle was set up for God's dwelling place. After every preparation was faithfully made, God revealed his presence: the cloud appeared over the tabernacle and led Israel forward. This preparation had in view the first promise: that God might be in fellowship with his people.

The second main concern springs out of the promise of the land. 'We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, "I will give it to you."' (10:29). They journeyed to Canaan because God had sworn to give it to them. Although they rebelled and were forbidden to enter the land (14), the rest of the book shows that God had not abandoned his purpose. After forty years God again prepared them to inherit the land. Indeed, the key to chs. 26 – 36 is inheritance. However, the land was not to be possessed for its own sake. The land was the

place where God could dwell among his people. The land without God was no inheritance at all. Everything relates, therefore, to the chief end of the covenant: to be the people of God, secure in fellowship with him.

The other two promises are far less prominent (see on 23:1 – 24:25). The main point is that the Abrahamic covenant determines the theology of Numbers. If that is not understood, Numbers remains a closed book.

The word of God

A leading doctrine in Numbers is the word of God. Chs. 1 – 10 emphasize that everything was done according to the word of God. While this happened, Israel enjoyed the blessing of God (6:22–27) and his presence (9:15–23; 10:35–36). Certain characteristics are prominent. First, the word of God is unchangeable. This was Moses' confidence when setting out from Sinai (10:29) and his refuge in difficulty (14:17–19). Joshua and Caleb's boldness in the face of fearful enemies came from the word of God, that he would give them the land (14:7–9). Secondly, the word of God is irresistible. The Israelites who refused to enter Canaan but later changed their mind were resisting the word of God. They perished for their folly (14:41–45). Later, Balaam was unable to resist God's word of blessing. He could not curse Israel but said, 'Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything of my own accord, good or bad, to go beyond the command of the LORD – and I must say only what the LORD says.' (24:13). When the word of God comes as oath, its unchangeableness and irresistible nature are emphasized (14:20–35).

Apostasy

The term 'apostasy' is rare in Scripture, but the sin of apostasy comes into sharp focus in chs. 14 – 15. Two passages combine to expound and warn against apostasy: the account of Israel's rebellion (ch. 14), and the following laws which differentiate between unintentional sin and defiant sin (15:22–31). The term 'apostasy' means lit. 'standing away from'. The man who commits apostasy 'stands away from' his covenant relationship with God. It follows, therefore, that only those who are embraced by the covenant can commit apostasy. Esau did this when he 'sold his inheritance rights' (Heb. 12:16). The text yields an analysis of apostasy and the following elements can be noted:

1. Apostasy involves knowledge. Israel had seen the glory of God and his signs (14:22). They knew the promise that the land would be theirs (14:3). The spies had seen the land and knew that it was exactly as promised, that 'it does flow with milk and honey!' (13:27; 14:8).

2. Apostasy involves rejection. Israel refused to hear the voice of God (14:22; the NIV reads 'who disobeyed me', but the Hebrew text reads 'and they did not hear my voice'). They rebelled against God (14:9) and rejected the land of promise (14:31). They rejected the good news brought to them by the spies (Heb. 4:1–2, 6).

3. There is no atonement for apostasy. Those who knowingly reject God's covenant promise cannot go unpunished. Although God forgave and was willing to preserve the nation, he could not overlook the sin of those who had 'treated him with contempt' (14:23). There was no atonement for them; intercession would not prevail in their case. 'Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished' (14:18, 22–23).

4. Apostasy leads to dispossession. The oath of God denied the people entry to the land (14:23, 28–35). At 14:12, after the words 'I will strike them down with a plague', the Hebrew text reads 'and dispossess them' (NIV 'destroy them'). The point is that they would be disinherited, cut off from their covenant inheritance. Only Caleb and Joshua would inherit (14:24).

What caused this terrible sequence of events? Unbelief. After receiving precious knowledge, they refused to believe. 'How long will they not believe in me, in all the signs which I have done in their midst?' (14:11, translated from the Hebrew). Outward disobedience springs from an inward refusal to believe despite the tremendous weight of evidence. Consequently, they treated God with contempt (14:11, 23). The same elements occur in the law of 15:22–31 where they are presented in terms of a contrast drawn between unintentional failure and defiant sin.

Thus, Numbers provides an analysis of the terrible sin of apostasy. A whole generation failed to enter Canaan because of this sin. The essence of apostasy is rejection of covenant standing through unbelief. Knowing the promises and the power of God who confirmed them with an oath, Israel refused to believe. Thus despising God, they rebelled. Afterwards, they were unable to find a way back. There was no way to undo their sin. They could never enter the land. They were dispossessed and died outside the land of promise. It is no accident that the record of their apostasy closes with the words 'and beat them down all the way to Hormah' (14:45). The name Hormah was given to this place later (21:3) but the writer uses it now because it means 'total destruction' (its NT equivalent is *anathema*). The name signifies the opposite of covenant relationship. The author is making the point that Israel was surely cut off, as the Canaanites were later.

Table 5. The contrast between unintentional failure and defiant sin (15:22–31)

Unintentional failure (15:22–29)	Defiant sin (15:30–31)
1. No knowledge. Although the law is known, the failure to keep it is hidden from the people (vs 22–24). The Hebrew word 'error'/'to err' is repeated ten times.	1. Knowledge. The Lord's word is known to the man and he knows also that he is acting contrary to it.
2. No rejection. There is no rejection of the commandment. The point of the language is that the sin is a mistake.	2. Rejection. The sin is committed *defiantly* (Hebrew: *with a high hand*). The man defies God: he *blasphemes* (v 30). He despises the word and acts in outright defiance of the commandment.
3. Atonement. Sacrifice is provided. The priest is to make atonement for the people (vs 25–26, 28).	3. No atonement. No offering is prescribed. On the contrary, *his guilt remains on him.* (v31).
4. Forgiveness. The promise is repeated: the community, or the individual, will be forgiven.	4. Dispossession. The person must be cut off from his people. This is stated twice; the second time, the text is more emphatic he *must surely be cut off* (vs 30–31).

Priesthood

Numbers contains instruction about the priesthood. The chief concern seems to be with the hierarchy. Aaron was the high priest, his sons were priests with him, and the Levites served under them (3:1–10). The hierarchy determined their service (4:1–33) with the priests having the holiest duties (they alone may enter the Most Holy Place, and even then, not every priest and not at all times). This hierarchy also determined the tithing system (18:8–32). Israel paid tithes to the Levites who in turn paid their tithes. Aaron's family received a portion from the Levites' tithes. The doctrine of priesthood is a means for teaching about God's holiness and his mercy. On the one hand, God's holiness is magnified by the distance set between him and even the majority of the priests. It is emphasized by the need for mediation. On the other hand, God's provision of mediators is a token of his mercy. He provides the means for dealing with sins. Thus Israel may continue to be his people.

When opponents challenged Aaron's high priesthood (and the leadership of Moses), God upheld his servants (chs. 16 – 17). The reason is clear. Their opposition challenged the authority of God himself who had set apart his servants.

Use in the New Testament

The influence of Numbers upon the NT is extensive and profound.

1. It provided principles which influence church order and ministry. The ordering of the camp (2:1–34) shows that God requires order, not disorder, in the churches (1 Cor. 14:33). The hierarchy of priests and Levites (3:1 – 4:49; 17:1–13) shows that ministers must not function without authority nor think too highly of themselves but be subject to one another (Rom. 12:3–8; see on 27:12–23; *cf.* 1 Cor. 14:32). The fact that there was no inheritance for Levites (26:57–62) shows that ministers of God should not have worldly interests but be devoted to God's service (2 Tim. 2:4). Tithing (18:8–32) is behind the teaching that ministers of the gospel have the right to financial support (1 Cor. 9:3–14; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17–18). The seventy elders (11:16–30) provide a model for church councils (Acts 15), the association of local churches, unity of practice and mutual help (Col. 4:15–16; 1 Cor. 11:16; 2 Cor. 8 – 9). Korah's rebellion (16:16–35) is also held up as a warning (Jas. 5:9; Jude 11). Daily offerings (28:1–8) are a model for continual prayer (1 Thes. 5:17).

2. A parallel is drawn between the journey to Canaan and Christian pilgrimage (this is the basis of 1 Cor. 10:1–13; 2 Cor. 5:1–10; Heb. 3:1 – 4:13). For example, the common experience of Christ and the promise (1 Cor. 10:3–4; Heb. 4:2), the complaints about bread from heaven (11:4–15; *cf.* Jn. 6:1–65, especially v41), the refusal to believe the message therefore making God a liar (14:11; *cf.* 1 Jn. 5:10), deliberate sin which cannot be forgiven (15:22–31; *cf.* Mt. 12:22–32), the impossibility of repentance (14:39–45; *cf.* Heb. 6:4–20;

12:17) and sin for which we should not pray (1 Jn. 5:16). In essence, the NT takes the generation that fell in the desert as a sober warning of apostasy.

3. The high priesthood of Christ is compared and contrasted with Aaron's high priesthood (Heb. 4:14 – 5:10; 6:13 – 8:13). Hebrews can hardly be understood apart from its background in Numbers. Similarly, Christ's sacrifice is presented against the background of the sacrifices of the tabernacle (Heb. 9:1 – 10:18), *e.g.* the reference to the ashes of the heifer (19:1–22; *cf.* Heb. 9:13–14).

4. The NT draws several images from Numbers: the serpent lifted up (21:4–9; *cf.* Jn. 3:14), the trumpet call (10:1–10; *cf.* Mt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 14:8; 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:16; Heb. 12:19), the cloud and tabernacle (9:15 – 23; *cf.* Jn. 1:14) and the sacrifice of lambs (28:1–8; *cf.* Jn. 1:29).

5. The three great feasts (28:16 – 29:38) supply the framework for the three main events of salvation. Passover, Weeks and Tabernacles correspond with Easter, Pentecost and the second coming of Christ. Thus, Tabernacles prefigures the harvest at the close of the age (see on 29:12–38). John's gospel is also oriented to the feasts.

6. Other elements of NT teaching are influenced by Numbers. The Day of Atonement (29:7–11), celebrated a few days before Tabernacles, emphasizes the need for repentance, without which a person will be cut off. Similarly, repentance is needed before Christ comes and 'unless you repent, you too will all perish' (Lk. 13:5; *cf.* Mk. 1:1–8). Balaam (chs. 22 – 24) is taken as a warning not to desire gain from wrongdoing (2 Pet. 2:15–16; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14). The purging of the camp illustrates the purity required in the church (see on 5:1–4). The Aaronic blessing influences the greeting in all of Paul's letters and also the end of Revelation (see on 6:22–27).

7. Hebrews seems to have adopted similar structures to Numbers: pilgrimage to the land and the connection between the covenant word of promise and faith or unbelief. It shares a keen concern with other related doctrines such as priesthood and apostasy.

Authorship

Traditionally, as part of the Pentateuch, Numbers has been attributed to Moses. Moses is the central figure, the events took place in his lifetime, and the laws were given through him. However, there are indications that Moses did not give the text its final form. Note the following points about Numbers, which take account of evidence from the rest of the Pentateuch.

1. Moses is referred to throughout as if someone else is writing about him (1:1 says 'The LORD spoke to Moses', it does not say 'to me'). Furthermore, the text highly commends Moses (12:3). Would Moses praise himself?

2. The Pentateuch contains evidence that it was written some time after Moses' lifetime. It records his death and the thirty days mourning (Dt. 34:5–8) and compares him with later prophets (Dt. 34:10). Numbers mentions that certain cities' names were changed, which probably happened after the settlement (32:38, 42).

3. The Bible nowhere claims that Moses wrote the whole of Genesis to Deuteronomy. It does claim that Moses actually wrote down certain parts (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27–28; Nu. 33:2; Dt. 31:9, 19, 22). Later Scripture speaks of the 'Book of the Law of Moses' (1 Ki. 2:3; 2 Ki. 14:6; Ezr. 7:6; Ne. 8:1; 13:1; Dan. 9:11, 13). The NT regards the law as coming from Moses and refers to the Pentateuch as 'Moses' (Lk. 16:29, 31; Jn. 1:17). Moses is said to have written of Christ (Jn. 1:45; 5:46). Thus Scripture indicates that Moses wrote the law, a record of Israel's journey, a song and prophecy of Christ (*e.g.* Dt. 18:15). It is scriptural, therefore, to speak of Mosaic authorship in these terms. Yet it is probable that Moses' successors drew his writings together in the final form of the text as it appears today. Other biblical writings seem to have passed through a similar process (consider Is. 8:16; Jn. 21:24–25; Rom. 16:22); Hebrews, for example, was written by those who heard the apostles (Heb. 2:3).

Scholars have developed various theories to explain how the Pentateuch arrived at its final canonical form. These are outlined in the general introduction to the Pentateuch. In dealing with this question, it is essential to distinguish between the clear evidence of Scripture and what scholars make of that evidence.

Further reading

G. J. Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC (IVP, 1981).
J. Philip, *Numbers*, CC (Word, 1987).
R. B. Allen, *Numbers*, EBC (Zondervan, 1990).
J. Milgrom, *Numbers*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

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Commentary

1:1 – 10:36 Preparation to go to the promised land

The first part of Numbers contains an account of the final preparation of Israel before they left Sinai and journeyed to Canaan. These ten chapters must be seen in their context within the Pentateuch. Israel stayed at Sinai for about one year (10:11; Ex. 19:1). A covenant was made (Ex. 20:1 – 24:18) and the tabernacle was built (Ex. 25 – 31; 35 – 40). At the beginning of the second year, there was an explosion of activity: the tabernacle was erected (Ex. 40:34–38; Nu. 7:1), priests were ordained (Lv. 8 – 10) and for twelve days the tribes brought offerings (7:1–89). Passover was kept on the fourteenth day (for seven days, 9:1–14), a census was taken and the tribes were organized around the tabernacle (chs. 1 – 4). During this time, Moses was receiving laws (Lv. 1 – 7, 11 – 27) and purifying the camp (5:1–4). After one month and twenty days, Israel was ready to leave for Canaan (10:11–12).

The following points should be drawn from the context of this section. The land was Israel's goal from the time of the exodus (Ex. 13:11). They were brought out of Egypt in order to go to the land and serve God (Ex. 6:6–8). After Israel sinned with the golden calf, God told Moses to go to Canaan without his presence (Ex. 33:3). Had Moses gone at that critical moment, Leviticus and Numbers would never have been written. Israel would have gone without any preparation, with no tabernacle, no priesthood, no commandments. In short, they would have gone away 'God-less' and entered Canaan (or not!) as a secular nation. This teaches that the preparation described in chs. 1 – 10 was for one purpose, that God might be with his people when they left Sinai. This set Israel apart from every other nation. It would have been a curse of incalculable proportions for them to have left Sinai without God; they would have been like the Gentiles, 'objects of wrath' 'without hope and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:3, 12).

Thus, the preparation moves towards its climax. As Israel left Sinai for Canaan, Moses summed up the situation: 'Rise up, O LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you. . . . Return, O LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel.' (10:35–36). God was with his people and led them forth in triumph to the land which he had sworn to give them. The sense of victory is overwhelming.

This section is written according to a scheme which is not perfectly chronological (see the Introduction). The structure follows the plan of the camp given in ch. 2. First, there is the numbering and ordering of Israel (chs. 1 – 2) and then the priests (chs. 3 – 4); secondly, the consecrating of Israel's camp (chs. 5 – 6) and then the priests' camp (chs. 7 – 8); and last, the final preparations and setting out (chs. 9 – 10). The details of the text should be understood as they are presented within this overarching scheme.

1:1 – 2:34 Israel numbered and ordered (first census)

1:1–3 The LORD commands Moses to number the people. The first words of the book, *The LORD* spoke, show that the word of

God directed everything that was done in preparation for the journey (*cf.* 4:49; 7:89; 9:18–23). It has been explained in the Introduction how this book alternates between God's word and the words of men. All was well as long as Israel followed God's word. As soon as they began to speak, their unbelieving and discontented hearts were revealed and trouble came (11:1–3). Details of the *Tent of Meeting* or tabernacle are given in Ex. 25 – 31 and 35 – 40 (see on 4:1–33). This was God's dwelling place in the midst of his people (Ex. 25:8).

We know already that approximately 600,000 men on foot left Egypt with women and children and Gentiles who had joined them (Ex. 12:37–38). Now a head-count is taken. The *census* followed certain principles. It respected tribal and family structures. Only males over twenty years old were counted. It seems that they became adults at the age of twenty (3). Women were not counted as they did not have independent status but belonged under the authority of father or husband (see on ch. 30). It is quite clear from this that the authority of man over woman was beyond question. Children were also kept in subjection to their parents. Israel was not a society of equals; such an idea is completely foreign to the Bible. Among the men, leaders were identified; and among the Levites, we find a hierarchy. God requires people to respect the differences which he has put among them. This is true for the church today whose members have gifts that differ according to God's gracious will (Rom. 12:3–8). However, this must not become an excuse for imposing man-made distinctions which are not of God.

Ex. 30:12–16 gives an idea of how the census was conducted: as they were counted, the Israelites crossed over a line and joined those already numbered among the people of God (see also Ex. 38:25–28). This is a graphic picture. The census lists resemble in some ways the book of life of which Moses speaks. How terrible to be blotted out of the roll of God's people (Ex. 32:32–33; Ps. 69:28). The book of life is not mentioned many times in Scripture. It is later called the Lamb's book of life. Anyone whose name is not written there will not enter the presence of God but be cast out forever (Rev. 13:8; 20:11–15). There is an analogy between Israel preparing for Canaan and God's people today preparing for the kingdom that cannot be shaken. As the camp was purged of all the unclean (5:1–4), similarly only the pure will be recorded in the book of life and enter the heavenly city (Rev. 3:5; 21:27). One purpose of the census was to muster an army. This was to be the means of bringing the people into their inheritance in the promised land. Thus, the census immediately introduces the ultimate goal of Numbers, set by the promise of God. The word *army* also means 'host', a further reminder that God was keeping his promise to multiply the descendants of Abraham. There were already so many Israelites that the Egyptians were afraid of them. God's promise was that they would become so numerous that they could not be counted. The census thus indicates that the promise had not yet been fulfilled. A greater census is thus foreshadowed, when all God's people will be assembled to him (Rev. 7:4, 9).

1:4–16 The leaders of the tribes. The men appointed to number the people were tribal leaders, heads of families (4). Israel's tribes were made up of *clans and families* (20). By appointing these men to conduct the census, God chose to respect the social order he had already created. Although God deals with people according to their position (*e.g.* teachers will be judged more strictly), nevertheless, this is balanced by strict impartiality. The Bible warns that God does not show favouritism, which some have learned to their peril (chs. 16 – 17; Lv. 10). The names which appear in the list of leaders are interesting. Eight names include the word *El*, which means 'God' (*e.g.* Elizur in v 5 means 'my God is a rock'); others have the name of God, *Shaddai*, in them (*e.g.* Ammi-shaddai in v 12). None uses the divine name revealed to Moses at the burning bush; contrast later names such as Jehoshaphat (*Yeho*-shaphat) or Jeremiah (Jeremi-*Yah*). The name of God revealed to Moses in Ex. 3:13–15 is written in Hebrew using four letters YHWH. Since the pronunciation is uncertain, most Bibles tend to translate it LORD. The fact that none of the leaders' names is formed using this divine name indicates that the list is genuinely old. Notice that these leaders later brought the tribes' offerings to dedicate the Tent of Meeting (7:1–89).

1:17–46 The census. The large numbers are striking. Only seventy persons had entered Egypt (Ex. 1:1–5) but they had multiplied until even Pharaoh was afraid of them (Ex. 1:7–9). Even in the hardship of slavery, God was keeping his promise to make Abraham's descendants like the stars, impossible to count. However, after forty years, the second census revealed that their numbers had fallen from 603,550 to 601,730 (1:46; 26:51). This perhaps signalled that God's blessing had been withheld from the evil generation which perished in the desert. Nevertheless, they were not totally abandoned and when Moses reviewed the history, he was able to remind them, 'The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked

anything'. (Dt. 2:7). Indeed, they had been fed with manna from heaven since the day they left Egypt (Ex. 16:35). Notice also that some tribes decreased while others increased, but Judah remained most numerous. Throughout Israel's history, Judah was favoured by God. From this tribe the Messiah would eventually come (see on 2:1–34). The census record follows a formula and the same words are repeated for each tribe. Each time we read that these men were *able to serve in the army*. Here is a reminder of obligation. The Bible always joins privilege to obligation. Entry into Canaan was the privilege; but as each man was counted and crossed the line, he knew that he was becoming a soldier (Ex. 23:20–33). Similarly, the responsibility to be spiritual soldiers is laid upon the NT church (Eph. 6:10–17; 1 Tim. 6:12; Heb. 4:11). No member is exempt from this duty. The way to the kingdom is narrow and difficult (Mt. 7:14).

Table 6. The two censuses

Tribe	First census (1:20–46)	Second census (26:5–51)	
Reuben	46,500	43,730	
Simeon	59,300	22,200	
Gad	45,650	40,500	
Judah	74,600	76,500	
Issachar	54,400	64,300	
Zebulun	57,400	60,500	
Ephraim	40,500	32,500	*
Manasseh	32,200	52,700	*
Benjamin	35,400	45,600	
Dan	62,700	64,400	
Asher	41,500	53,400	
Naphtali	53,400	45,400	
Total	603,550	601,730	

* order reversed in second census

Scholars have raised four difficulties with the large numbers reported in the text.

1. The problem of size. If there were over 600,000 fighting men, the whole multitude must have been more than two million persons. How could all these have survived in the desert for forty years? The reality of this problem was faced by Israel from the start (Ex. 16;3) and the provision of manna was remembered throughout history (Dt. 29:5–6; Jn. 6:31). Besides that, they left Egypt with flocks and herds large enough to make many sacrifices (Ex. 12:32; Nu. 32:16; 7:1–89), they drank water from the rock, and moved repeatedly to new sites. They also took the spoils of battle (31:25–54; Ex. 17:8–16).

2. Alleged inconsistency in Scripture. Some texts say that their numbers were small, the fewest of all peoples (Ex. 23:29–30; Dt. 7:7). Such statements do not contain head counts but are assessments designed to teach Israel humility – they did not merit God's love. They are balanced by evidence that Israel was nevertheless a substantial force (Ex. 1:7).

3. The totals are all round numbers and therefore seem artificial. The text states that the men counted were 'able to serve in the army'. It is possible that the men were placed in cohorts and odd numbers were left aside, but we must avoid speculation. We are simply not told why the numbers are round. However, one thing is clear: at this time Moses had organized Israel under 'officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens' (Ex. 18:21). This may be the clearest reason why the census produced totals to the nearest hundred, fifty and ten.

4. The relatively few firstborn sons. There were 22,273 firstborn sons (3:43) but 603,550 adult males, a ratio of 1 to 27. If there were a similar number of daughters, the figures would suggest that families had fifty or more children and only one was 'a firstborn'. Various suggestions have been made to resolve this problem, for instance, perhaps only those born since the Passover were numbered; or the household may have included sons, homeborn slaves and servants bought with money (*e.g.* Abraham's household in Gn. 14:14; 15:2; 17:13 included all these, but Isaac was Abraham's heir). The term 'firstborn' may refer to the one son who would succeed his father as the head of the household in due time. Other considerations might include the Egyptian policy of murdering boys at birth, but this happened many years before and failed to reduce Israel's numbers (Ex. 1:22).

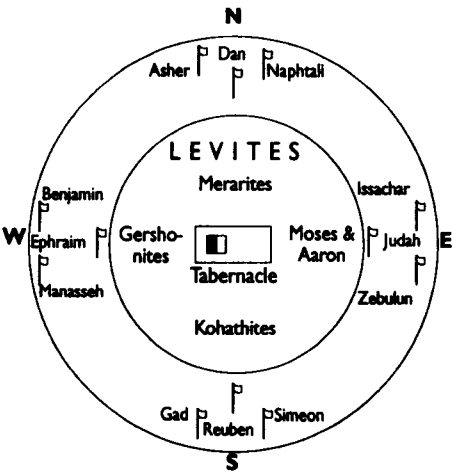
Disturbed by such apparent difficulties with the large numbers, some have thought that the numbers are not actual but require interpretation, *e.g.* the term 'thousand' might mean a clan or group, not exactly 1,000 people. However, Ex. 38:25–28 does not favour such a view because it confirms the total of 603,550. Furthermore, in other places in Numbers where quantities or measurements are given, it seems that the figures quoted are intended to be mathematically accurate and consistent (3:21–22; 31:32–47; 35:4–5). Should we then take the census numbers literally? This is the natural way to understand a census (a head count) unless we discover strong evidence to the contrary. The four objections noted above must not be overestimated. The first two are not strong enough to overturn the literal understanding. We cannot be certain that the totals are round numbers, nevertheless, this characteristic might alert us to look for an underlying assumption taken for granted in ancient Israel not

known to us. The evidence of Ex. 18:21 points to this. The fourth objection, that there are proportionately few firstborn, may point in the same direction. We must be careful not to reject a literal interpretation simply because we cannot fully understand it. One thing is clear. The text makes no attempt to reconcile these figures. It was not a problem to the author.

1:47–54 The tribe of Levi. Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob (Gn. 29:34) and was known for violence (Gn. 34:25–31; 49:5–7). The Levites' ferocity in a right cause singled them out as priests. Following the sin of the golden calf, they were ready to put about 3,000 of their own kin to death with the sword (Ex. 32:25–29). Now their separation to priesthood is confirmed. They were not to be numbered in the census nor serve in the army. Instead, they were put in charge of the tabernacle. This was a great task which left no room for any other duty. The apostle Paul applies the same principle to Christian ministry (2 Tim. 2:1–7). The Levites were not to camp with the other tribes but around the Tent of Meeting (53). The Tent is called *the tabernacle of the Testimony* (referring to the tablets of the Testimony, Ex. 34:29).

Although Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests, not all could approach the Tent. Only the tribe of Levi was called to this service. Anyone else (described in the Hebrew as 'a stranger' to the tribe of Levi) who dared to come near was to be put to death (51). God would never allow his holiness to be forgotten. His people are to fear him at all times with reverence and awe. Overfamiliarity with God is great folly and sin. Thus, Mt Sinai was not to be touched (Ex. 19:11–13, 21–24), and Moses had to remove his shoes at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5–6). We may be astonished that the beauty of the sanctuary was hidden from the eyes of almost all Israel. Even among the priests, the high priest alone could enter the Most Holy Place, and only once each year (Lv. 16:2). The NT uses this to show that Christ's high priesthood is far superior to Aaron's; Christ opened the way into heaven itself. Nevertheless, this does not remove the fear of God; on the contrary it is emphasized (Heb. 10:19–22; 12:18–29). The separation of Levi, however, did not reduce the number of tribes. Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, formed two tribes to make the number up to twelve.

2:1–34 Arrangement of the camp. The order of Israel's camp was a concern of Almighty God. The apostles never lost sight of the fact that God is a God of order, not confusion (1 Cor. 14:33). The plan of the camp teaches three lessons. First, the Tent of Meeting was in the centre, signifying the presence of God with his people. God was keeping his word to the patriarchs to be the God of their children. Every eye should be upon him. This is a continuous theme of the Bible (*e.g.* Ps. 46:5, 7, 10–11) and its ultimate goal (Rev. 21:3, 22–23; 22:1–5). Through the incarnation, the Lord Jesus was also in the midst of his people. John uses the image of the camp when he says that Jesus 'tabernacled' among them (Jn. 1:14). The Lord promised his disciples, 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.' (Mt. 28:20).



Plan of the camp.

Secondly, as a lesson in God's holiness, the tribes were kept at a distance from the Tent. We are not told how far away, but the space in between must have been wide enough for the whole Levite tribe. Later, when crossing the Jordan, Israel followed the ark at a distance of about 1,000 m (Jos. 3:4).

Thirdly, the east side of the Tent was the place of honour; Moses and Aaron camped on this side, facing the entrance (3:38). Judah, rather than Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, was placed on the east. This meant that Judah led the march from Sinai to Canaan. On the march, the tabernacle was carried after the first six tribes, right in the middle (17), but the ark of the covenant went before them (10:33–36). After describing the arrangement of the camp, the text concludes with a summary: Israel was numbered, a host of 603,550 not counting the Levites, and all this was done by command of the Lord.

Notes. The twelve tribes. There are several lists of the tribes in Scripture (*e.g.* Gn. 29–30; 49; Dt. 33; Jos. 13–21; Rev. 7:5–8). These lists raise some interesting questions. For example, the order changes and sometimes a

tribe is left out (*e.g.* Dan is omitted in Rev. 7:5–8, a point which Irenaeus noted in the second century AD). We find other lists in Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and some other ancient texts such as the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs. Ezekiel's vision of the restoration of Israel includes a list of the tribes (Ezk. 48), and the new Jerusalem is to have twelve gates, one for each tribe (Ezk. 48:30–35; Rev. 21:10–21). The Qumran scroll called the War Rule gives directions for 'the unleashing of the attack of the sons of light against the company of the sons of darkness'. This shows the influence of the camp organization. In various ways, the preparation for the War resembles the preparation at Sinai.

The place of Judah. In the census Reuben is listed first (1:20), but Jacob had said that Reuben would lose pride of place and Judah would have his brothers' praise, and that the Messiah would come from Judah (Gn. 49:4, 8–12). As history ran its course, Judah was elevated. Judah's camp was on the east of the Tent. Judah brought the first day's offerings when the Tent was dedicated (7:12). Judah was first to go into battle against the Canaanites (Jdg. 1:1). Judah received its inheritance first (Jos. 15:1) while Reuben's inheritance was on the other side of Jordan. King David was from the tribe of Judah and Jerusalem was in the territory of Judah. The ten tribes of Israel went into captivity in 721 BC, but Judah was spared (see on 4:34–39). Our LORD came from Judah, 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David' (Rev. 5:5).

3:1 – 4:49 Priests numbered and ordered

3:1–4 The family of Aaron and Moses. The priesthood is a focus of interest throughout the book. Aaron and his sons, *the anointed priests, who were ordained to serve as priests* (3), held the highest office among the Levites (Ex. 28 – 29; Lv. 8 – 9). Fire from God had consumed their first offerings, a mark of acceptance (Lv. 9:23–24). Later, Elijah prayed for the same sign to show that God was still Israel's God and to confirm that Elijah was truly his servant (1 Ki. 18:36–39). Although Aaron and his sons held a place of great honour, we are reminded that Aaron's two oldest sons had died when they offered *unauthorised fire* (Lv. 10:1–4). This draws attention to the importance of divine authority, a prominent issue in Numbers.

God was determined to establish an *authorized* priesthood in Israel. Several times during the desert years, Moses and Aaron were challenged. Each time, God upheld them and rejected others (chs. 12; 16 – 18). Because of the absolute need for divine authority, the writer to the Hebrews stresses that Christ's high priesthood is lawful, for 'No-one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was' (Heb. 5:4). Christ did not appoint himself but was lawfully appointed by God, even though there had to be a change in the law, since Christ did not come from the tribe of Levi (Heb. 7:12). It is of ultimate importance, therefore, to know that Christ was appointed high priest by God. Furthermore, Christ is superior: he was appointed with an oath (unlike Aaron) and his priesthood is eternally effective because he lives forever.

The death of Aaron's sons teaches the further lesson that privilege brings responsibility. God's ministers have greater responsibility than the people. When Aaron's two sons were killed, Moses said, 'This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honoured."' (Lv. 10:3). Similarly, James warns, 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.' (Jas 3:1). Thus, the Bible warns that before God men stand in mortal danger and his servants must take great care to obey him in every respect. (See 1 Sa. 15:19; 1 Ki. 22:28; Is. 6:1–7; Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 11:27–34.) Luther taught the priesthood of all believers, that all Christians are to serve God in their lives (Rom. 12:1–8; 1 Pet. 2:9). In this matter, care should be exercised to observe proper distinctions, since Scripture has not removed the need for preachers and leaders to be properly called and appointed. They must still take care to serve him in the way that he has commanded (Rom. 10:15) to avoid the indictment, 'I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied.' (Je. 23:21). Even worse will be the judgment of those who claim to serve Christ but are mistaken: 'Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"' (Mt. 7:22–23).

3:5–10 The Levites given to Aaron. The whole tribe of Levi was to assist Aaron in the tabernacle service. This is a very practical measure; many hands were needed to transport the tabernacle and its furniture. A distinction was maintained between the priests (Aaron's family) and the Levites (10). The priests alone could approach the sanctuary; anyone else would face death. This hierarchy was designed to elevate the glory of God. When some Levites did challenge this strict command, they forfeited their lives (16:1–33). In early NT

times, the apostles appointed seven men to assist them, later identified as deacons (Acts 6). Thus, it became common to compare elders and deacons with priests and Levites. The levitical structure is summed up in v 9.

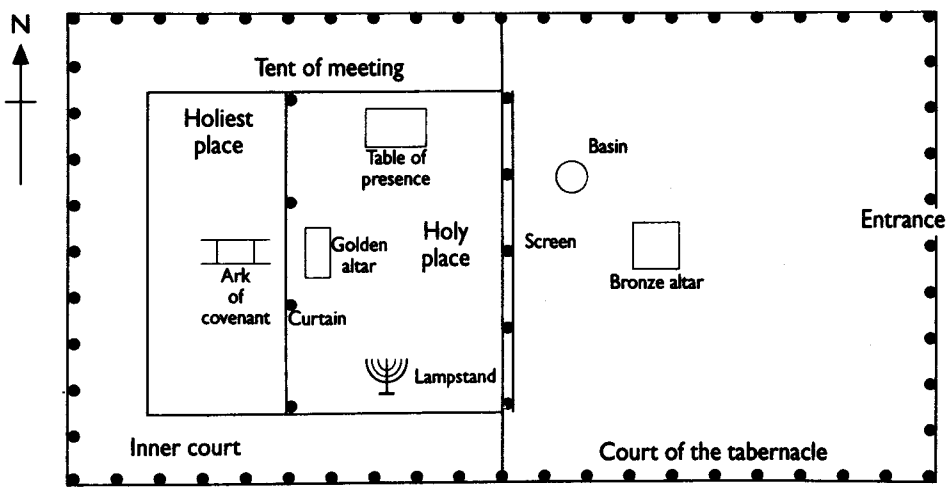
3:11–13 Levites taken in place of the firstborn. Although the Levites were given to Aaron and his sons, they belonged to the Lord. It was a principle that the firstborn (and firstfruits) were the Lord's (13). On Passover night, God had claimed the firstborn as his own (Ex. 13:1–16). Now the Levites are taken in place of the firstborn. This substitution may have assisted the transition from household sacrifice to national worship. In patriarchal times, the head of the house (men such as Noah and Job) acted as the family's priest (Gn. 8:20; Jb. 1:5), perhaps in time to be succeeded by the first son. Now that Israel was a nation, although some celebrations of faith continued within the home (*e.g.* Passover), there had to be a unified, organized sanctuary (*cf.* Dt. 12:5–14).

3:14–39 The first Levite census. The Levites were made up of three clans, Gershon, Kohath and Merari, each with its family branches. Every male one month old and upwards was numbered in order to match the Levites with the firstborn (40–51). The duties of each clan are summarized and further instructions are added later (4:4–33).

The Levites were also told where to camp. Aaron and his sons had to camp facing the door of the tabernacle on the east. They were priests and no-one else was permitted to approach the sanctuary (38). Among the Levites, the Kohathites had the most sacred task. They were directed by Eleazar, *the chief leader* (Heb. 'prince of princes'; v 32). He would eventually become high priest in place of Aaron (20:26–28). The other Levites were under Ithamar (see 4:28, 33). The total of the three Levite clans adds up to 22,300, not 22,000 (39). However, 22,000 is not a round number because it is matched with the 22,273 firstborn, and falls short by 273 (43). Many scholars accept that a slight textual corruption probably occurred very early in the copying of the Hebrew manuscripts and the Hebrew letter 'l' was missed out (*i.e. sh-l-sh* 'three' became *sh-sh* 'six') and so 8,300 was changed to 8,600 Kohathites.

Table 7. Summary of Levitical responsibilities

Gershonites (3:21–26) (under Ithamar)	Kohathites (3:27–32) (under Eleazar)	Merarites (3:33–37) (under Ithamar)
Tabernacle and Tent: coverings, curtains, ropes, *etc.*	The sanctuary: ark, table, lampstand, altar, related articles, and the veil.	Tabernacle and courtyard: frames, crossbars, posts, bases, pegs and ropes.



Plan of the Tent of Meeting.

3:40–51 Census and redemption of the firstborn. There were 273 more firstborn than Levites. Each of these had to be redeemed with five shekels of silver, thought to be equivalent to a labourer's wages for almost six months. Redemption by paying a ransom was common practice (Lv. 25). The price was measured by an official weight, *the sanctuary shekel* (47; *cf.* Ex. 30:13). The priests probably kept a standard weight in the sanctuary to ensure that just measures were used (Lv. 19:35–36). This practical matter of love for one's neighbour entered Israel's faith: 'The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.' (Pr. 11:1; see Pr. 16:11; 20:23; Ezk 45:10). The *Rules of Discipline of the Calvinistic Methodists or the Presbyterians of Wales* (adopted in 1823) laid down the same principle for members: 'That they be men of few words in buying and selling, . . . not taking advantage of others' ignorance to put two prices on the same thing; but, as far as they understand its value and the state of the market, asking and paying for all goods the due and proper price.' (XIV). Just as the Levites were given to Aaron, so the redemption money was given to him and his sons.

4:1–33 Duties of the Levites. Levites from thirty to fifty years old were to do the work and these were numbered. The word *work* (4) can mean warfare, hard service or even trials. Therefore, the age limit was a practical matter; God's servants must be physically fit for their task. Since the Kohathites would be in charge of the most holy things (3:31), they were now ranked before the Gershonites. In clear detail, they were instructed how they must keep the ark of the Testimony (always shielded or covered by the curtain of the Most Holy Place), the table of the Presence, the lampstand and the gold altar. All these items were of gold, with their utensils and vessels. Aaron and his sons had to cover these with coloured cloths before the Kohathites entered. Even when moving the Tent, the Kohathites were not allowed to see nor touch the holy things or they would die (15, 20).

The colours of the coverings are significant. Every piece of sacred furniture was covered in a blue cloth. Perhaps blue, the colour of heaven, was a reminder of the presence of God. When God revealed himself to Israel's leaders at Sinai, we read, 'Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself' (Ex. 24:9–10). There was also a practical purpose in choosing blue cloth. It would distinguish the most sacred vessels from other things which were covered in scarlet or purple (4:8, 13). At a glance men would know what lay beneath that blue covering. Anyone who looked or touched would be without excuse and his death would follow.

The directions given to the Levites taught them to honour God. Each man was to carry out his prescribed duties and not exceed his authority. Among those who serve him, God will be glorified and feared. It has sometimes been asked, 'How can we reconcile this with God's love? Indeed, why do such fearful things not happen today?' Taking this a step further, it is asked, 'Is not the Old Testament rather imperfect?' 'Can this God be the same as God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ?' Such questions reveal a fundamental error in understanding the nature of God. The Old and New Testaments are perfectly consistent: our God is a consuming fire; he cannot be mocked (Acts 5:1–11; Gal. 6:7; Heb. 12:29). Although the love of God and his forgiveness are beyond measure, he will not permit men to dishonour him. His own glory is first; man's good comes second. It is the miracle of his grace that these two things are both satisfied in the work of Christ. An interesting discussion of this very point is found in the second volume of Iain Murray's biography of Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones (I. H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. The Fight of Faith [1939–1981]* [The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990], vol. 2, p. 319). This message causes those who loved the Lord to *rejoice with trembling* (Ps. 2:11). A second lesson is also taught. When the gifts of God's people are ordered as God has commanded, there is room for every gift. Each one, functioning in its proper place, serves the community. The apostle Paul impresses this point upon the church at Corinth. The church is like a body, in which the many different parts help one another and every one is needed (1 Cor. 12 – 14; Eph. 4:7–16).

4:34–49 The count completed. A total of 8,580 Levites were appointed to active service. It was evidently a major task to move the tabernacle and its furniture.

Note. The first generation of Levites would spend their whole life following these instructions as they journeyed through the desert. However, after Israel settled in Canaan their role developed. They lived throughout Israel (see on 35:6–34). When Jerusalem became the permanent site for the tabernacle (and later the temple), the Levite clans received new tasks. David put them in charge of music and other duties of the tabernacle; the Aaronic priests still presented the offerings (1 Ch. 6:31–49).

5:1 – 6:27 Consecration of Israel's camp

These chapters contain the first group of laws in Numbers. At first sight, the laws appear quite

varied and unrelated: skin disease, fraud, adultery, Nazirite vows, and the priestly blessing. However, these laws are related to one another by a common theme, and they fit their context perfectly. The common theme is separation, from impurity and to the Lord, in order that the whole of Israel may receive the Lord's blessing. Now that Israel and the priests have been numbered and set in order, the next step must be taken: Israel must be purified before God's blessing and presence can be known. The consecration of Israel follows two stages. First, the whole camp must be purged (chs. 5 – 6); secondly, the tabernacle and the priesthood must be consecrated (chs. 7 – 8). The laws (5:5 – 6:27) emphasize the complete purity and dedication required and the great blessing which arises.

5:1–4 Sending away the unclean. This sums up the interest of chs. 5 – 6: the whole camp must be pure for the Lord's presence. The need for cleanness was made evident when Israel first came to Mt Sinai (Ex. 19:10, 14–15). Laws were given explaining what caused uncleanness, *e.g.* infectious skin disease (Lv. 13 – 14), bodily discharges (Lv. 15:2–25) and touching dead bodies (Lv. 11:39; 21:1–4). Infectious skin disease was traditionally identified as leprosy, but modern scholars think it refers to psoriasis or a similar complaint. Animals were either clean or unclean, and only clean animals were to be eaten (Lv. 11; see Acts 10:9–16, 28–29). 'Clean' and 'unclean' were legal terms symbolizing spiritual holiness and defilement. Therefore, God's holiness demanded cleanness, *so that they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them* (3). Note that the command is comprehensive: in v 2 the word 'all' is repeated three times in the Hebrew (the RSV has 'every'), but this cannot be detected from the NIV translation.

The gulf between the holy and the defiled runs through the fabric of the universe. The two realms of light and darkness, the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the evil one, are at war. The Abrahamic covenant divides between the holy people and the unclean nations, who are strangers to the covenants of promise, without God and without hope in the world. The polarity between the two kingdoms began at Gn. 3 (God drove out Adam and Eve because of the defilement of sin), and it will be seen at the end, when 'Nothing impure will ever enter' the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:27). Thus, 5:1–4 provides a sober forewarning of the final exclusion of those who are still in their sins (*cf.* Mt. 25:41; 2 Thes. 1:9–10).

It may seem severe and unloving to expel from Israel's camp those who were suffering from disease. However, we learn from this that God will not lower his standards to accommodate man. Certainly, he pities our weaknesses, but never by becoming anything less himself. He always maintains his own holiness and righteousness. He will never accept the impure into his fellowship (1 Jn. 1:5–7). God's honour was the chief concern and demanded their exclusion. How can such absolute holiness be reconciled with God's compassion upon sinners, the needy and the outcast? God shows compassion by giving men the way to remove their uncleanness and thereby remove the grounds for their exclusion. That way is Christ.

Another principle also emerges from this incident, that the good of the whole people takes priority over the good of individuals.The interests of certain individuals were not permitted to jeopardize the future of the nation. If the unclean were not put out, then all Israel would be defiled and God would never be among them. There is instruction here for the modern church not to harbour uncleanness. The church dare not entertain evil and accommodate the sins of various minorities who insist on their own way, perhaps under a false claim upon love!

Note that the Gentiles were regarded as unclean, but in the New Testament they are no longer to be viewed in that way. The meaning of Peter's vision is that the Gentiles can now be brought into the church (Acts 10). Paul states that the children of a single believing parent are clean (1 Cor. 7:14). This cleanness, for Jew and Gentile alike, is gained by Christ (Heb. 9:11–14). He was crucified 'outside the camp' for this purpose (Heb. 13:12–14).

5:5–10 Confession and restitution for frauds. Stolen property must be restored (*cf.* Lv. 6:1–7) and one fifth added to compensate for the wrong. The underlying thought here is that stolen property contaminates the one who holds it. This interpretation can be established in two ways. First, the context links unfaithfulness with uncleanness (12–31), and secondly, there is the case of Achan who became 'devoted to destruction' by taking objects which were 'devoted to destruction' (Jos. 7). The practical consequences of fraud are not explored in the text, but there can be little doubt that such fraud would create serious breaches among the people of God and destroy their peace. The prophet Isaiah later portrays such strife as the uncleanness of running sores (Is. 1:5–6). Numbers here focuses rather on the nature of the wrong as unfaithfulness to the Lord, not just to man. The spiritual nature of fraud or theft needs to be understood. The man who steals from his brother takes what God has given to him, refusing to trust the goodness of God to maintain him in times of need and to enrich him out of his bounty. His unbelief leads him to hate

his brother, to covet what he has and to steal it. He also reveals his heart, that his love is set not on God but on material things. Analysis reveals the depths of evil in the thief's heart. Finally, we may recall Christ's teaching that offerings are not acceptable if there are unresolved wrongs between people (Mt. 5:23–24). Note that the priest must function in dealing with this wrong and that confession of sin is required.

5:11–31 A wife suspected of unfaithfulness. This is another breach of faith, this time between husband and wife. In this case the husband suspects that his wife has committed adultery, which unfaithfulness causes uncleanness and destroys fellowship with God. If there were witnesses, the death penalty would follow (Gn. 20:3; Lv. 20:10; Dt. 22:22). But without witnesses, no judge could condemn on the grounds of mere suspicion. Where there is doubt, the matter must be left in the hands of God who knows all things. The priest had to follow a ritual, making the woman under suspicion take a curse upon herself. Her response, *Amen*, means 'Let this come true in my case' (see Dt. 27:14–26). If guilty, she would become a curse. The RSV translates v 21, 'the LORD make you an execration and an oath among your people'. The thought that she would embody the curse was expressed in ritual (23–28) – the priest wrote the curse on a scroll and washed off the words into the water and the woman drank it. This was not magic, and there was no harmful substance in the ink. The writing materials were probably a leather scroll and ink made of lamp black or soot mixed in water with gum, materials readily available in the desert. The curse was powerful because it was uttered before the LORD (16), who knows the heart, and he would make the curse effective if the woman was guilty.

Note. The language of v 23 gives us insight into the meaning of later scriptures. We read that 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us' (Gal. 3:13); though not guilty, he suffered the curse in his own body. Similarly, Isaiah prophesies that the Lord's Servant would be made 'to be a covenant for the people' (Is. 42:6; 49:8). Even as the Servant embodied the covenant, Paul is confident that all God's promises are confirmed 'in Christ Jesus' (2 Cor. 1:20).

6:1–21 Nazirite vow. The Nazirite vow was a *special vow* (2), *i.e.* an extraordinary vow not to be taken lightly. It was assumed that the vow would last for a limited period. There were three marks of the Nazirite separation: abstaining from wine and grape products (3–4; Israel later sinned by giving Nazirites wine Am. 2:11–12); not touching dead bodies (6–8); and not cutting his hair (5) The first two conditions are like the rules for priests during their service. Priests should not drink wine, because they would cease to be vigilant in observing the law and teaching it (Lv. 10:6–11). The high priest should not even enter the place where a corpse lay, not even that of his father or mother, although the ordinary priests could attend to a close relative (Lv. 21:1–4, 11). Uncut hair was peculiar to the Nazirite and was *the symbol of his separation to God* (7). The word 'Nazirite' is related to the Hebrew term *nēzer*, which has two meanings, 'vow' and 'crown'. Thus the Heb. text says *the nēzer of his God is upon his head.* This may contain a deliberate suggestion that the long hair which was a sign of the vow (*nēzer*) was like a crown (*nēzer*). If the vow was broken (*e.g.* if someone 'dies on him'), he had to pay a penalty and start afresh (9–12). When the period of separation ended he had to shave his head and burn the hair in the flames of the fellowship offering (13–21). Samson was a Nazirite from birth (Jdg. 13; *cf.* 16:17–20), and Paul seems to have made such a vow (Acts 18:18; 21:20–26). The Nazirite expressed the highest form of separation to the Lord, apart from the priesthood. He was a token of Israel's dedication to God. The law was clear that vows had to be fulfilled (Dt. 23:21–23; see Jdg. 11:30–39; Pss. 56:12; 65:1; 116:18; *cf.* Mt. 5:33–37).

6:22–27 The priestly blessing. The place of this blessing is appropriate. Israel had been set in order and consecrated to the Lord, and now God provided the blessing following their obedience. The blessing is not a thoughtless cliché which trips off the tongue; it is packed with meaning. It falls into six parts.

1. *The LORD bless you.* Blessing sums up the covenant benefits which God shows to his people (Dt. 28:1–14). Sons would expect a blessing from their father (*e.g.* Gn. 27:27–29, 38; 49:1–28). God's blessing was given to Adam, whom Luke calls 'the son of God' (Gn. 1:28; 5:1–3; Lk. 3:38). Through Adam's fall the curse came in (Gn. 3:14–19), but blessing was promised again to Abraham and his descendants (Gn. 12:1–3). Blessing entails fruitfulness (descendants, flocks, harvests), but these benefits are tokens of the true blessing, the relationship with the Lord. Only if God is our Father are we truly blessed (Gn. 17:16; 22:17–18; Lv. 26:3–13; Dt. 28:2–14).

2. *And keep you.* The purpose of the protection was to keep Israel in covenant relationship with God. The Lord was Israel's keeper (Ps. 121:7–8; *cf.* Heb. 13:6). Christ, the good shepherd, kept his sheep and lost none except for Judas Iscariot (Jn. 6:37–40; 10:11–16; 18:9).

3. *The LORD make his face shine upon you. His face* means his presence, revealed in the cloud of

fire (Ex. 40:34ff.); *shine upon you* means that God takes pleasure in his people and saves them (Pr. 16:15; Pss. 31:16; 67:1f.; 80:3, 7, 19).

4. *And be gracious to you.* The outcome of God's pleasure is his grace; his covenant mercy. It is fundamental to salvation that God's favour is unmerited. It is not deserved in any way; rather God shows mercy because of his own love and faithfulness to his oath (Dt. 7:7–8). This principle can be traced throughout Scripture (Ezk. 16:1ff.; Rom. 5:1–11; 9:10–13, 18; 11:5; 1 Cor. 1:26ff.).

5. *The LORD turn his face towards you.* This is more emphatic and asks that God might pay attention to Israel. It may reflect the fact that he had chosen them and not other nations. If God hid his face, Israel would suffer and perish (Pss. 30:7; 44:24; 104:29).

6. *And give you peace. Peace* means completeness and well-being. This has long been recognized as covenant language. Covenants were made to secure peace through a right relationship. But when God gives peace, it extends to the whole of life; even human enemies are quiet (Lv. 26:6; Pr. 16:7). These words were later seen as a promise of the Messiah, the 'Prince of Peace' (Is. 9:6), and find their true depths in Christ (Jn. 14:27; Eph. 2:14–18).

We should note two points about the form of this blessing. First, it is poetic, having three lines divided into two parts. Each line is longer than the previous one, making the blessing stronger and more emphatic. Secondly, it uses repetition. Twice it speaks of God's *face* (presence); that we might enter the presence of God is the goal of all redemption. It repeats the divine name *the LORD* (Heb. YHWH) three times. Some think that this anticipates the Trinity (see Rom. 10:9; 2 Cor. 3:17). Scholars regard this as very ancient poetry. In 1979, two small silver scrolls from the seventh century BC were unearthed in Jerusalem. They were found to contain the words of Nu. 6:24–26 in a form almost identical to the Hebrew text.

The influence of these words runs through the Bible (Pss. 67; 121; 122; 124; 128). Paul's letters begin with a greeting which always uses the words 'grace' and 'peace' (*e.g.* Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; and 2 Tim. 1:2 adds 'mercy'). In most cases Paul says the grace and peace are from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, and without doubt he is taking up the priestly blessing.

God says, *so they will put my name on the Israelites* (27), which is a mark of ownership. This idea appears again at two key places in Scripture. First, in Isaiah's prophecy of Israel's restoration: 'One will say, "I belong to the LORD" . . . still another will write on his hand, "The LORD's"' (Is. 44:5). This was a time of great blessing when Judah and Israel were restored from captivity. Secondly, in the final gathering of God's people, foreseen in Revelation: 'They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads' (Rev. 22:4; see 2:17; 14:1). The Bible closes with a glimpse of the final blessed state of the saints (Rev. 22:1–5), foretold in language that reflects the priestly blessing: 'no longer . . . any curse' (Rev. 22:3; *cf.* Nu. 6:24, 27); 'the Lord God will give them light' and they will not need sun nor lamp (Rev. 22:5; *cf.* Nu. 6:25). Thus, these ancient words hold promise of that fulness of covenant blessing for which God's children in every age have longed, and which will be granted in its perfection on the day which God has appointed.

7:1 – 8:26 Consecration of the tabernacle and priesthood

The keynote of these chapters is holiness and purification. The tabernacle is sanctified and the priests are purified. All this is done with much shedding of blood.

7:1–89 The tabernacle consecrated. The language used here is precise: Moses *consecrated* the tabernacle (*i.e.* made it holy) and 'dedicated' the altar (1,10–11). The word *dedication* occurs in only a few places in Scripture. Similarly, Solomon consecrated the middle court and dedicated the altar (2 Ch. 7:7, 9) but the occasion became known as the 'dedication' of the temple (2 Ch. 7:5). In the Apocrypha, 2 Macc. 2:19 reads, 'The story of Judas Maccabeus and his brothers, and the purification of the great temple, and the dedication of the altar.' This event is celebrated at the Feast of Hanukkah on 25th Chislev (December), a feast mentioned in Jn. 10:22. The consecration of the tabernacle was the first of such events. Israel's leaders brought gifts, sin offerings and fellowship offerings. These leaders are not named but the text says that they supervised the census (2). The census was actually taken one month after the tabernacle was set up (1:1) but the author has already told us about it. The same kind of anticipation is found in vs 6–8: carts and oxen were given to the Levites, who had not yet been ordained (3 – 4; 8:5–26). The gifts and offerings were brought in two stages. First, carts and oxen for the tabernacle (3–9); second, gifts of silver plates, bowls, gold dishes and offerings for the altar (10–88). The Kohathites were not given carts or oxen because these could be used only for the tent, not for the holy things, which the Kohathites looked after (9). When David brought up the ark to Jerusalem, it was placed on a new cart (2 Sa. 6:3–4). After Uzzah's death, however, we hear no more about a cart, only about 'those who were carrying the ark' (2 Sa. 6:13; 15:24).

Uzzah's death caused them to discover exactly what the law required (1 Ch. 15:11–15). The record of the tribes' offerings (10–88) shows how repetitive Scripture can be (perhaps a reminder that it was not written to entertain, but for our instruction).

We may note in passing that Judah is again placed first (see on 2:1–34). By stating the offering of each tribe on its day, we see that their offerings were liberal and equal. The apostle Paul, collecting for the relief of the saints in Jerusalem, required the same kind of equality in the Macedonian churches: 'Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality' (2 Cor. 8:13).

The offerings for the dedication of the altar are totalled in vs 84–88. Rivers of blood were shed in those twelve days. Without the shedding of sacrificial blood, there could be no cleansing (Heb. 9:22). During those twelve days, other sacrifices were also made (*e.g.* when Aaron was ordained; Lv. 8 – 9). And before the twelve days were over, they were choosing the Passover lamb for slaughter on the fourteenth day.

The outcome of the dedication is presented in three ways in three parallel accounts (7:89; Ex. 40:34–35; Lv. 8 – 9), each account reflecting the leading interests of the book. Ex. 40:34–35 describes the cloud covering the tent and the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle continuously, reflecting its theme of God's glorious presence with his people. Lv. 9:23–24 tells how Moses and Aaron blessed the people and how fire came out and consumed the sacrifices, reflecting its theme of a priesthood acceptable to God. Here (89), the Lord speaks to Moses, reflecting Numbers' theme of the word of God. However, Numbers does not ignore the other aspects. Indeed, the Levitical priesthood is the next concern (8:5–26) and then the cloud (9:15–23).

The focus of the first ten chapters is upon the word of God, and the text implies the great privilege of having it. God had favoured Moses uniquely by speaking to him face to face (12:6–8). Indeed, the Hebrew text does not even name God directly in v 89, but says that Moses entered the tent to speak 'with him' (the NIV adds *the LORD* by way of explanation). That God's voice comes from over the *atonement cover* (traditionally called 'the mercy seat') on the ark of the Testimony shows that his word comes as a covenant privilege and displays his great mercy. Further, God speaks from between the cherubim, who in the beginning barred the way to God's paradise and the tree of life (Gn. 3:24). God's word is life; and this connection between the word of truth and eternal life is never lost, but it is most clearly displayed in the teaching of Christ in the gospels (*e.g.* Jn. 1:4; 6:63).

8:1–4 The seven lamps. These lamps were made on the pattern shown to Moses (4; Ex. 25:31–40; see Heb. 8:5) and had to face forward to light up the area in front of the lampstand. In this position, they would cast light upon the table of the Presence with the twelve loaves. The lights had to be kept burning continually (Lv. 24:2–4). The seven golden lampstands are seen in John's vision where they represent the seven churches (Rev. 1:12ff.).

8:5–26 Levites purified and assigned to their work. The Levites had to be ceremonially cleansed with *the water of cleansing* (lit.) 'water of sin' (7). The Israelites laid their hands on the Levites (10), and then the Levites put their hands on the sin offering. This was usually done with confession of sin, and it showed that the animal was a substitute (12). The basic meaning of laying on of hands seems to be 'transferring' a right or status to a substitute: transferring blessing to a successor (Gn. 48:14); transferring authority in ordination (Nu. 27:23); transferring guilt to a sacrificial victim. Ordination by laying on of hands was practised in the NT church (Acts 6:6; 13:3; also Mk. 5;23; Acts 8:15–18; Heb. 6:2). It seems to have implied participation with someone in his work, and hence Paul warns against haste (1 Tim. 5:22). The context of ch. 8 indicates that the Levites were Israel's offering to the Lord (11, 15). They were separated to the Lord (14, 16) and replaced the firstborn (17f). Despite this emphasis, it is not forgotten that the Levites were also given to Aaron (19, 22). Finally, age limits are mentioned, from twenty-five to fifty years old (24–26). The census counted men from thirty to fifty years of age only (4:3; but the LXX reads twenty-five here also). In David's time, when the tabernacle was settled in Zion, the age limit was lowered to twenty years old (1 Ch. 23:24–27), although David counted only those over thirty (1 Ch. 23:3). This was followed in later generations (2 Ch. 31:17; Ezr. 3:8). Retirement did not mean removal from office. At fifty the Levite was to continue to function by serving his brothers. Generally, God's servants seem to have continued to serve him into old age, and till their death, according to the strength which he supplied (Dt. 34:7; 1 Sa. 4:14f.; 12:2; 2 Tim. 4:6–8; 2 Pet. 1:13–15).

9:1 – 10:36 Setting out for the land, led by the Lord's presence

9:1–14 The Passover. The original Passover marked Israel's setting out from Egypt. Now they celebrated its first anniversary before setting out from Sinai. We have already

noted that the narrative is out of chronological sequence, and here the author wants to place the Passover just before setting out. Thus, he reminds us that God was still delivering and leading out his people. The problem of uncleanness which would prevent a man keeping the Passover is dealt with (vs 6–13; *cf.* Jn. 18:28). The problem was very serious: men who were unclean through contact with a corpse, could not join the people in bringing the Lord's offering. There was a real fear of being removed from the community. Therefore an additional law was given, that they must keep the Passover one month later. However, there is no reduction of the importance of the Passover as they must still observe the same rules (11–12). If, however, a man had no legitimate excuse and still failed to keep the Passover, he would be cut off from Israel. He would receive no forgiveness for wilful neglect of God's law. Weakness is helped; rebellion is never tolerated. There is also provision for the alien to participate but not in a casual way; he would have to be circumcised (Ex. 12:48–49). In this way, the Scripture anticipates the place of Gentiles in salvation. We may note how seriously the Scripture views the Passover. This became important for John, who interprets Christ's death as a fulfilment of the Passover in all its details (see Jn. 19:17–37). Indeed, John draws out the fact that this true Passover lamb of God would take away the sin 'of the world' (Jn. 1:29; *cf.* 1 Cor. 5:7).

9:15–23 The cloud. According to Exodus, the pillar of cloud represented the glory of the Lord filling the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–38). Numbers, however, says nothing about the glory but is interested in the fact that the cloud led Israel forward. The passage repeats that Israel set out and encamped at the Lord's command, which was signalled by the movement of the cloud. There is also a development of thought through the repetition: the cloud was there from the beginning (15); it appeared like fire at night (16); it led Israel (17–18); the time spent at camp sites varied from a few days to a whole year, anticipating that Israel would spend a long period in the desert (19–22); and the text ends by emphasizing how Israel followed the Lord's command (23). The cloud appeared later when Solomon dedicated the temple (1 Ki. 8:10–12). Christ Jesus entered the cloud on the mount of transfiguration (Lk. 9:34) and again at his ascension (Acts 1:9). The images of the cloud of God's presence and the temple are brought together in the person of Christ. He *is* the temple (Rev. 21:22), and in him the fullness of God's glory dwells (Jn. 17:21; Col. 1:19). Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, believers become living stones in the temple (Jn. 7:37–39; 1 Cor. 6:19; 1 Pet. 2:4–5). Thus, God has seen fit to manifest his glory in the spiritual fabric of the church (Eph. 2:22; 3:10–11, 21).

10:1–10 The silver trumpets. This was the final preparation for setting out from Sinai. The trumpets were made from hammered silver. (Silver had been smelted and worked for centuries before this time.) Josephus describes them as a narrow tube about 18 in (45 cm) long, bell-shaped at the end, and they are shown on Titus' triumphal arch in Rome. They were different from the common ram's horn and could give a clearer note. Different trumpet notes called different assemblies (the leaders, the whole assembly, the tribes' setting out), and they were blown in warfare and at the start of great feasts. The trumpets were committed to the priests who had authority to lead (they also led through instruction). Israel's well-being was secure while the trumpet sounded God's call. Thus, the trumpet continued in use through the generations (2 Ki. 11:14; Ezr. 3:10; Ps. 98:6). The apostle Paul took it as a symbol of preaching, saying that the ministry must give a clear call (1 Cor. 14:8), otherwise men will not prepare for spiritual battle. As the trumpets were committed to the priests, so preaching is committed to God's servants, and to elders in particular (Acts 20:17–35; Tit. 1:5; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). If the trumpet were to fall into impostors' hands, they would ruin the church of Christ, as savage wolves who will not spare the flock. The NT draws a second powerful image: as the trumpet summoned Israel to the feasts, so will the trumpet call the dead to life (Mt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:16; Rev. 8 – 9). The call to the feasts was a joyful sound (Ps. 98:6); so this image conveys the joy of the resurrection to eternal life and the table prepared in Christ's kingdom.

10:11–34 Israel leaves Sinai. This is the climax of the first part of Numbers (chs. 1 – 10). The whole purpose of the preparation at Sinai was that God could be present with his people and lead them to Canaan. New information is given about the order in which they journeyed: the tabernacle went after the first division, not in the middle with the holy vessels. This was, perhaps, a practical measure, so that the tabernacle could be erected before the holy vessels arrived at the new camp site. The ark led (33), with Judah as the first tribe (14) and Dan as the rear guard (25). Moses wanted Hobab, the son of Reuel, his father-in-law, to journey with them because he knew the desert terrain. Moses' words to him explained what Israel was doing: the reason for their journey lay in the promise to Abraham, and their goal was the promised land.

10:35–36 Conclusion. Moses' words express two key biblical themes: the victory of the

guard (25). Moses wanted Hobab, the son of Reuel, his father-in-law, to journey with them because he knew the desert terrain. Moses' words to him explained what Israel was doing: the reason for their journey lay in the promise to Abraham, and their goal was the promised land.

10:35–36 Conclusion. Moses' words express two key biblical themes: the victory of the Lord over his enemies; and the abiding presence of God with his people. These were displayed as the ark set out, and as it came to rest again in the centre of the camp. Since this was the supreme climax of almost one year's preparation (Ex. 19:1), we must pay careful attention to it.

The Bible often speaks of God's triumph over his enemies. In Eden, it was promised that the serpent, man's deadly enemy, would be defeated (Gn. 3:15). Babylon (which is the same as Babel) became the 'capital city' of God's foes, and Babel's tower was a symbol of united rebellion against the Most High (Gn. 11:1–9). Later, Babylon was the place where God's people were held captive. It was their hated enemy (Ps. 137) and was destined for destruction (Is. 13 – 14). In Revelation, God's victory is described as Babylon's fall, which is the cause of great praise (Rev. 12:7–17; 14:8; 17:4–6; 18:1 – 19:5).

God has sworn that every knee will bow to him (Is. 45:23). This will include all enemies, who will cower in terror rather than humbly bow in adoration but, nevertheless, they will bow the knee. The destruction of the kingdom of this world was determined in the eternal counsel of the Triune God, which took place before creation. Then, the course of history was ordained, which included spiritual warfare in heaven. By means of this plan, God will be glorified and shown to be above all, the almighty ruler of the universe. The Father will elevate the Son, and give him the highest name, and the Son will honour the Father. The goal is that God will be seen to be all in all. This plan entailed the creation, man's fall and redemption. It was not revealed at the start, but is slowly unfolding through historical covenants and through the course of redemptive history. It will be seen fully at the end of the age, when every creature will admire the depths of God's wisdom and mercy.

The second theme in Moses' words is one of supreme mercy and grace: God dwells among the countless thousands of Israel. This is the fellowship which the saints in every age have desired. This is the kingdom of God. Warfield writes that 'the establishment and development of the kingdom of God . . . may well be called the cardinal theme of the Old Testament' (B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Doctrines* [Banner of Truth Trust, 1988, first published 1929], p. 11). Thus, the concluding words of the first part of Numbers draw us into the heart of the Bible's message. The second and third parts are primarily concerned with this same key theme, the entrance of God's people into the promised land.

11:1 – 25:18 Journeying to the promised land

The middle section of the book (chs. 11 – 25) covers the journey from Sinai to the border of Canaan, Israel's failure to take the land and the years of wandering in the wilderness. First, we read of Israel's rebellion (chs. 11 – 19); then we move directly to the end of the period, when Israel is again approaching Canaan, soon to possess it (chs. 20 – 25). This middle section is in sharp contrast with the first part. We move from God's word preparing the people, to their words of complaint and their refusal to believe and enter the land.

11:1 – 12:16 Complaining

The opening verse is very dramatic if read with what comes immediately before (10:35–36). Moses had just called on God to defeat his foes and remain with his people, and without interval, we read, *Now the people complained about their hardships* (Heb. 'evil') *in the hearing of the* LORD (1). The contrast with all the good that had just been done to them is stark. The wording in Hebrew is a deliberate contrast: they grumbled 'about evil' when they had received good. A prominent theme of chs. 11 – 25 is 'complaining'. The Hebrew text uses several terms; but the Greek Septuagint uses one, *gonguzō* (which the NIV translates 'complain'), a term used significantly by John and Paul (see on 11:4–15).

11:1–3 The first complaining at Taberah. The pattern of future complaining is established in this first short account: the people grumble; the Lord hears and his anger is provoked; Moses intercedes and the judgment is halted. Moses is often cast as interceding for them (as he did at Horeb, in the sin of the golden calf; Ex. 32). The punishment reminds us that our God is a consuming fire. Fire often symbolizes God's presence and activity (see Gn. 15:17–18, when the flaming torch passed between the pieces of animal; Ex. 3, at the burning bush *cf.* Heb. 12:29). The Israelites had already learned this in a costly way, in the death of Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu (Lv. 10).

11:4–15 A second complaining. The Heb. for *rabble* gives the idea of a general gathering, and the Gk. translation (*epimiktos*) carries the sense of a mixed people. It probably refers to the Gentile adherents. Therefore, the

text adds that *the Israelites started wailing*. Here is an object lesson that God's people can be influenced by those around them and led into sin. Their words show that they have despised the Lord, '*If only we had meat to eat!*' (lit. 'Who will cause us to eat meat?'). Suddenly the text reads like a menu – *fish, cucumbers, melons* (5) – as the Israelites compare the manna provided by God with the variety of food available in Egypt. They had forgotten that they were delivered from the iron furnace and they despised the heaven-sent goodness of God. Ps. 78 describes Israel's sin at length (*cf.* Ex. 16:3); they had no faith, they forgot what God had done and they lied to God (Ps 78:22, 32, 36, 42). The heart of the matter is unbelief and forgetfulness, leading to discontent and complaining. Numbers gives an accurate picture of their behaviour. They went to their homes and they spread their complaints in their own families (10), which was totally destructive. By stirring up discontent in their own families, they were leading them to their deaths. We may note that the word 'complaining' is not very common in the NT, but John chose to use it for one specific situation – when Christ tells the Jews that he is the bread of life which came down from heaven, far superior to the manna (Jn. 6:35, 41–61). By 'grumbling about him' these Jews were repeating the sins of their ancestors recorded in Numbers – and the cause was the same, unbelief (Jn. 6:64). These examples are warnings to the church today (1 Cor. 10:10–11). Such grumbling can lead to a fall, and it can also destroy the faith of others. Perhaps many young people have forsaken the church, and even ultimately perished, because they heard complaining in their own home. It is a fact that evil speaking destroys those who listen to it. Numbers now exposes the burden which Moses felt (11), that Israel was like a child which must be nursed.

11:16–35 The appointment of the elders and the provision of meat. The problem was met with a double response. First, seventy elders were appointed to assist Moses. Jethro had already seen that Moses needed help and judges had been chosen (Ex. 18:13–26). Now seventy elders were established as a ruling council. These elders may have been those who ascended Mt Sinai with Moses, *i.e.* the chief men of the people (Ex. 24:9–11). Later in history we find similar ruling bodies, *e.g.* the Sanhedrin, mentioned in the gospels. Similarly, the Christian church soon called councils to address issues which concerned the world-wide church (beginning in Acts 15). Thus, Israel was governed by elders from early times. It was probably a natural development in a society in which the father was the head of the household and his household included servants as well as children. The rule of elders continued through the OT period (see Ru. 4:2; Pr. 31:23); it was found among the Jews in Christ's time (Mt. 16:21; Lk.7:3); was adopted as the model for local churches by the apostles (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:17; Tit. 1:5; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1); and, it seems, it will remain at the end of the age (Rev. 4:4; 19:4). These men were chosen in Moses' day to act with Moses as God's shepherds. The NT calls elders shepherds, who serve the chief shepherd (1 Pet. 5:1–4) and must give an account to him (Heb. 13:17). For this reason they should be obeyed. The elders were given to ensure that Moses did not carry the burden singlehanded, and this seems to be a pattern followed by later generations so that in the NT, it appears natural to think of churches led by a body of elders (or overseers; Phil. 1:1). The Lord placed his Spirit upon the elders who would assist Moses (24–30). The sign of the Spirit's coming was prophecy, as at other times (1 Sa. 10:6–13; Joel 2:28; Acts 2:4; 1 Cor. 12:10). Throughout the Bible, the leaders of God's people were enabled to function only by the Holy Spirit. The judges, Saul, David, the prophets, the apostles and the elders of the church at Ephesus are all examples.

Besides giving spiritual elders to Moses, the Lord dealt with the other side of the problem, the people's complaining. Evidently, it seemed impossible to find in the desert enough meat to satisfy the people's craving. (There were 600,000 men on foot; 11:21–22. Here is confirmation that the large numbers recorded in the census are intended to be taken literally; see on 1:17–46). Moses' reaction is similar to the disciples' at the feeding of the five thousand (Jn. 6:7). Whenever things are impossible to men, the Scripture gives the same answer: the Lord's arm is not shortened! (Gn. 18:14; Is. 50:2; 59:1; Je. 32:17, 27). Nothing is impossible to God. The almighty power of the sovereign ruler of heaven and earth has always been a refuge to those who trust in him (see Dn. 1 – 6). God will display his power to confirm his word (23). The provision of quail is an example of God's control over his creation. These birds belong to the family of pheasants and partridges. They winter in Africa and migrate northwards, usually in March or April. In that year they were driven in great quantities to Israel by a wind. However, with this answer came wrath. As the people ate, they died of the plague. Thus, the first two places on Israel's journey were called Taberah ('burning' 11:3) and Kibroth Hattaavah ('graves of craving'; 11:34). The journey was becoming a trail of death. We do not know where these sites were, except that they must lie somewhere between Mt Sinai and Hazeroth (see on Nu. 33).

12:1–16 Miriam and Aaron oppose

Moses. A third rebellion followed at Hazeroth, the next camp site. Moses had married a Cushite wife, probably Ethiopian (in Gn. 10:6 Cush means Ethiopia), and this was probably his second wife (his first wife was Zipporah, a Midianite; Ex. 2:16–21). Making this an excuse, Miriam and Aaron spoke against him. They desired equality with him as leaders of Israel. Miriam seems to have been the main culprit and she bore the punishment. It may seem strange that she, being a woman, should have challenged the authority of her brother. However, she was a prophetess and leader of the Israelite women (Ex. 15:20–21).

Again, we read that the Lord heard their hostile words. His response was to confirm his choice of Moses (6–8) and then to judge Miriam and Aaron (9–10). There are many parallels between Miriam's rebellion and Israel's craving for meat (ch. 11:4–35). On both occasions, God's provision (the manna; Moses' leadership) was rejected, and in response, God confirmed Moses' position (by giving him elders and by his word) and judgment fell (the plague; Miriam's leprosy). The author comments about Moses' humility (3). True humility consists in a commitment to obeying God's will to the point of self-denial. Such self-sacrifice can leave a man vulnerable and forced to cast himself on God to protect and sustain him. Further, as he strives to serve God, he discovers his own weaknesses and failings, and in that way reaches a proper view of himself. Humility is not a negative quality (devaluing of self) but a positive commitment to service, supremely exemplified in Christ (Phil. 2:3–8). Moses showed humility in continuing to lead Israel through the desert for forty years, even though it was a burden. He did not defend himself but turned to God, who defends and helps the humble (Pss. 147:6; 149:4; Mt. 5:5; 1 Pet. 5:6). On this occasion, the Lord left Miriam and Aaron in no doubt as he upheld his servant Moses. Thus, Numbers records three 'complainings' before Israel was half way to Canaan.

13:1 – 14:45 Israel rejects the promised land

The *Desert of Paran* lay south of Canaan and from here spies could survey the land. The journey had been a trail of complaining but, when the spies returned, Israel's rebellion was a final catastrophe.

13:1–16 The spies. The text begins with God's word. The command to spy out the land included a reminder that he was giving them the land and the time was near. Each tribe was represented by a leader. These were different from those who carried out the census and brought offerings when the tabernacle was dedicated. They were probably younger. Joshua, for instance, who was among them, was Moses' servant and a young man (Ex. 33:11; Nu. 11:28). Moses changed his name from Hoshea to Joshua, a change of meaning from 'he saves' to 'The LORD saves' (16). This is probably the first Israelite name in which the Lord's name was used. Its Greek form is Jesus.

13:17–25 Forty days of exploration. The spies were sent to explore Canaan's two regions, the Negev in the south and the hills to the north (17). They travelled as far as its northern boundary, covering the land spoken of in God's promise (21). That *it was the season for the first ripe grapes* (*i.e.* the end of July) indicates it was about two months after leaving Sinai. The spies travelled about 250 miles (400 km) northwards and did not return until mid-September. They visited Hebron (22), where the patriarchs were buried (Gn. 23:17–20; 49:29–33; 50:13). Numbers tells us that Hebron was built seven years before Zoan (Tanis or Avaris), which was the Hyksos capital in Egypt, built *c.* 1700 BC (22). Perhaps the author of Numbers knew about Egypt's building of Zoan because Israel had been involved. Hebron was a powerful reminder of God's promise. But here, at the heart of Israel's goal, were the Anakim, renowned warriors (Dt. 9:2). They are even mentioned in Egyptian texts of 1800 – 1700 BC. Caleb eventually defeated them (Jos. 15:14; Jdg. 1:10).

13:26–33 An evil report. The spies' opening words give them away. *The land to which you sent us* has no mention that the Lord had sent them and no acknowledgement of his promise (*cf.* 10:29). They showed the rich fruit and confirmed that the land *does flow with milk and honey*. (This description of fruitfulness is used of the Galilee region in the Egyptian *Story of Sinuhe*.) This confirmed the exact wording of God's promise about the land (Ex. 3:8, 17). The spies, however, focused on the fortified cities and their powerful inhabitants, some of whom were like giants, and declared that conquest was impossible. Caleb had to silence the people (30). We learn later that Joshua was on his side (14:6). The people had already begun to complain again. It is a tragic irony that the spies were speaking of the very nations already named in God's promise to Abraham (Gn. 15:18). God had already indicated that the Amorites were 'filling up' their iniquity and were being reserved for his judgment, which Israel would execute (Gn. 15;16).

14:1–10 The people rebel. The Israelites *grumbled* (*i.e.* 'complained'), and this was nothing less than rebellion (9). The nature of their sin is amplified through this chapter: complaining against the Lord (27, 29, 36); rejecting the land, which amounts to a rejection of the

covenant (31); and turning away from the Lord (43). They questioned the purpose of God (3) and rejected Moses (4). Notice that their foolish wish that they should die in the desert (2) is granted (28). This reminds us of the later warning that men will have to give an account for every careless word they speak (Mt. 12:36–37). Joshua and Caleb were clear-sighted enough to understand the enormity of Israel's sin; they tore their clothes as a sign of their grief and anger. It is as if they were mourning for the dead. They reaffirmed their conviction that God would do what he had promised and lead them into the land (8).

14:11–25 The mercy and judgment of the Lord. The Lord's word begins with an accurate analysis of Israel's sin – it is unbelief. They refused to believe in God and treated him with contempt (11). 'Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar' (1 Jn. 5:10). Israel's real fault was to think that God was not able to keep his word. Faith is in essence the certainty that God will fulfil what he has spoken. The unbelief of Israel in this moment is in contrast with the faith of their forefather Abraham (Gn. 15:6). God's response is twofold: the NIV says '*I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them*'. *Destroy* means 'disinherit', *i.e.* they would not receive the inheritance of the land. Moses interceded on the basis of covenant (16) and the mercy of God (18–19). He had stood on this very same ground when Israel made the golden calf at Horeb (Ex. 32:11–14). True prayer is of this character: it rests on the promises of God and asks that God will accomplish his word. This is what is meant by the prayer of faith; it is made according to his will (1 Jn. 5:14). The glory of God in the whole earth is bound up with his covenant and its fulfilment. The Lord's answer to Moses teaches us much about the heart of biblical theology. First, there is forgiveness, because of which God will continue with Israel as his people and work out his promise with the younger generation (24). Secondly, there is judgment. Forgiveness is never arbitrary nor at the expense of God's glory. His oath (21–25) shows that his own glory is his chief concern. Therefore, those who have despised him would never see the land. The next day, they had to return on their route, back towards the Red Sea. This was an immediate reversal of the progress made.

14:26–38 Death in the desert. A second oath followed the first (28). Every one numbered at Sinai who had complained against the Lord would die in the desert, as they had wished. Their children must endure the desert for forty years. We see here an instance of the sins of parents being visited upon their children. Forty years would pass before they would enter the land. Throughout this chapter there is constant reference to the covenant purpose, which is confirmed to the children (31), for God would give them the land. Finally, the congregation that conspired against the Lord would now experience his opposition (34). Punishment came swiftly, and the plague killed the ten spies who had brought Israel a bad report.

14:39–45 Some presume to enter the land. There was another lesson yet to learn. The people realized their mistake too late. They then wished to recover the position and proceed to attack the land. First, this is a case where repentance came too late. It recalls Esau's weeping *after* he had sold the birthright and lost the blessing. It was too late then (Heb. 12:17). Secondly, they were despising God's word again. He had commanded them to return to the desert (25). Therefore, when they went into Canaan, they went alone, and the Lord was not with them, the ark did not leave the camp (42, 44). Their very words 'We will go up to the place the LORD said' (40) show their lack of faith, making no reference to the oath sworn to the patriarchs. The text says that they were beaten back as far as Hormah in the Negev (its precise location is a matter of debate). Its name is connected with the Heb. word *hērem* ('devoted to destruction') a fitting conclusion to this appalling episode. (See on 'Apostasy' in the Introduction.)

15:1–41 Laws for the land: offerings and forgiveness

We return to the word of the Lord after the destruction of the rebels. Immediately there is comfort. Although the oath of God had closed the door to Canaan for forty years, the promise that Israel would live in Canaan was confirmed: *After you enter the land I am giving you* . . . (2). Thus, the laws that follow are connected with what has just happened,

15:1–21 Offerings from the land. All offerings made by fire on the altar were to be accompanied by fine flour mixed with oil, and outpoured wine. The quantities are laid down for the different animals. An ephah was about 5 gall. (22 l.) and a hin was about 6 pt (3.6 l.). There is remarkable reassurance in this law. Repeatedly it speaks of an aroma pleasing to the Lord, implying that he would accept Israel again. The three elements, flour, oil and wine, were the chief agricultural products of Canaan. Indeed, since the spies had just visited the land and it was now about mid-September, Israel probably knew that the inhabitants were at that time gathering olive harvest, from which the oil would one day be taken. There is a principle of thankfulness in this law. Israel must return to the Lord an offering from the land which he had

given to them in the first place. Such is the spirit of the law, the very opposite of grumbling and complaining.

The last part of the law is also remarkable (13–16). It reminds us that the community included strangers (*aliens*), and it makes room for them to offer sacrifices with the Israelites. They must also observe the same statutes and laws. This reflects the purpose of God's covenant with Abraham, that the nations would be blessed through his offspring (Gn. 12:3; 17:12). At a number of points, therefore, the law embraces the stranger, and in this way it respects God's promises. After saying this, God commanded Israel to bring an offering from the first of the grain harvested (17–21). This drives home the principle that God's people should offer to him first, before they satisfy their desires. These practices were to endure among the people of God (15, 21).

15:22–31 Errors and deliberate sin. The preceding laws confirm God's promise of Canaan, whereas this section addresses the obstacle of sin. There is a crucial distinction between unintentional failure (error) and defiant sin ('sinning with a high hand' is the Heb. idiom). Unintentional failure is sin committed without realizing it; it is done 'out of sight' (24) by the community as a whole or by an individual among them (27). For any such sin, forgiveness was available, and again this applied to the stranger also. Forgiveness applied where sin was not deliberate. No forgiveness was possible for any person who sinned defiantly (30–31).

The distinction contained here runs through the Scriptures. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven in the present age or eternity (Mt. 12:22–32). This sin involves rejecting the witness of the Spirit to Christ. Indeed, Christ Jesus warned the Jews who did not believe in him that their guilt remained because they claimed to have knowledge (Jn. 9:39–41). Their sin was unbelief, a refusal to believe in the Son of God. Further warnings about the impossibility of being restored are found in Hebrews (Heb. 6:4–8) and John forbids us to pray for such a sin, which 'leads to death' (1 Jn. 5:13–17). This whole subject is of vital importance to the people of God in every age. It spurs us on to grow in faith, to 'put off the old nature' with its grumbling spirit and unbelief.

15:32–36 The Sabbath breaker. This record is placed here as an example of defiant sin. It does not state that the offender broke the Sabbath deliberately, but it is impossible to think otherwise as the whole community was resting. He must have known the Sabbath law, and the behaviour of every other person was surely witness enough. The sentence was certain death (35). The execution took place outside the camp. The assembly led him out, probably a symbolic demonstration of his removal from Israel (cut off from his people).

15:37–41 Blue tassels. These were a reminder to keep the commandments. It seems that they were worn on the four corners of the cloak (Dt. 22:12). The colour blue was chosen again. The curtain of the tabernacle which concealed the ark of the covenant was blue, and this may have been the reason why the cord had to be blue.

There is an interesting scene in the life of King David connected with this. Trapped by Saul in the caves of Engedi, David stealthily cut off the corner of Saul's robe (1 Sa. 24:1–15). David did this to prove that he was not seeking to kill Saul. His decision to cut off the corner of the garment may have been symbolic. Some suggest that it was a sign of taking away the kingdom. If the blue tassel hung from the corner of Saul's robe, it may have been a way of telling Saul that, in trying to kill David, he had forsaken the law of God. The wearing of tassels or fringes became a permanent feature of Jewish life, and the Pharisees liked to make their fringes long as a show of piety and to earn the praise of men (Mt. 23:5).

The concluding words offer a reminder of the fundamental purpose of the law: it was given because the Lord was Israel's God and in order that they might truly be his people (41).

16:1 – 17:13 Korah's rebellion and Aaron's priesthood confirmed

The text does not say when or where this rebellion occurred. However, there are indications that the rebels were dissatisfied because Moses had not brought them into Canaan (14). Therefore, this new opposition to Moses and Aaron may have arisen quite soon after the failure to enter Canaan. The main interest in chs. 16 – 19 is the high priesthood of Aaron.

16:1–15 The rebellion against Moses and Aaron. The rebels were led by men of high standing. Korah was a Levite of the Kohathite clan, which cared for the ark and the vessels of the sanctuary. The Reubenite with him also belonged to a noble family. They were joined by 250 princes of the community, who had been called to the council and were well known among the people. Their complaint was against the hierarchy; they were claiming equal status with Moses and Aaron. This, therefore, was a challenge to the order imposed by God at Sinai (chs. 3 – 4). They were seeking the priesthood too (10). Moses' words, *you and all you followers have banded together* (11), contain a play on words. 'Banded together' is a Hebrew word connected with the name Levi. When Moses summoned them, the heart of their

resistance spilt out. They contradicted the covenant promises of God in a double way (13–14): they described Egypt as the land flowing with milk and honey (a description which God had given to Canaan), and they complained that Moses and Aaron had failed to bring them into the promised inheritance.

16:16–35 Judgment on the rebels. The choice of priests was for God alone. Bringing incense symbolized coming to God's presence for his approval. Scripture compares the prayers of the saints with incense (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 8:3). When the tabernacle was set up, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's two sons offered incense not commanded by God. They were not accepted and they died (Lv. 10). Therefore, Korah and his followers must have realized the seriousness of the situation as they drew near with their censers. Their danger became all too clear when the glory of the Lord appeared at the door of the tent, an ominous warning of judgment (*cf.* 12:5; 14:10). This image may have influenced James when he warns the church, 'Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!' (Jas. 5:9).

The Lord did not acknowledge Korah's party. He addressed Moses and Aaron only. We are told later in the record that the elders were standing with Moses (25). The assembly was commanded to separate from the rebels' tents 'or you will be swept away because of their sins' (26). When the judgment came, however, it became evident that mere separation was not enough. They fled in terror (34), resembling Lot's escape from the ruin of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn. 19:17).

The judgment on Korah and his band of followers was immediate. The author's account of their deaths brings out the point that they were spiritually lost. Sheol swallowed them alive. Sheol ('the grave') was viewed as the abode of the dead beneath the earth. Their possessions perished with them, as happened to Achan when he took the spoils of Jericho devoted to destruction (Jos. 7). Finally, the text sums up that they perished from the midst of the community, implying that they had lost their place among God's people (33). The 250 supporters died as Nadab and Abihu had. Some scholars think that the splitting of the ground was a natural phenomenon, pointing to conditions in parts of the desert that would make this possible. Such explanations, whatever their substance, should never obscure the truth that God had judged the enemies of his servants Moses and Aaron.

16:36–40 Bronze overlaying the altar. Attention now moves from Moses to Aaron. From here to the end of ch. 19, the Aaronic priesthood is the key subject. The censers were hammered into a covering for the altar as a reminder that Aaron's sons alone should burn incense (see on 3:1–4).

16:41–50 The people grumble. The following day, the people showed that their hearts were with Korah. They speak of his party as *the LORD's people* (41). How quickly they forgot the fearful judgment that had fallen the day before. Indeed, it was worse than forgetfulness; it was a refusal to believe that God had done this. They blamed Moses for killing them. This is another instance of the unbelief of that generation. As before, the appearance of the cloud of glory signalled impending wrath. Although Moses seems to have interceded again (45), it was Aaron who made atonement to stop the plague. Aaron was thus acting as Israel's high priest. The fact that the plague stopped was a further sign that God had chosen him. There is a vivid picture of Aaron standing between the living and the dead, which should be remembered by all God's people for Aaron foreshadowed Christ, who is our high priest and stands between us and eternal death. By his intercession and atonement we are saved. The main lesson of the text here is to cleave to God's chosen servants. We can compare the early church, who were so devoted to the apostles' fellowship (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 4:16). The reason is clear: through the apostles' fellowship, they entered into the fellowship of God and Christ (1 Jn. 1:1–4). It is so today – we must enter the one fellowship through faith (see Jn. 17:20–23).

17:1–13 God's sign confirming his choice of Aaron. Israel's persistent unbelief and complaining was answered by a sign. It seems that signs were given not for believers but for the unbelieving and rebellious (10). For example, this was the purpose of the gift of tongues (1 Cor. 14:22) and the signs done by Christ (Jn. 6:30); and Ahaz would not ask for a sign because he would not test the Lord (Is. 7:10–14). The aim of this sign was to silence the constant grumbling against Aaron. It was actually the second sign, the first being the bronze overlaying the altar, but this sign was miraculous. The twelve staffs represented the twelve tribes (the Heb. word means 'staff, branch or tribe'). The staffs were placed, with leaders' names upon them, before the ark of the Testimony, in the very presence of God. Aaron's rod burst into life, sprouting with buds and blossom and almonds. This did not simply signify divine choice, but the nature of the sign expressed an abundance of life. The message was – through my chosen servant you will find life. This had already been experienced when Aaron stood between the dead and the living (16:48). The budding staff was kept through the generations (Heb. 9:4). It became a witness that

God would confirm his word. Perhaps this lay in the background of later references to the righteous Branch (Je. 23:5; 33:15–16; Zc. 3:8; 6:12). Ch. 17 closes with the fear of Israel that they would all die because they could not approach the Lord. This is a confession: they need a mediator (as at Sinai; Ex. 20:18–21), and the laws which follow (chs. 18 – 19) are a response to this need. The same is true of every person, and the need is met, ultimately, only in Christ Jesus. This is made plain in Hebrews.

The message of chs. 16 – 17 is to insist that Aaron's high priesthood is respected. This is, first, an expression of God's holiness – he cannot be approached except by one whom he has called. This points forward to the new covenant – we can only draw near to God in Christ our high priest, whom God has appointed. Secondly, we learn that God will not allow his servants to be dismissed; he will uphold them. In the Christian age, he has appointed men to serve him. They are not masters but servants charged with oversight of the flock. These men are elders (which is the same office as bishop; see, for example, J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.3.8; and Tit. 1:5–7). The church should respect these leaders out of reverence for Christ who has provided them. Their only mandate is to serve Christ, and they wield no authority other than his word. They bear tremendous responsibility, which can only be discharged through holiness, faithfulness and love. Although there is abundant teaching on this in the NT, its roots go down into OT texts such as this one.

18:1 – 19:22 The priests' duties

The next two chapters are a response to Israel's question, 'Are we all going to die?' The answer lies in the priesthood, in its duty (ch. 18) and its purifying of Israel (ch. 19).

18:1–7 Responsibility of priests and Levites. Rank and responsibility are combined. Aaron's family would bear guilt for any offences against the tabernacle and its service. The Levites were given to the priests to assist them, and together they would bear the guilt for any breaches (3). The Levites are said to be 'joined to Aaron'. The Heb. word 'join' comes from the same root as the name Levi. The Lord had made them a gift to Aaron. At the same time, the distinction between priest and Levite was maintained (7).

18:8–32 Tithes. When Korah, Dathan and Abiram tried to usurp Moses, he was insistent that he had not lorded it over them. In particular, he had taken nothing from them, not 'so much as a donkey' (16:15). Now, the Lord commanded that Aaron should have a portion of Israel's offerings. This was an everlasting provision (19). This commandment is both righteous and practical. It is right that workers should receive wages. Even the ox must not be muzzled when it treads out the grain, such is God's care for his creatures (Dt. 25:4). It is practical in that it ensured priests were able to serve full time in their office since they would not be anxious about their food. The tithing system is logical. Levi would not possess land in Canaan to cultivate and farm. Instead, God would be their inheritance and they would serve him without distraction, supported by tithes. Twelve tribes (600,000 men), each bringing tithes and offerings would maintain some 22,000 Levites (26). The people had received the land freely, and thus they paid their tithes from what God had first given. In their turn, the thousands of Levites must bring their tithes to the Lord. From their tithes Aaron's family would take their portion (28). By this means, the priests would be well supplied.

The principle of tithing was not introduced by the law. Abraham had recognized this duty before the law was given. It is a principle of righteousness to return something to God from all that he has given (Gn. 14:20; Heb. 7:4). Later in history the Levites were neglected, and one of Nehemiah's reforms was to re-establish tithing (Ne. 10:32–39). Malachi accused Israel of robbing God, through their unbelief. He challenged them to bring the whole tithe, after which God's blessing would be so great that they would 'not have room enough for it' (Mal. 3:6–12). The principle of tithing was established for ever. Thus, as the Aaronic priesthood is fulfilled in Christ, there can be no doubt that the church's tithes are his also. There is continuity in the NT. Paul defended his right to a living from the gospel (1 Cor. 9:3–14). If this commandment is despised the result will be neglect of the ministry, resulting in spiritual decline (Mt. 10:9–10; Gal. 6:6–7; 1 Tim. 5:17–18).

19:1–22 Water for purification. The law commands purity and holiness. Before leaving Sinai, Israel had driven out from the camp all unclean persons. At this point, a way of purifying from sin and uncleanness was provided. The reason for putting this law here is found in v 20: if anyone is unclean, he defiles the sanctuary. Thus, the concern is the same as in ch. 18: offences against the sanctuary bring wrath upon Israel by offending the holiness of God. The ashes of the red heifer must be mixed in water, and the water is then to be used for cleansing. This was not new. Moses had also mixed the blood of calves with hyssop, scarlet wool and water to sprinkle the people and the scroll of the covenant (Ex. 24:6–8; *cf.* Heb. 9:19–22). Hebrews teaches that sin cannot be cleansed without shedding blood (Heb. 9:22). Yet this

sprinkling with the ashes of a heifer only cleansed the flesh; the blood of Christ cleanses the conscience (Heb. 9:13–14). If anyone neglected the water of cleansing, he would be cut off from his people. He would be deliberately spurning what God had provided, and thus committing wilful sin, done in full knowledge of God's law. The same principle attaches to Christ's sacrifice. If anyone refuses to believe in him, he is condemned already, because he has not believed on the Son of God (Jn. 3:18). He has turned his back upon the only means that God has given to remove his sins.

20:1 – 21:35 Journeying towards Canaan again

In the first month probably means mid-March. Thirty-eight years had elapsed and the fortieth year had come. We are not told this directly, but if we compare Moses' list of camp sites (20:1 corresponds with 33:36, noting v 38), we can see that the author has passed over approximately thirty-eight years spent in the desert – silent testimony that they were wasted. By about October, Israel would cross the brook Zered, thirty-eight years after turning back from Kadesh Barnea in the desert of Paran (Dt. 2:14; *cf.* Nu. 14:25). Moses, and later Jephthah, reviewed this history (Dt. 2:2–15; Jdg. 11:15–27).

20:1 Miriam dies. Later in the year, Aaron and Moses would also die. This marks the end of the generation that could not enter Canaan.

20:2–13 Complaining at Meribah. The desert years ended as they began, with complaining. It is possible now that the second generation was copying the ways of the first. Deuteronomy records how Moses warned them that they were hard-hearted and would soon depart from God. As in times past, the glory of the Lord appeared to confront the rebels. Moses and Aaron took the staff which had budded, the sign that God had commissioned Aaron (17:1–13). But Moses did not follow the Lord's command exactly. He did not speak to the rock but struck it twice, and his words suggest that he was bringing water out of the rock (10). Because he did not honour the Lord, he was not able to lead Israel into the land.

20:14–21 Edom refuses to let Israel pass. Israel began to come into contact with the nations surrounding Canaan. For centuries their history would be deeply affected by this contact, in both diplomatic exchange and warfare. Kadesh was situated on Edom's border. If Israel was to enter Canaan from the south, they had to pass through Edom. Notice how the text includes the messages between the two nations. Permission was refused.

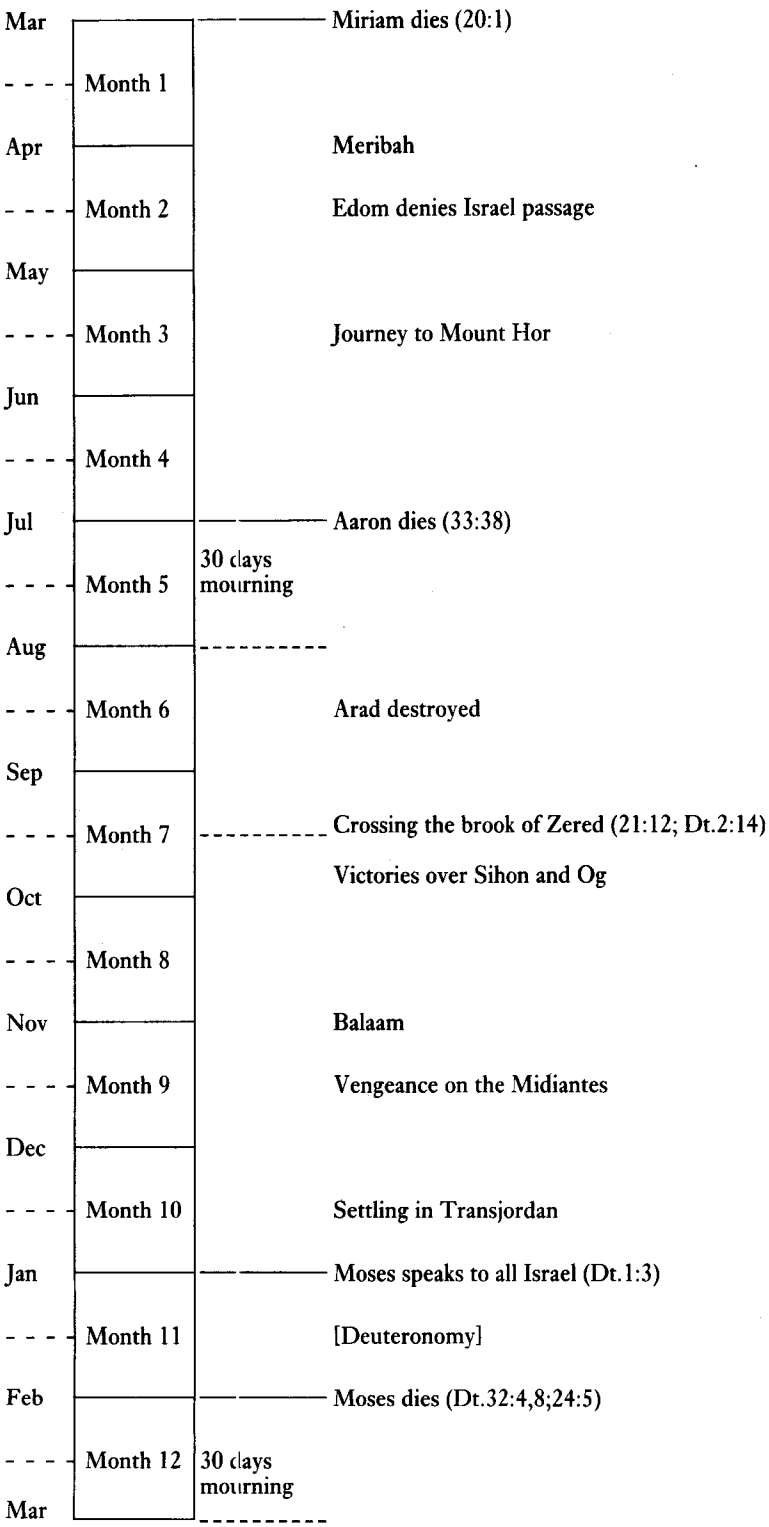
20:22–29 Aaron dies. (*cf.* 33:37–39). The location of Mt Hor is uncertain, except that it was on Edom's border (Dt. 10:6 names it Moserah). Aaron's death occurred four months after Miriam's, around mid-July in the fortieth year (33:38). These deaths signified the passing away of the first generation. Moses, now left alone, must also die soon, since the forty years had run their course and the land must be possessed without him. Although this passage is marked by sadness, it also heralds the approaching entrance to the promised land. Eleazar takes Aaron's place.

21:1–3 Arad destroyed. Arad was a Canaanite city. These very people, with the Amalekites, had destroyed some of the Israelites about thirty-eight years earlier at the very same place, Hormah (14:45). Now they attacked them again. On this occasion, Israel relied on God. Israel's vow to 'devote them to destruction' was also in line with God's promises. These Canaanites were to be dispossessed.

21:4–9 The bronze snake. Unable to cross Edomite territory, Israel had to go around, which meant turning back towards the Red Sea (and this in the middle of the fortieth year). Impatience gave way to open rebellion once more and contempt for the manna which God had provided was again voiced. The fiery snakes may have been a kind of adder which is known in the sandy wastes of Sinai, and which is very poisonous. The antidote was to look at a bronze snake held up on a pole. Later, Hezekiah destroyed the bronze snake because it had become an object of idolatry (2 Ki. 18:4). The lifting up of Christ was compared to this incident in the desert, as those who look to him will live (Jn. 3:14–15). It seems that the means of deliverance in both cases was faith.

21:10–20 Journey to Moab. The pace of the story quickens. The tribes were on the move, speeding towards the border of Canaan. These are the last stages of the journey, and the author surveys them briefly and swiftly. The NIV has introduced a variety of language where the Hebrew is very repetitive. The Hebrew repeats 'they set out' and 'they camped' (21:10, 11, 12, 13). Looking back through the text, the same phrase 'and they set out . . .' introduced the previous stages (20:22; 21:4). The repetition is a device to create a sense of haste. Israel was making haste to reach the land. This travelogue contains two quotations. The first is from an ancient record, the *Book of the Wars of the LORD* (14–15; *cf.* references to the Book of Jashar in Jos. 10:13; 2 Sa. 1:18). The quotation, as translated in the NIV, is an incomplete list of place-names. However, the Hebrew text may admit other translations (*e.g. cf.* AV). The LXX reads: 'Therefore it is said in a book, a war of the Lord has set on fire Zoob, and the brooks of

The fortieth year: reconstruction of the possible pattern of events.



Arnon. And he has appointed brooks to cause Er to dwell there; and it lies near to the coasts of Moab.'

The second quotation is of a song. Israel now sang for joy as the Lord helped them on their journey. This fits well with the impression which the author is trying to create of rapid progress towards the goal.

21:21–35 Defeat of Sihon and Og. Israel was hemmed in between Moab and the Amorites (21:13). The way to Canaan was barred. The message sent to Sihon, king of the Amorites, was similar to the message to Edom (22; 20:17), and the response was the same: to muster an army and repel them. This time Israel did not turn away but defeated the aggressor and occupied its cities. Again, an ancient saying is quoted to mark this victory. The *poets* (27) is (lit.) 'men who use proverbs', and probably refers to the wise men of Israel, who summed up the situation in an enigmatic saying. Their words anticipated the coming defeat of Moab, whose god was Chemosh (29;1 Ki. 11:33). Og, king of Bashan, was the next enemy defeated (32–35; a fuller account is in Dt. 3:1–11). After both victories, Israel occupied the land taken (25, 31, 35). More detail is given later about the occupation of Transjordan by two and a half tribes (ch. 32).

22:1 – 24:25 Balaam's oracles

This section begins by recording the last stage of the journey, which left Israel encamped along the Jordan opposite Jericho, poised to enter Canaan (1; 33:48). Jericho would be taken first (Jos. 5:13 – 6:27). The events that took place on the plains of Moab probably covered the last five months of the fortieth year (mid-October to mid-March), and take in the rest of Numbers and the whole of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy hardly mentions the Balaam episode (Dt. 4:3; 23:4–5).

22:1–20 Balaam summoned. Moab joined forces with the Midianites living in Sinai and east of Jordan (Ex. 2:15–17; Jdg. 6). Together they summoned Balaam from Pethor on the River (*i.e.* the Euphrates) to come and curse Israel. Israel was now at a crucial point, probably four months away from the end of the forty years' desert exile. They were on the brink of inheriting Canaan when this deadly enemy was summoned. The crucial message of chs. 22 – 24 was that God would certainly bless his people and confirm his covenant promises with them. The account of Balak's summons to Balaam drives home this point in three ways.

First, Balak's message announces the issue at stake: Is Israel blessed or cursed? His words to Balaam, '*For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed*' (6) recall God's promise to Abraham, And I will bless you . . . I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse (Gn. 12:2–3; *cf.* Gn. 27:33). Thus, Balak's words alert us to the fact that God's covenant purpose is now on trial. Balak called the false prophet, renowned for the power of his curses, to contradict God's blessing. The central message of these chapters is thus set in sharp relief: God's blessing is irrevocable. The whole episode is important for this one reason: God's blessing was confirmed in the mouth of a dreadful enemy (12).

Secondly, God forbids Balaam to go and curse Israel (12) or to say anything other than what he commands (20, 38). As Balaam rode to Balak, the *angel of the* LORD opposed him (21–35).

Thirdly, the certainty of God's blessing was acknowledged even by Israel's enemies (3–5, 11). In other words, Israel was already being blessed and was very numerous – exactly what God had promised. The security of the covenant blessing is thus hammered home throughout the episode. Balaam is regarded in Scripture as an evil man. The apostle Peter's verdict is, 'He loved the wages of wickedness' (2 Pet. 2:15–16; Jude 11). His desire for riches drove him to oppose God and his people. The text repeatedly mentions his fees for divination (22:7, 17–18; 24:11). When Israel took revenge on Midian, Balaam perished with them (31:8).

22:21–41 Balaam commanded to speak only God's word. The fact that the donkey spoke makes this incident exceptional. Though naturally unable to speak, the donkey was empowered by God to rebuke the extreme folly of the prophet. But the donkey was also a living rebuke to Balaam, because of the contrast between them. The donkey saw the angel standing in their way, and wisely drew back; Balaam saw nothing and wickedly pressed on his way. The donkey faithfully served Balaam, saving his life; he wickedly beat the animal (*cf.* Pr. 12:10). Balaam found that God was his adversary. The whole point of this unusual scene was to stress to Balaam that he should not speak a word beyond what God had commanded him (35, 38). Balak's eagerness to have Balaam's help oozes out of the text. He came to the border to greet him, mildly rebuked him for the delay and mentioned again how he would reward him (36–37). The very next morning, they both ascended Bamoth Baal ('the high places of Baal') to pronounce curses (41).

23:1 – 24:25 Balaam's oracles blessing Israel. Balaam spoke four oracles about Israel and three oracles about the nations. The text makes clear that God had put the words into Balaam's mouth (23:5, 12, 16, 17, 26; 24:2, 13, 16). One thing should be understood about

these God-given oracles. Each of the four oracles concerning Israel takes up one of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant and confirms it. The first oracle (23:7–10), stressing that God has not cursed Israel, confirms that Israel will be like the dust of the earth. *Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?* (23:10). The second oracle (23:18–24), stressing that God cannot change his promise, confirms that God is present among his people (a clear reference to the promise of a relationship with God). *The LORD their God is with them* (23:21). The third oracle (24:3–9), a vision from *the Almighty*, the name by which God appeared to Abraham, confirms that Israel will inherit the land promised (24:5, 6). The predicted defeat of Agag, the Amalekite king shows that Canaan is in mind here (see 1 Sa. 15:8). Finally, the prediction that Israel would devour hostile nations (24:8) fulfils the promise that they would possess their enemies' cities (Gn. 22:17). That the Abrahamic covenant is in mind is further indicated by the last words of v 9, *May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!* (*cf.* Gn. 12:3).

The fourth oracle is perhaps the most remarkable (24:15–19). It is an oracle from *the Most High* (24:16), by whom Melchizedek blessed Abraham (Gn. 14:18–20). Melchizedek is himself associated with Christ Jesus in the NT (Heb. 7:1–17; see Ps. 110:4). This oracle promises a king in the distant future who will defeat Israel's enemies (17–19). *He will crush the foreheads of Moab* (17) seems to anticipate David's victories (2 Sa. 8:2). However, the promise to Abraham (Gn. 12:3; 22:18), with the rest of Scripture, teaches us to see in the promise of David's throne, the promise of the Messiah whom the Gentiles will obey (Gn. 49:10). Thus, Balaam confirmed God's promises to Abraham.

Balak grew more angry as Balaam proceeded through his oracles, but the prophet could not help himself. He was compelled to bless Israel. Afterwards, unbidden, he went on to prophesy the future of other peoples: Amalek (20), the Kenites (21–22), Asshur and Eber (24). The Amalekites, Israel's fierce enemies, were destroyed in Hezekiah's time (1 Ch. 4:43). Some of the Kenites were with Israel, but Canaan was their land and they are the first nation named in the list of those to be dispossessed (Gn. 15:19). Asshur usually means Assyria. Eber might refer to Babylon and Kittim (i.e. Greece). If so, Balaam was looking far into the future of Israel's history.

25:1–18 Israel seduced by Moab

Whilst Israel could not be cursed because God's word is almighty, it could be seduced because it was weak. Once again, we observe a characteristic of Numbers: it juxtaposes the word of God with the rebellion of man. God's word had blessed; now Israel rebelled. The text of Numbers does not tell us, but we find out later in Scripture, that it was Balaam's idea to entice Israel into idolatry and sexual immorality (2 Pet. 2:13–16; Rev. 2:14). The two sins were connected. Either the cult of Baal involved sexual practices, a kind of fertility cult, or the enticement of the Moabite women led Israel to share their idolatry. This was a foretaste of Canaan's dangers, and later Israel fell in the same way. The people of God are continually warned against marriage with the surrounding nations who would lead them away from God.

When Israel sinned with the golden calf at Sinai, the Levites marked themselves out for God's service by putting their own families to death (Ex. 32:25–29). On this occasion Aaron's grandson, Phinehas, distinguished himself by his zeal for the Lord's glory. Seeing an Israelite take a Midianite chief's daughter to his tent, he followed them and ran them through with a spear. They were guilty of outright defiance of God's word in flagrant disregard of the weeping Israelites. Phinehas' action stopped the plague which had already taken 24,000 lives (Paul says 23,000 in a single day; 1 Cor. 10:8; *cf.* Aaron's action some years before, 16:47–48). Recognizing Phinehas' zeal, God confirmed his priesthood in an everlasting covenant (25:13; see Ne. 13:29). God displayed his mercy in giving this covenant, because it guaranteed that there would be priests in future to make atonement for Israel. The NT states that the Aaronic priesthood had been changed with the work of Christ (Heb. 7:11–22). There is no conflict here. Through the work of the prophets, it became clear that the priesthood would ultimately find its fulfilment in Christ.

Finally, in the desert, God commanded Israel to treat the Midianites as enemies because of this event. Their destruction followed swiftly (ch. 31).

26:1 – 36:13 New preparation to inherit the promised land

The theme of the third part of the book is the inheritance. The desert period was ending, and Israel was at its final campsite. New preparation had to be made to possess the land which God had sworn to give them. Attention is focused on how the land was to be allotted and on the laws to be kept in it.

26:1 – 27:23 Israel is numbered (the second census) and the land is to be allotted

26:1–4 The second census commanded. This was the way in which the first

preparation began. The new census was a sign that the period of judgment was ending and the time had come to prepare anew to enter the promised land. The census was to be conducted on the same basis as the first (26:2 repeats briefly 1:2).

26:5–51 Israel counted by their clans. Three characteristics of this census report should be noticed: the total number of Israel had fallen slightly over the forty years (see 1:17–46); some tribes had increased, others decreased; this time the clans within each tribe were named. Comments were also made about Korah's rebellion (which is a warning; 10; *cf.* 1 Cor. 10:6, 11), the death of two of Judah's sons (19) and the fact that Zelophehad of Manasseh had only daughters (33).

It is essential to understand why the census was recorded in this way. First, the slight fall in numbers marks the withholding of blessing from the generation that fell in the desert through their rebellion. Growth in numbers was a blessing of God. But these were wasted years, when Israel marked time. The other characteristics reflect the author's primary interest in chs. 26 – 36, the inheritance. Each of these characteristics shapes the way in which Israel would possess the land. This should become clear as the third part of Numbers unfolds. In particular, tribes would be allotted land according to their size, and this would determine their scope for wealth and growth through the centuries. It is also noticeable that two further sections are devoted to the problem of the inheritance rights of Zelophehad's daughters, a vital concern because the inheritance would normally pass to sons (27:1–11 and 36:1–13).

26:52–56 The allotment of the land. The main concern of the third part of Numbers is the inheritance in Canaan. Each tribe was to have land in proportion to its size, distributed by lot. This did not mean leaving it to chance. It was known that God was able to determine the outcome of the lot (Pr. 16:33).

26:57–62 The Levites counted. In the first census, the Levites were numbered separately because they were not to serve in the army but were to be priests. On this occasion, they were omitted from the main census because they would receive no inheritance. This was not a new, different reason. If they had received land like the other tribes, they would have been distracted from serving God by farming duties (see on 18:8–32). This reflects a principle that the ministers of God should not become entangled in worldly business but should be completely devoted to God's service (2 Tim. 2:4).

26:63–65 Not one of the first generation remained. This is why the census was commanded. Here is a sober reminder that God's judgment is sure and certain. As he swore on oath, not one of the generation that rebelled were left, except Joshua and Caleb. It should never be overlooked that God will always fulfil his word. In particular, no oath of God has ever failed nor ever will fail.

27:1–11 Zelophehad's daughters' inheritance. It was customary that the inheritance would pass to sons (*e.g.* Gn. 27; Dt. 21:15–17; Lk. 15:11–32). Genealogies rarely mention a woman (Mt. 1:3–5 is an exception). It is clear that women did not have an independent standing but came under the headship of their father or husband (see on ch. 30). The principle of male headship within the churches was retained by the apostles (1 Cor. 11:2–16; 14:34–37; 1 Tim. 2:9–15; 1 Pet. 3:1–6). Zelophehad's daughters were thus afraid that they would have no inheritance, since their father had died and they had no brothers. Their action is very significant. They approached the tabernacle entrance (2). (This was the place of judgment where the leaders of the assembly met and, more importantly, the place where the Judge of all the earth stood (see on 16:16–35)). Thus, they appealed to God, the defender of the defenceless, the fatherless and the widow (Jas. 1:27). It was always his concern to defend his peoples' right to their place in the land (consider 1 Ki. 21; Is. 5:8).

The appeal made by Zelophehad's daughters gained them justice, and a permanent law was given to Israel to defend others who would be in a similar situation (6–11). This was not an incidental detail in Israel's life. The position of Zelophehad's daughters had already been hinted at in 26:33, and it is the matter which concludes the whole book (36:1–13). The spiritual significance of this issue is immense. Canaan was the homeland where God would establish fellowship with his people. If anyone were excluded, they would be kept out of God's fellowship. Canaan was not just a place in which to live; nor was it a mere token of the new earth and new Jerusalem. It was historically the kingdom of God and the only place where God was known in the earth (Dt. 4:7). Through the instruction which was to be gained here, men and women would enter the kingdom of God. Therefore, this was no trivial matter.

27:12–23 Joshua appointed to succeed Moses. Moses was soon to ascend Mt Nebo, where he would die (Dt. 32:48–52; 34:1–12). His final acts were to appoint Joshua, take vengeance on Midian and deliver again the law of God. Even this great servant of God, who was 'faithful in all God's house' (Heb. 3:2), was unable to enter Canaan because, on one occasion he had not honoured God as holy. This

must teach God's people to fear his holy name (Is. 6:1–5). The holiness of God is absolute; it cannot be modified one jot to accommodate sinful people. Here is sober encouragement to heed the word of God, every line and sentence of it. But even then, it seems impossible for people to enter the kingdom, and it is therefore a cause for rejoicing that Christ Jesus has entered heaven itself on our behalf (Heb. 9:24). He entered where no man could go.

Moses, knowing that he was about to die, showed a characteristic care for the people. They were not to be left as *sheep without a shepherd* (*cf.* 1 Ki. 22:17; Ezk. 34:5; Mt. 9:36). He asked God to appoint a new leader, since God alone knows hearts of men, and is *the God of the spirits of all mankind* (16; see 16:22). The same concern occupied the apostles when they chose someone to take Judas Iscariot's place (Acts 1:24). God's people need to be led by people approved by God. God's chosen leaders were always at pains to know that they were acting in his will (see 1 Sa. 30:7–8; Acts 16:6–10). Joshua is identified as a man *in whom is the Spirit* (18). Israel's leaders could only lead by God's Spirit (see 11:25; 1 Sa. 16:1–13; Acts 20:28). The symbolic act used to set Joshua aside was the laying on of hands (see on 8:5–26).

28:1 – 30:16 Offerings and vows

28:1–8 Daily burnt offerings. This restates the law given in Ex. 29:38–43. Other laws are also drawn together in this section (Lv. 1 – 7; 23; and Nu. 15). Every morning and evening, a lamb had to be sacrificed. The purpose of this is most important: 'Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the LORD their God . . .' (Ex. 29:45–46). Elijah's sacrifice at Mt Carmel took place at the time of the evening sacrifice, and his purpose was exactly as stated in the law: 'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel' (1 Ki. 18:36). These laws are restated at this point because the main concern is with the inheritance. The only reason why the inheritance was truly desirable was as the place where God would dwell with his people. All the time, the author has his eye upon the fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant. Possessing the land and becoming a great nation was all to the end that God might create a people for his praise. Thus the sacrifice of the lambs was a means to this great end.

The NT teaches that these sacrifices were 'types', foreshadowing Christ's death. He was the spotless lamb who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). Indeed he died at the time of the evening sacrifices, when the Passover lambs were also killed. His death abolished these sacrifices, and they soon ceased to be offered when the temple fell in AD 70.

The large numbers of sacrifices show the weight of sin which must be removed before God can be approached. They also speak of God's great grace as he had provided Israel with riches, flocks and herds in abundance to enable them to bring his sacrifices. They brought only a part of what he had given them in the first place. The same is true of the offerings which modern Christians should bring; they only return to God a small part of what they have received. The pattern of morning and evening sacrifices has been taken as a model for times of prayer in the church. Certainly, the apostles in early NT times observed the temple hours of prayer (Acts 3:1). We are not told whether this practice persisted, but we do know that the apostles taught the churches to pray continually (1 Thes. 5:17).

28:9–10 Sabbath burnt offerings. These were in addition to the daily offerings. The Sabbath was set apart as holy to the Lord (Ex. 20:8–11; Dt. 5:12–15).

28:11–15 Burnt offerings for the first of the month. The Israelites used a lunar calendar, so the months were determined by the phases of the moon. Each month was about twenty- nine to thirty days long and thus the year was approximately eleven days short of a full solar year. Therefore, at intervals, an extra month had to be inserted to restore the calendar. The start of each month was kept as a Sabbath. On this day, two young bulls, a ram and seven lambs were offered, plus a goat as a sin offering. It was as if each new month could not start without the covering of sacrifice.

28:16–25 Passover burnt offerings. The offerings for Passover were the same as for the new moon, except that they were repeated for seven days. Passover was also marked by unleavened bread. It was celebrated in the first month Nisan (or Abib), which fell in March/April (Ex. 12; Nu. 9:1–14; Dt. 16; Jos. 5:10; 2 Ki. 23:21). This was the time that Christ Jesus died, as a Passover lamb (Jn. 19:17–37; 1 Cor. 5:7).

28:26–31 Feast of Weeks' burnt offerings. This was the second great festival, also called the day of first fruits, celebrating the end of the barley harvest (Ex. 23:16; Lv. 23:15–21; Dt. 16:9–12). It fell seven weeks (fifty days) after the Passover near the end of May (the beginning of Siwan), and was also known as Pentecost. It was during this feast that the Holy Spirit was sent to the first disciples of Christ, who were like the firstfruits of the gospel harvest (Acts 2).

29:1–6 Feast of Trumpets' burnt offerings. The remaining three festivals were celebrated in the seventh month (Tishri,

September/October). On the first day of the month, the trumpets were sounded (*cf.* Lv. 23:23–25). Offerings were the same as for the first two feasts, except that only one young bull was brought. The sounding of the trumpets was significant. It summoned the people and called God to remember his people (see 10:1–10).

29:7–11 Day of Atonement's burnt offerings. The tenth day of the seventh month was the Day of Atonement, when all sin was put away (Lv. 16:1–34; 23:26–32). This was the only occasion in the year when the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place. God's holiness and human sinfulness are totally incompatible (Lv. 16; Heb. 9:7). On this day, Israel had to afflict itself or deny itself. The Hebrew verb means 'to humble oneself' and seems to imply fasting. The ritual involved burning the sacrifice rather than eating it (the Passover lamb was eaten) and sending away the scapegoat into the desert. Later, Isaiah might have been referring to this when he spoke of the day of fasting (Is. 58:1–14). The crucial reason for self denial was that Israel was remembering its sin and repenting of it.

29:12–38 Feast of Tabernacles' burnt offerings. The name 'Feast of Tabernacles' comes from Lv. 23:33–43 but is not used here. This was the last great feast of the year, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. On the first day, thirteen young bulls, two rams and fourteen lambs were sacrificed. Each day, for seven days, the number of young bulls was reduced by one. On the eighth day, the same offerings as for the other feasts were presented. The concern in Numbers is with the offerings. We learn more about the significance of Tabernacles from Leviticus and Dt. 16:13–17 (see also Ne. 8:13–18). It was the time of the final harvest, a time of rejoicing, when Israel would bring abundant freewill offerings (39). This was the occasion when Solomon dedicated the temple, offering 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats, over fourteen days (1 Ki.8:2, 62–66).

There is a great spiritual analogy in these festivals. Passover (commemorating deliverance from Egypt and death) corresponds with Christ's crucifixion; Weeks or Pentecost (the day of firstfruits) corresponds with the sending of the Holy Spirit and the firstfruits of the gospel harvest (Acts 2). So Tabernacles corresponds with Christ's second coming at the close of the age, marking the end of the harvest. The time between Weeks and Tabernacles was a busy period when Israel laboured for the harvest. Similarly, between Pentecost and the second coming labourers are sent to reap the harvest among the Gentiles (Mt.9:37–38; 13:30–39; Lk. 10:2; Jn. 4:35). At the end of the age, the harvest will be gathered in and the weeds thrown into the fire (Mt. 13:39; Mk. 4:29; Rev. 14:15).

The harvest was also a time to remember that God had brought them into the land and blessed them bountifully there (this was why they lived in booths, recalling their journey to the land). Similarly, at the end of the age, God's people will rejoice in him who has brought them into the eternal kingdom. Thus the Feast of Tabernacles celebrates the inheritance, the key theme in chs. 26 – 36. Finally, there is a further point of analogy. Just as trumpets called the people to this greatest of feasts, so at the end, the trumpet will summon people to assemble before the God who is the judge of the living and the dead.

29:39–40 Additional offerings. All these burnt offerings were in addition to freewill offerings and offerings made to fulfil vows. Many sacrifices were an expression of abundant thanksgiving. The heart of the matter is summed up in the NT – 'God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Cor. 9:7). Even after we have done all, we are unprofitable servants who have done only what was our duty (Lk. 17:10).

30:1–16 The law concerning vows. The law about vows follows naturally the laws about burnt offerings (29:39). The fundamental principle is that vows must be kept (Dt. 23:21–23; Ec. 5:4). There are many examples of vows in Scripture and some were very extreme (Jdg. 11:30–40). If the vow cannot be fulfilled, Lv. 27 explains what must be done. Here, however, the concern is with vows made by a woman. The point is that a woman was under the authority of her father or her husband, and he could nullify her vow. She did not have an absolute right in this matter. If a widow, however, who was not under a man's authority, made a vow, she was bound by it. The NT requires Christian wives to submit to their husbands in the same way as Sarah submitted to Abraham, calling him 'her master' (Eph. 5:24; 1 Pet. 3:1–7). This is widely contradicted today, which only confirms the truth of Scripture (2 Tim. 4:3; *cf.* Pr. 31:10; Ec. 7:28) and provides a telling comment on the present age (2 Tim. 3:1–9). The NT teaching is sound in this matter and does not permit husbands to become overbearing. Rather, it commands the deepest love and self-sacrifice towards their wives, but only within the proper bounds of Scripture and never to the point of abdicating their biblical authority (Eph. 5:25–33).

31:1 – 32:42 Vengeance on Midian and settlement in Transjordan

The most important point to realize about ch. 31 is that it is not an account of a battle. It is not like, for example, Jos. 8 (the battle against Ai) or 1 Sa. 14 (Jonathan's attack upon the Philistines).

The author is not interested in the battle as such, which he passes over in one verse (7). On the contrary, the author's interest lies in three areas: the plunder and spoils of battle (which takes up 46 verses 9–54); the battle order (as previously he has been interested in the marching order; 10:11–36); and purification (19–24). These are abiding concerns of Numbers. The related attributes of God are his holiness and the fact that he is a God of order, not confusion (*cf.* 1 Cor. 14:33, RSV). God is holy in taking vengeance, in ordering his army, in taking spoils and in requiring his soldiers to purify themselves.

31:1–24 Vengeance on the Midianites. This account begins with a sober reminder that God has authority to take life. The destruction of the Midianites was righteous vengeance for the evil which they had done to God's people, leading them to dishonour God (see Nu. 25). At the same time, God reminds Moses that he also must soon die. This also displays God's perfect justice. Not only did he take vengeance against his enemies but he also did not overlook sin in his dearest servant. This is because his holiness and glory are more important than men's lives. Moses taught Israel the lesson that God 'shows no partiality and accepts no bribes' (Dt. 10:17; Ezk. 18; *cf.* Acts 10:34–35).

The battle order was established along clear principles, reflecting God's holiness and order. Each tribe was to play an equal part. Phinehas, the high priest's son, went with the army of 12,000. He had already distinguished himself (25:6–13), and it must have been a source of courage to the army to have had him in their midst, since God had sworn that his priesthood would endure (25:10–13). He took the trumpets to lead the battle and to call on God to remember his people in the warfare (10:9) and vessels of the sanctuary, symbols of God's presence (6). The text records a victory. Israel killed all the Midianite males, including Balaam, the architect of their fall (8). Later in history, the Midianites again rose as enemies (Jdg. 6 – 8). This does not cast doubt upon the historical truth of the record of this victory. It seems rather that the Midianites were a widespread confederation of tribes, associated with the Amalekites, Moabites, Ishmaelites and others. These Midianites were those with Moab.

Moses did not allow the returning army to bring the captives into the camp. He was angry that they had spared the women, the very ones who had tempted Israel to idolatry and immorality. At his command, only the young virgins were spared, and they became part of the nation. It is important to understand the exact nature of this killing of women and boys. Such virtually total destruction was not the 'devotion to destruction' suffered by Arad (21:1–3) and later by Jericho (Jos. 7) and the Amalekites (1 Sa. 15:3). (This topic is discussed on 14:39–45). That required every living soul to be killed, including animals, and cities and possessions were either burned or placed in the treasury of the sanctuary. The attack on Midian was different; it was *vengeance* or 'retribution' (3). Therefore, the spoil did not have to be destroyed. Once it was purified it could be divided (*cf.* Jos. 6:21, 24; 7:1–26; 1 Sa. 15:13–33). The women and boys were killed because the women had already turned Israel from the Lord, and if they were left alive, they would remain a threat to Israel's faithfulness (see on 25:1–18). Such women were the cause of Solomon's fall (1 Ki. 11:1–13).

The soldiers were unclean because of their contact with death and could not enter the camp for seven days (19–24). The purity of the camp was Moses' vital concern. He would not admit the Midianite women (13).

Note. 'Retribution' suggests justice whereas *vengeance* suggests the personal wrath of God. The wrath and vengeance of God are offensive ideas to many modern people, largely because they assume that God's wrath and vengeance is irrational, capricious, out-of-control. But Scripture teaches that God's wrath is revealed against man's sin (Rom. 1:18), and, 'vengeance is mine, I will repay' says the Lord (Rom.12:19; (AV KJV)). His wrath and 'vengeance' manifest his righteous indignation, and are not the result of bad temper.

31:25–54 Dividing the spoils of victory. The author is more interested in the spoils than the battle because the spoils were part of the inheritance in Transjordan. The scheme of dividing the spoils (sheep, cattle, donkeys and young maidens) paid respect to the priesthood and rewarded the battle toil of the soldiers. The soldiers received half, from which they paid tribute of one five hundredth to the high priest. The congregation received half, from which they gave one fiftieth to the Levites. Thus, *e.g.* Eleazar's family received 675 sheep, each soldier of the army (of 12,000 men) about twenty-eight sheep, the Levites (23,000) approximately one sheep among four and the congregation (589,730 excluding the army of 12,000) about one sheep between two. No account is given of the plunder of silver and gold. Each soldier took his part (53). Since not one soldier died in battle, they offered the gold to the Lord (49–50). This was also to make atonement for themselves. They had taken men's lives, and bloodshed had made them unclean (19–24). The numbers have been questioned by many scholars. They doubt that 12,000 men

could defeat a Midianite people that must have included many warriors, judging by the fact that 32,000 virgin girls were taken. Some suggest that the number is artificial. However, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that throughout history God's people won notable victories (*e.g.* Jdg. 7; 1 Sa. 30). This happens for one reason only, because the Lord fights for them as he promised (Dt. 28:7; 32:30).

32:1–42 Settlement in Transjordan. The lands of Jazer and Gilead lay east of Jordan. They were high lands (over 2,000 ft) enjoying good rainfall and ideal for flocks and herds (4). However, they were *outside* the land promised to Abraham. Therefore, it is surprising that these tribes wished to settle there. Moses was clearly appalled, remembering the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea approximately forty years earlier (11–12; see 14:21–35). He was afraid that they would discourage the whole nation from entering Canaan. Moses had an accurate insight into human nature. It is a natural tendency to look around at other people rather than to keep our eyes on God and his word (see *e.g.* Jn. 21:20–21). When this happens, the standards of obedience among God's people tend to fall.

The Reubenites and Gadites on this occasion gave their undertaking to cross the Jordan, even ahead of the other tribes, to fulfil their responsibility to ensure that Israel possessed the promised land. Moses bound them to this, leaving instructions with Joshua and Eleazar not to give them their inheritance if they broke their word (28–30). Any failure would be sin: *Be sure that your sin will find you out* (23). These words have become a proverb in the English language. After it had been agreed that Reuben and Gad could settle in Transjordan, half of Manasseh was joined to them (33) since they had been involved in the conquest of these lands (39–42). The account ends with a brief note of the building work which they did.

If we accept that the events of chs. 20 – 36, from Miriam's death, spanned the fortieth year, then the question of settling in Transjordan would have been raised at some time around December (*i.e.* the ninth month). This would be after the early rains, and the rich pastures would have been attractive (1, 4). Before the end of the year, on the first day of the eleventh month (Dt. 1:3), Moses summoned all Israel to hear the law again before he ascended Mt Nebo and died. This leaves an interval of about one month or so in which these tribes organized their settlement. This would not have been sufficient time to do any substantial building work. Therefore, the last few verses (34–42) may refer to work that was carried out some time later (after Jos. 13:1–33; 22). Indeed, the names of these towns were changed, and this was probably done after the settlement. The fact that this is recorded here seems to imply that the account was finally written down some time after the tribes had settled in their lands. This is not the only indication that the Pentateuch was finalized some time after the events of Moses' life (see the Introduction).

33:1–49 Summary of the journey

This record of the camp sites along the journey is one part of the text which Moses wrote down (2). Some of the places named in this list are difficult to identify. Therefore, it does not seem possible, given the present state of our knowledge, to map the route accurately. The format of the list is very repetitive; occasional comment is added (vs 4, 8, 9, 14, 38, 40). The reason why this record is placed here is quite clear: it is a summing up and leads into the conclusion of the account. What remains in Numbers is concerned exclusively with the inheritance: possession, distribution and the expulsion of the inhabitants (33:50–56); boundaries (34:1–15); officers charged with assigning the land (34:16–29); towns and cities for the Levites (35:1–34); and the unchangeable nature of the inheritance (36:1–13).

The record is strictly a list of camp sites, not a brief history, and therefore it makes passing reference to the exodus (3–4) and the crossing of the Red Sea (8), and no mention at all of the long stay at Sinai (15–16). This record bridges the gap between chs. 19 and 20, giving the route which Israel took (19–35). The day of Aaron's death, the first day of the fifth month in the fortieth year, is important for dating events (38). Beginning with the first Passover, the record covers the forty years and ends with a picture of Israel's hosts stretched out alongside the Jordan between two places several miles apart, Beth Jeshimoth (modern Tell el-Azeimeh) and Abel Shittim (modern Tell Kefrain). The extensive nature of the camp implies great numbers. The ten thousand thousands of Israel waited on the edge of their inheritance. Before they entered, they had to receive instruction in the law.

33:50 – 36:13 Commandments for the inheritance

These laws and the whole of Deuteronomy were given on the plains of Moab opposite Jericho (36:13).

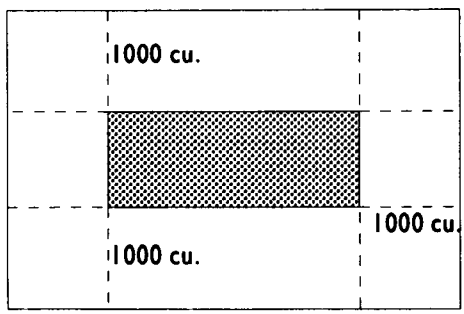
33:50–56 Command to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan. The command to possess Canaan contains three elements: the land is given to Israel, as promised in the Abrahamic covenant (Gn. 15:18–21); a summary of the way in which it was to be distributed (repeating 26:52–56); and the command to

drive out the nations, destroy their idols and their high places. This command is found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Ex. 23:23–33; 34:11–17; Lv. 20:1–5, 22–26; Dt. 7:1–5; 12:29–30; 13:6–18; 29:16–28).

34:1–15 The land's boundaries. Abraham was promised the land stretching between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates, identified as 'the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites' (Gn. 15:18–21; *cf.* Dt. 11:24). The boundaries described here match those known from Egyptian texts of the second millennium BC. This indicates that the definition of Canaan given here is a truly ancient one. By the time Israel arrived in Moab, the boundaries could be defined by reference to towns and places, and Joshua followed these same boundaries (Jos. 15 – 19). The land was to be allotted to nine-and-a-half tribes, since two-and-a-half tribes would settle in Transjordan (32). However, it appears that the full extent of the land promised was never possessed. For a brief period during the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel held the land from the Euphrates to the Gaza strip, or from Dan to Beersheba (1 Ki. 4:24–25), but afterwards their territory was reduced. Nevertheless, the ideal of the promise was not lost sight of (Ezk. 47:15–20). Even today, Israel maintains a claim, on a more limited scale, to this territory. The re-establishment of the state of Israel at midnight on 14 May 1948 was a remarkable event of modern times, following centuries during which the land had been occupied by other nations. But the promise to Abraham awaits fulfilment.

34:16–29 Leaders to allot the land. The authority for this task was given to Joshua and Eleazar (17), and their work is recorded in Jos. 14 – 19. Ten tribal leaders were appointed to assist them (18–29). Many of the names listed contain the word 'El' ('God'). This is evidence of the antiquity of the list itself, since later names contained the name of 'the LORD' (see on 1:4–16). It may also indicate that these were quite old men, *e.g.* Caleb was about eighty years old (see Jos. 14:10). Although these were the heads of Israel's tribes, they were definitely subject to Joshua and Eleazar. Caleb, for example, about five years later, asked Joshua to give him the inheritance promised to him. Such higher authority was essential to prevent territorial disputes among the tribes. It had to be clear that the land was allotted according to the will of God, through his appointed servants, and the boundaries were not to be altered (see Pr. 22:28; 23:10).

35:1–5 Levitical cities. Aaron's house and the Levites were not to have any inheritance (18:20–24). They were to depend upon the tithes which the other tribes paid. Nevertheless, in order to preserve their identity in Israel, they were given cities in which to live. After the tribes had taken the land, they had to assign the Levites their cities (Jos. 21). Each city was to have an area of land around it for pasture, to a boundary 1,500 ft from the city walls (*i.e.* 450 m) (4), and measuring about 3,000 feet square (*i.e.* 900 m (5). The geometry poses a slight problem. If the sides were 3,000 ft long, and each side of the square was 1,500 ft from the walls, the four sides could not have joined up. The measurements complete a square only if taken from a central point. Archaeological evidence suggests that Beth Shemesh, one of the cities chosen (Jos. 21:16), covered approximately seven acres (*i.e.* equivalent to about 3 hectares). The problem of interpreting the geometry has taxed the ingenuity of scholars. It seems probable that the boundaries were set by first tracing out a square or rectangle around the city walls and then measuring 1500 ft *from its corners* to establish the boundary.



Plan of the Levitical city.

The principle, however, is perfectly clear that the Levites should have a limited area of pasture-land around their towns.

35:6–34 Cities of refuge. The Levites' cities were scattered through the land in proportion to each tribe's land (8). This ensured that instruction in the law was planted among all tribes (Dt. 31:9; Mal. 2:6–7). There had to be forty-eight of these cities; they were chosen by lot a few years later (Jos. 21:1–42). Looking forward, it is significant that the Aaronic priests were settled in Judah (with Simeon and Benjamin), and the rest of the Kohathites, the Gershonites and Merarites were placed among the other tribes. God favoured Judah by placing his best servants among her. This may have been the major reason why Judah did not depart from the law as quickly as northern Israel and thus escaped the Assyrians who overthrew Samaria in 721 BC. Judah's decline was resisted by Aaron's descendants, men like Jeremiah. Nevertheless, Judah did eventually go into

captivity in 586 BC. This history teaches that when the church has faithful preachers, it is a sign of God's favour. The church should pray constantly that God will raise up faithful ministers and clothe them with salvation.

Six of the Levite towns were to be cities of refuge (6), three on each side of the Jordan (14). A person who had killed someone could flee to one of these cities seeking asylum. He would flee from *the avenger of blood*. The Hebrew term *avenger* is *gō'ēl*, 'kinsman, redeemer' (12, 19, 21, 24, 25, 27). It was the ancient custom for the close relative of a victim of murder to avenge his kin. This could lead to a series of tit-for-tat killings. A graphic example of this is found in the case of Abner (2 Sa. 2:8–28; 3:19–39). Part of Abner's tragedy was that he died in the very gates of Hebron, a city of refuge. The cities of refuge offered safety to the manslayer until he stood trial.

The provision of cities of refuge shows God's love of justice. By this means, he imposed the rule of law upon the custom of blood feuds. In a blood feud, the manslayer might be killed even for an accidental killing. Therefore, a distinction was made between murder and manslaughter. Murder is premeditated, committed out of enmity by lying in wait (16–21). Manslaughter is unintentional killing (22–24). This resembles the difference between deliberate sin and unintentional errors (see on 15:22–31). One who had committed unintentional manslaughter was protected from the avenger of blood, although his freedom was removed (28, 32). Conversely, no murderer was allowed to live (21, 31). There was no ransom for the life of a murderer, just as there was no atonement for deliberate sin (15:30–31). The law did not prevent the kinsman from taking vengeance where it was lawful. Indeed, in the case of widows who had no kinsman, God himself took that role (Ex. 22:22–24). The NT commands believers not to avenge themselves but to leave it to the Lord (Rom. 12:19), who will avenge them (Lk. 18:7–8; Rev. 6:10; 19:2).

Justice was strengthened by the requirement for two or more witnesses (30; see Dt. 17:6; 19:15; Mt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; Heb. 10:28). This was an enduring principle to which Christ appealed (Jn. 8:16–18; 5:32–41; 1 Jn. 5:6–8). This must have been the reason why the apostles did not go alone but in pairs, since they were Christ's witnesses and their testimony had to be legally valid (Lk. 10:1; Acts 13:2; note the plurality in Acts 2:32; 10:23; and the pairing of the disciples in Mt. 10:1–4).

The root cause for the cities of refuge is found in the Abrahamic covenant (which is implied in vs 33–34), that *bloodshed pollutes the land*. Israel was not to defile the land where God dwelt among them. For this selfsame reason Israel had purified the camp at Sinai, forty years before (5:3). The ultimate reason, therefore, was not justice for its own sake. Rather, it was to maintain God's purposes, set forth in the Abrahamic covenant. These were, first, to preserve Israel's fellowship with God, who is of purer eyes than to look upon iniquity (Hab. 1:12–13); and secondly, to preserve Israel in the land. In this matter, two of the promises are joined (34).

The gift of cities of refuge was no incidental matter. It was vital and practical and touched the heart of God's plan of redemption. What is more, the spirit of the law must be understood. The law is summed up in love for God and his people (Mt. 22:34–40). Murder goes hand in hand with hatred, the very opposite of love (1 Jn. 3:11–15).

36:1–13 The inheritance preserved. These laws, delivered to Israel *on the plains of Moab* (13), conclude with a commandment that preserved Israel's inheritance. The book of Deuteronomy, which follows, is concerned with the same matter from another standpoint, teaching Israel how to live in order to remain in the land.

The daughters of Zelophehad were to have received their father's inheritance (ch. 27). However, this posed a threat to Manasseh if they married into another tribe and took with them part of the tribal inheritance (3). Two solutions were proposed. First, the immediate situation was solved: the women had to marry within the tribe (6). It is important to note that freedom of choice in marriage is not absolute but is confined within the limits of God's will. It would have been ridiculous for these women to argue that they loved someone from another tribe. Far from it! They obeyed the Lord (10–12). This yields a principle for today, that Christian marriages should be contracted in submission to God's revealed will.

The text then goes on to establish a general principle for Israel, that *no inheritance in Israel is to pass from tribe to tribe* (7). This is repeated for emphasis (9). This is a fitting conclusion to Numbers. The Lord was commanding that the inheritance be preserved for ever. This has immense value for the believer. Since the inheritance in Canaan anticipated the coming of the kingdom of God in all its fullness, this law also gives assurance that God will not permit that inheritance to be taken away from his people. A place is reserved for every one of his people. This message comes through in the teaching of Christ (Lk. 12:32; Jn. 6:37, 40; 10:28). What guarantees eternally the promised inheritance? It is the covenant and oath which God gave to Abraham, which were confirmed for ever by Jesus Christ the Lord.

Peter John Naylor

DEUTERONOMY

Introduction

The book

Deuteronomy is the fifth and last book of the Pentateuch (see article on the Pentateuch), the books traditionally ascribed to Moses. It takes its name from the Greek translation of 17:18, which misunderstands the Hebrew 'a copy of this law', and takes it as a 'second law'. The title in Hebrew is taken from the opening words of the book, 'these are the words', *i.e.* the words of Moses to the Israelites just before they entered the promised land. This is a better way of thinking of the book. It is not so much a 'second law' as a preaching, or reapplication, of certain laws given in the preceding books of the Pentateuch.

Background

In the story of the Pentateuch so far, a promise has been given which is now close to its fulfilment. God had promised Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation (Gn. 12:1–3). That nation would dwell in a rich land 'flowing with milk and honey' (Ex. 3:17). The nation grew in Egyptian slavery, until miraculously delivered by God (Ex. 14), who then met them at Mt Sinai and formally made a 'covenant' with them, which included various laws that they were to keep (Ex. 19 – 24). The next step was to march into the land, but they failed to do this straight away because they were overawed by the obstacles in the way. Because of their lack of faith, therefore, the Lord decided that not that generation, but rather the next, should enter the promised land. In the meantime, they were condemned to forty years of living unsettled in the wilderness of Sinai (Nu. 13 – 14; see especially Nu. 14:20–35).

At the beginning of Deuteronomy, Moses, who himself will not enter the land, addresses the new generation. He reminds them of all the events that have brought them to this point, and prepares them to be faithful to their covenant with the Lord when they cross the River Jordan and receive the 'inheritance' which he has given them.

Date and authorship

Because a large part of the book is made up of the words of Moses, he has traditionally been regarded as its author. It is clear, however, that someone else must have been responsible for the final form of the book, since Moses appears as 'he' (rather than 'I') at a number of places (*e.g.* 1:1), including the account of his death (Dt. 34). It is best to see the book as a faithful record of his words written down at some point after his death.

At what point, then, was it written down? Many scholars believe that Deuteronomy was written as much as six centuries after Moses, in the seventh century BC. This view is based on the account of the discovery (in 621 BC) of the so-called 'Book of the Law' in the temple at Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah, when he was conducting a religious reform following years of idolatrous worship (2 Ki. 22:8). (See 28:61 for the name 'the Book of the Law' applied to Deuteronomy; *cf.* 31:24.) When such a view of authorship is taken, it is usually not held that the book is a faithful record of Moses' teaching, but rather that it expresses the concerns of Josiah's period, and that the name of Moses is simply used to give authority to the words. Laws which presuppose a settled existence and an agricultural life-style (*e.g.* 24:19–22) are sometimes said to be evidence of composition only after entry to the land. And passages which anticipate the exile in Babylon (586–539 BC), such as 4:25–31, 28:64–68 and 30:1–10, have been thought to have been composed as late as the exile itself.

To some extent, decisions about dating depend on whether the biblical writers can be thought to have foreseen conditions and events in Israel's history. There are independent reasons, however, for thinking that Deuteronomy was actually written much closer in time to Moses' own day.

First, Deuteronomy shows no knowledge of the main institutions of Israel's political and religious life during the period of the kings, namely the kings themselves and the Jerusalem temple. The phrase 'the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling' (12:5; *cf.* 12:11, 14; 14:24) is often taken to be a disguised allusion to Jerusalem. This would accord with the idea that Deuteronomy was written in Josiah's time, because he did destroy all other places of worship other than Jerusalem. There is no good evidence, however, for identifying the 'place' exclusively with Jerusalem. The importance of Shechem in ch. 27, for example, speaks against it.

Deuteronomy is also unenthusiastic about the idea of a king (17:14–20), merely permitting such a thing, and trying to ensure that the king would not become a tyrant. This law is unlikely to have come from the time of Josiah.

Secondly, Deuteronomy knows only a single, united Israel, and shows no acquaintance with the division of the nation into two kingdoms following the reign of Solomon, around 930 BC (1 Ki. 12).

Thirdly, the book warns again and again about the dangers of Canaanite religion (*e.g.* chs. 7, 13). The temptation to stop worshipping the true God, and follow the gods of Canaan, was present as soon as Israel set foot on Canaanite soil. Deuteronomy's concern, therefore, is understandable at a very early period of the nation's history, though it certainly remained a factor at all times between entering the land and the exile.

Fourthly, certain laws make best sense in relation to imminent (or recent) occupation of the land. One such is 12:15–25, which permits the 'secular' eating of meat. The law is in contrast to Lv. 17, which insists that all slaughter of meat must be sacrificial, and carried out at the Tent of Meeting (the place of sacrifice and worship until Solomon built the temple). Deuteronomy permits non-sacrificial slaughter simply because, after settling in the land, the distance to the place of worship was too great for many people to slaughter meat sacrificially simply in order to eat it.

Fifthly, Deuteronomy shares the concerns of the prophets, namely, the need for heartfelt religion, and a love of justice and the rights of the poor (14:28–29). Yet it is different from the prophetic books in the sense that it does not address particular occasions and individuals. It has much more the appearance of a programme for the future. It is likely, in fact, that the prophets take their cue from Deuteronomy, as well as from other parts of the Pentateuch. Amos, for example, may have Deuteronomy in mind when he shows how God has given different peoples their respective lands (Am. 9:7; see Dt. 2:19–23), or when through him God urges Israel: 'Seek me and live' (Am. 5:4; see Dt. 4:1; 4:29; 30:19; 32:46–47).

Finally, it has been shown that Deuteronomy formally resembles certain political treaties made by Hittite kings with weaker states, as well as certain ancient law-codes, such as that of the famous Babylonian king and lawgiver, Hammurabi. The treaty analogies are more important because Deuteronomy shares with them the elements of relationship and loyalty.

The parts of the Hittite treaty are as follows: (i) a preamble, announcing the treaty and those who are party to it; (ii) a historical prologue, remembering the previous relations between the parties; (iii) general stipulations, setting out the nature of the future relationship between the parties; (iv) specific stipulations, the detailed requirements made of the weaker party; (v) witnesses (gods were called to witness the treaty); (vi) blessings and curses: these are pronounced for loyalty and disloyalty respectively.

Deuteronomy has a similar, though not identical, pattern, namely: (i) preamble (1:1–5); (ii) historical prologue (1:6 – 4:49); (iii) general stipulations (chs. 5–11); (iv) specific stipulations (chs. 12–26); (v) blessings and curses (chs. 27–28); (vi) witnesses. Ch. 32 fulfils the latter function. 32:1 calls heaven and earth to witness the words to Israel, a necessary variation from the treaties because of Israel's monotheism.

The match between Deuteronomy and the treaties is not perfect. For example, Deuteronomy's curses section is unusually long. And if ch. 32 is the witnesses section the order is unusual. Furthermore, scholars vary on the precise way in which the parts of the treaty should be described, and therefore on how Deuteronomy fits it. Most importantly, Deuteronomy is not a political treaty, but a document of the covenant between the Lord and his people. The treaty form is a kind of figure of speech, showing that the Lord is Israel's 'king' (see 33:5).

For dating purposes, the important point is that these treaties date from the second millennium BC. Scholars differ, it should be said, on whether these second-millennium treaties are sufficiently different from other treaties of the first millennium to be evidence of a second-millennium date for Deuteronomy. The case is not finally proven. Yet the similarities between Deuteronomy and the Hittite treaties are striking, and remain an important supporting argument for a date in the late second millennium.

In conclusion, the data cannot prove conclusively any of the dates canvassed for Deuteronomy. But the evidence is consistent with its composition in the period following Moses' death. This may have been quite soon after, or within a few generations.

Theology

The theology of Deuteronomy has begun to become clear even as we have spoken of its background and date. It is helpful to bear in mind that it is always proclaiming the truth about God in contrast to what other peoples believe. Deuteronomy is a book for a people that has been brought out of Egypt, because God wanted a people that would be different (or 'holy'; 7:6), different from the Canaanites in the land they were going to (12:31), as well as different from the Egyptians (29:16–17). It is a

book of instruction, and meant to be preserved for this purpose. As such, it has a characteristic style, whose main feature is the repetition of certain key terms and phrases. Deuteronomy, like sermons, sounds sermonic! The point is that Israel should always remember that it is different from other peoples, and why.

This is why Deuteronomy speaks about 'election', God's choice of Israel (7:6–7; 14:2). When God called Abraham he clearly intended that the people who would be descended from him would bring benefit to all the nations (Gn. 12:3). The choice of Israel, therefore, does not mean that God does not love other peoples too. Deuteronomy, however, does not have much to say about the salvation of other peoples. It is concerned with what must come first; God's people must know him, and become faithful covenant partners.

The 'covenant' is the relationship between God and his chosen people. The idea had been present since God promised Noah that he would make a covenant with him, and that no such flood would ever happen again (Gn. 6:18; 9:9–17). The idea was developed with Abraham (Gn. 15:18; 17:2) and at Sinai, where it is shown that the covenant must be 'kept' (Ex. 19:5) and the Ten Commandments are given (Ex. 20:1–17). Deuteronomy spells out at length the two sides of covenant which we see in these other 'books of Moses', namely God's promise and the need for Israel to be obedient to his commands. On the one hand, it refers frequently to the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (the 'fathers'; *e.g.* 1:8); on the other, it actually repeats the Ten Commandments (5:6–21) as a kind of introduction to the other laws which follow.

In the revelation of God's covenant Deuteronomy's basic ideas about God are spelt out. First, God is 'one' (6:4). Israel is not to worship other gods, or even to worship the Lord *alongside* other gods (5:7). These were real moral dangers. There were good reasons, however, for Israel to understand with their whole heart (6:5) that the Lord was 'one'. The first is, obviously, because it was true. But in addition, it meant that no other god had a claim on the people. There was no rivalry between gods for their service. There is great freedom in knowing this, a freedom in the service of one all-powerful God.

Secondly, God may be known. He spoke to his people when he met them on Mt Sinai (always called Horeb in Deuteronomy), and he spoke in words, so that he might be understood. Deuteronomy lays great stress upon the *word* by which God makes himself known. In the covenant, it is possible to have a relationship with the living God, and be confident that what he says may be trusted.

Thirdly, God is spiritual. No images may be made of him, because he cannot be reduced to a material part of his own creation, and thus controlled by the worshipper (5:8–10). Nor does he live, in any simple way, at the place where he is worshipped; rather his 'Name' lives there (12:5; and see 1 Ki. 8:27–30 for the same idea).

Fourthly, he controls both history and nature. The gods of Canaan were understood primarily as nature gods, and the Israelites would often be tempted to think that it was they who had the real power in this area. Deuteronomy shows that the Lord has not only brought them out of Egypt, but that he also controls fertility and the seasons (7:13), and indeed that these things are not separable (16:9–12).

Fifthly, there is the possibility of an ordered and happy life before God. Deuteronomy insists that there is a balance in the order of things between 'righteousness' (loyalty to the standards of the relationship with God) and 'good', or prosperity (6:24–25). This is elaborated most obviously in the 'curses and blessings' of ch. 28. The reader of the book naturally asks whether this is not too mechanistic an understanding of morality. However, Deuteronomy is more subtle in this respect than appears at first glance, as we shall see.

Deuteronomy is firmly a book of God's grace. It stresses that Israel owes its whole being to him, for he has brought them out of Egypt, and will lead them into a land in which they will be richly blessed (*e.g.* 8:7–10). Even his commandments are part of his grace, for in keeping them Israel will experience true freedom. The laws of Deuteronomy are designed to enable every Israelite to enjoy fully the gifts of the land, and to protect each from possible exploitation at the hands of others. Israelites are 'brothers and sisters' in the community of God's making. Everyone, from the king (should they decide to have one; 17:14–20) to the 'slave' (15:12), is a 'brother' in Israel. This was a profoundly different idea of society from others in its day, in which most people were no better than serfs. Deuteronomy, therefore, has a vision of a harmonious society, in which people's knowledge of God enables them to live together in the best possible way.

The vision, however, cannot be realized without the faithfulness of the people. Will they have the spiritual liveliness and moral stamina to keep the covenant? The good of all requires, in the short term, what always appear to be sacrifices, the giving up of one's 'rights'. Deuteronomy knows very well the frailty of human beings. The frailty of this chosen people has already become evident in its story so far (1:26–46). Indeed, it is a 'stiff-necked' people that is to receive the gift of the land (9:4–6).

From its beginning, therefore, Deuteronomy asks whether this (or any) people can keep covenant with God. The question receives its answer only at the end of the book (ch. 30), in a passage which reckons that the 'curses' are likely to fall before a final salvation can occur.

The theology of Deuteronomy has relevance to modern Christians, but it must be read carefully, and in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ. Christians see themselves as the chosen people of God (1 Pet. 2:9), though in a quite different way from ancient Israel. They are not a political nation, living among other nations, nor do they need a land of their own, criminal laws, or their own leaders for times of peace and war. No more do they look for a single place of worship on earth in which God is more present than in other places. The period in God's dealings with human beings in the world when these things were important is past. Since Jesus came, God's people is international, living under different political systems, and actively seeking to extend God's kingdom in all the world. And, of course, it is no longer making sacrifices to atone for sin.

Yet the main lines of the theology of Deuteronomy remain relevant. The book teaches about the grace of God in making us his own, as well as about the need for us to respond to him in a wholehearted way, in love and obedience. For us too God has been made known, though now in Christ, who is himself the 'Place' where we meet him. Our covenant is a new covenant in Christ, in which, though as morally weak as ever Israel was, we are enabled to remain faithful. And the blessings of God are no longer thought of in terms of material prosperity, but apply both to this age and the age to come.

Deuteronomy, indeed, is no excuse for so-called 'prosperity-theology', though a careless reading might make it seem so. It does show a delight in the good things of the world, and a clear understanding of the need for human beings to enjoy the basic necessities of life. These things are as important for us and our world as they ever were. But Deuteronomy rules out any religion which disguises an attempt to become rich. It does so because it demands a love of God from the heart, and indeed a love of one's neighbour. This is the opposite of selfish calculation. That, in fact, is idolatry, which is for Deuteronomy the primary sin.

Further reading

R. Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy*, BST (IVP, 1993).

J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, TOTC (IVP, 1974).

P. C. Craigie, *Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1976).

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1:1 – 4:43 Moses' first address

1:1–5 Introduction to the book

The scene is set for the book in its opening words. In fact, the book's title in the Hebrew OT is *These are the words.* This is appropriate because Deuteronomy consists largely of words spoken by Moses on the east of the River Jordan, just before the people of Israel entered the land God was giving them. The opening phrase also prepares us for the subject-matter of Deuteronomy, namely the expounding of the *law* (5). The *law* refers to the Ten Commandments and other laws given by God at Mt Sinai (Ex. 20 – 23), always called *Horeb* in Deuteronomy (2). The term 'word' usually implies *God's* word in Deuteronomy. Moses preaches to Israel only what God has first told him to (3). This is what makes him a 'prophet', a title which he is later given (18:18).

The introduction also prepares for God's command to take the promised land by waging war. The words *after he had defeated Sihon* (4) stress that it is the Lord who has won Israel's previous battles. (For the victories recalled here, see Nu. 21 – 30, 33 – 35, and below, 2:26 – 3:22). The idea that God himself fights wars for his people (holy wars) is important in Deuteronomy (see the notes on ch. 7). As in the past, it is he who will win the battles that lie ahead, against the inhabitants of the land of Canaan.

Note. The place names indicate the route from *Horeb* to *Moab* The *Arabah* includes the Jordan valley, the Dead Sea and the area further south. *East of the Jordan* is a way of referring to this area, and is probably not evidence that Deuteronomy was written on the *west* of the Jordan (*i.e.* after the occupation of the land).

1:6 – 3:29 A retrospect and prologue

1:6–8 The command to enter the land. The story of the stay at *Horeb* spans Ex. 19 to Nu. 10:13. God now commands the people to go to their land. It is a great moment in their history, a fulfilment of the promise to the *fathers* (8). The description of the land recalls Gn. 15:18–21. It sweeps from west to east (the central mountain range, the foothills to the west, and the coastal plain) and from south to north (from the Negev up the coastal plain to Lebanon in the north, and even beyond, to the Euphrates). The area was not taken all at once, but finally conquered by David and held by Solomon.

1:9–18 The appointment of leaders. The increase in the people's size (10) fulfilled the promise made to Abraham (Gn. 15:5). It meant, however, that some system was needed for leadership and organization. Moses needed help (9; see also Ex. 18:17–27). The passage says more than this, however. The people of Israel were to be governed by the laws of God. The system, therefore, had to be one which allowed that government to work. The decentralization of authority (15) meant that God's law could be applied fairly to all in cases of dispute, whether between Israelites or between them and others (16–17).

The leaders were appointed to *judge.* They did not do so relying on their own wisdom alone, but rather, as instruments of God, they interpreted his laws. That is the nature of *judgment* here (17). God's judgment ensures that his standards are met for the benefit of every member of the people. All are equally entitled to justice.

In this idea of rule by God's law, which protects every individual equally, Israel is very different from the neighbouring peoples.

1:19–25 Sending spies. Having left Horeb, the people very quickly reached the borders of the land (19–20). The command to enter was then repeated (21). It is important to notice that God had already given the land. Its possession was certain – yet it still had to be taken. In a curious way, the promise is also a command. They must have the faith and courage to believe that God means what he says, and can do it. The command not to fear or be discouraged (21) was based on what the people already knew about God, for he had brought them, against all the odds, out of Egypt. The people had reason to trust him. If, however, they lack the faith and courage to do so, they could fail to receive what is rightfully theirs.

The decision to send the spies was a sign of nervousness, though Moses agreed to the plan (23). If the Israelites had believed in God's good intentions for them they would not have needed spies to confirm that '*It is a good land*' (25).

1:26–33 The people's fear. The spies saw a good land, but they also saw the people who lived there, who seemed to them like giants (28). Their reaction was fear and discouragement, the very things which Moses had warned them against (21), as he now did again (29). This fear was rooted in lack of faith. They felt, as they had done before, that God had never meant them any good, but that all their journeying up to now had been for the purpose of harming them (27; see also Ex. 17:1–3). In answer, Moses not only reminded them again that God had shown himself to be powerful (30), but also that he loves them (31).

The people, however, had chosen to walk by sight, first by sending the spies, then by letting themselves be discouraged by their report. Oddly, this made them blind to the obvious,

that God can overcome any obstacle. Moses was at pains to show how unreasonable this was (32–33).

1:34–40 God's sentence. In 1:8 we read that God had 'sworn' to give Israel the land. Here he swore again (34–35) that *this evil generation* would not see the promise fulfilled. An exception was made for Caleb (36), one of the spies (see Nu. 13:6), because he had a spirit of faith, not fear (Nu. 14:24).

While Caleb and Moses' successor Joshua (38; see Nu. 14:30), alone of their generation, would see the land, Moses himself would not (37). In Numbers, this sentence on Moses is explained by his failure to lead Israel rightly at the 'waters of Meribah' (Nu. 20:2–5, 12; 27:14). That incident may be in mind here, or possibly just Moses' part in the sending of the spies (23).

The fulfilment of the promise was held over for the next generation, those who were still children. These, being too young to make responsible choices (they *do not yet know good from bad*, 39), did not share the blame for the faint-heartedness of their parents. The command in v 40, however, sent the people away from the brink of their great prize to their long desert wandering.

1:41–46 Remorse too late. The people's decision (41) seemed to put right their sin of unbelief, but the time of opportunity was past. Despite their right-sounding words, they now trusted their own strength to go and take the land, thinking it *easy* (41). For this reason, the Lord resolved that they should not enter, and forbade them to go (42). It is very ironic that when they were told to go they would not, and when they did decide to try, that too was against God's command. They went, and were heavily defeated (44). And so they found that, in truth, they could not possess the land unless God gave it. When he turned a *deaf ear* to their weeping (45), it was because they first turned a deaf ear to him. The NT too teaches that salvation is the gift of God, and may not be forced from him (Acts 8:9–24).

The next two chapters tell how the Israelites set out from Kadesh (in the desert region to the south of the land of Canaan) and occupied the part of the promised land that lay east of the River Jordan. This passage recalls the story in Nu. 20:14 – 21:35, though it is less detailed. It will be clearer if read with the help of a Bible atlas.

2:1–8a Around Edom. At God's command (1), the people first moved south and east, towards Seir, the mountainous land which lay south of the Dead Sea. This must have seemed a move in the wrong direction, until the further command came to go north *through* this land, towards Canaan at last (4). The land belonged to the *descendants of Esau* whom Moses called *your brothers* (4), because Esau was the brother of Israel's own ancestor Jacob (Gn. 25:25–26). The land of Esau is elsewhere known as Edom (see Gn. 25:30).

As Jacob and Esau had quarrelled (Gn. 27:41–45), so their descendants would be enemies also (see Am. 1:11; Obadiah). In Nu. 20:18–20 we read that enmity was shown even at this meeting of Israel and Edom. However, Deuteronomy wants to stress here that God had given Edom its land, just as he was giving Canaan to Israel (see also 32:8–9; Am. 9:7). It does not tell us, therefore, that in fact the Israelites could not go through Edom, but had to go round it (Nu. 21:4). The Arabah (8) is the extension of the Jordan valley south of the Dead Sea, and, though dry, was a natural western boundary for Edom. Israel probably moved east from here. They were assured, however, that God would provide for them in this further desert journey (7).

2:8b–15 Around Moab. On their journey north, the people next came to the land of Moab, lying east of the southern half of the Dead Sea. Moab too had received its land from the Lord, and, therefore, Israel were forbidden to conquer it. It too was related to Israel, through Abraham's son-in-law Lot (Gn. 19:36–38). It too resisted Israel (Nu. 22 – 24; and see Dt. 23:3), though we are again told nothing of this here. The *Zered Valley* was the southern border of Moab; Israel somehow got from here to its northern border, with the Ammonites.

A kind of footnote (10–12) shows how both Moab and Edom had possessed their lands despite great obstacles. So too, God's power will enable his people to overcome such obstacles in their lives.

The death of those who had been adults when the people came out of Egypt (14–15) signals a new stage in the story. They were the ones who had wanted to enter the land in their own strength, and had been defeated (1:44). Now, in contrast, God would have victory. (For the time in the wilderness, *cf.* Nu. 14:34 – forty years. Probably, Deuteronomy allows two years for the journey to Sinai and the time spent there).

2:16–25 The 'Holy War' begins. The note on the Ammonites (19–23) is as if in brackets. Ammon too was related to Israel (Gn. 19:36–38). Its land lay to the north-east of Moab. Again Israel must respect it.

The River Arnon (the northern border of Moab) marks the beginning of the land which Israel might now call its own. The area to the north of Moab, still bordering the Dead Sea,

was held by Sihon the Amorite, king of one of the Canaanite peoples whom the Lord had promised to drive out before Israel (see 7:1). The command in v 24 contrasts with those in vs. 5, 9, 19. And notice that it was the Lord who would cause the peoples to fear Israel (25).

2:26–37 The defeat of Sihon. Israel's offer of peace to Sihon (26–29) shows that he brought his fate on himself by his own attitude. Deuteronomy's telling of the story makes a contrast between Edom, Moab and Ammon on the one hand and Sihon on the other, to emphasize Sihon's guilt. When we read that the Lord *had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate* (30) we are reminded of Pharaoh (Ex. 8:15, 32). The phrase does not mean that Sihon (or Pharaoh) really had no choice. Rather, it is a way of saying that they really did oppose God in his plans for his people.

The Israelites now had another chance to obey God and take the land he had given, but they must believe and go (31; see 1.8). This time they were successful. The important difference from their previous failure against the Amorites (1:44) was that they went at God's command and in his time.

The holy war idea lies behind Deuteronomy's understanding of God's gift of the land to Israel (see also 7:1–5 and *cf.* Jos. 6 – 8). In the holy war, the Lord sometimes *completely destroyed* whole peoples, or put them under a 'ban' (34). This idea is very strange, and seems savage to the modern reader. Two things may be said about it at this point. First, if nations must fight wars, then God wants Israel to know that *he* will control that part of their life, just like every other part. (The idea of holy war, incidentally, makes sense only wher God's people is an independent nation, which takes its place among others on the world stage. While Israel was exactly this at the time of Deuteronomy, Christians believe that God's people the church is a quite different thing, and therefore that the idea of a holy war has no place in the modern world).

Secondly, God is lord of all the earth and, as we have seen, it is he who gives lands to whom he chooses. His choices are not meaningless, however. For God is also judge of all the earth, and Deuteronomy insists that the nations which were driven out were actually guilty. Having said these things, the severity of the judgment on the nations is still hard to understand. We shall consider it further below (ch. 7).

The victory over Sihon has shown that nothing need stand between Israel and the land which God had promised to her. A victory over *Amorites* was important because it was Amorites who defeated the Israelites when they had first tried to take the land (1:44). Now that no city had proved to be (lit.) 'too high' to take (36), the people's earlier faithless reaction to the spies' report is shown up for the folly it was (1:28).

3:1–11 The defeat of Og. The Israelites continued northwards and were met in battle by another Amorite king, Og of Bashan. Once again, victory was quick and complete (3–4, 6). The main message is by now familiar, the Lord had already given victory, but the people must go and act on his word (2).

The region of Bashan (of which Argob, v 4, must have formed part) lay in the northern part of Transjordan east of the Sea of Galilee ('Kinnereth', v 17). Edrei was some distance east, on the River Yarmuk. Following the defeat of Sihon, Israel also held Gilead, to the south of Bashan. Both regions were fertile (see Am. 4:1, where Bashan is a byword for wealth) and strategic (Israel was now safe from attack from behind as she turned towards the land west of the Jordan). The total area now held by Israel was very large, stretching from the River Arnon, which flowed into the Dead Sea, all the way to Mt Hermon on the borders of Syria (8).

The note on Og's bedstead (11) is a hint of his local fame. It says something too about the technical skills being developed in his kingdom. That the bed should finish up in a museum in Ammon, however, shows nicely that Og and his greatness were a thing of the past.

3:12–17 Occupying the land. The main task of dividing the land was to fall to Joshua after the main conquest (Jos. 12 – 22; Jos. 12:1–6 gives again, in brief, the details of the present passage). It began here, however. Reuben and Gad are tribes corresponding to two of the sons of Jacob (Gn. 29:32; 30:11). The large tribe of Joseph had sub-divided into two groups, named after Joseph's two sons Manasseh and Ephraim (see Gn. 48:8–16). Manasseh would divide again, as far as territory was concerned, part taking land here in Transjordan, and part on the west of the Jordan (Jos. 17:7–18).

As the settlement in the land became a reality, parts of the regions allocated began to be associated with particular family groupings (14–15), because of their role in the conquest (see Nu. 32:39–42). In time, Makir came to stand for Manasseh (Jdg. 5:14)

Note. The boundary lines can be appreciated only with help of a Bible atlas. The *Arabah* here (17) refers to the Jordan valley (*cf.* the note on 2:8). *Kinnereth* is the Sea of Galilee, and the *Sea of the Arabah*, or *the Salt Sea*, is the Dead Sea.

3:18–22 Continuing the conquest. Moses now spoke to the tribes which had just received their territories (18–20). He warned them that their task would not be finished until they had played their full part in the conquest of

the whole land. In God's people, no part is to look only to its own interests; this is the true meaning of being *brothers* (18). The aim of the conquest was *rest* for the whole people (20; see also 12:9). This means living at peace in a land which fulfils all their needs. The women and children of the Transjordanian tribes were allowed to settle now in their towns; the warriors of all Israel, however, could not do so until the same blessing had been won for all. History would show that they would not always be faithful to this responsibility (Jdg. 5:15b–17a).

Moses' words to Joshua (21–22) also spoke of the need to go on with the task. As the Lord had been faithful up to then, so would he be in the tasks ahead, even if they seemed more difficult.

3:23–29 Moses and Joshua. On the brink of the land which had been his life-goal, Moses boldly expressed to God his longing to set foot on it, in spite of what God had already said to him about this (1:37). For the most part in Deuteronomy, our attention is not drawn to Moses, even though he is always present. This is a mark of his devotion to God's service – he may well have called himself God's *servant* (24). Here we have a glimpse of the man himself.

His prayer shows how close was his relationship with God, even though he asked something which was refused. It expressed worship; Moses was convinced that God could act in a way that no other god would (24), having seen the evidence, both in the exodus and now again in Transjordan. (He did not necessarily mean here that other gods actually existed; his question is rhetorical.) The answer was as before (26); Moses was involved in the guilt of the unfaithful generation of the wilderness (see above on 1:37). He must be content with seeing the land from Mt Pisgah, a high range near the northern end of the Dead Sea (27). The peak that Moses climbed is more precisely identified as Mt Nebo in 34:1.

In God's wisdom, the new phase of Israel's history needed a new leader. Moses' commissioning of Joshua is an important theme of Deuteronomy, and vital for the people's confidence. We see here at what great personal cost Moses did this. His laying down of his own deepest desire is the best measure of his faithfulness.

4:1–40 Preaching God's laws

Since the beginning of the book, we have been waiting for the actual requirements made of Israel in their covenant relationship with God (1:1, 3, 18). Up to now, there has been only the basic command to have enough faith to enter the land (2:31; 3:2, 22). This new section (4:1–40), though it is still within Moses' first address, a kind of prologue to the book, begins to show what was to be expected of Israel in the covenant.

4:1–8 'Decrees and laws'. Deuteronomy typically uses a number of different words for 'law'. Three appear in vs 1–2 (*decrees, laws* and *commands*) – not counting 'word' (translated *what I command you*), which can have the same meaning. V 1 states that keeping the commandments will lead to life, an important idea in the book (see 30:19–20).

This idea may surprise the reader who is used to the NT's teaching that salvation does not come by works of the law, but by faith (Rom. 9:31–32). Paul even seems to oppose the present verse, with Lv. 18:5, in Rom. 10:5 (to understand the Romans passage see the commentary on Romans, and below on Dt. 30:11–14). However, we should bear in mind that Deuteronomy seeks obedience from the heart (6:5; 10:16). This is different from dry legalism.

Moses went on to show that faithfulness to God had already brought life, and wickedness, death, in Israel's experience (3–4). Properly understood, keeping God's laws brings freedom and delight (see Ps. 119:45, 47). This was Israel's true destiny in the land. Other nations had their *wisdom*, but would envy that of Israel, whose very laws were wisdom (6). Israel's laws were unlike any others, just as her God was unlike any other (see 3:24). Their righteousness (8) implies that they bring salvation. Law and life are intimately related.

4:9–14 Keeping the faith. The key ideas here are 'learning' and 'teaching' (10–14). It is one thing to meet God once and hear his word; it is another to remain faithful. The people would always be in danger of 'forgetting' God's ways (9), for forgetting belongs to the heart as well as the mind. Therefore, they must discipline themselves and their children by diligence in learning and teaching the words of God (10, 12–14). In this context mention is made of the stone tablets (13) on which the Ten Commandments were written; the point of their writing down was as a witness to God's revelation, so that the people might always remember the requirements of their covenant relationship with him.

4:15–24 Worshipping God alone. The single most important thing that set Israel's religion apart from those of other nations was that it allowed no image to be made of God (see v 12 and 5:8–9). Images of any creature, or even the stars in the sky, might be mistaken for the form of God, or a god (16–19). God is not to be confused with any part of his own creation; by these commands he carefully guards his own spiritual nature. If he calls himself *jealous* in doing so (23–24), it is because he fervently desires

that his people should know him truly, and thus live (22b – for the contrast with Moses, see 1:37; 3:25–26).

4:25–31 The exile foreseen. In Israel's later history they would fail to keep the covenant at this basic level of true worship, and thus go into exile (25–27, see also 2 Ki. 17:9–12; 21:11–12; Je. 8:2). This will be like putting the promises into reverse (26–27; see also 28:64–68). And ironically, they will have in exile their fill of idols, find them powerless (28; see also Is. 44:9–20), and soon seek God again (29–30). It is very revealing for Deuteronomy's understanding of God that a breach of the covenant should not draw a line under his relationship with Israel once and for all. God, in his mercy, will receive his people again, if they seek him in heartfelt penitence (30–31; see also 30:1–10).

4:32–40 God's love for Israel. Moses finished his first address by summing up its main themes. There is no god like the God who had made himself known to Israel, nor any people like Israel, since they had been singled out by this God (see 3:24; 4:7). He saved them miraculously from slavery in Egypt, in order to give them life and freedom in a land in which he alone would be their king. In doing so he showed both his love (37) and his discipline (36). These cannot be separated; and when Israel carefully obeys God's word of love, she will have life (40).

4:41–43 Cities of refuge

When the land was occupied it was regarded as urgent to protect the lives of those who were unjustly pursued in blood-vengeance. Here cities were provided for the tribes which had been given land in Transjordan. (See also Nu. 35; Jos. 21, following the allocation of the whole land.)

4:44 – 28:68 Moses' second address

4:44–49 Introduction to the laws

The words *This is the law* (44) refer to all the laws that follow in chs. 5 – 26. The typical terms for the laws follow (45, see also v 1 and comment). One new term *stipulations* (the Hebrew word carries the idea of witness) is added. The different words do not refer to different kinds of law. Rather, they build up a picture of the nature of the laws, bringing together ideas of witness to God's character, permanent statute and basis for right judgment.

The laws were not new ones, but the same which were given at Horeb after the exodus (45). They were now given anew, in the context of Moses' preaching in Moab (46). The geographical details (46–49) are condensed from 3:8–17.

5:1–21 The Ten Commandments

Moses' second address proper now begins, with a basic call to pay heed to the law (1). He stressed the need for the covenant to become real here and now, and exaggerated to make the point (2–3). The covenant had indeed been made with the previous generation, the one which had been sentenced to wander in the desert and not see the land (1:35). However, it was vital that it should be treated as a new thing in each generation. The word *today* (1) sums up the need for this new commitment. It was as if this generation itself stood at Horeb (4).

The words *face to face* seem odd after 4:12, 15. They do not contradict those verses, however, but point to the directness of God's speaking with them. Even so, Moses had to stand between God and the people as a kind of mediator, because of their fear (5), and because of his own special relationship with God (see Ex. 33:11).

The Ten Commandments, or Decalogue, are first met at Ex. 20:2–17. (For a full exposition of them see the commentary at that place.) They now reappear in this prominent position in Deuteronomy, because they are no less than the basis of the covenant relationship. They also stand at the head of all the commands in Deuteronomy, because they are their source. Everything else follows from them.

We notice here two slight differences from the form of the Decalogue in Exodus, which help to understand Deuteronomy's special concerns. In the fourth commandment, it is stressed that the Sabbath *rest* was for the benefit of the servants of the household as well as of the masters (14; *cf.* Ex. 20:10). This merely draws out the significance of the command, and is in keeping with Deuteronomy's insistence on the equal right of all in Israel to enjoy the blessings of the covenant. The Sabbath, furthermore, was grounded in the release from Egypt rather than in the creation, again laying stress on God's special relationship with his people (15, *cf.* Ex. 20:11).

5:22 – 11:32 Basic exhortations

5:22–33 The commandments accepted. The Ten Commandments were spoken directly to the people from the fire and the cloud that covered the mountain (Ex. 19:16–18). God would give other commands to the people through Moses, but these were special, and there could be nothing else quite like them (22). For the two stone tablets, see 4:13 and comment.

Many in ancient Israel thought that to see God was to die (see Jdg. 13:22; Is. 6:5). This is why the people were amazed to be still alive

(24), but they were still fearful at being so close to God's presence (25–26). Curiously, they feared that, hearing God, they would die, yet it is only the words of God that can give them life (4:1)! However, they were willing to hear God, if only Moses would act as a go-between (27). (See also their acceptance of the terms of the covenant in Ex. 24:3.)

The Lord rejoiced in their willingness (28–29). His words here show that he is not some distant lawgiver, but loves his people passionately; his deepest desire is their good. Moses was confirmed in his role as go-between, or mediator (30–31). Faithfulness to the covenant would bring life and well-being, and the nation would have peace for a long time.

6:1–9 Passing on the teaching. Moses then moved on to the teaching which the Lord had given him for Israel in addition to the Ten Commandments, or as further explanation of them. In introducing this teaching he reminds the people again that these commandments are the way to life, reaching into the far future (2c). This long view raised once more the need for the teaching to be passed on – hence the phrase *you, your children and their children after you* (2). The vision of Israel in the land (3) is one of large numbers (fulfilling the promise to Abraham, Gn. 15:5), and of plenty (fulfilling a promise made to Moses at his call, Ex. 3:17).

The next passage has become a central prayer in Judaism (called the *Shema, Hear,* after its opening word), because it expresses in so few words the most important ideas in OT religion. First, the Lord alone is God of Israel.

To all intents and purposes he is the only God, since his power extends to all nations (32:8–9). Israel must worship him alone. Secondly, Israel itself is a unity. In Hebrew the words *you* and *your* in this passage (as often in Deuteronomy) are the words used when speaking to a single individual (the old 'thou' and 'thy' forms in English). The people's oneness includes both those who then stood before Moses and all the generations to come. This means that they must worship and obey as one, and allow no major divisions among them (see below on slavery, 15:12–18). It is also the reason why they must educate each new generation in the truth about God and themselves (7).

Thirdly, it is not enough for God's people simply to go through certain motions in their life and worship. Rather, they must truly love God, and devote their whole lives to him (5). The phrase *with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength* is a way of saying the whole person. The biblical idea of the *heart* covers our ideas of the will and the mind, so when Jesus recalled this passage in slightly different words he is still giving its essential meaning (Mt. 22:37; Mk. 12:30). True godliness means that all our abilities, as well as all we possess, are given to God.

The words of God are to be ever before his people (6–9), part of the routines of life, and of every normal human activity. This is not a religion for the Sabbath (or Sundays) only. God has something to say about every aspect of life and every decision that human beings can make. That is the point of the many kinds of regulations which we meet from ch. 12 onwards; together they express God's rule over the whole life of the people, individually and together – even though we live in a different time and place, we are obliged to work at making them apply to ourselves. Whether the instructions in vs 8–9 were meant to be taken literally or figuratively is hard to tell; the crucial point is that God's words should be *upon your hearts* (6). Those who love God will want to keep his commandments (Jn. 14:15).

6:10–19 Life in the land. Moses did not tire of reminding the people that the land they were about to enjoy was God's gift, promised ages ago to the forefathers of Israel (10; *cf.* 1:8). Then he paused to show how good this land would be (10–11), full of all the things a desert people longs for. It was not only naturally fruitful (Ex. 3:8), but had been tended and developed by its inhabitants. Moses wanted to stress the fact that the land with its wealth was indeed a gift to Israel. Their well-being must be a cause for gratitude, not self-satisfaction (12). Material prosperity, as modern western society shows, can always lead to spiritual indifference.

In Deuteronomy, the basic promise always keeps close company with the basic command. The gift brings a choice, which is now put in terms very like the first three commandments (13–15; *cf.* 5:7–11). When God gives the land, then he alone must be worshipped in it; it will be his people in his land. The swearing of oaths in his name (rather than in the names of other gods) is a way of expressing his unique right to their loyalty. His 'jealousy' (see 5:9) is his determination not to permit rivals, which is matched, of course, by total commitment on his part to the relationship with his people.

The basic command restated, Moses referred again (16–19) to the need for obedience to the range of commands anticipated in the Decalogue (5:6–21) and still to be fully set out. These are here put beside the command to take the land (a major theme in chs. 1–3). The people's commitment to a life of *right and good* was the other side of God's desire to let them enjoy the *good land* (18). The words in v 16, however, were a necessary reminder that Israel's record had not always been one of willing obedience – even when the Lord was in the act of

doing them good (see Ex. 17:7; Ps. 95:8).

Jesus used the words of vs 13 and 16 in Mt. 4:7, 10 (Lk. 4:8, 12) in response to Satan's attempt to get him to use religious power rather than give God true worship. Jesus saw his own experience of forty days in the wilderness as re-enacting Israel's testing there for forty years. Likewise, his followers should learn from times of difficulty to rely more fully on God.

6:20–25 Teaching the children. Moses then expanded the command to teach children the facts of the faith (20–25; see v 7). The child's question and parent's response remind us of the pattern for the Passover celebration (Ex. 12:26–28). When the child asks about *stipulations, decrees and laws* (20) it is interesting that the parent answers by telling how God miraculously rescued the people from Egypt, in fulfilment of the ancient promise (21–23). The commands, then, come after the promise, and are part of God's intention to bless his people (24b). *Righteousness* here has the sense of a true relationship between God and his people, and includes not only their keeping his standards, but also his commitment to save and keep them.

7:1–26 A holy people. Moses' address then focused on the need for Israel to take the land from its present inhabitants. In choosing Israel and giving her the land of Canaan, God also rejected the current dwellers in the land and put an end to their right to live there. This has always been implied by the promise (Ex. 3:17; 23:23).

The list of nations shows that the occupants of the land were not a single people, but distinct groups living in various parts of the land, and probably holding a number of fortified cities. Little is known of the Perizzites, Hivites or Girgashites (though see Jos. 11:3; Jdg. 3:3 for some locations). *Amorites* and *Canaanites* can have broader and narrower meanings, referring on the one hand to the peoples of Canaan in general (as in Gn. 15 16), but on the other to particular groups (see Jos. 5:1; 11:3). The Hittites, who controlled an empire in Anatolia and Syria in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BC, were apparently a migrant population (see Gn. 23). Jebusites controlled Jerusalem (see Jos. 15:63).

Part of the reason for the command to destroy the Canaanites was that they were themselves under God's judgment for their sin. The beginning of their story in the Bible goes back to their ancestor Ham, the son of Noah (Gn. 10:6, 15–18). Canaan, Ham's son, was laid under a curse because of Ham's lack of filial respect for his father (Gn. 9:20–25). When the land of Canaan was promised to Abraham's descendants, it was not given straight away because 'the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure' (Gn. 15:16). According to Deuteronomy, these peoples' wickedness was evidently very great, and therefore it was time for judgment (9:5).

The command to destroy these peoples was absolute. We have noted already that it was based on the ideas of God as lord and as judge in Israel's life and in all the world (see 2:34 and notes there). The present passage (1–6) explains the command further. Israel, God's people, was to keep itself free from the wickedness and corruption of the nations' religion and life. God's vision is for a people that knows him, and which becomes a certain kind of society because of that knowledge. That Israel should live alongside these peoples, yet be faithful to the covenant, was regarded as difficult or impossible. Inevitably (partly through intermarriage, v 3), the covenant people would cease to be distinctive; the worship of the Lord would be overwhelmed by that of Baal (4). If this happened, the whole purpose of rescuing Israel from Egypt to be a different kind of people would be frustrated. The removal of the Canaanites aimed above all to root out the false religion which they practised (5).

The destruction of the Canaanites, therefore, is part of a war between true and false religion (see also Eph. 6:12). Like the judgment on the world in the flood, it is only meant to happen once (Gn. 9:15b), and to show, in Israel's life, God's total opposition to the worship of other gods, which brings with it every kind of evil.

In saying why God rejected the Canaanites, we have seen something of why he chose Israel. In vs 6–11 this choice is explained further. First, to say Israel was *chosen* is as much as to say that she was *holy* (6). Both ideas mean a separation of this one people to belong specially to him (as his *treasured possession*, a king's personal treasure; see Ex. 19:5).

Secondly, it had nothing to do with Israel's own power (7); God's people must not feel able to boast in that (see 8:17). They had done nothing to deserve the love which had led God to rescue them from Egypt (8).

Thirdly, the choice of Israel brought obligations. God had made a covenant because of his love, and he would show his faithfulness in it, but he expected in return a love which was willing to be obedient (9). God's undertaking to expel the Canaanites was quickly followed by a stern warning to Israel not to take their own relationship with him for granted. The sign that that relationship was true would not be the name of 'Israel', nor any outward mark, but only a willingness to do the commandments of God (10–11). This is the other side of 'holiness'. The same warning still echoes in the NT (*e.g.* Rom. 9:30–32), and comes today not only to Jews but also to Christians.

Fourthly, the choice of Israel, and rejection of the Canaanites, was not for Israel's sake alone. Though it is not evident in Deuteronomy, the long-term purpose of the choice of Israel must not be forgotten, namely to bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Gn. 12:3). When God brought Israel into her land, it was a step on the way to that end. Israel in covenant with God could show the world what God is like – if she could be faithful.

The next passage (12–15) gives a glimpse of an obedient people blessed by God. The blessings belong firmly to 'this life', in accordance with Deuteronomy's vision. God thus affirms that the world he has made is good (see Gn. 1), and that it is possible for people to enjoy it. The blessings mentioned here, however, may also be seen as tokens of God's good intentions for his people in the age to come as well as in the present age.

Moses finally returned to the opening theme of the chapter, the necessity to remain untouched by the wicked practices of Canaan (16–26). At the same time he urged the people again not to fear the enemy, remembering their past failures (1:26–28) and reminding them of God's power to defeat the Canaanites as he defeated the Egyptians (see 1:29). He stressed that it is God who will be the true victor. (The word translated *hornet* in v 20 is obscure (it may be an image of panic and confusion; *cf.* Ex 23:28; Jos. 24:12), but the point is clear: the LORD has his own means of doing what he plans.) V 22 gives a clue that the conquest will not be quick and easy, as the people would find out (Jos. 13:1). Yet it would be inevitable if they were faithful. And it must be complete; even the names of the former peoples (represented by their *kings*) are to be 'wiped out' (24).

The final commands (25–26) required the destruction of the paraphernalia of false religion, and take up Deuteronomy's special hatred of images. The people must not be tempted by the idols because of the valuable materials used in them (25). Even to tamper with these things is to play with fire. They were therefore laid under the same ban as those who used them (2:34; 7:2).

8:1–9 Discipline in the desert. Up till now, Israel's period in the desert has been seen only as punishment for failing to go into the land at God's command (1:35, 46). Here, another angle is put on it, namely an opportunity for faith to grow. Jeremiah would later remember the desert period as one of devotion to God (Je. 2:2; see also Ho. 2:14). The emphasis here, however, is on discipline (2, 5), which is another side of God's love for Israel (7:6).

The opening verse makes a link again between the commandments and life (see 4:1 and comments). The command to *be careful* (1) is typical of Deuteronomy (see 7:12; 11:16). It is backed up here with the call to *remember* God's leading in the desert (2). Obedience to God is a matter not only of understanding, but of will and heart (see 6:5 and comments); and the heart is prone to go its own way. The strong sense of this human weakness in Deuteronomy explains commands like this, and the book's repetitive teaching style in general.

In the desert, the Israelites had been suddenly removed from all the familiar ways of obtaining what they needed to live. Even as slaves in Egypt, they had known where their next meal was coming from. They had not been desert people, and the hardness of life there seemed to threaten them with death (Ex. 16:3). These were times for testing faith in God. Their hunger proved that they could not survive without God's provision; and the miracle of the manna, and other unusual signs, showed that he was well able to meet their needs (3–4; see Ex. 16:4). The words later used by Jesus against Satan (Mt. 4:4; *cf.* comment on 6:13), *man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the* LORD (3), are not contrasting the life of the spirit with that of the body; rather, they are showing that all of life comes from God. His *word* is creative and life-giving (see Gn. 1) as well as commanding.

The land itself is a dream come true (7–10). This is the most delightful description of it in the book. To appreciate it, we have to remember that it was spoken to a people that had known only the hard desert life (though see 6:10–11). Plentiful water, a variety of crops, even luxuries such as *olive oil and honey* (or 'jam') – the goodness of God's gifts to human beings is known best after scarcity.

8:10–20 Do not forget! The theme of this section is very like that of the last. Now, however, the Israelites' tendency to forget God is more to the fore. It is natural to look to God in the desert, when nothing comes easily and when death is always near. But when there is plenty, human nature finds it harder to give God his due. This is a real problem which Deuteronomy faces squarely: God wants to bless his people with all the good things of his creation; yet when they receive those good things they are very likely to turn away from him, thinking that they do not need him. Great wealth can lead to the delusion of self-sufficiency (17).

The problem goes deep in human beings' relationship with God. There are those who believe that their wealth is a direct blessing from God, a sign of his approval. It is sometimes even thought that poverty is a sign of the opposite, his anger. The truth is not so simple. Everything we have is indeed from God; yet comfortable

well-being can blind people to their need of him, while the lack or loss of wealth (or health) can awaken faith. When we feel God has blessed us that is the very time to seek him as never before, and praise him for his faithfulness (10).

It was for this reason that the desert experience came before the gift of land, to humble the people. It was itself a gift, despite its harshness (15), whose purpose was blessing in the end (16b). And it was designed to remain in the people's memory, so that they might not forget, once they had reached journey's end in the promised land, that all their good comes from God (14, 18).

At stake was the covenant itself (18). The passage ends with a now familiar warning not to worship other gods. For the Israelites, to 'forget God' may well have meant giving their loyalty to some other god. False ideas are at the root of all wicked actions. Idolatry for modern people is any belief about what produces 'good' which has no place for God.

9:1–6 A stiff-necked people. The Israelites had once refused even to try to go into the land because of the great size and strength of its people, who included the gigantic Anakites (Dt. 1:28; Nu. 13:22; Jos. 11:22). The Lord now assured the people that he would overcome even these terrible enemies (as he had defeated Sihon and Og in Transjordan, 2:24 – 3:10). Nevertheless, the people themselves must still act. Notice the balance between *he will destroy them* and *you will drive them out* (3b).

In ch. 8 Moses spoke of the change from poverty to wealth, and the moral dangers that change would bring. Then he turned to another change in Israel's life, from oppressed people to conquerors. The temptation that this might bring was the idea that God had given them the land because they were better (more 'righteous') than other peoples (4). To believe this would have been another kind of ingratitude for God's goodness in blessing them. Moses showed, therefore (4–6), that they would conquer the other nations, not because of their righteousness, but for two quite different reasons: for the sake of God's promise to the forefathers, and because of the other nations' wickedness. And to reinforce the point, he went on to say that in fact the Israelites were far from being 'righteous'; on the contrary their record showed that they were *stiff-necked*, or stubbornly resistant to God's way for them.

9:7–29 The golden calf. The next long passage proves Moses' point that the Israelites were naturally stubborn. It recalls times when they had rebelled against God, especially the worst rebellion of all, the making of the golden calf (Ex. 32). This too they must *remember* (7; along with God's leading them in the desert, 8:2, and his commandments, 8:11). In order to keep on the difficult path of obedience to the covenant they must not only know God's goodness but also their own weakness. For this reason Moses now faced them with the painful memory of what they had done at Horeb.

First the story of the calf itself is told (8–17). It was the worst sin imaginable. It happened while the covenant was still being signed and sealed at Horeb. The covenant itself had been concluded, and the people had agreed to its terms (Ex. 24:7). Moses had gone back up the mountain in order to receive from God the Commandments written on tablets of stone (9; Ex. 24:12). It was then that the people, with the Commandments fresh in their minds, as well as the awful meeting with God in the thunder, fire and cloud (Ex. 19:16–19), persuaded Aaron to make an idol (16a; Ex. 32:1). Thus they broke the first two, crucial commandments, and turned their backs on the covenant as soon as it was made (12b, 16b).

At that time the Lord had thought of disowning his people. (Notice how he called them *Moses'* people, and said that *Moses* had brought them out of Egypt; 12.) He was even on the point of destroying them, and making a new nation of Moses' offspring (v 14b is like the original promise to Abraham, Gn. 12:2). When Moses broke the tablets it was as if the covenant itself lay in ruins (17).

Moses, however, did not seek the honour of fathering a new people himself. Rather he prayed for those to whom he had devoted his life, showing that the prophet's role included intercession as well as speaking the words of God. For his sincerity and persistence he was heard, and the people were spared (19b). In the prayer itself (26–29), Moses appealed to three things. First he recalled God's promise to the forefathers, which God himself had stressed so much (27; and see 1:8). Secondly, he pointed to all that God had done for them up to now, bringing them out of Egypt and making them his people (26, 29). Since they were his *inheritance*, God would actually be frustrating himself by destroying his people. Thirdly, he argued that God's own honour was at stake, for his judgment on his people would be seen by other nations as powerlessness to save them (28). This element of persuasion seems to be an important part of the power of Moses' prayer.

Note. 22–24 Almost as a parenthesis, Moses mentioned other occasions when Israel rebelled on their journey to the land. This was meant to show that the first and greatest sin was not an isolated incident, but that the people was rebellious at heart.

10:1–11 The covenant remade. The following section continues directly from the

preceding one. When God told Moses to make two more stone tablets it was his reply to Moses' prayer for the people (9:26–29). When the first tablets were broken (9:17) it seemed that the covenant story might end there and then. The new tablets meant that the covenant was renewed. This is very important in the theology of Deuteronomy. The covenant between God and Israel can overcome Israel's sin in the end, because of God's forgiveness and grace.

The new tablets, like the first, had the Ten Commandments written on them (see 4:13), that is, the basic requirements of the covenant. They were to be kept in a special *chest*, or *ark*, which Moses had made for the purpose (1, 3), and which is called elsewhere in Deuteronomy 'the ark of the covenant of the LORD' (31:9, 25). The ark has a particular emphasis in Deuteronomy. In Exodus we read that it was a rich and elaborate construction, a centre-piece of the tabernacle, from where the Lord spoke to the people (Ex. 25:10–22). Here its function as the container of the tablets of the law is stressed. The order of events is even compressed somewhat in Deuteronomy, in order to stress that the proper function of the ark was to hold the tablets. (In Exodus the making of the ark by Bezalel is not directly connected with the making of the new tablets; Ex. 37:1–9; see also 34:1–4).

The story of the breach and renewal of the covenant at Horeb is rounded off in vs 10–11, with the repetition of God's decision not to destroy the people. They might now continue on their way into the land as his covenant people.

Vs 6–9 seem to interrupt the story. However, the note about Aaron's death shows that he did not die at Horeb, despite his role in the sin there (9:16–21), and therefore that Moses' prayer for him (9:20) had been answered (as had his prayer for the people). For the place-names see Nu. 33:31–33. They were presumably close to Mt Hor (Nu. 20:27–28).

The mention of Aaron (who was of the tribe of Levi) seems to prompt a note about the Levites. In this passage the term *Levites* is used broadly to include the priests as well as the lower order of clergy, though the term can be used of these latter alone. On the death of Aaron, his role as priest would be borne by his descendants. (Aaron's sons were consecrated priests with him, Ex. 28 – 29.) Because of their priestly role the tribe of Levi would not possess a special territory of their own in Israel, like the other tribes. They would get their living from their priestly work.

10:12–22 Religion of the heart. The remainder of the chapter, and indeed ch. 11, is concerned with motivating the Israelites to be faithful to the covenant which had thus been renewed. First, Moses returned to the basic command of Deuteronomy, to love the Lord with heart and soul (12; *cf.* 6:5). To *fear* the Lord (12) is to give him due worship, recognizing his lordship over all the world. It is a natural accompaniment of love for him. The commands in vs 12–13 stress obedience to God's word. The phrase *what does the LORD your God ask of you?* is very like that in Mi. 6:8. Both passages aim to show that religion, with its practices, is dead unless it comes from the heart.

Moses went on to recall God's choice of Israel (14–15), and tried to stir their gratitude by dwelling on the wonder of this (see 7:7–8; 9:6). Then he used a new figure of speech to urge them to be changed from the stubborn people they had been in the past (16; *cf.* 9:6). The idea of 'circumcision of the heart' is another way of saying that outward signs and rituals are nothing in themselves, even though circumcision was given by God as a sign of his special relationship with Israel (Gn. 17:9–14). Deuteronomy does not want to abolish this and other rituals (such as sacrifice), only to put them in a true perspective.

Moses' thought then turned to another implication of God's character, namely his love of justice. A people that truly loves God will be like him in seeking the good of the defenceless, and doing so regardless of its own interests (17–19). This principle lies behind all the laws which are to follow in chs. 12–26.

The chapter finishes (20–22) with a final call to worship God alone, and a reminder of his faithfulness to his promise (see Gn. 15:5).

11:1–7 The Lord's discipline. As we have seen, the present generation was not held responsible for the people's failure to occupy the promised land at the first opportunity (1:39; *cf.* 2:14–15). Furthermore, Moses had stressed that God was making a covenant directly with them (5:3). They were now warned to learn from the way in which God had dealt with them since leaving Egypt. They had a special responsibility to understand the experiences they had had during the desert years. Their children, too young to appreciate those things or not yet born, would depend on them for their knowledge of what God had done (2; *cf.* vs 19–21).

What the people had seen is called God's *discipline* (2), never far from his love. It is illustrated in two quite different ways. First, Moses recalled the overthrow of the Egyptians, both in the plagues (3, *cf.* Ex. 7:14–12:30) and by the Israelites defeating the army which chased them after Pharaoh had allowed them to leave his land (4, *cf.* Ex. 14:5–31). This *discipline* was a proof of God's power as well as his love for his chosen people.

Secondly, Moses recalled the fate of Dathan and Abiram, who had challenged the right of Moses and Aaron to their roles of leadership, and, in particular, had wanted to share in the priesthood, rather than accept their status as 'Levites' (Nu. 16:3, 8–10). (For the duties of Levites in this narrower sense see Nu. 3:1–37, and the comment on Dt. 10:6–9).

'Discipline' here appears in its darker aspect, as the judgment of God on failure to keep the covenant, and especially on impudent, self-assertive rejection of his ways.

11:8–25 A land God cares for. Moses again made a link between obedience and life in the land (*cf.* 4:1). The contrast with Egypt is interesting because Dathan and Abiram had claimed that Egypt was a fertile land, and that the promised land had not materialized (Nu. 16:12–14). In fact, Egypt was fertile only thanks to laborious irrigation methods, whereas the promised land would be fertile because of the rain which God would give (10–11). V 12 suggests a parallel between God's choice of and care for the land and his love for his chosen people.

As always in Deuteronomy, the promise is linked closely with command. The richness of the land will be enjoyed only by a people that keeps the covenant requirements. Vs 14–15 give a picture of life as it might be enjoyed by such a people, with regular rains in autumn and spring, both essential to a healthy harvest. *Grain, new wine and oil* (14) is a typical way of speaking of the yield of the land in Deuteronomy (*cf.* 7:13; 12:17).

In contrast, a people that turns to other gods may not expect this abundance (16–17; and see 1 Ki. 17:1). These two alternatives are elsewhere known as the 'blessing' and the 'curse' (see below on v 26).

The blessing may be secured not only for the present generation but for all that follow, if the requirements of the covenant are faithfully taught as part of the life-style of the people (19–21; *cf.* 6:5–9). To avoid the impression, however, that the relationship between God and Israel was based on law-keeping alone, Moses returned to the idea of promise. The land could be Israel's only as God's gift (22–23, 25). The extent of the land (24) is as promised to Abraham (Gn. 15:18).

11:26–32 Two ways. The long prelude to the individual laws is drawing to a close. The present passage forms a link between it and the remainder of the book. The blessing and the curse (hinted at in vs 14–17) are the two ways open to Israel (26–28). These were spelt out at length after the laws had been given (Dt. 28). The solemnity of the choice Israel must make was impressed on them by a ceremony which took place on Mts Ebal and Gerizim, near the city of Shechem in the heart of the land (29–30). Their possession of Shechem was to be a kind of celebration of their conquest of the whole land, which would surely follow (hence the allusion to the Canaanites). The command itself is repeated and elaborated in ch. 27, and carried out in due course by Joshua (Jos. 8:30–35). Finally (32) Moses used now familiar words of exhortation to keep the covenant requirements. This leads directly into ch. 12, the beginning of the detailed, individual laws which were to govern the life of Israel in the land.

12:1 – 26:15 Specific laws

12:1–12 The place of worship. The particular laws now begin, v 1 forming a link with the general instructions which went before. The commands in ch. 12 concern the right worship of the Lord, and are a consequence of the basic requirement that Israel shall worship him alone (5:7). The former command to destroy all traces of Canaanite worship (7:5, 25) is now repeated (2–4). The point of desecrating their *places* of worship (2) is that that was where their *names* were remembered (3). The old Semitic view was that in the name lay the being and the power of any person. V 3 lists the trappings of the idolatrous religion of Canaan. The stone pillar was probably a kind of fertility symbol; the *Asherah* was named after the goddess Asherah, and may have been a wooden pole carved in her image.

In contrast to this false worship the Lord had chosen a *place* at which his *Name* should be remembered (5). The place is not identified. Location itself is not important, but only that it is the Lord's. In Israel's history it would be a number of places in succession, especially Shiloh (Je. 7:12) and Jerusalem (2 Ki. 21:4).

The command to go to the place (5) has in mind the regular worship of Israel. V 6 gives a list of sacrifices and offerings which will form part of that regular worship. The list here is not exhaustive, but a kind of summary of Israelite worship. (For a full description of the sacrifices see Lv. 1 – 7 and commentary). The burnt offering was offered as a whole to the Lord on the altar (Lv. 1:9); other kinds of sacrifice were largely consumed by worshipper and priest. The reasons for offering sacrifice might vary (see *e.g.* Lv. 7:11–18).

The dominant note in this worship is to be joy. V 7, in fact, offers an insight into the vision of Deuteronomy: a united people rejoicing in worship in the presence of its one God.

Vs 8–10 recall the current situation of the Israelites, not yet able, because of their desert life-style, to do all that would later be required. The promised *rest* from their enemies (see 3:20

and comment) will have been won only when all Israelites have settled in their allotted portions of the land, and their wars are over.

Vs 11–12 repeat the commands of vs 6–7, including the call to rejoice, but also issue an instruction to include the poor and weak in the community in the worship. We have seen that this is a basic implication of God's own character, to be worked out among his people (see 10:17–19). Now it is repeated in the context of worship. Deuteronomy knows that worship without either joy or love is dead.

12:13–28 An exception. This section is a long qualification of the preceding one. When the Israelites at last live in their land, many of them will live at a distance from the place of sacrifice. Though they will be required to make the pilgrimage on occasions (see Ex. 23:17), they are likely to do so infrequently. The present regulations permit them, therefore, to eat meat even though it has not been slaughtered sacrificially (the requirement of Lv. 17:1–7, when the people were still in the desert). In these cases animals which were fit for sacrifice would now be on a par with others which were not (*e.g.* the gazelle and the deer, v 15). The only restriction is that they must dispose of the blood properly, since blood must never be consumed (Gn. 9:4; Lv. 17:10–12). Saul carries out such a 'profane slaughter' in 1 Sa. 14:32–35.

Vs 15–19 and 20–28 are parallel statements of this permission. Each passage first gives the permission, then restates the basic rule that actual sacrifices must be taken to the place of worship.

12:29–31 Purity in worship. Ch. 12 is in many ways like ch. 7. Each begins and ends with warnings not to be led astray by Canaanite religion. These verses take up the theme of vs 1–4, and so close off the chapter by reminding the reader of the basic purpose of the regulations that it has given.

13:1–18 Temptations to idolatry. The primary concern of the laws with the first commandment (exclusive loyalty to the Lord, 5:7) underlies this chapter as it did the last. It considers three ways in which the Israelites might be led astray to worship false gods.

The first possible temptation comes from false prophets. At times it would not be easy for Israelites to recognize a false prophet, as they might use the typical language, and claim to have had revelations which could not easily be tested.

The first test of a true prophet was whether he was loyal to the Lord (there would be at least one other; see 18:20–22). No kind of experience or fine speech could make up for such basic error. The whole call of Israel would be put in danger by such a person – hence the recollection of the redemption from Egypt as part of the motivation to reject the idolater (5), and the renewed appeal to love the Lord (3). The false prophet must be severely dealt with. (The *testing* in v 3 is not deliberately devised by the Lord; the false prophet, nevertheless, does indeed provide a test of discernment and faithfulness).

Secondly, the temptation to false religion might come from any member of the community (6–11). In that case a grievous responsibility fell on the closest relatives and friends to expose the cancer in the body, and take the initiative in cutting it out.

Finally, the same rigour is to be applied to whole towns in which idolatrous worship has taken root (12–18). There may well be a political side to the apostasy of a whole town, since religion was so bound up with politics. That is, for a town to go after Baal would be a kind of protest against belonging to 'Israel' in the sense in which the Mosaic covenant means this. Such towns were to be subjected to the same 'ban' that Canaanite towns were laid under when Israel first entered the land (15–16; *cf.* 2:34; 7:1–5). Their fate – being left a heap of ruins for ever (16) – is just what would later befall the city of Ai at the hand of Joshua (Jos. 8:28). (This shows, incidentally, that it is the false religion, and not the peoples in question, that God hated.)

The measures commanded here are severe indeed, but they should be seen against the background of the powerful temptations which did indeed come to Israel during her history in the land of Canaan. The books of Kings are a story of chronic failure in this respect. Idolatry would, and did, undermine the very purpose for which God chose Israel, which was in the end the salvation of the world.

14:1–21 The holy people marked out. The next set of laws mainly concerns food. The passage opens by recalling that Israel is *holy* and *chosen* (2), a combination we have seen in 7:6 (see comment there). Now the people are also called God's *children* (lit. 'sons'; see 1:31; Ex. 4:22; Ho. 11:1 for the same idea using the singular). This close relationship which God has with the people is now made the basis of laws which are to mark them out visibly from others. The practices outlawed in v 1b belonged to Canaanite mourning rites (see 1 Ki. 18:28).

The bulk of the passage (3–20) distinguishes creatures which are considered acceptable for food from those which are not. The terms used are *clean* and *unclean*. There is no agreement on the exact meaning of these words. The main possibilities are that some animals were regarded as unfit to eat for health reasons, or that they were rejected for religious reasons. (The NIV's

ceremonially unclean in v 7b suggests the latter, though there is no extra word in Hebrew for *ceremonially*.)

Attempts to explain the underlying meaning of *clean* and *unclean* are hampered by the fact that a number of the animals themselves cannot be certainly identified. It may be too that there is no single underlying reason for acceptance and rejection. Sometimes, however, a reason for rejecting a creature suggests itself. In the case of scavengers such as the *vulture*, for example (12), the uncleanness probably arises from the fact that they feed on animals that die by themselves. These are ritually unacceptable, because the blood has not been properly disposed of (Lv. 17:15–16; see also v 21a, and 12:16). The same could apply to birds of prey (12–16). In other cases a creature's unacceptability may arise because of its use in some non-Israelite religious setting.

A persuasive general explanation of the food-laws has been offered by the anthropologist Mary Douglas in her *Purity and Danger* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), and taken up by G. J. Wenham in his *Leviticus* (Eerdmans, 1979). In Douglas's view the idea underlying 'holiness' in biblical ritual texts is that of wholeness or completeness. Individuals, animals, even materials are 'whole', when they conform to the class to which they belong (see Lv. 18:23; 19:19; 21:17–21). Consequently, animals are considered fit to be set aside for the holy sphere (*i.e.* sacrifice) if they belong properly to a class, and have no characteristics which might be considered 'mixed'. (See Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 18–25.)

The regulations in v 21 are again explained by Israel's 'holiness' (though there is no definite evidence to support this in the case of the final instruction). Foreigners, not being of the chosen people, were not subject to its special rules.

14:22–29 The tithe. The Israelite tithe was a dedication of the produce of the land. In an agricultural society crops were the immediate token of God's goodness, and they were thus an inevitable part of worship. It is not easy to say how much of an Israelite's wealth the tithe actually amounted to (even though it means lit. 'a tenth'); it was, moreover, only one among a number of offerings which Israelites were expected to bring. An understanding of it is further complicated by the different laws about it in the Pentateuch. In Nu. 18:21–29 it appears as an offering for the benefit of the Levites (who needed such offerings to live). Here, it is a feast in which the offerers and their households participate, though the Levites are not forgotten (27).

A full picture may be obtained by taking the different laws together. The family feast at the place of worship would have left large amounts over for the Levites' dues. The tithe of the third year, however (28–29), seems to have been put to special use, being collected in the towns rather than taken to the place of worship, and used for the disadvantaged (as well as the Levites, who lived in all parts of the land; Nu. 35:1–8).

The tithe as presented here is typical of Deuteronomy, however. It is celebrated by all Israel at the central place of worship. It is marked by joy in worship of the one God, and symbolizes the oneness of the people by stressing the fact that all share in it. And it shows a people that were at the same time obedient (in bringing its tithes) and blessed with abundance of the land (in the feast which the offering itself affords them).

Note. 24–26 A practical detail is included which recognizes the problem that some people lived a great distance from the place of worship. The law has this in common with the law which permits non-sacrificial slaughter (12:13–28).

15:1–18 Remitting debts and releasing slaves. The day-by-day life of Israel in the land is now regulated in a further way, in relation to debts and slavery. Both of these are understood as ways in which the stronger might help the weaker in the community. The idea of brotherhood in Israel is nowhere stronger than here (2–3).

Once again, dealings with fellow-Israelites are on a different footing from dealings with foreigners (see 14:21). The laws, therefore, continue to build on the idea of Israel as a holy people, showing within itself the standards of God. (The attitude to foreigners, therefore, is not discrimination in the modern sense, nor does it justify this. It is simply a consequence of Israel's special status at this point in the history of salvation. It is not a permanent principle.)

Debts were to be cancelled in the seventh year of a seven-year cycle. Since loans were to be made without interest (23:19–20; Ex. 22:25), they were purely an act of assistance to those who had fallen on hard times (as a result, perhaps, of a bad harvest) rather than a means of enriching the lender. The motive for lending lies in the nature of Israel. The people in covenant with God must live out its brotherhood and its knowledge that it holds its land not by reason of strength (see 8:17) but as gift. A consequence of this is that *there should be no poor among you* (4), which is actually a command. Only when the Israelites take responsibility for justice in this way can they go on experiencing that the land is indeed a gift, and know God's continuing blessing (4–6).

The call to be generous is developed further

in vs 7–11. The laws are well aware of the self-interest which enters into human planning, and the possibility, therefore, that a loan might be refused because the seventh year is approaching. This is because the borrower may not have the time (or the desire!) to repay before the lender is obliged to write off the loan. (It is not clear, incidentally, whether the loan is intended to be cancelled altogether, or merely suspended until the seventh year is past. In either case considerable self-sacrifice is required of the lender.) The NT too puts no limit on the generosity required of givers (Rom. 12:8; 2 Cor. 9:7).

At this point the laws of Deuteronomy come close to an open-ended commitment to other people of a sort which cannot easily be wrapped up in laws at all. (*Cf.* Lv. 19:18, which seems to make this point when it urges Israelites to 'love your neighbour as yourself'.) These things are hard to try in courts. However v 9c suggests that the obligations imposed here were very real. They could, it seems, be tested by others, and certainly by God.

Slavery in Israel was to be quite different from what is usually understood by the term. A person who had fallen on hard times might give himself or herself into the service of another as a way of surviving the emergency. This, however, was not intended to be a permanent arrangement (though the slave might choose this; 16–17). Certainly the *slave* (or *servant* – the word may be translated either way) is not owned by the master. The selling in v 12 implies only a sale of the slave's labour for a period. At the end of the period (in the seventh year again), and in return for his labour, the master must provide the slave with the means to live independently again. Once more, such generosity is the very means of a continuing enjoyment of the covenantal blessings which the Lord desires to give (18b).

15:19–23 The firstlings. All firstborn, both human and among domestic animals, were specially dedicated to the Lord. For the animals this meant sacrifice; humans were substituted by the sacrifice of another animal (Ex. 13:2, 13, 15).

Firstlings here, like the tithe, were made part of an annual feast at the place of worship. Imperfect animals, which were by definition not fit for sacrifice, might be eaten non-sacrificially (21–23). The regulations here are rather like those for non-sacrificial slaughter generally (12:13–28), the chief concern being the proper disposal of the blood.

The law of firstlings (as of sacrifices in general) stresses the offerer's willingness to part with what he might feel is rightfully his own. There is something in common, therefore, between this law and the preceding commands regarding debt and slave-release. In each case, Israel recognizes that all she has is God's gift.

16:1–17 The major feasts. The laws about sacrifices and offerings now continue with regulations about the three annual feasts (see also Ex. 23:14–17 and Lv. 23). Deuteronomy is less detailed than Leviticus, and can be seen as a kind of summary, with certain typical emphases.

The first feast occurs in March-April (*Abib*, known as Nisan after the exile), and is actually a combination of two feasts, namely Passover (on the 14th) and Unleavened Bread (15th–21st; see Lv. 23:5–8). This combination seems deliberate, as is suggested by the phrase *Do not eat it* [the Passover] *with bread made with yeast, but for seven days eat* [it with] *unleavened bread* (see the RSV). Furthermore, no clear distinction is made between the lamb of the Passover sacrifice itself and the other animals offered at the sacrifices made during the week (2).

The purpose of the combined feast is twofold. First, it is to remind the people of their miraculous escape from Egypt, because of God's power and his love for them (3; *cf.* Ex. 12–13). The need to remember God's care for his people is very important in Deuteronomy (6:4–12; 8:10–18), and the Passover, more than anything else, is the great act of remembering. It is similar to the Christian acts of commemoration, above all Easter, recalling the deliverance won by Christ through his resurrection, and also the Communion or Eucharist. From the similarity comes the idea of Christ as the 'Passover lamb' (1 Cor. 5:7).

Secondly, the feast as presented in Deuteronomy, points forward to the life in the land which the book everywhere anticipates. The *seventh day* of unleavened bread (8), moreover, is rather like a Sabbath rest, and we recall that life in the land was to be a kind of rest (12:9). When the people later enter the land, they celebrate Passover, and immediately afterwards eat unleavened bread that is the produce of the land (Jos. 5:10–12). The linking of the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread in Deuteronomy is probably intended both to recall God's past goodness, and to encourage belief that he will go on blessing in the land he is giving.

The Passover is essentially a family feast. It may seem surprising, therefore, that it is to be held at the central place of worship. However, after the sacrifice itself, the meal was indeed to be eaten in families, in *tents* (7) probably temporarily pitched around the place of worship.

The second feast of all Israel at the place of worship is the *Feast of Weeks* (9–12), also called the Feast of Harvest (Ex. 23:16) or Pentecost. It

is celebrated seven weeks (or more precisely fifty days, Lv. 23:15–16) after the offering of the first ripe grain of the year which is made during the feast of Unleavened Bread (Lv. 23:15). Deuteronomy's command to keep this feast has its typical emphases on rejoicing in worship, care for the poor, and memory of deliverance from Egypt.

Finally, the *Feast of Tabernacles* celebrates the gathering in of the whole harvest in late summer. Its name is explained by the command to live temporarily in tents during the feast as a reminder of the people's temporary dwellings during their flight from Egypt (Lv. 23:42–43). It is part of an extended calendar of events in the seventh month (approximately September) recorded in Leviticus (23:23–43), though omitted by Deuteronomy.

While it was common for ancient peoples to have great agricultural feasts, Israel's are distinguished by the fact that they are linked to their salvation from Egypt. The regular blessings of the land, therefore, always remind them that all their good depends on that first salvation.

The summary in vs 16–17 expresses a further typical concern of Deuteronomy, that the people should respond generously to God in their worship, in the light of his goodness to them.

16:18–20 Judges and officials. This little passage takes up a theme from the beginning of the book, namely the responsibility of judges and supporting officials for putting the commandments of God into practice (1:9–18). They are to officiate in towns throughout Israel, though difficult cases are to be taken to the central place of worship (17:8). *Justice* (19–20) means the right treatment of people that is their due under the law, and which is not to be neglected by the judges for their personal benefit. The instructions here stand at the head of a number of regulations about officials: judges (17:8–13), the king (17:14–20), priests (18:1–8) and prophets (18:14–21). These all have something to do with putting the laws into practice.

16:21 – 17:7 No other gods. It is interesting that the rules about judges and other officials are interspersed with reminders of the need for faithfulness in religion (16:21 – 17:7; 18:9–13). Justice cannot be separated from right religion.

The first 'religious' command here (16:21–22) repeats Deuteronomy's strong opposition to the symbols of Canaanite worship (*cf.* 7:5); only the God of Israel is to be worshipped. The second (17:1) contains another basic principle of true worship, namely that only undamaged animals should be sacrificed to God (*cf.* 15:21). To *sacrifice* an imperfect animal was no sacrifice at all, because it was of little value to the worshipper. True worship implies real self-sacrifice (see Mal. 1:6–8). Thirdly (2–7), the need to root out any who would lead astray to false religion is repeated. This law is in substance like that of ch. 13, but here the judicial means of proceeding is stressed (5–7). The *gate* (5) was where the judges sat. The punishment is so severe because the crime is a breach of the first commandment, and would destroy the covenantal relationship of the whole people with God.

17:8–13 Difficult cases. The difficult cases were not necessarily the worst crimes, but those in which it was hard to decide whether the offence had been committed intentionally or merely by accident or carelessness. The supreme court had its sessions at the place of worship, and was presided over by both priests and the judge. The judge in question would be one like Samuel, who is later seen exercising this duty at several places (1 Sa. 7:15–17). Quite how the judging was shared by the judge and the priests is not clear to us. The law shows again, however, how closely religious and civil law was intertwined in ancient Israel.

The decision of the supreme court was final, and the penalty for refusing to accept it, death (12). This might be disproportionate to the original crime, or even, presumably, be passed on the petitioner! It aimed, however, to preserve the process of law itself, and is, therefore, another fundamental safeguard of the covenant (13).

17:14–20 The law of the king. The law anticipates the people wanting a king, like other nations (14), as they actually will in due course (1 Sa. 8:5). Deuteronomy thinks of God as Israel's king. This is said in 33:5, and implied in the treaty-structure of the book. The same sense that human kingship is not God's ideal plan for Israel is expressed clearly by Gideon (Jdg. 8:23), and by Jotham's fable (Jdg. 9:7–15). When the Lord himself says Israel's request is a rejection of him as king (1 Sa. 8:7), he may be criticizing the spirit of the request only, thus leaving the door open for *his* king (David). Nevertheless, Deuteronomy seems not so much to institute human kingship as to permit it, and ensure that it is of a certain type.

The king according to Deuteronomy is by no means like the kings of the nations. He is chosen by God (15a) and, therefore, not self-selected by his own power. He is a *brother* in Israel (15b) and, therefore, essentially equal to other Israelites. He must not exploit his position in order to gain wealth, armies or many wives. Israel was not to exchange the tyranny of Egypt for a 'mini-Pharaoh' of their own. It is striking how similar this portrait of the false king is to

that of Solomon after he had become unfaithful to God (1 Ki. 10:26 – 11:8).

The ideal king, in contrast, is a student of God's law (18–20). He thus acknowledges that God is the true king of his people, and will not bear his office out of pride or ambition.

18:1–8 Rights of priests and Levites. The priestly classes are not much in evidence in Deuteronomy, which typically thinks of the people in its wholeness, not according to its inner divisions. However, the present passage safeguards an important principle: those who serve at the place of worship are entitled to their living from the wealth of the land.

Within the tribe of Levi, the priesthood proper was restricted to Aaron and his descendants (Ex. 28:1). The remainder of the tribe – the 'Levites' – were set aside for supporting duties in the tabernacle and temple (Nu. 3:5–10). Deuteronomy is not concerned with the differences between the kinds of 'clergy', but treats the whole levitical tribe as one. It is together, as a tribe, that they are treated differently from the rest of Israel, in that they do not have an *inheritance* (2) – *i.e.* a tribal territory.

However, they are by no means to be deprived of their right to a living, because they belong to the 'brotherhood' of Israel (2) just as much as any others. As *brothers* they 'inherit'. Their living comes in practice, however, from their share of the offerings made at the place of worship by their fellow-Israelites. This is what is really meant by *the LORD is their inheritance* (2; see also 10:8–9). Their good, therefore, depends on Israel being faithful in their worship of God. (See also Nu. 18, which sets out the dues that fall to priests and Levites more comprehensively.) The principle here applied to the Levites may have a general application to those who are employed by the churches or Christian organizations for various ministries. It implies a commitment on the part of the church membership to provide properly for such people. The only measure of what is 'proper' is the wealth of the church itself, and the principle of 'brotherhood' within it.

In vs 6–8 the point is made that Levites who live at various places in the land – in the cities which had to be provided for them in every tribal territory (Nu. 35:1–8) – had the right to come and serve at the central place of worship when they wished, and to receive payment accordingly. V 8b is a little obscure, but may imply that Levites could build up a certain amount of independent wealth from the pasture-lands they were allowed to hold around their cities.

18:9–22 Knowing God's will. The need to know the will of God on specific occasions (*e.g.* in time of war) was keenly felt in ancient times, and the nations around Israel had devised various magical procedures for finding it out. These included examining the entrails of birds and animals for omens, consulting the dead (11) and apparently even the sacrifice of children (10). Magic could be used to try to affect the course of events as well as simply to gain information.

All such practices are condemned in our passage. They are regarded as *detestable* along with Canaanite religious practices in general (7:25–26; 12:31). The use of magic emphasizes the skill of the 'knower', tampers with areas which God has ruled out of bounds, and lays the person open to influence from destructive powers. Among the people of God, in contrast, it is sufficient to know what God clearly speaks. This he has done through his word, and will go on doing, on special occasions, through his prophets. (For the stress on knowledge of God by his word, see 4:6–8, 9–14.)

The first and foremost prophet of Israel was Moses himself. He it was who spoke God's word when the covenant was being made at first on Mt Horeb. The people themselves, in their fear, had demanded such a mediator (16; *cf.* 5:23–27). The question now arises, however, how will the ministry of Moses be continued in Israel? The assurance comes that, though Moses himself must die in due course, he will have successors (18).

That the passage has a number of future prophets in mind (rather than one only) is clear from vs 20–22 where the issue is how false prophets may be distinguished from true ones. However, the 'Messianic' interpretation of 18:18, according to which Jesus is the promised *prophet*, is justified, because he spoke God's word in a wholly new and authoritative way (see Acts 3:22–23).

The final verses (20–22) ask how a true prophet may be known from a false one. The answer in v 22 is that a false prophet's words will not come true. This answer posed its own difficulties. Jeremiah faced the problem of recognition acutely, and his words did not come true until many years after he had begun to preach. However, in practice, a prophet's genuineness would in many cases be recognizable over a period of ministry. (Notice the test-case in Je. 28.) There is an important sense in which the message of God makes itself known to those who are willing to hear.

19:1–14 Cities of refuge. To the three cities of refuge provided for in Transjordan (4:41–43) a further three are to be added west of the river (2), and yet three more if necessary (9). Their purpose is that one guilty of accidental homicide might have a safe haven within easy reach, in whichever part of the land he happened to be (3). It would not be immediately clear

to others, of course, whether the one who sought refuge in the city was in fact innocent. The city, therefore, was not meant to give unconditional protection to all comers. The *avenger of blood*, however (who may have been a relative of the victim or an elder from his city), appears to assume the guilt of the one who caused death. The city's purpose, therefore, was to make sure that anyone accused of murder had a fair trial rather than be exposed to the revenge of the dead person's relatives. Vs 11–12 assume that some kind of legal process takes place to determine guilt or innocence (see also Nu. 35:12).

In the case of guilt the offence was capital, since murder was a breach of the basic covenant law (5:17). The death penalty was incurred in order to rid the land and people of this defiance of the covenant (13).

The law on the removal of the landmark (14) does not seem to relate closely to the preceding or to what follows. It would, however, have been a serious offence, in a land without hedges and fences, and when land was life. Abuses of this sort by greedy landowners might easily drive their poorer neighbours into poverty and slavery.

19:15–21 Witnesses. The law on witnesses follows naturally from the previous case, where a judicial process was assumed. It shows what is at stake in the ninth commandment (5:20). False witness against one accused of a crime would result in unjust punishment, which in the case of a capital offence would be death. A basic safeguard against an unjust verdict was the requirement for at least two witnesses to agree (15).

The law provides a deterrent against deliberate false witness. Whatever penalty attached to the crime for which the accused was tried was to be incurred by the witness who was found to be lying (19). The witness who perjured himself in a capital case made himself liable to the death penalty. Here was one case of the so-called *lex talionis* or 'law of talion' (21; *cf.* Ex. 21:23–25). This was not a licence for revenge, but a legal principle limiting punishment by making it fit the crime.

20:1–20 The conduct of war. This chapter contains principles for the conduct of war. These include rules for war in general (10–15) as well as the special kind of war against the peoples who occupied the land God was giving to Israel (16–18). The opening commands, however, apply to all war.

The main point in vs 1–4 is that all Israel's wars are really God's. His power in rescuing Israel from Egypt, against impossible odds, is a reassurance that the enemy's apparent greater strength need never be decisive. Even though not all war is 'holy', in the special sense reserved for war in the promised land (16–18), nevertheless, everything Israel did was 'religious', because their king was God. Thus it is that the army is addressed by the priest before going into battle. The main burden of his message is that the people need not fear, because God's power is made available to them.

The law evidently did not intend that Israel should have a standing army (of the sort that Solomon would later gather; 1 Ki. 10:26). Rather, it has a citizen army in mind. This is clear from v 9, where commanders are appointed only when the army is being prepared for battle. It is clear too because vs 5–9 assume that people will be taken from their normal activities in order to serve. In this context certain exemptions are granted. One who has built a new house but not yet lived in it need not go; nor one who is involved in the long process of bringing a new vineyard to fruitfulness (see Lv. 19:23–25); nor one who is engaged but not yet married (see also 24:5). These exemptions are in line with the main thrust of Deuteronomy, that God is giving his people a land whose fruits they are to enjoy, and in which they themselves are to have children so that future generations might also prosper (7:13). All this is only possible, of course, because God will fight for the people. It is a people that trusts God that can dare to allow some of its best people not to join its army in a crucial battle.

This is most obvious from the final exemption, which is simply for those who are afraid (8)! It was imperative that God's army should not be fearful, since victory depended on faith in a God who could overcome the odds. A fearful soldier might easily spread fear, and this could turn the tide against the whole army.

The rules of engagement are outlined for wars fought outside the promised land itself (10–15). These are relatively humane for the day. The offer of *peace* gave the opportunity to make a treaty with Israel, in which the defeated city would have been subordinate, but protected and, to an extent, free.

The approach to a city in the land is quite different (16–18). These verses are, as it were, in brackets. They summarize the commands regarding the taking of the land in the first place (7:1–5, 17–26), which are recalled here to make it very clear that the preceding rules apply only to warfare outside the land.

The final commands, again relevant to all war, limit the damage caused to the environment by the conduct of war. The protection of fruit trees is easy to understand, especially in relation to the promised land, since the whole point of taking it was so that the people should enjoy its fruit. War should never defeat its own

objectives. Even the use of non-fruit-bearing trees for siege-works, though permitted, seems to be limited by the strict needs of the occasion. The environment as such – God's creation – is therefore respected.

The regulations for war in ch. 20 need to be used with great caution when principles are sought for the conduct of modern wars. The first requirement is to distinguish holy war from other kinds, even in Israel. Holy war is a concept which applies only, once and for all, to Israel's occupation of its God-given land. Even Israel's wars in general are special, because at that period in the history of God's dealing with humanity his people was also a nation, a political unit. Now that that people is a church, which fights no wars as such, no nation has a mandate to suppose that God marches in its ranks in the wars that it fights – even where those wars may reasonably be thought just. By the same token, Christian 'just-war' theory is right not to take this chapter as a mandate for fighting against impossible odds.

On the other hand, the principles of restraint, diplomacy, mercy and respect for non-combatants remain valid for all wars. And any warfare which involves large-scale devastation of the creation itself should be repugnant, in view of vs 19–20.

21:1–9 The unsolved murder. We have already had regulations regarding penalties for murder and manslaughter (19:4–13). The issue in cases of murder is not just the due punishment of the guilty person, but also a religious purification of the whole land and people (19:13), so that the covenant can continue. When the murderer cannot be found (and the present regulation seems to suppose that the unsolved killing is murder), the land cannot be purified in the normal way, *i.e.* by execution of the murderer (see also Gn. 9:6). This law, therefore, provides for the religious purification to be made in another way.

Responsibility for the procedure is taken by the elders of the city nearest to the scene of the crime (2). They carry out a ritual killing of a heifer. It is interesting that neither the heifer nor the place chosen for the ceremony should have been used for agricultural purposes (3–4). The ritual, therefore, is like a sacrifice in that the victim and the place are, as it were, set aside specially for the purpose – though the rite is not actually a sacrifice (since the animal's blood is not spilt). It is also like a sacrifice in that it makes atonement for the spilling of the murdered person's blood (Lv. 17:11).

The elders of the nearest city have taken responsibility for the act of atonement on behalf of all Israel (8). They are themselves innocent of the crime, however, as is signified by the hand-washing ritual (7).

21:10–14 Marrying a captive woman. This law follows from the law about treatment of defeated enemies in foreign lands (20:10–14, especially v 14). A man may take a captive woman as his wife after certain rituals have been observed. The shaving of hair, trimming of nails and changing of clothes are symbols of mourning for *her father and mother.* This may mean only that she mourns her removal from family and homeland. The rituals, therefore, represent a leaving behind of the former homeland, a kind of transition to becoming an Israelite.

Once the rituals have been completed, the marriage may be consummated. If for any reason the husband then decides to divorce her, she must be treated with all the rights of a wife, not a slave, and become a free person. The word translated *dishonoured* (14) may only be another way of referring to the consummation of the marriage, *i.e.* that which gives her her right to freedom.

21:15–17 The right of the firstborn. This law recalls the story of Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel, where Rachel was the younger and better loved, but where Leah conceived first (Gn. 29:21–35). The right of the firstborn is not new with this law, nor confined to Israel, but the law aims to safeguard the child against the father's tendency to follow his own preferences (see Gn. 49:3–4).

21:18–21 The disobedient son. The seriousness of the charge of disobedience to parents lies in the fact that it is a breach of a basic covenant command (5:16), and that the family is an essential means of maintaining the covenant in Israel (6:7, 21–25; *cf.* Mk. 7:10). Presumably, the disobedience in question is of a very serious kind; the loose life-style indicated by v 20 may simply be a symptom of a determined opposition to the ways of God which the parents have tried to teach (18).

This apparently unnatural law aims to stress the responsibility of parents to maintain the covenant. Indeed, it fell to parents, in principle, to initiate legal action against a son who threatened the well-being of the whole community because of his defiance of the covenant standards. In the NT too, love of God and zeal for the kingdom are to be put above family loyalties (Mt. 10:37, but see also Mk. 7:9–13).

21:22 – 22:12 Various laws. 22–23 The hanging here, which may mean impalement on a post, is the exposure of a body after the execution itself (see 1 Sa. 31:10). Such a practice was probably ancient, and intended to heap shame on the victim even after his death, by showing that, as one who had broken the covenant, he was under God's curse. Non-burial was supposed to prevent the spirit of the dead person enjoying repose in the after-life. The law here

limits this, perhaps because the curse on the murderer might somehow defile the whole people (23b). This law lies behind the statement in Gal. 3:13 that Christ took upon himself the curse of the law due to all because of sin. The manner of his execution, therefore, was awful not only because of its pain, but also because of its shame.

22:1–4 The law says not only 'you shall not', but also 'you shall'. This is because the point of the law is to ensure the good of the whole people. If Israelites are to be truly brothers and sisters, they have a responsibility for each other's good. These obligations aim to protect the livelihood of fellow-Israelites. Deuteronomy comes close here to the idea of law as the obligation to love one's neighbour, whatever that may cost (see Lv. 19:17–18).

5 The point here is not simply about fashion, but about certain deviant sexual practices, signified by the wearing of the clothes of the opposite sex. Homosexual practice may lie behind the law (see Lv. 18:22; 20:13). It is possible too that some rituals of non-Israelite religions involved transvestism, and that the practice is condemned for this reason.

6–7 The concern here is rather like that which protected fruit-bearing trees from being destroyed in time of war (20:19), namely the fruitfulness of the land. The mother bird is spared because she can go on being fertile. There may well be a respect for the natural world itself here, as well as a concern to protect sources of food.

8 The law about a parapet is intended to safeguard life. Like the instructions in vs 1–4 it shows that the law goes further than simply stopping people from hurting others by acts of violence and greed; it requires that everything possible should be done to ensure the good of others.

9–11 The reason behind these prohibitions is no longer clear to us. It is probably either a respect for the different classes of created thing (as in Gn. 1:11c: 'according to their various kinds'), or because such mixtures were well known in Egypt. In the latter case the law would mark the distinctiveness of Israel, the holy people, and therefore be an outward mark of their wholehearted devotion to God. If such outward marks could be abused (Mt. 23:5), the need for encouragements to holy living always remains relevant.

12 The point of the tassels is to remind the wearer constantly of God's laws (Nu. 15:37–41; see also Dt. 6:8–9 for a similar idea).

22:13–30 Laws about sexual relations. 13–21 The issue here is whether a newly-married woman was a virgin at the time of her marriage. The law considers the situation in which the man accuses his new wife of unchastity, following his first intercourse with her. The accusation is by its nature hard to prove true or false. Nevertheless, provision is made for a trial, and it is presumed that proof can be obtained.

The *proof of her virginity* may be the blood-stained sheet from the marriage-bed on the night of the consummation, or alternatively a sheet which showed evidence of recent menstruation and, therefore, that the woman was not pregnant at the time of marriage. The latter is more likely to be available to the parents to produce.

If the charge is shown to be false, the man is punished, both by flogging and by payment of huge damages to the father of the woman. If the woman is found guilty, she is punishable by death, because she has in effect committed adultery (*cf.* vs 23–24).

22 The law on adultery concisely prescribes the death penalty for both offenders, in keeping with the fact that adultery is a breach of the basic covenant law (5:18). Whether the law was carried out may have depended on the wronged husband's decision (Pr. 6:32–35). The death-penalty only applied if the offenders were caught 'red-handed' (*is found*); an outlook common throughout the whole of the Ancient Near East.

23–29 These verses are an extension of the law on adultery, because they concern cases of intercourse between a man and a woman engaged to someone else. Whether the case is rape or adultery depends on whether the woman consented. In the town, her silence is taken as consent (23–24); in the country, she is given the benefit of the doubt, and only the man dies (25–27).

The law makes a distinction between a woman who is engaged and one who is not, in a way that is strange to the modern reader (28–29). This is because marriage laws in Israel were closely related to family and property laws. A man paid the father of his bride a substantial sum for his daughter's hand (Ex. 22:16–17). When a man rapes or seduces a woman who is not yet engaged, however, there is a simple remedy: he must make her his wife, and pay for the privilege (29).

30 The *father's wife* may well be the man's step-mother where, as 21:15–18 shows, the society is not strictly monogamous. However, this is a particular adulterous act which is held to be specially reprehensible (even assuming that the father is already dead), because it also breaks the commandment demanding respect of parents (5:16; *cf.* 27:20; Lv. 18:8; 20:11).

23:1–8 Exclusion from the assembly. *The assembly of the* LORD is the people of

Israel as it worships the Lord in the tabernacle or temple. To belong to Israel at worship is to belong to it completely. In the ancient world, as in the modern, people often moved and settled in new places. As Israel became well-established in their land, they would face the question, on what basis might foreigners living among them become effectively members of Israel?

The exclusions in vs 1–2 probably arise from involvement in the worship of other gods. The deformities in v 1 may be self-inflicted mutilations for the purposes of idolatrous worship, possibly of the goddess Ishtar. The *forbidden marriage* (2) suggests a union with a cult-prostitute.

Ammonites and Moabites were permanently excluded from fellowship with Israel because of their determined resistance to them on their way to the promised land. Moab's resort to magical arts to prevent their arrival inevitably rebounded upon them because of the Lord's greater power (Nu. 22 – 24). Nevertheless, their hostility is remembered sombrely here. Ammon is presumed to have resisted similarly (see Nu. 21:24), though there is no similar record of a confrontation with that people (*cf.* 2:37).

Edomites and Egyptians, on the other hand, could be treated more generously. Both had in fact opposed Israel's progress towards their land, Egypt at the very beginning (Ex. 7 – 14) and Edom on the way (Nu. 20:18–21). In these cases, however, other factors are more important: it was in Egypt that Israel was permitted to flourish for many years and become a people; and Edom was Israel's *brother* in a special sense, because the people's ancestor Esau was the brother of Jacob (Gn. 25:21–26).

23:9–14 Uncleanness in the camp. A number of natural physical conditions, among them 'bodily discharges' (Lv. 15), could make someone, for a time, ritually *unclean*, that is, unfit to participate in the community's worship. These verses refer to that class of legislation in a rather general way, applying them especially to the military camp. Provision is also made for the disposal of human waste outside the camp. The camp was to be a fit place for the Lord to be (his presence probably symbolized by the ark of the covenant) and, therefore, nothing unseemly should be tolerated in it.

23:15–24 Various laws. 15–16 This regulation concerns a slave who has escaped from his master in some foreign land and sought refuge in Israel. Israel's own laws about slavery show that the OT is opposed to it as an oppressive instrument; Israel herself, indeed, had escaped from slavery. For these reasons, Israelites are to give sanctuary to runaway slaves.

17–18 Some of the rituals of Canaanite and Babylonian religion involved sexual intercourse of leading members of the community with men and women who were attached for the purpose to certain sanctuaries. It was thought that deities could be induced by this means to give fertility to the land. The practice was abominable to the God of Israel, who gave fertility because of his love for his people, and who could not be manipulated by these magical means.

19–20 This law is related to those in 15:1–18 (see comment there), which provide for the release of debts and slavery. Economics in Israel was not to result in huge gaps between rich and poor, but rather to promote the brotherhood of Israelites. For this reason interest-taking is banned, as contrary to the spirit of a land seen as the common heritage of all. Since the idea of brotherhood applied only to Israel, a concession is made for deals involving others.

21–23 Vows were voluntary acts of devotion, usually fulfilled by a sacrifice (Lv. 7:16–18; Ps. 22:25). The law here is based on the huge importance attached to words and promises in Deuteronomy; the whole covenant is based on this and, therefore, their casual or insincere use was an offence in God's eyes.

24–25 The point here is to permit the taking of the produce of the land to satisfy hunger. The law distinguishes between this and mere theft, or exploitation of one's neighbour, whose labour and livelihood is in his crops.

24:1 – 25:16 Further laws. 1–4 This law takes for granted the practice of divorce in Israel, in spite of the Lord's hatred of it, recorded elsewhere (Mal. 2:16). (Notice, however, the two exceptions to the man's right to a divorce; 22:19, 29.) This law makes no attempt to justify the practice in general. The reason for the man's wish to divorce (*he finds something indecent about her*) is not clear; it may be some ritual impurity, or a failure to bear children, or sexual immodesty. It is not, in any case, said to be an adequate reason for divorce. The point of the law is merely to prevent a return to the first husband after a second marriage of the divorced woman has ended. (Je. 3:1–5 presupposes this point.) The aim may have been to make divorce so solemn and final that it would not be entered upon lightly.

5 This law is related to those in 20:5–7, which make certain exemptions from military service. The newly-wed man is now further exempted from all public service. The crucial importance of having children underlies the law, but the purpose of bringing happiness to his wife is typical of Deuteronomy's strong emphasis on the land as a blessing to the whole people.

6–7 The taking of 'securities', or pledges, against debts was itself a permitted practice (see also vs 10–13). However, nothing must be taken

which affects the debtor's right to basic necessities or his ability to make his livelihood (*cf.* 23:17). The concern to protect the life of all Israelites underlies v 7 too, which is in the spirit of the prohibition of murder (5:17), and of the enlightened laws regarding slavery (15:12–18). No Israelite may completely control the life of another.

8–9 The law regarding skin diseases (the term probably has a wider and more general reference than leprosy) refers to laws known from elsewhere, as in Lv. 13 – 14. There, provision is made for the sufferers to be ritually purified. This law merely requires care in obeying those instructions.

10–13 This law is related to that in v 6. The principle is expressed again that pledge-taking must not be the means of oppressing a poor person, or driving him further into hardship. The command in v 11 respects the freedom and dignity of the one who has fallen on hard times. And v 13b serves as a reminder that the making of a loan should be an act of generosity, pleasing to God, and intending the restoration of the debtor.

14–15 Delay in payment for work done could be a way of driving a poor person into needless hardship. Fair treatment of workers is, on the contrary, another way of putting into practice the ideals of the covenant (see also Mt. 20:1–16). In a modern setting, this law is relevant to fair employment conditions, and perhaps also condemns unfair business practices such as the deliberate late payment of debts.

16 This law affirms the responsibility of each individual in the eyes of the law (an idea developed in Ezk. 18) It does not contradict 5:9, which is about God's justice, and where the point is made that sin can have effects for generations after it.

17–22 The collection of laws here have in common the concern for those who cannot fend for themselves, namely the widow, the alien (*i.e.* the immigrant) and the orphan. These groups are elsewhere commended to the people's special care (14:29). Here they are expressly granted the full protection of the law. The provision for the widow goes even further than usual in the matter of pledges (17; *cf.* 24:12–13). Israel itself was helpless in Egypt and needed the help of God in order to become free and prosperous (18); here again her past provides a pattern for her own behaviour.

The laws on harvesting contain the idea already found in 23:24–25, only in reverse. The landowner should deliberately leave a residue of the crop for those who have no resources of their own. In this way the rights of everyone in Israel to the produce of the land are once again affirmed (*cf.* the book of Ruth).

25:1–3 This law is not about the judicial process itself, which has been covered elsewhere (17:8–13), but rather about the administration of corporal punishment (where it is the required penalty, *e.g.* 22:18). At stake is the dignity of the individual, who is, in spite of his crime, still *your brother*. This phrase implies that the one punished is still part of Israelite society. (2 Cor. 11:24 reflects the later practice of giving only thirty-nine strokes lest this law be broken by incorrect counting.)

4 Although Paul applies this law to the provision for those who work to spread the gospel (1 Cor. 9:9–10), here it applies to oxen and shows a real concern for their welfare: animals may be used by people, but not abused or exploited.

5–10 It was very important in ancient Israel that a man should have male offspring to carry on his name and inherit his property. It was, therefore, very serious for a man to die without having had a son. The present law (which has parallels in the Ancient Near East) provides that a specified brother of the dead man should act as husband of the widow for the purpose of having a son who would be counted as the son of the dead man.

The brother had a right to refuse to carry out his obligation (7–10). If he did this it might imply that he hoped himself to inherit the dead man's property, rather than pass it on to a 'son' of the dead man (Nu. 27:9). This may be why his refusal brings such shame upon him and his house in the eyes of the community.

11–12 In laws which are remarkable for their humaneness and concern for the personal integrity of the individual (*cf.* 25:1–3), this isolated example of bodily mutilation stands out. It may imply that the woman's action could injure the man's capacity to have children. The phrase *Show her no pity* is like the one in the 'law of talion' (19:21). The punishment may, in fact, be a near equivalent, in the circumstances, to the principle of 'eye for eye' *etc.* Even so, bodily mutilation in punishments is certainly exceptional in Israel, and may reflect in this case the importance in biblical thinking of having children (*cf.* Gn. 1:28; Ps. 127).

13–16 This law is in keeping with the general concern of Deuteronomy to avoid exploitation of fellow-Israelites, and to promote their good.

25:17–19 The memory of Amalek. The harsh sentence on the Amalekites recalls their attack on the Israelites on their journey from Egypt (Ex. 17:8–16). This attempt to stop Israel reaching the promised land makes them similar to Moab and Ammon, who were permanently excluded from fellowship with Israel for this same reason (23:3–5). Amalek's crime seems to be judged especially serious because of the

methods used. The Lord's enmity with them is permanent. In due course, Saul is instructed to put the decree against them into effect (1 Sa. 15:2).

The present command may be intended to round off the long collection of laws which began at ch. 12; its reference to *rest from all the enemies* (19) recalls 12:9.

26:1–15 Firstfruits and third-year tithe. We have seen that the body of laws which began at ch. 12 has been drawing to a close with the command to remove the memory of Amalek (25:17–19). It is now formally rounded off in this chapter with instructions about two ceremonies. These are hardly new material, but are placed here for a particular reason.

The first ceremony is that of *firstfruits*, or the offering of the first ripe produce in early summer. This would normally happen at the Feast of Weeks (Lv 23:15, 20; Nu. 28:26). Deuteronomy's law about the Feast of Weeks (16:9–12) did not expressly mention the firstfruits, no doubt because this passage was being deliberately kept for its present place in the book.

The reason for keeping it until now is that the offering of the firstfruits had special significance the first time that it was done in the new land. The present law is thinking primarily of that very first offering of the fruits of harvest which was made by the people which God had taken from slavery, and then from desert wandering, to being a people with a land of its own. While Israel was to bring its firstfruits regularly throughout its history, there is something specially moving about this ceremony (a little like the first American Thanksgiving) as a token of God's keeping of his promises.

The ceremony involves a kind of confession of faith which recognizes this faithfulness of God and contains the bones of the story of the making of Israel. It begins by remembering Jacob, the ancestor of Israel, called here *a wandering Aramean* (5). The phrase refers to his relatively unsettled life and migration to Egypt, and also to his years spent in the area of Aram, or Syria, where he married Rachel and Leah, daughters of Laban the Aramean (Gn. 28:5; 29). The confession continues by recalling the migration to Egypt, when the people of Jacob were 'few in number' (Gn. 46:8–27), the oppression by the Egyptians, the deliverance by the mighty acts of God and the final arrival in the land itself (5–9). It may seem odd that the covenant on Horeb is not mentioned. But the emphasis falls squarely on the story of promise, going back to the forefathers of Israel (Gn. 12:1) and now gloriously fulfilled. The ceremony was to happen at the central place of worship (2), and the usual notes of rejoicing and of help for the needy are present (11).

A second ceremony is now envisaged (12–15), namely the tithe of the third year, already met in 14:28–29 (see comment there). Like the firstfruits, this too is not actually a new command. It is repeated here perhaps with a view to the first observance of it in the land, and because it is typical of the spirit of the laws. That is, that the life of Israel, including the rituals of worship, centred on mercy and justice. The concern for the poor is in fact shared by the two rituals provided for in this chapter.

The tithe of the third year is accompanied by a declaration that the worshipper has fulfilled his obligations, first in bringing the tithe itself (here called the *sacred portion*), and then in keeping all God's commandments (13). The point of v 14a is to ensure that the food offered for the tithe had been handled in a ritually correct way. Food might become *unclean* through contact, even indirect, with a dead body, and this would apply to food eaten by one who was in mourning. Offering *to the dead* is unclear; it may refer to a practice in Canaanite religion, perhaps an offering to Baal himself, or it may simply be the giving of food to mourners in sympathy (Je. 16:7), which would be unclean for the reason just mentioned.

The ceremony closes with a prayer which recognizes two facts, both important in the theology of Deuteronomy in general; that God is spiritual and does not actually 'dwell' in the place of worship which he himself has caused to be built for him on earth (see also 1 Ki. 8:27–30); and that the good things which the people enjoy in the land are entirely due to God's gift, not their own strength (see 8:17–18). The long section of laws closes suitably on this strong note of the land as a gift.

26:16–19 The covenant agreement

This short passage sums up the obligations which both parties to the covenant have towards each other. The word *today* is typical of the book's preaching; here it refers to the time on the plains of Moab when the people formally accepted the words they had heard from Moses. The Lord commands (16), the people agree to follow (17), and the Lord undertakes that they will be his specially chosen people (18–19; *cf.* 7:6). There is nothing particularly binding about the order in which these ideas come; they come rather differently in ch. 7. Furthermore, the chosenness of Israel is for the purpose of being a holy people that sets forth God in the world; ultimately it will mean that this people has been chosen to bring Christ to the world – though, paradoxically, only because of their failure to keep the covenant. Nevertheless,

the elements of covenant are here: the mutual, heartfelt obligation of God and his people, for the honour of God's name and the benefit of the people themselves (*cf.* Lv. 26:12).

27:1–26 Writing down the laws

27:1–8 The altar on Mt Ebal. Instructions for two ceremonies now follow, to be held on Mt Ebal and, in the second case, Mt Gerizim also. These are mountains near Shechem, close to the centre of the promised land, and the ceremonies were to take place soon after the people had gone into it. The first ceremony (already foreshadowed in 11:26–32) consisted of setting up stones on Mt Ebal, containing *all the words of this law*, possibly meaning chs. 1 – 26 as a whole. The stones thus inscribed were to be a permanent reminder of them.

The setting up of the stones was to be solemnly marked by a sacrifice, for which an altar was to be separately erected. It is not likely that Shechem was thus marked out as the central place of worship which the Lord was to choose and which Israel was to seek (12:5); rather, this act of worship on Mt Ebal was a unique event marking the confirmation of the covenant at the beginning of the people's life in the land. For the rules for building the altar see also Ex. 20:24–25.

In this whole ceremony Deuteronomy is once again like an ancient treaty, in which a copy of its terms was placed in the temple of the god of each of the parties, in a ceremony accompanied by sacrifices. The ceremony was in fact carried out by Joshua in due course (Jos. 8:30–35).

27:9–26 Curses from Mt Ebal. Moses and the priests prepared the gathered tribes for the second ceremony on the mountains at Shechem. Treaties in the ancient world were often accompanied by a solemn declaration of blessings and curses. These were to be said (or perhaps echoed) by groupings of the tribes on the two mountains (12–13). The passage records for us, in the event, only the curses, said, not by the tribes on Mt Ebal, but by the *Levites* – presumably a group of these specially designated for the task, and probably stationed between the two mountains, and around the ark (the tribe of Levi as such was gathered on Mt Gerizim for the blessing). The ceremony is described in Jos. 8:33. We must assume that blessings corresponding to the curses recorded were also intended to be said.

The curses themselves are based on laws from other parts of the Pentateuch, not always from Deuteronomy. For example, the curse for misleading the blind (18) and those invoked for bestiality and certain unnatural sexual relations (21–23) come from Leviticus (Lv. 19:14; 18:9, 17, 23). The curses, then, are not a summary of Deuteronomy's laws in particular, though a number of them echo important deuteronomic concerns (*e.g.* vs 15, 19, 26). They all stand more or less close, however, to the Ten Commandments: the curses in vs 15, 16, 24 are strikingly so; those in vs 17, 18, 20–23, 25 are inferences from the Commandments, as are many of the laws of the OT. They may be united further by the idea of secrecy; even when someone flouts God's laws in secret and is apparently beyond the reach of the processes of law, God will pursue the criminal and punish him (note the phrase *in secret*; 15, 24).

The curses recorded here differ from those in ch. 28 in the following ways. First, they are directed against individuals who break various laws, and have the effect of dissociating them from the people. They are like the process of law in the sense that they aim to 'purge the evil' from the people and the land, so that the covenant might continue (22:21c). In covering secret offences they are like the law for the unsolved murder (21:1–9). Secondly, they focus on the nature of the sin or crime. The curses and blessings in ch. 28, on the other hand, relate not to individual crimes, but to apostasy of the people as a whole, and they focus (in the case of such apostasy) on the punishment itself. Thirdly, they are intended for the particular ceremony on Mts Ebal and Gerizim, while the curses and blessings that follow are part of Moses' preaching of the covenant on the plains of Moab.

28:1–68 Blessings and curses

28:1–14 The covenant blessings. Moses continued his preaching of the covenant in Moab with the blessings for keeping it and the curses which would follow if it was broken. Again the pattern of the ancient treaty is followed, where such blessings and curses, often rather similar in substance, are the motivations to loyalty.

The blessings relate to familiar themes of the book: Israel as chosen people (1, 9–10, 13; *cf.* 7:6; 26:19), rest from enemies (7; *cf.* 12:9), and prosperity (3–6, 8, 11–12). The picture is of a people roundly blessed by God. The concerns are those of every people in every place and time.

They could not, however, be taken for granted in the ancient Mediterranean world. Political instability was normal, and the failure of a harvest, a permanent worry, could plunge many into poverty and ruin. All ancient nations put fertility and victory over enemies at the heart of their religions. Baal was believed above all to ensure the former (see Ho. 2:5, 8).

In its blessings (and indeed its curses) Deuteronomy aims to show that it is the Lord

and not Baal who provides these things. Furthermore, in matters of life and death, it is not the desperate persuasion of magic, ritual prostitution and idolatry that brings security, but quiet obedience to the word of the one true and just God, whose whole desire is to bless and not to torment. The blessings and curses are an important part of Deuteronomy's teaching that God's universe is rational and moral. Human beings are not cut loose on a sea of doubt and danger. They can have confidence about the fundamental things in life because they know what God is like; they may indeed know God himself.

28:15–68 The covenant curses. The curses occupy rather more space than the blessings, presumably to stress the solemnity of failure to keep the covenant. They are in essence the opposite of the picture of blessedness that went before, an unflinching portrayal of all human woe.

The first group of curses (15–19) is an echo of the blessings in vs 3–6. Here is misery in the regular routines of life, affecting basic necessities, and the well-being of families – every part and moment of life.

Life is pictured (20–24) in all its uncertainty, subject to sudden ruin, disease and drought. Where the covenant is not kept, there are no 'everlasting arms' (33:27) to protect from these things. Nor is there safety from enemies, one of the great promises of the covenant (12:9); rather, the apostate people is exposed to defeat (*cf.* v 25 with v 7; the people's state in v 26 is probably a result of defeat). The Lord, far from bearing his people as a father bears his child (1:31), now seems to be actively hostile to them, bringing upon them the ills he had once rescued them from (27–29). Vs 30–35 focus on a failure to enjoy those very things which the law had safeguarded. Where men had been exempted from military service in order to build a life for their families, and simply to enjoy God's blessings, now the delights of wife, children, house, vineyard, herd and flock slip through the fingers, and are enjoyed by others. This is the reverse of the unmerited wealth in 6:10–11.

The miseries rehearsed already are so severe chiefly because there is no hope of deliverance. Much can be endured if there are grounds for hope in God. Here, however, the grim truth is that he has withdrawn his help. There is no covenantal hope for those who have forsaken the covenant.

On the contrary, the prospects for the apostate people are bleak. From the general pictures of wretchedness, the focus now falls on future historical events, which will bring the downfall of the people. These are intermingled with other glimpses of more ordinary deprivations, as in vs 38–44. Contrast the saying about the 'head and the tail' (43–44) with v 13; 26:19; and notice how the 'signs and wonders' of Israel's former victory are now turned against them (46; *cf.* 26:8). Pictures of defeat and exile now come into focus. Vs 36–37 proclaim it in general terms; vs 49–57 portray the horrors of siege, where people are reduced to the worst kind of barbarism. Finally, the misery of exile itself is depicted (64–68). It is seen, figuratively, as a return to Egypt (68), although in fact it would be inflicted on the larger, northern part of Israel, centuries after Moses, by Assyria, and on Judah, later still, by King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon.

Exile is the worst possible covenantal curse. It is seen, in fact, in vs 58–63, as a complete reversal and undoing of all the promised blessings of the covenant, and all that the Lord had won for his people. Notice how plagues come on Israel (59), where they had once come on Egypt; the diseases of Egypt, once left behind (7:15), now reappear (60). The promise of a numerous people in its own land is abandoned (62–63; *cf.* Gn. 15:5, 7). The life of Israel with the Lord was closely bound up with the land. Its loss is the climax of the falling of the curses on the people. When it comes, it will pose the question, is there a future for this people?

The blessings and curses can seem a somewhat crude way to motivate the people to keep the covenant. They do affirm important things, however. The nations around Israel believed in an unpredictable universe, in which many gods exerted influence on events, and could do so arbitrarily, without moral principle. Israel, in covenant with God, knew that he alone controlled events, and that he would always act in accordance with his revealed character. The curses show a knowledge, perhaps a fear, of the worst things that can happen to human societies. But the fact that it is God who rules over all eventualities in human life allows for a kind of hope which was impossible for those who did not know him.

The motivating use of reward and punishment is not confined to the OT, but rooted also in the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 5:17–30; 25:31–46).

29:1 – 30:20 Moses' third address

29:1–29 The covenant broken

The next two chapters have their own introduction, and are often referred to as Moses' third address. However, it is not completely separate from the preceding long address (which began at 4:44). Indeed, as the opening words of the book (1:1–5) looked forward to Moses' preaching of the covenant, so now this new

beginning (29:1) looks back upon it. As in 5:2–3, the covenant at Horeb is seen as being effective now in the lives of the next generation; here indeed, the preaching of Moses is actually seen as a further covenant, additional to that made at Horeb, though dependent upon it. In this way, Deuteronomy not only recalls the covenant, but is itself a document of covenant-renewal. No generation can ever take the covenant with the Lord for granted, but must always make it its own, by a fresh commitment.

The preaching in ch. 29 echoes themes already familiar from other parts of the book. First (2–8), Moses recalls all the Lord's care for the people in bringing them to the land. The verses contain a brief summary of the record of the journey to the edge of the land found in chs. 1–3. The extraordinary power of God shown on the journey out of Egypt is remembered in vs 5–6 (*cf.* 26:8), and vs 7–8 refer to the taking of the land east of the Jordan, more fully recorded in 2:26 – 3:28.

A note of caution is sounded in v 4. The people should have seen and heard enough to be able to understand and embrace the covenant. The laws themselves, which Moses gave them, were enough to make them wise (4:6). Yet Moses knew that they were not yet wise. He may have meant by this only that it would take time for them to realize how good and essential to full life the laws of God are, and how crucial it would be to observe them. We cannot help wondering, however, not for the first time, about whether Israel would have the character to be faithful covenant partners (see also 9:4–6, and comments).

The perspective in vs 9–15 is that of all God's past dealings with his people, from the promise to the forefathers (13). The stress, however, is strongly on the present need to obey (10, 14–15). The covenant also affects every member of the community, including even the resident alien (11), to whom the people have been commanded to show kindness (14:28–29).

The fatal danger of being lured into false worship is returned to (16–21). Behind this concern lies the first commandment, loyalty to the Lord alone (5:7), without which no life with him is possible. For this reason, opposition to false worship is a major theme in Deuteronomy (7:1–5; 12:1–4), and the sin of persuading others to take part in such worship seen as extremely grave (ch. 13). One of the worst moral dangers is the belief that one's actions in defiance of God's law will have no consequences. This is both unbelief and a foolish trust in one's own strength. The one who leads astray to other gods is here pictured as wholly deluded himself, thinking he can bring blessing and peace to himself when these are the gifts of God alone (19). His delusion, however, is not an excuse, for it comes from a habit of thought which has been learned and persisted with. And, therefore, because of the evil itself, and because of its danger to God's people, he is liable to the severest punishment (20–21).

The last part of the chapter (22–28) seems to take for granted that the curses of the covenant will indeed fall in due course on the people. Its perspective is that of the exile. The devastation of the land is compared with that of Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbouring cities (Gn. 14:8; 19), which had become bywords for the severest judgment (*cf.* Is. 1:7; Ho. 11:8). It must have been shocking for God's own people to hear that they might receive a judgment like that of those nations, which they were accustomed to think of as utterly wicked. The point of vs 25–28 is that the people are in this condition, not because their God is weak, but rather because he himself has brought upon them the curses of his own covenant with them. It is ironic that this generation's own descendants (22), presumably refugees from exile, should witness the devastation. If the generations of Israel had been properly instructed the disaster would not have occurred (*cf.* 6:7).

The final verse (29) means that the future is yet hidden; there is no necessity (after all) for these curses to fall. What *is* known to the people is the laws of God. These are all they need for life.

30:1–20 The covenant renewed

30:1–10 Returning to the Lord. The covenant curses in ch. 28 come to a climax with the threat of Israel's exile from her land (64–68), and the preaching in ch. 29 seems to suggest that this curse is likely. Moses then went a stage further, for these verses look to a future time when the exile has become a reality. The first verse supposes that the blessings and the curses have come in sequence. That is, they look forward to a time when the people, having first enjoyed the blessings of the land (which in Moses' day they were about to enter), in due course experience the curses of the covenant because they have failed to keep the covenant. This is a new situation that the preaching of the covenant is considering, for up till now it has concentrated on persuading the people to be faithful, and thus to avoid the disaster altogether.

The present passage shows, however, that even if the curses of the covenant should be invoked, that will not necessarily be the end of the story of God and his people. The grace of God has been shown marvellously to Israel in his choice of them and his making of a covenant with them in the first place, but it has not been exhausted even by these acts of love.

There is a future for the people of God. It does not follow automatically, however. A condition is attached, namely heartfelt repentance (2). The restoration of the people will be like their first blessing in that it involves both promises (land, population, prosperity; vs 5, 9) and commands (6b, 8, 10). Can this new arrangement, however, have any more success than the first? A new element in this passage recognizes the problem.

The new element is that the Lord is seen here taking a decisive new part in their fortunes. It will be by his power that they will be restored to their land. (This is the meaning, in effect, of the phrase *restore your fortunes*; v 3, see also Je. 29:14; 30:3.) Not only this, however, but he will create in them a new ability to be faithful. This is implied by the phrase: *The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts* (6); the same figure of speech in 10:16 had simply been an exhortation. In some mysterious way the Lord will renew the relationship to make his people faithful (though their own need to repent is not bypassed; v 2). This is without lessening the need for their real obedience; they are still responsible for their life with him. The point may be understood in the light of the NT teaching about the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling Christians to overcome their sinful nature (Rom. 8:9–27; Gal. 5:16–25).

30:11–20 The word is near. The final verses in the chapter come back to the present, as it were, with the typical stress in this book on *today* (15). They show that the people have in fact a real choice, and that faithfulness is not beyond their reach. The imaginary journeys up to heaven or across the sea to seek the truth (12–13) reflect the feeling of many ancient people that the meaning of life was a dark mystery which had to be teased from the gods. On the contrary, the truth about life and death, good and evil, is contained in the words which God has spoken to his people through Moses (14). There is no excuse for failure to respond, but rather a straight choice, of the most solemn kind, between life and blessing and death and destruction (v 15 – elaborated in vs 16–18). The Israelites understood this on the level of prosperity in the land they were about to enter (20b). The principle, however, is an enduring one for all people, embracing life in this age and in the one to come. For it is the Lord himself who is life (20), and he does not pass away.

31:1 – 34:12 From Moses to Joshua

31:1–8 Moses' charge to Joshua

Moses' main speeches are over. The time for action is very close; the promises are soon to be fulfilled. The rest of Deuteronomy is taken up with the handing over of leadership by Moses to Joshua, with farewell speeches and with the account of Moses' death.

The present passage reminds us that the long addresses of Moses took place on the plains of Moab. Part of the land had already been taken, namely that part that lay east of the Jordan, and some of the enemies of the people had already been defeated (Sihon and Og; *cf.* 2:24 – 3:11). The task remained to be finished, but God had told Moses that his own part in it, and his life, would end east of the Jordan (1:37–38; 3:23–29).

God committed himself to give the people victory just as he had done in the past (3). Their part was to show faith and courage (6, 8), the area in which they once failed badly, delaying their taking of the land (1:26–36). Their conquest of the remaining peoples must be complete (5b; *cf.* 2:33–34; 7:1–5), because of the dangers their false religion would pose if they were allowed to remain among the Israelites. The whole passage is framed by assurances of God's presence (3, 8). His people can indeed have courage, because he has promised his presence, and he cannot fail.

31:9–13 Reading the law

Moses solemnly wrote down the words of the law which he had spoken. Perhaps he had been doing this during the time in which he gave the addresses. It is clear that the words were intended to be written and not just preached: the Lord had already commanded that they be written on stones in a ceremony on Mt Ebal (27:1–8). It is also implied by the treaty form that the words should be preserved so that the covenant might be renewed from time to time. Moses entrusted the written document to the Levites who carried the ark. The ark was the sign of God's presence among his people. When the words of the covenant were kept with the ark it meant that the presence of God could not be taken for granted merely because of the possession of something visible and tangible. The same point would be made frequently by the prophets, who saw a danger that even the temple could become a source of falsely based trust (Je. 7:1–15).

The words of the law were, of course, to be remembered and taught constantly; this indeed is one of the great themes of the book (6:6–9, 20–25). Here, however, an extra provision was made, namely for a solemn reading of the whole law every seven years at the Feast of Tabernacles (16:13–17). This would be a strong symbol that the whole people (including resident aliens, *cf.* 29:11) was subject to the commands of God. How far this was practised during Israel's history is not known; it may well have been an early victim of the religious decline

which had already set in during the period of the judges. It is possible that King Josiah's reading of the law (2 Ki. 23:1–3) was an attempt to revive the practice – belatedly!

31:14–29 Israel's unfaithfulness predicted.

There followed a solemn ceremony of commissioning, at the tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting (where the ark had been kept during the time in the desert), in which the Lord passed the leadership from Moses to Joshua. The Lord's presence was experienced in the cloud which stood at the entrance to the Tent (15). Formerly this had been the special privilege of Moses (Ex. 33:7–11); now it was extended to his successor.

The Lord spoke first to Moses, and told of a time when the people would indeed forsake him and the covenant (16). Vs 17–18 summarize the curses which must follow (28:15–68), though the people's response to their due punishment sounds like an accusation (17b). Because the Lord knew that Israel had a heart to disobey him (21b) he told Moses to write down a song (contained in 32:1–43) which would serve as an accusation of unfaithfulness. Moses did so and taught it to Israel. They have by now been well warned, not only of the consequences of failure to keep the covenant, but of their weakness and liability to go astray.

The Lord then addressed Joshua with the familiar command to be courageous (23). He was well qualified to receive this charge, for he had already won God's approval as one of the spies who was not overawed by the strength of the enemy (Nu. 14:30, 38).

Finally, we are told again that Moses gave the written copy of his words (now called the *Book of the Law*, *cf.* 2 Ki. 22:8) to the Levites (25–26, *cf.* v 9), and ordered them to assemble the tribes to hear the song. The tone is rather pessimistic (like 29:22–28, and see 30:1). Moses believed that the people would certainly fail to keep the covenant, because of what he himself had seen of them (27; see especially the story of the great apostasy at Horeb, Ex. 32; Dt. 9:7–29). The curses of the covenant must surely fall.

31:30–32:43 Moses' song and final exhortation

Moses then spoke the words of the *song* which had been given to him by God (31:19) to warn Israel against being disloyal to him and his ways. The song is rather different from the preaching style found in most of the rest of the book. It is, in contrast, poetic, and in both substance and style it anticipates passages in the Psalms and the prophetic books.

The opening verses (1–3) are a kind of call to worship (*cf.* Ps. 29:1–2), announcing praise of God. They also show that the song will function as a kind of witness to the covenant that has been made. This is implied by the appeal to the heavens and the earth to listen to the words that will be spoken (*cf.* 30:19). Witnesses, usually gods of the nations concerned, played an important part in ancient Near Eastern treaties. Since monotheistic Israel cannot call on other gods as witnesses, Moses called, picturesquely, on the heavens and earth instead.

The next section (4–14) turns to praising God. As *the Rock* he is the one who saves, and in whom refuge can safely be taken (Ps. 18:2). His truth and righteousness (or straight dealing) are fundamental qualities (Ps. 25:8–10; 33:4; Jn. 14:6; Rev. 15:3; 19:11). These have been shown in his kindness to Israel from the beginning of his dealings with them (6b–14), despite the people's ingratitude (5–6a). God is remembered here as the *Creator*, especially of Israel (*cf.* Is. 43:15), and as their *Father*. The latter is a more intimate term than much covenantal language, but is an important note in the story of God's love for his people (*cf.* 1:31; also Ex. 4:22; Ho. 11:1).

The election of Israel is then put in the context of God's creation of the whole world, and his power in the lives of all nations (8); this note was also struck in the story of the conquest of the land east of Jordan (2:5, 9, 19). (The use of the name *the Most High* here alongside God's personal name Yahweh *the LORD* is for stylistic variation. It is one of the names for God used in Genesis, *e.g.* Gn. 14:22, and is suitable for asserting his complete supremacy in all creation.) Israel (*Jacob*), however, has a special place in his purposes (9). The 'finding' of Israel in a barren land (10) is a poetic way of remembering the wilderness period, which passes over many of the details of that story, including the time in Egypt itself. The beautiful image of the eagle and its young carries the ideas of both loving care and training for life (the eagle is pictured training its young for flight). These ideas, together with the oneness of God (12; *cf.* 6:4; Is. 43:10–12) and his rich provision for the people (13–14; *cf.* 8:7–10) are important generally in the book.

Israel's tendency to rebel against God, despite his goodness, is signalled even before these words of praise have been uttered (5–6a). Israel's rebellion shows an ingratitude that is deeply unnatural (*cf.* Is. 1:2). The point is now elaborated in vs 15–18. *Jeshurun* (15) is a poetic name for Israel. The rebellion takes the form, essentially, of idolatry. This has been seen throughout Deuteronomy as the supreme sin (5:7; 13). The condemnation of it here expresses God's anger vividly, and with some of the contempt shown by the prophets for *gods*

who are no gods at all (17; *cf.* Is. 44:9–20; Je. 10:11). These so-called gods are impostors who have absolutely no 'track-record' with Israel; how much the true God contrasts with them, for he has lavished care and love on his people, with great patience, over generations. The fickleness of the people could not be more savagely depicted.

The note then turns to one of judgment (19–27). As Israel turned from the Lord, so he will turn from them. As he has been made *jealous* (*cf.* 5:9) and angry, he will make them *envious* and angry in return (21). There is thus a rightness, a 'poetry', about this judgment. The worst of it will be that he will be hidden from them, he who has so graciously revealed himself in all the words which he has spoken through Moses. The hiddenness of God is the thing which the Psalmists find hardest (Ps. 10:1; 13:1). The means of judgment, furthermore, will be a people that has no understanding, that is, they have not had the privilege of knowing the laws which the Lord revealed to Israel (4:6–8; 29:4) – a people whose god is no god. There is heavy irony in Israel being subdued by a people such as this. The punishments (23–26) are reminiscent of the curses of the covenant (28:15–68). The Lord himself finds the idea of Israel's defeat by a godless people repugnant (27). Such a thing can only dishonour his own name in the world.

The theme of the enemies themselves is then taken further (28–33). It is nonsensical that a nation which has neither the wisdom of God (*cf.* v 21) nor the promise of his going with them should overcome God's own people – which has these privileges. The success and prosperity of such a nation is false in the end, because it is false at its roots (32–33). For this reason, the nation which God uses for judgment will in due course fall itself. Such a nation does not act out of zeal for God, but only for its own gain. The judgment that falls on the instrument of judgment is an assurance to Israel of the justice of God even when he judges them, and is a typical theme in prophecy (Is. 10:5–19; Je. 25:8–14). This is the vengeance of God (35). It is vengeance for the sake of justice, and for the final salvation of God's people. It will finally right all wrongs (Rom. 12:19). Only such vengeance counts; any other kind is mere self-destructive hatred.

The last section of the song is also the last phase in the story of God's dealings with his people, their revival. Judgment is now at last judgment in their favour (36), the judgment that the pious in Israel long for when they are oppressed (Ps. 7:6–11). It comes after Israel has reached its lowest point. In history, this will be the Babylonian exile. It will have a positive function, namely to demonstrate to the people that foreign gods, which have seemed so powerful and attractive, are indeed powerless (*cf.* Is. 46:1–2). The Lord alone is God (39; *cf.* Is. 41:4; 43:10). And he is so powerful that he can 'make alive' even after he has 'killed' (*cf.* Ho. 6:1). This refers to the historical restoration of the Jewish exiles to their land after the exile (*cf.* 30:3–5). In a profound sense, it points to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, with whom God raises all the redeemed from the death of sin to the life of the new age with him (Eph. 2:1–7). The song, which has struck such a sombre note throughout, ends with a cry of praise for the God who can and will save his people in the end, even from their own sins.

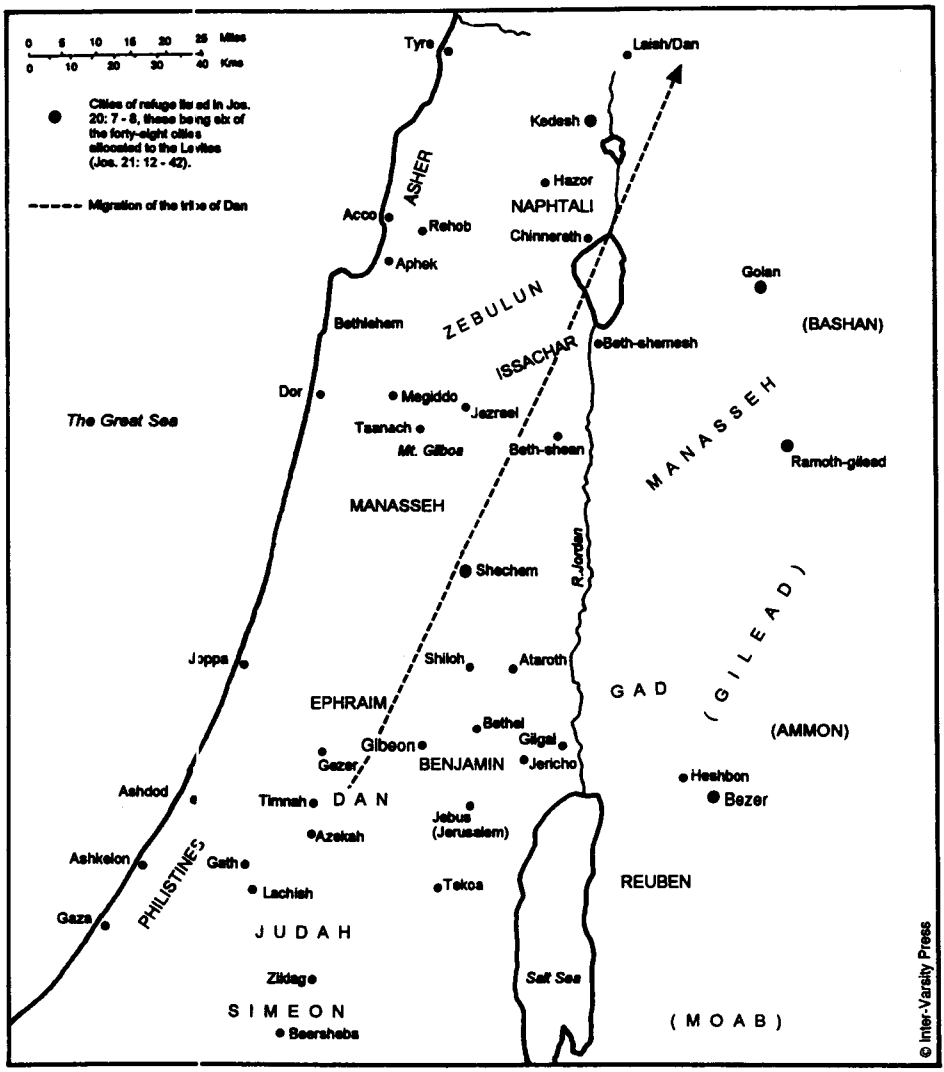
32:44–52 Moses is prepared for his death

Moses finally called the people to take very seriously all the words he had spoken to them (not just the song), reminding them that they are the words of life (see 4:1). He was now at the end of his life. The Lord told him to ascend Mt Nebo, from where he would have a panoramic view, heart-rending for him, of the land which had been the purpose of his whole life, but on which he would not set foot. There is a reminder once more of the reason for this (51; see Nu. 20:10–13).

33:1–29 Moses blesses the people

33:1–6 Introductory blessing. Before his death Moses gave his blessing to the tribes of Israel. It is in some ways like the blessing which Jacob pronounced on his sons (the fathers of the tribes) at the end of his life (Gn. 49). Isaac had also blessed Jacob and Esau (Gn. 27:27–29, 39–40). It was properly a father's privilege. Moses may be depicted here as a 'father' of Israel in a figurative sense. He had in any case a special authority to bless the people because he was *the man of God* (1; *cf.* the heading of Ps. 90), a term used for prophets (1 Ki. 17:18), among whom Moses himself was pre-eminent.

The blessing opens and closes with passages (2–5, 26–29) which praise God, and which focus especially on the story of the exodus from Egypt. This is the point of the Lord's 'coming' from *Sinai*, where the law was given (usually called 'Horeb' in Deuteronomy), and of the references to places in the desert on the way (2). The idea of the Lord's love for the people (3) belongs to the whole theology of choice or election (note again the closeness of choice and love in 7:6–7). That relationship was marked by the giving of the law through Moses (4), and the two things together – the powerful rescue of the people from slavery in Egypt and the giving of his law – establish the Lord as Israel's king (5; see the comments on 17:14–20).



Israel's tribal territories.

The reference to Moses in the third person (4) is a difficulty in a passage which is presented as his own words. One suggestion is that vs 3b–5 are a response of the people to Moses' opening words, preceding the blessings themselves (P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* [Eerdmans, 1976], p. 392). Moses' reference to himself in the third person, however, is not unthinkable, if it is seen as coming from beyond his own authority, and as something that is to be remembered and repeated in Israel.

33:6 The blessing of Reuben. The brief blessing of Reuben is hardly more than a prayer that the tribe should continue to exist. In the light of Gn. 49:4 this was no small thing for Reuben. As a tribe it ceased to have, or probably never had, the pre-eminence due to the firstborn.

33:7 The blessing of Judah. This seems to be a prayer for their safety in battle, and that they would trust the Lord for victory. Moses' blessing does not explicitly give to Judah the pre-eminence that Jacob's appears to (Gn. 49:8–12).

33:8–11 The blessing of Levi. This blessing reflects the choice of the tribe of Levi to provide priests (10:8–9) for Israel. The

Thummim and Urim (usually in the reverse order, Ex. 28:30) were means by which particular enquiries were made of God. The 'testing' of Levi at Massah and Meribah is not recorded in the pentateuchal narrative, unless the tribe is considered to have been represented by Moses himself in the event in question (Ex. 17:1–7). V 9 recognizes Levi's zeal for the Lord, a higher loyalty than family ties. The point may be a general one, because of Levi's dedication to the work of priesthood, which meant having no tribal territory (see 18:2). There may be a more specific reference, however, to the zeal of the Levites following the incident of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:25–29). The tribe of Levi, as priests, had a special responsibility for the regular teaching of the law, which had been deposited with them for keeping with the ark of the covenant (31:9, 25). This was in addition to their duties in controlling and enabling the regular sacrificial worship of the people. The blessing of Levi is a prayer for his ability and protection in discharging his solemn duties.

33:12 The blessing of Benjamin. The blessing sees Benjamin as the beloved of God, perhaps reflecting his father Jacob's love for him. The Lord's dwelling *between his shoulders* refers to the location of Jerusalem in Benjamin's territory (*cf.* Jos. 15:8; 18:28) – *shoulders* being understood as ridges of mountains.

33:13–17 The blessing of Joseph. This is the most lyrical of the blessings, praying above all for plenty for the large tribe of Joseph. The poetry evokes a wide range of the parts of the natural world. V 12 refers to the importance of the dew as a natural means of irrigation in Israel, and also, poetically, to the ancient belief that the earth was fed by waters underneath it. Joseph would actually come to be regarded as two separate tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh (17), called after the two sons of Joseph himself. They occupied a large area in central Israel and to the east of the Jordan, including some of the most fertile land. Fruitfulness is prominent also in Jacob's blessing of this tribe (Gn. 49:22). The blessing pictures the tribe, finally, as powerful in war, and large in population (17).

33:18–19 The blessing of Zebulun and Issachar. The territories of these two tribes lay between the Mediterranean and the Sea of Galilee. Tribal maps based on the divisions in the book of Joshua indicate that neither bordered on the former and Issachar merely touched on the latter. The borders, however, are not easy to draw precisely from the data in Joshua, and indeed may have varied from time to time (*cf.* Gn. 49:13). In any case, the blessing pictures for these tribes a prosperity based on the seas, presumably from fishing and trade (19b). It also sees the tribes responding with proper gratitude to God, from whom all blessings come. The mountain (19) may be Mt Tabor (*cf.* Jdg. 4:6).

33:20–21 The blessing of Gad. Gad's territory lay east of the Jordan in good, fertile land. The opening line may preferably be read 'Blessed be the broad domain of Gad'. *He chose the best land* probably does not mean to imply that he grabbed the best for himself; the story of the occupation does not give this impression (3:12–16). The point is just that it is very good. The allusions to the tribe of Gad's fierceness may look forward to the noble part it would play in the taking of the land (Jos. 22:1–6).

33:22 The blessing of Dan. This brief saying suggests great future potential for Dan. The phrase *springing out of Bashan* is odd, as Dan never occupied territory there. The phrase may only be a continuation of the image of the springing cub. Alternatively, the word translated *Bashan* should perhaps be translated quite differently, 'viper', with the result: '[Dan] shies away from the viper', a picture of timidity (*cf.* Gn. 49:17).

33:23 The blessing of Naphtali. The brief blessing on Naphtali concerns only the extent of his land. The *lake* is the Sea of Galilee. Naphtali occupied land well to the north of this lake, but the southern part, along the shoreline, might well be judged its most fertile. The phrase *southward to the lake*, therefore, can be readily understood from the perspective of Naphtali itself, principally to the north of it.

33:24–25 **The blessing of Asher.** The oil in the blessing of Asher is olive oil, much prized in biblical times, for its uses in food preparation (Nu. 11:8), health (Mk. 6:13) and hygiene (2 Sa. 12:20). It is used by the biblical writers as a symbol of plenty and gladness (Ps. 104:15). The picture of bathing feet in oil is one of extravagance, betokening great prosperity. Asher is pictured as strongly defended, perhaps because, being located in the far north, it was liable to attack from enemies.

33:26–29 Conclusion. The twelfth brother, Simeon, is omitted. Simeon in fact disappeared as a separate tribe at an early stage after the occupation of the land, simply absorbed, it seems, by Judah.

The closing verses focus again on the whole purpose of the blessings, namely to pray for the people as they go into the land. The blessings have tended to stress prosperity and military strength – the capacity of the people both to hold the land and to defend it. These have been the dominant themes of the whole book. In returning to them, Moses celebrated the incomparability of the Lord (26).

34:1–12 The death of Moses

In obedience to God's command (32:48–52), Moses then climbed from the Moabite plain to the summit of Mt Nebo, and saw a panorama of the land unfold below him. He had long known – as we have from early in the book (1:37) – that he would not himself set foot on it. But God permitted him, nonetheless, to see the culmination of his life's work. We are hardly intended to think that Moses literally saw the whole land, from Dan in the far north to the Mediterranean in the west, and to the Negev, or southern wilderness. The full extent of the land is given, however, in order to affirm that what he saw was really what God had promised. God's action was truly suited to his word. The moment had come when the ancient promise to Abraham was to be fulfilled (4; *cf.* Gn. 12:1; 15:7).

The experience of Moses at this moment is too moving and poignant to be expressed adequately. The account of it, and of Moses' death which duly follows (5–8), is to the point, without elaboration or sentimentality. The restraint is the most fitting last respect to pay to one of the great biblical figures. Moses' death was not a tragedy. This is clear from the note about his strength in old age (7), and from his epitaph (10–12). His life was lived before God, in obedience to him and in fellowship with him. There was, in fact, none like Moses, neither before nor after, whether as prophet or as powerful leader – until the coming of the one who was 'more than a prophet', Jesus Christ. The final tribute to Moses was that he followed God faithfully to the end of his life.

Nor had Israel been left without help. Her real source of strength is in God, not in any human figure. In real life, there must be successions, and there is positive harm in overattachment to personalities. Israel continued to have the words which the Lord had spoken through Moses. And she also had a worthy new leader, Joshua (9), to whom it fell to lead the people into the next stage of her journey, and life with God.

Gordon McConville

JOSHUA

Introduction

Author and date

Scholars differ about both the date and authorship of this anonymous book because they use different methods.

On the issue of authorship some scholars, following the Talmud (*c.* AD 500), assign the book to Joshua himself. They support this by noting that Rahab is said to be still alive at the time of writing (6:25) and that the author, using 'we', includes himself among those that crossed the Jordan (5:1). The remark about Rahab in 6:25, however, may refer to her descendants, and other Hebrew texts read 'they', not 'we' in 5:1. Also, as in 5:6, the author could have used 'we' out of a sense of solidarity with the generation that entered the land.

The dating issue is sometimes also decided entirely on the basis of remarks within Joshua, and some scholars who use this method date the book some time between the deaths of Joshua and his contemporaries who outlived him (24:29–31) and the time of Samuel (*c.* 1050 BC). Because Sidon is reckoned as Phoenicia's leading city (11:8) and Tyre conquered it about 1200 BC, some favour that as the date of the book's completion. Other internal pointers to the book's date are that Jebus, Old Jerusalem, and Gezer are as yet unconquered (15:63; 16:10). Jerusalem eventually fell to David (2 Sa. 5:6–10) and Gezer to Solomon (1 Ki. 9:16). Also in 13:2–3 the Philistines, who invaded Judah's coastal plain in 1175 BC are present, though this could have been a later scribal addition.

More recently scholars have started to look outside the book itself to decide the issue of dating. Some of them see links between Joshua and the Pentateuch. They think there is a continuation of the Pentateuch's alleged literary strands: namely, E in chapters 2–11 and P in 13–22, with various additions from other sources. Others have reached the conclusion that in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings there is a more or less closed, or at least shaped, unity. The language, style and theology of these books support the conclusion that a so-called Deuteronomist (an individual or a school) gathered together a variety of sources from various periods and wove them into a comprehensive whole during the exile. This would mean that Joshua was written *c.* 550 BC. These books are linked together by overlapping conclusions and introductions. Jos. 1:1 matches Dt. 34:1–12, especially v 5, where Moses is called for the first time 'servant of the LORD'. That accolade is bestowed on Joshua, also for the first time, at the end of Joshua (24:29). The conclusion of Joshua (24:29–31) is repeated as part of the introduction to Judges (2:6–9). The Deuteronomist's style is most apparent in the farewell addresses by Moses (Dt. 31), Joshua (Jos. 23), Samuel (1 Sa. 12), David (1 Ki. 2:1–4) and Solomon (1 Ki. 8:54–61), capped by the editorial summary of the Deuteronomist himself (2 Ki. 17).

Jews have always recognized the unity of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, calling them the 'Former Prophets'. This arrangement has the advantages of calling attention to the integrity of each book and of distinguishing between the Pentateuch, which describes the organization of Israel as the people of God under the Mosaic covenant, and Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings which interpret the history of Israel in terms of that covenant. The modern approach however emphasizes the strong links between Deuteronomy and these books. G. J. Wenham has found five theological themes which bind Deuteronomy and Joshua together: the holy war of conquest, the distribution of the land, the unity of all Israel, Joshua as the successor of Moses, and the covenant.

The modern approach is also an advance on the traditional view because it observes sources within Joshua to Kings and highlights the Deuteronomist's theological use of them. Joshua explicitly mentions the Book of Jashar as a source (10:13), and some problems within the book are best explained by source analysis. For example, in 11:21 Joshua is described as driving the Anakites out of Hebron, but in 14:12 Caleb is credited with that feat. This difference is not a contradiction, for Joshua as head of the army could have been credited with his subordinate's achievements. But it may be best explained in terms of varying sources.

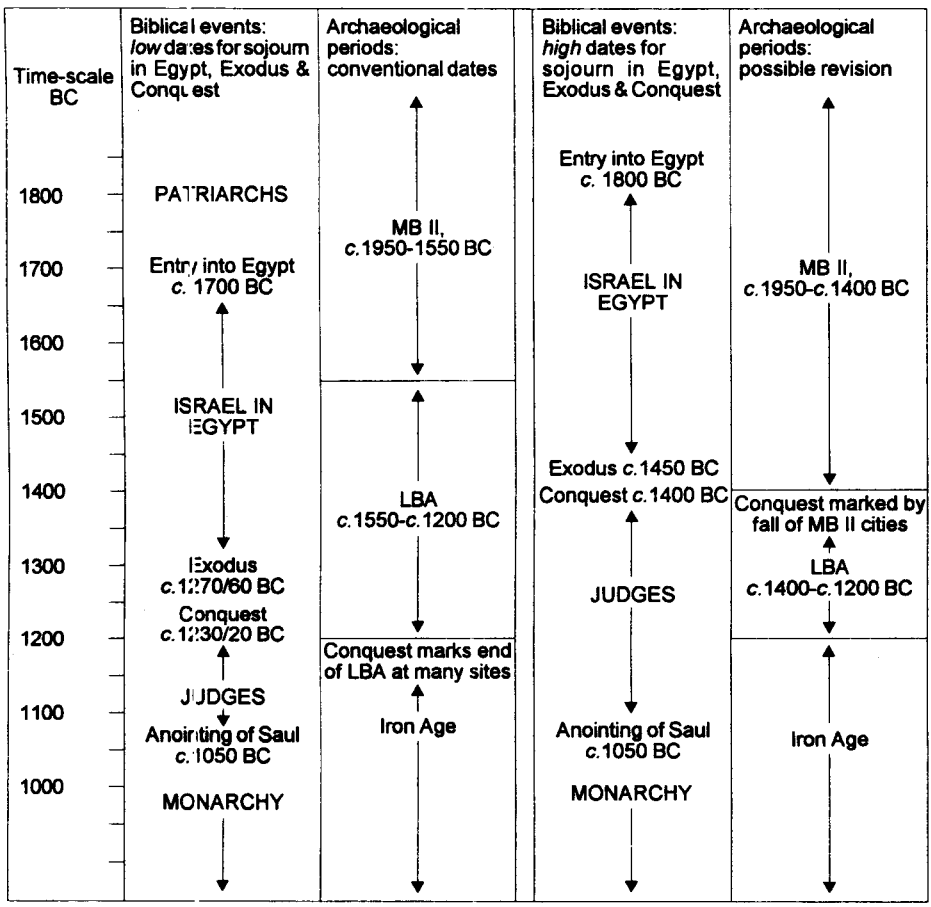
The Deuteronomist assumed his readers knew the earlier stories within the Pentateuch. For example, Joseph's bones are provided for in Gn. 50:25, taken out of Egypt in Ex. 13:19 and buried at Shechem in Jos. 24:32; and Caleb's promised inheritance in Nu. 14:24, 30 finds fulfilment in Jos. 14:6–15.

The date of the conquest

The attempt to date Israel's taking of the land is hampered by the nature of biblical history-writing, the way the Bible reckons dates, and the ambiguity of archaeological discoveries.

The men who compiled the Bible stories aimed primarily to teach theology, not to write about bare facts, so details are sometimes left out. Some reconstructions by modern historians of what actually happened, however, depart too radically from the Bible to be taken seriously.

By taking the figures given in 1 Ki. 6:1 and Jdg. 11:26 at face value, one could date the conquest *c.* 1400 BC. One cannot assume, however, that the Bible simply adds up the years in this way. Nevertheless, the archaeological evidence from Jericho and Hazor point to this date. At Jericho, the study of the ceramic remnants, royal scarabs, seismic activity in the region, destruction by fire and even ruins of toppled walls along with the use of carbon-14 dating marshals impressive evidence that the fortified city was finally destroyed about 1400. At Hazor, there are destruction levels at 1400, 1300, and 1230 BC. Almost all scholars assign the 1300 destruction to Pharaoh Seti I, leaving either of the others to Israel. The reference in Jdg. 4:2 to Hazor as a Canaanite city in opposition to Israel three or four generations *after* Joshua precludes the later date, unless one supposes either that the biblical narrative at Jdg. 4 is flawed or that the archaeological evidence is incomplete. Ai, if rightly identified, lacks evidence of an Israelite destruction, presenting a problem for either view (see on 7:2). J. Bimson has established 1400 BC as the date of the conquest on firmer ground by refining the dates of the archaeological periods in question.



Alternative suggestions for dating biblical events and archaeological periods in the second millennium BC. *(MB = Middle Bronze Age: LBA = Late Bronze Age.)*

On the other hand, the archaeological evidence from Pithom and Rameses in Egypt (Ex. 1:11), the lack of data corroborating established kingdoms of Edom and Moab east of the Jordan before the thirteenth century BC, and the hundreds of new settlements by pastoral nomads that sprang up in Israel at about 1200 in contrast to their absence in the earlier period, all favour dating the conquest in the second half of the thirteenth century.

The date of the conquest, however, does not really affect the theology or message of Joshua, as long as there was a conquest.

Theology

The book of Joshua is all about the promised land: its possession (chs. 1–12), its distribution (chs. 13–21) and its retention (chs. 22–24). On the other side, it is also about the dispossession of 'the wicked' from that land. The land fit for kings was given to a people fit to be kings (see Jos. 12).

The land as gift

The Creator of the whole earth (Pss. 24:1–2; 47:4) and unique Owner of Palestine (Lv. 25:23) made the patriarchs trustees of a land fit for kings, flowing with milk and honey (Dt. 31:20). He promised to give it to their descendants as a permanent inheritance (Gn. 17:8; Ex. 32:13). The occupation of the land, to be taken by stages (see 13:1–7), was launched dramatically by Joshua. It was then 'allotted' by God to Israel's tribes by casting lots (Nu. 33:50–54), and so became their inalienable possession which no-one could take forcibly from them. Only the Levites received no land of their own; instead they 'inherited' the LORD himself, opening the way to a spiritual understanding of the inheritance (13:14).

With Christ's resurrection and ascension and with the outpouring of the Spirit, it became clear that Joshua is a symbol of Christ and the land a symbol, a metaphor, of the church's salvation in Christ (*cf.* 1 Cor. 10:1–4). Both the land and the salvation in Christ are a gift (1:2, 6; *cf.* Rom. 6:23), possessed only through faith (1:7, 9; *cf.* Rom. 10:8–21; Eph. 1:8–9). They are both a place of blessing (Ex. 3:8; Nu. 13:27; Eph. 1:3–14), a home base of rest (Jos. 1:13; Heb. 4:1–11) and a holy place where one uniquely meets God (Ex. 15:17; Col. 3:1–4; 1 Tim. 2:5–6). They both also demand a life-style that conforms with God's law (1:7–8; 8:30–35; 1 Cor. 10:1–13). Through the new covenant Christ qualifies his church to live in this 'land' fit for kings (Ezk. 37:26). And yet, though the church today inherits eternal life and rest in Christ Jesus, after its resurrection it will enjoy a more solid 'land' appropriate to that state (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:50–54; Heb. 11:39–40). The 'land' remains a gift already received but not yet fully experienced.

Unity of the founding generation

The author aims to link Joshua with Moses and to identify the people that entered the land as the representatives of those that came out of Egypt (see 24:7, 17) Though the exodus and conquest lasted over two generations, the author of Joshua treats those founding generations as one. He links Moses and his assistant Joshua throughout the book. For example, God promised to be with both (1:5); both lead Israel across a formidable body of water that amazingly dries up and so are exalted in the eyes of the people (3:7); both take off their shoes in the presence of the LORD (5:13–15); both intercede for the people when they sin (7:7); both possess the land and distribute it (12:7–8; 14:1–5); both bless the people (22:6); and both mediate the old covenant (ch. 24). The generation under these two leaders saw the LORD's amazing wonders in the exodus and the conquest (24:7, 17) and entered into covenant with him; they are the first leaders of the nation ruled by God.

Unity of all Israel

The author is also concerned to portray the unity of the twelve tribes, using 'all Israel' and similar terms frequently (*e.g.* 3:1, 7, 17; 18:1; 22:14). The fighting men of the eastern tribes were not dismissed until after the conquest was completed (1:14–15; 22:1–9), and their misunderstood 'rival' altar caused consternation among the other nine-and-a-half tribes (22:10–34). Twelve men, one from each tribe, lifted a stone out of the Jordan to make a national memorial (4:1–9), and all the tribes renewed the Mosaic covenant at Shechem (8:33–34).

Covenant faithfulness

Joshua's generation proved the dominant theme of this history; namely, the Lord kept his promise to the patriarchs and gave Israel the land and rest. It is stated and restated at key points in the book: in the prologue before the conquest (1:1–9), after the conquest (11:23), and after the distribution of the land (21:43–45). The burial notices at the end of the book also symbolize this truth (24:28–33). This sacred history establishes Israel's confession, 'The LORD is God' (22:22), and the motivation for keeping his covenant (chs. 23–24). It encourages the faithful to possess the land that remains (13:1–7; 14:6–15; 19:49–50), while leaving the unfaithful without excuse (18:3), and sobers all with the dark realization that God also keeps the curses of his covenant (23:15–16; 24:19–24).

Israel for its part must fulfil its covenant obligations by taking, allotting, and retaining the land through the obedience of faith in the LORD, showing their faith in him by obeying his law.

Holy war

Obedience to the covenant involved Israel fighting according to the rules of holy war given in Deuteronomy. The LORD initiates the battle and, if Israel obeys wholeheartedly, ensures its success (1:2–9; *cf.* Nu. 27:18–21), intervening on occasion in the most amazing ways as at Jericho (6:20) and Gibeon (10:11, 14). While encouraging Israel to be strong in its faith in him, God destroys his enemies before battle begins by striking panic into their hearts (2:9–11, 24).

'To the victor belong the spoils', and so all the wicked Canaanites must be 'devoted' (Heb. *hērem*) to the LORD (6 17). The extermination of the Canaanites was designed to save Israel from temptation (Dt. 7:1–5). As G. A. Cooke describes it, 'anything which might endanger the religious life of the community was put out of harm's way by being prohibited to human use; to secure this effectively it must be utterly destroyed'. When Achan failed to devote to the LORD what was rightfully his, Achan and all he possessed were destroyed (7:15). Sometimes the LORD reserved the plunder to himself and at other times he rewarded his army with it (8:27). The Canaanites were exterminated because the righteous judgment of the Lord was at hand, not because of Israel's thirst for blood. The prostitute Rahab repented and found a permanent place in Israel (6:25). For the most part, however, God hardened the hearts of the Canaanites who were ripe for judgment (11:19–20). Their destruction prefigures the eternal punishment of the wicked (Mt. 25:46), as had the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah centuries before. Israel possessed their land because the Lord aimed to sanctify it. That is why the author places the account of the covenant renewal at Shechem right in the heart of the battle stories (8:30–34). If we do not recognize these parallels between Israel's judgment on the Canaanites and the last judgment we shall fail to see why Israel was instructed to act in this way.

Further reading

D. R. Davis, *No Falling Words: Expositions of the Book of Joshua* (Baker Book House, 1988).
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Commentary

1:1–18 Prologue

1:1–9 The Lord commands Joshua

1:1 Historical background. The reference to 'the death of Moses' (1) links the book of Joshua with Dt. 34:5 (*cf.* Jdg. 1:1; 2 Sa. 1:1; 2 Ki. 1:1) and signals the time for renewing the conquest. Moses is called *servant of the* LORD both to honour him and to legitimize his instructions to possess the land.

Moses renamed Hoshea (meaning 'Salvation') Joshua, which means 'The LORD is salvation' (Nu. 13:16). The name later became *yēšúa* whence the Greek *Iēsous*, and the English, 'Jesus'.

Joshua's title, *Moses' assistant* (*cf.* 1 Sa. 3:1; 1 Ki. 19:21), recalls that Joshua had been groomed for this leadership by gift, training and experience (*cf.* Ex. 17:8–15; 24:12–13; Nu. 14:6–12; 27:12–23; 32:12; Dt. 1:37–38; 34:9).

1:2–9 The Lord's command. The Lord's speech echoes those of Moses in Deuteronomy (*cf.* v 2 with Dt. 10:11; v 3 with Dt. 11:23–24; v 5a with Dt. 7:24; vs 5b–7a, 9, with Dt. 31:6–8). Vs. 7b–8 recall texts in Deuteronomy which identify it as the *Book of the Law* and stress the importance of meditating on and obeying this law (see Dt. 5:32–33; 30:10). The promise, *As I was with Moses, so I will be with you* (5), recalls God's response to Moses' objection in Ex. 3:12. The book of Joshua picks up where the Pentateuch left off.

The commands and promises in vs 2–9 set out the covenant relationship between God and his people. On God's side, he chose Israel to inherit the land (6). On Israel's side, they must now by faith claim the gift (3–4). It is not so much a matter of obedience, to *cross the Jordan*, important as that is, as a matter of trust in God (6–7, 9). He gives them reason to trust: his promised presence with them (5, 9b). Likewise the trusting church obeys its Lord's command to evangelize the world (Mt. 28:18–20). The command not to fear is a rule of holy war.

2–5 The first charge is to *cross the Jordan*. V 2 reads literally, 'Now arise, cross . . .' (*i.e.* 'cross immediately, do not delay'. Christ commands the church: 'Follow me', and he too allows no procrastination (*cf.* Lk. 9:59–62). In v 4 the outmost boundaries of the land are defined, though the southern boundary is sketchy. Only during the reign of Solomon did Israel control such an area (see 13:1–7). *The desert* refers to the eastern desert that begins in Trans-Jordan. *Lebanon* is included in the promised land in Jos. 13:5.

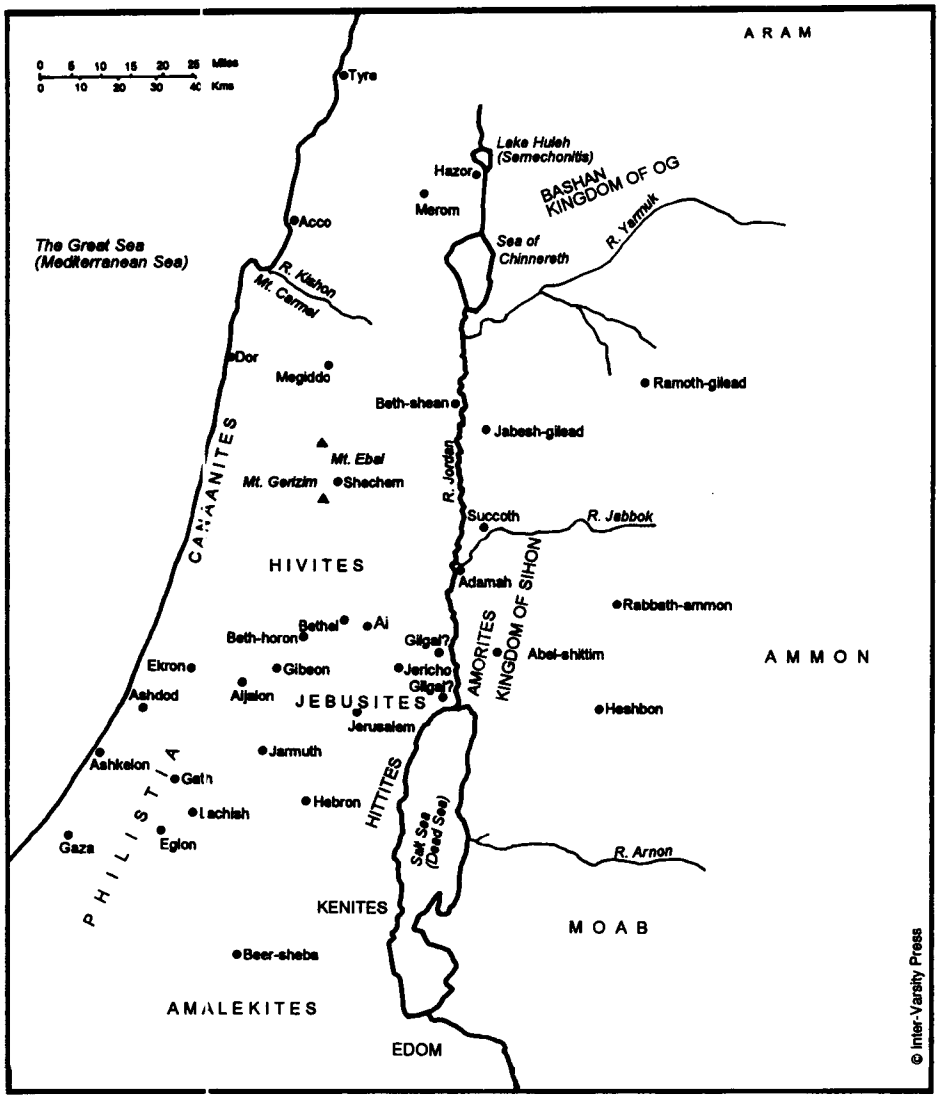
6 The second charge is to *inherit the land. Inherit* recalls God's grant of land to the patriarchs as a reward for their faithful service. Now Joshua must conquer (chs. 1–12) and distribute it (chs. 13–21).

7–9 The third charge, to *be courageous* and *meditate on the law* vs 7–8, shows that possessing the land depends on faith's obedience to the Book of the Law. Trust and obedience kiss, not fight (*cf.* Rom. 1:5; 16:26; Jas. 2:14–26). Though Joshua was groomed for this war, obedience, not might, guaranteed the success of the operation. Christians under the new covenant have the two-fold advantage that Christ satisfied the law's demands and promises (Mt. 5:17; Rom. 3:21–26) and through the Spirit has written the law upon their hearts (2 Cor. 3:3–6; Heb. 8:7–13; 10:15–18).

1:10–15 Joshua's charge to the people

Joshua's commands, both to the officers (10–11) and to the eastern tribes (12–15), echo Deuteronomy. Compare v 11 with *e.g.* Dt. 1:8; 4:1; 6:18; 8:1; 9:1, and, note that as the text itself states, Joshua's instruction to the eastern tribes is taken almost word for word from Moses' command (Dt 3:18–20; *cf.* Nu. 32).

1:10–11 Charge to the officers. The pattern of divine command followed now by Joshua's wholehearted and careful obedience shows how a holy war should be conducted. The narrator's concern with spiritual preparation, the real cause of victory, not with martial details, the apparent cause of success, is reflected in the lack of specificity about *supplies* in v 10 (covering everything needed for violent war) and the lack of detail in the command. Israel, now reckoned as an army *camp*, took three days (*i.e.* part of today, tomorrow, and part of the next day) to prepare itself for battle before breaking camp at Shittim (11; *cf.* Mi. 6:5). It takes time to ready oneself for battle (*cf.* Gal. 1:17–18). These *three days* prior to breaking up the



Canaan before the conquest.

camp, at the earliest 6 Nisan (April) (see 4:19), are not the same as the three days after they had left Shittim and camped at the Jordan itself (*cf.* 2:16, 22; 3:2).

1:12–15 Charge to the eastern tribes. God promised his people *rest*, that is, peace from enemy attacks, after taking possession of the land (13–15). The promise of *rest* comes out of the covenant relationship with God (Ex. 33:12–16). The rest into which Moses and Joshua led Israel prefigures the final and perfect rest into which Jesus leads his faithful church (Heb. 4:1–11).

1:16–18 The people's response to Joshua

The people responded with wholehearted faith and obedience (*whatever . . . wherever*), guaranteeing the continued success of the conquest. They promised to put the unfaithful to death and themselves commanded Joshua, *be strong and courageous*!

2:1 – 5:15 Entry into the land

This section shows how the Lord singlehandedly brought Israel into the land and how the nation was prepared spiritually for the battles ahead.

2:1–24 The spies report, 'Canaan defeated'

Although the spies were sent out to help Joshua plan his military campaign, the chief value of their report was to show Canaan's spiritual unpreparedness.

2:1 Spies sent out. The name Shittim (lit. 'The Acacias') suggests a harsh environment.

Perhaps in an attempt to avoid arousing suspicion as foreigners, the spies whom Joshua sent *secretly* entered the house of a common prostitute, who doubtless had many visitors. Note that although the Hebrew reads literally 'slept', not 'stayed', the narrator pointedly says they slept there, not with her (1), though this was the assumption of the men of Jericho. The same verb is translated 'lay down' in v 8 with no sexual connotation. Clearly the author did not intend to say that they had sex with Rahab.

2:2–7 Rahab conceals the spies. Reconnaissance, espionage, and deception are necessary in war, even holy war (see 1; *cf.* Jdg 7:9–16). Rahab hid the spies and misled the king of Jericho's scouts with lies (2–7). She clandestinely let the spies escape and instructed them how to avoid detection by hiding in the mountains pitted with caves to the west of the city – the opposite of what might be expected by a posse (16–17). The deceptions by Joshua and Rahab raise eyebrows. How can they be a legitimate part of holy war? (*Cf.* Mt. 5:33–37; Eph. 4:14–15).

Indirect analogies of situations where deception and disinformation are right and necessary may help. Hunters use traps and blinds; fishermen, lures and bait. In sport, players will often try to trick their opponents by putting spin on a ball or adopting deceptive postures. In chess a player deceives his opponent into taking his weaker piece in order to capture his stronger one; in poker one keeps a 'straight face'. God was kind to the midwives for deceiving Pharaoh (Ex. 1:19–20), and 'by faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born' (Heb. 11:23). In all these situations we do not accuse the participants of acting according to the unethical principle that a right end justifies a wrong means. Rather, we recognize that in such situations deception is legitimate, not wrong. So also the OT recognizes that in war intelligence, counter-intelligence and decoys are all part of 'the game'. Joshua set an ambush (Jos. 8:9), and David used Hushai as a mole in conjunction with a network of spies (2 Sa. 15:32–37; 16:15–22). In the NT Paul escaped the Jews under the cover of night (Acts 9:23–26), and the angel took advantage of the sleeping soldiers to release Peter from Herod's clutches (Acts 12:6–10). In most situations, however, lies are wrong (Pr. 30:7–8), and truth is required (Eph. 4:15). The believer must listen to God's Spirit through Scripture and conscience so as not to rationalize the situation.

2:8–14 Covenant with Rahab. Rahab's night talk with the spies disclosed her faith (9a, 11b), in contrast to the Canaanites' fear (9b–11a). Israel's triumphs in contrast to the Canaanites' panic convinced her that the Lord had given Israel the land (9) and that he is God (11; *cf.* Dt. 4:39). To judge from pottery imported into Palestine at this time and from the international diplomacy reflected in the Amarna Letters (*c.* 1350 BC), Israel's exodus and conquest could have been widely reported throughout the contemporary world. Rahab and the Canaanites responded to the same reports (10; *cf.* Dt. 2:24 – 3:11). Rahab's faith led to life, while the Canaanites' unbelief led to death (*cf.* 2 Cor. 2:14–16).

Rahab's report that the hearts of the Canaanites were melting in fear (9) persuaded the spies that the Lord had defeated the land without them having to lift a sword (24; *cf.* 1:5; Ex. 15:13–16; 23:27; Dt. 2:25, 11:25). The courage of Israel's new generation of fighting men (1:6 – 9) contrasted sharply with the preceding, timid generation (Nu. 13 – 14; *cf.* 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Jn. 4:4)

After her confession of faith (9–11), the first in the Bible, Rahab sought salvation within the covenant community (12–13). In v 12 *kindness* (Heb. *hesed*) is a shorthand way of saying 'unfailing help to a needy covenant partner'. God's salvation is available to all who seek him. Characteristically, Rahab sought the salvation of her entire family (see 24:15). The sign she wanted was the oath the spies gave in v 14. These circumcised men accepted this converted prostitute into the full fellowship of the covenant community, and were even willing to die for her and her family. The oath with the Gibeonites in ch. 9 is another matter. They heard the fame of Israel's God, but they never confessed him as their Lord.

2:15–16 Rahab helps the spies escape. Like Abraham and Ruth, Rahab renounced her country in favour of Israel. In fact, she risked her life to be identified with Israel's God (4–7, 15–16). The NT honours the faith (Heb. 11:31) that produced her good works (Jas. 2:25). Her faith even earned her a place in the lineage of Jesus (Mt. 1:5).

2:17–21 Covenant stipulations. The distinction the spies made between faithful

Rahab and the disobedient Canaanites finds its final fulfilment in the last judgment (Mt. 25:31–46; Rev. 20:11–15). As Israel needed the scarlet blood of the lamb on their door-frames to distinguish them from the condemned Egyptians (Ex. 12:7, 13), so Rahab needed *this scarlet cord* that the Israelites provided to distinguish her and her family from the doomed Canaanites. Today, believing families accept by faith God's demarcating sign of baptism (Acts 2:38–39; 16:31–33) and proclaim Christ's death when they drink the cup of the new covenant in his scarlet blood (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25–26).

2:22–24 The spies' report. The spies' exact report of Rahab's testimony (*cf.* 9, 24) underscored the point that God had defeated the Canaanites spiritually.

3:1 – 4:24 Crossing the Jordan

Crossing the Jordan marked the moment when Israel breached the last barrier to the promised land and so escaped the desert. The divine Warrior, symbolized by his ark, led them into the swollen Jordan, dried it up, protected them throughout and led them into the promised land.

During most of the year the Jordan can be forded easily (*cf.* Jdg. 3:28; 8:4), but God waited until early spring (when it was in full flood, principally from the melting snows on Mt Hermon) to lead the Israelites across, thereby exalting Joshua in the eyes of the nation (6) and making Israel know that the living God was among them (8, 13).

3:1–17 The Jordan opens. Under Joshua's faithful leadership the holy war proceeded in a stately, orderly fashion, without haste or delay.

1 Israel calculated that God's mighty acts connected with the crossing began at Shittim (*cf.* Mi. 6:5). Since the people went up from the Jordan on 10 Nisan (4:19), the first month of the lunar year corresponding to our April, they could not have arrived at the east bank of the forbidding Jordan before 8 Nisan, three days earlier (3:2, 5). The extra time between their arrival at the Jordan and their fording of it was necessary for the spiritual preparation of the people (5).

There are four speeches preparing the people for the crossing: one by the officers to the people (2–4), one by Joshua to the people and to the priests (5–6), one by the LORD to Joshua (7–8), and one by Joshua to the whole nation (9–13). Each speech reveals a bit more about the marvel to happen, reaching a climax in Joshua's final address.

2–4 The officers commanded the people about following the ark. The ark, a gold-plated chest 4 ft × 2 ft × 2 ft (120 cm × 60 cm × 60 cm; see Ex. 25:10–22), symbolized the throne of God and was sometimes carried into battle (see Nu. 10:35; 1 Sa. 4–6). But it was no mere symbol, God was really present there directing the priests who carried it (*cf.* 4:11; Dt. 10:8; 1 Sa. 6:7–12). Housing the Ten Commandments, Israel's constitution (Dt. 10:1–4; 31:26), the ark stood for his ethical rule and Israel's covenantal relationship with him. It also symbolizes the gospel for, in addition to housing the law by which all will be judged (see Rom. 2:12–16), its lid, the mercy seat, sprinkled with atoning blood, prefigures the cleansing blood of Christ (Heb. 9).

The command to keep a gap of *about a thousand yards* (900 m) between them and the ark gave all Israel a full view of God's wondrous leadership.

5–6 On 9 Nisan Joshua instructed the people to consecrate themeselves (*cf.* Nu. 11:18), emphasizing the army's holiness. This sanctification involved washing their clothes (*cf.* Ex. 19:10) and abstaining from sex (*cf.* Ex. 19:15). On 10 Nisan Joshua instructed the priests to pick up the ark.

7–8 At this critical moment God rewarded Joshua's faith, promising that when the priests stood in the Jordan he would mark out Joshua as he had Moses. Joshua prefigures Christ who leads his church out of the wilderness of this world to cross the river of death in their pilgrimage to the heavenly city.

9–13 Joshua now solemnly addressed the people. In v 10 *living God* evokes a contrast with the local gods who died and came to life again with the seasons and who could not maintain control of history. Seven nations were singled out probably because seven represents completeness (*cf.* Dt. 7:1). In v 12, Joshua set apart the twelve men to carry stones into the Jordan to provide a firm footing in the muddy river bottom for the priests bearing the heavy ark (*cf.* 4:8).

At the climax of his address Joshua predicted the Jordan would stand up in a *heap*, showing that God, not natural causes, was responsible for it. Joshua's prophetic speech qualified him as a worthy successor to Moses.

14–17 The narrative now focuses both on the perfect obedience of the people – everything proceeded exactly according to the earlier instructions – and on the astonishing character of the event. The text goes out of its way to stress that the crossing occurred in April at first harvest (see 5:10–11), when the river was overflowing. In line with other intended parallels between Moses and Joshua, the crossing occurred at the same season of the year as Israel crossed the Red Sea.

The crossing probably took place near the

ford the Arabs call Al-Maghtas, 7 miles (12 km) south-east of Jericho and 8 miles (13 km) west of Tell el-Hammam. The city of Adam, today Tell ed-Damiye, where the waters piled up, is 17 miles (27 km) upstream from Jericho, and so a wide stretch of the river bottom, more than 18 miles (30 km), was exposed for the whole nation to cross quickly. A landslide dammed up the river in 1267 and in 1906. An earthquake on 11 July, 1927, dammed the meandering stream for 21½ hours. These parallels give the account credibility without taking away from Joshua's prediction and the amazing timing of the event.

4:1–24 The closing of the Jordan and the national memorial. The narrator continues to stress the amazing character of the crossing (18) but concentrates on the national cairn. This memorial was just one in a series of memorials commemorating God's mighty acts (*cf.* Ex. 13:3–6; 1 Sa. 7:12), climaxing in the bread and cup proclaiming 'the LORD's death until he comes' (1 Cor. 11:26).

1–4 Once again God, as Commander-in-Chief, initiated the action. His instruction to appoint twelve men assumes that the twelve men set apart in 3:12 had laid down the stones as a firm platform for the six priests. The number *twelve*, occurs five times in vs 1–8, highlighting the unity of the twelve tribes who made up one nation under Joshua's leadership (*cf.* Ex. 24:4; 1 Ki. 18:31–35). 1 emphasizes the salvation of all Israel and serves as a pledge that all of true Israel will be saved, both Jews (Rom. 11:25–27) and Gentiles (Gal. 6:15–16). Christ will not lose one of his sheep; all will be saved (Jn. 10:27–28).

5–7 Once again, God's commander on earth's stage obeyed his instructions. The twelve stones were to serve forever as a *sign* and as a *memorial* (*cf.* Ex. 12:26–27; Dt. 6:20–25). Memory plays an important role in any society. Without a memory a person loses identity, and without a history to sustain it a society and the world around it become virtually phantom. Any society that hopes to endure must become, as sociologists put it, 'a community of memory and hope'. In ancient Israel, monuments and rituals such as the Passover (Ex. 13 – 14) served this function. The numerous memorials mentioned in Joshua as still in existence (*e.g.* 7:26; 8:29; 10:27) were later superseded by the biblical books that sustain the church. It is assumed that the stories explaining the monuments were transmitted accurately in oral form until the time of the writing, otherwise they would have carried no conviction and could not have sustained the people in reality (*cf.* 2 Pet. 1:16). Some scholars reverse their function. According to them, these monuments encouraged Israel to create stories to explain their existence, not to remind them of what actually happened!

8–9 In v 9 the Hebrew reads literally, 'and Joshua erected twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan', expecting the reader to understand that these were twelve other stones (as the Greek translation clarifies). The solid stone platform which was removed from under the feet of the porters in the muddy river bed to make the memorial had to be replaced (see NIV mg.). Obviously these submerged replacement stones could not serve as a national memorial, but for anyone interested, they were still there as signs at the time of writing, beyond the reach of vandals.

10–13 The priests ascended from the Jordan, and the ark reassumed its lead only after everything had been properly executed. The point is that the Lord and his priests remained at the place of danger, not the people who hurried over. 12 adds that the eastern tribes went ahead of the others (see 1:12–13). Though armed for the battle, the 40,000 fighting men never lifted a sword for the Lord fought for them even as he had for the armed militia at the Red Sea (*cf.* Ex. 13:18; 14:13–31). The Hebrew word traditionally translated 'thousand' probably means a contingent of five to fourteen men as in the muster lists of Nu. 1 and 26. Some fighting men remained behind on the east side of the Jordan to protect their homes (*cf.* 22:8). The people crossed over *before the Lord* on the west bank as before a viewing stand. The divine Commander-in-Chief once again assumed his position as King in the midst of the war-camp.

14 As the Lord promised, Joshua was now exalted. 10 Nisan (see on 3:1), the day the Passover lamb was selected (Ex. 12:3), was a day when Israel learned again to fear both God (24; 3:10) and Joshua.

15–18 As the Jordan resumed its flow it was as though gates had closed behind the divine King and his vassals as they entered the royal estate. The timing of the Jordan's closing was just as amazing as at its opening (*cf.* 3:15).

19–24 On that same day Israel erected the national memorial at Gilgal (*cf.* 4:2). Gilgal may be located at Khirbet el-Mefjir. The national memorial commemorated in this catechism from generation to generation (21, 24) that the Lord dried up the Jordan (22–23; *cf.* Ex. 14:22), probably for the reasons suggested at 3:7. The joining of the crossing of the Jordan with that of the Red Sea underscored the typological unity of the two

events in salvation and history. The pronoun *you* (plural) in v 2 represents all Israel as a united body. All believers are able to be present in some way at these historical events through Scripture, imagination, and faith. Moreover, through the monument the *peoples of the earth* would *know* that God's hand is powerful (*cf.* 2:10; 3:10; Ex. 15:14–16) and Israel would *fear*, that is, give single-minded allegiance to the Lord (see Dt. 5:29; 8:6 *etc.*). Today these purposes are achieved through proclaiming Christ's death for sin and his resurrection from the dead (*cf.* Rom. 10:6–9).

5:1–14 Ritual preparations

Each of the paragraphs in this chapter displays a parallel between Moses and Joshua, forging yet more links between the two leaders at Israel's founding. They both struck fear into their enemies (1, *cf.* Ex. 15:10–13), they both initiated circumcision before fully entering the task (2–9; *cf.* Ex. 4:24–26), they both celebrated the Passover as part of the march to the holy land (10–12; *cf.* Ex. 12), and they both took their sandals off before the Lord (13–15; *cf.* Ex. 3:5).

5:1 Introduction. This verse, depicting the Canaanite reaction to the Jordan crossing, links this chapter with 4:24, predicting the world's reaction. *The Amorite kings* (*i.e.* those of the city-states in the mountains *west of the Jordan*) and *the Canaanite kings* (*i.e.* those of the city-states on the plains *along the coast*) are a sample of the seven nations in 3:10. These kings knew about the Lord's mighty act, but instead of fleeing to him in faith, as Rahab had done, their rebellious hearts sank in fear and immobilized them (*cf.* 2:10; 11:20).

5:2–9 Covenant renewal: circumcision. Terse narratives of Israel's circumcision (2–3, 8–9) frame a detailed explanation (4–7).

2–3 Again, the LORD commanded (2) and Joshua executed perfectly (3). Joshua indirectly circumcised the whole nation through the parents (*cf.* Gn. 21:4; Ex. 4:25). Two interpretations have been proposed why the narrator represents this circumcision as *again* (*lit.* 'a second time'). On the one hand, perhaps that portion of the united militia who were forty years and older and circumcised in Egypt were reckoned as the first circumcision, and those under forty, who were not circumcised in the desert, were deemed the second. This interpretation best suits vs 4–7. On the other hand, the older portion of the militia may have had to be circumcised again because Egyptian circumcision was incomplete, unlike the Israelite complete circumcision. This interpretation best explains the emphasis on *flint knives* and the reference to *the reproach of Egypt* (9). Flint knives, so abundant in Canaan in contrast to Egypt, were probably required because they were associated with the Israelite complete circumcision. Statues of fighting men in Canaan during the third millennium BC show warriors as fully circumcised. Now in the land the Israelites could freely circumcise themselves properly and remove from themselves *the reproach of Egypt* (9), the incomplete circumcision. The hill of foreskins (3 NIV mg.) may have been the name of a little hillock in the vicinity of Gilgal, which means 'Roll away, Roll away' the reproach (9).

4–7 Most of the militia, born during the forty years in the desert (*cf.* Nu. 14:20–22, 29–31; Dt. 2:14), had to be circumcised for the first time. Two related questions need to be addressed: Why circumcision and why at Gilgal? In Egypt circumcision seems to have made one fit for manhood. Circumcision in Israel made one qualified for the covenantal relationship with God (Gn. 17:9–14) and so a fit heir to the promised land. J. A. Motyer has commented that 'Circumcision . . . is the token of that work of grace whereby God chooses out and marks men for His own'. He also noted 'It [circumcision] was integrated into the Mosaic system in connection with the Passover' (*cf.* Ex. 12:44). Here too the sacred rite of initiation had to precede the Passover (10). Had the unbelieving generation circumcised their children in the desert, it would have reduced the gracious ritual to levity; hence, it was appropriately held in abeyance until Israel's arrival in the flinty land.

5:10–12 Covenant meal: Passover. The celebration of Passover on 14 Nisan at the end of their journey reminded the Israelites that they began this marvellous journey with God through his Passover. This is a forerunner of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 5:7), whose blood provides Christians with salvation from God's judgment on Satan's world (*cf.* Ex. 12:1–7) and whose flesh, symbolized by bread, provides for their sanctification (Ex. 12:8–11). On the very next day (the phrase comes three times in vs 11–12), they began to enjoy the long anticipated food in the promised land. The tiresome forty years of eating manna in the desert were now behind them (*cf.* Nu. 11:4–9).

5:13–15 Worship of the commander. Joshua's final preparation for holy war involved encountering the Lord, for his worship was as yet too imperfect for the task ahead. The mysterious man Joshua met was not the Lord himself, but his heavenly captain (NIV

mg. best serves the Hebrew). As secular messengers were fully equated with their senders (*e.g.* 2 Sa. 3:12–13; 1 Ki. 20:2–4), God's angel (*cf.* Gn. 31:11; Ex. 3:2; 14:19) and his angelic captain (*cf.* Dn. 10:5, 20) were also treated with equal respect. He tells Joshua that he is neither for Israel nor her enemies. He is *commander of the army of the* LORD, including his angels (2 Ki. 6:15–17; Ps. 103:20–21), not an ally (3:10). Should Israel break covenant, the holy God will turn his sword against them (Lv. 26:25; Dt. 28:15–26), as Israel and Achan learned at the battle of Ai (ch. 7). Joshua appropriately bowed in homage before this angelic being. The answer to his second question (14b) was as unexpected as the first. Instead of an awaited battle bulletin, he was ordered to worship better. Though prostrate, his unclean sandals were still on. With Joshua unshod, holy war can begin.

6:1 – 12:24 Taking the land

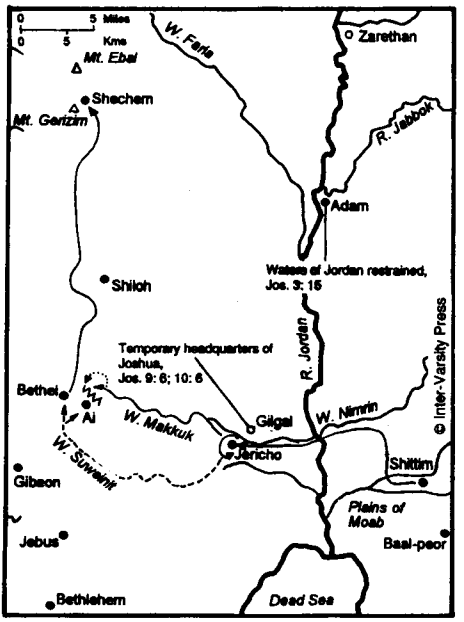
The conquest of the land took a long time (11:18) and many battles (12:1–24). Of these the narrator selects four for historical and theological reasons. Israel initiated the first two, which were against the cities of Jericho (6:1–27) and Ai (7:1 – 8:29), and various Canaanite coalitions initiated the other two in the south (10:1–43) and in the north (11:1–15). Israel's battles against the two central cities gave it a firm beach-head in the land, dividing it in two. The battles against Jericho and the southern coalition are marked by the Lord's amazing interventions. They are balanced by the battles against Ai and the northern alliance, marked by brilliant strategy. At the heart of this section, Israel pledged itself to keep God's law in the land (8:30–34). This is what the war was all about.

6:1–27 Battle of Jericho

6:1 Introduction. Jericho (modern Tell es-Sultan), probably dedicated to the moon god (its name means 'moon city'), was strategically located, having a large oasis in a region where water was precious and controlling the main roads into the interior.

6:2–5 The Lord's instructions. The Lord's instructions to Joshua display the character of the covenant. God graciously gave Israel the land, but they must make it theirs by obeying faithfully (Heb. 11:30; *cf.* 1:2–9). The first instruction that the army was to march around the city about 650 yds (600 m) once a day for six days served notice that the divine King was marking out the city as his. Jericho's king and his forces resisted Israel (24:11), but they were as impotent as Satan and his host before Christ and his church (Mt. 12:22–29; Lk. 10:18; Eph. 6:10–18). The second instruction that seven priests were to bear seven trumpets of ram's horn before the ark, signalled the start of the holy war. The ark is God's holy throne (see 3:3). The third instruction that the seven priests were to march seven times on the seventh day – the number seven is repeated three times in v 14 – signified perfection. The fourth instruction that the people were to give an earth-shaking shout when they heard the last blast of the horns, gave voice to their faith. The fifth command that each warrior was to attack the city straight ahead after the walls fell, found its consummation when they 'devoted' the city to the Lord (17–20).

6:6–7 Joshua's commands. Joshua repeated the orders which applied to the priests and then those which applied to the people. The ark is mentioned first for God is the King (*cf.*



- City
- City (uncertain location)
- Mountain peak
- Clash of forces
- Israelites move from Shittim to Jericho and march around the city
- Main Israelite force pitches battle versus Ai, then feigns retreat
- Large ambush force approaches Ai from south
- Small ambush force approaches Ai from north
- Joshua leads Israelites to Shechem to ratify officially the Mosaic covenant with them (Jos 8: 30f; 24: 1f. *cf.* Dt 27: 4f.)

Jericho, Ai and the renewal of the covenant at Shechem.

3:2–4). Joshua creatively deployed some armed men as a vanguard before the priests blowing trumpets and others as a rearguard behind the ark (9). In this way the divine King assumed his rightful place at the heart of his sacred warriors. The length and depth of the procession is not important.

6:8–14 Orders executed. As the holy army was marching in solemn procession, the seven priests were blowing the trumpets and the armed men, or Joshua's orders, were as silent as granite. This went on for six days. The drawn out style of the dramatic narrative matches the drawn out march.

6:15–21 Jericho falls. Tradition relates that the seventh day was the Sabbath, which was not allowed to interfere with the holy war. Joshua's command to *devote* (Heb. *ḥērem*) the city involved killing all the people in it to prevent Israel's spiritual contagion (Dt. 20:16–18). Sometimes the *ḥērem* involved burning the city (24; 11:13), and on other occasions it did not include the plundering of the conquered cities (*cf.* 8:26–27; 11:14). The principle is worked out in the church through excommunication (1 Cor. 5:13), a principle and procedure that may need sometimes to be re-applied today.

The holy army followed the instructions perfectly and with their tremendous shout Jericho's walls collapsed. Major earthquakes happen in the Jordan Valley on an average of four times a century, and the excavations at Jericho have revealed clear evidence of a collapse of at least one mud brick wall. This data gives credibility to the epic without detracting from the wonder that God predicted it and executed it with perfect timing.

6:22–25 Rahab lives and Jericho dies. The conclusion of the story switches between the rescue of Rahab (22–23, 25) and the destruction of the city (24, 26) to contrast their fates. Both by repetition and by extended details God's covenant-keeping, even with a Canaanite prostitute (17b, 22–23, 25), is underscored. Rahab and her household were at first placed outside the camp (23) because they were ceremonially unclean (Lv. 13:46; Dt. 23:3), but at the time of writing her descendants were settled permanently in Israel. There is a sense in which she continues to live in the new Israel through her descendant, Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:5).

The prophet Joshua pronounced a curse on any person trying to rebuild the foundations of this city 'devoted' to the Lord (*cf.* 1 Ki. 16:34). The curse, though descriptive, not prescriptive, was nevertheless appropriate, for the firstborn belongs to the Lord (Ex. 13:1) and so takes the place of the city 'devoted' to the Lord.

6:27 Joshua's fame. Joshua's fame was and still is spread abroad (27; 3:7; 4:14). To sum up, Rahab and Joshua live, but Jericho was 'devoted' in death to the Lord.

7:1 – 8:29 Battle at Ai

The battle's two parts, the debacle (7:1–26) and victory (8:1–29), both teach lessons of faith.

7:1–26 The debacle. Straight away the narrator implicates all the Israelites (6:18) in Achan's sin. The concept of national solidarity, the notion that an individual's acts affect the whole group, illuminates other scriptures (2 Sa. 21:1–9; Acts 9:4; Col. 1:24) and is the basis for the doctrine of humankind's original sin in Adam and for the justification of the saints through Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:12–19).

2–5 Ai ominously means 'The Ruin'. Its modern identity is uncertain for the traditional site, et Tell, has been shown to be unoccupied at this time. Israel's folly and defeat must be seen in the light of God's wrath (1). It was one thing to send spies to reconnoitre Jericho (2:1), but it was a clear violation of holy war and of God's instructions to Joshua at his commissioning (Nu. 27:21) to initiate battle without consulting the Lord. Ironically, Joshua was to cast lots after the defeat (14). The spies violated holy war standards by counting on 'thousands' (better, 'contingents'; see on 4:13), not the Lord. If the contingents involved fifteen men each, then thirty-six men constituted an 80% loss. In explaining this rout, one ought not to blame just these violations of holy war, the ultimate cause of defeat, or just Joshua's tactical blunder in attempting a frontal attack, the immediate cause: it was both.

6–9 In great distress Joshua and the elders tore their clothes (*cf.* Gn. 37:29, 34; Jdg. 11:35) and fell down before the ark, the sacred place of enquiry (*cf.* Jdg. 20:18, 23, 26–27). They complained grievously and enquired daringly and frankly of God the reason for their defeat (*cf.* Is. 6:11). Joshua came close to blaming God as Israel had (*cf.* Ex. 14:21; 16:2–8). From Joshua's ignorant perspective the debacle seemed foolish. Should the Canaanites have regained their confidence and from their mountain strongholds descended together upon the Israelites, who were trapped by the swollen Jordan, the situation would have been desperate indeed.

10–15 The Lord answered curtly, *Stand up* and underscored the nation's guilt: *Israel has sinned.* By defrauding the holy God – putting their tastes and assessing their judgments to be better than God's word – the Israelites had defamed his glorious name. God protected his **honour by making them the *ḥērem.***

16–23 To provide a way for national salvation, God commanded the profaned camp to reconsecrate itself (see 3:5) and to rid itself of the *hērem* (13). God isolated the guilty through the 'yes'and 'no' answers of the sacred lot (*cf.* 14:2; 18:6; Ex. 28:30), pin-pointing Achan by a process of elimination (14, 17). The guilty then confessed the wrong they had done. Everything is naked before God (Heb. 4:13). The sin would be righted by burning all that belonged to Achan as God's new glorifying *hērem*. Perhaps the stolen property from Jericho would have inflicted Israel with its physical contagion and so must be put to the purifying fire (see 6:17, 24). In biblical times families acted more as a single unit under the headship of the father than in western cultures. Families entered into covenant with God as a group (see on 2:8–14, 18), and they broke covenant collectively as here. Achan probably hid the plunder in the family tent with the full knowledge of his entire family (*cf.* Acts 5:1–2).

By confessing his sin Achan gave glory to God (19), for it entailed acknowledging God's omniscience, sovereignty, truth, zeal and holiness. Significantly, unbelieving Achan misnamed the *hērem plunder*. His view of holy war was wrong. For him Jericho was a prize he earned, not something the divine King won. Likewise materialists see the earth's resources as theirs, not as the Lord's.

24–26 *All Israel* must participate in the expiating stoning (*cf.* v 1). The stone cairn at Achor (which means 'disaster') commemorated Achan's tragic sacrilege (*cf.* 4:5–7).

8:1–29 Victory at Ai. 1–2 In the renewed attack, the rules of holy war were followed scrupulously. First, the Lord commanded the attack, and Joshua flawlessly, and yet innovatively, executed the details. Secondly, the army was commanded not to fear because God had promised it victory (see 1:7–9). Victory was just as sure at the outset of the second attack as defeat was certain at the start of the first.

Yet each battle in the conquest was unique. Holy war standards normally entailed a reduced force so that Israel's faith would be in the Lord, not in military might (see Dt. 17:16; Jdg. 7:1–8). In this case, however, Israel sent the whole army. In the first and unsuccessful attack the reduced numbers actually represented Israel's false confidence (see 7:3). Now the whole army expressed faith by going up again against the formidable foe. In this battle the Lord's *hērem* included only the city and the people, not the livestock and precious metals (*cf.* 6:17; 7:15). The battle plan called for a normal military strategy, a cunning ambush, not a priestly procession like the one that amazingly toppled Jericho's walls. At the exodus, the Lord of Hosts amazingly used the Red Sea and the east wind, not Israel's armed men, to destroy the mighty Egyptian army (Ex. 14:10–31), but in the next battle against the Amalekites he entrusted the sword to Joshua (Ex. 17:8–16; *cf.* 1:1). Likewise in the history of the church, at the time of the apostles there were amazing acts, and afterwards, the not-so-amazing (*cf.* Heb. 2:3–4). In both ways Christ builds his church (Mt. 16:19).

3–13 The Lord commanded a deceptive ambush (*cf.* 2:2–7). The number involved in the ambush is unclear. V 3 speaks of thirty contingents (see on 4:13) but v 12 of five. It has been suggested that v 3 be read, 'he sent thirty of his best fighting men, a man from each contingent' (Boling; see below) (*cf.* 2 Sa. 23:24–39). The full ambush consisted of five contingents of militia men. Note the change from *fighting men* in v 3 to simply *men* in v 12. The ambushers made the 12 mile (20 km) climb up the steep mountain, and under the cover of night hid themselves behind a hill, or boulders, or in caves, on the west side of Ai (9, 13). The next morning Joshua set out from Gilgal with the main fighting force, and in full view of Ai pitched camp beyond a valley north of it. *That night*, the second for the ambushers now fully ready, Joshua scouted out the valley where the battle would take place to assure the success of his deceptive manoeuvre.

14–17 To the king of Ai, Joshua's manoeuvre looked like a replay. Early the next morning he quickly and rashly marched forth to the assigned place for battle, hoping for a rerun of the previous rout. Joshua feigned a retreat, using the past one to good advantage, and lured the king to throw away all caution. To annihilate the fleeing decoy, the king summoned all his troops out of the city, even out of the temple (called here *Bethel*; *cf.* Jdg. 20:18, NIV mg.), a city's last point of defence on its acropolis. Here *Bethel* (lit. 'house of God') is not a place-name but a description of Ai's temple (so R.G. Boling and G. E. Wright, *Anchor Bible*, *Joshua*, p. 240).

18–23 At the critical moment the Lord intervened and commanded Joshua to raise the *kîdôn*, *the javelin*, or better a curved sword, a scimitar. Stretched out towards Ai, it symbolized the Lord's sovereignty over the city. The Hebrew of v 19 suggests that the men in ambush had already quickly left their hiding places. As soon as Joshua gave the signal, they rushed forward and into the city. Israel's main army now turned back against its hapless pursuers who, looking back, saw their city going up in smoke and the five Israelite units sallying forth from their rear.

24–27 According to the standards of holy war

against the Canaanites, Ai's full twelve contingents and their wives became the Lord's *hērem, destroyed* (26 and NIV mg.)

28–29 The burnt city, a permanent heap of ruins, and the king's tomb, a cairn at its gate, served as memorials (*cf.* 4:5–7) and proved the events really happened. The king of Ai was hung *on a tree*, perhaps impaled on a pole, to show that he was under God's curse. According to the law he had to be taken down before nightfall (Dt. 21:23). By contrast, in the NT the King of Israel 'redeemed us . . . by becoming a curse for us' on a tree (Gal. 3:13). He too was taken down at sunset (Jn. 19:31).

8:30–35 Covenant renewed at Mt Ebal

At the heart of his battle stories, the narrator pauses to recount that Israel renewed the covenant at Shechem as Moses had instructed (Dt. 11:29). The claim and rule of Israel's Lord were published abroad. The altar symbolized God's claim to the land (*cf.* Gn. 12:8), and the law defined the character of his rule. As unpruned vines (Lv. 25:5, 11) and uncut hair (Nu. 6:5) were symbols in Israel that these objects were holy or dedicated to the Lord, so an altar of unhewn field-stones showed it belonged to the Creator. Mt Ebal is north of Shechem (modern Nablus), the site of ill-omen, and Mt Gerizim, the lower of the two. (33) is south of it. One should assume that Israel had free access to this area either because they had an existing treaty with the Shechemites (see ch. 24; *cf.* Gn. 34; Jdg. 9) or because the Canaanites, cowering in their strongholds, were afraid to confront them in this sparsely populated area. Mt Ebal, the mountain of curses, was selected as the appropriate site for the altar because there God removed the sinner's curse.

The burnt offerings symbolized Israel's total consecration to God and served to ransom them. The fellowship offerings, which were eaten, celebrated their relationship with God. The same sacrifices were used in the ceremony at Mt Sinai when Israel initially ratified the covenant (Ex. 24:5). They prefigure Christ's blood for the new covenant (Lk. 22:20). An altar has been found on Mt Ebal and according to its excavator, A. Zetal, all the scientific evidence fits very well with the biblical description.

Since Joshua was following the law of Moses, the reader should assume that the great stones were covered with plaster and the law inscribed upon them (32; *cf.* Dt. 27:1–8). The extent of the law written in the sight of the solemnly assembled Israelites is not stated. The reader should also assume that in the natural amphitheatre with splendid acoustic properties six tribes on Mt Gerizim shouted the blessings on obedience and six on Mt Ebal the curses on disobedience (33; *cf.* Dt. 27). The tribes, composed of native and naturalized citizens, stood facing the priests who bore the ark, the divine King's throne (see 6:6–7). Afterwards, in the hearing of all the citizens of God's kingdom, Joshua read the law, expressed through the blessings and curses, the essence of Israel's treaty with God (34–35; *cf.* Dt. 11:26; 30:1).

9:1–27 Treaty with Gibeon

The treaty with the Gibeonites was an obvious exception to the rule of holy war. This account shows that Israel was able to determine that under certain circumstances an exception could and must be made to the law. Compromising situations often arise, as here (14) and *e.g.* in divorce cases because the word of God was not sought in the first place. In the time of the Judges, Israel so entangled itself with covenants of peace with the condemned nations, violating the *hērem* (see on 6:15–21), that the Lord no longer drove out the Canaanites (Jdg. 2:1–5). Many in the church today are opting for peaceful co-existence with the world and losing their spiritual power.

9:1–2 Canaanite confederacy. The exceptional diplomacy of Gibeon is presented against the background of the decision of other Canaanite confederacies to wage war against Israel (10:1 – 11:23). The Gibeonites risked peace, not war. Unfortunately, though they feared God, they did not opt for a third solution, full vassalage within God's covenant, as Rahab had done (see 2:8–14). Confronted with Christ and his gospel, people can likewise opt for one of these three postures: fight against him, peaceful co-existence without submission to him, or full membership in the new covenant through his blood and spiritual rebirth.

9:3–13 Gibeon's deception. Gibeon and its four allies are called Hivites (7) to remind us that they are one of the sentenced nations. The popular identification of Gibeon with el-Jib, 8 miles (13 km) north-west of Jerusalem, is questionable. With terms of peace in their mouths, they approached Joshua, who must take ultimate responsibility for what happened, even though he seemingly allowed the elders to participate in the negotiations (6, 8b, 15).

The Gibeonites staked their hope for a peace treaty on Israel's policy of making peace with compliant cities that were far removed from Israel, and not a part of the condemned nations who might pollute them (Dt. 20:10–15). The Gibeonites therefore pretended to come from a great distance.

Whereas deception is a recognized necessity in war, deception in making treaties is unacceptable (see on 2:2–7), and so Joshua cursed them (23). In truth, Joshua and the elders were also in

the wrong for depending on their senses rather than enquiring of the Lord (14). The church must not substitute its own understanding, however attractive, for the word of God.

9:14–15 Treaty with Gibeon. Perhaps Israel *sampled* (better, 'took') the food because it was part of the covenant-making procedure. Ultimately Israel, not Gibeon, was in the wrong for it failed to consult the Lord.

9:16–18 The Gibeonites' deception discovered. Just three days later Israel discovered the guile of the Gibeonites, and it took another three days to make the 17 mile (27 km) journey from Gilgal to the Gibeonite league to confirm the report. The four towns constituting this league controlled the approaches to Jerusalem from the north-west and so lived on a vital artery within the Israelite confederacy. The assembly rightly complained against their leaders because Israel's existence in the land was now threatened by this pagan presence.

9:19–27 Resolution. Three times in successive verses (18, 19, 20) the point is made emphatically that Israel must not break an oath, even though made under false colours, and so misuse God's name (*cf.* Ex. 20:7; 2 Sa. 21:1–14; Mt. 5:33–37). This is a truth that needs to be re-asserted in an age of broken marriage vows and of broken business contracts. The elders resolved the problem of securing an irrevocable treaty under false pretences by interpreting the treaty's term, 'servant', in the most onerous way – the Gibeonites were to become wood cutters and water carriers for all the congregation. Joshua added cultic service to the non-cultic duties demanded by the elders.

10:1–43 Conquest of the south

The southern campaign consisted of two parts: the rout of the five Amorite kings besieging Gibeon, and the subsequent capture of royal cities and subjugation of territory.

10:1–28 Battle at Gibeon. 1–7 Joshua's conquest of Ai, and above all the submission of Gibeon, prompted the alarmed king of Jerusalem to form an alliance with four other royal cities and besiege Gibeon. City-states in Israel's world often joined forces in repelling an enemy (*cf.* Gn. 14:1–3). From a letter in the Amarna correspondence (*c.* 1350 BC) it may be inferred that Gibeon was part of a Jerusalem kingdom which incorporated most of the Judean hill country. Faced with attack by this powerful coalition, Gibeon appealed to Joshua to fulfil Israel's treaty obligation and come to their help. Israel rose to this first real test of their mettle.

The king of Jerusalem, Adoni-Zedek (which means 'My LORD is Righteous'), ruled over a city composed of Amorites and Hittites, both of whom were to be 'devoted' in death to God (see on 6:15–21; *cf.* Dt. 7:1). Adoni-Zedek's world-view prevented him from understanding that Israel's victories were due to the Lord, not Joshua, and so from his frame of reference it was a matter of matching armies against armies. Unlike the Gibeonites, who had heard the fame of the Lord (9:9–10), he heard the fame of Joshua. The king's *good fighters* (2), like medieval knights (*cf.* 'fighting men' 6:2), were trained and wealthy enough to arm themselves well. At this time the Egyptians controlled Canaan, and Lachish (modern Tell ed-Duweir) was its provincial capital.

8–15 Gibeon's battleground provided a stage on which the divine warrior displayed wonders. This is the third and final act of the Lord's amazing interventions on Israel's behalf (*cf.* chs. 3–4, 6). In the best traditions of holy war the Lord gave instruction, probably after being consulted; commanded Israel not to fear, promising them victory (8); threw the enemy into panic when Joshua took them by surprise after a 22 mile (35 km) tortuous, twisting, uphill all-night climb from Gilgal to Hebron (9–10); and rained a deadly barrage of hailstones upon the routed enemy fleeing towards its strongholds in the foothills (11) (*cf.* Ex. 14:24; Jdg. 4:15; Ps. 77:17–19.) Isaiah reflecting on this drama speaks of the Lord as rousing himself (Is. 28:21).

Using flashback, the narrator saved the most spectacular scene to last – the victory at the Beth-Horon pass (12–15). In this scene, the Lord's entourage, the sun and moon, play supporting roles to Joshua. The Canaanites coming up the slopes from the west of Gibeon (to which Joshua had brought relief after his strenuous, all-night climb) were looking east into the blinding sun above Gibeon when the battle began. To keep the advantage, Joshua, praying to the Lord, commanded the sun and moon, as the Lord's subordinates, to stay put until Israel avenged itself (*i.e.* defensively vindicated its sovereignty) on its enemy. Amazingly, the Lord submitted his heavenly attendants to a man's command on earth's stage. The sun may have been the principal deity at Gibeon as the moon was at Jericho (see 6:1). The narrator cites his source, *The Book of Jashar* ('The Book of the Upright One'), an early and probably poetic account or collection of national war songs celebrating Israel's heroes (*cf.* 2 Sa. 1:18–27).

There have been many attempts to translate the Hebrew of vs 12–13 in order to provide a more naturalistic interpretation of the event. Some scholars think it refers to a solar eclipse. Others suggest that the sun stopped shining, not moving, and that *about a full day* should be translated 'as when day is done'. A slightly modified form of this position claims that the

text refers to an early morning hailstorm that blackened the sky until the enemy was defeated and renders v 13 'The sun ceased shining in the midst of the sky and did not hasten to come up, [so that it was] as when day is done'. Although the Hebrew words translated *stand* and *stopped* may mean 'cease shining', especially in poetry, the narrator's prosaic qualifier to *stopped* in v 13b *in the middle of the sky* rather than 'shining' seems to favour the traditional interpretation. Similarly to take the words translated in the NIV *delayed going down* as 'did not hasten to come up' is to strain the meaning of the Hebrew. This interpretation, though ingenious, seems motivated, not by a normal reading of the text, but by an attempt to satisfy the rules of science. There have also been attempts to classify this passage as a historicized myth (see R.G. Boling in *Anchor Bible*), but that interpretation undermines the credibility of the inspired author.

Other scholars have rejected scientific explanations, regarding 'the phenomenon as one of the numerous miracles of which the Bible tells us . . . a "sign" of an extraordinary divine intervention which imparts a grace unmerited by man and inconceivable in any other way' (J.A. Soggin, *Joshua* [SCM, p. 123]. Joshua's command to the sun has been compared to Agamemnon's prayer to Zeus not to let the sun go down before the Achaeans have been victorious.

16–21 The epic of the battle of Gibeon is now resumed. Joshua did not stop his army to execute the five kings who, according to his intelligence reports, had hidden themselves in the cave at Makkedah. Instead he ordered a unit to block its entrance with great stones and to guard it, while his main force pursued the fleeing Canaanites, cutting off their retreat to their fortified cities in the west. Some, however, escaped (*cf.* vs 28–39). The troops then returned to the camp now set up at Makkedah. None dared criticize even one man of this vanquishing army (*cf.* Ex. 11:7, where 'bark' represents the same Hebrew word rendered here *uttered a word*). With that reputation they will soon have rest.

22–27 It was now time to dispatch the five kings. Joshua used the occasion to fortify spiritually his troops for future battles. Before the entire army he instructed his commanders to follow a widespread ancient custom and place their feet upon the necks of the humiliated kings (*cf.* 1 Ki. 5:3; Ps. 110 1; 1 Cor. 15:25–28). As the Lord had commanded Joshua at the beginning of the conquest (1:8), Joshua now commanded them not to fear, for these kings were an earnest of God's future victories. Then Joshua killed them. As he did with the king of Ai, he had these cursed kings impaled until the evening as a public spectacle to induce the fear of the Lord, not of the Canaanites. The stones in front of the cave functioned as yet another memorial to Joshua's amazing conquest (*cf.* 4:5–7). The kings' execution prefigures Satan's humiliation and defeat (*cf.* Gn. 3:15).

10:29–39 Annihilation of seven Amorite cities. In a sequel the narrator rapidly lists seven royal armies that Joshua wiped out and six royal cities that he fought against, captured, and put to the *hērem*.

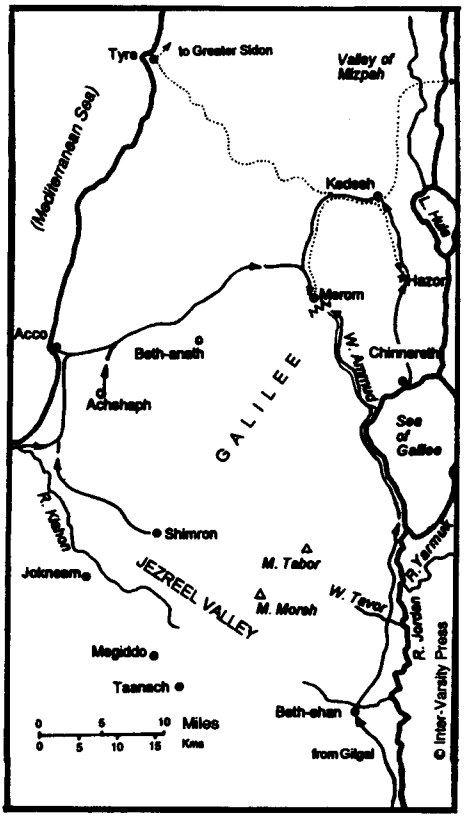
10:40–43 Summary. The three principal geographical areas of Judah, the hill country, the Negev and the foothills, were all subdued in this campaign. Though much land still remained to be taken (see 13:1–7), the back of the condemned Canaanites had been broken; in that sense it could be said that Joshua had subdued the whole region.

11:1–15 Conquest of the north

The northern campaign, like the southern one, also consisted of two parts: the rout at the Waters of Merom (11:1–9) and the subsequent capture of the cities (11:10–15). All the condemned nations assembled against Israel for this decisive and climactic battle for the land (*cf.* 3:10; 9:1–2).

11:1–9 Battle at the Waters of Merom. **1–5** The convener of the Canaanite coalition was Jabin, a dynastic ruler at Hazor (see Jdg. 4:2). Hazor (modern Tell Qedah) was a huge, strongly fortified city in Joshua's time, covering 200 acres (80 hectares) with a population of about 40,000. It was one of the major cities along the trade route between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Archaeology and ancient Near Eastern literatures corroborate the statement that *Hazor had been the head of all these kingdoms* (10).

The narrator presents Jabin's call to arms concentrically. At the heart of the army was Jabin (1a). Assembled around him were three kings of Galilee: from Madon (near Qarn Hattin in the heart of Galilee), Shimron (site uncertain), and Achshaph (somewhere in Asher, see 19:25). Reinforcing them were kings from the surrounding areas: in the north from the mountains in Upper Galilee, in the south from Kinnereth and the Jordan valley south of Kinnereth, and in the west from Naphoth Dor, a famous seaport just south of Mt Carmel (2). To provide maximum strength kings assembled from the more remote regions south and north of them (3). Regarding the remote south, v 3a, should read: 'to the Canaanites in the east and in the west to the Amorites: [between them] to the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites in the hill country.' From the remote north the Hivites hailed from below Mt Hermon in the region of Mizpah (an uncertain site meaning 'Look Out').



The conquest of Hazor.

These allies were armed with the ultimate weapon of their day, the lightweight horse-drawn chariot, which could be disassembled and reassembled for fighting in the plains. They met for the decisive battle probably in the plateau to the north of Jebel Jermaq, about 2.5 miles (4 km) north-east of Merom.

6–9 Once again Israel followed its rules of holy war: Joshua consulted the Lord, and he gave Joshua's army the encouragement needed against staggering odds; he told them both the time of battle, and the tactics to employ. When Joshua's men had crippled the horses, the charioteers would be forced to flee and the Israelites could then pursue them. Afterwards they could return and burn the chariots at their leisure, which is what they did (9). (On strategy versus miracle see 8:1–2; 9: 1–2; 10:8–15).

Joshua and his battle-hardened army now attacked suddenly in a pre-emptive strike (7). The holy rout was on again (8; *cf.* 10:9–11). The unholy coalition split apart, some fleeing to the north-west and others to the north-east, both hastening headlong out of the land. Following the rules of holy war Joshua spared none of them.

11:10–15 Capture of the cities. The fate of the captured cities parallels the list in 10:28–39. As in the case of Jericho, the vaunted city of Hazor was *totally destroyed* (*hērem*); nothing was spared and the city itself was burned (*cf.* 6:15–21). (For the archaelogical evidence at Hazor see Introduction: date of the conquest.) Unlike Jericho, however, no curse was placed upon anyone who rebuilt it (*cf.* Jdg. 4:2). The Israelites did not burn the other royal cities. As in the case of Ai, they kept the plunder (*cf.* 8:24–27), as the Lord had commanded Moses (Dt. 6:10–11). Moses' command, 'do not leave alive anything that breathes' (Dt. 20:16), must refer to human life, not flocks and cattle, for with the Lord's full approval Israel carried off the livestock for themselves (12–15).

11:16–23 Summary of the conquest

The summary at the end of the southern campaign (10:40–41) is matched by a summary of the entire conquest. The Arabah, unlike v 2, is the entire rift valley from above the Sea of Galilee to the Gulf of Eilat. Mt Halak ('Bald Mountain'), is Jeleb Halaq, far to the south-east of Beersheba and Seir is Edom. Baal-gad, the opposite pole on the north-south axis may be Banias, at the base of Mt Hermon and the source of the Jordan (17). To judge from the age of Caleb, if the numbers can be taken at face value, the *long time* (18) of the conquest may be seven years. Caleb was eighty-five at the end of the conquest (see 14:10) and seventy-eight when it began (*cf.* 14:7 and Dt. 2:14).

None of the Canaanites repented, except Rahab and her family, and only the Gibeonites sought a peace treaty, because the Lord hardened the hearts of the rest for slaughter (20; see 9:1–2). From the parallel situation of Pharaoh versus Moses one can infer that the hearts of the Canaanites against Joshua were, like all of humanhind, naturally hard (Ex. 7:11–14; 1 Cor. 2:14). When confronted with the Lord's amazing deeds through his servant, they, like Pharaoh, hardened their hearts (*cf.* Ex. 8:32; 9:34), whereupon the sovereign Lord hardened them (*cf.* Ex. 10:1). All people are dead in sin and deserve God's judgment; it is only through God's mercy that he gives new life to some (Rom. 9:10–18).

The summary in v 23 refers back to 1:3. Elsewhere the narrator notes the incompleteness of the conquest in more precise terms (see 13:1; 15:63; 16:10). For *rest* see on 1:12–15 and 10:21. Israel's wanderings were over. With organized resistance gone, the way was ready for the land to be distributed (23; see 1:6).

12:1–24 Appendix: list of defeated kings

This chapter, summarizing the kings the Israelites killed and whose lands they took over, provides a transition between the conquest of the land (chs. 1–11) and its distribution (chs. 12–21). This list confirms chs. 6–11.

Joshua repeatedly notes the change from the old, wicked kings and their lands to God as the new Ruler and his tribes who will sanctify the promised land. This change illustrates several truths. First, that the just kingdom of God rightfully replaces the unjust kingdoms of this world who have usurped his rule over the earth (see 3:9–13; 8:30–35). Secondly, that at the time of judgment God decisively eliminates the wicked. Thirdly, that the wicked cannot stand before a holy army, one that follows God's revelation and trusts in him (1:5; 10:8). Fourthly, that the eternal God keeps his promises. God had covenanted this land to the patriarchs and their seed. He has now fulfilled that promise but has not yet consummated it (see 1:6). The conquest reminds the church that the covenant-keeping God will give his people the new heavens and the new earth, as he promised, and correspondingly that they must wait patiently for their inheritance (Heb. 11:39–40). Fifthly, that the united people of God, in this case the tribes both west and east of the Jordan, dispossess the illegitimate rulers and inherit the promised land (see 1:12–15).

The summary is divided into two halves: Israel's conquest and settlement of the land east of the Jordan (1–5), and Joshua's conquest of the kings west of the Jordan (6–24).

12:1–5 Conquest of the land east of the Jordan by Moses and its settlement. The narrator first reminds his readers of the transitoriness of the kingdoms east of the Jordan.

1 The immense Gorge of the Arnon, Wadi el-Mujib, on the east side of the Jordan opposite Ein Gedi, is a natural border previously marking the boundary between the Moabites to the south and Amorites to the north (Jdg. 11:18–19). The Arabah here is the wide Jordan rift valley between the Sea of Galilee (Kinnereth) and the Dead Sea (Sea of the Arabah). At the time of Joshua the northern border was Mt Hermon, not the promised border at the Euphrates (see 1:4; 13:1–7).

2–3 The conquest of Sihon king of the Amorites is told in Nu. 21:21–31 and Dt. 2:24–37. Aroer (modern Ar'arah) is about 6 miles (10 km) from the Dead Sea on the north bank overlooking the Wadi el-Mujib. It symbolized the southern limit of this territory. The Wadi Jabbok, flowing westward into the Jordan, about 7 miles (12 km) north of the Dead Sea, formed Sihon's northern boundary. Israel was not allowed to encroach upon the eastern half of the land belonging to the Ammonites, who were not yet organized as a kingdom (see 13:25). Gilead proper was the hilly, forested country north of a line reaching westward from Heshbon to the Dead Sea and extending northwards towards the Wadi Yarmuk, but it flattens out into plains about 11 miles (18 km) south of Yarmuk. The northern extensions of these plains form the territory of Bashan. This hilly, wooded area is halved by the Wadi Jabbok.

4–5 The conquest of Og king of Bashan is told in Nu. 21:32–35 and Dt. 3:1–11. The Rephaites were giants who inhabited the land before the Israelites. They were known by their successors, the Moabites and Ammonites, as the Emimites and the Zamzummimites respectively (Dt. 2:11, 20–21). These formidable people, comparable in stature with the Anakites, were in the promised land at the time of Abraham (Gn. 15:20). The Geshurites and Maacathites were Aramean tribes on the eastern fringe of Israel.

6 These lands were conquered by Moses, who, under God, handed them over to the two-and-a-half tribes loyal to the Lord in order to sanctify the land. Twice Moses is called *servant of the* LORD (*cf.* 1:1) probably to show Israel's legitimate right to the land.

12:7–24 Conquest of the land west of the Jordan by Joshua. The land Joshua conquered is roughly the size of the state of Vermont in the USA or Wales in Great Britain.

7–8 *Joshua and the Israelites* in v 7 matches *Moses . . . and the Israelites* in v 6. (For Baal-gad, see on 11:17.) The list roughly follows the accounts of the conquest as presented in chs. 6–11 and supplements them. At this time Israel had its camp at Gilgal and had not yet settled the land or occupied its cities.

9–24 These 'kings' ruled over tiny city-states whose territory extended only about 3 miles (5 km) around the fortified city. In 668 BC, after his first campaign in Syria-Palestine, Ashurbanipal collected tribute from thirty-three kings.

13:1 – 21:45 Allotting the land

Land was allocated to some of the tribes prior to their taking possession of it (13:1–7). This remaining land presented a continuing challenge to the faith of these unsettled tribes.

Though all Israel fought concertedly to establish itself in the promised land, the various tribes took possession of their territories in

several ways, at different times, and with varying degrees of success. The two-and-a-half eastern tribes asked for and received from Moses the area east of the river (13:8–33; *cf.* 12:1–6). West of the river, Judah, Ephraim and Manasseh carved out land for themselves and then had it allotted to them by Joshua (15:1 – 17:18). The remaining seven tribes, however, did not have this success. In their case, Joshua had the land surveyed, divided it into seven appropriate geographical areas, and then cast lots for its distribution (18:1 – 19:51). It was then up to each tribe to claim its allotment.

13:1–7 Land still to be taken

The book of Joshua presents two views of the nature and scope of Israel's occupation of Canaan: lightning-quick and spectacularly successful battles in conquering the entire land (11:16–23; 21:43–45; *cf.* Ex. 23:23), and a series of many battles over a long time (11:18) with huge tracts of territory still to be possessed little by little after the conquest (13:1–7; 18:3; *cf.* Ex. 23:27–30; Jdg. 1). The tension may be resolved by noting two factors.

First, biblical historians present their material according to theological schemes. Sometimes, as in the case of the books of Kings and Chronicles and of the NT gospels, different authors present the same history from different angles. To make their points they carefully select material, organizing it thematically, not necessarily chronologically, and editing as necessary. They write history in order to provoke memory and inspire vision, not merely to chronicle events. Our narrator celebrates that when Joshua's amazing campaigns ended Canaanite resistance was gone. By the 'land' he means both the territory and its inhabitants. Now that the people of the land have been defeated, it could be said that the whole land in its geographic sense had been taken. That memory aimed to nerve Israel to settle the land that remained.

Secondly, Israel's possession of the land and the rest that ensued are expandable themes, for the land was taken 'little by little' (Ex. 23:30) but never totally (Heb. 4:1–14). Future generations must play their part (Jdg. 3:1–4). The author of Chronicles used Jdg. 3:1–4 to present David as greater than Joshua for he ruled from 'the Shihor River in Egypt to Lebo [the entrance to] Hamath', using vocabulary unique to these two texts. Isaiah saw the fulfilment of these ideal national boundaries in the Messianic age (Is. 11:12–16). At any given point during the process of possessing the land, it can be said God fulfilled his promise. Moreover, each individual fulfilment was a part of the ultimate fulfilment and could be reckoned as such. The NT presents the same tension regarding the kingdom of God: it is already here but in its fullest sense 'not yet'.

The lands that remained were:

2–3 The territory that will become Philistia, from Shihor ('River of Horus', the Nile) to Gezer (following the LXX, not Geshur as in NIV). Though later ruled by the Philistines (*cf.* 11:22; Gn. 10:14), this land was part of the Canaanite territory promised to Israel. The Avvites lived in the neighbourhood of Gaza.

4 The territory of the Canaanites from Arah (site unknown) of the Sidonians as far as Aphek, south-east of Byblos, and the Amorites, probably the kingdom of the Amurru in the Lebanon region.

5 The territory of the Gebalites *i.e.* the area of Byblos and all of Lebanon east of Baal Gad beneath Mt Hermon to the entrance to Hamath.

Other areas still to be taken were: strategic cities in the Jezreel valley – Megiddo, Taanach, Ibleam, Endor and Beth Shan (17:11–12; *cf.* Jdg. 1:27).

The coastal plain, Aphek, Gezer and Dor (13:4; 16:10; 17:11; *cf.* Jdg. 1:27, 29).

The city of Jerusalem (15:63; *cf.* Jdg. 1:21) and the territories of Geshur and Maacah (13:13).

These comments show that Israel carved out its territory in the mountains of Palestine while the native populations remained in the plains because they intimidated Israel with their iron chariots (see 17:16; Jdg. 1:19).

Allocate in v 6 means 'to cause to fall' (*i.e.* the lot ruled by God; *cf.* Nu. 33:54; Is. 34:17; Mi. 2:4–5).

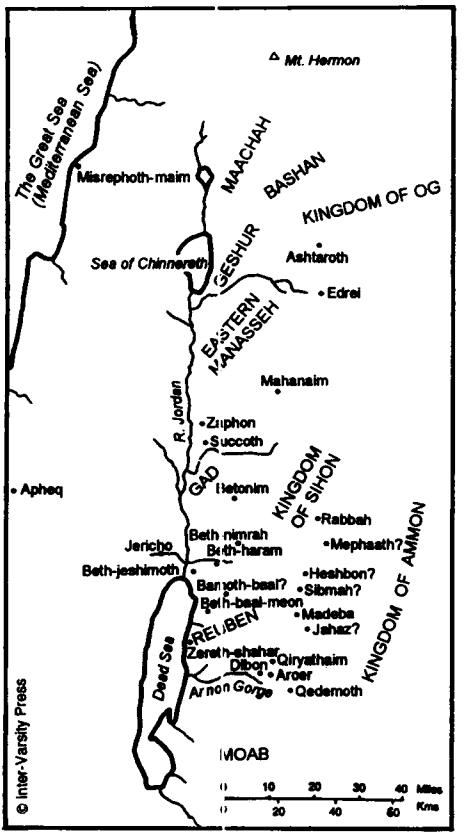
13:8–33 Distribution of the land east of the Jordan

This chapter aims to give a total idea of the land east of the Jordan, which Moses distributed.

13:8–13 Survey of the land for the eastern tribes. The allocation is linked with 12:1–5. The half-tribe of Manasseh is mentioned first to link it with v 7, not because it was most important.

13:14 The tribe of Levi. Vs 14 and 33 function as a frame to the more detailed account of the distribution of the land to the eastern tribes (15–31). In this way, the Levites' inheritance, the Lord and his offerings, is both highlighted and distinguished. The best inheritance was fellowship with the Lord himself, an inheritance available to all who desire it (*cf.* Pss. 16:5; 119:57; 142:5), showing that the inheritance was not linked inextricably with the land itself.

13:15–23 The tribe of Reuben. This section lists twelve captured towns first (17–20) and then the history of the conquest of the land



Reuben, Gad and eastern Manasseh.

east of the Jordan (21–22; *cf.* Nu. 21:21–32). *The entire realm of Sihon* (21a) must be qualified, for in v 27 part of it went to Gad. In view here is the part that extended over the tableland. 21b–22 mention the defeat of Sihon king of the Amorites adding that of the Midianite chiefs, and of Balaam the sorcerer (24:9–10; Dt. 23:4–5), to underscore the political and spiritual change of administrations that Moses, the lawgiver, brought about in the land (see on 12:1–5). 23 presents a summary.

13:24–28 The tribe of Gad. V 25 gives an overview and sets an eastern limit while v 26 sets limits on south and north and v 27 lists the western claims in the Jordan Valley. The introductory formula (24; *cf.* vs 15, 29) means to say that no less a person than Moses gave them this patrimony (see on 1:6). *All the towns of Gilead* near Jazer in southern Gilead (*cf.* v 31). *Half the Ammonite country* refers to the western part, between the Arnon and the Jabbok, not the eastern (see 12:1–5; Dt. 2:19). This Aroer is not to be confused with the one overlooking the Arnon Gorge (see 12:2; 13:16).

13:29–30 The half-tribe of Manasseh. The southernmost border for the tribe descending from Machir, son of Manasseh, is said to be Mahanaim, but no attempt is made to define precisely its other boundaries. These roughly fit the description in Dt. 3:4. **13–15** Manasseh, as Jacob's firstborn, was exceptional in that it received two portions, despite the preference expressed by Jacob in Gn. 48.

13:31–33 Summary. The summary frames this section. The reference to Levi promises the reader something better (*cf.* v 14).

14:1 – 19:51 Distribution of the land west of the Jordan

Between the introduction (14:1–5) and the conclusion (19:51), the narrator frames this section with the exemplary faiths of Caleb (14:6–15) and Joshua (19:49–50). These two heroes, who by faith outlived their own generation, claimed their inheritances and possessed them.

14:1–5 Introduction. The introduction to the distribution of the territory west of the Jordan names the land, the administrators, the method, the tribes and the legal warrant. The Egyptians referred to this land as 'Canaan', the administrative term used here for the territory in view (se 21:2; 22:9).

The Lord ultimately directed the distribution by means of the lot (see 13:6), while Eleazar the priest, Joshua and *the heads of the tribal clans* (*i.e.* sub-tribal chiefs; see 21:1) mediated the decision and administered it. Eleazar is mentioned first because Joshua stood before him at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and asked him to consult the Urim and Thummim, instruments that gave 'yes' or 'no' answers in response to specific inquiries (18:1–10; *cf.* Nu. 27:21).

Here the nine-and-a-half western tribes are in view, not the two-and-a-half eastern tribes (*cf.* 13:8–13). In Israel the firstborn received a double blessing (Dt. 21:15–17). Jacob, however, the father of all the tribes, made an exception. He passed over Reuben, his firstborn by Leah, his unloved wife (Gn. 29:31–32), and gave the double portion instead to Joseph, the firstborn of his beloved Rachel. He did this by elevating Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to full tribal status along with his own sons Reuben and Simeon (Gn. 48:1–9). The Mosaic law later disallowed this practice. The Levites were again excluded. In 13:14 their spiritual heritage is emphasized; here their practical needs are met (*cf.* Nu. 18:21–32). No less a figure than Moses, elsewhere called 'the servant of the LORD' (13:8; 14:7) and 'man of God' (14:6), approved this procedure. The point is repeated several times (2–3, 5). Since the clans followed Moses' legislation perfectly, their claims were valid.

14:6 – 17:18 Early allotments at Gilgal: Judah and Joseph. 14:6–15 Caleb's name means 'Dog' and may reflect the honoured status of this faithful and humble 'servant of the LORD' (Nu. 14:24). In the Amarna (*c.* 1350 BC) and the Lachish letters (586 BC) vassals use the term of themselves to express their loyalty to kings. The narrator refers to him as a Kenizzite because of his father (1 Chr. 4:13–15). His exceptional allotment is given first because his wholehearted commitment to the Lord – repeated three times for emphasis (8–9, 14) – exemplified the way in which the tribes were to claim their land even against redoubtable foes (see 13:1–7). With that kind of faith *the land had rest from war* (15; *cf.* 1:15: 11:23).

After an introduction (6a), Caleb's story has three parts: his legal right based on faith and God's word (6b–9), his claim of it by faith and war (10–12), and Joshua's grant (13–15).

Caleb's claim was based on God's promise to give him and Joshua the land in connection with their faithfulness in the reconnaissance from Kadesh (Nu. 14:24, 30). Caleb's conviction not to undermine the people's morale won him life and an inheritance (see Nu. 13). The land he had walked upon at that time was not the city of Hebron itself or its immediate pasture-lands but the fields and villages around it (13; see 21:11–12).

God's promise entailed that Caleb's inheritance should not be determined by casting lots. Probably the men of Judah accompanied him to support his claim. His demand exemplifies the nature of the covenant with God. He was granted the right to the land in the first place because of his faith (7–9) but now he must possess it by claiming it and driving out the mighty Anakites (10–12; see 1:6–7; *cf.* Mt. 25:34). Christians inherit their salvation through Christ (Eph. 1:14; Col. 3:24; Heb. 9:15). The Anakites, symbols of Israel's formidable enemies, are mentioned at the end of Joshua's battles (see 11:21–23) and now at the beginning of the distribution and Caleb's determination to drive them out. That Caleb might fully enjoy his inheritance, God did not allow him to age during his thirty-eight years in the cruel desert (11). The bodies of believers age, but not their spirits, and their bodies will be raised (2 Cor. 4:7–18).

Saints with the bold faith of Caleb and Rahab are rewarded (13–15), and the narrator goes out of his way to make the point (see 6:22–25). To 'bless' means to make potent, to reproduce and prevail (Gn. 22:17–18). Joshua, who himself was old, was making his eighty-five-year-old compatriot potent!

15:1–63 The narrator clearly states why he defines the tribal inheritances in such detail: it is to show that God keeps his promises (21:43–45). These precise definitions of the tribes' inheritances are a clear reminder that God fulfilled his promises to give his covenant people the land fit for kings. V 1 harks back to 11:23.

First, its boundaries are delineated: southern (1–4), eastern (5a), northern (5b–11) and western (12). *Allotment* in v 1 refers to the actual casting of the 'lot' (see 13:1–7). As an omen of Judah's future greatness and leadership (Gn. 49:10; Jdg. 1:1–2; 20:18), its allotment west of the Jordan is mentioned first (15:2–12).

Then Caleb's inheritance (15:13–19) is mentioned, again stressing how he dispossessed the former inhabitants to take possession of the gift as an example for others (see 14:6–15 and note similarity of 14:15 and 15:13). Caleb himself dispossessed the Anakites from Hebron, and he promised his daughter in marriage to a man of like faith who would take Debir (*cf.* 1 Sa. 17:25; 18:17). Othniel, his nephew (*cf.* Jdg. 1:13), won both the promised land and bride, as did Christ (*cf.* Eph. 5:25; Heb. 4:1–14). By boldly petitioning her father Caleb's daughter won coveted springs of water (*cf.* Lk. 11:1–13). This story, vs 13–19, is not presented in chronological order. Caleb and Othniel took their cities as part of the campaign recorded in 10:36–39.

Finally, the Canaanite towns included in the allotment were registered, town by town (*cf.* Dt. 6:10–11), according to Judah's geography. First the Negev (21–32), then the western foothills (33–44) and the coastal plain to be inhabited by the Philistines (45–47). Followed by the high hill country between Jerusalem and Hebron (48–60), and the desert towards the Dead Sea (61–62). These regions were further divided into eleven districts. Note how nearly every one ends with a total of the towns involved (32, 36, 41, 43, 47, 51, 54, 57, 59, 60, 62).

63 Though Joshua had killed the king of Jerusalem (10:1, 22–27), the Judeans could not dislodge the Jebusites from Jerusalem. In fact, however, the northern boundary of Judah (15:8) ran along the southern slope of Jebus (ancient Jerusalem) and so did not include the city itself which belonged to Benjamin (see 18:16, 28; Jdg. 1:21).

16:1 – 17:18 The presentation of Joseph's allotment consists of an overview of its southern boundary (16:1–4), the territory of Ephraim (16:5–10), the territory of Manasseh (17:1–13), and the complaint made by these tribes about the size of their inheritance (17:14–18).

16:1–4 This introduction describes the southern boundary, Ephraim's border with Benjamin (*cf.* 18:12–13) and Dan. For the meaning of *allotment* (1) and the theological significance of this distribution see comments on 15:1–63. Though Ephraim and Manasseh were reckoned as two tribes (see 14:4), they drew only one lot, not without protest (see 17:14): Ephraim in the south, Manasseh in the north. Manasseh's northern boundary is defined in its relation to Asher and Isaachar (10), though it retained cities within those two tribal areas (11).

16:5–10 Ephraim's inheritance is listed ahead of Manasseh's because Jacob put him first (see Gn. 48:17–20). The presentation of Ephraim's inheritance consists of a delineation of his boundaries (5–8), a reference to the towns and villages he inherited within Manasseh (9; see 15:1–63), and a note of failure (10). Joshua defeated the Gezerites but did not take their city (10:33; Jdg. 1:29).

17:1–13 Machir was Manasseh's firstborn (13:31; Gn. 50:23; Nu. 26:29). The Hebrew text says that he was a great warrior and so had already inherited Gilead, named after his son, and Bashan east of the Jordan (see 13:29–30; *cf.* Nu. 26:30–31). Gilead also had seven male descendants who inherited land west of the Jordan (see Nu. 26:30–32).

A grandson of Gilead, Zelophehad had no male descendants because he died in Korah's rebellion, but he was survived by five daughters. To ensure the survival of Israelite families without male offspring, even to sinners such as Zelophehad, the Lord promised that the father's rights be given to his daughters (3–6; see Nu. 26:33; 27:1–11). As a result, Manasseh's inheritance was divided among ten clans: Zelophehad's five living brothers and his five daughters. Like Caleb, these daughters appealed, by faith in the Lord's promise, to those administering the distribution of the land to give them their rights (14:1–5, 6–15).

The inability of Manasseh and Ephraim to dispossess the Canaanites serves as a transition to the next section (14–18). The lack of faith's obedience ultimately undermined Israel's spiritual commitment and led to Israel's intermarriage with the Canaanites and to their undoing (see Dt. 7:1–6; 12:29–31; Jdg. 3:1–6).

The request and failure of the people of Joseph at the end of the section on the early allotments (17:14–18) contrasts sharply with the request and success of Caleb of Judah at the beginning (14:6–15; Jdg. 1:27–28). The peoples of Joseph complained that their allotment was too small; Joshua responded that their faith was too small. In the light of this book's concern for the unity of all Israel, one could also add their interests were too selfish.

From a legal viewpoint their complaint that they were given but one 'lot' seems to have some justification for they were reckoned as two large tribes (14; see 16:1). The Lord, however, governed the lot and both Ephraim and Manasseh had been given separate tracts of land. Manasseh's was second west of the Jordan only to Judah's, and half of Manasseh was given a large tract of land east of the Jordan as well.

Joshua used their claim, *we are a numerous people* (*lit.* many/great), against them. Since they were 'great', they should deforest the hill country and not just be content with the towns the Canaanites had built and the pasturage they had cleared (15). *The hill country of Ephraim* may have included the forested areas on both sides of the Jordan. The term is so used in 2 Sa. 18:6 and the inhabitants of this area, the Perizzites and the Rephaites, are said respectively to have lived on both sides of the river (3:10; 12:4, 8; 13:12). It explains Joshua's statement that Ephraim and Manasseh *will have not only one allotment* (17). Their claim that *The hill country is not enough for us, and all the Canaanites who live in the plain have iron chariots* (16) exposed their spiritual failure: sloth, timidity and lack of vision.

Joshua replied with the confidence of faith: *clear* [*the forested hill country*] *and drive out* [*the Canaanites*] (17–18).

18:1 – 19:51 Allotment for the rest of the tribes at Shiloh (see map on p. 230). **18:1–10** Joshua moved his base camp from Gilgal (14:6) to Shiloh in the heart of Ephraim where the Lord's Tent of Meeting was pitched (see Ex. 33:7; Nu. 11:16; Dt. 31:14). Shiloh was in the centre of the promised land and its landscape includes a natural amphitheatre. By distributing the land in the Lord's presence, the theological significance of the conquest of the land and its distribution comes to the fore: it was the Lord's land, to be sanctified for him (see 8:30–35). In keeping with his theological perspective the narrator repeats that Israel had subdued the land, but by faith it must still be possessed (1–2; see 13:1–7).

Joshua chided the remaining seven tribes for their failure to fulfil their covenant obligations (3). The Hebrew word behind *wait* means 'to be slack'. God had given them the land, but they had failed to enter and possess it by faith (3; see 1:7–9, 11). To encourage them to obey in faith, Joshua sent out twenty-one men, three picked by each tribe, to survey the remaining land, write a description of it town by town (9) with a view to apportioning it, and bring the report to him. After the tribes themselves had divided it into seven parts, Joshua, through Eleazar the priest and

with the elders (*cf.* 14:1–5; 19:51), cast the Lord's lots for them (3–10). This mode of distributing the land, he reminded them, did not apply to Judah in the south and Joseph farther north (5); to the Levites (7a; *cf.* 13:14, 33) or to the eastern tribes (7b). The twenty-one men were surveyors, not spies (*cf.* 2:1–24).

18:11–28 The Hebrew word for *lot* in v 6 is translated 'allotment' in 15:1; 16:1; 17:1. The first lot fell to Benjamin, Rachel's second son, after Joseph (*cf.* 14:1–5). Vs 11–20 list the boundaries of this area and vs 22–24 the towns included within those boundaries – twelve in the unattractive, dry eastern district (21–24) and fourteen crowded on the desirable watershed ridge north and west of Jerusalem (25–28).

19:1–9 The second lot fell to Simeon, Jacob's second son by Leah (Gn. 29:33). In mapping out the land, it was decided that Judah's portion, though designated by lot, was larger than needed, and so Simeon was given land within Judah's allocation (9). This fulfilled Jacob's curse on Simeon that he should be dispersed in Israel (Gn. 49:7). In the taking of their lands, Judah and Simeon fought alongside each other (Jdg. 1:3). Simeon's towns were concentrated in the vicinity of Beersheba and the north-eastern Negev fringe, where oases are not numerous and where deep wells are essential for continuous settlement.

19:10–16 The third lot fell to Zebulun, Leah's youngest son (Gn. 30:19–20; 49:13).

19:17–23 The fourth lot fell to Isaachar, Jacob's fifth son by Leah (Gn. 30:14–17; 49:14). His towns and boundaries were not traced out beyond three certain points of reference, Jezreel (18), Mt Tabor and the Jordan River (22).

19:24–31 The fifth lot fell to Asher, Jacob's second son by Leah's maid-servant, Zilpah (Gn. 30:12–13; 49:20).

19:32–39 The sixth lot fell to Naphtali, Jacob's youngest son by Rachel's servant, Bilhah (Gn. 30:7; 49:21). His land included attractive, densely forested mountains and fairly fertile lower areas. Through this heartland of Galilee ran the major trade route between Jezreel and points north.

19:40–48 The seventh lot fell to Dan, Jacob's oldest son by Bilhah (Gn. 30:1–6; 49:16–17). Though only its towns are given, its boundaries can be inferred from those of the neighbouring territories of Judah and Ephraim. The Amorites forced this timorous and slothful tribe northwards (Jdg. 1:34). The full story of the Danites' later conquest at Leshem (Laish) is told in Jdg. 18. Dan represents the climax of failure to possess the land the Lord had given to Israel. In his case, the Amorites prevailed.

19:49–51 The conclusion consists of two parts: Joshua's inheritance (49–50) and a fulsome concluding report about the administrators of the lot, the place of casting, and the complete distribution of the land. The summary is important for the theology of this book. The unified people under God's command gave the town of Timnath Serah to Joshua, and he exemplified for them faith's obedience by requesting this as his inheritance, possessing it and rebuilding it. His example at the end the section on the distribution of the land west of Jordan complements Caleb's faith at its beginning (14:6–15). Through the casting of lots at the entrance to the Lord's tent, it was clear that this was the Lord's land, a gift to Israel, to be taken by faith. Though the tribes who failed gave excuses, they were without excuse.

20:1–9 Cities of refuge

As a practical measure to assure justice, God instructed Moses to have Israel locate six cities, three on each side of the Jordan, where anyone who killed a person *accidentally and unintentionally*, could flee and find asylum from the *avenger of blood* (Heb. *gō'ēl*, more precisely, 'the family protector'). After the conquest of the land east of the Jordan Moses promptly specified the three cities there (*cf.* Dt. 4:41–43; 19:1–13).

Innocent blood, like the curse, must find satisfaction. The Lord inquires into and vindicates innocent blood which cries out for vengeance (*cf.* Gn. 4:10; 9:5–6; 2 Sa. 16:7, 8). Homicidal blood pollutes the land (Nu. 35:33), defiles the hands (Is. 59:3) and calls forth judgment both by the Lord (1 Ki. 2:31, 33) and by the family protector, who is obliged to seek justice, not revenge, for his family. Innocent blood is expiated either by the death of the murderer (Nu. 35:33; Dt. 19:13) or by atonement (Dt. 21:7–9). Otherwise it brings upon the land the Lord's wrath and disaster (2 Sa. 21; 1 Ki. 2:31–33; 2 Ki. 24:4). In that light – the place of mercy in the OT has not been examined here but see Ps. 51, in particular v 14 – one sees the importance of establishing in fair courts whether the killing was deliberate or accidental. If the act was a deliberate one *i.e.* murder, then justice demanded the death sentence; if it was accidental or unintentional, then the criminal was allowed to live a normal life in the city of refuge.

When the alleged man-slayer arrived at a city of refuge, the elders, all Levites who were responsible for teaching the law, gave him a preliminary trial at the city gate, where court was held in ancient Israel. If he was found innocent, they gave him asylum from the family protector and sent him to stand trial before the assembly, a sort of pre-monarchic parliament vested with representative and judicial powers.

If this assembly of chieftans or adult males there found him guilty, they handed him over to the family protector for execution. If found innocent, they sent him back to the city of refuge where he had to stay until the death of the high priest serving at that time. He stayed there to protect him and the family protector from retaliatory vengeance. Perhaps the death of the high priest, Israel's chief representative before God, could be said to symbolize the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the church's high priest, who made satisfaction for all sin, both intentional and unintentional.

21:1–42 Levitical towns

21:1–3 Historical background. Though the Levites had the LORD for their inheritance (13:14, 33), they needed towns to live in and pasture-lands to support them. These needs were now provided for.

Like Joshua and Caleb, and unlike the slothful, timorous seven tribes who needed Joshua's prompting (18:2–3), the heads of the three branches of Levites (Nu. 3:17), took the initiative and approached the administrators of the sacred lot at Shiloh, claiming God's promise through Moses to give them forty-eight towns with their adjoining pasture-lands, including the six cities of refuge (41–42; *cf.*, Nu. 35:1–5). Tribes such as Judah that had many towns, gave up more territory than those tribes such as Naphtali that only had a few (Nu. 35:7–8).

The Israelites acceded to the Levites' request and gave this more pilgrim-like tribe, which was scattered throughout the land, towns from their own inheritance. In giving this sort of 'tithe' they blessed themselves, for the separatist Levites in their midst taught them the law that sanctified, blessed, and secured them in the land (Dt. 33:8–11).

21:4–7 Overview of the Levitical towns. The distribution of the Levitical towns was done according to the three branches of Levi. In the overview the sequence of the lot is given first, then the number of towns given to each branch and the tribal areas in which the towns were located.

The narrator repeats *allotted* several times to emphasize that it was the Lord who assigned these towns. To judge from the first lot, the allocation came out according to importance and/or size of the branch. The lot appropriately came out first to the Kohathites, because Aaron, and so the priestly line, belonged to that branch. God gave the priests towns from Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, that is, those areas closest to Jerusalem, where the temple would be located (4). Surprisingly, and significantly, the priests were not given Jerusalem; the Lord reserved that prize for the house of David, the temple's patrons. The rest of the Kohathites, the 'lower clergy', were assigned towns in the tribal areas next in proximity to Jerusalem, Ephraim, Dan, and the half-tribe of Manasseh west of the Jordan (5). The Gershonites were assigned towns in the far north, in Issachar, Asher, Napthtali and the half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan (6), and the Merarites were given towns just south of them, in Zebulun's territory west of the Jordan, and Gad and Reuben east of the Jordan (7).

21:8–42 The distribution of the forty-eight Levitical towns (*cf.* 1 Ch. 6:54–81). At the time these towns were distributed some, such as Gezer (21; *cf.* 16:10) and Tanaach (25; *cf.* 17:11–12), were still in Canaanite hands. The Levites had to possess them by faith's obedience.

21:43–45 Summary: God's amazing faithfulness

These verses constitute a link with 1:6, thereby underscoring the narrator's theological scheme: the Lord kept his covenant with the patriarchs to give them the land fit for kings. They possessed it, settled in it and had rest from attack on every side (see 1:15; 11:23). Not a promise failed (see 13:1–7).

22:1 – 24:33 Retaining the land

The narrator now relates three episodes to show that Israel must retain the land in the same way they possessed it. After being charged by Joshua to retain covenantal loyalty, the noble eastern militia, recognizing that the Lord had given them their lands, built an altar on their way home witnessing to their unity with Israel's Lord (22:1–34). In his farewell address, Joshua stressed covenant loyalty to remain in the land (23:1–16) and solemnized Israel's covenant by renewing it at Shechem (24:1–27).

22:1–34 The eastern tribes' altar of witness

22:1–8 Joshua's farewell to the eastern tribes. 1–5 Joshua's generous farewell to the eastern tribes forms a link with the commands in ch. 1. He commended them for scrupulously keeping his charge not to abandon their brothers but to assist them until the western tribes had rest from attack by the Canaanites (2–3; *cf.* 1:12–18). They had displayed faith's endurance in performing this mission over *a long time* (*cf.* 11:18; Heb. 12:1) and finished their course (*cf.* 2 Tim. 4:6–8). To them it could have been said, 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (Mt. 25:21). Joshua's reflection on *rest* (4a) looks

back to the prologue (1:6), and his charge to keep the law of Moses, the essence of which is summed up in one command, to love God from the heart (4–5; *cf.* Dt. 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; Mt. 22:37–40), and repeated the Lord's charge in the book's prologue (1:7–9). 'Love' was the basic stipulation in ancient Near Eastern treaties. No law can attain its goal so long as it is reluctantly endured. It must be founded on inward assent. *Heart and soul* are not meant to specify distinct spheres of life but to reinforce the complete devotion to God. *Heart* designates the intentionality of the whole person, and *soul* denotes the whole self, uniting flesh, will and vitality.

6–8 As Israel's charismatic leader, Joshua mediated God's blessing on the eastern militiamen. Sending them away to a splendid homecoming with the plunder they had won (see 11:10–15), he charged them in the best traditions of holy war to share it with those who had remained behind to protect their homes (*cf.* Nu. 31:27; 1 Sa. 30:16–25). All entered their rest fully rewarded (*cf.* Mt. 6:18; 16:27; Col. 3:24; 1 Tim. 5:18).

9–34 These faithful militia-men performed one last deed of exceptional loyalty to the Lord before rejoining their families. So that future generations in western Israel may not bar the eastern tribes from coming to worship the Lord west of the Jordan where he caused his Name to dwell, they built an *imposing altar* at Geliloth close to the Jordan (on either the east or west banks; the NIV is overly interpretative in v 11), as a witness that the Lord had elected them also to be his people.

Unfortunately, their creative, visionary act of faith was misinterpreted by the westerners as a rival altar to the Lord. The eastern and western tribes did not disagree on their interpretation of the law in Dt. 12:4–14 – both sides assumed that law prescribed that Israel worship only at the central sanctuary. The westerners, however, thought that the easterners were intending to worship the Lord according to their own will, not his. By looking at the way in which the two groups reconciled their differences, we can draw out sound principles for resolving doctrinal differences (*cf.* Mt. 18:15–20).

The western tribes, as the offended party, set about mending the rift in the following way:

– they squarely addressed themselves to the problem, and did not sweep it under the rug (11–12a).

– they took apostasy so seriously that they put purity above their own lives, not buying peace at any price (12b).

– they sent their ablest leaders, the priest Phinehas who had shown himself zealous for the Lord in the episode at Baal Peor (Nu. 25:7), and ten chiefs representing all the tribes, to investigate the matter and possibly to restore the offenders, not acting rashly (13–14).

– they addressed the perceived offence objectively as a breach of faith, an act of rebellion against God, not subjectively as a body-blow to their own egos (15–16).

– they argued their case on the conviction that God punishes sin as displayed at Baal Peor (*i.e.* it left them with the seeds of historical guilt and the LORD's plague, not on expediency –17).

– they also argued on the conviction that the sin of some affects all, as seen at Baal Peor (17–18) and in the case of Achan (18, 20; see 7:1), and such corporate guilt was not something inconsequential to them.

– they respected their brothers' consciences and convictions (*i.e.* that eastern Israel was defiled because it lacked God's holy sanctuary), not ruling their weak consciences out of court (19a; *cf.* Rom. 14:1–23).

– they were willing to sacrifice some of their possessions to restore their brothers to a clean conscience and proper worship, not insisting on their proper interpretation of the law (19b).

– having been corrected by the perceived offenders, they acceded to their creative expression of faith, not barring new and appropriate expressions of faith consistent with God's word (30–31).

– finally, the representatives reported to the full assembly for their approval, not overreaching their authority (32).

The eastern tribes, the offenders, responded by correcting the misunderstanding by presenting the facts of the situation solemnly, piously and vigorously. They agreed with taking decisive action against apostasy, being willing to die themselves to prevent it (23), and then explained clearly and fully their motivation. They said that they needed some appropriate monument, such as this replica altar, to overcome the natural barrier of the Jordan, as a witness to future generations that their covenant children had an equal right in the worship of God (24–28; see 4:5–7). It was not intended for sacrifices and so was not an apostasy.

As a result of these sound procedures the brothers separated reconciled with one another and praising God (30–34). If the absence of apostasy is a cause to praise God for his presence with his people (31), then its presence ought to prompt believers to investigate possible cause(s) of his disfavour.

23:1–16 Joshua's farewell address

Joshua's 'last words' put him in the distinguished company of Moses (Dt. 31:1–13), Samuel (1 Sa. 12:1–24) and David (1 Ki. 2:1–9) whose last words emphasized covenant fidelity. The

address was given shortly after Joshua allotted the land (see 13:1). Both Moses and Joshua, the founders of the theocracy, kept faith until their deaths and were models of the ideal leader, teaching the next generation to keep the covenant (*cf.* 2 Tim. 3:10 – 4:6; 2 Pet. 1:12–21).

23:1–4 Historical prologue. Whereas Moses validated God's covenant faithfulness by recounting his conquest of the land east of the Jordan (Dt. 31:4), Joshua verified it by rehearsing God's destruction of the Canaanites west of the Jordan (3) and his allotment of the conquered nations that remained (4). The people had seen it with their own eyes. The Hebrew word rendered 'remember' in v 4 is more precisely translated 'see', as in v 3. Today, however, the Spirit instils faith through proclaiming the words of faith (Rom. 10:6–13).

23:5–8 Covenant obligations. God had committed himself to continue to drive out the Canaanites (5) and Israel had committed itself to be strong in the faith (see 1:6,9) and keep the law (6). They promised not to be seduced into the worship of the Canaanite deities that made few moral demands (7; *cf.* Dt. 5:9; 8:19) and pledged themselves to continue to cling exclusively to God (8; see 1:7–9). As in his farewell to the eastern tribes, Joshua drew his vocabulary directly from the book of Deuteronomy.

23:9–11 Covenant experience. Joshua's generation had clung to the Lord and experienced his covenant promises. As promised, none had withstood them (see 1:5). At this point we can discern the narrator's theological scheme imposed on the data (see 13:1–7). He parades Israel's successes of faith over *great and powerful nations* and does not mention their failures of unbelief (see 17:12–13, 14–18; 18:3, 47). That positive experience was sufficient motivation to *love the* LORD *your God* (see 22:5).

23:12–13 Covenant curses. Israel's old covenant contained both promises of blessings for keeping it and threats of extreme punishment for violating it (see Lv. 26; Dt. 28). In setting forth the covenant obligations Joshua underscored religious separation from the Canaanites (7), and warned against all social contact with them (12), assuming that their religious and ethical pollution was contagious and would bring God's wrath upon Israel as upon them (*cf.* Dt. 7:2–4). Should Israel ally itself with these nations, they will be used against Israel to inflict the covenant curses on the unfaithful (*cf.* 5:13–15). In the battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world one cannot be neutral (*cf.* Eph. 6:10–18). Either the saint or the sinner must prevail. The one who is not *for* Christ is *against* him (Mt. 12:30). The uncommitted will be destroyed (*cf.* Pr. 24:30–34), but the Spirit within the saints is greater than the spiritual forces arrayed against them. Those professing a covenant relationship with God must persevere in their faith to remain in the land of blessing (13; *cf.* 2 Ch. 7:19–22; Heb. 6:4–7; 10:26–31), as Israel's tragic history so painfully teaches (2 Ki. 17:7–8; 24:20). For the advantages of the new covenant see 1:7–9 and for the disadvantages of co-existence with 'the nations' see 9:1–27.

23:14–16 God's word is true. The generation of Israel that conquered the land knew by experience that God kept his promises (1:1–9; 21:43–45). Joshua had validated that truth throughout his life (14). God's past faithfulness in keeping his covenant promises nerves saints to fidelity, comforts them in adversity, and restrains them in temptation (22:4–5). God is not capricious, and so his people do not have to live in anxiety. He speaks clearly both promises to inspire love and threats to provoke fear. God built Israel into a great nation in the good land to sanctify it by his law (see 8:30–35). If his people fail in their mission, he will destroy them (*cf.* Mk. 12:1–12).

24:1–28 Covenant renewal at Shechem

Israel's elders, who were eyewitnesses of the Lord's amazing acts in the founding of the nation, ratified and renewed their covenant with him four times. Originally at Sinai after the amazing exodus (Ex. 24); at Moab after God had miraculously preserved them in the desert and they had conquered the land east of the Jordan (Dt. 29:1); at Mt Ebal after the victories at Jericho and Ai (8:30–34); and finally here at Shechem after the astonishing triumphs over the Canaanite coalitions (11–13, 18). The first two were mediated through Moses, the last two through Joshua. Here is one of the strongest links between Moses and Joshua: both mediate the Lord's covenant. The elders on these occasions represented the whole nation.

Joshua assembled the people at Shechem *before God* (*i.e.* before the ark) to renew the covenant either at the same time as his farewell address (ch. 23) or on a separate occasion. Evidently, the portable sanctuary and ark had been moved to this sacred site (32; 8:30–35; Gn. 33:18–20).

The covenant was similar to ancient Near Eastern treaties in which a superpower (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Hatti) entered into a relationship with a weaker nation (Ugarit and Amurru [Amorite], to name just two). This kind of treaty, known as a 'vassal treaty', typically had six parts: a preamble identifying the Great King (2a); a historical prologue reciting the King's kindnesses to the vassal (2b–13); stipulations,

the basic one being to serve only the King and his kingdom (14); curses and blessings (19); witnesses (22, 27); and deposit of the treaty document (25–26). Any individual treaty could vary slightly from this outline, but the basic pattern can be discerned (*cf.* Ex. 19 – 24; 1 Sa. 12).

24:2a Preamble: Identifying the Great King. Joshua spoke as a prophet, as a messenger from the heavenly court. The Great King himself was always represented as the author of the covenant. The shift from 'I' to 'he' with reference to an author, as in v 7, is unexceptional in ancient literature.

24:2b–13 Historical prologue: The King's kindness. Typically, the Great King recounted the history of his relationship with his vassal to instil in him a sense of confidence and obligation (see 13:1–7). An enduring kingdom must be established on inward consent, not on naked force (23; 22:5).

The Lord began his unique relationship with Israel when he redeemed Abraham from his pagan family headed by Terah. Israel's blessed families circumcised their sons to show this new faith. The rest of that sacred history is well known from the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua except for the addition: *the citizens* [*lit.* 'the lords'] *of Jericho fought against you* (11). Seven nations are singled out to denote completeness (see 3:10). The *hornet* (*cf.* Dt. 7:20) is probably an image of panic and confusion by which God helped Israel to conquer. What is stressed is that the victory was gained not by force of arms but by God's miraculous intervention. *The two Amorite kings* are Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan (12:2–5). While Israel may have used *sword and bow* in taking the promised land, they cannot attribute their success to them (12; *cf.* 23:5; Ps. 44:1–3).

24:14–18 Stipulation: Be loyal to the Lord. The ancient vassal treaties essentially stipulated exclusive loyalty to the Great King. One Hittite treaty commands: 'Do not turn your eyes to anyone else'! So also here. *Fear the* LORD (14a) entails waving a white flag of surrender before the Lord's law, of submitting oneself to his commandments. One cannot 'fear him' and at the same time serve other gods (*cf.* 2 Ki. 17:32–34); these idols must be thrown away (14b; *cf.* Gn. 35:2–4). Israel's jealous God tolerates no rival. Neither does Jesus (*cf.* Mt. 6:24; Lk. 14:26). The reference to Egypt (14b) adds to the Pentateuch that Israel's redemption from Egypt was spiritual, not just political (see Ezk. 20:5–10; 23:1–4). God demands that the people chose where their allegiance lies, either with the old gods of Terah, the new gods of Canaan, or with himself (15; *cf.* 1 Ki. 18:21; Rev. 3:16), an offer of options that assumes Israel's freedom before God.

Entrance into this covenant was a matter for each individual family to decide as seen in Joshua's famous resolve (15b). Although Israel functioned as a nation, the covenant was essentially a family matter, and still is (*cf.* Acts. 16:31). As eyewitnesses of the acts recited in the prologue and so able to confirm its accuracy, that generation appropriately formed the foundation for the old covenant relationship with God. After this the covenant will be passed on by the mouth of one generation and received in the heart of the next (Dt. 31:11–14). So also the new covenant community is built on the apostles who were eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus Christ, especially his resurrection (Acts. 1:21–22; 1 Cor. 15:8), and after that the mouth confesses it and the heart receives it (Rom. 10:6–10).

24:19–21 Covenant curses. Joshua knew from divine revelation and from experience that the people were incapable of keeping the old covenant (19; see Dt. 31:14 – 32:47). He soberly warned that to break covenant with the holy and jealous God, who does *not forgive your rebellion and your sins* (*i.e.* go back on his covenant curses) would lead to the disastrous sanctions of the covenant curses (20; *cf.* 23:12–13). Precisely because God's character does not change, his attitude to people changes when they turn to him or against him; in this way he rewards good and punishes evil (*cf.* Je. 18:5–10). Their only hope is in the atoning blood of Christ (*cf.* Pss. 32:1–2; 130:3–4; Lk. 22:20; Rom. 3:21–26). Through the failure of the old covenant, on account of human fickleness, Israel will learn centuries later the necessity of the new covenant and a walk in the Spirit, even as Paul had to learn it (Rom. 7:7 – 8:4). God's ways in history are filled with mystery to his own glory (Rom. 11:33–36).

The founding generation essentially kept the covenant, though Joshua still had to exhort some families to throw away their old gods (14, 23).

24:22–27 Covenant witnesses and deposit of the law. Moses taught the people a song as a witness against them (Dt. 31:9 – 32:44). Joshua called upon the people to be witnesses against themselves (22). With their resolve, wise for its knowledge of God's faithfulness and yet at the same time foolish for its ignorance of human fickleness (24), Joshua renewed the covenant, drawing up its contents in line with the stipulations and recording them in a certain *Book of the Law of God* (25a–26), not preserved apart from this notice. The large stone he erected as a further witness against them was possibly a pillar containing the covenant (26b–27; *cf.* 8:31–32; Jdg. 9:6; see also 4:5–7; Gn. 28:18; 31:45–50; 1 Sa. 7:12).

24:28 Dismissal of the assembly. His work finished, the land possessed and the covenant renewed, Joshua dismissed the people for the last time.

24:29–33 Postscript: burial notices

The Deuteronomist concludes his book with the burials of Joshua (29–30), Joseph (32) and Eleazar (33) in the rest of the promised land, for they symbolize his dominant theme: God gave that faithful generation rest in the land he had promised the fathers. Joshua is finally rewarded with the honorific title he earned: *servant of the* LORD (*cf.* 1:1). Another and greater will mediate the new covenant (Is. 42:6; 49:8).

28–31 links the books of Joshua and Judges (Jdg. 2:6–9), contrasting the blessedness of the founding generation with the wretchedness of the next. V 32 links the book with the Pentateuch (*cf.* Gn. 50:25; Ex. 13:19).

Bruce K. Waltke

JUDGES

Introduction

The place of Judges in the Old Testament

The book of Judges is part of the Bible's account of Israel's history from its entry into the land of Canaan (in the book of Joshua) to its eventual removal from it (at the end of 2 Kings). Much of this part of the OT is devoted to accounts of the reigns of Israel's kings, beginning with Saul, David and Solomon. But between Israel's arrival in Canaan and the setting up of the monarchy there was a period of about two hundred years (roughly 1200–1000 BC) known as the period of the judges. In this period Israel had no formal, centralized administration and depended on specially gifted men and women that God raised up to provide leadership. They were called judges because they carried out God's judgment, either by driving out enemies or by settling disputes among the Israelites themselves. The activities of these judges are described in the book of Judges (hence its name) and in the opening chapters of 1 Samuel.

In the traditional arrangement of the OT (still reflected in Jewish Bibles today) the books Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings occur in a section called 'The Prophets' along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve so-called 'minor prophets' (Hosea – Malachi). As a sub-group, Joshua – 2 Kings are known as the 'Former Prophets'. They are so called because they are traditionally thought to have been written by prophets, but also (and more importantly) because they are prophetic in their style and interests. They clearly have a very strong historical dimension to them, but like the other prophetic books they are not concerned simply with history for history's sake. They are not mere chronicles of events. Rather, they are interested in how God was at work in the events they describe. In particular, they are concerned with God's special relationship with Israel and how this was expressed in both judgment and salvation in Israel's history. This special relationship was based on the covenant which God made with the Israelites at Mt Sinai after he brought them out of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 19 – 20), and this in turn was based on the promises which God had made to Abraham centuries before (Gn. 12:1–2). As we shall see, the book of Judges is clearly prophetic in this sense. It is a theological account of Israel's history in the judges period. And like the other prophetic books, it contains a message which is still relevant for the present and the future.

Israel in the period of the judges

Little is known about Israel's way of life in the judges' period apart from what can be gleaned from the OT. The chief source of information is the book of Judges itself, but the books of Ruth and 1 Samuel also shed valuable light on the period.

Israel's territory at that time was divided into tribal areas (see Jos. 13 – 21 and map on p. 230). Of the twelve tribes, nine-and-a-half occupied the region between the Jordan River (including the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea) and the Mediterranean coast. The other two-and-a-half occupied the plateau region east of the Jordan. Conquests by neighbouring peoples such as the Midianites, Moabites and Ammonites (to the east) and the Philistines and other so-called Sea Peoples (to the west) usually involved only part of Israel's territory, which meant that only one or two tribes were directly affected.

The essential bond between the tribes was their common history and their allegiance to the LORD (Yahweh). He himself was their supreme Ruler or Judge (11:27) and his law was their constitution. It was this covenant relationship with the LORD which bound them together and gave them their identity as a distinct people. At least once a year a religious festival was held at which the people were reminded of their identity and of the obligations which this entailed. These gatherings were probably held at Shiloh, which was centrally located and was the place where the Tent of Meeting had originally been set up after Israel's arrival in Canaan (Jos 18:1; Jdg. 21:19; 1 Sa. 1:3). This probably remained the place of the central sanctuary throughout the judges period, although the ark of the covenant was sometimes moved to other places, especially in times of crisis (18:27). How well attended these festivals were and exactly what happened at them is not definitely known but almost certainly thanks were given for blessings received (*e.g.* good harvests), prayer was made, sacrifices were offered, the law given at Mt Sinai was read, and a fresh oath of loyalty was

taken (to the LORD and to one another). Probably it was the judge in office at the time who read the law, assisted by the priests (2:17; 18:27). What all this amounted to was a renewal of the covenant and a fresh commitment to live by it (*cf.* Jos. 24).

For the most part, day-to-day administration of justice and oversight of community affairs was provided locally by the elders of the various clans and tribes (11:4–11; Ru. 4:1–12). But matters which could not be settled locally were brought for settlement to the judge who was in office at the time, either at some central location (4:4–5) or at certain designated towns which the judge visited regularly (1 Sa. 7:15–17). From time to time, as occasion warranted, *ad hoc* assemblies of representatives from the various tribes were convened to deal with matters of common concern, such as serious misconduct by one of the tribes or an enemy attack on one or more of them. On such occasions decisive, concerted action was required to preserve the integrity of Israel. There was no standing army, so it was necessary to raise a fresh force of volunteer fighters each time a national emergency arose, and the personal charisma of an individual often played a crucial role in getting this done quickly. It seems that at least some of the judges rose to office precisely because of their ability to provide inspiring leadership on such occasions (11:1–10). Others seem to have been appointed in more peaceful circumstances, though exactly how this was done is not known.

In practice, however, the 'system' (if that is the correct term for it) rarely if ever worked as smoothly as this. There was in fact little effective unity among the Israelite tribes in the period of the judges. For a start, they were separated from each other by settlements of unconquered Canaanites (1:19, 27–36; 4:2–3). Unlike the Israelites, these people had farmed the land for generations and attributed their success at raising crops to their worship of various male and female nature gods, the Baals and the Ashtoreths. They believed that these controlled the soil and weather and hence the fertility of field and flock. The Israelites were very attracted to these gods and increasingly mixed the worship of them with their worship of their own God, Yahweh. This inevitably led to a weakening of their loyalty to God and to one another, and resulted in a spiritual and moral decline that was so serious that it threatened to destroy Israel from within. The tribes were slow to help one another in times of crisis (5:16–17; 12:1–7) and even fell to fighting among themselves (8:1–3; 12:1–6; 20:1–48). Most people were concerned only for their own interests and took advantage of the absence of central government to do as they pleased (17:6; 21:25). This inner decay threatened to destroy the very fabric of Israel and, in fact, constituted a far more serious threat to its survival in the judges period than any external attack.

As always in such circumstances, however, there were faithful Israelites who continued quietly to pursue lives of genuine piety. The book of Judges focuses mainly on the frequent crises that Israel faced and thus gives a rather turbulent impression of the period. But it also clearly indicates that there were long periods of peace and relative prosperity in which life at the local level could settle down into a more even tenor (3:11, 30; 8:28; 10:3–5; 12:8–10). In this respect, Judges is nicely complemented by the book of Ruth with its gentle, moving story of one family's affairs in Bethlehem. Here farmers struggled against the vagaries of the weather, people met and fell in love, and the elders sought to guide the affairs of the community along the tried and proven paths of covenant law and local custom. Both books testify to the fact that, whether in the turbulence of national crisis or the more even tenor of village life, God was deeply involved and sovereignly at work in the lives of his people, preserving and disciplining them, and overruling all things for their good.

The origin and date of the book of Judges

Precisely how the book of Judges came into existence and when it was completed in the form we now have it continues to be a matter of debate among scholars. The traditional Jewish view is that it was written by the prophet Samuel, and this may contain at least an element of truth. But there are indications that the process of the book's composition was far more complex and protracted than this traditional view suggests.

The bulk of the book appears to be based on source material which was either contemporary with, or very close to, the events themselves. The notices concerning the so-called 'minor judges' in 10:1–5 and 12:8–15 (framing the Jephthah story) are probably drawn from a documentary source of this kind. And the accounts of the exploits of the deliverer-judges such as Ehud, Barak, Gideon and Samson, are most probably derived from an early collection of such hero-stories in either oral or written form. The fact that Jephthah seems to have featured in both may have given the original author of the book his cue to combine these two sources. Much less seems to have been known about the exploits of Othniel, the first deliverer, and so the account of his career is expressed in fairly general, stereotyped terms by the author himself (3:7–11). The poetic Song of Deborah

and Barak in ch. 5 is composed in very early Hebrew and is acknowledged by most scholars to have originated very close in time to the events it describes. Other early source material seems to be reflected in the opening chapter of the book (especially vs 4–7, 11–15, 22–26) and in the two vividly told stories of chs. 17 – 21.

The hand of an editor who has worked with the source materials is clearly discernible in the overview which is provided in 2:6–19, and in the repetitive introductions and conclusions to the major episodes in chs. 3 – 16. These provide a kind of editorial framework which unifies the central part of Judges. Another clear instance of editorial work is in the refrain of 17:6; 18:1; 19:1 and 21:25, which binds together the two major narratives that conclude the book.

The evidence for early source material is clear, as is the evidence for editorial shaping. But whether the latter was done by a single author or by two or more authors in succession is difficult, if not impossible, to say.

It is also difficult to know for certain when the final shaping of the book took place. As is explained more fully in the commentary itself, the detailed description of the location of Shiloh in 21:19 suggests a time of writing when the destruction of Shiloh (an event of uncertain date) was remembered, but long since past (*cf.* Je. 7:14), and the expression 'the captivity of the land' in 18:30 probably refers to the final devastation of the northern kingdom of Israel by Assyria in the eighth century BC. More significantly, the overview of the judges' period in 2:11–19, the speeches in 2:1–5, 6:7–10 and 10:11–15, and the repetitive introductions and conclusions to the major episodes in chs. 3 – 16 are all strongly reminiscent of both the style and theological concerns of the book of Deuteronomy. This suggests that the author who added this material lived after the reforms carred out by king Josiah in the seventh century BC (1 Ki. 22). The nature of these reforms leaves little doubt that the 'Book of the Law' that was discovered in the temple at that time was some form of the book of Deuteronomy. Certainly the influence of Deuteronomy is clear in the next couple of centuries in the preaching of Jeremiah and in the books of 1 and 2 Kings, and it seems to be present in Judges also.

Most scholars believe that Judges is part of what was originally one long piece of historical writing spanning what is now the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. It is thought that this history of Israel from the conquest of Canaan until the Babylonian exile was written after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC (2 Ki. 25:1–2) to explain why this disaster had happened. It did so by showing how Israel had begun to slide into apostasy soon after its entry into Canaan, and how this had continued in subsequent centuries until God's judgment had finally fallen on the nation. The disaster of 587 BC was thus seen to be the fulfilment of the covenant curses of Dt. 28. The style and theology of the whole work from beginning to end was strongly influenced by the book of Deuteronomy, and for that reason it is commonly referred to as the 'Deuteronomic history'. One of the strongest pieces of evidence for this theory is that the statement in 1 Ki. 6:1 that Solomon began to build the temple 480 (40 × 12) years after the exodus from Egypt a ears to be part of a chronological scheme which spans Deuteronomy to 2 Kings and is reflected in the book of Judges itself. This can be seen in the 'round' numbers (40 years or 80 years) used for the periods of peace (7:11; 3:30; 5:31; 8:28). Contrast the more unpredictable figures which appear in the material drawn directly from early sources (*e.g.* 3:8, 14; 4:3; 10:2–3).

Scholars are divided over whether the Deuteronomic history was first conceived as a whole and later divided up into separate books, or whether the books first existed independently and were given their final shape by someone who had the larger picture in view. Probably a combination of these two processes was involved. The books of Kings were probably written directly by the author himself from various sources, while in the earlier part of the history he worked with books that already existed in some form. In any case, the result we now have is a series of closely related books rather than a single composition in the strict sense. But given its close relationship to the other books in the series, it is probable that Judges was given its final shape at the same time as they were, namely, in the sixth century BC during the Babylonian exile. Samuel may well have had a hand in the early stages of its formation, but the identity of the final author or editor is unknown.

Structure and themes

Whatever its history, the book of Judges as we now have it is a well-rounded literary unit with a very definite structure and clearly developed themes.

The main body of the book, which deals with the careers of the various judges themselves, extends from 3:7 to 16:31. This is preceded by an introduction in two parts (1:1 – 2:5 and 2:6 – 3:6) and followed by an epilogue, also in two parts (chs. 17 – 18 and 19 – 21). The question that is asked at the beginning of the book (1:1–2) is asked again in very different circumstances at the end (20:18). Thus, as we come to the end of the book we are invited to reflect on the point from which we set out and on all that has happened in between.

The first part of the introduction (1:1 – 2:5) is about the progressive deterioration in Israel's relationship with the Canaanites that followed the death of Joshua (1:1). The efforts of the various tribes to possess and occupy the lands that had been allocated to them (Jos. 13 – 19) ran into increasing difficulties as the Canaanites, particularly on the coastal plain and in key fortified cities in the north, put up very determined resistance (see especially vs 19, 27–28). This led to a tense stalemate situation in which Israelites and Canaanites lived side-by-side. The Israelites held the upper hand, but were still excluded from significant parts of the land. The tribe of Dan, in particular, was confined to the hills and was unable to get a secure foothold in its allotted territory near the coast (1:34). It was a situation that fell far short of the expectations with which Israel had set out, expectations grounded in the promises God had made to their ancestors (Jos. 23:1–5; *cf.* Gn. 12:1–3; 15:12–21; 28:13–15). This section of the introduction ends with the Israelites weeping before the Lord at Bokim (Bethel) and being told what has gone wrong (2:1–5). The reason for their failure has not been the iron chariots or strong fortifications of the Canaanites, but their own unfaithfulness. In the territory which they had succeeded in taking they had begun to compromise by allowing the pagan altars of the Canaanites to remain standing, and because of this the Lord had withdrawn his help from them. As well as looking back, this key speech by the 'angel of the LORD' also looks forward with the prediction that the Canaanites and their gods will continue to be snares and stumbling-blocks to the Israelites.

The second part of the introduction (2:6 – 3:6) then returns to the beginning (notice how Joshua reappears in 2:6) and makes this underlying spiritual problem the main focus of attention. In a few deft strokes Israel's initial decline into apostasy is sketched in (2:6–10), and then the whole pattern of the ensuing judges' period is laid out (2:11–19). It is presented as a period of persistent apostasy, in which the Lord alternately judges the Israelites by handing them over to foreign oppressors, and then (when they are in great distress) has pity on them and raises up a judge to deliver them. At these times the Israelites temporarily give up their apostasy, but quickly return to it as soon as the judge dies (19a). In short, despite the Lord's many attempts to retrieve them from their evil ways, the Israelites persist in them (19b). This leads to another crucial speech in 2:20–22, in which the Lord announces what he intends to do as his final response to all that has taken place. The nations which were originally left (at the time Joshua died) to test Israel's faithfulness are now to be left permanently as a punishment for her unfaithfulness (see the commentary on these verses). This is the climax of this second part, and of the introduction as a whole. The verses that remain (2:23 – 3:6) simply summarize what has already been said.

So the introduction, as well as diagnosing what went wrong and laying out for us what is to follow, makes it very clear what the central issue of the book is, namely, Israel's persistent apostasy in the judges' period and the Lord's response to it. The book answers the question, 'Why didn't Israel ever fully possess the land that God promised to their ancestors?' And the answer is given, 'Because of the apostasy that followed the death of Joshua'. Judges explains the Lord's action as fully justified in view of Israel's persistent unfaithfulness. The later books of the Deuteronomic history go on to explain and justify his more drastic act of evicting Israel from the land altogether (see above).

The central section of the book (3:7 – 16:31) fills out the outline already given in the introduction (2:11–19) and develops a number of sub-themes in the process. It records the careers of twelve judges in all: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Barak, Gideon, Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon and Samson. Deborah and Jael both play very significant roles in the Barak episode, and Deborah is even said to have 'led' (lit. 'judged') Israel (4:4–5), but in terms of the overall design of the book, chs. 4 – 5 must be seen as essentially an account of Barak's career. And although the activities of Gideon's son, Abimelech are recounted in some detail, he is not a judge at all in terms of the way that office has been described in the introduction.

Just as the first part of the introduction began with Judah and ended with Dan (1:1–34), so this central section begins with Othniel from Judah (3:7–11) and ends with Samson the Danite (chs. 13 – 16). Othniel's career exemplifies what a judge was meant to be and do. The following judges represent a series of variations on this basic pattern, culminating with Samson, whose behaviour is so bizarre that he is barely recognizable as a judge at all. The pattern of this part of the book has frequently been described in terms of a repeating cycle of apostasy, oppression, calling on the Lord, deliverance, peace and renewed apostasy. There is certainly much repetition, but there is also progressive change, so that the result is better described in terms of a downward spiral than a simple repeating pattern.

Disunity among the Israelites first appears in the Barak episode (5:16–17, 23), and grows worse under later judges. After the forty years which followed Gideon's victory (8:28), the land is never again said to enjoy peace, and by the

time of the Samson episode is reached the Israelites no longer even cry out to the Lord to save them. And as these chapters run their course the judges themselves gradually become more and more implicated in the wrongdoing of the nation as a whole. The climax is reached in Samson, whose personal waywardness and reluctance to embrace his calling perfectly epitomize the waywardness and struggle of the nation as a whole. As Israel had been set apart from other nations by God's covenant with them, so Samson is set apart from other men by his calling as a Nazirite. As Israel had gone after foreign gods, Samson goes after foreign women. Israel had wanted to be as other nations; Samson wants to be as other men. And as Israel had repeatedly called on the Lord in its distress, so too does Samson. In short, the sub-themes that run through the whole central section of the book (Israel's struggle against her destiny and the Lord's perseverance with her in judgment and grace) are finally brought to a sharp focus in the story of Samson. His story is the story of Israel as a whole in the judges' period.

The two stories which form the epilogue (chs. 17 – 21) are located very generally in the judges' period but do not follow chronologically from what has gone before. In them the focus shifts from the sin of Israel as a whole to the sins of the individuals and communities which comprise it: 'everyone did as he saw fit' (17:6). The first story (Micah and his idols; chs. 17 – 18) is about the religious chaos of the period, and the second (the Levite and his concubine; chs. 19 – 21) is about the accompanying moral chaos. Together they show that Israel was even more endangered by its own internal decay, morally and spiritually, than by any external attack. The second story in particular shows how the very institutions which should have provided stability (the levitical priesthood, hospitality and family life, eldership and the assembly of tribal leaders) were all rendered ineffective, and even positively harmful, because of the moral bankruptcy of individuals. The epilogue leaves us in no doubt that it was certainly not the quality of its leadership or its institutions that held Israel together. Israel's survival was a miracle of God's grace.

The refrain which runs through the epilogue ('In those days there was no king in Israel . . .', 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25) brings down the curtain on one period and anticipates another. Kingship, like judgeship, will have its place in Israel's ongoing history and prove useful in its time, but it too will fail through human sinfulness. As the Deuteronomic history as a whole shows, no institution, however valid, holds the key to Israel's future. it is only the Lord's ongoing commitment to his people that does this, 'For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal.' (Jb.5:18).

Relevance for Christians today

The NT contains very few clear references to the book of Judges. There is a passing reference to the judges period as a whole in Acts 13:20, and Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah are named as heroes of faith in Heb. 11:32. Apart from this, there are only, at best, veiled allusions. For example, Mary was hailed in terms that suggest that her blessedness was comparable to that of Jael (Lk. 1:42; *cf.* Jdg. 5:24), and there appear to be allusions to Samson (Jdg. 13:4–5) in the birth announcements of both John the Baptist (Lk. 1:15) and Jesus (Mt. 2:23).

These few references and allusions point, however, to a far deeper continuity between Judges and the NT than may at first appear. For the coming of Christ, preceded by John the Baptist, was the culmination of all God's acts of judgment and grace in the OT period, including the period of the judges (Lk. 1:54–55, 68–79). And if the Israelites of the judges period failed through unbelief to enter into their full inheritance, that did not mean that God's ultimate purposes for this people had been frustrated. God remained committed to them, and through Christ would finally atone for their sins and so bring to full realization all that he had promised, including the inclusion in his kingdom of people of all nations. As the apostle Paul put it, 'For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ' (2 Cor. 1:20). This means that the Israelies of the judges period are our spiritual ancestors, and that the God who showed himself to be so committed to them is our God too. He is none other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It may surprise us to find men with such obvious faults as Gideon, Barak, Jephthah and Samson held up as heroes of faith. But perhaps, on reflection, it is not so surprising after all, for the one thing they all knew was that, in the end, it was only the Lord himself that could save Israel (11:27). To know that and to act upon it, as these men did, is what faith is all about. In this respect, the stories of the judges have something to teach us all, and especially those who are called to the leadership of God's people. But more importantly, in spite of their many faults, all the judges were forerunners of the greatest Saviour of all. And perhaps it is as much by their imperfections, as by their divinely empowered exploits, that they point beyond themselves to him. The book of Judges is about faithless people and a faithful God. The story of the Israelites in the period of the judges is our story too.

Further reading

A. E. Cundall and L. Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, TOTC (IVP 1968).
M. Wilcock, *The Message of Judges*, BST (IVP, 1992).
D. R. Davis, *Such a Great Salvation: Expositions of the Book of Judges* (Baker Book House, 1990).
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Commentary

1:1 – 2:5 After Joshua: military decline

1:1–2 The Israelites inquire of the Lord

For *the death of Joshua* see Jos. 24:28–29. Before his death Joshua had spoken of Canaanites still living in the land that had been allocated to the various tribes, but he assured the Israelites that with the Lord's help they would be able to drive these people out (Jos. 23:1–5). By inquiring of the Lord the people acknowledged that he was their true leader. They probably made their inquiry through a priest (see 20:18, 27–28) at Gilgal near Jericho, since this was the point from which they moved out (1:16; 2:1; *cf.* Jos.5 10). Judah, named to go first in the oracle of v 2, was the most numerous and powerful tribe and the tribe from which Jesus the Messiah would eventually come (Gn. 49:10).

1:3–21 The successes and failures of the southern tribes

Notice how the mention of the Judah–Simeon alliance in vs 3 and 17 frames the account of Judah's campaign in vs 4–16. An appendix which summarizes Judah's achievements follows in vs. 18–21. The alliance was natural because Simeon was a smaller tribe whose allotted territory lay within Judah's (Jos. 19:1).

Judah's progress is first traced *up* from the Jordan Valley to Jerusalem via Bezek (4–8; the NIV's *attacked* in v 4 is lit. 'went up') and then *down* to the coastal plain southwest of Jerusalem

via Hebron, Debir and Zephath-Hormah (9–16). The mutilation of *Adoni-Bezek* (which means 'Lord of Bezek') was just retribution for his own brutal treatment of others (5–7). *Jerusalem* (7–8) is the pre-Israelite city on the border of the territories of Judah and Benjamin (Jos. 15:8; 18:28). It was dealt a devastating blow by Judah, but its inhabitants, *the Jebusites*, retained (or perhaps later regained) a foothold there (21). *Hebron*, or *Kiriath Arba* ('town of Arba'), was a stronghold of the Anakim, the descendants of Arba, who were proverbial for their stature and prowess (Nu. 13:32–33). *Othniel*, who distinguished himself in battle at *Debir* (11–15) reappears in 3:9 as the first judge, and his shrewd and resourceful bride *Acsah* is the first of a number of such women who feature in the book (Jael in ch. 4; the 'certain woman' of Thebez in ch. 9; and Delilah in ch. 16). The faithful *Caleb*, old but still vigorous, was a notable representative of the elders who outlived Joshua (2:7; *cf.* Nu.13:30). V 16 records the fulfilment of a promise made by Moses to Hobab, the leader of the Kenites, a Midianite clan (Nu. 10:29–32), while v 17 shows Judah repaying Simeon's help by participating in the successful campaign against Zephath, a town in Simeon's territory.

So far so good, but the appendix in vs 18–21 contains the first disturbing indications that all was not well. Judah had initial successes against the coastal cities of *Gaza*, *Ashkelon* and *Ekron* (18) but was unable to drive out the people of this area *because they had iron chariots* (19). This probably indicates that the Philistines, with their superior technology, had already arrived in the area. But why iron chariots should be so decisive is puzzling in view of the fact that *the LORD was with the men of Judah* (19; *cf.* v 2). Equally puzzling is the failure of the Benjamites to drive out the Jebusites from Jerusalem (21). Caleb fully capitalized on the victory at Hebron (20; *cf.* v 10), but the Benjamites did not do likewise after the victory at Jerusalem (8). The real cause of these failutes is not revealed until 2:1–5.

Note. 15 *The Negev* is the dry, southern part of Palestine, southwest of the southern tip of the Dead Sea. Access to water was critical if the land Caleb gave Acsah was to be productive.

1:22–36 The successes and failures of the northern tribes

The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were descendants of two sons of Joseph of the same names (Gn. 41:51). They were the two most numerous and powerful Israelite tribes of central and northern Palestine. So *the house of Joseph* here refers to these two tribes and the other northern tribes associated with them. The two occurrences of this expression (22, 35) frame vs 22–35, which is an account of the successes and failures of these northern tribes. V 36 stands outside this frame as an appendix. This means that vs 22–36 have the same general pattern as vs 3–21. The house of Joseph 'attacked' in v 22 as Judah had in v 4 (the verb is lit. 'went up' in both cases), and the Lord was with them (22) as he had also been with Judah (19). Like Judah, the house of Joseph had initial success (22–26), but this was followed by a string of failures (27–35) much more widespread and serious than in the south. The seeds of this failure can already be seen in vs 22–26. Bethel was taken only by entering into an agreement with a Canaanite who later rebuilt the city on a new site (23, 24, 26). In the following verses a deteriorating situation is traced, with Canaanites living among Israelites (27–30), Israelites living among Canaanites (31–33) and finally Amorites confining Israelites to the hills (34). The end result is a stand-off situation, with the northern tribes collectively strong enough to dominate but not drive out the remaining Canaanites (28, 30, 33, 35). The final note (36) confirms that what was achieved was partition of the land between Israelites and non-Israelites rather than full occupation. Again, the reasons for this failure, only hinted at here, are given explicitly in 2:1–5.

Notes. 22 *Bethel* ('house of God') was so named by Jacob (Gn. 28:17–19; see also on 4:5). **26** The Hittite Empire included present-day Turkey and northern Palestine, as far south as the Orontes River. There were also some Hittites in the vicinity of Hebron (Gn. 23:1–16), but the context here suggests a more remote location. **27** *Beth Shan*, *Taanach* and *Megiddo* were a line of Canaanite strongholds extending westwards from Mt Carmel in northern Palestine along the fertile Jezreel Valley. **29** *Gezer* was a strategic town on the road from the coastal plain to Jerusalem. **30** The location of *Kitron* and *Nahalol* is unknown. **31** *Acco* ... *Rehob* were cities on the coast north from Mt Carmel in what is now Lebanon. **33** *Beth Shemesh* ('house of the sun') and *Beth Anath* ('house of Anath', a fertility goddess) were towns near the Jordan, just south of the Sea of Galilee. **34** The *Amorites* ('westerners') were a semitic people from the Arabian desert who had settled in Canaan before the Israelites. **35** *Mount Heres*, *Aijalon* and *Shaalbim* were towns in the hills west of Jerusalem. **36** *Scorpion Pass* ('Akrabbim') and *Sela* ('Rock') were near the southern tip of the Dead Sea (*cf.* the Amorite 'Hazezon Tamar' of Gn. 14:7).

2:1–5 Israel accused of disobedience

This unit is the climax of 1:1 – 2:5. With the 'going up' of *the angel of the* LORD in v 1, the time for review and assessment had come (see 1:1, and the comments on 1:2 and 1:22). Now at last the real cause of the failure described in the previous chapter is revealed: unfaithfulness to the Lord (2; *cf.* Ex. 34:12–16). If they had been faithful the Lord would have given the Israelites complete victory. As it is, what should have been a victory celebration turned out to be a time of bitter weeping (4).

Notes. 1 *The angel of the* LORD is 'the LORD' himself in the form of an angel (*cf.* 6:11–24; 13:3–21). *Gilgal* ('circle') was near Jericho (see 1:1, 16 and comments). *Bokim* ('weepers') was probably Bethel, but called Bokim here for the reason given in vs 4–5. 3 *Now therefore I tell you* is more correctly, 'And I also said . . .'. The reference is to a threat previously made (see Nu. 33:35; Jos. 23:13). It is not until 2:20ff. that the Lord announces his intention to carry out this threat.

2:6 – 3:6 After Joshua: spiritual decline

2:6–10 The slide into apostasy

The speech by the angel of the Lord in vs 1–5 introduced the theme of Israel's unfaithfulness. The author now begins a second review of the period following Joshua's death from this new perspective. It took only one generation for the memory of the great things God had done for Israel under Joshua to grow dim, and with it true knowledge of God himself.

Note. The background to vs 6–10 as a whole is Jos. 24 (especially vs 28–31). 9 *Timnath Heres* (see the NIV mg.) was in the hills north-west of Jerusalem.

2:11–19 Overview of the judges period

These verses outline a pattern that will be repeated many times in the following chapters. Israel provokes the Lord by worshipping other gods (11–13). The Lord punishes them by handing them over to their enemies (14–15). When they are in dire straits the Lord raises up judges who save them (16–18). When the judge dies the people return to their old ways (19). The Lord is both angry and compassionate (12, 18b). The Israelites are stubbornly rebellious (17, 19b).

Note. The *Baals* and *Ashtoreths* (11, 13) were nature gods (male and female, respectively) worshipped by the Canaanites. They were believed to control the weather and to have power to increase the fertility of soil, animals and humans. The *judges* (16, 18, 19) had a military role (as deliverers), a religious role (as preachers of God's law; see v 17) and a legal role in settling disputes in times of peace (see 4:4–5).

2:20 – 3:6 The Lord's ultimate response

With this passage we are taken to the end of the judges' period and told what the Lord finally did as a result of Israel's persistent apostasy. The Canaanites who had originally been left at the time of Joshua's death to test Israel's faithfulness were finally left permanently as a punishment for her unfaithfulness (2:20 – 3:4). That is, Israel failed the test, and the Lord put into effect the threat he had made at Bokim (2:3). The last two verses (3:4–5) summarize the whole introduction to the book: Israel lived among the Canaanites (*cf.* 1:1 – 2:5) and served their gods (*cf.* 2:6 – 3:6). Intermarriage with Canaanites, mentioned here for the first time, was something that had been explicitly forbidden by the Lord (Dt. 7:3).

Notes. 22 The Hebrew text does not have the words *I will use them.* Both this verse and the next refer to the original leaving of some Canaanites as a test, at the time of Joshua's death (*cf.* Jos. 23:4–5). 3:1 The *wars in Canaan* are the wars of conquest described in the book of Joshua. 3:2 The Lord intended to test the next generation by giving them too the experience of warfare against the Canaanites. 3:3 The *Philistines* migrated from Asia Minor (modern Turkey) via Crete, arriving shortly after the Israelites (see 1:18; *cf.* Amos 9:7). They established a five-city state centred on what is now the Gaza strip in southwest Palestine, but extending beyond it. The *Sidonians* are the Phoenicians, whose chief city at this time was Sidon. The identity of the *Hivites* is unknown. *Mount Baal Hermon to Lebo Hamath* refers to the mountainous region east of the main Lebanon range (towards Damascus). 3:5 This is the traditional list of the nations that lived in Canaan before Israelite occupation (*cf.* Ex. 3:8, 17; 23:23).

3:7 – 16:31 The careers of the judges

3:7–11 Othniel

After the overview of 2:6 – 3:6, the author now begins to give us, in order, the careers of the various judges that the Lord raised up (see 2:16). The first, Othniel, is a model figure in a number of ways. He belonged to a clan which had close connections with Judah, the leading tribe (1:13). Moreover, he had already distinguished himself in battle and won Caleb's daughter as his wife (1:11–15) – no intermarriage with Canaanites for him! (See 3:6.)

Othniel's career followed the pattern outlined in 2:11–19 but with two details added:

Israel's cry (9) and his endowment with the Spirit (10). Othniel was designated as God's chosen deliverer by a special gift of power given to him by God through his Spirit. In this sense he was a 'charismatic' leader. Othniel, the first judge, exemplifies the essential features of judgeship. The careers of the following judges represent variations on this basic pattern.

Notes. 7 *Asherahs* were the equivalent of 'Ashtoreths' (see 2:13 and comment). 8 *Cushan-Rishathaim* ('Cushan of double wickedness') was probably a name coined for the tyrant by his victims. His real identity is unknown. *Aram Naharaim* ('Aram of the two rivers') was probably in northern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq–Syria). See the NIV mg. and *cf.* the RSV. 9 Apart from being Caleb's son-in-law, Othniel was also either his younger brother or his nephew, probably the latter (the Hebrew, like the English, is ambiguous), *cf.* 1 Ch. 4:13–15. 10 *Became Israel's judge* (lit. 'judged Israel'; *cf.* the RSV) should be taken here to involve an element of proclamation (see 2:17 and comment). *Cf.* Samuel in the context of the Philistine crisis (1 Sa. 7:6; RSV).

3:12–30 Ehud

Vs 12–14 provide the background for the account of the career of Ehud, the second judge, in vs 15–30. While the basic pattern is the same as for Othniel, Ehud himself is a strikingly different figure. He was from the tribe of Benjamin (15), which received only negative comment in ch. 1 (see 1:21). Further, he was left-handed (15) and used cunning deception to assassinate the tyrant (16–25) before engaging in open battle (26–29). But his actions were, nevertheless, providentially directed by the Lord, who used this most unlikely hero to bring deliverance to his undeserving, but desperate people (15, 28, 30).

Notes. 12 *Moab* was a small state to the east of the Dead Sea (within what is now the state of Jordan). The Moabites (and the Ammonites; v 13) were descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew (Gn. 12:5; 19:36). 13 Ammon was directly north-east of Moab. The *Amalekites* were a nomadic tribe from southern Canaan and the northern parts of the Arabian peninsula. They were the first enemies the Israelites encountered after leaving Egypt (Ex. 17:8–16). The *City of Palms* is Jericho (see the NIV mg. and *cf.* 1:16). The city itself was in ruins (Jos. 6:24; 1 Ki. 16:34). Eglon's 'summer palace' (probably not nearly as grand as this translation suggests; see the NIV mg.) was most likely at the nearby oasis of 'Ain es-Sultan', which Moab had temporarily occupied. 15 Being *left-handed* gave Ehud an advantage (surprise) which he exploited to the full (21; *cf.* 20:17). 19 *Idols* (lit. 'sculptured stones') were probably not the stones set up by Joshua (Jos. 4:20) but the remains of an ancient pagan stone circle. On *Gilgal* ('circle') see 1:1, 2:1 and comments. This was the first place the Israelites had camped after crossing the Jordan (Jos. 4:19). 26 The location of *Seriah* is unknown.

3:31 Shamgar

Shamgar is an even stranger hero than Ehud. He was possibly not even an Israelite, since 'Shamgar' is not typically Hebrew and 'Anath' is a clearly pagan name (see note below). Yet he too 'saved Israel' by achieving a notable victory over the Philistines, who were the enemies of both the Israelites and the Canaanites (see on 3:3). In this, and in his very unconventional way of fighting ('with an ox-goad'!) Shamgar anticipated the later exploits of Samson (15: 15–16). 'The days of Shamgar son of Anath' are recalled in 5:6 as difficult times, when Israel was hard-pressed by its enemies. In these circumstances the Lord, ever faithful, used extraordinary means to save them, if only temporarily. Since there is no mention of peace being restored (*cf.* 3:30 and 5:31), Shamgar's victory was probably an isolated one, but significant nonetheless.

Notes. *Anath* was the Canaanite goddess of war, the sister and wife of Baal. *Son of Anath* here probably means 'a man like Anath', *i.e.* 'a warrior'. The number *six hundred* was commonly used to refer to an organized military force under a commander (*cf.* 18:11).

4:1–5:31 Barak (plus Deborah and Jael)

4:1–3 Oppression. V 1 makes it clear that apostasy had set in from the time of Ehud's death. Shamgar's victory had brought temporary relief but no change in Israel's spiritual condition. Hence the Lord's renewed judgment, this time in the form of Jabin and Sisera.

Notes. 2 Hazor was eighteen miles north-west of the Sea of Galilee, close to what is now the Israel–Lebanon border. It was at one time the most powerful Canaanite city in northern Palestine. *Jabin* was probably a royal title for the kings of Hazor (*cf.* 'Pharaoh' for the kings of Egypt). Joshua had defeated another 'Jabin' at Hazor almost 200 years earlier (Jos. 11:1–11). V 23–24 probably refer to the final destruction of the resurgent Hazor in the thirteenth century, as attested by archaeology. The name *Sisera* suggests he was the leader of a group of the so-called Sea People who, like the Philistines, had migrated to Palestine by ship from the eastern Aegean. Both the name of *Harosheth Haggoyim* ('Harosheth of the [foreign] nations') and its location (close to the Mediterranean coast near Mt Carmel in northwest Palestine) suggest that

it was originally a settlement of these Sea People. In them Jabin, whose own power was on the wane, found a promising ally against the Israelites.

4:4–24 Deliverance. As the places and tribes which are mentioned indicate, the action this time took place in central and northern Palestine, rather than in the south, and especially in the vicinity of the Kishon River (7), which flows westward through the fertile Jezreel Valley to the coast near Mt Carmel, or present day Haifa. Unlike previous episodes, the work of delivering Israel this time was shared between three principal characters: Deborah the prophetess and judge (in the administrative sense; 4–5), Barak, who is called by Deborah to lead Israel in battle (6–16) and Jael, who finally despatches Sisera single-handed in her tent (17–22). It is, however, the Lord's own intervention (15) which is the decisive turning point. Particular interest lies in the way the Lord, in rescuing Israel yet again, took the honour of victory away from a man who showed himself unworthy of it (9) and gave it to a woman (not Deborah, as we expect, but Jael). Women are dominant in this episode. Jael, with her non-Israelite background (11, 17) and unconventional methods (21; *cf.* Ehud and Shamgar) further illustrates the Lord's sovereign freedom in using whom he will to accomplish his purposes.

Notes. 4 *Leading* is lit. 'judging'. (See the NIV mg. and *cf.* Ex. 18:13–16.) **5** *Ramah and Bethel* were five and twelve miles, respectively, north of Jerusalem (*cf.* 1:22 and note). The *hill country of Ephraim* is a reference to central Palestine (*cf.* 3:27). For 'Ephraim' see on 1:22. **6** *Kedesh* was just southwest of the Sea of Galilee, near modern Tiberius. For *ten thousand*, see on 5:8. *Mount Tabor* was on the northern edge of the Jezreel Valley, at the meeting place of the tribal territories of Issachar, Zebulun and Naphtali. **11** On *Hebe: the Kenite ... Moses' brother-in-law* see 1:16 and *cf.* Nu. 10:20–33. *The Kenites* (the name means 'smith') were nomads inhabiting southern Palestine but sometimes, as here, moving further north.

5:1–31 Victory song. The Hebrew used in this song shows it to be one of the most ancient pieces of poetry in the OT. A version of it was sung on the day of battle (1), and it was probably given its present form soon after. It may have been preserved in some such collection as 'the Book of Jashar' (Jos. 10:13) or 'the Book of the Wars of the LORD' (Nu. 21:14). Songs like this were often sung in public worship and were reminders to later generations of the faithfulness of God and of the great things he had done for Israel, his covenant people. But here, this particular song appears as part of the Deborah–Barak episode, which is not formally concluded until the song is complete (see v 31b and *cf.* 3:11, 30). Unlike the preceding narrative, however, it is not concerned with how the Lord took the honour of victory from Barak and gave it to a woman. It pays tribute to those individuals and tribes who valiantly played their part (including Jael) and rebukes those who did not, thus alerting us to a certain lack of unity among the tribes (a problem that will emerge more clearly later in the book). The battle involved mainly the central and northern tribes (there is no mention of Judah), and of these some acquitted themselves more creditably than others. But the main theme of the song is 'the righteous acts' of the Lord himself, who went forth as Israel's champion and overwhelmed his enemies (and Israel's) by unleashing the powers of heaven against them. In this it is very reminiscent of the song the Israelites sang in the time of Moses when the Lord fought for them against the Egyptians (Ex. 15). Through such events Israel learned that the Lord who had made them his own by covenant was Lord of creation as well as of history, Creator as well as Redeemer. This was a vital element of Israel's faith, because their Canaanite neighbours worshipped nature deities (the Baals) who were believed to control the weather, and the Israelites themselves were constantly tempted to worship these gods (2:11).

The song's main sections are as follows: prelude (praise to the Lord and a call to hear the song; 2–3); the Lord's arrival as Israel's champion (4–5); conditions prevailing before the battle (6–8); a call to participate in the battle (9–13); the response of the Israelite tribes (14–18); the battle itself (19–23); the death of Sisera (24–27); the waiting of his mother in vain (28–30); epilogue (31). The battle itself is the climax. The stars fight from the heavens, and on earth the River Kishon responds by becoming a torrent and overwhelming the enemy. The scene ends with the pounding of horses' hooves as the defeated chariotry try desperately to escape.

The two scenes which follow show how completely the enemy was undone. The inaction (waiting) of the second, is the complement of the action (murder) of the first. The muted conversation between Sisera's mother and her maids only thinly veiled an unspoken dread. Sisera would never return. But what was bad news for Sisera's household was good news indeed for Israel: the oppressor was dead. It was a deliverance Israel did not deserve but one which the Lord graciously granted them. The Deborah–Barak episode ends with a crashing victory hymn in praise of the Lord and his loyal supporters, but especially of the Lord. He

himself was the true Saviour of Israel and complete master of their environment.

Notes. 2 Israel had no standing army at this time. The fighters were all non-professional volunteers. 4–5 *Seir* was a mountain in Edom, to the south of Israel. *Sinai* (Mt Sinai) was further south again and was the place where the Lord first revealed himself to Israel. The Lord is pictured as coming to Israel's rescue from Mt Sinai, via Edom. He is surrounded by cloud, thunder and earthquake, as at his first coming to his people (Ex. 19:16–19). He comes in storm, and he unleashes a storm (literally) on his enemies (20–21). 6 On *Shamgar* see 4:31. 8 On *they chose new gods* see 2:12; 4:1. The Israelites had been disarmed by their enemies (*cf.* 1 Sa. 13:19). The Hebrew word translated *thousand* originally meant a clan (as in 6:15) or small military contingent. The number of Israelites was probably much smaller than the usual English translation suggests. 10 *White donkeys* were ridden by the people of importance (*cf.* 10:4). 14 Those *whose roots were in Amalek* were descendants of Amalekites who had settled in the territory of Ephraim (*cf.* 12:15). 14 *Makir* is an alternative name for the tribe of Manasseh (*cf.* Gn. 50:23) 17 *Gilead* is probably an indirect reference to the tribe of Gad. At this time they lived in Gilead, a region to the east of the Jordan River (see 1 Ch. 5:16). Dan's original territory was in the south, near the coast. Later, most of them moved to a new inland location in the far north (1:34; 18:1; *cf.* Jos. 19:40–48). 19 Canaan was not a unified state. Jabin and Sisera were leaders of an anti-Israelite coalition (see 4:2) On *Taanach* and *Megiddo* see on 1:27. 20 As heavenly bodies, the *stars* (from the writer's point of view) participated in the convulsions that brought the rain. 23 *Meroz* is unknown but was probably an ally of whom better things were expected. Meroz is cursed. Jael, by contrast, is blessed (24). On *the angel of the* LORD see on 2:1. 25 *Milk* was used by Jael for its sleep-inducing properties (*cf.* 4:19). 27 Sisera suffered a similar fate to Eglon (3:25). 28 *Sisera's mother* is the tragic counterpart to Deborah, 'a mother in Israel' (7). 31 Cursing of enemies in this way had been common since the time of Moses (see Nu. 10:35, and *cf.* Ps. 68:1–3). At its best it was not motivated by personal vindictiveness but by a recognition that judgment belonged to God, and that his honour was bound up with the fate of his people. In the light of new revelation (*e.g.* Rom. 12:17–21), cursing enemies is not appropriate for Christians today. *Like the sun when it rises in its strength*, *cf.* Samson (chs. 13 – 16), whose name is derived from the Hebrew word *šemeš* meaning 'sun'.

6:1–8:35 Gideon

6:1–6 Oppression by the Midianites. The news of renewed apostasy in v 1 comes as a shock after the high praise of the preceding chapter. It confronts us in a particularly striking way with the fickleness of the Israelites, who cannot for long resist the attraction of other gods no matter how much the Lord exerts himself on their behalf. The Gideon episode explores this problem more fully than previous episodes have done.

Barak's victory over the Canaanite chariot forces had opened the broad, fertile Jezreel Valley to Israelite settlement and the cultivation of crops. A different kind of enemy then appeared in the same area and a new struggle for control of it ensued. This time the Israelites were punished by being subjected to repeated raids by Midianites and others who swept across the land like locusts, devouring and destroying everything in their path. With their means of sustenance destroyed, the Israelites were reduced to a pitiful state, living in dens and caves like animals. In their desperation they appealed, as usual, to the Lord.

Notes. 1 *Midianites* were desert dwellers from northwest Arabia, related to the Israelites through Abraham (Gn. 25:1–5). 3 On *Amalekites* see on 3:13. *Other eastern peoples* refers to other nomadic tribes from Arabia and Syria (see Gn. 29:1). 4 *Gaza* was on the Mediterranean coast in the south. 5 Large-scale domestication of the camel (a recent development) made long-range raids possible.

6:7–10 A prophet sent to rebuke Israel. In a surprising development, Yahweh did not respond to Israel's cry for help by immediately sending them a deliverer. Instead he sent a prophet to tell them that by their behaviour they had forfeited all right to deliverance. The prophet's speech ended on this note of indictment, leaving it unclear what the Lord intended to do. It was a tense moment, when Israel's fate hung in the balance. Only grace could save them.

Note. 10 For *Amorites* see on 1:34.

6:11–24 The 'angel of the LORD' commissions Gideon. With the arrival of the angel it became clear that the Lord intended to save Israel once again, and that his chosen instrument on this occasion was Gideon, whose call followed the same pattern as that of Moses in Ex. 3. Like Moses, he received his call while he was in hiding from the enemy, doing menial work to keep his family alive (11). Like Moses, he was told that the Lord was sending him on a mission (14). He protested, as Moses did, that he was inadequate for the task (15). He received the same promise as Moses received, 'I will be

with you' (16), and, like Moses, he received a sign to confirm his call (17). Finally, miraculous fire signalled God's presence (21), as it did in the call of Moses. So the message is clear: Gideon was to be used by God to save Israel from the Midianites, just as Moses was used to save Israel from the Egyptians. The God of the exodus has come to Israel's rescue again.

Notes. **11** *Ophrah* was in the territory of Manasseh, but is otherwise unknown. The two references to Ophrah in vs 11 and 24 frame the description of Gideon's call. *The Abiezrite.* From 'Abiezer' a clan belonging to the tribe of Manasseh (Jos. 17:2). **12** For *angel of the LORD* see on 2:1. **15** *Lord* means 'Sir' (see the NIV mg.). Gideon did not yet recognize his visitor. **22** It was only at this point that Gideon realized who he had been speaking to, and his fear stemmed from his knowledge of the rules of holiness (*cf.* 13:22, and see Ex. 33:20). But the Lord at once reassured him (23). Gideon had been accorded a rare privilege; the Lord had appeared to him but spared his life. **24** *The LORD is Peace* (Heb. *šālôm*) This echoes the Lord's reassuring 'Peace!' in the previous verse. The altar commemorated the particular revelation of God that took place there (*cf.* Gn. 28:16–19).

6:25–32 Gideon pulls down the altar of Baal. Gideon's enlistment by the Lord immediately projected him into a head-on confrontation with his own family and clan, for they had become Baal worshippers, something that the Lord would not tolerate. The Lord's altar and Baal's altar could not stand side-by-side, for this was a direct contradiction of the very first commandment, 'You shall have no other gods besides me' (Ex. 20:3; NIV mg.) Parallels to this kind of predicament are often found today when people's commitment to Christ sets them against their families' wishes or principles.

Gideon, fearful of the consequences, carried out the Lord's orders under cover of darkness and with the help of his servants. The men of the town were outraged at the destruction of Baal's altar, and Gideon was saved from death only by the quick thinking of his father who, faced with defending Baal's honour or saving his son, unhesitatingly chose in favour of his son (31). Miraculously, Gideon emerged as a hero. In effect he had been reborn, and in recognition of this was given a new name which marked him as living proof of Baal's powerlessness (see note on v 32). Gideon had begun his career by driving Baal from the field, and the stage was now set for him to rally the Israelite militia to fight a holy war against the external, human foe, the Midianites (33–35).

Notes. **25** The choice of *the second bull* (also in v 26) was apparently an act of grace whereby the clan was spared the loss of their prime breeding bull. On the *Asherah pole* see the NIV mg. and comments on 2:13 and 3:7. **26** On a *proper kind of altar* see the NIV mg. and *cf.* Ex. 20:25–26). **27** As the son of the clan head Gideon was a man of some wealth and influence (*cf.* vs 12, 14), despite his self-effacing words in v 15. **31** *Cf.* Elijah's challenge to Baal's followers at a later time (1 Ki. 19:27) **32** The name *Jerub-Baal* (see the NIV mg.) is a challenge to Baal to act if he can.

6:33–35 Gideon rallies the fighting men. Gideon soon showed that he was not lacking in resourcefulness when it came to uniting the scattered Israelites in a common cause and commanding them in the field. With the fighting men of his own clan, the Abiezrites, firmly consolidated as his power base (34), he called for wider support, first from Manasseh as a whole (35a) and then from the neighbouring northern tribes who had common cause with his own against the invaders (35b). But this was not human resourcefulness alone. He was a man who had been taken over and energized by the *Spirit of the LORD* (34).

Note. **33** See the comments and notes on vs 1–6. The implication of this verse is that, militarily, things have now come to a head and an outright battle is inevitable.

6:36–40 Gideon seeks reassurance by putting out a fleece. It was common practice in the ancient world to seek last-minute confirmation of divine support before a battle was joined (*cf.* 1 Ki. 22:6–28). But given the assurances Gideon had already received, his action was more an expression of unbelief than of faith, as Gideon himself virtually admitted by his opening wods, '*If you will save Israel . . . as you have promised . . .*' (36). *Cf.* also v 39: '*Do not be angry with me . . .*'. God's positive response to Gideon's repeated experiment with the fleece was a gracious concession to his weak faith rather than an indication that God was pleased with him for seeking reassurance in this way. Similar actions by Christians today should not be necessary, but God in his mercy sometimes responds to such calls for reassurance.

Note. **39** Making the fleece dry was a greater miracle, since, supposing dew fell on both, the hard floor would ordinarily dry more quickly than the fleece.

7:1–8 The reduction of Gideon's fighting force to three hundred. Gideon's fighting force was reduced to 300 (the rest were made reservists) so that Israel would not be able to boast that their own strength had saved them (2). But along with this drastic reduction came a further word of assurance to Gideon: '*With the three hundred . . . I will save you*' (7).

Notes. **1** *The spring of Harod* ('spring of trembling', *cf.* v 3) was on the south side of the

Valley of Jezreel (see on 1:29). The *hill of Moreh* ('hill of the teacher') was directly opposite, at a point where the valley narrowed. 3 The only Gilead we know of elsewhere in the OT is a mountainous region east of the Jordan (see on 5:17), but that does not fit the context here. Either this is another *Mount Gilead* or, as some suggest, the text originally read 'Mount Gilboa' (see 1 Sa. 28:4), but was accidentally changed in transmission. On *thousand* see on 5:8. **5–6** The text of these verses seems to have suffered in transmission. The original distinction must have been between those who knelt and drank from their hands, and those (the 300) who put their faces to the water and lapped like dogs. Thus, it was probably the most unlikely who were chosen, to make it even clearer that the victory was no human achievement.

7:9–15 Gideon goes down to the Midianite camp at night. In this final scene before the battle the Lord, realizing that Gideon would be too fearful to spy out the enemy camp alone, even at night, gave him permission in advance to take this servant Purah with him for moral support. (This night scene recalls the earlier one in 6:27–32.) They were shown that the feared Midianites were in fact in a state of near panic; the Lord had unsettled them with nightmares which had convinced them that their cause was lost (13–14). So Gideon took heart and settled on a plan to stampede them. But it was clear that there would be no real fight; God had already given the enemy into Gideon's hand (14–15).

Note. 13 Barley was the most common cereal crop in Palestine and the staple food of the poorer people. The dream confirmed the point of the water test of vs 1–7, that the Lord would achieve a great victory with the most unpromising material.

7:16–25 The rout of the Midianites. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility go hand in hand here, as they always do in Scripture. Although the victory was God-given, shrewd tactics also played an important part. Gideon showed great skill in deploying his small band in such a way as to create the impression of a huge force surrounding the enemy camp. And the cry of Gideon's men, '*A sword for the* LORD *and for Gideon*' (20), played upon the fears already instilled in the Midianites by the dream of vs 13–14. It was all too much for them. In panic and confusion they first turned their swords on one another, and then fled in disarray towards the Jordan, only to find their escape route blocked by the reservists that Gideon had called up (24–25). The capture and execution of two of their leaders shows just how devastating a defeat they had suffered (25). We may reflect that today God still works, by his Spirit, with the most unpromising material to accomplish his purposes.

Notes. 16 *Trumpets, jars* and *torches* were strange weapons indeed – but effective! It is possible that the 300 did not have any real weapons at all, and they do not appear to have done any fighting (see v 21). 20 '*A sword for the* LORD' threatened death by the sword, but ironically it was the swords of the Midianites themselves which turned out to be '*for the* LORD' (22). 22 All the places mentioned in this verse and v 24 were in or near the Jordan Valley. 25 *Oreb* and *Zeeb* mean 'Raven' and 'Wolf', respectively. The places where they were killed were subsequently named after them, and were so known in the author's own time.

8:1–3 The Ephraimites challenge Gideon. Ephraim and Manasseh were the two leading tribes of the central sector of Israel (see on 1:22–36), and it was probably for this reason that the Ephraimites felt slighted by the fact that Gideon (who was from Manasseh) did not include them in his initial call-up (6:34–35). But Gideon had not yet completed the war with the Midianites, at least to his own satisfaction (4–5) and could not afford an all-out rift in his own ranks at this crucial stage. The Ephraimites had in fact done very well and had every right to be proud. When Gideon pointed this out to them their anger with him subsided. It is a classic example of a gentle answer turning away wrath (Pr. 15:1). Contrast Jephthah's reaction to the same group in 12:1–6.

8:4–21 Gideon's pursuit and capture of Zebah and Zalmunna. In this second phase of the war, which took place east of the Jordan, Gideon appears in a strange new light. His stated purpose was to capture *Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian* (5), and he pressed towards this goal with frenzied determination despite the hunger and weariness of his men and the refusal of the leaders of Succoth and Peniel to give him support. He expected these two kings to be given into his hand as surely as Oreb and Zeeb had been (7), but there is no indication of any involvement by Yahweh in the matter (*cf.* 8:11–12 with 7:21–22).

Gideon's humility and caution completely disappear. He now throws diplomacy to the wind, demanding support with threats of retribution on those who fail to give it (7–8). And in marked contrast to the earlier phase of Gideon's career, there is no longer any reference to the Lord being involved in what he does. It is clear that what he now achieves is by his own strength of character and tactical skill, not by reliance upon the Lord. His actions against Succoth and Penial anticipate the similar, more brutal actions of his son Abimelech against Shechem and Thebez (*cf.* vs

15–17 with 9:46–49). At length, the reason for Gideon's frenzied pursuit of Zebah and Zalmunna is revealed: they had killed his brothers in some earlier battle, and Gideon has been intent on squaring accounts with them (18–19). Finally, Jether, Gideon's son, who is introduced unexpectedly in v 20, serves to highlight the change that has taken place in his father. Gideon's earlier diffidence is mirrored in Jether, who hesitates when he is told to kill the prisoners, *because . . . he was afraid* (20). Gideon himself, by way of contrast, has *the bearing of a prince* (18), and is a man of *strength* (21).

Notes. 5 The place was named *Succoth* ('shelters') because Jacob had once encamped there (Gn. 33:17). It was on the lower reaches of the Jabbok River, just east of the Jordan. 8 *Peniel* ('face of God') was so named by Jacob because God had appeared to him there (Gn. 28:30). It was just a few miles to the east of Succoth. 10 *Karkor* was east of the Dead Sea, well beyond the limits of Israelite settlement. On *fifteen thousand* see on 5:8. 11 The location of *Nobah* is unknown. *Jogbehah* was seven miles north-west of modern Amman. 13 The location of *the Pass of Heres* is unknown.

8:22–27 Gideon's rule over Israel. The Israelites proposed that Gideon should be more than a judge; he should rule like a king, and his sons should succeed him (22). Gideon had been behaving more and more like a king since he had crossed the Jordan, and it seemed only right to his followers that he should now become one. Their reason was that he had saved Israel. But this was a fundamental misconception, which Gideon's own recent behaviour had helped to produce. It was the Lord, not Gideon, who had saved Israel. The danger all along had been that the people would fail to give the Lord the credit for their deliverance (see especially 7:2), and this was precisely what they now did. When it was put to him in this way Gideon quite correctly rejected the offer, and his request for materials to make an ephod (see below) was entirely in keeping with his statement that it was the Lord himself who would rule Israel. If the Lord was to rule he must be inquired of, and it was apparently with the intention of making such inquiry possible that Gideon made an ephod and put it in Ophrah, where the Lord had first appeared to him. But it was an act of piety that went wrong, for the ephod became a virtual idol, and Gideon and his family became involved in the false worship associated with it. After starting so well, Gideon ended by inadvertently plunging Israel back into apostasy.

Notes. 24 *Ishmaelites* is a general term for the Bedouin of the desert region east of the Jordan, of which the Midianites were one group (see Gn. 16:12, 37:28, 36). 27 An *ephod* was a priestly garment with two stones (the Urim and Thummim) in the breastpiece, used for obtaining yes–no answers from God (see Ex. 28:28–30; 1 Sa. 23:6–12).

8:28–35 The death of Gideon and the birth of Abimelech. Gideon's positive legacy to Israel was forty years of peace (28), during which he apparently retired into private life (29) in keeping with his assertion that the Lord, not he, was to rule Israel. But Gideon's lifestyle (many wives, seventy sons and a concubine) was far more like that of a ruler than of a private citizen. There was a disturbing discrepancy between his public pronouncements and his private practice. His negative legacy to Israel was apostasy and violence. After his death, the idolatry associated with the ephod which he had set up quickly developed into full-scale Baal worship (33), and his son Abimelech (see the note on v 31) showed that he had none of his father's scruples about the acquisition and exercise of power. Vs 28–35 as a whole serve as a bridge to the account of Abimelech's career which follows in ch. 9. What Gideon had secretly coveted his son seized with bloody force.

Notes. 31 The meaning of *Abimelech* ('my father is king') is a telling comment on Gideon's ambivalent attitude to kingship. 33 *Baal-Berith* ('Baal of the covenant') was the god worshipped at Shechem, Abimelech's home town. The name suggests a cult which was part Canaanite and part Israelite.

9:1–57 Abimelech's experiment with kingship

The theme of this sequel to the Gideon episode is divine retribution. This is made crystal clear by the author at a key point in the story (23–24) and again at the very end, after the climax has been reached with Abimelech's death (56–57). It is an account of how God caused the evil that Abimelech and the men of Shechem did to rebound upon their own heads.

The details of the story show this process of retribution being worked out with almost mathematical precision from the point at which God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem (23). Abimelech's going to Shechem to incite its leaders to conspire with him against the sons of Jerub-Baal (*i.e.* of Gideon; vs 1–2) was answered by Gaal's arrival in Shechem to incite its leaders to conspire with *him* against Abimelech (26–29). The ambush set by the men of Shechem (25) was answered by the ambush set against *them* by Abimelech (34). Finally, Abimelech himself, who killed his brothers on a stone (5, 18), was killed beside a stone which was dropped on his head by an unnamed woman at Thebez (54). So in the

unfolding story, under God's overruling providence, act answers to act and evil to evil, until the chief instigator of the evil, Abimelech, is himself struck down. Thereupon his followers, as if waking from a bad dream, down their weapons and go home without completing their assault on Thebez (55).

9:1–6 Abimelech's rise to power. Abimelech's rise to power was totally different from that of the heroes of the previous chapters. He was no judge raised up by the Lord, but a king who raised himself up by intrigue and violence. He was the only son that Gideon had by his concubine in Shechem (8:31). So Abimelech had two sets of brothers: the other sons of his father (seventy in all) and the other sons of his mother (influential men in Shechem). Abimelech exploited his unique position skilfully. He turned brothers against brothers in such a way as to leave himself as the only surviving son of Gideon capable of succeeding his father. And succeed him he did, but without the wide support his father had enjoyed. Only the citizens of Schechem, it seems, acknowledged Abimelech as king (6).

Notes. 1 *Shechem* was situated at a strategic pass in central Canaan, associated with Israel from patriarchal times, but with a mixed Canaanite–Israelite population (Gn. 12:6–7; Jos. 24). 2 On *Jerub-Baal* see 6:32. 3 For *Baal-Berith* see on 8:33. 5 *On one stone* indicates a mass public execution. 6 'Millo' means a 'filling' (*i.e.* an artificial mound). *Beth Millo* ('house of the mound') was probably a fortress in or near Shechem. *The great tree at the pillar* was a sacred tree at a standing stone associated with the semi-pagan worship of the Shechemites (*cf.* Dt. 16:21–22).

9:7–21 Jotham confronts the citizens of Shechem. Jotham, the only son of Gideon to survive the massacre at Ophrah (5), proved to be Abimelech's undoing. He confronted the citizens of Shechem with the evil they had done and called on them to listen to him, and on God to witness their response. It was a solemn moment. Jotham used a fable to achieve his purpose, but the main thrust of his speech lay not in the fable itself (8–15), but in his application of it to the current situation (16–21). The central charge he brought against his hearers was that they had not acted *honourably and in good faith towards Jerub-Baal* (Gideon) and his family. Gideon had conferred many benefits on them, but their only response had been to murder nearly all his sons and make the least worthy of them their king. Jotham concluded by setting before his hearers the alternatives of blessing (19) or curse (20). Blessing, however, had ceased to be a real alternative because the crime was irrevocable. The detailing of the curse in v 20 was in effect an announcement of judgment, and in the rest of the story the author shows how it was put into effect. The concluding words of the chapter refer to this judgment as *the curse of Jotham, son of Jerub-Baal* (57).

Notes. 7 *Mount Gerizim* was to the south-west of Shechem (see on 9:1). 8 In the OT anointing with oil was used to indicate appointment to a special office or role in God's purposes. In particular, priests and kings were anointed (see Ex. 28:41; 2 Sa. 2:4). 9 Oil (like wine; *cf.* Ex. 29:40) was an important element in religious observances both within and outside Israel (*e.g.* Ex. 25:6; Lv. 8:26; Nu. 7:19). 21 *Beer* simply means 'well' and features in many town names of this period (*e.g.* Beersheba, 'well of seven' or 'well of the oath'; Gn. 21:31). The location of this particular 'Beer' is unknown.

9:22–57 The violent end of Abimelech's reign. Abimelech's rule was short-lived, a mere three years (22). But no doubt it was three years too long for those who had to endure it. Like all tyrants his ability to impose his rule widely depended on the loyalty of a relatively small in-group who stood to benefit from it. With the crumbling of this narrow support base Abimelech's days were numbered. What initial grievances the citizens of Shechem had is not clear, but their conflict with Abimelech was sharpened by the arrival of Gaal, who presented himself as an attractive alternative (26). Abimelech's downfall follows the classic pattern: general discontent, the beginnings of organized opposition, the emergence of a rival leader, full-scale civil war with its inevitable horrors, and finally the death of the tyrant and the dispersal of his supporters. It is only the final stage that contains anything really surprising, but the twist in the plot at this point is entirely in keeping with the character of the book as a whole. Abimelech, as we have seen, was not slain in a final titanic showdown with Gaal, but by a woman who dropped a stone on his head! This is a book which shows again and again how the sovereign God uses unlikely means to achieve his ends. The means by which the vistory was achieved leaves us in no doubt that it was God's doing. He constantly works in this book in a way that confounds human expectations and excludes human boasting (see 7:1–3).

Notes. 23 *An evil spirit* was used by God to judge Abimelech. God is not evil, but evil powers are subject to his control (*cf.* 1 Sa. 16:14; Jb. 1:12). 27 This was apparently a grape harvest festival involving pagan rites (see on 8:33). 28 *Shechem* and *Hamor* were rulers of the area in the time of the patriarchs. Shechem, who apparently gave his name to the town, raped Jacob's daughter (Gn. 34:2). Gaal and his

followers associated themselves with *Hamor* who, in contrast to Shechem (and Abimelech), was untainted by contact with foreigners. *Zebul* (see v 30) was apparently an unpopular figure, perhaps because he too was not of untainted native stock. **37** *The centre of the land* was a prominent landmark, possibly Mt Gerizim, just south of the city. The strategic Shechem Pass, between Mt Gerizim and Mt Ebal, was centrally located in Canaan (see Dt. 11:29). *The soothsayers' tree* was outside the city, in contrast to the tree of v 6. Possibly it was the 'great tree of Moreh [the teacher]' mentioned in Gn. 12:6 and if so was an ancient pagan site, possibly still frequented by the Shechemites (see on v 6). **41** *Arumah* was probably *Jabal al 'Urma*, a hilly area to the southeast of the city. **45** He *scattered salt over it* to make it and its surrounding fields infertile (*cf.* Dt. 29:23; Je. 17:6). **46** *El-Berith* ('God of the covenant') is equivalent to 'Baal-Berith' (see on 8:33, and *cf.* 9:4). **47** *Mount Zalmon* ('shaded') was probably so-called because it was well forested. Its precise location is unknown. **50** *Thebez* is the modern Tubas, north of Nablus. **53** The *upper millstone* was one of two large stones used for grinding grain.

10:1–5 Tola and Jair

There is no mention of any external threat during the time of Tola and Jair. Tola is said to have 'saved' Israel, to be sure, but in context this probably refers to the sad state that Israel had been left in by Abimelech's disastrous rule. Tola 'saved' Israel by providing a period of stable administration (*cf.* Deborah in 4:4–5). Likewise, the description of Jair's thirty sons in v 4 points to the peacefulness of the times and, in Jair's case, the prosperity and prestige enjoyed by the judge. It also shows the unpreparedness of the Gileadites for the disaster about to break upon them. Small use Jair's pampered sons would be when the Ammonites launched their invasion (10:7)! Then the Gileadites would search desperately for a fighter (10:18). They would eventually find one in Jephthah, the outcast, whose comparatively hard life had toughened him for just such a role (11:1–3).

Notes. 1 *Issachar* was a northern Israelite tribe (see on 4:4). *Shamir* is thought to be identical with Samaria, in central Israel, south of the territory of Issachar. Some members of the Issachar tribe must have migrated there. **3** For *Gilead* see on 7:3. **4** *Havvoth Jair* means 'the settlements of Jair'. **5** *Kamon* was in Jair's home territory, about 15 miles (24 km) east of the Jordan River.

10:6–12:7 Jephthah

The story of Jephthah's career unfolds in five episodes, and in each of them a dialogue plays a crucial role. The first episode (10:6–16) has to do with Israel's renewed apostasy and the consequences that flowed from it. This sets the scene for what is to follow. The dialogue in this opening episode takes the form of a confrontation between Israel and the Lord (10–16). The second episode runs from 10:17 to 11:11 and has to do with the recruitment of Jephthah to lead the Gileadites in the coming battle with the Ammonites. The dialogue here is between the elders of Gilead and Jephthah (11:5–11). The third episode (11:12–28) is wholly taken up with a diplomatic exchange (dialogue at a distance) with the Ammonite king. The failure of this diplomatic exchange leads inevitably to the climactic fourth episode (11:29–38), in which the battle takes place. But this episode is complicated by Jephthah's vow and its outcome, which becomes the real focus of attention. The dramatic centre of this episode, therefore, is the dialogue between Jephthah and his daughter in vs 34–38. The fifth and final episode (12:1–7) deals with a confrontation between Jephthah and the men of Ephraim which follows the battle. The dialogue here is in vs 1–4a.

At one level, of course, the story is simply an account of how the Lord used Jephthah to save Israel from the Ammonites. But the dialogues point to a deeper level of meaning than this. Every dialogue is essentially an exercise in negotiation, and this is true even of Israel's repentance (in the first episode) and Jephthah's vow (in the crucial fourth). At its deepest level the story of Jephthah is about the tragic consequences that follow when religion degenerates into bargaining with God. It shows us how deeply the Israelites of Jephthah's day, including Jephthah himself, had begun to misconstrue their relationship with God. Indeed it was only because of the Lord's great mercies that they were not left to the fate they so richly deserved (*cf.* La. 3:22).

10:6–16 Israel appeals to the Lord. There are three conflicts in this opening episode of the Jephthah story. The first and most obvious is between Israel and the Ammonites. With the Lord's permission (though they were not aware of it) the Ammonites had reduced sinful Israel to a desperate state (9). In their desperation the Israelites appealed to the Lord to save them. This brought to a head the second conflict in this episode, namely, the conflict between the Israelites and the Lord, because his response was to confront them with their shameful record of repeated apostasy and hotly to rebuff their appeal. He saw the shallowness of their repentance and was angered by it. He would not be used by them again (13–14). This was a tense moment, when Israel's whole future again hung in the balance. We are reminded of

the earlier confrontation in 6:7–10, but this one was far more ominous. Now it was the Lord himself who confronted Israel, and his rejection of their appeal was explicit and apparently final. But the closing two verses introduce hope by opening a window for us into a conflict going on within the Lord himself. For all his justifiable anger, he could not bear Israel's misery any longer. It was not their renunciation of other gods which moved him. They had done that many times before, only to return to their old ways (16; *cf.* vs 11–14). It was not their repentance that he found impossible to ignore, but their misery. Only the Lord's pity stood between the Israelites and utter ruin. They deserved to be abandoned, but (such is his mercy) he could not give them up (*cf.* 2:18; Ho. 11:8–9). It is this conflict within the heart and mind of God himself which holds the key to the resolution of the other two. The rest of the story will show its outworking.

Notes. 6 On *the Baals and the Ashtoreths* see on 2:11, 13. *Aram* was the ancient name for Syria (*cf.* 3:8 and note). For *Sidon* see on 3:3; on *Moab* and *the Ammonites* see on 3:12; and on *the Philistines* see on 3:3. **8** For *Gilead* see on 7:3. *The Amorites* (see on 1:34) had settled in Gilead as well as in Canaan itself (Nu. 21:21). **9** Only *the Ammonites* feature in the Jephthah story; the Philistines will loom large in the Samson story of chs. 13–16. The present passage introduces the first and foreshadows the second. **11** The reference to *the Egyptians* is to the time of Moses. The reference to *the Amorites* is probably to the encounter with Sihon recorded in Nu. 21:21–31. For *the Amalekites* see on 3:13. **12** *The Sidonians* (see 3:3) may have been part of the Canaanite coalition led by Jabin and Sisera (5:19). *The Maonites* are unknown, but perhaps this is a reference to the Midianites (*cf.* the NIV mg. and see also on 6:1).

10:17 – 11:11 The Gileadites appeal to Jephthah. The second episode opens with the Ammonites about to launch a fresh offensive and the Israelites taking desperate counsel with one another. It was natural that the Gileadites were the most vocal since it was their territory which was most immediately threatened. But they had no effective leader, and hence their united approach to Jephthah, whom they had formerly rejected (11:7). But Jephthah was wary. Why should he trust those who had treated him so badly in the past? This led to some hard-nosed negotiating in which Jephthah was offered, and accepted, the twin role of tribal leader and military commander (11:8, 11). The bargain thus struck was formally ratified in a ceremony held at Mizpah, the place at which the initial gathering had been (*cf.* 11:11 with 10:17). So the episode ended where it began, but with Jephthah now installed as leader.

On reflection we can see that this episode parallels the first. The 'repentance' of Israel was like the desperate negotiating of the Gileadites. But Jephthah's response was significantly different from God's. The Lord was moved by pity (10:16); Jephthah was apparently moved only by self-interest and personal ambition. He outnegotiated the negotiators, while the Lord stood in the background as the silent witness of all that had taken place (11:11).

Notes. 10:17 *Mizpah* ('watchtower') was a common name, but this particular Mizpah (in Gilead) is of unknown location. **11:1** *Gilead* is here a person's name, in contrast to 10:17 and elsewhere (*cf.* Jos. 17:1, 3). **3** *Tob* ('good') was a town in Aram (Syria) (2 Sa. 10:6–8).

11:12–28 Jephthah uses diplomacy. The territory in dispute here lay in southern Gilead, to the north of the Arnon River. It had once been Moabite territory, but they had lost it to the Amorites, who had in turn lost it to the Israelites in the time of Moses (Nu. 21:21–31). By the time of Jephthah, the Ammonites had apparently seized Moab itself, which lay to the south of the Arnon (v 24 of the present passage). Jephthah's argument was that Israel had not taken any land from the Ammonites, and that they should follow the precedent set by the former rulers of Moab and recognize the Arnon as the border between their respective territories (25).

This episode reveals something of Jephthah's potential for greatness. He shows that he is capable of transcending the Gileadite sphere and assuming responsibility for the affairs of Israel as a whole. But it is not surprising that his diplomacy fails. His tone is hardly that of a man suing for peace. He seems more intent on playing for time and establishing the justice of his cause, in the hope that the Lord, the supreme Judge (27), will decide in his (and Israel's) favour. His closing appeal to the Lord to decide the issue *this day* is virtually a declaration of war, and a clear sign that the climax of the story is at hand.

Notes. 13 *The Arnon* and *the Jabbok* were two streams or wadis on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Between them they enclosed much of southern Gilead (*cf.* v 18). **16** *Red Sea* ('sea of reeds') is probably a reference to the Gulf of Aqabah, as in Nu. 33:10–11. Kadesh-barnea was a settelement on the extreme southern fringe of Canaan (Nu. 13:26). **17** *Edom* was the land occupied by the descendants of Esau, south of the Dead Sea. For *Moab* see on 3:12. **19** For *the Amorites* see on 1:34 and 10:8, 11. *Heshbon* was formerly a Moabite town, taken by Sihon, king of the Amorites, and made his royal city (Nu. 21:26). **20** The precise location

of *Jahaz* is unknown. **24** *Chemosh* was the god of Moab (1 Ki. 11:7; 2 Ki. 23:13; Je. 48:7, 13, 46), but since the Ammonites currently ruled Moab, Chemosh was regarded as their god as well. It was common for rulers to 'adopt' the god or gods of the territories they conquered in this way. **25** *Balak son of Zippor* was the king of Moab in the time of Moses (Nu. 22 – 24). **26** *Aroer* was a town on the northern bank of the River Arnon (see on v 13).

11:29–40 Jephthah's vow and its outcome. The coming of the Spirit on Jephthah (29) sets in motion a sequence of events that we are now familiar with. It leads predictably to the decisive victory in v 33. But that sequence is interrupted in this case by a vow (30–31), and once made it dominates the whole episode. The battle receives only cursory treatment, its chief interest being that it creates the conditions in which Jephthah will have to fulfil his vow.

Vows, as such, were not unusual (*e.g.* Nu. 30; Ps. 22:25; Ec. 5:4–5). But this was no ordinary vow. It explicitly pledged a burnt offering (31b) but did not specify the victim, only the means by which it would be identified: 'whatever [or whoever] comes out . . .' (31a). The wording was ambiguous, and put all the inhabitants of Jephthah's house at risk. To our horror, and his, it was his virgin daughter, his only child, who became the victim (34–35), and the real tragedy is that such a vow was totally unnecessary (as previous episodes have shown). In context it can be seen as nothing other than a mistaken attempt to bargain with God. Jephthah the master negotiator overplayed his hand and paid a tragic price. The second half of this episode reads like a grim inversion of Gn. 22, the story of another father and another only child. But Jephthah was no Abraham, and in his case there was no voice from heaven, only a punishing silence. We can only conclude that the Lord was as angry with Jephthah's vow as he was with Israel's 'repentance'. *Cf.* the action of the king of Moab in 2 Ki. 3:26–27. It is worth considering how often modern prayers contain elements of bargaining with God. Jephthah's example makes it clear that God is not to be bargained with in this way.

Notes. 29 On *Manasseh* see on 1:27. **33** On *Aroer* see on v 26. The precise locations of *Minnith* and *Abel Karamim* are unknown.

12:1–7 Jephthah puts down a rebellion. With the external threat removed intertribal jealousies sprang up again (*cf.* 8:1–4). It is pretty clear that the Ephraimites regarded themselves as the natural leaders of Israel and were not willing to acknowledge as judge anyone outside their own tribe, least of all a Gileadite. Jephthah took the same basic approach to them as he had to the Ammonites: he argued the justice of his cause and then (receiving no reply) took to the field. The summary notice of 12:7 makes the political consequences clear: the tribes west of the Jordan were brought to heel and Jephthah judged the whole of Israel for six years. In short, he proved himself to be a strong leader.

For all that, however, this was no holy war. There was no appeal to the Lord to decide the issue and there is no suggestion that the victory was God-given (contrast 11:27, 29, 32). In fact the whole episode is presented with wry humour as a rather squalid tribal feud which shows just how deeply divided Israel was. It is an ominous sign of things to come, especially in chs. 19–21.

Notes. 1 For *Ephraim* see on 1:22. *Zaphon* was about 2 miles (3 km) east of the Jordan in central Gilead. **4** *Renegades* is lit. 'fugitives'. The implication is that Jephthah's followers (or at least some of them) were the descendants of Ephraimites and Manassites who had fled to Gilead as deserters or refugees. *Cf.* Jephthah's own past (11:1–3). **5** *Survivor* is plural in Hebrew, lit. 'fugitives' (as in v 4). The Gileadites turned the tables on the Ephraimites and made *them* fugitives! **6** The meaning of '*Shibboleth*' is uncertain and unimportant. It served admirably as a pronunciation test to identify the fleeing Ephraimites. For *forty-two thousand* see on 5:8.

12:8–15 Ibzan, Elon and Abdon

After the two Gileadites, Jair and Jephthah, the judgeship returned to the northern tribes west of the Jordan. The story of Jephthah and his only child (a daughter) is followed here by the note about Ibzan, who had thirty daughters and acquired another thirty as wives for his thirty sons! Of all the judges, daughters are mentioned only in connection with Jephthah and Ibzan, and the contrast between them serves to underscore the tragic barrenness suffered by Jephthah in consequence of his vow. Very little is recorded about Elon and Abdon, but the note about Abdon's sons and grandsons riding on donkeys recalls the similar ostentation of Jair and his family (10:4). The mention of sons perhaps also suggests that, from Gideon onwards, judgeship was always on the verge of turning into kingship, with sons succeeding their fathers to office (*cf.* 1 Sa. 8:1). But as the next climactic episode shows, the age of charismatic saviours was not yet over.

Notes. 8 This is probably the northern *Bethlehem* of Jos. 19:15, on the Zebulun-Asher border. Ibzan may have been from the tribe of Asher. Elon, the next judge, is from Zebulun. *Led* is lit. 'judged' (*cf.* vs 11, 13). **11** The precise location of *Aijalon* is unknown; it is not the southern Aijalon of 1:35. **13** *Pirathon* was in

central Canaan, on the Ephraim-Manasseh border, 6 miles (9 km) south-west of modern Nablus. **15** For *Amalekites* see on 3:13; 5:14.

13:1 – 16:31 Samson

The structure of the Samson story is clear. After the opening verse (13:1) has briefly set the scene, Samson's extraordinary birth is described in 13:2–25. His adult career is then unfolded in two movements spanning chs. 14 – 16. The first begins with his going down to Timnah in 14:1 and climaxes in his slaughter of the Philistines at Ramath Lehi in 15:14–20. The second begins with his going to Gaza in 16:1 and climaxes in his slaughter of the Philistines and his own death in the temple of Dagon in 16:23–31. The two notices about his judgeship at 15:20 and 16:31b formally mark the ends of these two movements.

Samson was the last of the judges whose careers are described in the book, and more space is devoted to him than to any of the others. Of all of them, Samson most epitomises the state of Israel as a whole in the judges' period. He was separated to God but could never fully come to terms with his separateness. As Israel went after foreign gods, Samson went after foreign women. And as Israel in desperation called on the Lord elsewhere in the book, so did Samson at both climaxes of the story (15:18; 16:28). In Samson we see the Lord's struggle with wayward Israel focused in his struggle with one representative man. In a very real sense Samson *was* Israel. And in the end it was the Lord who was victorious. The Philistines and their false god were defeated, and Samson at last came to terms with his destiny. It is a tragic story, but also one of victory and hope. Under God, Samson *began* the deliverance of Israel from the Philistines (13:5); David later completed it (2 Sa. 8:1). It is perhaps not out of place to see Israel, and therefore Samson, as prefiguring the church, wayward and unpredictable but still used by God.

13:1–25 Samson's miraculous birth. The brief introduction in v 1 suggests that the faith of the Israelites had reached a particularly low ebb indeed; they no longer even cried out to the Lord to save them (contrast 3:9,15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10). Against this background Samson's birth was all the more remarkable. As an act of pure grace it showed the strength of God's commitment to his people, and as a miracle it proclaimed his lordship over life and death. Samson's barren mother was like Israel as a whole, and as the Lord brought life to her dead womb, so would he bring life to Israel through Samson. But it would not be without cost, a cost Samson's mother seems to be instinctively aware of in v 7, *the boy will be a Nazirite of God . . . until the day of his death.* The climax of the story casts a long shadow before it. Like a far greater one to come, this deliverer will fulfil his mission at the cost of his own life.

Notes. 1 For *the Philistines* see on 3:3 and 10:9. **2** *Zorah* was 12 miles (19 km) west of Jerusalem, just north of the Valley of Sorek (16:4; *cf.* 18:2, 8, 11). For *the Danites cf.* 1:34; 18:1–31, and see on 5:17. **3** For *the angel of the* LORD see on 2:1–5 and 6:11–24. **5** *Nazirite* is from the Heb. *nāzar* meaning 'to separate, consecrate'. A Nazirite was a person who had consecrated himself to the Lord by taking a special vow (see Nu. 6). Such vows were normally voluntary and for a limited period only. Samson, however, was made a life-long Nazirite by God, even before he was born. **18** *Beyond understanding* is lit. 'wonderful'. The clear implication is that the messenger was in fact God himself (*cf.* Ex. 15:11; Is. 9:6). **22** See on 6:22–23. **25** *Mahaneh Dan* ('Camp of Dan') was between Zorah and Jerusalem (18:12). *Eshtaol* was near Zorah.

14:1–20 Samson's wedding. This chapter begins with Samson going *down* to Timnah (1). He went *down* there again in v 5, followed by his father in v 10. He later went *down* to Ashkelon in v 19a, and then finally back *up* to his father's house in v 19b. So the chapter ends where it began – one complete movement. But it was only a beginning, as we shall see in the next chapter, where the account of Samson's relationship with the girl from Timnah is continued.

Ch. 14 is full of secrets. There is the secret of the Lord's purposeful control of Samson's actions: he was *seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines* (4). There is the secret of what Samson did to the lion (6) and of the source of the honey he took back to his parents (9). Finally, there is the secret of the riddle (14), which is developed out of the previous two. Behind all this puzzling activity, driving it forwards to its predetermined goal, was the Spirit of the Lord (13:25; 14:6, 19). Samson seemed intent on indulging his personal desires in complete disregard of his calling as a Nazirite. He defiled himself by scooping honey from a carcass (8; *cf.* Nu. 6:6), presumably drank wine at the feast (10; *cf.* Nu. 6:3) and fraternized with the Philistines instead of trying to save Israel from them (1–3; *cf.* 13:5). But all the time he was unwittingly fulfilling God's purpose (4). He was the Lord's chosen instrument for the deliverance of Israel, and nothing that he did could change that.

The Samson story is a fascinating study in the relationship between human freedom and divine sovereignty. It shows the Lord working

all things together for the good of his people, even when they were least aware of it, and despite the waywardness of the one he had chosen to use. He is still the same gracious, sovereign God today. He still works all things together for the good of his people, whether they are aware of it or not. In his perfect servant, Jesus, however, there is no trace of the waywardness that we see in Samson (Rom. 5:6–8; 8:28).

Notes. 1 The exact location of *Timnah* is unknown, but it was on the Judah–Dan border (Jos. 15:10; 19:43) and was at this time in Philistine hands. 3 *Uncircumcised* is a term of disdain (*cf.* 15:18). As far as we know, the Philistines were the only immediate neighbours of Israel who did not practise circumcision. 11 Perhaps the *thirty companions* were intended as a kind of bodyguard, since Samson was in potentially hostile territory. 12 The *linen garments* were large rectangular sheets of linen that could be worn by day and slept in at night. It was the fact that they were made of linen, and therefore of high quality, that made them such a prize. 15 *Father's household* refers to the entire family, including servants (*cf.* 15:6). 19 *Ashkelon* was 23 miles (37 km) south-west, on the coast (see on 1:18). 20 *The friend* ('best man') was presumably different from the 'thirty companions' of v 11 (*cf.* 15:2 and Jn. 3:29).

15:1–20 Growing conflict with the Philistines. The father of Samson's new bride interpreted Samson's violent, angry departure as evidence that he had abandoned her, and (presumably to salvage some family honour) gave her instead to Samson's 'best man' (14:20; 15:2). But Samson saw things differently, and considered himself fully justified in wreaking havoc in the fields around Timnah, effectively depriving the locals of the fruits of a whole season's labour (1, 3–5). The Philistines were understandably incensed and, unable to get their hands on Samson himself, took brutal vengeance on his wife and her father (6). Thereupon Samson went on another orgy of destruction (this time destroying men rather than crops) and then withdrew, satisfied that he had squared the account with his enemies (7–8). But by this time the train of events had gathered a momentum that was unstoppable. The Philistines would not rest until they had destroyed the destroyer himself, and to this end they invaded Judah in order to capture him (9–10). This put the men of Judah in a difficult position, but they quickly decided that Samson must be sacrificed. The cost of defending him was too great. (Contrast the courageous lead taken by the men of this same tribe in 1:1–3. Their craven behaviour here shows just how low Israel as a whole had sunk.) Apparently accepting the inevitable, Samson allowed them to bind him and prepare to hand him over (11–13). But no-one was prepared for what happened next! The Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson in power, and certain defeat was turned into a glorious (if gory) victory that marked the effective beginning of Samson's rule as judge (14–17, 20).

At one level this is a repulsive tale of retaliation and ever-escalating violence, with the action driven by the dark forces of anger, hate, and the desire for revenge. But at another, more fundamental level, it is a story of God's power bringing victory out of defeat and subduing the enemies of his people. And at the end, even Samson himself acknowledged that he was the Lord's servant and that what had happened had been God's doing (18). He cried out to the Lord, acknowledging his own utter weakness and dependence on God, and found God ready and willing to grant his request (18–19). It was one of his finest moments, and an anticipation of the climax towards which the whole story of his career was moving (see 16:28–30).

Notes. 1 Samson's marriage appears to have been according to Philistine custom, in which the bride remained with her own family and was visited there by her husband. Any children resulting from the marriage would belong to the bride's family. 8 *The rock of Etam* was apparently a prominent and well-known landmark. Its location is unknown. 9 *Lehi* ('jawbone') was perhaps so-called because of the appearance of a rocky crag there. But Samson's exploits were to give its name a new significance (17). Again, its location is uncertain. 11 For *three thousand cf.* vs 15–16 and see on 5:8. 15 *A fresh jawbone, i.e.* one that was still strong, not dry and brittle. It was a makeshift weapon (*cf.* Shamgar's ox-goad; 3:31). 16 For *made donkeys of them* see the NIV mg. 18 For *the uncircumcised* see on 14:3. 19 *The hollow place* was probably a rock depression containing a spring. The naming of the spring *En Hakkore* ('caller's spring') is an allusion to Samson's 'crying out' (lit. 'calling') to the Lord in v 18. In everyday Hebrew, however, the partridge was known as 'the caller' (*haqôrē*) because of its song, and the spring may, therefore, have originally been known as 'partridge spring'. But if so, this place too gained a new significance because of Samson. 20 *Led* is lit. 'judged'; *cf.* 16:31 and see on 2:16–19.

16:1–22 Samson and Delilah. This passage begins with Samson going to Gaza by his own choice (1) and ends with him being taken there as a prisoner (21). The action develops around his relationships with two women: a nameless prostitute (1–3) and Delilah (4–22). Both women were probably Philistines, although this is never explicitly stated. With the

prostitute it was simply a matter of lust, but with Delilah it was love – at least on Samson's side (4). The first incident gives startling proof of his great strength; the second takes up the question of what the source of this strength is. In neither incident did Samson act rationally and purposefully, yet both resulted (eventually if not at once) in humiliating defeat for the Philistines (3, 23–30). It is clear, therefore, that although Samson appeared to be out of control, the Lord was still using him to achieve his purposes.

The incident with Delilah is particularly revealing, especially when Samson finally *told her everything* (17). Samson was not ignorant of his calling. He had known all along that he was a Nazirite and that the secret of his strength lay in his special relationship with God (his hair was merely a sign of this). But he had never been able fully to come to terms with his separateness. He had always secretly wanted to be as other men and to enjoy the pleasures that they enjoyed (a temptation that is surely common to Christians today). In Delilah he saw a chance, perhaps his last chance, for the happiness he had always wanted. In giving in to her request, Samson virtually invited Delilah to release him from his Naziriteship; to make him the ordinary man he had always wanted to be (17). But, paradoxically, the effect of this was simply to have him forcibly removed from where he wanted to be and placed back into the front line of conflict with the Philistines (20–21). The Lord withdrew from Samson only long enough for this to be achieved. The closing verse of the passage (his *hair . . . began to grow again*; 22) points clearly to what was to come (23–30). Samson may have wanted to be as other men, but the Lord would not let him be, any more than he would let Israel be like other nations. Samson's struggle against his calling was like the struggle of Israel as a whole.

Notes. 1 For *Gaza* see on 1:18; 3:3; 6:4. 2 If typical of this period, the *city gate* was an elaborate structure at least two storeys high, with guard rooms flanking a tunnel-like opening. Those waiting for Samson were indoors and probably asleep when he removed the doors (3). 3 *Hebron* was in the Judean hills 38 miles (60km) east of Gaza. The particular hill where Samson put the doors was probably somewhere between the two (see on 1:10). 4 The *Valley of Sorek* ('Vineyard Valley'; *cf.* 15:5) was about 13 miles (21 km) south-west of Jerusalem. 5 *Eleven hundred shekels* is about 28 lbs (13 kg); *cf.* 17:1,3). 7 The *fresh thongs* ('pieces of uncured gut') were possibly bowstrings in the making (see the NIV mg.). 13. The most conspicuous sign of Samson's separation to God as a Nazirite was his seven *braids* (*cf.* v 17). See on 13:5. The *loom* was a primitive kind, with its two upright posts fixed in the ground. A *pin* was a flat piece of wood for beating down the newly woven material to tighten it. 21 They *gouged out his eyes* to humiliate him and make him helpless (*cf.* 2 Ki. 25:7). They *set him to grinding*, probably at a hand mill. It is doubtful if the larger type of mill, normally turned by an ass, was known at this time.

16:23–31 Death and triumph in Gaza. The Samson story reaches a stunning climax in this final scene, as does the whole central section of the book. The fundamental problem with the Israelites throughout the whole period of the judges had been their fatal attraction to other gods (2:10–13). Samson's great contribution to God's purpose was to demonstrate, if only in his death, the total supremacy of the Lord (Yahweh) and the utter irrelevance of other gods (represented here by Dagon). In this, Samson's achievement is not unlike that of Elijah on Mt. Carmel (1 Ki. 18:16–40).

There is great irony in the repeated claim that *their god* had given Samson into their hands (23–24), for in reality it was the Lord who had done so, precisely to bring about their downfall. There is great sadness in Samson's prayer in v 28. Earlier he had asked for life (15:18–19); now he asked for death. Even in death his motives were not pure; he sought personal revenge rather than the glory of God. But at least he did at last do what he had been finally set apart to do, and the victory was unquestionably the Lord's. There would be more telling battles with the Philistines in the future, but the recognition that the Lord alone is God was the foundation on which Israel's future deliverance was to be built. Samson certainly made a significant beginning (see 13:5).

The Samson story, therefore, ends where it began, with Samson taken home and laid to rest by his sorrowing family. At least they could take comfort from the fact that his death had not been in vain, although we are undoubtedly in a better position to appreciate that than they were. For all his failings he was a forerunner of Jesus, who by his death brought down our great enemy and laid the foundation for a deliverance yet to be revealed in its fullness (Heb. 2:14–15; 1 Pet. 1:3–5).

Notes. 23 *Dagon* ('grain') was a Canaanite agricultural god, apparently adopted by the Philistines on their arrival. (See on 3:3.) There was also a Dagon temple at Ashdod according to 1 Sa. 5:1–5. 25 Perhaps Samson *performed* by being made to carry out feats of strength. 26 The type of temple is known from excavations in the area. The roof was supported by wooden *pillars* on stone bases. Dignitaries were below, in the temple itself, and common people watched

from above. 28 *Sovereign* LORD is lit., 'my lord Yahweh'. The name 'Yahweh' is particularly associated with the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and the covenant made with them at Sinai (Ex. 6:1–8; 20:2). Samson was praying as an Israelite, invoking the covenant relationship. As often in the OT, *remember* here implies action, not mere recollection (*cf.* Gn. 8:1; 19:29; Ex. 2:24). 31 For *Zorah and Eshtaol* see on 13:25.

17:1 – 18:31 Religious chaos: Micah and his shrine

As explained in the Introduction, this is the first of two stories which form the epilogue to the book. They both feature a Levite and are bound together by the refrain of 17:6, 18:1a, 19:1a and 21:25. They describe the religious and moral chaos that threatened to destroy Israel from within during the judges period, when Israel had no king and everyone did as he saw fit, or lit. 'what was right in his own eyes'.

17:1–13 The origin of Micah's idols

Micah enters the story as a self-confessed thief. The money he had stolen had been dedicated to God by his mother – to be made into idols! Apparently conscience stricken, Micah told her what he had done and returned it to her. She, for her part, was so relieved to have it back, that she uttered not one word of reproach, but instead blessed her son in the name of the Lord! But there is more absurdity to come. Comparison of v 3 with v 4 suggests that Micah's mother used only a fraction of the dedicated money for the purpose she had stipulated. What did she do with the rest? And Micah himself, when he became the proud owner of the new idols, was sure that the Lord would bless him because he had a Levite as his priest (13)! Just how wrong he was will quickly become apparent in the next chapter.

This opening scene is full of irony that arises mainly from the fact that the characters are apparently unaware of the incongruity of their words and actions. It illustrates perfectly the chaos that arises when everyone does whatever is right in his own eyes(6).

Notes. 1 *Micah* ("Who is like Yah[weh]?") is an ironical name indeed for an idolater! For the *hill country of Ephraim* see on 4:5. 2 *Eleven hundred shekels* was a large sum of money (see the NIV mg. and *cf.* 16:5). Micah's mother had dedicated the money to God (*cf.* Mk. 7:11). By implication this involved a *curse* (or 'oath') on anyone who misappropriated it. 3 *For my son* is, 'on behalf of my son'. The idols would have been made by a silversmith and the finished products given to Micah (4). Micah's mother apparently regarded the *carved image* and *cast idol* as objects of religious art and mistakenly aimed to honour the Lord with them. 5 For Micah's *ephod*, see on 8:22–27 (Gideon's ephod). 7 The *young Levite* was a member of the priestly tribe of Levi (Dt. 33:8–11). Only descendants of Aaron were supposed to be actual priests; the rest were to be assistants (Nu. 8:5–26). With no tribal territory of their own, they lived among the other tribes. Although allotted specific towns, they were not confined to these, especially in the chaotic conditions of the judges period. This Levite from Bethlehem in Judah was a descendant of Moses (18:30). See also on 19:1. 10 The Levite was to *be my father, i.e.* someone to whom Micah would look for guidance in religious matters (*cf.* 2 Ki. 6:21; 13:14). In all other respects, however, the Levite was more like a son to Micah than a father (11).

18:1–31 The subsequent history of Micah's idols

As we saw in the opening chapter of the book, the Danites were unable to gain full possession of their allotted territory in the south (1:34). Their migration to the far north, which is recounted here, probably took place quite early in the judges period (see note on v 12).

The second part of the Micah story consists of several scenes reflecting the movement of the Danites to and fro, and their encounters with various persons *en route*. There are two scenes involving the Levite whom Micah had recruited to be his priest. He was consulted by the Danite spies (3–6) and gave them a favourable oracle, and then agreed to abandon Micah and go with the Danites and serve them instead. In the scene which follows (22–26) Micah himself makes his final appearance, a pathetic broken man (24). In Laish, which the Danites re-name, Micah's shrine is re-opened, as it were, on a new site and under new management (30–31). But the ominous words *until the captivity of the land* point to the fact that this shrine eventually suffered the same fate as the original one (see note on v 30).

The whole story is told with wry humour. There are many superficial similarities to Israel's original conquest of the land (Nu. 13 – 14; Dt. 1). But for all their show of strength, the Danites here were actually in retreat, withdrawing from their true inheritance under Canaanite pressure (see above). And Laish, in contrast to the fortified cities conquered by Joshua, was remote, quiet, unsuspecting and defenceless (27–28). The author's sympathies seem to lie more with the Danites' victims rather than with the Danites themselves.

In the end the story is more about Micah than the Danites. It is above all about the false

confidence people have that they can manipulate God with religious objects and institutions. The Danites essentially made the same mistake as Micah, and their new shrine was doomed from the start, just as surely as Micah's was. Self-serving religion brings God's judgment, not his blessing (see especially 17:13).

Notes. **2** For *Zorah and Eshtaol* see on 13:2, 25. *Clans* is lit. the singular, 'clan', which appears to be equivalent to 'tribe' here (*cf.* vs 11, 19). Contrast 6:11. For *the hill country of Ephraim* see on 4:5. **7** *Laish* was in the far north of Canaan, 25 miles (40 km) due north of the Sea of Galilee. It was renamed 'Dan' by the Danites (29). The *Sidonians* (see on 3:3) lived on the Mediterranean coast where Lebanon is today. **11** For *six hundred* see on 3:31. **12** *Kiriath Jearim* ('city of forests') was in the hills about 8 miles (13 km) west of Jerusalem. *Cf.* Kiriath Sepher, 'city of book[s]', in 1:11. *Mahaneh Dan* means 'camp of Dan'. It appears from 13:25 that the place was already known by this name in Samson's day. It is likely, therefore, that Samson's community was a small group of Danites who remained in the south after the bulk of the tribe had moved north. **14** For *ephod cf.* 17:5 and see on 8:27. The *household gods* (Heb., *t^{e}rāpîm*) were apparently small objects (Gn. 31:19) which, like the ephod, were used for divination [see Ezk. 21:21 (where 'idols' translates *t^{e}rāpîm*) and 2 Ki. 23:24]. **19** *Be our father cf.* 17:10. **21** The idea was to keep the warriors between their possessions (including what they had stolen) and anyone who might give chase. **28** The precise location of *Beth Rehob* is unknown, but see on v 7 and *cf.* Nu. 13:21. **29** *Israel* is used here as the alternative name for Jacob (Gn. 30:4–6; 32:8). **30** For *Gershom* see Ex. 2:22. The founding priest was the grandson of Moses. This gave the place great prestige and probably explains why Jeroboam I later chose it to be one of the two national shrines of the northern kingdom (1 Ki. 12:25–30). It remained, however, a centre of idolatry. The Hebrew text has a small 'n' (Heb. *nun*) inserted in the word 'Moses' to change it into 'Manasseh', the wicked king of that name (2 Ki. 21). This was done out of respect for Moses, but it is clear what the original reading was (see the NIV mg.). *The captivity of the land* is probably a reference to the final conquest of the northern kingdom by Assyria in 722 BC, especially since 2 Ki. 17 refers specifically to the deportation of priests at that time (27; *cf.* vs 1–6). **31** *Shiloh* was about 19 miles (30 km) north of Jerusalem. It was here that the Israelites first set up the Tent of Meeting after their arrival in Canaan (Jos. 18:1). By Samuel's time this had been replaced by a more permanent building (1 Sa. 1:9,24), but Shiloh and its sanctuary were later destroyed, probably by the Philistines (Jer. 7:12).

19:1 – 21:25 Moral chaos: the Levite and his concubine

This second major story unfolds in four episodes: the outrage in Gibeah (19:1–28); preparations for war: the Levite's call and Israel's response (19:29 – 20:11); the war itself (20:12–48); and post-war reconstruction: wives for the Benjamite survivors (21:1–25). The main action takes place in the third episode. The first two trace developments leading up to it, and the last deals with the consequences that flowed from it.

19:1–28 The outrage in Gibeah

Apart from triggering the main action which follows, this opening episode serves two major purposes. It shows us how debased even such a noble thing as hospitality had become in Israel in the judges period, and it throws significant light on the character of the Levite, who is to play a key role in episode 2.

There are two scenes here involving hospitality. The first, in Bethlehem (1–10), is normal enough, but the second, in Gibeah (11–28), is perverted and grotesque, with unmistakable similarities to the description of life in Sodom in Gn. 19:1–13. This is particularly ironical because the travellers had deliberately avoided pagan towns in order to seek hospitality with their fellow-Israelites (12–14). The rowdies in the streets of Gibeah were clearly morally bankrupt, but so too was the old man who opened his house to the travellers. It was this apparently model host whose perverted sense of duty led him to conceive the idea of casting two innocent women to the dogs (23–24). Here is moral bankruptcy indeed. When God's people do whatever is right in their own eyes they are no better than Sodomites.

The Levite himself, however, is the most perverted of all. After having thrust out his concubine to the mob he retired to bed and apparently gave no further thought to her until he found her dead or unconscious on the doorstep in the morning. Then, with almost unbelievable callousness, he told her to get up because he was ready to go (27–28). This was the man who will summon all Israel to war in the next episode. In retrospect we can understand very well why his concubine found it impossible to live with him (see v 2 and note).

Notes. **1** For the *hill country of Ephraim* see on 4:5. Taking *a concubine* was a practice common in the ancient Near East and allowed under OT law (Ex. 21:7–11; *cf.* Gn. 16:2–5; 29:24, 29; Jdg. 8:31; 2 Sa. 5:13). A concubine was normally a second wife or a wife without a normal

dowry and, therefore, of lower status. Contrast Jephthah's mother, who was a prostitute (11:1). *Bethlehem in Judah*, the birthplace of Jesus, was 6 miles (9 km) south of Jerusalem. *Cf.* 17:7, and contrast the northern Bethlehem of 12:8. **2** Her unfaithfulness appears to have consisted solely in leaving her husband. There is no suggestion of relations with other men. **10** *Jebus* was the pre-Israelite name for Jerusalem. See v 11 and *cf.* 1:21. **12** *Gibeah* was 3 miles (5 km) north of Jerusalem, in the territory of Benjamin. See v 14 and *cf.* Jos. 18:28. *Ramah* was 2 miles (3 km) north of Gibeah. **18** *The house of the LORD* was presumably the sanctuary at Shiloh (see on 18:31). But the Septuagint (the ancient Greek version of the OT) has 'my house', which makes better sense in the context and may well represent the original reading.

19:29 – 21:25 The response to the outrage

19:29 – 20:11 Preparations for war. In the previous episode it was Israelite hospitality which came under scrutiny. In this one it is the 'assembly', an ad hoc meeting of representatives of the various tribes to deal with a matter of common concern (20:1; *cf.* 21:10,13,16). The assembly in this sense later became obsolete, but in the days before Israel had a king it was an important institution. The welfare, and in some cases the very existence of the nation, depended on its functioning effectively. Here the matter of national importance is the outrage committed at Gibeah, and the convenor of the assembly is the Levite of episode 1.

Irony is created by the fact that we, the readers, know more about both the convenor and the matter in hand then the members of the assembly do. To us the Levite's dismemberment of his concubine and distribution of her parts is an extension of the cool callousness he showed towards her at Gibeah. To them it was an act of holy zeal. They were galvanized into action and came out *as one man*, from Dan to Beersheba (20:1). That is, the summons issued by this Levite elicited a response which far surpassed anything achieved by the judges raised up by the Lord.

Having called the assembly together, the Levite gave what was at best a distorted account of what had happened, designed totally to camouflage his complicity (*cf.* 20:5 with 19:25). In view of this, the high moral tone he adopted has a particularly hollow ring to it. It is not even clear that his concubine had died (as he implied) as a direct result of her rape in Gibeah (5b). She may have died at his own hand when he got her home (see 19:28 and comment).

For all this, the members of the assembly are just as impressed by the Levite's speech as they were by his grisly summons. They arise *as one man* and decide at once on united punitive action against Gibeah (8–11). It may well have been that drastic action was called for, but what would become of Israel when its assembly could be convened and manipulated by a person of such dubious morals as this Levite? That is the serious question posed by this second episode.

Notes. 29 *Cf.* Saul's later action in 1 Sa. 11:6–7. This was apparently a customary way of summoning league partners to action, with an implied threat for any who failed to respond. The difference here is that the victim is a human being (*cf.* Jephthah's daughter, 11:34–40). The *twelve parts* represented the twelve tribes of Israel (*cf.* 1 Ki. 11:29–31). **20:1** For *Dan* see on 18:7. *Beersheba* ('well of the seven'; see Gn. 21:31) was 48 miles (76 km) south of Jerusalem, midway between the coast and the Dead Sea. *From Dan to Beersheba* means 'from the far north to the far south'. For *Gilead* see on 5:17. *Mizpah* ('watchtower') was 8 miles (13 km) north of Jerusalem (Jos. 18:26; 1 Sa. 7:5). It is not the Mizpah in Gilead of 10:17. **2** For *four hundred thousand* see on 5:8. **9** Objects were cast on the ground or drawn from a container as a means of seeking guidance from God (*cf.* Jos. 18:6; Pr. 16:33). **10** Again the numbers seem too large, and the explanation for 'thousand' given in the note on 5:8 does not work so well here. Possibly only the first part (*ten . . . out of every hundred*) is original. The essential idea is that ten percent of the men were set aside to act as a supply company for the rest.

20:12–48 The war itself. The outcome of the assembly in the previous episode was a holy war, which in many ways recalls the campaign against Ai in Joshua's time (see on vs 29 and 48). Holy war is something we have witnessed repeatedly throughout the book of Judges, but there are disturbing differences here. The enquiry in v 18 (*'Who of us shall go first?'*) recalls the opening enquiry of the book (1:1), and it receives the same reply. But how different the circumstances! There it was a united Israel waging a war of occupation against the Canaanites. Here it is a divided Israel, fighting a civil war in which brother is pitted against brother (28). There victory was given at once (1:4). Here it is withheld until Israel is thoroughly broken and demoralized (26–28). Indeed, the 'holy' war of this chapter scarcely rates as such. It was decided on at an assembly convened by a man of bad character, and it concluded in a bloodbath that reeked more of vengeful excess than of justice (see again on v 48).

Most of the space in vs 18–48 is devoted to a description of the fighting, with the fluctuating fortunes of the opposing sides. But the three enquiries (by the Israelites) and responses (by the Lord) in vs 18, 23, and 28 let us see what was

going on at a deeper level. They show us what was happening in the minds of the Israelites and between them and the Lord as the war proceeded through its various phases. The Israelites were confident about the rightness and eventual outcome of their cause (18). They were already committed to the war, and the Lord's approval was assumed. They therefore raised a purely procedural matter: how was the campaign to be conducted? The Lord commanded Judah to go first, appropriately so since the ravished concubine was from Judah (19:1). But there was no promise of victory and none materialized; quite the reverse (19–21). The second enquiry (23) shows the drastic loss of confidence the enquirers had suffered as a result of their disastrous defeat. They were doubtful about the wisdom of continuing the war, and struck a conciliatory note by referring to the Benjamites as their 'brothers'. But the Lord sent them into battle again – to another resounding defeat (23b–25). After their first setback they had wept; now they wept and fasted and offered sacrifices. They explicitly asked whether they should desist – a possibility which clearly loomed very large in their minds (28). Again they were sent back to the fight, but now at last with a promise of victory. In the ensuing battle the fortunes of the two sides were suddenly reversed when the Lord intervened on the side of 'Israel', which was thereby saved from dissolution (35).

The Benjamites undoubtedly deserved to be punished. But the moral and spiritual state of the nation as a whole was such that holy war almost destroyed it instead of preserving it. In this third episode the Lord appears to be as angry with the rest of Israel as he is with the Benjamites, and he shows it by distributing defeat and victory in such a way that the whole of Israel is judged. He is both the judge and preserver of his wayward people.

Notes. 15 For *twenty-six thousand* see on 5:8. **16** Ehud, also a Benjamite, was left-handed (see 3:15 and note). **18** Since *Bethel* means 'house of God', it could be that the place referred to here is the Tent of Meeting at Shiloh (see on 19:18). But the earlier references to the town Bethel make it probable that it is that same town that is on view here (*cf.* v 26, and see on 1:22; 2:1; 4:5). For *enquired of God* see on 1:1. **26** *Weeping* and fasting were acts of repentance (*cf.* 2:4). They had concluded from what happened that the Lord was angry with them. The burnt offering (see Lv. 1) symbolized the complete consecration of the offerer to God. *Fellowship offerings* (see Lv. 3), which included a meal, symbolized restored fellowship with God and with one another. **27** In this period *the ark* was sometimes moved from the central sanctuary, especially in wartime (*cf.* 1 Sa. 4:4–5 where, as here, the central sanctuary was at Shiloh). See on 18:31 and 19:18. **28** *Phinehas* here, is the grandson of Aaron (Ex. 6:25), not the later Phinehas of 1 Sa. 4:4. The name is of Egyptian origin. *Cf.* Jonathan, the grandson of Moses in 18:30. If these genealogies are taken at face value (and there is no good reason to do otherwise) the events recorded in chs. 17 – 21 evidently took place quite early in the judges period. **29** *Cf.* the tactics used against Ai in Joshua's day (Jos. 8:3–8). **33** The exact location of *Baal Tamar* is unknown. **35** Possibly the original sense of *25,100* was 'twenty-five contingents, one hundred men'. *Cf.* the thirty casualties of v 39. This verse is an anticipatory summary of the fuller account given in vs 36b–46. **45** *The rock of Rimmon* was a limestone outcrop about 4 miles (6 km) east of Bethel, cut off by ravines on three sides and with caves where the fugitives could hide. The name survives in the modern village of Rammun. The location of *Gidom* is unknown. **47** On the interpretation of the numbers I have advocated, *six hundred men* would have been the bulk of the Benjamite force (see on vs 15, 35). **48** In holy war (war waged at the Lord's direct command) the Israelites were sometimes told not to take any loot but to destroy everything as a way of offering it to God. This was known as the 'ban'. It was also an extreme form of divine judgment on Israel's enemies (Jos. 6:21; 1 Sa. 15:1–3) and, in certain circumstances, on Israelites themselves (Dt. 13:12–18). Here it is applied without any specific instruction from the Lord to do so.

21:1–25 Rehabilitation of the surviving Benjamites. In this final episode, attention swings back to the workings of the tribal assembly (see above on 19:29 – 20:11). The two oaths sworn at Mizpah (1, 5b) were intended to stop the evil committed by the Benjamites from contaminating the whole nation and to ensure full participation by the other tribes in the punitive action that was required. But the excessive slaughter of 20:48 had now produced an unexpected result: the entire tribe of Benjamin was threatened with extinction.

The first attempt to deal with the problem (it was only partly successful) is a clear case of using one oath to circumvent another (6–13). It was a manoeuvre that was legally justifiable, but morally dubious to say the least, and a terrible price was paid by the people of Jabesh Gilead (11). The second (15–23) has exactly the same character. The justification given in v 22 was a clever piece of casuistry which entirely avoided the moral issues involved. The same men who had been so outraged at the rape of the Levite's concubine now asked the men of Shiloh meekly to accept the rape of their daughters as a *fait accompli*.

The following ironical pattern emerges: (a) the rape of the concubine; (b) holy war against Benjamin; (c) problem: the oath – Benjamin threatened with extinction; (b^1) 'holy' war against Jabesh Gilead; (a^1) the rape of the daughters of Shiloh.

The behaviour of the assembly in this episode again shows us just how morally and spiritually bankrupt Israel had become. But in spite of this the story finally moves to a point of fragile equilibrium, with the Benjamites rehabilitated and calm restored (23–24). Amazingly, Israel has survived, but looking back we must conclude that this was due much more to God's overruling than to the performance of its leaders and its institutions. Israel's survival in the chaotic period of the judges was a miracle of God's grace, as salvation always is (Eph. 2:8).

Notes. **1** For *Mizpah* see on 20:1. **2** For *Bethel* see on 20:18. **4** The altar was built, not at Bethel, where an altar already stood (20:26), but *the next day*, back at Mizpah, their base camp (20:1). Ad hoc altars of this kind were sometimes built in times of national peril or rejoicing, especially before or after a battle (*cf.* Ex. 20:24–25; 1 Sa. 14:35). For *burnt offerings and fellowship offerings* see on 20:26. **5** The RSV is more accurate with 'did not come up in the assembly'. The reference is to the initial assembly of 20:1. **8** *Jabesh Gilead* was a town just east of the Jordan River, about 22 miles (35 km) south of the Sea of Galilee. The absence of representatives from Jabesh Gilead was conspicuous, since men *had* come from other parts of Gilead (20:1). **9** This count confirmed what the leaders had only vaguely been aware of, that there had been no representatives from Jabesh Gilead at the earlier assembly either (see on v 5). **10** For *twelve thousand* see on 5:8. For *put to the sword . . . women and children* see on 20:48. **11** The virgins were spared. The leaders may have had in mind the precedent that had been set in the campaign against the Midianites in Moses' time (see Nu. 31, especially v 17). **12** Mizpah had been the base camp during the war itself (20:1; 21:1). *Shiloh*, which was further north, was closer to Jabesh Gilead and, therefore, a more convenient place for receiving and transferring the virgins (see on 18:31). *In Canaan* means west of the Jordan, in Canaan proper. *Cf.* the further details about Shiloh's location in v 19b. These were probably added in the final stages of the book's composition for the sake of readers who lived long after Shiloh had been destroyed. Again, see on 18:31. **19** 1 Sa. 1:3. Ex. 3:24 prescribe three such festivals, but in the chaotic conditions of the judges period it should not surprise us that only one was observed. The detailed description of Shiloh's location is puzzling, but see on v 12. For *Bethel* see on 4:5. For *Shechem* see on 9:1. *Lebonah* was 3 miles (5 km) west of Shiloh (see on 18:31). **21** The festival was probably a corrupt, semi-pagan form of the Feast of Tabernacles, which was held at the time of the grape harvest (Dt. 16:13–15). See also on 9:27 and 8:33. **22** *During the war*, *i.e.* during the campaign against Jabesh Gilead. But the earliest form of the text can equally be translated 'by war' (*i.e.* 'by force'). **23** *Their inheritance* (*cf.* v 24) was the land allotted to them after the initial conquest of Canaan (Jos. 14:1; 18:11–27).

Barry G. Webb

RUTH

Introduction

It is not difficult to account for the appeal of this short book. As an example of storytelling alone it has outstanding merit, with its symmetry of form and vivid characterization, but above all it is a book with a message. When Naomi was finding life bleak and pointless, Ruth chose to stand by her mother-in-law rather than leave the older widow to face the journey into the future all alone. Tragedy in Moab led to a happy ending in Bethlehem, and selfless loyalty was rewarded. God overruled events to bring love and security to those who trusted him, while at the same time weaving their lives into his purpose for the world. God remained hidden, but was nevertheless at work in the ordinary affairs of daily life, fulfilling his promises to his people.

Many attempts have been made to classify the book of Ruth according to the categories of modern European literature. It has been regarded in turn as a *novella*, an idyll and a historical novel, all of which imply a large fictional element. In an attempt to set the book against a Near Eastern background, other scholars have suggested that it had its origins in cultic mythology, but without producing convincing evidence. The book itself, with its opening words, 'In the days when the judges ruled', and its concluding genealogy ending with King David, imply historical and verifiable events. True, it deals with an ordinary family and not with the exploits of the great, but the link between Ruth the Moabitess and King David is not likely to have been invented, for it did nothing to enhance his standing in Israel. Though the writer took great pains to make his book a work of art, he evidently intended it to be accepted as historical. It is a true story, beautifully told, after the style of the patriarchal narratives, where some of the same themes occur, such as famine, exile and return, and childlessness, through which God makes himself known.

Authorship and date

The book offers no indication of the identity of its author. The Talmud (*c.* AD 200) attributes it to Samuel, but Samuel died before David became king (1 Sa. 28:3), and the book implies that the kingship of David was well known. The period of the judges is referred to as a past era, and the necessity of explaining the shoe ceremony in 4:7 indicates that some time elapsed before the events were recorded. A scribe at the court of Solomon would have had access to the royal archives, and the period which saw literature and the arts flourishing might well have produced this artistic gem. Several recent scholars have detected a female perspective in the book which has suggested to them that the author was a woman. In a society dominated by men it is significant that the book should have been written about two women, whose initiatives brought about the action, and whose faith was rewarded. In God's providence their lives even played a part in preparing for the coming of the Saviour (Mt. 1:5; Lk. 3:32). Whoever wrote the book was in tune with God's revealed purpose of blessing 'all peoples on earth' (Gn. 12:3), and had lived long enough to recognize God's working in human lives. Few writers have been more successful in making goodness attractive.

The date of writing is also difficult to establish. It could be at any point between the reign of David (*c.* 1000 BC) and the book's acceptance into the canon of Scripture in the second century BC. The era much favoured during this century has been the post-exilic period, especially the fifth or fourth century BC, when the book could have been a protest against the narrow nationalism of Ezra and Nehemiah. The presence of Aramaic words in the Hebrew was thought to support a late date, but more recent studies have questioned the force of this argument. The book shows no sign of being 'protest literature', and study of the language has been used to show that its classical Hebrew is likely to be pre-exilic (*i.e.* seventh century at the latest). It seems likely that the writer lived long enough after the events he recorded to see them in perspective, perhaps during the reign of Solomon. One tentative suggestion is that the prophet Nathan could have been the author. He left records of David's reign (1 Ch. 29:29), fearlessly challenged the king's personal life (2 Sa. 12:1–12), and yet was willing later to support Bathsheba (1 Ki. 1:11–53).

Place in the canon

The book of Ruth was treasured as Scripture in both Jewish and Christian circles, and was included in official lists of scriptural books when the church began to compile these in the second century AD. The references in the gospels (Mt.

1:5; Lk. 3:32) show that Ruth was regarded as authoritative when they were written.

In our English Bibles Ruth follows Judges, as it does in the LXX and Vulgate translations. In printed Hebrew Bibles, however, Ruth appears in the third division, the Writings, where it is the second of the five scrolls which were used liturgically in the synagogue by the sixth century AD. The Song of Songs was the first because it was used at Passover; Ruth was used at Pentecost. The Babylonian Talmud, which is older than the sixth century, began the Writings with Ruth, followed by the Psalms. Other texts have Ruth as the first of the five scrolls because it belongs first chronologically. Evidently the book was first placed among the Writings and was later transferred to the position where it belongs historically, between Judges and Samuel.

Themes

Famine is the circumstance that caused an Israelite family to migrate to alien Moab. Famine was a recurring event in patriarchal times, causing Jacob and his sons to migrate to Egypt. Enslaved and oppressed, they experienced God's deliverance, an event remembered annually at Passover (Ex 12:1–29). In the book of Ruth the same God came to the aid of two needy women, demonstrating his power to bring good out of sorrow, life out of death.

Marriage is another theme central to the book. It was central in Naomi's thinking. While she regarded herself as too old for marriage, for her daughters-in-law it was a priority which she urged them to pursue (1:9). The birth of a grandson would give her new zest for life and if, by God's providence, he could be legally accepted as Elimelech's heir then her joy would be complete. Ruth, the young widow from Moab who had thrown in her lot with her mother-in-law and had embraced the faith of Israel, assumed that remarriage was not only right and proper but also her express duty. In order that she could provide for Naomi, she needed a husband who would accept Naomi as a member of the family. For that reason her story had to be a love story with a difference, but under Naomi's guidance it turned out to be even more unusual. She might have married an eligible young man of her own generation, but that would not have solved Naomi's problem over the family property, nor would it have given an heir to Elimelech. By marrying into her late husband's family, Ruth brought security into Naomi's life as well as into her own. Her selfless love mirrored that of the God of Israel, in whom she had put her trust.

The two women dominate the story, but Boaz, a close relative of Elimelech, also had to be willing for new responsibilities. Not only was Naomi expecting him to marry the widow of Mahlon, his relative who had died in Moab, but also to buy property which might not in the end be his. The legal provision favoured the family which had been bereft, ensuring that a son born of the marriage would inherit Elimelech's property and continue his line. The nearer relative to whom Boaz put the proposition rejected it on the grounds that it endangered his own estate (4:6). Boaz large-heartedly accepted the family responsibility, though it was costly, to the unqualified approval of the elders and people of Bethlehem, who prayed for God's blessing to prosper his standing in the community and give children to Ruth.

By the end of the story those prayers were answered more fully than any of the participants could have imagined. Israel's felt need of a king was to be met after Saul's death through David, a grandson of the boy called Obed who was born to Ruth and Boaz. David, for all his faults, established the kingdom, built Jerusalem, and inspired visions of the ideal king to come. God took the love and obedience of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, and wove it into his eternal purpose to show 'love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments' (Dt. 5:10). The Messiah was indeed born into this same family (Mt. 1:5–6,16; Lk. 3:23–31).

A further theme, implicit in all that has been written thus far, is God's providential ordering of human life. The author of Ruth could see part of God's purpose for human history being fulfilled in David; the Christian reader can fit the part into the whole, for God was executing a plan to redeem humankind through great David's greater son. The author of Ruth was also aware of God's hand upon the personal circumstances of families and individuals, encouraging them to look back over events and to trace the mysterious outworking of God's overflowing goodness in their lives. The events speak for themselves. In personal life and in history God was working out his good purpose.

Further reading

(See the booklist on Judges)

D. Atkinson, *The Message of Ruth*, BST (IVP, 1983).
R. L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1988).
M. D. Gow, *The Book of Ruth* (Apollos, 1992).
D. A. Leggett, *The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament* (Mack, 1974).

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Commentary

1:1–22 Return to Bethlehem

1:1–7 The scene is set

The opening words refer to the historical period described in the book of Judges (roughly 1250–1050 BC), which ends, 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit' (Jdg. 21:25). The book of Ruth ends with the words, 'Jesse the father of David', and it was David who fulfilled Israel's felt need of a king. *Bethlehem in Judah*, as opposed to Bethlehem in Zebulun (Jos. 19:15), is called Ephrath in Gn. 35:19; the name survived in *Ephrathites* (2). Bethlehem means 'house of bread' and the name reflects the fertility of its fields and orchards. But even in Bethlehem famine struck the community and caused one family to migrate for a while to *Moab*. From Bethlehem it is possible to see the hills of Moab on the horizon to the east, across the Dead Sea. Though near geographically it was not friendly territory. The Moabites were descended from Lot (Gn. 19:27) and so were distant relations of Israel, but they had been hostile when the Israelites had approached from Egypt after the exodus (Nu. 21:29). Early in the period of the judges Eglon King of Moab had invaded and dominated the Israelites for eighteen years (Jdg. 3:14).

Elimelech decided to move to Moab. For his wife, Naomi, the eventual outcome of the move was tragic. First, she lost her husband, and later her two sons. Their residence in Moab, meant to be temporary, lasted ten years and at the end of it Naomi was bereft both of a means of livelihood and of hope for the future.

The turning point came when she heard that *the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.* She prepared *to return*, a recurring verb in the chapter. In Hebrew the same verb is used for 'repent', and in returning home Naomi was demonstrating a change of mind, a 'repentance'. Her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, set out with Naomi, feeling duty-bound as close relatives to accompany her. The familiar pattern of behaviour of the old patriarchs was being repeated. Abraham and Isaac had both left in times of famine, only to return later when food was available again.

1:8–18 Far-reaching decisions

The storyteller has set the scene, but from this point on the characters speak for themselves. Naomi, taking nothing for granted, urged her two daughters-in-law to return to their parental homes in Moab. They may have been in their late teens or early twenties, and Naomi took a motherly interest in seeking what was best for them. They had both been loving wives, and Naomi appreciated their affection for her, hence her prayer, *May the LORD show kindness to you.* Her hope was that his providential care would lead each of them to a second marriage. The *kindness* of the Lord bound Israel in a special relationship to God (see the note at the end of the chapter), but Naomi did not hesitate to pray that it should be extended to these two girls from Moab. She could have had in mind the Lord's promise to Abraham that all the peoples of the earth should be blessed through him (Gn. 12:3). Love, security and a home are

among the blessings the Lord provides. Naomi's advice, *Return home, my daughters,* was sound common sense (11–13), though it was to her own disadvantage. *The LORD's hand has gone out against me* sums up her reading of events.

Naomi saw the famine, the consequent migration to Moab and the death, first of her husband and then of her sons, as signs of divine displeasure with her personally. That is why it was so *bitter* an experience. If she had thought blind fate ordered her life, she would have accepted her situation with passive resignation. As it was, by accusing God she declared her faith that he was ultimately the one who overruled events and since he was also the God who intended to bless, Naomi found hope even in the depths of despair.

Orpah left and is heard of no more, *but Ruth clung to* Naomi. The verb is the same as that used of marriage in Gn. 2:24, 'Therefore shall a man . . . cleave unto his wife' (RV). Ruth, in total commitment, put care for Naomi before her own interests. Love 'is not self-seeking' (1 Cor. 13:4). The reader is caught up in the drama, wanting to find out how things turned out for Ruth, who took the risk of accompanying her mother-in-law.

Naomi did not accept Ruth's decision without a protest. It was natural that parents and religious upbringing should exert a powerful attraction, but Naomi's protest called forth the most sublime response. Ruth's mind was made up, *Where you go I will go.* Naomi's well-being was her first concern, though that involved emigration from her homeland, leaving her parents who were still living (2:11), and settling among strangers. From this point on Naomi's people would be her people, though Ruth had no certainty that she would find acceptance. Most significant of all Ruth declared Naomi's God to be her God. Her resolve was total, extending even to death, and confirmed on oath in the name of her new-found Lord. Ruth's declaration forms the climax of this chapter. The author no doubt hoped that readers would follow her example.

1:19–22 The homecoming

The arrival of Naomi caused a stir of interest and excitement in Bethlehem, especially among the women. Their question suggests that they hardly recognized her because she was so changed, but also that they were overjoyed to see her again. Naomi quickly cut short any celebration by revealing the depth of her despair. Overcome by memories of past happiness in Bethlehem she could not bear to be called Naomi (which means 'pleasant' or 'lovely'). Far more appropriate in her view was *Mara* (meaning 'bitter'), and she blamed *the Almighty* (*Shaddai*) for her bitter experiences. He it was who had promised a great destiny to Abraham (Gn. 17:1). He ruled over the cosmic order (Jb. 34:12–13) and so it followed that he must have been responsible for the tragedy that had overtaken her. *I went away full,* happily married and blessed with two sons, *but the Lord has brought me back empty,* bereft of my source of happiness. The Lord who gave, and whose characteristic it is to give, had inexplicably taken away her loved ones. Moreover, she interpreted his action as a sign of his displeasure, for *the LORD has afflicted me* means 'has testified against me' (NIV mg.), as if in a court of law.

Some stylistic devices in the last three verses call for comment. The deliberate pattern in the use of the divine names, *the Almighty . . . the LORD . . .* the *LORD . . . the Almighty,* lays great stress on the sovereign rule of God over human affairs, and yet he is the LORD who had revealed his loving purposes to Abraham. Because he is in control there is an implied hope, a hint of a better future. The narrator rounds off the first episode with a summary that looks both backwards and forwards. *Naomi returned* looks back by repeating a key verb in the chapter, whereas mention of her *daughter-in-law* indicates that Ruth will take centre stage in the next scene. The final words of the chapter, *as the barley harvest was beginning,* not only anticipate the next episode, but also match the time note in 1:1, so completing a kind of bracket round the first chapter of the narrative.

Note. 8 There is more to the word *kindness* than the reader might suspect. It translates the Hebrew word *hesed*, here and in 2:20 and 3:10. Supremely it is the characteristic of God himself in his dealings with those who are his people. Sometimes (e.g. Ex. 15:13) it is translated 'unfailing love' and the word conveys the Lord's faithfulness to his covenant promises (Dt. 7:9). People who have experienced the Lord's *hesed* are intended to reflect the same loving care in their relationships with others. Ruth the Moabitess is said to have done so (3:10), because of her selfless loyalty to Naomi and because, by declaring Naomi's God to be her God, she entered into the sphere of his blessing. By the same route, other non-Israelites were able to know for themselves the Lord's *hesed*, for he is 'rich in love . . . he has compassion on all he has made' (Ps. 145:8–9). Supremely that steadfast love was revealed in Christ and is a secure basis for Christians' trust in the God of Naomi and Ruth today.

2:1–23 Ruth finds favour

2:1–3 Family connections

At this point the narrator skilfully introduces

the fact that a relative of Elimelech was still living in Bethlehem. Naomi knew of him but determined not to ask him for support, though he was a *man of standing* who could have helped her. The immediate need was food. It was humiliating to be reduced to such poverty, but because it was harvest time there was a means of self-help. God's law stipulated that farmers were not to harvest the corners of their fields, but leave grain for the poor to collect (Lv. 19:9; 23:22). Special blessing would follow from this generous action (Dt. 24:19). Ruth decided to take advantage of this provision, but guessed that not all farmers would welcome people foraging on their land, especially a foreigner. She wanted to go where she would *find favour*. Though she knew nothing about any near relatives of her father-in-law, she 'happened' to choose to glean in a field belonging to Boaz, who was *from the clan of Elimelech*. The repetition of these words which occur in v 1 underlines their importance. Her choice of field was no accident; God had been her unseen guide as subsequent events were to prove.

2:4–17 Unexpected kindness

The landlord arrived and greeted his workforce with words which we associate more with church than with our place of work. *The LORD be with you!*, words familiar to many Christians, are used only here in this exact form. The usual greeting was 'Peace' (*šālôm*). Boaz and his farm workers acknowledged their dependence on the Lord for a good harvest. He wanted to know who the newcomer was and the foreman gave the Moabitess a good testimonial. She had three recommendations that had won her respect. She had come with Naomi, she had asked permission to pick up what the reapers left, and she had worked on steadily though gleaning was discouragingly unrewarding.

Boaz turned approvingly to Ruth, urging her to remain in his fields, and promising her special protection. He included her among his servant girls, gave orders that the young men were to respect her, and gave her permission to get a drink from the water jars. Unusually, these are said to be filled by the *men*. This farm seems to have been run on distinctive lines. Instead of being regarded with suspicion Ruth was accepted. She took nothing for granted but by bowing low indicated how grateful she was. Why should the farmer be so kind to her? The answer was that her reputation had gone ahead of her. The people of Bethlehem recognized goodness in action and approved of Ruth's courage in accompanying Naomi. With *May the LORD repay you* Boaz was expressing more than a pious wish. Aware of Ruth's self-sacrifice Boaz wanted her to be *richly rewarded* so that her faith would be strengthened by seeing all her needs met. Such was the promise to those who took God at his word (Dt. 5:10). God's people loved to liken God's protecting care to that of a bird spreading its wings over its chicks (*cf.* Pss. 17:8; 36:7). Jesus' use of the same metaphor has reinforced its message (Mt. 23:37). Ruth's reply amply expressed her gratitude, but she kept her distance by calling Boaz *my lord* ('sir') and referring to herself as his servant, so indicating her lowly status.

At mealtime Boaz singled her out again, inviting her to share the food provided for the reapers. He even served her with *roasted grain*, some of which Ruth saved to take back for Naomi. As she got up to start work again, Boaz gave orders that she should be allowed to collect grain from the sheaves (the norm was for the sheaves to be protected from gleaners). The reapers were told deliberately to drop grain for her to pick up. The result was that Ruth finished the day with far more to show for her work than she had dared hope to glean. One estimate is that it was the equivalent of at least half a month's wages.

2:18–23 News and food to share

Ruth's huge load of barley enabled Naomi to see at a glance that all had gone well. Someone must have been extra generous, hence her excited questions and her invocation of blessing on Ruth's benefactor. For the third time in two verses Naomi is referred to as Ruth's *mother-in-law*, as though to suggest that the relationship had special importance. Ruth's disclosure of the name *Boaz* revealed that there was indeed a family connection, and family relationships, 'daughter', 'mother-in-law', continue to be mentioned in subsequent conversations between Naomi and Ruth. Naomi's prayer became more specific now. She instantly foresaw possible developments. *He has not stopped showing his kindness* could refer to Boaz, but Naomi is thinking of the Lord's providence in guiding Ruth to the field of Boaz. This was evidence of the Lord's covenant love (*ḥesed*) to *the dead* Elimelech and his son through their widows. Though related by marriage and not by blood, they were fully included in the family. But there was more. Boaz was not only a close relative but also *one of our kinsman-redeemers* (see note below).

Israel's family law made careful provision for members of a clan who fell on hard times, so protecting the continuance of the kin group. Boaz was one of those to whom Naomi was entitled to look for support but there were several ways in which protection could be given and Naomi did not specify what she had in mind. Ruth added to their elation by disclosing that

Boaz had invited her to accompany his workers until harvesting was finished in a couple of months' time. They need have no worry about the immediate future and during the harvest season Ruth would become part of the community in Bethlehem.

There have been several significant emphases in this chapter. The good character of Ruth was pointed out by the foreman (7) and enlarged upon by Boaz (11) who included her among his workers and saw she had plenty of food to take home with her. Ruth felt she belonged on this farm and gratefully accepted all that was so kindly offered. Both the giving and the receiving were aspects of a developing relationship, a growing in understanding of God's ways. Naomi, by calling Ruth her *daughter*, pointed to a closeness between them. Ruth stayed close to the servant girls (23). The verb used here and in vs 8 and 21 ('stay with') is the same as that used of the marriage bond in Gn. 2:24 (translated 'cleave' in the AV, RV and RSV). It occurs in 1:14 concerning Ruth's commitment to Naomi. The author is pointing to the secret of 'togetherness', of loyalty that results in cohesion in a family and in society. It should especially characterize the people of God.

Note. 20 *Kinsman-redeemer.* Strong family ties in Israel meant that the verb 'redeem' was in common use; it belonged to the realm of family law. Each member of a family or clan had an obligation to defend and provide for any other who was destitute or a victim of injustice. The redeemer of property was to buy back land a relative had sold in time of need (Lv. 25:25), thus keeping it within the family. If someone sold himself into slavery, his nearest relative was to buy his freedom (Lv. 25:47–55). A redeemer also had the duty of avenging a murder (Nu. 35:19; Dt. 19:6). The book of Ruth extends his duties to providing an heir for a male relative who has died childless. Usually this duty fell to a brother (Dt. 25:5–10), but in the case of Ruth who had no brothers-in-law, a more distant relative was expected to marry her, as Naomi revealed (ch. 3).

When the OT asserted that Yahweh was Israel's redeemer, the events of the exodus were to the fore: 'I will redeem you with an outstretched arm' (Ex. 6:6); 'In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed' (Ex. 15:13). Yahweh declared himself to be Israel's divine Kinsman, ready to deliver and help them (Is. 41:14). The special contribution of the book of Ruth is the insight that the near kinsman alone possessed the right to redeem, and yet was under no obligation to do so. The willingness of Boaz to undertake a costly duty foreshadowed that of the greater Redeemer, who was to descend from him.

3:1–18 Faith, resolve and action

3:1–6 Naomi's plan

In OT times marriage was arranged by parents, so it was fitting that Naomi should take steps to find a home and security for Ruth. Some weeks had passed, because harvesting was over and threshing was in progress. Naomi had been giving careful thought to the best approach to Boaz in his capacity as a near relative. Her hope was that he would accept responsibility as their kinsman-redeemer by marrying Ruth. But, kind as he had been, Boaz had not made any move towards marriage, hence Naomi's decision to put on the pressure. Her plans were to involve considerable courage on Ruth's part.

Ruth was to wash and change so as to be at her best for this important evening. Her perfume would be alluring when the darkness blotted out all sight of her attire. Threshing-floors were usually high up to catch the full benefit of the breeze, but wind gaps could sometimes provide similar conditions at lower levels. Ruth was to remain undetected but at the same time she was to be sure to identify where Boaz chose to spend the night. When all was still she was to approach, secretly remove the covering from the feet of Boaz and lie near them. When he woke up Ruth was to present her plea. Despite the risk of rebuff and rejection Ruth carried out the plan of her mother-in-law.

3:7–15 The midnight meeting

After the traditional feasting at the threshing floor Boaz retired for the night in good humour. Providentially he chose to lie down *at the far end of the grain pile* where there would be a little privacy. The *far end* may also imply a possible approach route for thieves, against whom Boaz set himself as guard. Once he had fallen asleep Ruth took up her position at his feet, the place of submission, and waited. In the middle of the night Boaz awoke and at this point the story becomes intensely gripping. How will these two worthy people conduct themselves in so compromising a situation? Boaz became aware of a woman's presence but could not identify her. His stark question was, therefore, to be expected. Ruth's reply, though respectful, was not deferential as it had been in 2:10, 13. She spoke in her own right, and took the courage to request Boaz to act as kinsman-redeemer and marry her. That is the significance of the words, *Spread the corner of your garment over me.* The word for *corner* is the same as that for 'wing' in 2:12. Ruth reminded Boaz of his own words, and requested him to become the fulfiller of his own prayer. 'Spreading the cloak over' was a vivid expression for providing protection, warmth and fellowship. The phrase spoke eloquently of marriage.

There was no hesitation in the response of Boaz. Ruth could let go of her fears for no rebuke was forthcoming. Instead, she received a blessing and acceptance as a 'daughter' in the family. No longer was she a stranger or foreigner. Boaz realized that Ruth was primarily concerned for Naomi's future. It would have been natural for Ruth to have sought a husband of her own age rather than someone old enough to be her father. He had observed her reticence and respected her for it. He could do all she asked without incurring blame because the whole community had come to appreciate Ruth's integrity. But first he had to confront a relative who had a prior claim to the role of kinsman-redeemer. Why had this man not been mentioned before? The answer can only be surmised, but it seems likely that Naomi, if she knew of the man, had already decided that he was unlikely to take on any extra responsibilities. Boaz would put the matter to the test. Meanwhile Ruth was to remain at his feet till the morning, despite the possible danger of prying eyes. Boaz had nothing to hide, and within a few hours the public hearing of the legal case would be over and settled.

Ruth left, however, as soon as it was light enough to see her way. Once again Boaz made sure she had a generous gift of food, tied conveniently into the woven shawl she was wearing. The *six measures* can no longer be exactly quantified. No doubt Boaz gave Ruth as large a gift as she could carry.

3:16–18 More encouragements for Naomi

Naomi, eagerly awaiting Ruth's return, knew from the load she was carrying that Ruth had good news. Boaz continued to show generosity to Naomi, *your mother-in-law*. Still the emphasis is on family relationships, which undergird the action of the story, and it continues in v 18: *Wait, my daughter*. There was still a period of suspense before the drama ended. Fortunately, the legal process could begin immediately, and its outcome would be known before the day was over.

4:1–22 The marriage and its outcome

4:1–12 A marriage is arranged

The main gate of the town served as the local law court. Planned with an open space around which benches provided places to sit in the shade of the high walls, the gate was a natural meeting place. It had the advantage of being open to the public, who could observe that justice was done. Boaz knew that his relative would be sure to go through the gate to work and the relative, who remains unnamed, would be prepared for some serious business when he was invited to *sit down*. The *ten elders of the town*, chosen at random, roughly correspond to the jury in English law. Responsible adults were presumed to be competent to discern what was just. In Bethlehem these elders represented the community in which the legal decision had to be carried out. Their approval was essential and the seated group of twelve constituted the court of law.

Boaz first broached the matter of property. Elimelech had been the owner of property, which would have been handed on to his sons, had they lived. It is unlikely that Naomi, the widow, would have had the right of inheritance, but she was probably selling the land on behalf of her sons. During the family's absence in Moab someone else would have been responsible for the land, but now that the harvest had been reaped the time had come for Naomi to negotiate the best possible outcome. In particular, she would want to keep the land in the family, hence her appeal to a relative. Boaz, aware of all that was involved, put the option clearly to the nearer relative, stating that if he would not redeem the land then Boaz would. Only when the reply comes, *I will redeem it* is the more crucial subject broached.

Elimelech had a right to an heir. Ruth the Moabitess, his daughter-in-law, was still living, and the man who bought the field had the duty of raising an heir for the dead man through her. If a son were born, the land would revert to him and Elimelech's property would remain in his family. The kinsman would then lose what he had bought and would have another family to keep, hence his reply, *I cannot do it*. The cost was too high. The generosity of Boaz in accepting these financial losses becomes the more apparent.

There had been no need for the author to explain the law of redemption which was apparently still current at the time of writing. Another custom, however, had dropped out of use and therefore had to be explained (7). Both parts of the redemption agreement were completed by the symbolic handing over of a sandal, which represented possession (*cf.* Jos. 1:3). The elders were formal witnesses that Boaz was legally entitled to the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon, and that Mahlon's widow was to become his wife. Ruth's first son would rightly be known as the 'son of Elimelech', thus perpetuating the name of the dead. This son would also be heir to the property, so ensuring continuation of the family's name and possessions. *From the town records* (10) is a free translation (*cf.* the more literal 'from the gate of his place' in the RV). In view of the legal status of the 'gate', what is meant is the community's

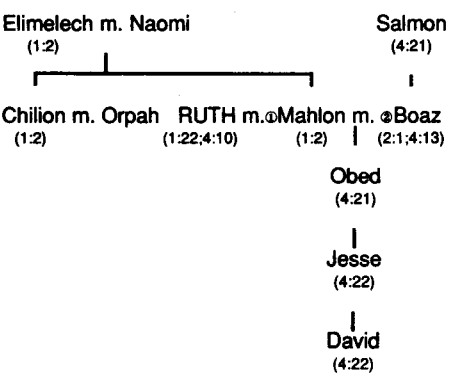
legal records, whether these were transmitted orally or in writing.

Passers-by had swelled the crowd at the gate, and joined the elders in bearing witness to the legality of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth, though she was not present in person to give her consent. The approval of the people of Bethlehem helped to encourage the permanence of the marriage, as does the presence of wedding guests today, as well as providing a cause for happy celebration. Good wishes for the new venture were expressed in prayers that recalled Israel's past experience of God's goodness. *Rachel and Leah*, together with their maids, had borne Jacob (Israel) twelve sons, who became the fathers of the twelve tribes (Ex. 1:1–5). Boaz would be seen to be rewarded if Ruth bore him many sons to add to his prestige and prosperity. The prayer went on to select for mention the story of Judah and Tamar (Gn. 38). The author had good reasons for referring to this shameful incident in Judah's life. First, it concerned a similar marriage custom to that referred to in this chapter, where a brother of the dead man was expected to marry the widow, hence the term 'levirate marriage' (from the Latin *levir*, 'brother-in-law'). Whereas Tamar's rights had been ignored by Judah, Boaz had honoured the obligation. Secondly, there was a special local interest. Perez, who was born to Tamar as a result of her strategem, was an ancestor of Boaz (18), and one of only three ancestors of the whole tribe of Judah. Probably most of the local population had descended from him. What God had done for Judah, despite his lack of concern for Tamar, would not God do for Boaz, and reward his kindness by giving him a family of sons? Thirdly, Tamar, like Ruth, had had to take the initiative.

4:13–17 A son for Naomi

In fulfilment of his promise Boaz duly married Ruth. *The Lord enabled her to conceive* may be a reference to the absence of children by her first marriage, but Scripture never takes for granted the conception of a child and regards each individual as the Lord's special work of creation (*e.g.* Ps. 139:13). The birth of a son was the culmination of joy for the women present, who exclaimed, *Praise be to the* LORD! and addressed their delight to *Naomi* rather than to Ruth. Honour was due to the older generation, and those who had known Naomi before she went to Moab would be overjoyed to see how the Lord was providing for her future. Their prayer that he might be famous throughout Israel is shown to have been answered in the genealogy of David (17). Naomi, the central figure in the opening chapter of the story, is the central figure again at its close. The emptiness of bereavement had now been replaced by fulness; bitterness by joy (1:21). Because the child would have been regarded as the grandson of Elimelech and Naomi, her husband's name would not die and his property would have an heir. Moreover, Naomi would have a protector to look after her in her old age, as well as her loving daughter-in-law, who was *better . . . than seven sons.* Praise for Ruth reaches its climax in these words of the women of Bethlehem.

Naomi's 'fulness' revolved round her grandchild; looking after him as she had looked after her own children gave her a new lease of life. The name *Obed* (short for Obadiah) implied that he was a 'servant of the Lord' and thus summed up the hopes of everyone for this child. The author then leaps forward two generations to show how important Obed was to be as the grandfather of King David. God's sovereign purpose could be traced through all the generations from Perez, who had been named in the marriage blessing (12), to David, hundreds of years later. Ruth's determination to throw in her lot with Naomi had had far-reaching consequences, beyond anything she could ever have guessed. In view of the fact that all Judah's kings belonged to David's dynasty, the Moabite girl had most illustrious descendants, and the prayer of Boaz that she might be richly rewarded by the Lord (1:12) was spectacularly answered.



The family of Ruth.

4:18–22 Concluding genealogy

The ten-generation genealogy from Perez to David omits some generations, as a comparison with 1 Ch. 2 shows, but it forms a fitting conclusion to the book. Whereas its opening words recorded famine, migration and deaths, the end of the book looks forward in hope. The list of names, covering the period from the patriarchs to David, reminds the reader that what happened to Naomi and Ruth was part of the ongoing saving work of God through the centuries. Life

had meaning because the Lord, who had made clear promises to Abraham, was active in each generation, revealing his character, keeping his promises and achieving his purposes. This was the unseen factor that created a historical perspective in Israel, unique in the ancient world. But Israel's history is not concerned only with the great ones in the land. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz illustrate that true greatness reflects the character of the living God, whose steadfast love called forth a responding love in those who put their trust in him.

Joyce Baldwin

1 AND 2 SAMUEL

Introduction

In the Hebrew text the two books of Samuel formed one only. The ancient Greek Old Testament viewed the books of Samuel and Kings as a single historical work, and divided it into four sections called 'Books of the Kingdoms' (or 'Reigns'). The Latin Bible kept this division, calling the four sections 'Kings' (see the subtitles in the AV). Since the sixteenth century Hebrew Bibles too have divided the original book of Samuel into two parts, named the first and second books of Samuel.

The text

It is unfortunate that the standard (Massoretic) Hebrew text of the books of Samuel has been relatively poorly preserved (see for instance 1 Sa. 13:1). The ancient Greek text (the Septuagint) often differs from the Hebrew, and can be very helpful. Some useful additional Hebrew evidence is also available from the Qumran manuscripts (the Dead Sea Scrolls). Occasionally other ancient translations can be used. The NIV footnotes make reference to these sources of information where they are important (see for instance 2 Sa. 13:39; 14:4).

Approaching the books of Samuel

Scholars find three underlying problems in approaching the books of Samuel. The first is *textual.* Is the standard Hebrew text to be followed, or the ancient Greek, or Qumran or other evidence, where these differ? The second is *literary.* Do different source documents or traditions lie behind complex sections of Samuel? If so, must they be sifted out and treated individually? The third is *historical.* Did events happen exactly as stated in Samuel, or must we try to distinguish the historical from the unhistorical? All three problems sometimes coincide, as, for example, in the story of David and Goliath. Here the text is very much shorter in an important Greek manuscript than in the Hebrew, and many scholars think the shorter text is the original one. The Hebrew account may have used material from at least one extra source document. If so, is this additional material equally accurate historically or not?

For a full discussion of such technical questions, larger commentaries must be consulted. For the purposes of this commentary, the NIV text has been accepted as the basis for comment; the NIV usually follows the Hebrew closely. Secondly, the commentary assumes that the biblical stories should be treated as they stand. Many recent studies have been stressing the need to approach the material as a unity, without denying that the biblical authors used many sources. Thirdly, the commentary also treats these stories as historical. This is not to deny that some historical problems exist. However, the biblical writers undoubtedly believed that they were presenting historical facts, and we must share their approach if we are to understand their purpose and message. For this period of Israel's history there is very little by way of external evidence, but two lines of argument can be offered in support of the general historical accuracy of the books of Samuel. First, the general picture makes good sense and fits its historical context well. For example, the start of the Israelite monarchy must inevitably have been difficult and controversial – exactly how it is portrayed. Again, the Philistine activities are entirely credible. Secondly, the portraits of the main characters ring true. David in particular is represented realistically, as a man of great ability and charm, but with some very obvious weaknesses and failings. He is not idealized, in spite of the sympathetic treatment of him.

Date, authorship and purpose

The name Samuel in the title refers to the first major character in the books but he was not the author; his death is recorded as early as 1 Sa. 25:1. The author is unknown but he cannot have been writing earlier than the death of Solomon, towards the end of the tenth century BC, since 1 Sa. 27:6 shows knowledge of the divided monarchy. It is generally agreed that the books of Samuel were not written by themselves but were part of the whole sequence of books beginning with Joshua and ending with Kings. If so, the author of this whole historical work was writing at the time of the Babylonian exile (sixth century BC). Some verses, such as 1 Sa. 9:9 and 2 Sa. 13:18, suggest that the writer lived long after the events he records. However, the author made use of many ancient and authentic source documents, one of which is mentioned by name (2 Sa. 1:18).

In exploring the biblical author's purpose, therefore, we have to consider the purpose of Joshua-Judges-Samuel-Kings as a whole.

These books cover the history of Israel from the time of the conquest of Canaan until the exile. It was a period of victory, success, decline and fall. Above all, the author wanted to demonstrate God's hand and God's purposes in all these historical events. In particular, these books are a commentary on kingship, an institution which ultimately failed, and yet which laid the basis for the Messianic hope. In this broader context, the books of Samuel deal with Israel's first two kings, Saul and David. David was Israel's greatest king, and his notable achievements are described in detail. Yet he was far from perfect, and his reign was by no means trouble-free. The books of Samuel explain the two sides of this picture, and show how God overruled in the history of Israel by interacting with David and other important individuals. The message is a call to repentance, as God's people suffered for their past sins at the time of the exile. It is also a call to faith, with its reminders about God's election of Israel, his provision for his people in every age, his faithfulness to them, and his promise of a coming King.

Further reading

J. G. Baldwin, *Samuel*, TOTC (IVP, 1988).
R. P. Gordon, *I and II Samuel* (Paternoster/Zondervan, 1986).
R. W. Klein, *I Samuel*, WBC (Word, 1986).
A. A. Anderson, *II Samuel*, WBC (Word, 1989).

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Commentary

1 Sa. 1:1 – 7:17 Samuel's early years

The historical situation at the start of the narrative of the books of Samuel is that of the end of the period of the judges; 1 Samuel is the sequel to the book of Judges. There are two major themes in the books of Samuel: the problem of the leadership of God's people Israel, and the presence of God in their midst. The first theme means that the history of Israel is presented in terms of the lives and careers of three outstanding individuals – Samuel, Saul and David. The second theme involves frequent mention of the shrine and the ark of the covenant. (The two themes come together when the Lord is said to be 'with' one leader or another.)

This period of three generations saw two major changes in Israel. The first was a constitutional change. The system of government changed radically, as leadership by the judges gave place to a monarchy. This change involved many administrative details, especially centralization and what we would now call bureaucracy. It also resulted in the rise of one family to great power and prestige, namely David's dynasty. The second big change was the fall of the shrine at Shiloh. Shiloh was replaced, after an interval, by Jerusalem, which was made not only the religious but also the political capital of the kingdom of Israel. It is interesting to notice that all the events of 1 and 2 Samuel had the effect of transferring leadership in Israel from the tribe of Ephraim to the tribe of Judah. These were the two biggest tribes, and their territories were separated by the small tribe of Benjamin (see the map, p. 230). The leadership moved southwards, then, from Shiloh (Eli) first to Benjamin (Samuel and Saul), and then to Judah (David).

The books of Samuel not only record *how* all this happened, but also *why* it took place. Various human beings come into the story, with a variety of motives. More important to the biblical writers was the question of God's purposes and actions in all these threads of human history.

1:1 – 3:21 Samuel and Eli

During the period of the judges, the Israelite tribes usually acted independently of each other, and must have recognized different leaders in different parts of the country (see map on p. 238). Tribal elders were important (see 8:4), and the priestly families in major shrines such as Shiloh must have been politically influential. ('Judges' as such did not always exist, nor did they give leadership to the whole country.) As our story begins, then, we can assume that the most important leader of the time was Eli. He was ageing, and his two sons were expected to replace him before long (1:3). But in fact it was to be Samuel who would replace Eli, as these chapters explain. The first question is how Samuel came to be at Shiloh at all; ch. 1 answers that question.

1:1–8 Elkanah and his two wives. The first three verses set the scene, describing Samuel's parents and their annual pilgrimage to the Shiloh shrine. It was legal to marry more than one wife (see Dt. 21:15–17), and indeed a second wife was probably a sign of affluence. The general picture is of a respectable, God-fearing family. But it was not an entirely happy family. Barrenness can still cause psychological distress, but it was much worse in OT times, in a culture where it was viewed as a disgrace for a married woman to have no children. Despite Elkanah's attempts to help and console Hannah, the unkindness of her rival-wife Peninnah made her position intolerable.

Ramathaim is a longer form of the usual 'Ramah' (see v 19). According to 1 Ch. 6:22–38 the Zuphites were a Levite clan, but the emphasis here is on the fact that Elkanah lived in the tribal lands of Ephraim. So it was natural for him to worship at *Shiloh*. These verses illustrate some religious customs of the times. Whole families made pilgrimages once a year to sanctuaries such as Shiloh, in order to worship either at a festival time or on some special family occasion. The families presented animals to be sacrificed. After the sacrifice had been offered, part of the meat was returned to the worshippers. Further details are given in 2:13–16. Such *portions* of meat were very much valued, evidently, but in this case they gave rise to favouritism, jealousy, bitterness and distress.

1:9–20 Hannah's prayer and Samuel's birth. In desperation, Hannah was driven to earnest prayer for a *son*. Her prayer was reinforced by a solemn vow (11). The God-given son would be consecrated to God from birth to death. Nu. 6 describes how Israelites could voluntarily consecrate themselves to God's service for a fixed period of time. Such people were known as Nazirites, and they vowed never to cut their hair, a visible symbol of their dedication to God. In the same way, Hannah promised that her son would be a permanent Nazirite.

Eli, the chief *priest* at Shiloh, was persuaded to give Hannah's prayer his blessing and support (17). His initial misunderstanding (13–14) is perhaps a first hint to the reader that Eli was gradually losing his competence as Israel's leader.

The sequel was the birth of *Samuel*. Vs 19–20 bring together the human and divine agency. In one sense Samuel's birth was perfectly natural, but the removal of Hannah's barrenness was

entirely God's doing. Hannah herself was in no doubt that God had responded to her prayer. The name *Samuel* does not literally mean 'asked'; in Hebrew the name sounds like the phrase 'heard by God'. Several OT explanations of names draw out the implications of other, different words that resembled the names. The name Saul means 'asked', and the biblical author may be telling us at the outset that Samuel was a man sent by God in a way that Saul would not be.

1:21–28 The dedication of Samuel. The chapter ends by recording how Hannah, with her husband's full agreement, fulfilled her vow and gave Samuel *to the* LORD. They took other gifts and offerings to Shiloh (24), but their greatest self-sacrifice was to leave the boy there at the sanctuary, *young as he was.* The last sentence of the chapter probably refers to the youthful Samuel, who *worshipped the* LORD *there* at Shiloh when his parents left him with Eli (2:11 is similar). The verb *worshipped* is ambiguous, and either Eli or Elkanah could be intended; but Samuel seems the most natural subject. A Hebrew manuscript found at Qumran makes Hannah the subject, 'she worshipped', which gives good sense: she donated the child to Eli and then worshipped God, who had *granted* what she *asked of him.* This minor textual problem does not affect the general sense.

The story of Hannah should not be read as a promise that God will always remove barrenness or any other physical problem, though it does underline the value of believing prayer. Its chief purpose is to show how God overruled events: if Hannah had had a son at an earlier date, she would not have placed him in the Shiloh temple, to grow up there to be a man of God – in the public gaze, ready for leadership.

2:1–10 The song of Hannah. Hannah's song is thought by many commentators to have been a psalm of later date placed on her lips by the biblical writer. It reads more like a psalm than an individual's *prayer*; but the chief reason for this view is the reference in v 10 to a *king.* Obviously in Hannah's time Israel had no king, and her son Samuel was not destined to be a king. The poem is called a prayer, not a prophetic oracle, so we would not expect it to include a long-range prediction. It seems very likely, then, that Hannah's original words have been expanded. Certainly the biblical author used the poem as a whole to give a forward look and provide a theological purpose to the record of events described in 1 and 2 Samuel. Samuel's birth was the first step in God's plans to give Israel *deliverance* from her Philistine *enemies* (1). From humble beginnings and difficult circumstances, David would get divine *strength* as God's *anointed*, God's *king* over Israel (10). In the context, the mention of hostility (1) and barrenness (5) remind us of Hannah's own personal experiences, but the poem has a much wider standpoint. It is concerned to show how God can, and often does, upset human values and estimates. Life and death, wealth and poverty, are wholly within his control; so too are the rise and fall of nations, for God's authority and power reach to *the ends of the earth* (10). But God does not overthrow the powerful and strengthen the weak in a spiteful or unjust way. God had linked himself with the Israelites (a small and weak nation) and made himself their God. So the poem expresses faith from the start in *our God*, described as the *Rock* (2) – a clear picture of security and stability. The picture drawn from a raised or exalted animal's *horn* (1, 10) is less clear to us; it appears to mean a visible sign of strength or success.

Note. 10 The kings of Israel were all *anointed* with oil at the start of their reigns (see 10:1 and 16:13 and the notes on these verses).

2:11–26 The sanctuary at Shiloh. Samuel's service of God at Shiloh thus began in his boyhood. No doubt simple tasks, assisting Eli, were all that he could do at first, but as he *grew up* (21) his ministry developed sufficiently to impress favourably all who came to Shiloh (26). We are given a final glimpse of Samuel's parents in vs 19–21, and it is made clear that God had permanently removed Hannah's barrenness and brought her joy in motherhood and family life: she had given Samuel to God, but gained richly in return.

Samuel, then, however simply, *ministered before the* LORD (11). We are given no details of his activities, but the passage sums up by telling us that both God and Israelite worshippers were pleased with him (26). There is a glaring contrast between Samuel and *Eli's sons*, Hophni and Phinehas (12). They were the most prominent priests at Shiloh (see 1:3), and their greedy, arrogant and selfish behaviour is described in detail in vs 13–16. Ordinary worshippers were angered by them, as v 23 shows, and the whole sanctuary was brought into disrepute. The passage is even more concerned to emphasize God's anger, and his decision to bring the situation to an end (25). Eli himself was a godly man, distressed by his sons' conduct, but his *rebuke* (25) had no effect on them.

13–17 It seems likely that the *practice* described in v 13 was the ordinary custom at Shiloh, even though the regulations in Lv. 7:31–35 are rather different. In any case, all priests were entitled to a proper share of the sacrificial *meat.* Eli's two sons, however, showed such greed for *roast* meat that they grabbed what they wanted, *by force* if necessary, even

before *the fat was burned* as a sacrifice to God. Even ordinary worshippers knew that God ought to have his part before any human beings ate their portions (16). In this way Hophni and Phinehas put God in second place, showing *contempt* for the *LORD* himself and for his *offering* (17).

18–19 The *ephod* was a priestly garment, probably worn outside the *robe* which *his mother made him*. Even in the simple matter of dress, Samuel, unlike Eli's sons, was careful to do what was right.

25 Eli's challenging question was based on legal procedure, and pictures God as the judge. A judge can arbitrate between two men, but if somebody does wrong to the judge himself, then there is no possibility of avoiding judgment.

2:27–36 A prophecy about the priesthood. The phrase *man of God* was another title for a prophet. The unnamed prophet here set out a very detailed picture of what was going to happen to the priesthood in Israel. The downfall of Eli's family is foretold: *Hophni and Phinehas* will *die on the same day*, and others of Eli's family will be reduced to begging for very humble priestly jobs (36). V 31 foretells the massacre which took place at Nob (see ch. 22). V 35 predicts the rise of *a faithful priest*, but looks beyond Samuel's ministry to that of Zadok. Zadok became high priest in David's reign (2 Sa. 8:17), and his family (*his house*) held the office of high priest in Jerusalem throughout the period of the monarchy. David and his line of kings are here called God's *anointed*.

The details of v 35 had little meaning for Eli, since he was to die many years before David became king or Zadok became high priest. The verse was important for the readers of 1 Samuel, however, since it made clear to them that Zadok's accession to the priesthood was God's will and plan. The biblical authors constantly had their readers in mind, and it is very likely that when appropriate they expanded the original words and speeches of historical characters, in order to aid the understanding of the readers. It may be, then, that the unknown prophet's speech to Eli was briefer than it now appears. Even so, an important OT principle must not be overlooked: God not only overruled in Israel's affairs but also announced beforehand all important events and changes. This was one important role of the prophets. Another feature of the prophetic role was to remind their hearers of significant past events, especially those events which revealed God's goodness. This historical dimension is found in this speech in vs 27–28.

3:1–21 The call of Samuel. An attentive reader of 2:27–36 might have been puzzled by the fact that this prophecy about the priesthood had nothing to say about Samuel's future. The prediction about a 'faithful priest' in 2:35 was not fulfilled by Samuel, and his descendants were not 'firmly established' in the priesthood. Ch. 3 supplies the answer: Samuel's future role was not that of head of a priestly family. Instead, he was to be the great prophet of his generation. Priests needed no divine call to office, because they were born into priestly families. Prophets, on the other hand, received individual calls, direct experiences of God; and ch. 3 records the prophetic call of Samuel.

The word of the LORD and *visions* (1) were the two types of divine gift to prophets. There are two reasons for telling us that both were *rare* (lit. 'precious') at that time. First, the statement draws attention to Israel's serious need for prophetic guidance. Secondly, it explains in advance why Samuel and Eli were both taken by surprise when *the LORD called* aloud to *Samuel* (4).

Two features of the temple are mentioned in v 3, *the lamp of God* and *the ark* of the covenant. Both were symbols of the presence of God. Lv. 24:1–4 gives careful instructions to the priests to keep a lamp burning in the sanctuary every night. When Samuel heard God's voice, the lamp was still alight, *i.e.* it was just before dawn. If God did choose to speak, it would be here in the shrine that his voice was expected to be heard; that is why Samuel was *lying down* near the ark. The call came three times, confirming to both Samuel and Eli that it was truly a message from God.

Vs 11–14, God's message to Samuel, confirmed the prophecy of 2:27–36. The full details of what would happen are not repeated, but the guilt of Eli himself is given new emphasis. Eli had not been a vicious or *contemptible* priest like his sons, but he was after all the man in charge of the shrine, and *he failed to restrain them*. Samuel naturally hesitated at first to tell Eli what he had heard. (The word *vision* simply means this whole prophetic experience.) On hearing the stern words of Yahweh, Eli made no complaint. His response showed his resigned acceptance of God's judgment, so making it clear that the change of priestly leadership in Israel was accepted by Eli himself. (In exactly the same way, King Saul later acknowledged that God was transferring royal leadership from him to David; see 24:20.)

Vs 19–21 give a brief summary of the years that followed, during which Samuel *grew up*. For the time being Eli continued as priest at *Shiloh*, and so did his evil sons; but already it was Samuel who attracted popular attention. The shrine itself became less important than the man of God, since God's presence was clearly

with him. Whatever Samuel foretold came true (19). No longer was the prophetic word or vision a rarity, and *all Israel* came to realize this. *Dan* was the most important town in the north of Israel, and *Beersheba* lay in the far south of the country; thus Samuel's reputation spread through the whole extent of the land. God's *word* came regularly to Samuel, and from Samuel it was passed on to all Israel's citizens (4:1).

4:1 – 7:17 Battles with the Philistines

At this point Samuel disappears from the story until 7:3. There is effective literary skill in this unexpected feature, since the reader has been led to expect great things from Samuel. There is also theological purpose in it. Chs. 4–6, besides explaining how God's judgment on Eli and his family was fulfilled, make a contrast between the word of God (revealed through prophets like Samuel) and the ark of the covenant. The ark was an important symbol of God's presence, but it was a silent one. The ark could easily be misunderstood, or stolen, or moved to some remote place. The spoken word of God, as we have already seen, was never remote, but known from Dan to Beersheba. However, for three chapters it is the ark which is the centre of attention. It not only symbolized God's presence but also his power. In losing the ark to the Philistines, Israel would learn that God might choose to remove his power from them; neither they nor the Philistines could manipulate God!

4:1–11 Two Philistine victories. The location of the events of chs. 1–3 was a small area of southern Ephraim. The scene now shifts westwards, from the hills towards the coastal plain, which the *Philistines* had conquered a century earlier. This small but powerful nation had begun to dominate parts of Israel in the time of Samson (Jdg. 13 – 16), and their well-trained army now posed a new threat. The Israelites had no permanent army and, in an emergency, had to call men from farms and fields to fight any battle that was forced upon them. It is not surprising, then, that the Philistines won a swift victory at Aphek (2); but it was a shock to the Israelite *elders*, who evidently had fully expected God to give Israel the victory. The passage shows how little either the Israelites or the Philistines understood about God. Both Israelites and Philistines believed that the ark of the covenant itself was a sort of idol, a magic object which would give Israel great power on the battlefield. So the ark was brought to the battlefield, escorted by Hophni and Phinehas. The Philistines feared its power, but did not despair, presumably because they worshipped their own gods, including Dagon (5:2). They fought bravely and won an even bigger victory. Israel lost many men in battle, including Eli's two sons: and in this way the prophecy of 2:34 came true. *The ark* too *was captured.*

Notes. 4 This description of Yahweh refers to the way the ark was constructed: see Ex. 25:17–22. **6** The term *Hebrew* meant the same thing as 'Israelite'.

4:12–22 The death of Eli. Before following the ark into Philistine territory, the story rounds off the life of Eli. Aged ninety-eight, he did not die of old age but after a fall brought on by the shock at hearing the bad news. The prophecy of ch. 2 had foretold that Eli's family would lose their priestly leadership, but had implied that the family line itself would continue to exist. So the last verses of ch. 4 mention the birth of a grandson to Eli. Nothing is said of his life and career, but his name itself told a sad story: *Ichabod* meant 'no glory'. His dying mother was thinking of the loss of the ark, and she too seemed to suppose that God had *departed* from Israel along with the ark. In that idea she was wrong, but the name she gave to her son symbolized the fact that all honour and privilege had departed from the family of Eli.

Some commentators have asked whether Israel did not pay a very high price for the sins of two men – Hophni and Phinehas deserved to die, but what about the thousands of other Israelites who died on the battlefield? The book of Judges shows that Israel suffered many military defeats when she had been unfaithful to God, and 1 Sa. 7:3–4 shows that Israel was again guilty of idolatry in Samuel's time. In 1 Sa. 4, however, no reason is given. Yahweh acted as he planned, without explanation either to Israel or to the reader. The biblical author's interest is the fate of Eli's family. His other main purpose is to show that God was in control of events, but the reader only gradually becomes aware of that as the story unfolds in the next two chapters.

18 This verse makes it clear that Eli had been the most important political figure in Israel in his generation. The verb *led* literally means 'judged', so the writer is consciously linking Eli with the outstanding figures described in the book of Judges. Eli's death meant that the Israelites badly needed a new leader, and one who (like the judges) would rescue them from foreign assailants.

5:1–12 The ark in Philistine hands. The chief cities of the Philistines were five in number, and three of them are featured in ch. 5: Ashdod (1), Gath (8) and Ekron (10). The Philistines worshipped Canaanite gods, of whom Dagon was one. (Samson had destroyed the Dagon temple in another major Philistine city, Gaza; see Jdg. 16:30.) It was common practice in the Ancient Near East for conquerors to

place captured idols in the temples of their own deities; no doubt it was believed that the victors' gods had defeated and captured the gods of their enemies. So the Philistines thought that Dagon had now defeated and captured Yahweh. However, it soon became clear that Dagon was not in control even of his own statue! The collapse of this idol led to a strange local superstition (5). V 6 at last tells the reader plainly that Yahweh himself was active in events in Ashdod; the Philistines there had no such revelation from God, and had to make their own deductions. If the collapse of their idol only puzzled them, their own personal sufferings quickly persuaded them that Yahweh was powerful and active because of the ark of the covenant there in their temple. So the ark was sent first to Gath, then to Ekron, with similar results in both towns.

6:1–12 The return of the ark. By now all the Philistines were convinced that the ark was the property of Yahweh the God of Israel (2) and also that it was a very dangerous object. It had to be handled with great care, or even worse trouble would afflict them. So they naturally turned to their own religious experts for advice on how to return the ark to Israel safely. Their advisers had to answer two separate questions. Where exactly in Israel should the ark be sent? And how should it be done? Their detailed reply gives us an interesting picture of religious ideas of the time. First, a *guilt offering* was required, as a confession that wrong had been done. Secondly, compensation must be paid (in *gold*). Thirdly, the transport provided for the ark must not be driven or guided in any particular direction, but left for the gods to overrule. (Evidently the religious experts feared the power of Yahweh, but were not quite sure if he had really caused the Philistine troubles.)

Another aspect of Philistine thought can be seen in the fact that they made *models* of the things that they wanted to get rid of (5). This practice is known to scholars as sympathetic magic; it was believed that when the models were removed, the troubles would go too! The *tumours* were a symptom of a *plague* which was probably caused by the *rats*. Nobody in the ancient world knew that rats were instrumental in causing plagues, and it looks as if the rats were attacking food stores.

V 6 reminds us that God had previously used plagues to force an earlier enemy of Israel, Egypt, to release his people Israel (see Ex. 7 – 12). The power of Israel's God was to be seen in his control of events outside Israel. In later centuries, when other enemies (especially Assyria and Babylon) proved much too strong for Israel and Judah, these stories demonstrating God's power became a source of great comfort to God's people and encouraged their faith in his ability to rescue them.

6:13 – 7:1 The ark returns to Israel. Without human agency, the cows took the ark to *Beth Shemesh*, which was a town inside Israelite territory, just across the Philistine frontier. The Philistines' scheme had succeeded – or rather, Yahweh himself had brought his property back to Israel. Vs 16–18 show how seriously the Philistines had treated the problem of the ark: all *five* of their kings followed the ark to the Israelite border, even though the ark had never been taken to two of the *towns* listed in v 17.

Vs 13–15 tell us that the Israelites of Beth Shemesh were overjoyed at the ark's return, and that their first actions were right and proper. For example, the men who handled the sacred ark were *Levites*, men whose special responsibility it was to carry it (see Dt. 10:8). So v 19 strikes a very unexpected note. The *heavy blow* suffered by Beth Shemesh showed that the ark was just as dangerous to Israelites as to Philistines: God must be treated with proper reverence and respect. The chief reason for mentioning this unhappy incident is that it explains why the ark finished its journey not in Beth Shemesh but in a nearby town, *Kiriath Jearim*.

7:2–17 Samuel's achievements. The story of the ark's wanderings ends at v 2. It was brought from Abinadab's house and taken to Jerusalem in David's reign, many years later (see 2 Sa. 6). The *twenty years* seems to refer, not to the ark's stay at *Kiriath Jearim*, but to the depressed state of *the people of Israel*. The ark's presence in their land had caused much trouble to the Philistines, but we must not forget that in the battles of ch. 4 they had inflicted a very heavy defeat on Israel. The Philistines were still the triumphant conquerors, and could impose their wishes on the Israelites in the territories of Benjamin, southern Ephraim, and elsewhere. V 7 illustrates this situation – both Philistine aggression and Israelite fear.

For the first time, we are given a reason in v 3 for the Israelites' weakness: there was widespread idolatry among them. The *foreign gods* included the Canaanite god *Baal* and the Canaanite goddess *Ashtoreth* (4). As it had frequently in the book of Judges, Israelite unfaithfulness to Yahweh had caused divine punishment. And as in Judges, genuine Israelite repentance would reverse the situation. God's method had always been to punish sinful Israel by means of foreign invasion and attack, and to rescue repentant Israel through the leadership of 'judges'. Ch. 7 presents exactly the same sequence of sin, repentance and salvation. The man chosen by God to bring deliverance was of

course Samuel, who is in this context appropriately called 'judge' (6).

In chs. 1–3 Samuel was first an apprentice priest, then a prophet. Now in 7:6 we find him in a new role, as Israel's 'judge' or political *leader*. The word is deliberately used to show that he was God's chosen man to deliver Israel. In practice, it is not obvious what exactly his political role was as yet, since the Philistines were so dominant. At any rate, all Israel listened to him (4:1), and so he alone was able to call a national assembly *at Mizpah*, in Benjamite territory. (Shiloh had been left in ruins by the Philistines and was probably abandoned.) The purpose was a religious one, but such a large gathering looked like an army – and indeed turned into an army (10–11). So it is no wonder that the Philistines saw it as a potential threat to them and attacked it. But of course the Israelite assembly was no trained army, and but for God's help would have been massacred by the Philistines. Ancient peoples believed that thunder and lightning were signs of divine anger, so the Philistine *panic* is easily understood.

The memorial *stone* (12) set up to celebrate the Israelite victory was named *Ebenezer*, lit. 'stone of help'. The Israelites had suffered defeat at a different place called Ebenezer (see 4:1), some miles further north, and it seems that Samuel deliberately reapplied the name to record this first Israelite victory over the Philistines. In reality it was probably only a minor victory, but it was enough to keep the Philistines out of *Israelite territory* for some considerable time, and it was the beginning of a period in which Philistine power declined, thanks to *the hand of the* LORD (13). The Israelite successes of this period, which is referred to as Samuel's *lifetime*, were achieved under the military leadership of King Saul (14:47), for Samuel was never a soldier. However, Saul is not mentioned in ch. 7, for several reasons. The first is that 7:13–17 is simply a summary of Samuel's activities. Secondly, Saul has not yet been brought into the story, and it would have spoiled the effect of the following chapters to introduce his name at this point. Thirdly, there is a hidden message in ch. 7, anticipating the events of ch. 8. In ch. 8 the elders of Israel demanded a king, thereby demoting Samuel and taking political leadership away from him. Ch. 7 is therefore making the claim that even without Saul's military skills, Samuel was perfectly capable of leading Israel to victory. God was the real author of victory, and he had long ago called Samuel to speak for him and to give Israel whatever guidance was needed. From a human point of view, Samuel became subordinate to Saul once Saul became king. From God's standpoint, however, it was as if the king was subordinate to the man of God.

The final paragraph shows Samuel in yet another role – as *judge* in the ordinary English sense of the word, a role which he retained after Saul became king. His centre was at *Ramah*, his ancestral *home* (see 1:19), and the other cities listed were in the same general area. Thus these verses indicate the breadth of Samuel's services to Israel. They also lay a geographical foundation for the events of the following chapters, which took place in *Ramah* (8:4), *Mizpah* (10:17) and *Gilgal* (11:14); *Bethel* too gets a brief mention (10:3).

Note. 14 The *Amorites*, also called Canaanites, lived in towns and cities inside Israel. At times they seem to have fought alongside the Philistines against the Israelites. By whatever means, Samuel was able to keep on good terms with them.

8:1 – 15:35 Samuel and Saul

This section includes a full description of the sequence of events which brought Saul to the throne of Israel. The start of a monarchy meant an enormous change in the way Israel was governed and organized. Such a major development deserved the full discussion given in chs. 8–12. The first king was Saul, and he naturally plays a prominent part in the story. But the biblical author never lets us forget Samuel; indeed, in the biblical writer's view Samuel remained the real leader of Israel, even when he had handed over military and political affairs to the new king. In the last chapter of the section, ch. 15, Samuel still had the God-given authority to reject Saul's kingship.

8:1 – 12:25 Saul becomes king

In approaching these chapters, it is helpful to be aware of three perspectives: the modern historian's, the biblical author's, and the storyteller's.

To the modern historian, the rise of a monarchy in Israel was inevitable. The Philistines posed a serious threat, and they were well equipped and well organized. The Israelites had the advantage of a bigger population, but they were disunited. The various Israelite tribes to a large extent acted independently, and none of them had a permanent army. So the choice was clear-cut: unless they found a means of uniting the tribes and building up an army, Israel would perish as a nation. In the ancient world, kingship was the only possible structure for achieving this goal. So from the historical perspective, the elders' urgent request in 8:5 was a natural one. We should bear in mind that the Israelite victory recorded in ch. 7 had not changed the general situation of Philistine power and

imperialism. So to the historian, the Israelite elders' conduct comes as no surprise.

The perspective of the biblical author was quite different. From his point of view, Israel already had a king: as 8:7 tells us, none other than Yahweh himself. Human kings might be weak or incompetent, but how could a divine king fail to lead his people to peace and prosperity? God had proved many times in the past that he could give his people victory, and in the person of Samuel God had already provided them with all the human leadership that was necessary. It was true that Israel had suffered defeats, as in ch. 4, but such defeats were their own fault, due to their failure to be loyal to their king, Yahweh. So from the biblical, theological perspective, the elders' request for a human king was sinful, a rejection of God's kingship and an attempt to win victories without his guidance or help.

As the storyteller and the theologian were the same person, the third perspective is basically no different from the second. However, it is important not to lose sight of the sheer literary skill of the biblical author and the way he shapes his narrative to make his theological points clear and effective. To the historian, we have seen, the elders' request for a king comes as no surprise. To the ordinary reader, however, it comes as a complete shock after the picture of Samuel's achievements which the storyteller has provided in ch. 7. To the storyteller, Philistine power was relatively unimportant and so could be ignored for the time being; the real power lay in God's hands, not the Philistines'. The serious human problem was not Israelite military weakness but Israelite lack of faith.

Of course, there are other perspectives too, especially those of the actors in all these events – the elders, Samuel and Saul. The position of Saul must have been particularly uncomfortable. How could a human king hope to be acceptable to God, if the very existence of a king meant rejection of God? And yet the story says that God chose Saul to be king! In a sense there is a sort of compromise worked out in these chapters. The theological perspective, while insisting that Yahweh was Israel's king, fully recognized that a human mediator was necessary, someone who would give visible human leadership but would take his orders from Yahweh. Samuel had been such a mediator and leader. So even though the elders' demand was sinful, God could work with it, provided that he himself chose the man to be king. God in fact chose first Saul, then David, and used them to defeat Israel's enemies the Philistines. Even so, kingship was sure to bring misery to Israel in the long run. The ultimate problem with kingship was that it gave power not just to one man but to his descendants after him.

It is widely believed that different sections of these chapters were drawn from different source documents. It has been observed that chs. 8 and 12 express strong criticisms of monarchy in general. On the other hand, the middle chapters treat Saul himself very positively. Ch. 11 is in some ways a distinct story. All these sections may be equally historical, but scholars have frequently raised questions and issues. For instance, Saul is made king at three different times and at three different places (10:1; 10:17–25; 11:14–15) – which is by no means impossible in the unique circumstances. It is perfectly possible to see the overall story-line as plausible, and to think of the different sections as presenting different perspectives on kingship rather than conflicting accounts. But larger commentaries should be consulted on this whole complex issue.

8:1–9 The demand for a king. The Israelite *elders*, the local representatives of the clans and tribes of Israel, had genuine reasons for anxiety. They saw that Samuel was growing *old* and there was no obvious successor to continue the struggle against the Philistines. History was repeating itself. The sins of Eli's sons had brought about one major change in Israel; and now the sins of Samuel's sons were the first step in an even greater change. In both cases, the sins were well known to the public, and the public had a right to protest. One important difference is that Samuel's sons were not under his direct supervision, for Beersheba lay far away to the south, and neither God nor man could blame him for their activities. There is dramatic irony in all this. With both Eli and now Samuel, it was obvious to everybody that great and good men can have evil, worthless sons; and yet the elders responded by demanding a *king*. By definition, a king is a ruler whose son automatically becomes king after him! The biblical author thus demonstrates that the elders' arguments were insincere. It is not until v 20 that their real reason is expressed.

Undoubtedly the elders' demand was a rejection of Samuel, and naturally he was *displeased*, even though they left the choice of a king in his hands. God's words in v 7 do not deny that Samuel was *rejected* but they stress that he was not the only person being rejected. Behind the elders' rejection of Samuel lay the fact that they were also rejecting God's authority, for it was he who had sent Israel one able leader after another, including Samuel. As v 8 reminds us, there was nothing new in Israelites rejecting Yahweh for other *gods*, but the elders' demand went a step further, rejecting his political arrangements for his own people.

The description of God as *king* of Israel is very frequent biblical language, found as early as Ex. 15:18. We easily interpret it as a straightforward metaphor, a convenient human picture. The Israelites were probably apt to do the same, and so failed to see what was meant and implied. If God was truly king, then he made the political decisions for Israel, he made the laws and the constitution, he decided on wars and alliances, and did everything else that a human king might do in other countries. (Of course, God needed his messengers to announce his decisions and decrees, and the prophets, in particular, filled that role.) Unless a human king of Israel was absolutely obedient to Yahweh's decisions, then he would certainly in some ways be displacing God. So the elders' demand amounted to treason.

8:10–22 Samuel's advice rejected. Before deciding on having a monarchy, the Israelites ought to consider what it will mean to them: so Samuel here paints a grim picture of the side-effects of monarchy. The elders' vision was a narrow one; all they looked for was an effective military leader (20). Samuel's description of kingship in action draws attention to forced labour and conscription, heavy taxes and finally tyranny. So if Israel chose kingship, as they did, they would eventually have to pay a heavy price for the limited military benefits. They believed a king would give them such things as security, stability and success; Samuel warned them that kings were much more likely to take than to give. (Notice how often the verb *take* occurs in vs 11–17.)

It has often been pointed out that the details of vs 11–17 fit Solomon very well, and it can be argued that the description is of a much later date than Samuel's time. Against this view, there is plenty of evidence that long before Solomon's time the excesses of kingship were well known, and there is no reason why Samuel should not have voiced such sentiments. Both arguments have a valid point to make. Samuel probably did attack the whole idea of monarchy, but equally probably the biblical writer has expanded Samuel's speech in order to remind later readers of the way in which Solomon demonstrated the truth of Samuel's arguments.

If the Israelites then chose a monarchy, they would eventually be sorry – there could be no turning back. But Samuel's warning fell on deaf ears (19). We are not to suppose that the elders' decision gave God no choice, but he freely chose to let Israel have its own way in this matter (21). V 20 shows that although the elders wanted Israel to be able to defeat other nations, they also wanted to adopt the patterns set by other nations. Consciously or unconsciously, God's people are always under social pressure to conform to the ways of the world. Paul warned of the danger (see Rom. 12:2).

9:1–14 Saul comes to Ramah. It is very likely that at this point the biblical author made use of a different document for his information, but in any case there is no doubt about his literary skill and dramatic effects. Without any warning, the scene shifts from Samuel to Saul, here mentioned for the first time. The reader is held in suspense, wondering how Samuel will go about finding and making a king; but naturally every reader must have known that Saul had been Israel's first king, so the introduction of his name causes no surprise. The story goes on to explain the circumstances in which Samuel and Saul met. Note how skilfully the narrator disguises the fact that Ramah is the town and Samuel the prophet. (Ramah was Samuel's home town, but he had only just returned to it from his judicial circuit, see 7:16–17.) The only clue given is the mention of *the district of Zuph* (5), where Ramah was (see 1:1).

From one point of view, this is a typical 'rags to riches' story. Saul's family were not paupers, and he himself was physically *impressive* (2); but the family were not aristocrats, and their tribe, Benjamin, was small and relatively unimportant in Israel (see v 21), overshadowed by Ephraim to the north and Judah to the south. Saul can have had no ambitions or expectations about becoming king. The chief point of this passage may well be Saul's innocence and lack of ambition. He did not set out to gain any fame or power, but merely to retrieve his father's lost property. He did not seek kingship; but God, so to speak, found him and went on to make him king. Saul did not even know who Samuel was, or recognize him when they met. We can imagine that after the events of ch. 8, some ambitious men may have tried to get access to Samuel, to impress him with their ability, or to win his favour. Saul was not such a man.

Note. 12 Altars, such as Samuel had built at Ramah (7:17) were often on hills (or artificial mounds), and such 'high places' served as open-air shrines. It is clear from this passage that Samuel was not merely prophet and judge, but still had some priestly functions too.

9:15–27 Samuel entertains Saul. The story so far has made it clear that no human being had planned that Samuel and Saul should ever meet. God had overruled Saul's movements, and now revealed directly to Samuel that Saul was God's own choice to be king. So Samuel knew Saul when the two men met, and also knew what must be done to make Saul king. Saul, however, remained in ignorance of God's plans throughout the events of this chapter: Samuel only gradually made him aware that God had special plans for him. In

v 20, Samuel referred to *the desire of Israel*; the reader understands that he meant their desire for a king, but such a remark naturally puzzled Saul. Then Samuel's action in v 24 showed Saul that he was an honoured guest, but still did not reveal the full truth. The section continues to make the point that far from grasping at kingship and power, Saul even now was humbly unaware of his future role. Saul did not seize power, nor did Samuel promote some close friend of his own to the kingship; Saul was wholly God's choice.

The word 'king' does not occur in this chapter. V 16 and 10:1 both use the word *leader* (Heb. *nāgîd*) instead. The exact meaning of the Hebrew word is disputed; possibly 'king-designate' is the sense, with the implication that Saul was not actually king until the public ceremony at Mizpah described in ch. 10. At any rate, in the context it is unlikely that the word stands in any contrast to a king, because the verb *anoint*, used with it, implies kingship. The function of Saul as leader is clarified: his task is to *deliver* Israel from *the Philistines* and to *govern* (lit. 'restrain', 'control') the Israelites. In this way God was going to provide, through Saul, the two most important political needs of the time. The first was the defeat of the enemy, who could otherwise have crushed Israel out of existence. The other was the internal need of Israel for unity and strong government.

Note. 27 Samuel made sure that it would be a private anointing; not even his *servant* knew the secret. The first anointing of David was also private (16:1–13). In both cases, their reigns did not actually begin until a public ceremony had been held.

10:1–8 The anointing. The simple act of anointing is described in v 1. *Oil* was *poured* on the future king's *head* by a representative of *the* LORD, in this case Samuel. This act symbolized that God was marking this man out, setting him apart from everyone else, as his choice of king. We cannot be sure of the full significance of anointing in Israel. One possibility is that it was a symbol of a covenant relationship; if so, it showed God making a special covenant with the individual king, promising to give him help, strength and wisdom. The oil was perhaps a symbol of God-given power. Anointing was a well-known ritual in the Ancient Near East, although outside Israel it was not usual to anoint kings. In Egypt, the king was not anointed, but his vassals were. If the same concept was familiar in Israel, it may well suggest that the anointing made Saul the vassal-king under Yahweh, who was the great king.

V 1 also describes Israel as Yahweh's *inheritance*, his permanent possession. This description, which included both the land and the people, is another important statement to the new king: he is in no sense the owner of Israel, which still belongs to God.

So Saul would be subordinate to God; but even so, kingship was a brand-new institution in Israel, and it would not be surprising if Saul had doubts about it all. He needed *signs* that he really was to be king, and signs too that he was capable of the task. Accordingly, he was promised three signs. (V 7 makes it clear that Samuel's predictions were meant as signs, and very likely the original Hebrew text mentioned signs in v 1 as well; see the NIV mg.) The first sign (2) was to assure him that he could put the past behind him; his future role was not that of a farmer. The second sign (3–4) was to assure him that the Israelites would recognize him as king. The *loaves of bread* were part of the offerings being taken to the shrine at *Bethel*, so the men would not give them casually to any passing stranger, but only to somebody of very high status. The third sign (5–6) would give him assurance that he had the necessary gifts and abilities for the task of leadership. The 'judges' before him had all been equipped for leadership by the gift of *the Spirit of the* LORD, and Saul would recognize that he was being equipped in the same way. Once these signs had been *fulfilled*, Saul could have full confidence to act as king, because God would clearly be with him.

Gibeah was Saul's home town (26), called 'Gibeah of Saul' in 11:4. Its full name was *Gibeah of God*, or Gibeath-elohim. It indicates the weakness of Israel that even in Saul's own home town there was a *Philistine outpost* at this time. Bands of *prophets* were a feature of times of political and spiritual danger (see also 2 Ki. 2). Unlike the great individual prophets, they appear to have remained in communities, and responded to music with ecstatic behaviour. There is evidence that Saul was easily affected by music (see 16:14–23), and God here planned to make use of this facet of Saul's personality.

V 8 is Samuel's final instruction to Saul in this passage, and it refers forward to ch. 13 (see 13:4, 8). Samuel's words to Saul must have been more detailed than this brief sentence intended for the reader, which gives the misleading impression that Saul was to go immediately to *Gilgal*. This cannot be the case, in view of all the events that followed before either Samuel or Saul went to Gilgal. From ch. 13 we can deduce that Samuel must have instructed Saul, once he had taken charge as king, to summon an Israelite assembly at Gilgal to form an army against the Philistines. But that lay some while in the future.

10:9–16 The secret is kept. The story-teller briefly lets us know that all three *signs were fulfilled*, and he moves straight to the third of

them, with a new purpose in mind. It is important that the story should emphasize that nobody except Samuel and Saul knew that Saul had been designated king. This emphasis is conveyed by recounting two episodes. The first episode, the fulfilment of the third sign, shows that although Saul himself learned from the sign, other people misunderstood it completely. Indeed, they sneered at Saul's experience – so much so that *it became a saying*, reinforced by a later event (see 19:23–24). They apparently sneered at the band of prophets too, if *And who is their father?* means 'they are nobodies!'. Plainly Saul's experience did not impress people in his own home town of *Gibeah*. Acts 2:13 records a similar episode, when Spirit-filled men were insulted by bystanders; and 1 Cor. 2:14 remarks in general terms that 'The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them.'

The second episode is a conversation Saul had with his *uncle*, not previously mentioned, whom he met at the local shrine. Saul's father would have known why he had been absent, but his uncle did not. Saul's mention of *Samuel* invited his uncle's curiosity, but Saul was careful to say nothing about *the kingship*. So not even Saul's neighbours and relatives had any idea of the fact that he was the man destined to be king.

10:17–27 The ceremony at Mizpah. Mizpah seems to have acted as the capital city at this time; this was the second national assembly to be held there (see 7:15–16). So it was the appropriate place for the ceremony which would make Saul king. This passage is the direct sequel to ch. 8, so far as the Israelite representatives were concerned, for they would have known nothing of the personal and private events recorded in 9:1 – 10:16. Samuel immediately repeated his earlier rebukes in the name of Yahweh. Even though Saul had been chosen and equipped by Yahweh to serve as king, the Israelite demand for a king was still seen as defiance of God. Samuel reminded them afresh that God had never failed to rescue them from powerful enemies.

We might have expected Samuel to announce at once that Yahweh had chosen Saul, and then to proceed to a public anointing. But vs 20–24 record a very different ceremony, one in which Saul is chosen by lot, just as if no previous decision had been made. We know all too little about the mechanism that was used; in particular, it is puzzling how Saul can have been picked out in his absence. The point is nevertheless made that even now Saul is a modest and humble man, avoiding rather than seeking kingship. He was an impressive figure, however, and most of the assembly gave him instant recognition. And so Saul was made king by acclamation: he was not imposed on the Israelites by Samuel or by Yahweh, but was accepted by the representatives of Israel as a whole. (It is implied that the *trouble-makers* were few in number.) It was important that this first king of Israel should have a united people behind him, so it was appropriate that the people should freely and voluntarily accept him as king. This fact explains why the secrecy had been necessary beforehand.

V 25 refers to a document, *deposited* at the shrine, where no doubt the priests looked after it. It has been described as the royal 'constitution'. We are given no details of its content, but it was probably an expanded version of Dt. 17:18–20. The *regulations* no doubt included both 'rights and duties' (as the single Hebrew word is rendered in the RSV). In other words, it was a document which told the king what he had a right to expect from his citizens, and what his duties were, under God, towards them. Thus the king and the people were in covenant relationship with each other.

Saul went home like everyone else (26); *Gibeah* seems to have become his capital city in due course. At the start of the monarchy, there can have been no central taxation system, and Saul was for the time being dependent on his farm for his livelihood (see 11:5).

It is not really surprising that there were some cynical Israelites who doubted Saul's ability to lead Israel to victory over the Philistines (27). If the Israelite elders had been guilty of rejecting God's kingship, these men were doubly guilty, for they rejected God's choice of a human king too. They are described as *trouble-makers*, or 'worthless people' (GNB).

11:1–11 Saul's first victory. The biblical writer once again surprises the reader, by switching attention away from Israel's central region and western frontier (where the Philistines were located) to the south-eastern frontier. The *Ammonite* king *Nahash* ruled a small state in Transjordan, on the borders of the Israelite territory known as Gilead. At some earlier date his army had invaded Israelite territory, and they now besieged the city of *Jabesh Gilead*. (See map on page 238.)

This situation illustrates the extent of Israelite weakness at the start of Saul's reign; again we must bear in mind that the ceremony making Saul king gave Israel potential for unity and strength, but did not create these things automatically or immediately. We cannot be sure how far Saul's real authority extended even at the height of his powers and reputation; at the start of his reign his degree of control was probably very limited. Each Israelite tribe had been used to acting independently, and this narrative reveals that even an individual city like Jabesh

Gilead could make its own treaties. It is significant too that the *messengers* from Jabesh acted as if Saul were not king, and sent word *throughout Israel*, seeking any help they could find; but it was Saul who in fact responded to their appeal.

The situation also shows the extent of Ammonite hatred for Israelites, though the brutality envisaged in v 2 contrasts oddly, by modern standards, with the gentlemanly delay described in v 3. Ammon was too small to have attacked a united Israel, but a disunited Israel, distracted by Philistine aggression elsewhere, was a natural prey.

Vs 6–11 reveal how Saul responded. Like the 'judges' before him, he was given power by *the Spirit of God*, and acted with vigour and authority, demanding a full muster of Israelite men from towns and villages, farms and fields. V 7 implies that it was fear of Yahweh rather than respect for Saul or Samuel which led so many men to come to fight the necessary battle. The numbers of soldiers given in v 8 seem much too big, here as elsewhere in the OT historical books. It is often suggested that the Hebrew word translated *thousand* in the NIV (and most English versions) should instead be translated '[military] unit', a fairly small group of soldiers. It is interesting to find *Judah* listed separately from the rest of Israel. This distinction may reflect the later division of the kingdom after Solomon's death.

This passage (and many others in the OT) reveals a God who helped his people in warfare, a concept which creates a moral problem for many Christians. The historical realities of the situation were such that there could be no peaceful solution. This Israelite war, moreover, was not due to territorial greed, nor a desire to dominate other peoples, but to prevent injustice and oppression. The OT consistently shows God's opposition to injustice.

Saul's first decisive action, then, resulted in an important victory. The citizens of Jabesh never forgot their debt to him (see 31:11–13).

11:12–15 The ceremony at Gilgal. The sequel to Saul's victory in Transjordan was a ceremony at *Gilgal*, when *all the people* acknowledged *Saul as king*. No doubt the participants mostly consisted of his victorious army. Gilgal was the nearest to the River Jordan of the cities where *Samuel* exercised authority (7:16). Some scholars find in this chapter the only genuine historical account of how Saul became king; it is easy enough to dismiss v 14 (and all mention of Samuel in the chapter) as an editorial addition, and then to translate the phrase *confirmed Saul as king* as 'made Saul king' (the literal sense). However, the story reads plausibly enough as it stands, and the reason for a new ceremony is plain to see, in view of the earlier measure of hostility to Saul (10:27). Now for the first time the whole nation gave him allegiance. The reference to Yahweh and to *fellowship offerings* in v 15 may suggest a covenant ceremony, on analogy with Ex. 24.

The excitement of the victory and of the ceremony led to *a great celebration*: lit. 'Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced very greatly'. The absence of Samuel's name is significant: if everyone else had by now forgotten the events of ch. 8, he had not. No blame is attached to Saul, but the elders of Israel had been guilty of rejecting both Yahweh and Samuel. The next chapter goes on to express Samuel's further rebukes and warnings.

12:1–15 Samuel's speech. It is not certain whether this speech belongs to the same context as the end of ch. 11, namely the assembly at Gilgal, or to a later national assembly towards the end of Samuel's life. In some ways the speech reads like a farewell, but the brief introduction to it in v 1 gives us no clue. In any case, the speech comes appropriately at this point. The biblical writer places it here to provide the reader with an opportunity for reflection before beginning the story of the monarchy. Ch. 11 had ended on a note of joy and excitement, as the Israelites celebrated one victory and looked forward confidently to future victories over the Philistines. They now had a king, and one who had already proved himself a capable soldier. So they had a strong sense of well-being. However, Samuel's speech analysed the present situation and explored the past, in order to provide guidance for the future. The speech makes it clear that the future did not depend on the existence of a king, nor on his abilities, but on the will of God. God's will in turn would depend on their loyalty to him.

First, Samuel asked for an accounting of his own administration, now that he had relinquished political leadership (1–5). His hearers could only agree that he had given them good and just leadership in every respect over many years. (Nothing is said of their earlier complaint about his two sons in 8:1–5; but the reference to his *sons* here in v 2 may imply that he had dismissed them from their posts in Beersheba and brought them back home.) There is emphasis on the fact that Samuel had *taken* nothing unjustly from anyone. This description of Samuel makes a strong contrast with his own description of kings in 8:11–18, which shows them taking one thing after another from their subjects. There is a broader perspective intended by the biblical author. The speech is contrasting the judges of the past with the kings of the present and future. The leaders of the past had been individuals chosen by God, and so had given good government; but now the Israelites were beginning to

choose their own leaders, and that was a very dangerous step to take. It was true that God had chosen Saul, and would later choose David too, but in the Northern Kingdom after Solomon's death, many kings would be chosen by one section or another of the populace.

Vs 8–11 remind the Israelites of several important facts from their past history. First, God had constantly looked after their needs, rescuing them from many enemies. Secondly, God had chosen and provided the human leaders who had led them to victory. Thirdly, their defeats had been due to their own sinfulness, since they had repeatedly turned from Yahweh to idolatry. V 11 lists some of the able leaders God had provided for them. It is not impossible that Samuel included his own name, as the last of the judges, or perhaps the biblical author added it; but possibly we should read Samson's name instead (see the NIV mg.)

V 12 renews the accusation of 8:7–8 that by demanding a human king the Israelites were rejecting Yahweh's kingship over them. This verse, which implies that *Nahash* must have been harassing Israelites in Transjordan long before his attack on Jabesh Gilead, shows how readily Israel made the wrong response to the situations that arose. When Nahash harassed them, they ought to have realized that only their own disloyalty to God could have caused such a situation; but instead of repentance (as in the past) they took matters into their own hands, rejected Yahweh's rule, and demanded a king. However, at least they had asked Yahweh to choose the actual man to be king, and perhaps because of that, Yahweh was now prepared to give them another chance before any punishment. It all depended on their, and their king's, obedience to Yahweh.

12:16–25 Encouragement and warning. Samuel's listeners might have questioned whether his interpretation of Israel's history was correct. Any such doubts were removed by a miraculous sign from heaven. In early summer, the time of the *wheat harvest*, neither *thunder* nor *rain* would normally occur in the land of Israel, so Samuel's prediction and its prompt fulfilment proved that God was speaking through him. This whole passage shows Samuel to be a prophet in every sense of the word. He analysed the past and present, he predicted the future, he reminded Israel of God's goodness, he recalled them from idolatry, and he promised to intercede for them in prayer and teach them what was *good and right.*

V 22 reminds hearers and readers that Yahweh had entered into a covenant with his people: God had made Israel *his own* people, and was bound by his own oath not to *reject* them. So the lesson – both for Samuel's listeners and for later generations – was their duty to keep their side of the covenant. If they failed to do so, particularly by turning from true worship to *idols*, then God would undoubtedly punish them. The last verse indicates in a few words how God would punish them: by exile and by the fall of the monarchy, both of which occurred in the sixth century BC. Thus, as soon as the monarchy began, its end was envisaged. There is, however, a note of hope here for those who lived in the exilic period. Samuel's speech showed that the eventual fall of the monarchy would be part of God's actions and planning, and that even then *the LORD will not reject his people.* So even in the distress of the exile, Yahweh's people must not turn to other gods. In case any readers were tempted to do so, v 21 draws attention to the *useless* nature of idols.

13:1 – 15:35 Warfare and conflict

Much of Saul's reign would be a wartime situation. The Philistines were the chief enemy, and chs. 13 and 14 tell of some of Saul's early successes against them. Ch. 15 gives details of a victory over a smaller enemy, the Amalekites. Other victorious campaigns are mentioned in 14:47 but not described. So from one point of view these chapters describe a very successful start to Saul's reign, in which he consistently 'delivered' the Israelites from their enemies (14:47).

Yet these same chapters end on a grim and unhappy note: *the LORD was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel* (15:35). The events recorded in chs. 13–15 were occasions not only of warfare against foreign enemies but also of personal conflicts between Saul and other Israelites. In ch. 14, Saul might have killed his own son, and he ended up quarrelling with his own troops. More seriously, in both chs. 13 and 15 we find Saul causing great offence to Samuel, who spoke in the name of God. Despite all the good signs up to this point, Saul quickly proved that though he could win battles, he was not the right man to lead Israel.

Saul's reign was not a total disaster, even though it ended in failure and defeat (recorded in ch. 31). He gave Israel fresh hope as he began to co-ordinate its tribes (previously independent), gradually built up an army, defeated the Philistines more than once, and drove them out of Israelite lands. Despite his final failure in battle, he paved the way for his successor in some important respects. David's own testimony to Saul should not be overlooked (2 Sa. 1:19–27).

Nevertheless, chs. 13–15 show clearly that from God's point of view Saul was a failure, in spite of the fact that God himself had chosen him to be king. The basic reason given is that he refused to submit to God's instructions

mediated through Samuel the prophet. The message is clear: God would not bless a king of Israel who set himself above the prophets whom God established. The events described in chs. 13–15 can be seen as a power struggle, God siding with the prophet against the king.

It is not clear how long Saul's reign lasted. The uncertainty is due to the fact that as it stands, the Hebrew text of 13:1 reads as follows: 'Saul was year(s) old when he became king, and for two years he reigned over Israel'. Plainly a number has accidentally dropped out before the phrase 'year(s) old', and the NIV has very reasonably inserted the figure *thirty*, taken from some Greek manuscripts (see the NIV mg.) It is therefore equally reasonable to suppose that another figure has accidentally been omitted, before the *two years* assigned to his reign, although a few scholars believe that a mere two years is the correct figure. The figure *forty-two* is based on Acts 13:21 and on the Jewish historian Josephus; both give the round figure 'forty'. However, the number forty was often used in OT times to signify a generation, so a smaller figure, such as the 'twenty-two' of the NEB, is quite possible. A mere two years is very unlikely.

13:1–7 Preparations for battle. V 2 describes Saul's general preparations for the inevitable warfare with the Philistines. He *chose* men to form a permanent army in readiness for battle, and stationed them in two different places. He himself captained the larger body of troops, and his son Jonathan (here mentioned for the first time) captained the other. V 3 then desdribes the cause of the first major battle. Angry at the loss of their *outpost*, *the Philistines* brought a large and well-equipped army into Israelite territory, determined to crush the smaller Israelite army. The Israelite troops had very few proper weapons (see v 22), and it is not surprising that many of them deserted. Saul's 2000 men dwindled to 600 (15). But Saul had one hidden advantage: he had still one command from God to carry out, and his obedience to this command could transform his hopeless situation. This command was to go to Gilgal and wait there for Samuel (10:8). So Saul went to *Gilgal* (4) and *remained* there in readiness (7).

13:8–14 Samuel rebukes Saul. At the last minute Saul disobeyed Samuel's instructions. A modern reader's sympathy tends to lie with Saul, since the military situation was so critical (his men were deserting) and Samuel arrived late. It is clear, however, that Samuel was only slightly late, but Saul had not waited a moment longer than the time stipulated. Saul is not rebuked for taking priestly functions upon himself, but rather for taking the prophet's place. Samuel had promised (10:8) both to offer the sacrifices which were appropriate before a battle and also to give Saul guidance and instructions about the battle. But Saul believed he could dispense with both. His offence may seem trivial to us, but a basic question was involved: would the new king be subject to the prophet or would he overrule him? The prophet spoke and acted on God's behalf, so Saul had proved by one foolish deed that he did not consider himself bound by God's instructions. It was an action which would cost his family the kingship (14). God would transfer it to another man, *a man after his own heart*, *i.e.* 'the kind of man he wants' (GNB). David is meant, who comes into the story in ch. 16. David was no more sinless than Saul, but he was always obedient to prophetic instructions.

13:15–23 Troop movements. This paragraph briefly sets out the final troop movements which preceded the battle. By moving his men to *Gibeah*, Saul was uniting his force with Jonathan's (see v 2), and so even if the Israelite soldiers were few in number and badly equipped, they were one single army. The Philistines on the other hand divided their troops to a limited extent (17), and this apparently contributed to their defeat.

19–21 Till now, the Philistines had been able to deny the Israelites *swords* and *spears*, and had charged a very high *price* for *sharpening* any tools that might be used as weapons. Presumably the Israelites had at least bows and arrows.

14:1–23 Jonathan's exploit. Nobody would have expected an Israelite victory, in view of all the difficulties described in the previous chapter, but two things changed the situation dramatically. One was Jonathan's courage and daring, and the other was the will of God to give Israel victory. As Jonathan himself remarked, *Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving.* The Philistines were literally *uncircumcised*, since they did not practise this custom; but the word is used here to mean that they were outside the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Gn. 17 shows that circumcision was a covenantal sign. God would fight on behalf of his covenant people. Jonathan's plan succeeded by sheer surprise, and by the use of a very narrow vantage-point among the hills and valleys. Thus two men were able to kill *twenty.*

No doubt Jonathan ought to have told his father (1), but the impression we get from v 2 is that Saul was as much in ignorance of God's plans as he was of Jonathan's. He was a man out of touch with events, despite the fact that he was accompanied by the priest *Ahijah* from *Shiloh.* Ahijah *was wearing an ephod*, the priestly robe which offered a means for finding out the will of God (see Ex. 28:6–30). Yet it seems that Saul made no effort to find out God's will.

Vs 15–19 describe *panic* among the Philistines, following Jonathan's surprise attack, and puzzlement among Saul's troops. At last Saul made a move to consult God (18), but since the situation was developing rapidly, he changed his mind. The biblical writer thus emphasizes that it was God who won the victory (15, 23); Saul joined in the pursuit of the fleeing Philistines, but knew little about what was happening.

18 The mention of *the ark* is surprising here, though it is possible that it had been brought from Kiriath Jearim (7:1–2), just as it had been taken from Shiloh to an earlier battlefield (4:4–5). It seems more likely that the Greek text should be followed here, which refers to the 'ephod' instead of the ark (see the NIV mg.). We know from v 3 that Ahijah was wearing the ephod, by which God's will could be discovered. In Hebrew, the words 'ark' and 'ephod' are quite similar and could easily be confused.

14:24–45 Jonathan in danger. The story again takes an unexpected turn. The battle situation continues until v 46, but it is from now on merely a background to the interplay between Saul, Jonathan and their troops. The storyteller leaves these three parties to speak and act for themselves, and offers neither moral nor religious judgments on any of them. This leaves the reader with a number of unanswered questions. Was Saul right to make the oath he did (24–28)? Was Jonathan right to criticize the oath publicly (29–30)? Were the troops justified in ignoring the oath (31)? Was Saul right to seek to enforce the oath and execute an innocent man, his own son (44)? Were the troops right to defend Jonathan, and so disobey their king's authority (45)? Perhaps these are questions we are not meant to ask. The writer's purpose is not to moralize but to draw a clearer picture of Saul for us.

He appears as an impulsive man, making a foolish oath on the spur of the moment, without thinking about the consequences. Nevertheless, having made it he earnestly tried to carry it out to the letter. He had disobeyed Yahweh at Gilgal (ch. 13), and he had no wish to receive a second rebuke from Samuel. So he carefully offered sacrifices (33–35), and then took the proper steps to find out God's guidance: in other words, he consulted the sacred ephod in the priest Ahijah's possession (36, 37, 41, 42; and see v 3). Finding that Jonathan was the man who had innocently broken the oath, Saul was fully prepared to carry out the execution of his own son, rather than break his vow to God. The impression we gain is of a man who was out of touch with God's wishes. V 37 mentions that *God did not answer him*, and the troops' final comment (45) gave the credit for the victory to Jonathan and to God, not to Saul. We can readily sympathize with an impulsive and well-meaning but blundering man, but is such a man suitable to be king? Obviously not. Thus the whole episode demonstrated two things: that God could give victory to Israel against more powerful enemies, and that Saul's leadership achieved little. Although he remained king until the end of his life, God's plans were already bypassing him.

Note. 41–42 Without knowing exactly how the sacred mechanism worked, we can see that it was able to answer direct questions and pick out one man from another. The two parts of the mechanism were called 'Urim' and 'Thummim', which are named in the Greek text of these verses (see the NIV mg.) See also Ex. 28:29–30.

14:46–52 Outline of Saul's reign. The chapter ends with some brief details about Saul's reign, for our fuller information. V 47 indicates the range of *enemies* threatening Israel at this period, on the east, north and west. The *Amalekites* (48), to the south, were raiders who harassed the settled population of the area. The next chapter describes Saul's campaign against them. The *Philistines* had now been driven out of Israelite territory (46) but never stopped their invasions and attacks (52).

Most of Saul's family named in vs 49–51 will come into the story at later points. V 52, which relates to Saul's standing army, lays a foundation for the career of David (18:2, 5).

15:1–35 The final rejection of Saul. The writer's purpose in this detailed narrative is to confirm Saul's unsuitability to rule Israel, and to confirm Yahweh's rejection of him. Through Samuel, Saul was given explicit orders. He carried them out in part, but saw no harm in disregarding the rest of them. V 24 shows that he knew perfectly well what he was doing (and tells us the reason why he did so), but he told lies about it twice over (13, 20), pretending that he thought he had obeyed orders. Finally, he was forced to admit the truth and confess that he had *sinned*, and *violated the LORD's command.* The result was God's final rejection of him, and also the final breach between him and Samuel.

As with ch. 13, the modern reader's sympathy tends to lie with Saul, not because of his lies, but because he wanted to save a man's life. It is important, therefore, to realize from the start that Saul had no humanitarian motives whatever – that is not the point at issue. The issue, as the biblical author sees it, is whether a king of Israel was willing or not to obey God's instructions as given through a prophet. Obedience is the key virtue (22); but Saul had displayed *arrogance* (23). The livestock evidently attracted the greed of Saul's troops, and no doubt of Saul too. It is less clear why Agag's life was spared, but probably Saul saw some

political or financial advantage in it, and hoped to negotiate a deal with other Amalekite groups.

The Amalekites were old enemies of Israel (2), and their whole way of life was a threat to the Israelite people. They had some cities, but for the most part they were nomads, brutally raiding and plundering farms and livestock, especially on the southern borders of Israel. Their very existence was thus a permanent threat to Israel, and stern measures were essential and justified. The Amalekites were a *wicked people* (18).

The command in God's name to *destroy* the Amalekites *totally* (3) made use of what is called in English a 'ban', a custom practised occasionally both by Israel and its neighbours. This religious vow of total destruction was not frequently employed, not even during warfare, and there were always special reasons for its use. Notice how careful the Israelites were to make sure that another tribe, *the Kenites*, were not harmed along with the Amalekites (6). The fact that even livestock were included in the 'ban' shows that there was a sort of sacrificial aspect to it; in a sense, killing humans and animals was a way of handing them over to God. The people who were so wicked must be eliminated as a threat, and they and all their belongings were, by the 'ban', handed over to Yahweh. It was greed, not kindliness, which caused the 'ban' to be broken (9, 19).

The NT counterpart to such a story is the spiritual battle Paul speaks about (Eph. 6:10–18). Paul advises constant alertness, because greed, lies and disobedience are dangers to God's people in every age.

The historical importance of this chapter is that it explains why Yahweh and the prophet Samuel rejected Saul. Its theological importance is to be seen especially in vs 22, 23 and 29. Vs 22 and 23 put in perspective the relative values of obedience to God and worship of God. It is a frequent human error to think that God will overlook and forgive all one's sins so long as one is careful to attend the shrine (or church) and offer sacrifices (or hymns of praise). Several OT prophets had to attack this false reasoning; Amos could even describe God as saying that he 'hated' and 'despised' religious feasts, sacrifices and offerings (Am. 5 21–24). In the same way, we tend to think false worship is the worst possible sin against God; Samuel said that arrogant disobedience was just as bad.

V 29 offers us a description of God as one who *does not lie* (unlike Saul!) nor *change his mind*. God may in mercy delay punishment, or give men and women opportunities to change their minds in repentance; but he does not change his mind about his purposes and plans. God had determined that the future of Israel would be in the hands of a *better* man, David (28). Later readers, no doubt in very different circumstances, could take comfort and assurance from the fact that their God made them promises, and his promises were absolutely true and certain.

The chapter ends on an unhappy note: *Samuel mourned* and *Yahweh was grieved*. Israel must be provided with a better king than Saul. Ch. 16 tells how God began the process of replacing Saul.

16:1 – 31:13 Saul and David

The rest of 1 Samuel is the story of Saul's relationship with David. Samuel, after anointing David to be the next king, quietly fades from the scene. Saul has been rejected, although God permitted him to remain king as long as he lived. But the future will lie with David, who is very young and inexperienced as yet. These chapters describe how God equipped him for his future career, watched over him through every danger, and exhibited him to Israel as the man of his choice.

16:1 – 17:58 David takes his place at court

David's proper place was the royal court, but he would scarcely be welcome there as successor-designate to Saul. These two chapters tell how his own abilities brought him to Saul's side.

16:1–13 The anointing of David. Here too the narrator's skill is very evident, as he holds back mention of David's name until the last verse, even though David is the real focus of the story. From this chapter until the end of 2 Samuel, David will be the central figure. The chief purpose of this section is to show that David was chosen by God and anointed by Samuel. David was no ruthless, ambitious man determined to seize power. He was God's own choice, even when he was a young lad doing a humble task. Even Samuel would have chosen another man (6)! It was important that Samuel should carry out the anointing, the old leader creating the new leader. This action provided continuity of leadership in Israel. It was also an objective proof, though admittedly to a very small and private group of people, that David was meant to be king. A prophet might have a private call from God, but a man chosen to be king must have something more than just an inner voice calling him, which other people might doubt.

The story includes in v 7 a general point about God's principles of choice. It seems that the Israelites expected their leaders to have an impressive physique and good looks (7, 12 and 18; 9:2). Wiser Israelites would have looked more for inner qualities, and v 7 confirms that

God does so. To David's inner qualities, God added something else – the *power* of his *Spirit* (13). David had this gift from Yahweh no less than the judges and Saul before him; it was vital to the leadership of the nation. In this general OT context, the function of Yahweh's Spirit was to equip individuals for military leadership.

We are reminded in vs 2, 4 and 5 that Saul was still king, and a man to be feared. From a purely political point of view, Samuel's action in anointing David amounted to treason, and he was forced to use secrecy and even a measure of deceit.

16:14–23 David brought to the court. This passage and ch. 17 show how two separate talents of David brought him to Saul's attention, making him a permanent member of the royal court (18:2). The first talent was his skill as a harpist, and the second was his military ability, which took time to develop. This passage concentrates on his musical gifts, but briefly mentions his military skills too. The background was a period of occasional Philistine attacks, when Saul would be forced to call men from their farms to fight the enemy. Thus David was sometimes looking after his father's sheep and at other times fighting the Philistines. By itself, his ability on the battlefield might not have brought him to Saul's notice; it was his skill as a harpist which brought him to the royal court.

V 14 gives us the first indication of the problems that would disturb Saul from now on. His position as king was never easy, with the Philistines a permanent threat and with the unity and support of Israel a doubtful matter. Samuel's rejection too must have undermined both his position and his peace of mind. So he is said to have suffered from *an evil spirit from the LORD*, which must not be understood as demon possession. The biblical writer is making the point that as David (the future king) gained the Spirit of Yahweh, so Saul (the rejected king) lost it; and God so controlled events that Saul's loss led him to need music, and Saul's own courtier led him to David. In that sense Saul's *evil spirit*, his anxious state of mind, was under God's control.

Thus David's first step towards kingship was to come to the royal court and give valued service to the existing king. There is good reason to think that David later suffered much hostile propaganda, which claimed that he had been a ruthless traitor during Saul's reign. Passages like ch. 16, therefore, stress David's loyalty and goodwill towards Saul.

17:1–11 The Philistine challenge. The scene switches from the peaceful royal court to a new battlefield, near *Socoh in Judah* – in other words there was a fresh invasion by Philistine troops, which Saul had to counter. Perhaps because of earlier losses, the Philistines used a different type of warfare this time. They put forward a *champion* (4) and demanded that an Israelite champion should come forward and fight him in single combat. The theory behind such individual combat was the belief that either the gods or the stronger god would grant victory to whichever man they chose. A victory could thus be won without much loss of life. In view of *Goliath's* height, powerful weapons and strong armour, the Philistines clearly had no doubts who would win. It is noteworthy that not even Saul, whose height has been emphasized earlier in the story (9:2, 10:23), had the courage to accept the challenge; he too was *dismayed and terrified* (11). Saul thus displayed his lack of leadership: Israel needed a new soldier to lead them into battle.

17:12–30 David comes to the battlefield. David now comes back into the story. Vs 12–19 explain how it happened that he was not with the Israelite army when Goliath first uttered his challenge, and why he came on the scene some *forty days* later. The author means us to understand that God overruled these events. David did not come as a warrior, it is evident. (Probably the events of ch. 17 took place before those of 16:21.) V 25 is not unimportant, since it explains why David would become prominent in Israel, and lays a foundation for 18:17. However, this verse makes an interesting contrast with v. 26. In his decision to take up Goliath's challenge, David's motives were not his own *wealth* and honour, but the wish to honour God and to remove *disgrace from Israel.* David showed himself a suitable leader for Israel, in contrast to the frightened Saul and his own quarrelsome brothers.

17:31–40 Saul interviews David. This conversation between Saul and David highlights David's courage and his faith in *the living God*, and so again testifies to his suitable qualities for leadership. Saul could have displayed the same faith and courage, but he did not. Saul is shown to put his faith in military experience and in strong *armour*, so that his attitude was not really very different from that of Goliath. The storyteller would not have denied, of course, that experience and armour are usually important in battle; but the truth was that only God could give David the victory in this unique situation.

17:41–58 David's victory. So the duel took place. It seemed a very unequal contest to Goliath, who felt insulted when he saw an apparently unarmed youth approaching. The reader, however, knows in advance that it really was an unequal contest, since David's God was in control. Both combatants made their speeches, as was appropriate in a battle between

champions, and both named their gods. Goliath could only utter curses *by his gods*, but David's God was no tribal deity but the God who would become known in *the whole world. The* LORD *saves* (47) is the motto of the whole Bible; in context, David does not mean his own salvation from death but the deliverance of Israel from Philistine domination.

David's exploit resulted in a wide-ranging victory, and the Philistines were driven back to their own cities of *Gath* and *Ekron*. David had driven them away from Israelite territory. The battle trophies included the *head* of Goliath; the skull was later taken to *Jerusalem*, after David had captured that city (2 Sa. 5).

The final paragraph, vs 55–58, has caused much discussion. Scholars have often interpreted it as meaning that Saul did not recognize David or know anything about him. If so, it contradicts 16: 14–23. It may be agreed that ch. 17 is drawn from a different source document than ch. 16, but it is not necessary to conclude that ch. 17 reflects a tradition that Saul and David had never previously met. On the evidence of ch. 17 alone, we know that the two men were in conversation *before* David's encounter with Goliath, so Saul must have known David's name at the very least. The questions Saul put to Abner were not so much about David, in fact, as about his family, presumably because Saul was now under obligation to give David his daughter in marriage, in fulfilment of his vow (17:25). It was, therefore, important for him to find out all he could about the background of the man who would now be a court figure.

18:1 – 20:42 David and Jonathan

Though it forms a part of the more significant story of the relationship between David and Saul, this section of 1 Samuel concentrates more on Jonathan than on Saul. The biblical writer had a purpose in describing so fully this proverbial friendship. He wanted to demonstrate beyond any doubt that the man whom David displaced from succeeding to the throne was his best friend. The story helped to disprove any later rumours that David had been a hated rival of Jonathan. In the end, it was the Philistines who killed Jonathan, at a time when David was far away (ch. 31). Before then, Jonathan himself would acknowledge David as the future king over Israel (23:16–18).

18:1–9 Saul's jealousy. The immediate result of David's exploit against Goliath was a place at court, and he gained *a high rank in the army. Jonathan*, whose earlier exploit had also caused an Israelite victory, showed no jealousy of this new man at court; on the contrary, he quickly made a lasting friendship with him. Indeed, his actions towards David seemed to signify that he saw in David a greater man than himself, a man who deserved to lead Israel in the future.

With far less cause, Saul did show jealousy. The popular song that angered him was never intended to make him inferior to David; the numbers were not meant to be exact! Rather, the song was meant to declare what a fine team David and Saul made. Even so, it can readily be seen that David's successes and popularity gave him the potential to become a rival of Saul, if he wished to do so. Saul's fears were misplaced but not irrational.

18:10–30 Saul attempts to kill David. Saul's jealousy soon revealed itself in action, as he tried by various means to cause David's death. His first attempt was an impulsive one, at a time when he was not fully in control of himself (10–11). He was not *prophesying* in any good sense, although 'raved' (RSV) perhaps exaggerates his condition.

The reason given in v 12 for Saul's fear of David is interesting. Saul saw that *the* LORD *was with David*, in other words, he saw that he was successful in all that he undertook. He saw David's success, and realized that it was God-given, but he thought he could put an end to it, as if he had the power to defeat God's plans. So the chapter describes Saul's scheming to get David killed. If David had died in battle against the Philistines, as Saul hoped, no blame at all would have attached to Saul. But since in truth *the* LORD *was with David* throughout these events (28), Saul's plans were bound to fail. From Saul's point of view, the situation got steadily worse; his young rival not only survived but increased his repuation, and married a royal princess, *Michal* (27). It is not fully clear why David did not marry *Merab* (17–19). David's humble response (18) to the king's offer was conventional and was not a refusal of Merab, any more than his words in v 23 were a refusal of Michal. Probably Saul's act in giving Merab to another man was either simply impulsive or else a deliberate insult to David.

Saul appears in an increasingly bad light in these chapters. By contrast, David took no action to harm or betray Saul, and this is proved by the fact that Saul's own family loved David (28; 19:1). Saul was David's *enemy* (29), but David was never Saul's enemy.

19:1–10 David's escape. Saul's hopes that David would die in battle had failed, so he now invited his own courtiers *to kill David.* This created a new situation, and a very dangerous one for David. Jonathan had a choice: he could carry out his father's wishes and help to kill David, or he could try to change Saul's mind and attitude. The fact that he took the second course of action proves that Jonathan was

convinced that David was no enemy to him or to Saul. The fact that Saul was forced to agree with him, and even took an oath not to kill David (6), is additional proof that David was no traitor. Once again, therefore, we see how the biblical author defends David's character.

However, Saul once again lost control of himself, and threw a *spear* at David. David now had really no alternative but to *escape.*

19:11–24 David's flight. Saul's determination to kill David hardened and he made no further attempts to hide it. Jonathan had saved David's life earlier in the chapter, and now Saul's daughter Michal saved it. She used lies and deceit to do so, but the passage does not rebuke her in any way; the narrator is more concerned to show how narrow an escape David had. The passage also shows that Saul's own family were prepared to take any necessary steps to protect David from their own father. It is surprising to find that there was *an idol* in *David's house.* The Hebrew word translated 'idol' is thought to mean a household idol of some sort, but possibly it relates in some way to the worship of Yahweh; certainly there is no suggestion elsewhere that David was ever guilty of worshipping other gods.

In these chapters we see David acting with doubtful morality more than once. He is guilty of lies and deceit in ch. 21 and of murderous intentions in ch. 25, for example. Plainly he is not being held up as a model. Rather, the biblical writer is emphasizing how difficult his circumstances were, plus the fact that through all his difficulties (and in spite of his lapses) God took care of him.

It was natural that David should wish to consult Samuel, the man who had anointed him for kingship (ch. 16). However, the passage relates nothing of their conversation and instead stresses the nature of prophetic power. Normally *the Spirit of God* equipped men with power to perform or to speak God's will. In the presence of such power, which was in a sense infectious, Saul's soldiers and finally Saul himself found themselves *prophesying.* Yet in their case the experience did not give them power but robbed them of it. Saul, indeed, was robbed of all royal dignity too. It was symbolic that he himself took off all his royal robes. Once again we meet the sneering proverb of 10:11, and this time the taunt was fully justified.

Clearly, this episode does not describe what we normally understand by 'prophecy'. The Hebrew word 'prophesied' can in some contexts refer to abnormal, trance-like states (see also 1 Ki. 18:29). God's powerful presence could have different effects in different circumstances.

20:1–7 David consults Jonathan. After all that had happened, we would not have expected David to contemplate any return to his place at court. However, he was a court figure, and even Saul might wish to preserve proper procedures. It is clear that David's absence from court on a *festival* occasion would cause public comment and possible embarrassment (5–7). David was under no illusions about the danger he was in (3), but he felt that he had the right to demand justice: what *crime* had he committed? Jonathan saw things rather differently, wishing to believe the best about his father, and apparently convinced that David was in no immediate danger.

The emphasis of the passage is to be found in vs 14–17. The actual situation was the danger confronting David, in which Jonathan could help him, but these verses are concerned with David's future help to Jonathan. A simple friendship needs no formal *covenant.* However, both Jonathan and David were men of importance in Israel, and there would be political rivalry between their families, *i.e.* the house of Saul and *the house of David* (16). In many societies such a situation could have led to political assassinations, or even to the total destruction of one of the families. Hence the importance of the covenant they made. After the events of this chapter Jonathan and David scarcely met again, so their firm promises to each other were particularly significant now. V 17 again stresses the depth of David and Jonathan's commitment to each other. (Recent suggestions of a homosexual relationship between David and Jonathan are total misinterpretations; the whole emphasis of the biblical author lies on the fact that David was not a political enemy of Saul or his family, and that Jonathan had no fear or suspicion whatever of David.)

20:18–42 David's final departure. Jonathan's detailed instructions to David (19–22) were apparently necessary to enable him to give David a message without anyone seeing them in conversation together. It is clear that Jonathan did not want even his servant *boy* (21, 39) to know he was meeting David. If Saul was quite determined to kill David, any sign of Jonathan talking to David would look like treason. Not even Jonathan was safe from Saul's anger. In the event, Jonathan succeeded in holding a last private conversation with David.

Saul saw one thing clearly: unless David were killed, Jonathan would never succeed to the throne (31). The difference was that Jonathan accepted this fact, but Saul's hatred for David was by now intense. We can assume that Saul would have used the festival as an opportunity for another direct attack on David's life. The festival was a state occasion, when the absence of an important court figure would be noticed

by everyone, although absence for reasons of ceremonial uncleanness was always a possibility in ancient Israel. Many regulations about this are to be found in Lv. 11 – 15. Otherwise the absence of an important person could be suspicious. Even a king's son had to ask for permission to be absent (see 2 Sa. 15:7–9).

21:1 – 26:25 David as a fugitive

21:1–15 David at Nob and at Gath. The main point of this chapter is to demonstrate how dangerous and desperate David's situation was. He was completely alone (1) and unarmed, and in itself this was a suspicious circumstance; an important soldier would naturally have an escort. David could see no option but deceit. The biblical author does not approve of deceit – indeed, David himself accepted the blame for what happened because of it (22:22). However, the writer does not rebuke David for it; he is fully aware of David's difficulties. Undoubtedly, David's enemies later condemned him for both incidents recorded in this chapter. David's visit to *Nob* resulted in the death of many devout men (22:18), and his visit to *Gath* (10–15) looked like the act of a traitor, since *Achish* was a Philistine king. So the writer explains, first, that although David did indeed deceive *Ahimelech the priest*, he could not have known what would happen afterwards. The problem was caused by *Doeg* (7), one of Saul's officials, who was there in order to fulfil a vow.

Secondly, the writer explains that when David crossed the frontier and went to Gath, he hoped that he would not be recognized. When he was recognized, he made a fool of the Philistine king. He was certainly not honoured by the Philistines, who would have welcomed a capable soldier who had rebelled against Saul. At the very least they would have prevented his return to Israel but for his apparent insanity.

22:1–5 David gains support. In ch. 21 David had been a lone fugitive, in very great danger. Returning from *Gath* to Israelite territory, he soon attracted some support. His own family joined him, not to support him but for their own safety, and David soon ensured that his parents were sent abroad, out of Saul's reach. His supporters were outlaws like himself, and there were enough of them to make a small army. In Saul's eyes, they were undoubtedly rebels and traitors. What are we to think? Later chapters will show that David never used this army to attack either Saul or Israelite troops, but this has yet to be seen. However, another supporter of David was a *prophet*, *Gad* by name, and we can see the hand of God at work, giving guidance to David (5). Thus in a very literal sense God was still with David. The successful soldier had become a successful fugitive. It was sensible for him to move into *Judah*, well away from Saul's capital city. Judah was his own tribe, and he could reasonably hope that some citizens would be well disposed toward him.

22:6–23 The massacre at Nob. *Nob* was at this time a major sanctuary. After the Philistine victory of ch. 4, the Shiloh sanctuary had been destroyed, and Nob may have replaced it in importance. *Ahimelech*, the chief priest at Nob, was the grandson of Eli of Shiloh. It is astonishing that Saul should have massacred so many priests at such an important sanctuary, despite the very reasonable defence which Ahimelech made (14–15). The chapter demonstrates that by now Saul was suspicious of everybody, including Jonathan (8), and saw a conspiracy where none existed. It is significant that his own *officials* refused to obey his orders (17).

Saul's brutality at Nob had a result which he did not foresee. One man who *escaped* the massacre was *Abiathar* (a future high priest at Jerusalem), who had little choice but to join David. In this way David gained priestly support in addition to the prophet Gad.

23:1–14 David at Keilah. This section sets up an interesting contrast between human power and God's control. Saul's royal power could not be resisted either by David or by the people of the town of *Keilah*. This chapter shows David forced to move further and further south, towards more barren terrain. As for the citizens of Keilah, they may have felt friendly towards David (they too were Judeans), but they dared not risk Saul's anger and revenge. Everybody must have known how Saul had treated Nob. But even though the people of Keilah were prepared to *surrender* David to Saul (12), they must have felt a lasting gratitude to David, who had just *saved* them from the Philistines (5). This was useful to him at a later date.

Saul had great power, then, from the human standpoint; but it was God who really controlled events, especially by giving David the guidance he needed through *Abiathar* and *the ephod* (6). In this way David knew when to go to Keilah and when to leave it, and how to keep out of Saul's *hands* (14). God allowed full freedom of action to all the individuals and groups but yet he overruled so that his will prevailed. David escaped yet again from Saul, and was able to do a service to an Israelite city, an act which would be remembered long afterwards. Saul showed himself unfit to be king, because he had attacked one of his own cities; David was already doing a king's task, in defeating his nation's enemies, the Philistines.

23:15–28 David in the region of Ziph. The district near the town of *Ziph* was desert

(14). It is fairly easy to hide in such terrain, but it is not easy to feed an army of 600 men there. David's band of followers had grown since 22:1. This may partly explain why the people of Ziph were so hostile to him; perhaps they saw him as a threat to their food supplies. So they were ready to help Saul locate David, but once again God overruled, this time by using the Philistines to achieve his purposes (27–28).

There is dramatic irony in the fact that although Saul and his troops could not find David, Jonathan had no such difficulty. No doubt David had posted sentries, who would have guided Jonathan to David. The chief purpose of Jonathan's visit was to give David reassurance. In renewing their *covenant*, Jonathan again confirmed his willingness to be subordinate to David; in other words, he renounced his own position as crown prince. Jonathan did not live long enough to fulfil this promise, but the biblical writer uses Jonathan's promise as another indication of the goodwill that always existed between Jonathan and David. David stole nothing from Jonathan, and Jonathan begrudged David nothing.

23:29 – 24:22 David and Saul meet at En Gedi. The detailed narrative of ch. 24 recounts a dramatic incident during David's time as a fugitive. The drama draws attention to some important facts about David and Saul. At different points in the story, both men had an opportunity to kill their opponent. Both men were prevented from such violent action by the power of conscience. David must have been tempted to kill the man who had been persecuting him, especially when his own soldiers urged him to do so. But his conscience held him back; he even felt remorseful after damaging Saul's robe slightly. As for Saul, when David suddenly spoke to him, he had David completely in his power at last, trapped in the cave; but David's words stirred his conscience. The words of the two men are therefore particularly significant. David expressed high reverence for the person of the king as such. Saul, we know, had been rejected by Yahweh; but he remained king, the man who had been *anointed* through Samuel by *the* LORD (6). No man, declared David, had the right to attack the person of the king of Israel.

Saul replied by a frank confession that he had wronged David, and that David had never wronged him. Looking into the future, he acknowledged that David would be king.

Here again, the text is intended to defend David from later accusations of ruthless hostility to Saul and his *descendants* (21). The chapter makes it abundantly clear that David not only spared Saul's life but also took a solemn *oath* to spare the lives of Saul's family after him. The emphasis in David's words on the sacredness of the king's person and life may have been a sermon to later men and groups who wished to overthrow kings by assassination or rebellion.

25:1–11 Nabal's hostility. Samuel's death (1) marked the end of an era. He died before David, whom he had anointed (ch. 16), actually became king; but at least Saul had now recognized that David would be the next king (24:20). Samuel's work was done.

Despite Saul's words of repentance in 24:16–21, there was no possibility of real reconciliation between Saul and David, and David remained with his large band of men in the semi-barren areas of Judah. It would not be long before Saul made fresh attempts to capture him. Meanwhile David had the daily task of finding provisions for his followers, and this passage shows how difficult that could be. He tried to win support and provisions from rich farmers like *Nabal* by giving them assistance and protection from raiders (like the Amalekites), and then seeking generosity from them. No doubt there were other farmers who gladly helped David, and probably some who helped rather reluctantly; Nabal was *mean* by nature in *his dealings* (3) and rudely refused. Technically, he had the right to act as he did, and his remark that David was a 'servant' who had broken away from his 'master' was not too far from the truth. The reader, however, knows that David was no rebel against Saul, and that God had chosen David to be king; so Nabal is seen to be completely out of touch with God's plans.

25:12–35 Abigail's intervention. David's anger with Nabal was understandable, and we may sense some desperation on his part to find provisions. Nevertheless, Nabal's actions certainly did not justify David's murderous reaction. The story goes to show that David could at times be harsh and violent, but God was still overruling events and prevented David from committing an evil deed. God's agent was not a prophet, nor the guidance of the priest Abiathar, but the wife of the very man whom David planned to kill. It was no coincidence that Abigail was an intelligent woman (3), who not only saw the dangers but took swift and effective action to prevent tragedy. Her words to David reminded him that the God who had anointed him to be king was sure to protect him and take care of his needs in the meantime. David had no need, therefore, to be violent and vengeful.

The message of Abigail's words was a theological one, making clear David's position in God's sight. We may add that her message was a very sensible one from a human standpoint as well: if David had attacked a local farmer, it is very unlikely that he would ever have won the support of the tribe of Judah at a later date.

25:36–44 David's marriages. The end of the story relates the death of Nabal, followed by David's taking the widow, Abigail, in marriage. Nabal's death was after all a natural one, from the human standpoint but the writer conveys the general truth that all life and death are in God's hands. We may be sure that Nabal's neighbours shared that belief, and took note that God might punish any hostility to David. So the death of Nabal may have helped David's cause.

David's only *wife* till now was Saul's daughter, *Michal* (18:27). Saul had remarried her to another man (44). This act showed his hatred of David; it was also a political move, intended to destroy any claim to the throne David might have had as Saul's son-in-law. Political marriages were common at the time, and by his marriages to *Abigail* and *Ahinoam* (42–43) David was making important links with influential families in Judah. His future way to kingship would be due to the support of the tribe of Judah, not because of any support from the existing royal court. The writer does not say so, but he plainly saw David's marriage to Abigail as part of God's plans for him.

26:1–25 David in Saul's camp. The kernel of this narrative is the same as that of ch. 24. Saul took an army into Judah to hunt for David, and almost caught him; David had the opportunity to kill Saul but instead he conversed with the king, who confessed that he had wronged David. Some of the details are very similar to those of ch. 24, such as the part played by *the Ziphites* (1). But many other details are totally different. Here David is not accidentally hiding in a cave as in ch. 24, but deliberately visiting Saul's camp. Abner comes into this story, but plays no part in ch. 24. Some scholars nevertheless suppose that both chapters are dealing in different ways with the same event. The important question is why the biblical author decided to use two such similar stories. The answer is partly that he wanted to reinforce the emphasis of ch. 24 The Israelites put faith in double testimony (Dt. 19:15), and here for the second time David resisted temptation and refused to harm *the LORD's anointed* (9); also for the second time, Saul admitted his own wrongdoing (21) and acknowledged that David would have a great future (25). So once again the writer emphasizes David's refusal to do any harm to Saul, and the fact that (in his better moments) Saul took all the blame on himself.

The new element in this story lies in David's words in v 19. This verse looks ahead to the next chapter, when David reluctantly left the land of Israel and took refuge with the Philistines. David's enemies later argued that David was a traitor to Israel who had even worshipped false gods in Philistia. V 19 does not mean that David would in reality worship Philistine *gods*, but it does draw our attention to the fact that in foreign territory there would be no temples to Yahweh where David could worship the true God. David therefore expressed his great reluctance to leave Israel's borders, so much so that he pronounced a curse on those who would be responsible for it.

Note. 21 Saul called himself a *fool*, just as Abigail had called her husband a fool for opposing David (25:25). The two Hebrew words are different, but the idea is the same. All who oppose God's plans are eventually shown to be fools.

27:1 – 30:31 David in Philistine territory

This was to be the most difficult period of David's career. Unable to stay in Israelite territory, he was forced to take refuge with one of the Philistine kings. David led a small army, and it is obvious that the Philistines would not welcome Israelite soldiers unless they could be trusted to fight against their fellow-Israelites. David's men had the initial advantage that Saul, the king of Israel, was undoubtedly their enemy. David had to persuade the Philistines that he and his men were and would remain the enemy of both Saul and Israel as a whole. Yet of course, David had no wish to attack Israelites, and he would never have become king of Israel if he had ever done so. So he faced a very difficult task, in addition to the problem of feeding and financing his army. Yet he succeeded, for God was still 'with him'.

27:1–12 David and King Achish. David's recent narrow escapes from Saul proved to him that he could not continue indefinitely to avoid capture and death. His band of 600 men could not remain hidden for long. We may assume that they would have received no welcome from any neutral country or from any ally of Saul's. David's only hope was to become an apparent ally of Saul's enemies, the Philistines. So he returned to *Gath*, which he had briefly visited some time previously (21:10–15). This time he had the full respect of the Philistine king, *Achish*, and was given a headquarters, the town of *Ziklag*. We may see God's overruling even in this Philistine decision. Ziklag was near the Israelite frontier (see map, page 230), and Achish expected David to attack Israelites in Judah. Ziklag, however, was also close to another frontier; to the south of Ziklag lived several tribes who were enemies of both Israel and the Philistines. This gave David the opportunity to benefit the people of Judah, by attacking their enemies, and at the same time to deceive Achish. Achish could see for himself the spoils of war, but he did not guess where they

came from. David was also benefiting himself, because these spoils of war met the needs of his men for food and livelihood.

David's skill in seizing such an opportunity is clear. From a Christian standpoint, we cannot admire his use of deceit nor his butchery of men and women alike. The passage is not, of course, commending deceit and cruelty. Basically, it is showing how desperate David's situation was – a situation which had been created by Saul. It also shows David's determination to do nothing to harm his own people, but to do anything and everything possible to help them. His first duty was to Israel, and he felt no obligations at all to Israel's enemies.

28:1–25 Saul consults a medium. Events now began to move towards a climax. The closing chapters of 1 Samuel deal with a single major event, a great battle between Israel and the Philistines, and with the actions and fortunes of the three parties involved – Saul and the Israelite army, the Philistine army, and David and his smaller army. The Philistines initiated these events, mustering their forces in strength (1, 4). Most of the battles between Israel and the Philistines took place in the southern part of the country, but now the Philistines changed their strategy and mustered in the north, *at Shunem*. They were probably trying to cut Israel in two, separating Saul from his northern tribes. At any rate, Saul could not ignore this threat, and it seems that he was forced to fight on level ground, where Philistine chariots gave them a great advantage. (Usually the Israelites were able to fight in the hills, where chariots were of little use.) Israel was, therefore, in a dangerous situation, and Saul was desperately in need of military advice. Although the story is told in personal terms, it is important to realize that Saul was seeking guidance as king of Israel, not as a private individual. But as king of Israel he could get no prophetic help. V 6 mentions the three usual means for learning Yahweh's will; the *Urim* refers to the priestly ephod (see 14:37). Saul could no longer consult Samuel, who had recently died, unless he could do so through a medium; but Saul himself had driven all the mediums out of the central part of his realm. The OT laws attack the practice of consulting the dead (necromancy) (see Lv. 19:31; Dt. 18:9–14) and Saul had upheld such laws. It was a sign of his desperation that he now consulted a medium, and that to do so he had to go as far north as *Endor*, a journey to the far side of the Philistine camp.

The biblical author here is not concerned either to attack or to ridicule the practice of necromancy; he is simply intending to portray Saul's desperation and Yahweh's firm decisions. Whether God allowed Samuel himself to reappear or whether some spirit took the form of Samuel, the fact was that so far as Saul was concerned, he saw Samuel and he heard the voice of Samuel. This voice repeated and confirmed Yahweh's rejection of Saul and choice of David. V 19 adds a new prediction, about the outcome of the battle next day.

The intention of this story is to emphasize Saul's hopelessness – and to show how low he had sunk, when even a criminal helped to comfort him. For the woman was a criminal, by Saul's own laws. The chapter is certainly not endorsing the activities of mediums; God's guidance is never to be obtained from them.

29:1–11 The Philistines and David. We have seen in ch. 28 how helpless Saul was, and that his situation was hopeless. In a different way, David seemed equally helpless, at the mercy of Philistine decisions. His group of men was too small to fight the Philistines, and he dared not disobey orders; the only hope he could see was to continue to deceive Achish. It is difficult to guess what David would have done if Achish had persuaded the other Philistine rulers of David's loyalty and reliability. However, the other Philistine kings overruled Achish. They could clearly see the danger that David's army might change sides during the battle, which could then have caused a defeat for the Philistines (4). They also remembered David's reputation as a soldier, which the Israelite women had commemorated in song (5; see 18:7). The author does not say so, but he leaves the reader to come to the conclusion that it was really God who overruled Achish and rescued David from an impossible situation.

Notes. 1 The episode occurred at *Aphek*, before the Philistines marched on northwards and camped at Shunem (28:1). In other words, the events of ch. 29 took place before those of ch. 28. **6** Achish here swears by the God of Israel, presumably because he was addressing an Israelite. His reference in v 9 to *an angel of God* is less specific; it was perhaps a conventional phrase. There is no suggestion in this passage that Achish worshipped Yahweh. **11** The Israelite camp was already at *Jezreel* (1), so this verse signals the start of the battle.

30:1–17 David defeats the Amalekites. The narrative follows David southwards, back to his headquarters at *Ziklag*, and leaves the story of the battle of Gilboa until ch. 31. Part of the writer's purpose in giving so much detail is to emphasize that David and his men were many miles away from the Philistine army when the battle took place. We can readily imagine that David's enemies later spread the false rumour that David and his men had helped the Philistines to defeat Saul's army. On the

contrary, this chapter shows David attacking Israel's enemies the Amalekites while the battle between Saul and the Philistines was taking place.

Another important aspect of this story is that the enemy is Amalek. Saul's failure to eliminate this people, who had been such a longstanding threat to Israel, has been recorded in ch. 15. It was the cause of Yahweh's rejection of Saul. Now in ch. 30, David is described as doing what Saul ought to have done.

30:18–31 David's plunder. Nomadic raiders are not easy to find, and it was a near-miracle that David *recovered everything that the Amalekites had taken.*

V 7 makes an important point, contrasting David's conduct in a very difficult situation with Saul's in ch. 28. Saul had consulted a medium, but David went to the man of God in order to learn God's will. Saul's consultation had ended in utter despair, David's ended in encouragement (6).

Not only had God intervened to prevent David from having to fight against fellow-Israelites, but God's timing was perfect too. David and his men had arrived back in Ziklag long before the Amalekites had expected them. Otherwise the captured wives and children would have been sold into slavery.

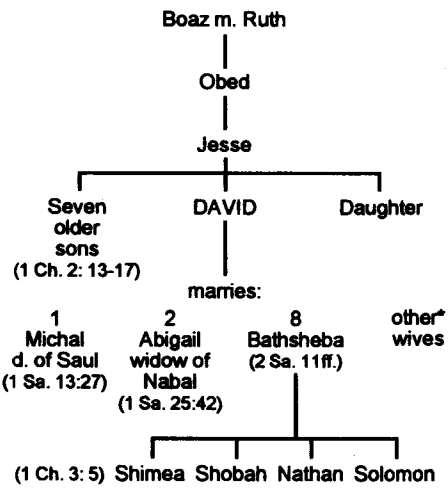
The passage shows how David imposed his authority on his troops who were fierce men (see v 6) and who included *trouble-makers* among them (22). Here we see him already taking decision such as a king would usually make (see v 25 especially). His overall policy was to benefit all his people equally, and also to repay hospitality to the towns and areas of Judah where he and his men had previously been fugitives from Saul (27–31). This was a shrewd political move: when the time came, the people of Judah freely chose him as their king rather than serve a son of Saul (2 Sa. 2:10).

31:1–13 The battle of Gilboa

The battle is named after *Mount Gilboa.* The battle began on the plain, but the defeated Israelites were driven up the slopes of the hillside where many of them died, including both Saul and Jonathan. The chapter does not give the number of casualties, but evidently it was a major Philistine victory, enabling them to occupy several Israelite towns (7). Saul's reign thus ended in disaster, for Saul himself and for Israel. It seemed that the gods of the Philistines had triumphed; but 2 Samuel will go on to tell how David defeated the Philistines permanently.

The last paragraph of the chapter makes a fitting end to the story of Saul's kingship. His first act as king had been to rescue the city of Jabesh Gilead (ch. 11); its citizens now rescued his body and gave his *bones* a decent burial. It is puzzling why they *burned* the bodies, since cremation does not seem to have been an Israelite custom. Whatever the reason, the action was meant to honour the dead.

So 1 Samuel ends on a note of tragedy. It was, however, a tragedy foretold by God's spokesman (28:19), and it did not mean that Israel's God had been defeated. He had already chosen the next king of Israel, and equipped him to be a better soldier and a better leader than Saul. God would deal with the Philistine menace in his own good time.



* Eight of David's wives are mentioned by name in the Bible.

The family of David, simplified.

2 Sa. 1:1 – 8:18 The early years of David's reign

1:1 – 4:12 David and Ish-Bosheth

The death of Saul opened the way for David to fulfil his destiny to become king of Israel. The biblical writer has in 1 Samuel unambiguously pointed the way forward to this conclusion. However, there were still two major obstacles in David's way: from a human standpoint, indeed, there was no certainty that David would become king of all Israel. The first obstacle was the fact that one of Saul's sons, Ish-Bosheth, had not been killed in the battle of Gilboa, and he was soon recognized as king by most of the tribes (see 2:9). David became king in Judah, and civil war resulted. The other obstacle was the Philistines who were determined to keep Israel

weak and in subjection to them. The Philistines, however, made a tactical error. They took no action to prevent David becoming king in Judah, presumably because they wished to encourage civil war among the Israelites, thinking it would divide and weaken Israel. Nor, apparently, did they attack Ish-Bosheth, for the same reason. Thus, David did not have two enemies simultaneously, and so he was able to overcome both obstacles, one after the other. The biblical writer is in no doubt that God overruled in these Philistine decisions, as in all the other events which brought David to the throne of all Israel.

1:1–16 The Amalekite messenger. At the start of this narrative, David is still in *Ziklag* (see 1 Sa. 30:26), awaiting news about the Philistine invasion of northern Israel. It is ironic that the messenger who brought the news of Gilboa was an *Amalekite*, a member of the nation which had been such a persistent enemy to Israel. Both Saul and David had fought against them. This Amalekite, however, was an immigrant to Israel, a resident *alien* (13).

It is no surprise to the reader to be told of the death of Saul and Jonathan, but the manner of Saul's death as described by the Amalekite is unexpected. It is just possible that Saul lived for a short time after falling on his own sword (1 Sa. 31:4), until the Amalekite arrived on the scene and *killed him* (10) at his own request. But the Amalekite was probably telling some lies. In general, it seems more likely that he was robbing corpses on the battlefield than that he just *happened to be* in the middle of a fierce battle (6).

We are not told whether David fully believed him or not, but he accepted the evidence of the man's words (16) and of the *crown* and arm*band* he brought from Gilboa, in the absence of any human witnesses. On the basis of that evidence, David executed the messenger. David's action in doing so is fully consistent with his attitude to Saul's person expressed in 1 Sa. 24:6 and 26:9. The king was *the LORD's anointed*, and the Amalekite, as a resident of Israel, was under obligation to obey Israel's law-code, yet he had killed Israel's king. In executing him as a murderer, David was already acting as if he were king and judge.

There is a further political aspect to the episode. In acting as he did, David was demonstrating once again that he was no enemy of Saul: he defended the dead king's rights to the last.

1:17–27 David's lament. The poem in vs 19–27 is not a private *lament* to express David's emotions but a national poem, describing in memorable language the depth of Israel's loss. The lament was published (to use a modern equivalent) – recorded in writing and made known throughout the nation (18). *The Book of Jashar* was an ancient document used by some OT writers (see also Jos. 10:13). We do not know why the poem was entitled *lament of the bow*.

God had rejected Saul, as 1 Samuel made repeatedly clear; but this poem looks at Saul from a human standpoint, and reminds us of his significance to Israel over a number of years: giving leadership, creating national unity, driving the Philistines back, and bringing Israel prosperity (see v 24). Jonathan is bracketed with Saul, both because of David's deep friendship with him and because of his military successes (see 1 Sa. 14).

The poetic imagery throughout the lament needs to be noted, but it is readily understood. In v 20 David expresses the hope that the news of Saul's death could be kept from the enemy: *Gath* and *Ashkelon* were two important Philistine cities. In v 21 he curses the hills of *Gilboa*, where Saul and Jonathan had been killed. In the last verse of his lament David calls Saul and Jonathan 'warriors' (NIV *mighty*) and '*weapons of war*', reminding readers of the fact that their deaths were in the context of a disastrous defeat for Israel. The poem expresses no hope for the future, but David himself was destined to supply hope and victory to a defeated nation.

2:1–7 David becomes king in Judah. Saul's death meant that David was now free to move out of Philistine territory and back to his native *Judah*. Two things might have obstructed this move. If Saul had left a strong successor, equally hostile to David, it would not have been possible. If the Philistines had objected to the move, it would have been very difficult. So it is not surprising that David *enquired of the LORD* about it; in other words, he asked Abiathar to consult the sacred oracle (see 1 Sa. 23:9–12).

Neither the biblical writer nor the reader finds it surprising that David was now made *king* (although over only one tribe, Judah). God's will had been clearly revealed, as early as 1 Sa. 16. However, from a purely political standpoint, the decision of the *men of Judah* could not have been predicted. The death of Saul and the overwhelming Philistine victory at Gilboa must have created political chaos throughout Israel, and the tribal elders must have been very uncertain at first as to the wisest course of action. David had at least three things to offer them: a good reputation as a soldier, a history of helpful actions towards Judah, and some sort of alliance or understanding with the Philistines. He was also, of course, a Judean himself.

David's message to the city of *Jabesh Gilead* is of special interest. This city had strong links with Saul (see 1 Sa. 11; 31:11–13), and it lay in

Transjordan, in the same area where David's rival king Ish-Bosheth had established his capital city, Mahanaim (8–9). We would, therefore, have expected Ish-Bosheth, rather than David, to send Jabesh Gilead such a message of thanks and encouragement. David was in fact already indicating to Israelites outside Judah that he believed he was the true successor to Saul, and had authority over all Israel. His message ignored the existence of Ish-Bosheth.

David's capital city was *Hebron*, towards the south of Judah. Later, Jerusalem would become his capital, but at this point in time Jerusalem was not in Israelite hands. In fact, Jerusalem may have been a partial barrier, separating Judah from the Israelite tribes further north. If so, it would help to explain why Judah made its own decision and chose its own king.

2:8–32 Civil war. *Abner* (first mentioned in 1 Sa. 14:50) had evidently escaped from the battlefield where Saul had died, and he took charge of Israelite affairs in the northern part of the country. Although he himself was a close relative of Saul, he did not make himself king but tried to rally Israelite support to Saul's surviving son *Ish-Bosheth*. So Ish-Bosheth became king; in theory over *all Israel* (9), but in reality over a limited area. No doubt the Philistines were now the real masters of the central areas of Israel, especially the tribal regions of Ephraim and Benjamin. Ish-Bosheth's main area of control was east of the River Jordan (*Gilead*), and his capital *Mahanaim* was there (see map, p. 341). Still, *Ephraim* and *Benjamin* and some other groups (9) recognized him as king, despite the realities of the situation.

There is no obvious reason why David should have attacked Ish-Bosheth, so it seems probable that Ish-Bosheth decided to attack David in order to bring Judah under his control. Ish-Bosheth's troops were sent to *Gibeon*, just north of the border of Judah, and David sent his own troops to block their advance. As in 1 Sa. 17, both sides tried to avoid unnecessary bloodshed by using picked champions to settle the issue. Perhaps both sides believed that Yahweh would show his will be giving a clear victory to one group of *twelve men* or the other. However, a real *battle* followed (17); vs 30–31 give us some idea of the scale of it.

The chief purpose behind all the details given in this narrative is to introduce the reader to *Joab*. Joab was to be David's commander-in-chief throughout his long reign, and it is clear from vs 28–30 that he was already in command. The story explains how it happened that Abner, the Israelite commander, killed one of Joab's brothers. Abner himself obviously had no wish to kill *Asahel*, above all because he wanted to avoid a blood feud. After Asahel's death, Joab was willing to act sensibly and agree to a truce, but his own personal feelings remain hidden in this chapter. They will be revealed in 3:27.

3:1–5 David's family. The writer does not give further details of the civil *war*, in which David steadily gained the upper hand (1). Instead, he gives details of David's wives and *sons*. The implication may well be that David was secure and settled in Judah, unlike Ish-Bosheth, whose cause was doomed. So far as we know, Ish-Bosheth had no family. The main importance of the details, however, is to lay a foundation for later events. Several of David's sons later played significant roles. *Amnon* and *Absalom* are the chief characters in chs. 13–18, and *Adonijah* tried to seize the throne in David's old age (1 Ki. 1). Solomon is not mentioned yet: he was born later, in Jerusalem (see 12:24).

David's marriages to *Ahinoam* and *Abigail* have already been mentioned (1 Sa. 25:42–43). His more recent marriage to *Maacah* was to cement an alliance with the *king of Geshur*, a small state in northern Transjordan.

3:6–21 Abner changes sides. It is clear from v 6 that Abner was an ambitious man. He was powerful enough in Ish-Bosheth's kingdom, but by now the real power in Israel lay in David's hands, as Abner perceived. We may suspect that he deliberately planned the quarrel with Ish-Bosheth, in order to have a good excuse for abandoning him. It is not actually recorded that he did have sexual relations with Saul's former *concubine*, but he did not deny the accusation. Such an act would amount to a claim to Saul's throne (see 16:21–22), and it is not surprising that Ish-Bosheth protested and a quarrel resulted.

Abner now felt free to send *messengers* to David, offering to *help* make him king of all Israel. His question *Whose land is it?* (12) was intended to inform David that he, Abner, not Ish-Bosheth, was the most influential man with the northern tribes. This was no doubt true, but if both Abner and Ish-Bosheth had lived for some years after this, it is quite likely that Abner would have been forced to fight against Ish-Bosheth. The *agreement* Abner requested from David (12) probably included a high military position in David's army for Abner. David's insistence that his first wife *Michal* should be restored to him (13–14) had several motives. Saul had stolen her from him in an act of cruelty and injustice (1 Sa. 25:44), and David was determined that the injustice should be put right. The loss of Michal had also been a public humiliation for David, and that too must be put right. There was probably also a political motive: his marriage to Saul's daughter gave him status in Israel, and legitimacy to succeed to

Saul's position as king. Finally, David's marriage to Michal had been a love-match at the start (1 Sa. 18:20) and his affection for her may have been an additional reason for reclaiming her now. David was in the right, but we can still feel sympathy for *Paltiel.*

Abner carried out his side of the bargain. When he reported back to David, he could promise the immediate acceptance of David as king by *all Israel* (21). This was, of course, in David's interests and we can be sure that he showed his pleasure to Abner. In turn, Abner must have been pleased with the developing situation, and he had no reason to be fearful. So he *went in peace*, and under 'safe conduct' (REB).

3:22–39 Abner's murder. Perhaps Joab believed that Abner was a spy and not to be trusted, as he told David (25). More probably that was merely an excuse: v 30 gives the real reason why he murdered Abner in such a treacherous way.

The murder of Abner was a very serious embarrassment to David. The murderer was one of his senior officers, and the suspicion would have been widespread that David had given the instructions to kill Abner. In Ish-Bosheth's kingdom, it must have seemed that David meant to kill all relatives of Saul in order to secure his own position. David's only defence was to show publicly, in every way possible, that he was innocent of the murder. So he honoured Abner and mourned him publicly. V 37 records that he was able to persuade the populace, both in Judah and northern Israel, of his innocence.

The fact that the writer tells the full story of Abner's death shows that at a later date some of David's enemies were still accusing David of relentless hostility to Saul and his family. It is true that David did nothing to punish the killer; v 39 gives his reason for this. David did not mean that he was *weak* in character, but that Joab and his brother Abishai (the *sons of Zeruiah*) were too influential in the kingdom to be brought to trial. David's resentment of Joab's action lasted for many years (see 1 Ki. 2:5–6).

4:1–12 Ish-Bosheth's murder. The assassination of Abner could have caused a permanent breach between the northern kingdom and Judah, preventing David from becoming king of all Israel. However, the opposite happened: the death of Abner weakened a weak king and a weak kingdom still further. The weak king was assassinated and the kingdom collapsed.

It is not explained why *Recab* and *Baanah* murdered Ish-Bosheth. Saul had once attacked Gibeon (see 21:2), and perhaps *Beeroth*, the home of Recab and Baanah, had suffered with it (the two cities are linked in Jos. 9:17). Whether or not the assassins had some such old grievance against Saul and his family, they certainly believed that David would reward them for killing his rival king. Once again, therefore, David had to protect himself from rumours that he had given orders for the murder. He did so by executing the murderers and speaking well of Ish-Bosheth.

Thus ended Ish-Bosheth's reign. He presumably left no sons, and his only close relative was his *crippled* nephew *Mephibosheth* (4). Clearly, nobody supposed that Mephibosheth was capable of becoming king. (The story of Mephibosheth continues in ch. 9.) The assassinations had in fact cleared the way for David to become king of all Israel; the biblical writer knew that God overruled even in wicked human deeds, but it is easy to see why some Israelites believed that David himself had 'overruled' and paid men to assassinate all his rivals.

5:1–25 David takes full control

This relatively brief chapter records three of David's most important achievements. First, he unified the nation, and all the Israelite tribes acknowledged him as king. Secondly, he captured Jerusalem which was one of a number of cities inside Israelite territory but not under Israelite control. Such cities split the country, separating one Israelite tribe from another. Their Canaanite citizens, too, were a permanent danger, since they were often willing to act as the Philistines' allies against Israel. So David eliminated this danger, taking control of all these 'foreign' cities. His third achievement was to eliminate the Philistine threat altogether. He defeated Israel's old enemy so thoroughly that they never again posed a problem for Israel. Ch. 8 lists further achievements of David.

5:1–5 King of all Israel. This paragraph makes it clear that David did not conquer the northern Israelite tribes, nor govern them against their will. The initiative to make him their king came from them – their representatives made the journey south to *Hebron* to invite him to be their king. Clearly the death of Ish-Bosheth had meant the collapse of government in the north, and in the face of Philistine aggression the northern tribal representatives were anxious to get strong and effective government. In theory, they might have chosen one of themselves, but there were three powerful reasons for turning to David which are outlined in vs 1–2.

The summary of David's reign in v 5 gives a time-scale for the capture of Jerusalem (described in vs 6–9). Ish-Bosheth's reign had lasted only two years (2:10), but David continued to reign in *Hebron* for more than five further years. The Israelite elders probably acknowledged him as king soon after Ish-Bosheth's death, but some

time elapsed before he was ready to attack Jerusalem.

5:6–16 The capture of Jerusalem. *Jerusalem* was already an ancient city. In earlier times, both the tribes of Judah and Benjamin had attempted to capture it (see Jdg. 1:8, 21) but it was still controlled by a Canaanite people called the *Jebusites*. It was a strongly fortified city, and the Jebusites were confident that David's troops could not capture it. There are uncertainties about the meaning of some words and phrases in vs 6–8, but it seems probable that the Jebusites were contemptuous: even a *blind* and *lame* garrison would be able to defeat David's attack! But instead of a direct attack on the strong walls, David's men apparently found a *water shaft* and were able to enter the city unexpectedly by this means. Jerusalem's main water supply came from a spring outside the city walls; a number of shafts and tunnels have been discovered by archaeologists.

Having captured Jerusalem, David soon made it his capital. It was much more central than Hebron, and since it lay in Benjamite territory, it would help the northern Israelites to feel that David was truly king of all Israel. David had a *palace* built there and established a royal harem. Notice the name of *Solomon* in v 15.

5:17–25 The defeat of the Philistines. The Philistines had allowed David to rule in Judah without any interference; a divided Israel gave them strength. But once all the Israelite tribes supported David, the Philistines became his enemy (17). Their attacks probably occurred before his capture of Jerusalem, and *the stronghold* mentioned is Adullam, David's earlier military headquarters (see 1 Sa. 22:1–4). Both of the Philistines' attacks were in *the Valley of Rephaim* (18, 22) which lay south of Jerusalem, and this fact may have drawn David's attention to the importance of mastering this whole area.

David's two victories are described briefly, but with enough detail to show that he *enquired of the* LORD before every battle. God never failed to answer his chosen king; the contrast with Saul is noteworthy (*cf* 1 Sa. 28: 6).

The fact that a foreign king, *Hiram, sent messengers to David*, demonstrates the growing power and importance of both David himself and the nation he ruled. For most of the tenth century BC, Israel was the most powerful nation in the whole region. The biblical writer acknowledges David's skills and achievements but he credits them ultimately to *the* LORD *God Almighty* (10). These achievements were not intended by God to glorify David but to benefit God's *people Israel* (12). Without doubt, David brought many material benefits, peace and prosperity to Israel.

The writer makes no comment on David's harem. In one way, it was a recognized symbol of David's political stature in the Ancient Near East; but later chapters will show how much trouble was caused by the rivalry between his many sons. Dt. 17:17 offers a general warning about having many wives, as appropriate for David as for Solomon.

Note. 7 *Zion* is a frequent biblical synonym for Jerusalem. Possibly it was originally the name of *the fortress* part of the city. Jerusalem now became known as *the City of David*; this name was still used in NT times (see Lk. 2:11).

6:1 – 7:29 David, the ark and the house of God

Saul had never shown any interest in the ark of the covenant, and he had caused offence to prophets and priests. David, by contrast, working closely with prophets and priests, treated the ark with great reverence and honour. The ark was permanently installed at Jerusalem (ch. 6). Ch. 7 conveys some of God's plans for the future, relating to the ark's new home and to David.

6:1–19 The ark brought to Jerusalem. This chapter resumes the story of *the ark* (1 Sa. 4:4 – 7:2). For many years the ark had remained at *Baalah*, a town also called Kiriath Jearim (1 Sa. 7:2; see Jos. 15:9). In transferring the ark to Jerusalem, David was also transforming Jerusalem, making it the most important sanctuary in his kingdom. It became his religious capital as well as his political capital. The action had political value in itself too, since it gave Jerusalem added importance in the eyes of all Israel, and so helped to unify the country. The emphasis of the biblical writer is, however, on the religious aspects of David's actions. He took the greatest possible care to treat the ark with all reverence. The death of *Uzzah* (6–8), which was never forgotten, was a reminder of the power of God, symbolized by the ark. (The Israelites in Beth Shemesh had suffered for similar careless handling of the ark, see 1 Sa. 6:19). David learned that he was not free to do as he liked with the ark; still less could he manipulate the God represented by the ark. Although this event was a sad one at the time, the record of it was no doubt a comfort to later generations of Israelites; it reminded them that their God Yahweh was more powerful than any foreign attackers or oppressors. It also taught them that respect for God's holiness was essential to the well-being of the community.

So, the ark was installed at Jerusalem, but in a *tent* (17). It was not until Solomon's reign that a temple was built (1 Ki. 6).

6:20–23 The barrenness of Michal. This episode about Michal comes unexpectedly, and indeed it is puzzling why she was so

hostile to David's actions. Despite what she said, it must have been clear to her that the people did not despise David but shared his joy in the celebrations. His angry retort was justified in the circumstances. Perhaps the writer means us to assume that this quarrel between David and Michal led to a permanent breach between them. In any case, she never gave birth to *children*.

V 23 is the important point. Many later chapters are concerned with David's sons and with their ambitions to become king. If Michal had ever had a son, he would have had a strong claim to the throne, as Saul's grandson and David's son. No such son was born and the writer means us to conclude that God overruled in this matter too.

7:1–17 Nathan's prophecy. This chapter continues and completes the story of David and the Jerusalem sanctuary. The events recorded in it belong to a fairly late date in David's reign, as v 1 implies.

We have here the most important passage in the books of Samuel, and one of the key passages in the whole OT. It discusses the future of the Jerusalem sanctuary and of the Davidic monarchy – the two institutions which were vital to the people of Israel for several centuries after David. Through the prophet Nathan, God made firm promises to David about both of these things. These solemn divine promises amounted to an 'everlasting covenant' given to David (see 23:5).

The two themes are cleverly linked by the use of the word 'house'. The same Hebrew word not only meant an ordinary house, but also a temple, and thirdly a dynasty (just as in English, the current British royal family is called 'the house of Windsor'). The chapter begins by discussing David's plans to build a temple for Yahweh, a *house* for God (5). Then in v 11, the theme of *a house* for David is introduced – not his palace, but the Davidic dynasty, *i.e.* the sons and descendants who would succeed him as kings in Jerusalem.

God's promises about both these things are brought together in v 13: David's son *will build* the temple; the dynasty will last *for ever*. These are very positive promises, but the chapter contains a number of negative points too. First, David's plan to build the temple is refused. Secondly, God does not take pleasure in temples. (These two points are implied by vs 5–7.) Thirdly, v 14 recognizes that some of David's descendants would be unworthy kings, and would deserve and get divine punishment. These various points, both positive and negative, provide a description and an explanation for the events from David's time (early tenth century BC) down to 587 BC. In that period the temple was built, not by David, but by his son Solomon. Many of their successors were weak or sinful, but the dynasty continued unbroken for four centuries.

In 587 BC, the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, and Judah ceased to be a kingdom. The family of David continued in existence, but never regained the throne. What message does this chapter hold for such a changed situation? It tells us first that God is not dependent on temples, and his people, therefore, do not need temples. Stephen re-emphasized this lesson in NT times (see Acts 7:44–50). Secondly, God's promise about David's descendants was permanent. It was the basis of the expectation of the Messiah, 'great David's greater Son'. This promise gave assurance to the generations of God's people who lived in the last centuries of the OT period, and then received its fulfilment in the birth of Jesus Christ; as the whole NT and the Christian church bear witness.

All these promises, as God fulfilled them, would make David's *name great* (9). Without question, David was Israel's greatest king and his reputation stands for all time as one of the greatest men of history. However, his God-given greatness was not for his own benefit and glory, but in order to benefit the nation he ruled. So v 10 indicates God's plans and promises for Israel through David. These promises came true during David's own reign and remained God's ultimate plans for his people despite the fact that in later times Israel and Judah often suffered political hardships, chiefly because of their sins against God. These plans depended on the fulfilment of God's promise to send a Son of David, the Messiah, who would be the one finally to bring God's people the security and peace they always need.

7:18–29 David's prayer. A personal thanksgiving was the appropriate response to the promises made to David through Nathan. This grateful prayer was offered in the tent-shrine David had just erected (18), and nothing more is said here about the proposed temple. The only *house* David mentioned was his own future dynasty (19, 25). He was grateful both for the content of God's promises and for the fact that they had been made known to him. As he said, it is given to very few individuals to be told the future of their family (19).

David's prayer does not ignore the fact that God's blessing to his family would mean blessing to Israel too. Vs 23–24 recall God's goodness shown to Israel in the past. The continuation of David's line would mean God's continued blessings to *the one nation* he had chosen and made his *very own for ever*. The grateful words of David in this prayer would bring comfort and reassurance to many Israelites in later troubled times.

8:1–18 Further victories

Many of the victories recorded in this chapter took place before the events of ch. 7. By placing them here, the biblical writer illustrates the beginning of the fulfilment of God's promises to David outlined in ch. 7.

A fresh defeat of the *Philistines* is briefly recorded (1). The phrase *Metheg Ammah* is unknown, and perhaps is not a place-name at all; several commentators translate it 'supremacy'. The parallel verse in Chronicles refers to the well-known city of Gath (1 Ch. 18:1). The Philistines were on Israel's south-western frontier.

The *Moabites* had been friendly to David at an earlier stage (1 Sa. 22:3–4), and we do not know what caused warfare between them and David now. His harsh treatment of them suggests that they were guilty of serious treachery (2). The Moabites were on Israel's south-eastern borders.

The campaigns described in vs 3–10 were against several Aramean kingdoms, to the north of Israel. In the end David was taking *tribute* from a number of smaller states, and his *control* stretched as far as the northern *Euphrates*. (See map, p. 341.) Vs 12–14 return to the south-eastern area, and tell us that David defeated *Ammonites* and *Edomites* as well as Moabites.

Thus David achieved military success wherever it was necessary. He also built up a sound administration in Israel itself (15). The chapter ends by listing his chief officials. *Joab* and *Abiathar* are by now familiar names to the reader. *Benaiah* commanded the royal bodyguard, and he played an important part in the accession of Solomon as king (1 Ki. 1). Some of *David's sons* were *royal advisers*; no doubt this is true, but the Hebrew word literally means 'priests', and no doubt they had some priestly functions, although these are not described.

The most significant new name in this list is that of *Zadok*. Many scholars believe that he had earlier links with worship in Jerusalem, but this can only be a guess. Whatever his background may have been, he later became the sole high priest in Jerusalem, and his family retained the high priesthood for many centuries.

9:1 – 20:26 King David and his court

A new section of the books of Samuel begins with this chapter. Ch 8 has summarized the achievements of David, to a large extent outside the borders of Israel. Ch. 9 turns to internal affairs, indeed almost to household affairs. The 'household' is the royal court, and its affairs affected the whole kingdom.

Chs. 9–20 have often been called 'the succession narrative', since a major theme in them relates to the matter of David's successor. Every reader, from the beginning, has known that it was Solomon who took the throne after David; and 12:24 indicates, early in the story, that God himself favoured Solomon from his birth. However, it was not at all clear at the time who would be the next king, and probably David himself did not decide to support Solomon until near the end of his reign. So other sons of David, especially Absalom, pursued their ambitions to seize the throne. Ch. 9–20 and 1 Ki. 1 – 2 follow the whole sequence of events.

These chapters show how even in David's reign God fulfilled the two things Nathan had described to David in 7:12–15. On the one hand, God's love would be constant towards David himself and towards his chosen (but unnamed!) successor. On the other hand, God would punish sinful behaviour 'with the rod of men', in other words by using the actions of other men as punishment. So in chs. 9–20 we see how David's sins brought him a great deal of misery and trouble; and yet God's love was never taken from him.

9:1–13 David and Mephibosheth

Mephibosheth has already been mentioned in 4:4. He was one of the few survivors of Saul's family, following the murder of Ish-Bosheth. His home, *Lo Debar*, was not far from Ish-Bosheth's capital, Mahanaim. David now brought him to Jerusalem. Some scholars have supposed that David viewed him as a possible threat and brought him to Jerusalem in order to keep watch on his activities. If so, the biblical writer gives no hint of it. The emphasis is rather on David's *kindness*, and on the honoured position he gave to Mephibosheth. David was fulfilling his promise given to Mephibosheth's father, Jonathan (1 Sa. 20:42), not only towards Mephibosheth but also his son *Mica* (12) after him. The chapter twice reminds the reader that Mephibosheth was *crippled*, so stressing his helplessness. It is doubtful if he could ever have been an effective rival to David, in spite of Ziba's later accusation (16:3).

10:1 – 12:31 Warfare with Ammon and its consequences

Ch. 10, taken by itself, is all about a successful Israelite campaign against the Ammonites, and resumes the record of David's victories begun in ch. 8. It is in fact a link chapter, because this particular military campaign had its effects in Jerusalem. One of the Israelite soldiers who fought in Transjordan was Uriah, whose wife Bathsheba was seduced by David in her husband's absence. Subsequently David made use of the warfare to bring about Uriah's death.

Thus chs. 10–12 link the theme of warfare with affairs at the royal court.

10:1–19 The Ammonite campaign. Ammon was a small kingdom in Transjordan which had been hostile to Israel during Saul's reign; Saul had defeated the king *Nahash* whose death now occurred (see 1 Sa. 11). David, by contrast, had been in alliance with the Ammonites until now. The *Ammonite nobles* (3) no doubt feared that now David was king of a united Israel, he would change his attitude towards them. Even if they had good reason for such suspicions, it was a very foolish step to insult David and provoke him into warfare. The Ammonite kingdom was too small to win a war against Israel, and so they sought allies among the *Arameans* to the north.

Ch. 8 recorded some of David's victories over Aramean states and armies, and it is not clear when the victories of ch. 10 took place. Since the chapter deals with a period before the birth of Solomon, the war must have taken place quite early in David's reign. The decision of the Arameans to make peace with David (19) may, therefore, have been a temporary one. The important point is that they abandoned their alliance with *the Ammonites*, who continued to fight but with no hope of success. The end of the war is described in 12:29–31.

11:1–13 David's relations with Bathsheba and Uriah. It was normal for military enterprises to cease in the winter months, so David resumed his operations against Ammon *In the spring.* V 1 does not imply that David's duty was to accompany the army. His presence in person was hardly necessary when an Israelite victory was so certain. The Ammonites' army was quickly *destroyed* and their capital city *besieged.* By now the Israelite army was powerful, and David's position very secure. It is all too often the case that a sense of ease and security is the prelude to spiritual and moral failure.

David had every right, then, to remain *in Jerusalem*, but the actions that followed were inexcusable. *Bathsheba* was a married woman, and David knew it. The note in v 4 about her *uncleanness* means that she had recently menstruated, so that without doubt the pregnancy was due to David's adultery with her. Bathsheba's morality could, perhaps, also be questioned but the biblical author puts all the blame on David: David was the king, and was acting in a very high-handed fashion, abusing his power and position.

David's useless attempts to induce Uriah to *go home* and to have intercourse with his wife also put him in a very bad light (6–13). The author makes no attempt to justify David. The background to this part of the story is the fact that the soldiers had taken an oath at the start of the campaign to abstain from sexual relations (*cf.* 1 Sa. 21:4–5). It is possible that David's suggestion to Uriah that he should wash his feet (8) refers to a ritual that would release him from this oath. In any case, Uriah considered himself to be on active duty and showed the highest standards of conduct.

11:14–27 Uriah's death. Until this point David hoped that his adultery could remain hidden, and that the unborn child would be accepted as Uriah's. Now that Uriah had killed that hope, he determined to kill Uriah. He feared a public scandal, naturally, and this would have been all the more serious because the penalty in Israel for adultery was death. Yet David, as chief judge in the land, could hardly sentence himself to death! Thus his casual immorality had caused him a very serious problem. The death of Uriah solved the problem: David married the widow, and nobody would have known whose child it was (27). Joab no doubt guessed the truth, but he would never have betrayed David. But v 27 reminds us that the whole truth was known to God.

David, then, did not hesitate to plan the death of Uriah, but he hoped to avoid the death of any other soldiers. When he read David's instructions, Joab adjusted the plan, with the result that several other soldiers died alongside Uriah (17). He clearly realized that David's plan was too obvious; his own plan hid the fact that Uriah was intended to be a victim. Joab's loyalty to David is revealed by this incident, and also his ruthlessness. But David was the real murderer.

The reference in v 21 is to Jdg. 9:50–53. *Abimelech*'s death had shown Israelite troops the dangers of getting too *close to the wall* of a besieged city.

12:1–14 Nathan's rebuke. *Nathan* was a prophet (7:2), the spokesman of God at the royal court and a worthy successor to Samuel. He had the authority and the courage to act as critic and judge of the king. Before making the direct accusations of v 9, he told his famous parable. Some biblical parables were meant to puzzle, but not this one. David was misled into supposing that Nathan was describing a genuine incident, and so he pronounced sentence before realizing what Nathan really meant. David knew that the proper penalty for the theft of a sheep was fourfold repayment (Ex. 22:1), but he also expressed his indignation – so heartless a thief deserved to die. In this way he condemned himself.

The purpose of the parable was not only to induce David to condemn himself, but also to portray vividly the realities of the situation. Kings, if they were greedy, had the power to grab anything they wanted, and ordinary citizens were helpless. Nathan went on to point

out how greedy David had been. In addition to his wives, he had apparently taken Saul's concubines (8) as a symbol that he had taken over royal control from Saul.

Vs 11–14 give God's verdict. David himself would survive into old age, but bloodshed in his own family would *bring calamity* upon him. The following chapters show how true this prophecy was. Absalom fulfilled the prediction of v 11 literally (16:22). It is important to notice, however, that God's punishment was accompanied by pardon, because David was repentant (13). David's honest repentance is very different from Saul's attempts to deceive Samuel (1 Sa. 13 and 15). The title of Ps. 51 links this psalm of penitence with this episode.

12:15–31 The birth of Solomon. Nathan's final prediction, that the illegitimate child would die, was the first to be fulfilled. David did not accept it fatalistically. This passage emphasizes how much David cared for the baby and draws attention to his anguish during its final illness. His feelings were so deep that he ignored the usual conventions, causing anxiety to *his servants*. David's sincere grief, as well as his care for Bathsheba, have the effect of attracting the reader's sympathy. The writer's purpose, however, was to show how effective God's verdict was: David's punishment had begun.

The chapters that follow continue the story of David's troubles. Two verses in this passage (24–25), however, show that while punishing David, God was not forgetting Israel. The birth of *Solomon* was God's way of fulfilling his promise in 7:12–13. The message to David through Nathan that *the LORD loved* Solomon is a signal to the reader that this was the son chosen by God to be the next king. So God's plans for the future were laid. (Solomon does not reappear in the story until 1 Ki. 1.)

Vs 26–31 round off the story of the victorious war against Ammon. On this occasion David himself went with the army. Joab again demonstrated his loyalty to the king.

Note. 30 It is possible that the very heavy *crown* belonged not to the Ammonite king but to the idol of Milcom, the chief god worshipped in Ammon. (See the NIV mg. REB and NRSV.)

13:1 – 18:33 David and his eldest sons

The central figure of these chapters is Absalom, David's third son (see 3:2–3). The eldest son, Amnon, was murdered by Absalom, and it seems likely that the second son must have died young, since he is never mentioned again. At any rate, after murdering Amnon, Absalom was free to make his own bid for the crown.

13:1–22 The rape of Tamar. *Tamar* was Amnon's half-sister. Her mother was Maacah (see 3:2–3). Marriage with a half-sister was prohibited under the law of Lv. 18:11 and Dt. 27:22. Perhaps the king had the authority to suspend this law, as Tamar suggested (13), but at any rate Amnon plainly thought marriage was *impossible* (2). His lust, deceit and brutality make him a very unpleasant character – the eldest son of David, but obviously not a suitable man to rule Israel. However, the purpose of the story is not to moralize about Amnon, but to show how David's own household produced 'calamity' for him, fulfilling 12:11. David *was furious* (21), but evidently did nothing to punish the wrongdoer. That was a bad mistake because it only increased Absalom's understandable anger to the point of hatred.

13:23–39 The murder of Amnon. Until this point our sympathies have been with Absalom, but this passage reveals that his character was not much better than Amnon's. He was equally violent and equally deceitful. Presumably, he waited *two years* (23) before taking action, in order to deceive his father. This chapter shows that even the king's sons were not free to come and go as they pleased, but needed royal permission to leave the court. So Absalom had to lay his plans carefully, plans which included his flight to *Geshur*, his mother's home (37).

The detailed account of the false rumour that Absalom had killed all his brothers may have the purpose of demonstrating God's overruling to protect Solomon. Clearly, Absalom could have killed them all if he had wished, and if so, Solomon would have died with them. Later on, Absalom was ambitious to become king but at this stage his only motive was revenge upon Amnon.

V 39 adds a realistic human touch; after three years David's grief for Amnon had abated, and he began to think differently about Absalom, who was probably his eldest surviving son. This change of heart prepared the way for ch. 14.

14:1–20 Joab's scheme. We may reasonably deduce from v 19 that *Joab* had tried to persuade David to forgive Absalom and bring him back to the royal court. If so, he failed to persuade him. Joab seems to have been anxious to ensure a smooth succession, and clearly viewed Absalom as the man to succeed David. He thus had the interests of the nation at heart, but he twice gave his support to the wrong son of David (see also 1 Ki. 1:7).

Failing to persuade David, he decided to trick him instead and made use of a *wise woman*. Like Nathan in ch. 13, she pretended that there was a case for David to deal with in his role as chief judge. The 'moral' of her story was that the welfare of a whole family is more important than the proper punishment of an individual, and David agreed with her. Applying this principle, she argued that the welfare of the whole

nation was more important than the punishment of its crown prince (13) and that, therefore, Absalom ought to be recalled from exile.

Joab's fear was that David might die while Absalom was still in exile, leaving Israel in political chaos. The woman's words in v 14 seem to mean that God was sparing David's life long enough for him to bring back Absalom.

14:21–33 Absalom's return to Jerusalem. Although the Tekoan woman flattered David about his wisdom (20), his action towards Absalom was not in fact very wise. He allowed Absalom back into Israel but refused to restore him to his position at court. Absalom could have done David little harm if he had remained in exile, and he might have wished David no harm if David had welcomed him back. Instead, David's action deeply angered him and at the same time gave him every opportunity to build up a conspiracy against David. This passage shows what an attractive person Absalom was outwardly but also indicates his arrogance.

15:1–12 Absalom's conspiracy. There is no doubt that Absalom was a natural leader, with many skills and abilities. If his character had been different, he might have been an excellent king after David. It is remarkable that he was able to persuade so many people in Israel to support him and to turn against David. Vs 1–6 tell how he deceived people who were discontented with the judicial system and no doubt he made similar use of any kind of discontent. Even so, one would have thought that David's great benefits to the nation would have kept most of the population loyal to him. So Absalom's skills can be seen in his ability to build up strong support. Even Bathsheba's grandfather *Ahithophel* deserted David (12). Absalom was also skilful in achieving such a large-scale conspiracy without any rumour of it reaching the royal court. From various pieces of information we can deduce that Absalom gained many followers both in Judah (where *Hebron* was) and the northern tribes, but not many in Jerusalem. It is probable that to preserve secrecy Absalom dared not canvass support in Jerusalem to any extent.

Note. 6 By *the men of Israel* the writer may mean the northern tribesmen as opposed to Judah, but more probably he means both north and south as opposed to Jerusalemites.

15:13–37 David's flight. David had two choices, either to stay in Jerusalem and face a siege, or to flee to safety. He chose the latter course, which saved Jerusalem from damage and gave him time to manoeuvre and to organize an army against Absalom. So he headed eastwards, eventually reaching Mahanaim in Transjordan, Ish-Bosheth's former capital (17:24). Chs. 15 and 16 give detailed attention to the attitudes and decisions of some important individuals in this situation.

David's *officials* (14) had little choice, since Absalom would certainly have dismissed or even killed them. The *concubines* were given no choice at all, either by David or Absalom (16; see 16:22). His *men* (18) were David's personal troops, with his foreign bodyguard; the regular army was presumably supporting Absalom (see 17:1). The loyalty of David's personal troops, here voiced by their captain *Ittai*, ultimately gave him the victory.

It was a good sign for David that the two high priests remained loyal (24–29). It is interesting that David sent the *ark of God* back to Jerusalem, resigned to accept God's will for himself. Unlike the Israelites in Eli's time (1 Sa. 4:3–4) David did not believe that the ark would magically bring him victory. He could also make use of some loyal men in Jerusalem; his question to *Zadok*, *Aren't you a seer?*, more probably means 'Aren't you an observant man?'

Another loyal friend sent back to Jerusalem was *Hushai* (30–37), who must have been a well-known member of the royal council. The story as a whole makes it clear that *Ahithophel* was an outstanding adviser (see 16:23), and his support for Absalom was a cause of great anxiety for David. David therefore sent Hushai back, in the hope that he could contradict any advice given to Absalom by Ahithophel. It was an idea that proved successful (17:1–14).

16:1–14 Ziba and Shimei. The struggle for power was between father and son, David and Absalom. Which of them would get the support of Saul's family? David was quickly led to believe that they were siding with Absalom. *Shimei* was openly hostile to David, accusing him of causing the deaths of several of Saul's *household.* He blamed David for the murders of, at least, Abner and Ish-Bosheth (chs. 3–4). In response, David once again showed himself less violent than Joab, and also more willing to seek and to accept the will of God (10–12).

As for Saul's grandson *Mephibosheth*, *Ziba* persuaded David that he had turned traitor. Mephibosheth's real feelings about David are never recorded, but Ziba's accusation (3) was probably untrue. It is very difficult to see how the struggle between David and Absalom could have resulted in Mephibosheth gaining *the kingdom.* On the other hand, it is easy to see why Ziba made the accusation: a reward was immediately promised him.

16:15–23 Hushai and Ahithophel. Entering *Jerusalem* unopposed with his army, Absalom no doubt formed a council of advisers, among them *Hushai* and *Ahithophel.* Hushai's

purpose, as we know from 15:34, was to deceive Absalom and undermine Ahithophel's advice. He immediately succeeded in deceiving Absalom, implying that he believed that Absalom was *the one chosen by the* LORD. In fact, he was sure that David remained God's chosen one.

Hushai did not interfere with Ahithophel's first piece of advice. Ahithophel rightly saw that the public appropriation of David's *concubines* would create a total and permanent breach between father and son. It is likely that many Israelites had hesitated to support Absalom in case he and his father ended their quarrel; hostile reactions against David would then have been dangerous. Hushai probably took the view that Absalom's seizure of the concubines might gain as much support for David as for Absalom, so he said nothing.

17:1–14 Hushai's success. Ahithophel's next counsel concerned the military aspect of the rebellion. His scheme made good sense. Speed and surprise would win the war with very few casualties. Once David was dead, all opposition to Absalom would be pointless.

Hushai's advice was eloquently expressed (8–13). It was based on the fact that Absolom's army was bigger than David's. The flaw in his scheme (as Hushai well knew) was that it involved a long delay, and so would give David and Joab, with all their military experience, ample time to make proper preparations. Hushai's scheme was so bad, in fact, that Ahithophel soon committed suicide (23). The biblical author recognizes that Absalom and his officers were misled by God as much as by Hushai (14).

17:15–29 Before the battle. Hushai hurried off to send word to David, obviously before Absalom had made a decision. The detailed narrative of vs 17–22 emphasizes that the messengers were almost caught; their escape was another instance of God's overruling to frustrate Absalom.

Thanks to Hushai, David was able to make his headquarters in a fortified city, *Mahanaim*, while Absalom and his army, in due course, *crossed the Jordan* (24). Absalom's commander-in-chief *Amasa* lacked the skill and experience of *Joab*, to whom he was related. (He was also a relative of both David and Absalom.) Vs 27–29 indicate that even in Mahanaim, previously Ish-Bosheth's capital, David had influential friends; he could face the forthcoming battle with confidence.

18:1–18 Absalom's death. Inevitably, *the casualties that day were great* (7). Rebellions do not come cheap. *David's men* were able to show their superior experience, while Absalom's troops knew little about the terrain and suffered heavily as a result (8). But no doubt many men died on both sides.

The writer concentrates his attention on the lives of only two men, David and Absalom. Neither of them seems to have appreciated Ahithophel's perspective in 17:3, namely that the death of only one man (whether David or Absalom) would settle the issue. So David was ready to risk his life (and Absalom not only risked his life but lost it) but his troops were wiser than the king, and ensured that his life was not endangered. Joab ensured that Absalom's life was ended, and with his death the battle and the war ended too (15–16). Joab saw matters more clearly than David, who found it impossible to view his son as an enemy.

V 18 rounds off the story of Absalom, giving a fresh illustration of his arrogance. His only real *monument* was his grave, deep *in the forest*. His words imply that his three sons (14:27) had already died.

16:19–33 The news of Absalom's death. The choice of a messenger to the king depended on the content of the news. But was the news good or bad? *Ahimaaz* was confident that the news was good, but *Joab* knew that David was more interested in Absalom's welfare than in the outcome of the battle. So Joab chose a foreign soldier to bring David the bad news of Absalom's death. The story is one of the most poignant in the Bible, as David hoped for the best as he tried to interpret the unusual situation of two separate messengers approaching.

David's final pathetic words are ironic: if he had simply remained in Jerusalem he would have died instead of Absalom! David's deep and irrational grief proves how real was God's punishment, foretold by Nathan (12:10). It is the chief purpose of the writer to emphasize this point.

19:1 – 20:26 David's return and Sheba's revolt

Wars, and especially civil wars, may achieve their aims but they inevitably give rise to new problems. David had won, but the country had lost its unity, and chs. 19 and 20 reveal something of the consequences. David was eventually successful in re-establishing unity for the remainder of his reign, and so God's promises to him were fulfilled. He did not lose the throne, but his later years were unhappy ones.

19:1–15 Preparations for David's return. This section is concerned with three distinct groups of people: David's army, Absalom's northern supporters, and the representatives of the tribe of Judah. David could easily have offended any of these. He had to show graciousness and forgiveness to former rebels without angering loyal supporters.

At first, he was in danger of offending his

victorious army, till Joab once again took firm action. David's decision to make *Amasa* the *commander of* his army (13) had two motives. First, it would show all rebels the extent of David's forgiveness, since Amasa had been their commander. Secondly, David took pleasure in displacing Joab, who had been responsible for killing Absalom.

The northern tribesmen were ready to accept David as king once more, but plainly Judah showed some hesitation. We may infer that Absalom's revolt had divided Judah, and as a tribe they were uncertain about David's attitude towards them. It was, however, essential for David's position that his own tribe should give him solid support, and he made it his priority to win them over. Some friction between north and south resulted (see vs 40–43).

19:16–39 David's return. This whole section is set at the River Jordan, and it is the dramatic reversal of 16:1–14. The individuals who had reacted to David in various ways when he had been fleeing from Jerusalem now came to meet him as he returned victorious. David was forgiving to enemies like *Shimei* (18–23) and he rewarded those who had been truly loyal like *Barzillai* (31–40). *Ziba* once again reached David before his master *Mephibosheth*, but this time Mephibosheth presented himself and tried to undo the harm Ziba had caused (17–18, 24–30). Perhaps David could not decide which man was telling the truth, or else he felt that Ziba's loyalty deserved some reward. The important consequence was that Mephibosheth lost some property but retained his life and presumably his honoured position at court.

19:40 – 20:13 Rebellion in the north. The final verses of ch. 19 revert to the tense relationship between Judah and the northern tribes. The northern group were half-hearted about David (40), even though they claimed a greater share in the king (43). The friction between them and Judah resulted in another revolt against David, led by *Sheba* (20:1). It was in reality a small affair which ended without a battle, but it had wide appeal nevertheless (20:2).

The personal interest centres on Joab and his relative Amasa. Amasa showed that he was a poor general, and it was Joab yet again whose ability and loyalty to David would defeat the enemy. The story also demonstrates again Joab's brutal and ruthless character.

20:14–26 The end of the rebellion. The weakness of this revolt is demonstrated by the fact that Sheba retreated, never stopping to fight, to a frontier town on the northern border of Israel, *Abel Beth Maacah*. Even here he did not fight a battle but waited to be besieged. It seems that Abel was a poor choice, because it was a town with a reputation for wisdom and for *peaceful* conduct (18–19). The citizens acted swiftly and ended the hostilities by killing Sheba. Once again the death of a single individual settled the issue.

The victorious *Joab* went back *to the king in Jerusalem*, confident that he was once again commander-in-chief of *Israel's entire army*, and David must have confirmed this position (23). The last verses of the chapter list David's officials towards the end of the reign, a list which contains some changes from the earlier list of 8:16–18. The mention of *forced labour* is new, and shows that David's administration had to depend on forcing numbers of free-born Israelites into some state works and projects. The most poignant change is the absence of any mention of David's sons. Some of his sons were still alive, including Adonijah and Solomon, but Amnon and Absalom were both dead in tragic circumstances. The story of David's sons is continued in 1 Ki. 1.

21:1 – 24:25 David's reign: problems and prospects

These last four chapters of 2 Samuel are often referred to as an appendix to the book. The contents are varied, and the chapters interrupt the story of the succession struggles. There is, nevertheless, more unity of theme and deliberate purpose on the part of the writer than is at first apparent. These chapters illustrate some of David's other problems, and show how God provided guidance and loyal supporters for David in all his difficulties. They show too how his experiences of life and of God together made him 'the sweet psalmist of Israel'. Lastly, this section opens some important future perspectives.

21:1–22 Famine and warfare

21:1–14 The execution of Saul's family. Most of the troubles of David's reign were due to warfare, but the land of Israel suffered occasional droughts and famines too, and this chapter recalls a particularly serious *famine*, perhaps fairly early in David's reign. The oracle of God, when consulted (1), referred to an episode not mentioned elsewhere, an attack by Saul on the people of the city of Gibeon. The background is that in defending Israel Saul had attacked not only the Philistines but any non-Israelites who posed a threat. But the *Gibeonites* posed no threat, and to break the old treaty with them (see Jos. 9) was a serious crime. The wrong had never been put right. By modern laws, to punish Saul's family for Saul's sins would be equally wrong, but in the ancient world the principle of a family's common responsibility was strongly held. Even so, we may still feel that the Gibeonites were vindictive.

The writer's chief reason for telling this story is to show that David was not responsible for the deaths of the seven men now executed. No doubt there were some Israelites like Shimei (16:5–8) who accused David of hatred of Saul's family. This passage, therefore, reminds the reader about David's treatment of *Mephibosheth*, and shows his scrupulous care for the remains of Saul and his descendants.

21:15–22 Incidents from the Philistine wars. This section gives us a fragment from the Philistine wars of David, and it is not clear what its purpose is, nor why it has been placed at this point. In some ways it lays a foundation for ch. 22, which contains a psalm in which enemies and warfare are a major theme. Probably the chief reason for including these verses is to provide a setting for the description of David as *the lamp of Israel* which must not be *extinguished* (17). The king was seen by his men as vital to the welfare of Israel, a very different picture from the description of a king by Samuel in 1 Sa. 8. David had been punished by God, as earlier chapters have shown, but in these closing chapters we are reminded of the close relationship between Yahweh and David, Yahweh's chosen and anointed king.

Note. 19 *Elhanan . . . killed Goliath.* This is a puzzling statement, but both this verse and its parallel in 1 Ch. 20:5 (where the words are rather different) contain textual problems. It is unlikely, therefore, that it contradicts the story of David's defeat of Goliath in 1 Sa. 17. One possibility is that 'Elhanan' was David's personal name and 'David' his throne-name.

22:1 – 23:7 Two psalms of David

22:1–51 A song of praise. This song is also included, with minor differences, in the book of Psalms, as Ps. 18. Its place among the psalms shows that it was used as a general thanksgiving hymn. Its use here is partly to illustrate David's reputation as a psalmist, but more particularly to give a general commentary on David's experience of God. Much of his reign had been occupied in struggling against a variety of *enemies* (1) but he had won through to a period of peace. He must have been a man of great ability, but in this psalm all the credit for victory and success is given to God.

Vs 1–7 describe what God had been to David, above all his *deliverer*. Vs 8–20, in very pictorial language, describe God responding to David's pleas for help, and emphasize God's great power. Vs 21–25 refer to the basis for God's intervention: as a king, David had upheld God's laws among the Israelite people. (V 24 is plainly not recalling David's sins against Uriah; the psalm is concerned with royal policy, not personal conduct.)

Vs 26–37 turn to the theme of God's faithfulness; he had truly kept his covenant with David (see ch. 7). Vs 38–46 consider David's enemies, especially the foreign nations he had defeated with God's help. Vs 47–51 round off the psalm with renewed praise. The last words of the chapter look forward: God would keep covenant with David's *descendants* too. For more detailed comments, see the commentary on Ps. 18.

23:1–7 David's last words. This second psalm is about the same themes as ch. 22 but puts more emphasis on the *covenant* God had made with David, and pays less attention to enemies. Such *evil men* need careful handling, but their end is certain (7).

The psalm recognizes the prophetic *Spirit* which inspired David as a *singer of songs*. Above all, however, David's kingship is vividly described. Because his rule was carried out *in righteousness* and *in the fear of God* it was wonderfully beneficial to Israel (4). The *salvation* and the fulfilment of David's *every desire* mentioned in v 5 also relate to his rule; victory and prosperity for Israel are meant.

23:8–39 David's mighty men

The help God gave to David against his enemies has been acknowledged in the two psalms. The writer now testifies to the human help he received, and lists his outstanding soldiers. First, there was an elite group called *the Three* whose heroism is illustrated in vs 8–12. Vs 13–17 mention the exploits of three others, unnamed, who belonged to *the Thirty*. Vs 18–23 pick out two others from the Thirty, *Abishai* and *Benaiah*, both of whom have been mentioned in earlier chapters.

Asahel (24) was killed early in David's reign (2:23), and the death of *Uriah* (39) has also been described (11:17). This suggests that other men were added to the Thirty when necessary to keep the number correct. Thus the number *thirty-seven* (39) can be explained.

24:1–17 Census and plague

This is a puzzling chapter for a modern reader; though if we are wise we all recognize that God's actions may at any time be inscrutable, beyond our understanding. Here, the biblical writer does not explain why Yahweh was angry with Israel (1), nor why a census was sinful. There is evidence that in the Ancient Near East a census was thought to be dangerous and likely to attract divine anger. The simple fact is that this census was followed by a plague, and the biblical writer sees God's hand in it. In 1 Ch. 21:1 Satan's activity is mentioned, but the writer of Samuel is more concerned to stress God's control of all historical events. God's

intervention was proved, in any case, by *the word of the* LORD (11); in fact, the plague was the least of three possible evils.

V 16 introduces us to *the threshing-floor of Araunah.* As early readers would have known at once, this was the site of the future temple, erected in Jerusalem by Solomon. It was precisely at this site, then, that God's presence was revealed in this plague situation. God's anger and God's power had been demonstrated; now God's mercy too was made evident to Israel.

24:18–25 The new altar

This final paragraph brings the books of Samuel to an end, with a strong forward look. The threshing-floor of Araunah becomes a sacred place, a shrine for sacrifices, offerings and prayer (25) – in fact, Solomon's temple in embryo. Here is a scene of hope and fellowship (and the plague came to an end).

Despite David's sin (10), he appears in a good light in this chapter. He confessed his sin, he was careful to consult God's prophet, he interceded for his people (17) and he paid Araunah in full for all he took from him. In earlier chapters, David has been a far from perfect king, and he is still seen here to be a sinful man; but he nevertheless left a good example for later kings to follow, not least in his concern for the proper worship of God. These concerns continue into the books of Kings, which go on to complete the story of David.

D. F. Payne

1 AND 2 KINGS

Introduction

Title and place in the canon

The two books of Samuel and the two books of Kings were originally meant to be read as one. 1 Kings continues the account of David's reign begun in 2 Samuel, and the first two chapters provide the conclusion to the court history of David (also called the succession narrative), which breaks off at the end of 2 Sa. 20. The break between 1 and 2 Kings interrupts the account of the reign of Azariah and the ministry of Elijah.

The original unity of the four books is reflected in the title which they bear in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT, made in the third and second centuries BC) – 1–4 *Basileiai*, the four books of 'kingdoms' or 'reigns'. We cannot be sure when the division into four books first occurred or why, but it has been suggested that it was the work of an editor who divided the OT into lectionary rolls of roughly equal length.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Kings conclude the section known as the Former Prophets (*i.e.* Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings), the historical books which span the period from the Israelites' arrival in the promised land to their eventual loss of the land and Judah's exile in Babylon. In understanding the message of the books of Kings this wider context should always be borne in mind.

Date and authorship

Date of Kings in its present form

In its present form, Kings cannot have been written before the release of King Jehoiachin from prison in 561 BC, roughly midway through the Babylonian exile. This is the latest event recorded in the work, which therefore seems to have been composed sometime between that date and the first return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem in 538 BC. The work was evidently not a free composition of the exilic period, however, since the author makes use of a variety of older sources, some of which he names (see below).

Recent theories of the composition of Kings

In the 1940s Martin Noth brought a new perspective to the study of 1 and 2 Kings. He argued that Kings should be seen as part of a larger work, beginning with Joshua and ending with 2 Kings, produced by a single author during the exile. Although this writer used older sources, he was more than simply an editor or compiler; he was an author who welded his sources into a unity which expressed his own understanding of Israel's history. In particular, Noth argued that the whole work was strongly coloured by the theology and style of Deuteronomy. Hence it has been dubbed the 'Deuteronomistic (or Deuteronomic) history'. Noth's 'Deuteronomistic historian' stresses that cultic worship should take place only in the Jerusalem temple (even kings who 'did what was right in the eyes of the LORD' are criticized for not doing away with alternative places of worship, 'the high places'; *e.g.* 2 Ki. 12:2–3). He is also strongly critical of idolatry, seeing it as the cause of the ultimate disaster of the exile (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 14:15–16; 2 Ki. 21:13–14).

Some scholars who accept Noth's case for a Deuteronomistic history have adapted his theory to include two or more editions of the work. Several who take this view argue that the first edition, written before the exile, came to a climax with the reforms of King Josiah. The sudden and unexpected reversal of Judah's fortunes after Josiah's reign, leading to the catastrophe of the exile, made a second edition necessary. However, most arguments in favour of two or more editions of the work depend on assumptions about how an original author would have compiled and structured his history. Recent studies of ancient methods of composition have cast doubt on these assumptions, and currently there is a trend away from the two-edition view. For example, although 2 Ki. 25:27–30 may strike a modern reader as an unlikely way for the original author to have rounded off his work, it is now appreciated that it could well have been perfectly acceptable in an ancient context. In short, there is no good reason to reject the view that Kings (if not the whole Deuteronomistic history) is the work of a single author, working in the second half of the exile.

In view of the range of sources he was able to draw on (see below), and his interest in the fate of King Jehoiachin, the author was probably one of the high-ranking civil servants ('nobles', 'officials' and 'leading men of the land') exiled with

Jehoiachin in 597 BC (2 Ki. 24:12–15), ten years before Jerusalem was destroyed. He may even have been a scribe, whose profession (had the exile not intervened) would have been to record the affairs of the royal court. We may guess that he wrote primarily for his fellow-members of the exiled royal court who were searching for a theology that would make sense of the catastrophe which had overtaken them, their king, their city and their land. The theology which he offers, expressed in the form of a history, is rooted in the teachings of Deuteronomy and shot through with a high view of the prophetic word. He shows his readers time and again how God's word, delivered by his prophets, has an irrevocable influence on events, warning, judging and bringing judgment to pass (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 11:11–13, 31–39; 19:15–18; 21:17–29; 2 Ki. 9:1–10, 36–37; 17:7–23; 21:10–15).

Sources

The author evidently had sources at his disposal from which he derived information such as the length of each king's reign and (for the period of the divided monarchy) synchronisms between the reigns of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah. Such information was probably contained in king lists and chronicles of the sort which we know were kept by the kings of Assyria and Babylon. Such sources sometimes contained brief accounts of selected events and achievements of a king's reign and so may have supplied the writer with, for example, his account of Solomon's building projects (1 Ki. 9:15–19). However, there is much material in Kings, particularly the numerous stories of the words and actions of the prophets, which must have come from other kinds of sources.

Sometimes the reader is referred to another work for further information, *e.g.* 'the book of the annals [RSV, 'acts'] of Solomon' (1 Ki. 11:41), 'the book of the annals [RSV, 'Chronicles'] of the kings of Israel' (1 Ki. 14:19) and 'the book of the annals [RSV, 'Chronicles'] of the kings of Judah' (1 Ki. 14:29). While the writer's original readership presumably had ready access to these, they have unfortunately not survived for us to study. (The biblical books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, written after the return from exile, are not to be confused with the 'Chronicles' mentioned in 1 Ki. 14; however, they may occasionally preserve some additional information from those lost works.)

Occasionally the writer leaves the perspective of his pre-exilic sources unchanged, *e.g.* in 1 Ki. 8:8, where the expression 'they are still there today' stems from a time before the temple was destroyed.

Biblical history writing

It is an impressive achievement of the author that he has produced a work which preserves the variety of his sources while welding them into a powerful unity. But what kind of writing is it? Even a first impression of the work is enough to tell us that, although it deals with history, it is not history writing of the kind produced by modern historians. The very fact that the writer refers us to other sources for further information shows that he has given us only a selection of the material available to him. In other words, he has chosen to include only that material which serves his aims. This is also suggested by the very uneven and selective treatment given to the long procession of kings. The treatment of Solomon's reign occupies seventeen times as much space as that of Joash's reign, although both reigns lasted forty years.

Furthermore, the writer's view of what made a king important is very different from that of a modern historian. Thanks to archaeological discoveries we know that Omri was a king of some importance on the international scene, yet the brief and disapproving account of his reign in 1 Ki. 16:23–28 gives us no hint of this. Perhaps his true political stature was reflected in 'the book of the annals of the kings of Israel', to which we are referred, but the writer of Kings was not interested in telling us about it. To him, Omri's significance was that he 'did evil in the eyes of the LORD', leading Israel deeper into apostasy.

Indeed, no king is judged by the writer of Kings according to his success or failure in the political arena or on the battlefield. The single most important criterion for the author is what a king did or did not do for the cultic worship of his people. Kings who upheld its purity are praised (though even they are censured for failing to 'remove the high places') while those who fostered idolatry are condemned. And kings who sponsored idolatry to a sufficiently serious extent are held responsible for the eventual destruction of their kingdoms. It is true, of course, that all history writing involves interpretation as well as the reporting of events. But the degree of selectivity and interpretation found in Kings (and in other OT history writing) is striking by modern standards.

In short, what we have here is not a straightforward history but a history which contains its own theological commentary on events. The author's intention was not so much to record the events themselves as to explain their significance.

Structure

If there is a careful arrangement of the material in 1 and 2 Kings, it is not immediately obvious,

and the structure of the work has been discerned in a variety of ways.

It is perhaps most helpful to see a basic threefold structure. The first part deals with Solomon's accession and reign (1 Ki. 1 – 11); the second deals with the period of the two separate kingdoms, Israel and Judah (1 Ki. 12 – 2 Ki. 17); and the third deals with the time after the fall of Israel when Judah survived alone (2 Ki. 18 – 25). There is a clue that the writer himself may have had some such division in mind, in that the first two parts conclude with extended theological comments (1 Ki. 11:1–13; 29–39; 2 Ki. 17:7–23, 34–41).

The middle section is by far the longest (twenty-eight chapters) and can itself be divided helpfully into three parts. The first, 1 Ki. 12:1 – 16:28, deals with the kings of Israel and Judah from Solomon's death to the reign of Omri in Israel. The second, 1 Ki. 16:29 – 2 Ki. 10:36 deals with the dynasty of Omri and its horrific downfall and is concerned almost exclusively with events in Israel. There are only two brief interludes about Judah in the whole of this section (1 Ki. 22:41–50 and 2 Ki. 8:16–29), *i.e.* a total of only twenty-four verses out of more than sixteen chapters. The treatment of Omri's dynasty has been extended by the inclusion of stories concerning Elijah and Elisha. Elijah dominates 1 Ki. 17 – 19 and 21 and 2 Ki. 1:1 – 2:18; Elisha is the major prophetic figure in 2 Ki. 2:19 – 8:15 (with further appearances in 9:1–3 and 13:14–21, the latter being outside the section we are discussing). Stories of other prophets also help to swell the account of this period (1 Ki. 20:13–43; 22:1–28). The third part consists of 2 Ki. 11 – 17 and once again deals with kings of Israel and Judah.

The message of 1 and 2 Kings

Kings begins with the monarchy at its high point as Solomon succeeded David as ruler over a united kingdom. In the first few chapters the climax of the whole of the Deuteronomistic history is reached with the building of the temple. But the glories of Solomon's reign were short-lived. His own foibles led to the kingdom dividing as soon as he was dead. The sins of Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, set the north on the road to disaster, and the writer provides plenty of signs that Judah had the potential to go the same way. After Israel had fallen, Judah enjoyed the reigns of two reforming kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, who seemed likely to lift their kingdom to new heights and save it from the fate of Israel. But both reigns were followed by dramatic reversals, and it became plain that even a king of Josiah's stature could not avert disaster. At the end we are left with the depressing conclusion that disaster was inevitable, given that no-one (and therefore no king) is sinless (*cf.* 1 Ki. 8:46). The writer admits that even David, his prototype for the good king, was not perfect (1 Ki. 15:5). If the prototype fell short, what hope could there be for any who came after him?

Kings thus demonstrates how it was that God destroyed his own people and sent them into exile. Its main purpose is to justify God's terrible decision by showing that the kings of Israel and Judah, almost without exception, were hopelessly flawed. The kings were not alone in this, of course; the people as a whole possessed a chronic tendency to sin.

Is Kings, therefore, a history without hope? It certainly offers a negative assessment of human institutions. In this respect it concludes a theme begun in the book of Judges. That book ends with the failure of the judges as an institution and the hope that monarchy might have something better to offer (Jdg. 21:25). In Kings, monarchy is put to the test and likewise fails.

On the other hand, Kings illustrates God's commitment to Israel and his involvement in the nation's political life. It therefore warns us that political institutions are not to be treated as an arena where God's writ does not run. He is shown to be active there in grace as well as in judgment. Indeed, the interweaving of human freedom and responsibility with God's sovereignty is subtly portrayed throughout, discouraging a too simplistic view of their relationship. Both good and bad human actions are taken up by God and used to forward his overarching purposes. He is a God who works out those purposes in history, both by means of and in spite of sinful human beings.

Although there is plenty of emphasis on the fact that faithfulness brings blessing and faithlessness judgment, there is more to the writer's theology than a cause-and-effect connection between actions and consequences. God's freedom produces surprising turns of events. For example, Israel was not destroyed in the time of Jehoahaz, not because its kings showed signs of improvement but simply because God chose to show Israel mercy and grace (2 Ki. 13:4–6, 22–23; 14:26–27). But God's freedom is not only freedom to exercise mercy. His determination to destroy Judah remained fixed in spite of Josiah's unquestioned piety and far-reaching religious reforms. God's freedom means that he cannot be manipulated by human beings. It is not the behaviour of kings which shapes history but the sovereign will of God.

It is partly this emphasis on God's freedom that holds out some hope for Judah at the end of 2 Kings. Because God is free to act as he pleases, exile may not be his final word. But

hope also exists because, as the writer reminds the exiles, if God's people repent and seek him, he may forgive them and cause their conquerors to show them mercy (1 Ki. 8:46–51). The book is never any more explicit than this in suggesting what may lie beyond exile. There is no promise of a return to the land, nor of a restoration of the Davidic dynasty. (What hope could be pinned on the latter anyway, following its catastrophic failure to bring salvation?) The Christian reader may see the dynasty finally restored in the person of Jesus, the second David, but such a hope is nowhere expressed in Kings; for that we must turn to the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The historical background

The books of Kings cover a period of slightly over 400 years, from Solomon's accession in (or slightly before) 970 BC to the freeing of the exiled king Jehoiachin from prison in 561 BC. Only a brief sketch of the history of this period can be provided here. It is divided into three parts corresponding to the three major divisions of Kings as discussed above.

Solomon's reign (970–930 BC)

Solomon benefited from the peaceful conditions bequeathed to him by David. For at least the first half of his reign he enjoyed good relations with Egypt in the south and Hiram of Tyre in the north. Both were important trading partners. There were no major powers to threaten the security of Solomon's small empire. Egypt had ceased to be a great power in the Near East nearly two centuries before his accession. The Pharaohs of the Twenty-first Dynasty (1089–945 BC) undertook no foreign policy except to maintain secure borders and good relations with Egypt's neighbours. It was probably with Siamun of this dynasty (978–959 BC) that Solomon entered into an alliance sealed by his marriage to the Pharaoh's daughter (1 Ki. 3:1).

However, the latter part of Solomon's reign saw a deterioration of his foreign relations. There is a hint that his relationship with Hiram of Tyre became less cordial (1 Ki. 9:10–13), and he faced hostility from Edom in the south and Damascus in the north (1 Ki. 11:14–25). A change of dynasty brought Shoshenq I (Shishak) to the throne of Egypt in 945 BC; he gave asylum to Jeroboam when Solomon tried to kill him (1 Ki. 11:40) and attacked Jerusalem a few years after Solomon's death (1 Ki. 14:25–26).

The divided monarchy (930–722 BC)

Shishak's invasion of Palestine in the fifth year of Rehoboam (925 BC) was not followed up by any attempt to consolidate Egyptian control of the region. The days of Egypt's empire were past. Long-term threats to Israel and Judah lay elsewhere.

Israel's King Omri (885–874 BC) achieved considerable international standing, though we learn nothing of this from the biblical account. On the Moabite Stone (or Mesha Stele), an inscription by King Mesha of Moab *c.* 850 BC to commemorate his successful rebellion against Israel (see 2 Ki. 3:4–27), Omri is named as the king who had earlier conquered Moab and made it Israel's vassal. As late as 722 BC, Israel is referred to in Assyrian sources as 'the land of Omri'.

Aram ('Syria'; RSV), a city-state ruled from Damascus, became a threat to Israel in the ninth century BC. Under Ben-Hadad it attacked Israel to aid Asa of Judah (1 Ki. 15:18–20), perhaps around 895 BC. Another Ben-Hadad (probably the son and successor of the first) was the almost constant enemy of Ahab and his sons and twice besieged Samaria (1 Ki. 20; 2 Ki. 6 – 7). A brief period of peace between Ahab and Ben-Hadad (1 Ki. 22:1) was probably prompted by the emergence of Assyria as a common enemy. Threatened by the western advances of Assyria under Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC) a number of small kingdoms formed a coalition to oppose him. Shalmaneser's own account of the battle of Qarqar (853 BC) names Ahab and Ben-Hadad as members of this alliance and records that Ahab fielded 2,000 chariots and 10,000 foot-soldiers – one of the largest forces in the coalition. Although Shalmaneser claimed a victory over the alliance, Assyria's interference in the west was temporarily halted.

Hostilities with Aram were renewed as soon as the threat from Assyria had passed (1 Ki. 22:2–3). Around 843 BC Ben-Hadad was assassinated by Hazael who ruled in his place (2 Ki. 8:7–15). Israel barely survived the attacks of Hazael and his son Ben-Hadad III (2 Ki. 13:3–7), and even Judah was threatened (2 Ki. 12:17–18). However, military and economic revival came to both Israel and Judah under their respective kings, Jeroboam II (782–753 BC) and Azariah/Uzziah (767–740 BC).

However, Assyria was soon to change the face of the Near East. The campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC) began a drastic expansion of the Assyrian Empire, into which Israel was rapidly absorbed. Through the voluntary submission of Menahem (see on 2 Ki. 15:17–22), Israel became an Assyrian satellite state, probably in 738 BC. Following the abortive rebellion of Pekah, its territory was reduced and it became a vassal (732 BC), subject to greater Assyrian interference but still allowed its own king. When Hoshea rebelled, Samaria was destroyed (722 BC) and the district became

an Assyrian province under the control of a military governor. Part of the population was deported to other parts of the Assyrian Empire and replaced by foreign settlers. Thus the northern tribes lost their identity, and Israel ceased to exist.

Judah alone (722–587 BC)

Judah had submitted to Assyria under Ahaz in 734 BC (2 Ki. 16:7–8), but Hezekiah reversed his father's policies and rebelled. The Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 BC) invaded Judah in 701 BC and reduced its territory, capturing forty-six fortified cities and deporting 200,150 captives. Jerusalem almost suffered destruction at his hands but was miraculously delivered (2 Ki. 18 – 19). Judah continued under Assyrian control throughout the long reign of Manasseh, who is mentioned as a vassal by Sennacherib's successors Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal. Under Ashurbanipal (668–630 BC) the Assyrian Empire reached its greatest extent. He invaded Egypt and captured Thebes in 663 BC. But towards the end of his reign Assyria's hold on the western parts of its empire began to crumble. Josiah was able to extend his reforms into the old territory of Israel without interference.

Judah's independence was, however, short-lived. Josiah died in 609 BC while trying to prevent Neco, king of Egypt, from aiding the last king of Assyria against Babylon (see the commentary on 2 Ki. 23:29–30). Egypt briefly moved into the power-vacuum left by the collapse of Assyria, laying claim to Syria-Palestine. Judah thus became a vassal of Egypt. However, the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar defeated Neco at Carchemish in 605 BC, and Judah became part of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. In the same year Nebuchadnezzar succeeded his father Nabopolassar on the throne of Babylon.

Judah twice rebelled against Babylonian rule. The first attempt resulted in the deportation of King Jehoiachin and the cream of Jerusalem's population to Babylon (597 BC). The second attempt was better organized but just as ill-fated. It involved Zedekiah acting as a member of an anti-Babylonian alliance and looking to Egypt for support. Egyptian help was late and ineffective. In 588 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar was besieging Jerusalem, the army of Pharaoh Hophra set out to aid the city, and the siege was briefly lifted (Je. 37:5–8). The Egyptians, however, were soon dealt with, and the siege was renewed. In 587 BC Jerusalem was destroyed, and a second group of exiles made their way to Babylon. Although the exiled Jehoiachin was later treated with respect by Nebuchadnezzar's successor (2 Ki. 25:27–30), the rule of Judah's kings was finished.

Chronology

Scholars attempting to reconcile biblical data on the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah with the dates provided by Assyrian and Babylonian sources have faced many difficulties. This is not the place to outline the problems (for one example see the commentary on 2 Ki. 18:9–12) or their possible solutions. A good brief discussion can be found in W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 288–297. For a detailed treatment see E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 3rd edn. (Zondervan, 1984). The table on page 22 adopts Thiele's scheme with some minor emendations.

Further reading

D. J. Wiseman, *1 and 2 Kings*, TOTC (IVP, 1993).

A. G. Auld, *Kings*, DSB (St Andrew Press/Westminster/John Knox Press, 1986).

G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 2 vols., NCB (Eerdmans, 1984).

R. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1987).

J. G. McConville, 'Narrative and Meaning in the Book of Kings', *Biblica* 70/1 (1989), pp. 31–48.

Outline of contents

(*In this analysis the two books are treated as a whole*)

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Commentary

1:1 – 11:43 Solomon

1:1 – 2:46 Solomon's rule established

1:1–10 David and Adonijah. Here we find David in the weakness of old age, unable to keep warm or to perform sexually (1–4). Waiting in the wings is Adonijah, the fourth of six sons born to David by six different wives while he was king in Hebron (2 Sa. 3:2–5). David's first son, Ammon, had been murdered by the third, Absalom, who himself died while leading a rebellion against David (2 Sa. 13:23–29; 18:9–15). As no mention is made of David's second son, Chileab, he had presumably died too, leaving Adonijah as the eldest surviving son and natural heir to David's throne. The writer intends to remind us of these circumstances by pointing out that Adonijah *was born next after Absalom* (6). The description of him as a *very handsome* man recalls David's early good looks (1 Sa. 16:12) and further suggests that here is David's natural successor.

Adonijah had not only set his heart on the throne but had enlisted the support of some notable members of David's court (7, 9). The note that he acquired *chariots and horses . . . with fifty men to run ahead of him* (5) recalls the preparations which Absalom made before trying to grasp the throne (2 Sa. 15:1), just as David's failure to question Adonijah's actions (6) recalls his failure to nip Absalom's rebellion in the bud. David's weakness in this scene cannot be blamed entirely on old age, for it is consistent with his earlier failures to assert himself where his sons were concerned (2 Sa. 13 – 15).

Without David's knowledge, Adonijah arranged a feast with sacrifices and had himself proclaimed king at En Rogel, a spring just to the south of Jerusalem (9; *cf.* vs 13, 18, 25). This does not mean that David ceased immediately to be king, but rather that Adonijah would henceforth rule as co-regent. In view of David's advanced age, however, there can be no doubt that Adonijah would have been the effective monarch.

1:11–37 Nathan's intervention. We have already been told that Nathan the prophet was not of Adonijah's party (8), and now he emerges as the supporter of a rival claimant, Solomon. It becomes apparent in these verses that David had sworn an oath to Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, that her son would be the next king. (Either that or Nathan and Bathsheba set out to convince David that he had sworn such an oath when in fact he had not! But the fact that Adonijah did not invite Solomon to his celebrations suggests that he recognized him as having some claim to the throne and was making a carefully timed pre-emptive move.) Bathsheba's entry into the story reminds us of the lustful David of 2 Sa. 11 and throws the present picture of the impotent old man into sharp relief.

Although Nathan is given his title 'the prophet' several times in this chapter he brought no 'word of the LORD' to the failing king. Instead all is done by intrigue and clever persuasion. First, having been coached by Nathan, Bathsheba reminds the king of his oath and informs him of Adonijah's accession feast. Then Nathan makes his own carefully timed entry (*while she was still speaking with the king*) and broaches the issue from a different angle. Speaking less confrontationally than Bathsheba, Nathan pretends to think that David might have sanctioned Adonijah's celebration and politely points out that certain people, including himself, have not been invited.

David belatedly stirs himself and seizes control of events, swearing that his former oath will be fulfilled at once (30). Calling for Solomon's

other main supporters, Zadok the priest and Benaiah, he swiftly gives instructions for Solomon's immediate anointing at Gihon, a spring outside the eastern wall of Jerusalem.

1:38–53 Solomon becomes king. Accompanied by his chief supporters and David's bodyguard (*the Kerethites and the Pelethites*), Solomon goes to Gihon, significantly riding *on King David's mule* (38). David does not attend, perhaps because he was too frail to travel even the short distance to the foot of the eastern slope. The large crowd, assembled at short notice, indicates that Solomon was a popular candidate. Adonijah hears the noise of this crowd at En Rogel, and a full report of events soon reaches him; realizing that the game was up, his supporters quietly disperse.

Adonijah himself expects that Solomon (whom he refers to as '*King Solomon*') would want to kill him, so he seeks refuge by taking hold of *the horns of the altar*. Israelite altars (as illustrated by archaeological finds) had pointed projections which stood up from the four corners of the square top. Seizing two of these 'horns' gave a person sanctuary. The altar in question presumably stood in the tent which David had set up to house the 'ark of the LORD' (2 Sa. 6:17; *cf.* 1 Ki. 2 28).

Until this point Solomon has been a shadowy and passive figure (he is 'made king', 'caused to ride' *etc.*), but now he enters the story as a character in his own right. He acts decisively but with shrewdness and caution, promising to spare Adonijah's life so long as he remains loyal. Adonijah humbly acknowledges his younger brother as the new king (53), but there is no real reconciliation between the two men. We are left with the impression that matters are not yet settled.

In the final three verses of the chapter, Solomon is referred to four times as *King Solomon* (twice in reported speech and twice by the narrator himself); Adonijah, on the other hand, has been referred to only once as *King*, and that was in the reported acclamation of his supporters (25).

Thus the chapter ends with Solomon anointed king and David satisfied that Yahweh's will has been done (48). But God's will had previously been neglected; David is spurred into action only by Adonijah's bid for power and Nathan's concern for the safety of Solomon's supporters, including himself. As in the story of Joseph, God's activity remains hidden among the plots and ambitions of human beings.

2:1–12 The death of David. We are not told how long Solomon ruled as co-regent before David died. The story moves straight to the eve of the old king's death.

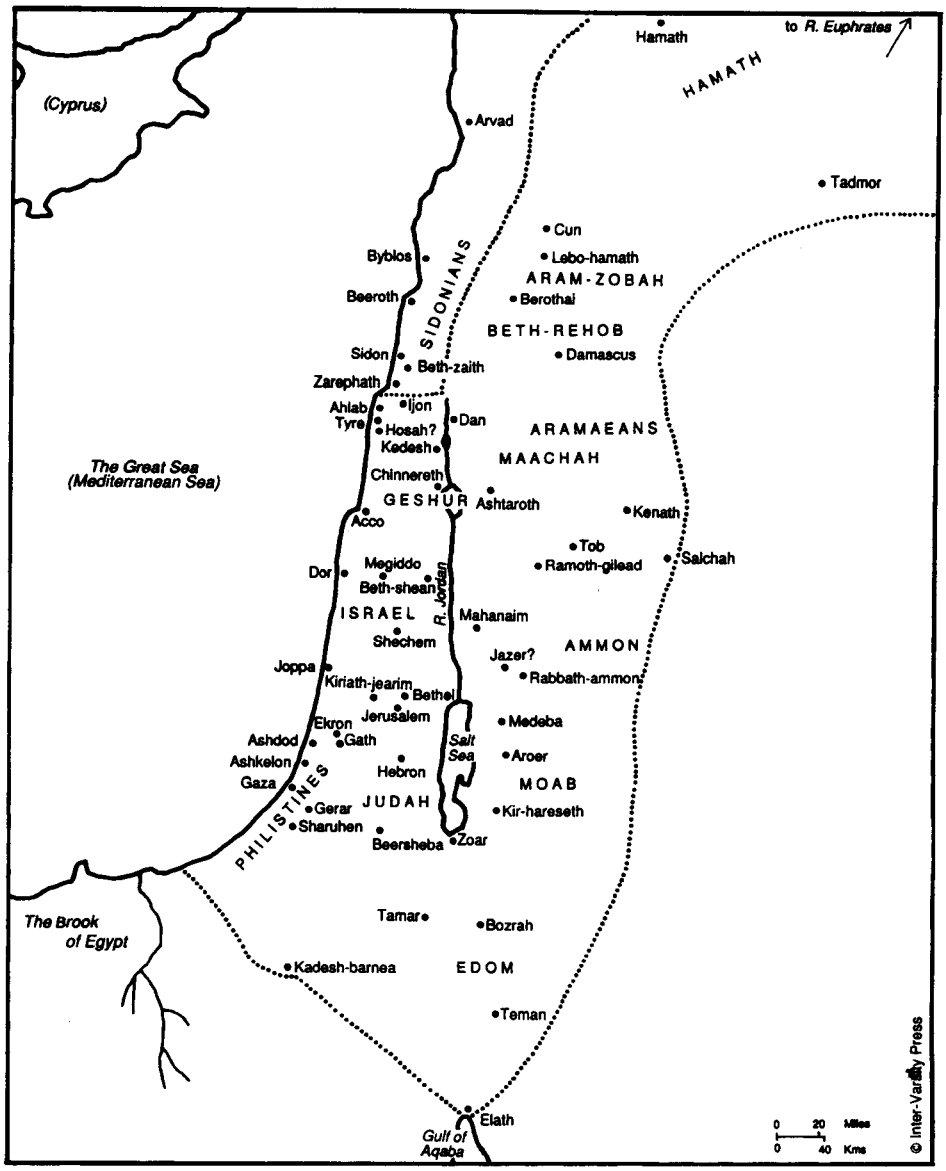
First, David gives Solomon advice on matters spiritual. He is to walk in Yahweh's ways and keep his commandments. Yahweh's promise of an everlasting dynasty (2 Sa. 7) is clearly understood by David to be conditional on the faithfulness of his descendants (4), a fact which gains significance as the story unfolds.

Secondly, David instructs Solomon to deal with certain items of unfinished business. Murders committed by Joab against David's will are to be avenged; the sons of Barzillai are to be rewarded for their loyalty; and Shimei is to be punished for cursing David at the time of Absalom's rebellion. No specific instructions are given concerning Joab and Shimei; David simply tells Solomon to act in accordance with his wisdom (6, 9). The deathbed speech which begins bright with spiritual counsel ends dark with menace. It is followed by a formal notice of David's death and burial, of a kind which occurs regularly throughout the books of Kings.

2:13–25 The death of Adonijah. Adonijah approaches Bathsheba in her role as queen-mother, an honoured position at the royal court, to request the girl Abishag as his wife. Abishag's status had been that of royal concubine (even though David had been incapable of sexual relations), and for a man to take such a concubine for himself could be tantamount to a bid for royal power (*cf.* 2 Sa. 3:6–8; 16:21–22). When the request is relayed to Solomon the implication is not lost on him; he interprets it as the opening gambit in a new move to seize the throne (22). Unlike his father, he is not slow to take action: Adonijah is killed the same day.

2:26–27 Abiathar banished. Solomon moves with swift efficiency to mop up all other traces of opposition to his reign. For giving support to Adonijah, Abiathar is expelled from his role as priest and banished to an internal exile on his estate at Anathoth, some 3 miles (5 km) north of Jerusalem. The writer sees his rustication fulfilling the earlier words of an anonymous prophet concerning the line of Eli (1 Sa. 2:27–36). Abiathar's place is taken by Zadok (35). Anathoth was a town allotted to the Levites and was later the home of Jeremiah (Je. 1:1).

2:28–35 The death of Joab. On hearing of Adonijah's death, Joab realizes his own danger and flees to *the tent of the LORD* to seek sanctuary at the horns of the altar. However, it is not his support for Adonijah which endangers his life so much as David's deathbed instructions to Solomon. While Benaiah has some scruples about killing Joab at the altar, Solomon has none about ordering Benaiah to do it. He appears to consider that the need to avenge Joab's victims and the wrong done to David overrides the law of sanctuary. He declares that by having Joab killed he is enacting divine retribution and that Yahweh's blessing of peace



The empire which King David bequeathed to his son Solomon.

will be upon the house of David *for ever* (33). Thus Benaiah kills Joab and takes his place as commander of the army.

The writer passes no comment on any of this and we are left wondering whether he approved of Solomon's actions or not. At least he knew that Solomon's prediction of everlasting peace would not be fulfilled!

2:36–46 The death of Shimei. Against Shimei Solomon takes the relatively lenient measure of confining him to Jerusalem, forbidding him to leave on pain of death. Was this all Solomon intended to do, or did he hope from the start that the condition would eventually provide a reason to put Shimei to death? Probably the latter, for David's instruction had been that Shimei be brought *down to the grave in blood* (9). When after three years Shimei breaks the condition, Solomon reveals that he regards his death as divine retribution for the wrong

done to David (44). Once again Solomon predicts that his reign will be blessed and (incorrectly) that David's dynasty will be established for ever (45).

David's unfinished business having been dealt with and all opposition squashed, Solomon emerges as a pragmatic, shrewd and decisive monarch, confident that he is enacting God's judgments and that he will receive God's blessing. It is not a particularly attractive picture, but we are left in no doubt that *the kingdom was now firmly established in Solomon's hands* (46).

3:1 – 4:34 Greatness and wisdom

3:1 Alliance with Egypt. In order to emphasize that Solomon was also establishing himself in the arena of international politics, the writer next tells of his alliance with Egypt, sealed by his marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh (probably Siamun of Egypt's Twenty-first Dynasty; see the introduction). A marriage alliance with the erstwhile superpower of the Near East must have enhanced Solomon's standing considerably. There is, however, another side to this political move; for his marriage to a non-Israelite was in breach of Dt. 7:3. It also points forward to his duplication of this sin in 1 Ki. 11:1–6.

3:2–15 Solomon at Gibeon. This is the first of four occasions when Yahweh speaks to Solomon (*cf.* 6:11–13; 9:1–9; 11:11–13). The writer feels obliged to explain why the event occurred at *the most important high place*, Gibeon: king and people all worshipped there because the temple had not yet been built (2). To clear Solomon of any suspicion of failure, the writer also states that Solomon loved Yahweh and walked in the statutes of David (3).

It is stated twice that God spoke to Solomon in a dream (5, 15), a form of communication which is treated with deep suspicion in some parts of Scripture (Dt. 13:1–5; Je. 23:25–32), but with great respect in others (*e.g.* the stories of Joseph and Daniel). Yahweh's first words to Solomon simply invited him to make a request. We might expect that Solomon, faced with such an offer from the Lord of all creation, would have needed some time to think, but his reply seems to have been immediate. This, at least, is in keeping with the decisive manner with which Solomon has acted so far, but his request itself is somewhat surprising. We would not have guessed that the self-confident Solomon, already praised by David for his wisdom (2:6, 9), lacked *a discerning heart*. Perhaps he had realized that more than mere shrewdness and cunning was necessary for the just leadership of God's people. Faced with that task he feels he is *only a little child*. He is also very conscious that the people of Israel are God's people and that he is God's *servant* (the terms *your people* and *your servant* are both used three times in the Hebrew of vs 7–9).

Solomon therefore asks for an understanding mind with which to rule the people. The Hebrew verb used for this activity carries the ideas of judging and justice. This is in keeping with the fact that in Israel the king himself was the final court of appeal (2 Sa. 14:4–17; 15:2; 1 Ki. 3:16–28) and was personally responsible for the promotion of justice. Hence in Ps. 72:1–4 the psalmist prays: 'Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice . . . He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor.' The ability to judge with righteousness and defend the poor is also an important part of Isaiah's picture of the ideal king who is to come (Is. 11:3–5). These same qualities should provide our agenda whenever we pray for 'Kings and all those in authority' (1 Tim. 2:2).

God commends Solomon's sense of priorities and bestows on him wisdom far beyond the ordinary. He promises him, in addition, those things which he could have asked for but did not: riches, honour and (if he would continue to walk in God's ways) long life.

On waking Solomon returns at once to Jerusalem to celebrate the momentous event with sacrifices and a feast before the ark of the covenant. There were clearly some things for which the high places, even *the most important high place* at Gibeon, were not adequate.

3:16–28 Wisdom demonstrated. Solomon's new gift is immediately demonstrated in the well-known story of the two prostitutes arguing over a baby.

Solomon proposes a simple solution: the child is to be sliced in half so that both women could share it. The ruling is so shocking in its brutality that it sounds like the callous response of a judge wearied beyond endurance by the claims and counter-claims of the two women. Indeed, the narrative is open to that interpretation. However, the very different reactions of the women allow Solomon to decide which was the real mother of the living child. Its life is spared, and Solomon's reputation is made. The people are in no doubt that he is equipped with *wisdom from God* for the dispensing of justice.

4:1–34 Internal arrangements of the kingdom. The first nineteen verses seem at first sight to be a rather tedious listing of Solomon's court officials. But the passage reveals some interesting facts about the administration of the kingdom.

First, we should note that the priests are

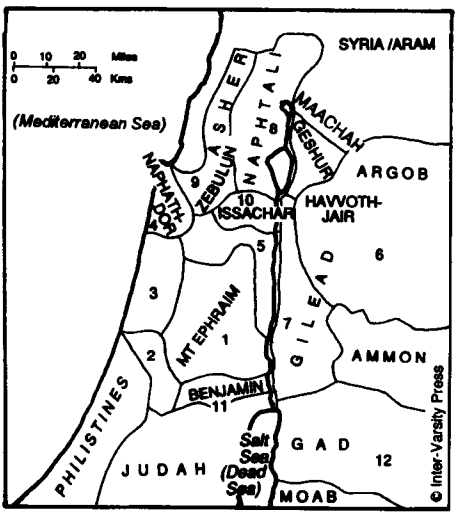
included among Solomon's *chief officials* (2–5). We are reminded that David had brought the cultic religion of the land firmly under royal control when he made Jerusalem the new capital of the kingdom. (It is surprising to find *Abiathar* included in the list in view of his expulsion in 2:26–27; perhaps he was not expelled so early in Solomon's reign as the position of that note might suggest.)

Secondly, the list of twelve officers (7–19) reveals a significant administrative reform. Many of the twelve geographical districts for which they are responsible do not correspond to the old tribal territories. Parts of the country had been divided up in fresh ways which ignored traditional tribal boundaries. It is hard to imagine such a move being warmly welcomed. But even more important is the fact that the districts administered by these twelve officers did not include the territory of Judah. (Judah had an officer of its own if the end of v 19 is read as in the RSV, 'And there was one officer in the land of Judah'.) This alerts us to the fact that the term *all Israel* is used in two different ways in this chapter. When v 1 tells us that Solomon *ruled over all Israel* it clearly means the whole kingdom; but when v 7 says that Solomon *had twelve district governors over all Israel* it means Israel (the northern tribes) as distinct from Judah. In fact, Judah and Israel are referred to as separate entities in v 20. It is therefore clear that Judah and Israel continued to be administered separately, as they had been under David (2 Sa. 24:1, 9).

There is, however, an even more important fact to be deduced from the list of officials. Their task was to administer the collection of taxes in kind to supply the needs of the royal household. Each of the twelve governors was responsible for supplying the court for one month of the year (7). This means that Judah had no role in the taxation system; the burden fell entirely on Israel. The description of the court's astonishing daily consumption in vs 22–23 gives us some idea of how great that burden must have been.

Nevertheless, all Israel and Judah *ate, they drank and they were happy* (20). The realm was secure, thanks to an army enhanced with a massive contingent of chariots (25–26). With such military strength Solomon should have had no difficulty holding together the empire which David had created, stretching from north-west Mesopotamia to the southern coastal plain (21, 24). However, this picture is modified somewhat in later chapters.

The chapter ends by praising Solomon's wisdom, stressing, with the aid of comparisons, his extraordinary depth of understanding and breadth of knowledge. For the writer this is not



Solomon's twelve administrative districts as described in 1 Kings 4: 7–19.

a change of subject; the wealth, strength, prosperity and greatness which were described in the preceding verses are all to be seen as manifestations of Solomon's wisdom. (We will find the same linkage in 10:14–29.)

And yet there is a tension in this chapter. For when we read it in the light of later events it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the extravagance of Solomon's court, and the burden which it placed on the northern tribes, were the seeds of that discontent which eventually split the kingdom.

5:1–18 Preparations for temple-building

The heart of the account of Solomon's reign is the long section (6:1 – 9:9) devoted primarily to the building of the temple in Jerusalem. This is framed by two notices concerning Solomon's dealings with Hiram king of Tyre (5:1–18; 9:10–14).

5:1–12 Solomon and Hiram. *Hiram king of Tyre* had earlier supplied David with timber, carpenters and stonemasons to build his residence in Jerusalem (2 Sa. 5:11). On hearing of Solomon's accession, Hiram sent a formal embassy to ensure that warm diplomatic relations continued between the two royal houses. Solomon took the opportunity to negotiate Hiram's help with another building project. The time had come to take up his God-given task of building a temple in Jerusalem (4–5).

Although he is styled simply *king of Tyre*, Hiram evidently ruled over a large part of the Phoenician coast and the forested mountains of Lebanon; men from Sidon and Byblos (Gebal) were among the workers he supplied (6, 18).

In return for the timber and craftsmen Solomon undertook to supply Hiram's court with grain and olive oil. The arrangement was embodied in *a treaty* (12). The amount of grain supplied each year to Hiram's court (11) was not much less than the amount consumed annually by Solomon's. In other words, the commitment must have virtually doubled the grain tax which the people of Israel had to pay.

5:13–18 Solomon's labour force. Having explained how Solomon secured the raw materials for the temple, the writer turns to the raising of the labour force. Solomon *conscripted labourers from all Israel*, totalling 30,000 men (13). It is not clear which of its two meanings *all Israel* has in this verse. These workers had to spend every third month in Lebanon; in other words, they were absent from their farms for a third of each year. In addition, 150,000 people were employed in the hill country at home, quarrying, cutting and transporting stone. The whole project took seven years to complete (6:38).

The writer doubtless intended to impress his readers with the grand scale of Solomon's preparations, but for the modern reader the account creates a certain tension which the narrator may not have intended. On the one hand, we cannot fail to be impressed that Solomon was able to command such a massive workforce and raise the taxes to pay for Phoenician help. On the other hand, neither can we escape the fact that the cost in human labour and the produce of the land must have imposed a crushing burden on the people.

6:1 – 7:51 Building the temple

6:1–38 The building. This chapter is clearly arranged in a symmetrical pattern in which the second part is the mirror-image of the first. The pattern has God's word to Solomon at its centre, emphasizing its importance: A^1 chronological note (1); B^1 description of the building's basic structure (2–10); C God speaks to Solomon (11–13); B^2 description of decoration and fittings (14–36); A^2 chronological note (37–38).

However, this chapter does not contain everything the writer has to tell us about the equipping of the temple. He describes its furnishings in 7:13–51, after giving an account of Solomon's royal palace. The reason for this rather surprising arrangement of the material is suggested below.

The opening chronological note does not date the beginning of the building work just in relation to Solomon's reign but also in terms of time elapsed since the exodus from Egypt. There are probably two main reasons for this. First, it invites comparison between the two events; it suggests that the building of the temple was as significant an event in Israel's history as that which saw the birth of the nation. Secondly, by placing the temple project in its historical context, it reminds us that Yahweh is a God whose purposes are worked out in history and whose plans are often long-term. The promise of a place which 'the LORD your God will choose . . . to put his Name there for his dwelling' (Dt. 12:5) took many lifetimes to find its fulfilment.

The description of the temple and its decoration contains several difficulties for the modern reader. There are some architectural terms which are not easy to translate, and much of the detail is difficult to visualize. It is a great pity that the text has not come down to us complete with ground plans, elevations and artist's impressions!

Vs 2–10 describe the basic shell of the building. It was rectangular and aligned on an east–west axis. The main part of the building, consisting of the holy place (*main hall*; 'nave' in the RSV) and the *inner sanctuary* (also called *the Most Holy Place*; 16), was about 90 ft (27 m) long, 30 ft (9 m) wide and 45 ft (13.5 m) high. The porch or vestibule (*portico*) was the same width as the rest of the building and added a further 15 ft (4.5 m) to its length. Three storeys of rooms were built around the outside (excluding the porch) and were half the height of the temple itself. These had their own entrance on the south side and did not connect with the interior of the temple. The purpose of these outer rooms is not explained, but they were probably for the storage of vestments and certain offerings, and perhaps provided accommodation for the priests on duty. Light entered the temple through windows which must have been set in the upper half of the walls, above the height of the outer rooms. The building was roofed with beams and planks of cedar.

The stones for the temple were all fully prepared at the quarry so that no iron tools were used on the building site (7). This odd detail, which interrupts the description of the outer rooms, is probably intended to show that the work was done in compliance with a commandment in Ex. 20:25 (*cf.* Dt. 27:5–6). This actually concerns the building of altars and instructs that only unhewn stones (*i.e.* stones in their natural state, as would be used to make a dry-stone wall) must be employed. Solomon's craftsmen were building a temple, not an altar, and they evidently felt free to use cut and dressed stone throughout. But they worked in the spirit of the commandment's proscription of the use of tools, making sure none were used on the temple site.

Inside the temple the stonework was completely covered with wooden panels, *cedar* on the walls and ceiling and *pine* on the floors (15).

The inner sanctuary must have had either a raised floor or a false ceiling (or both), reducing its height from 30 to 20 cubits (about 30ft/9 m) and making its interior a perfect cube (20). The panels on the walls were carved to portray flowers and gourds, and the walls, ceiling and floor of the whole building were all overlaid with gold, as were the cedar wood altar and the huge olive wood *cherubim* of the inner sanctuary. These cherubim probably resembled the winged sphinxes familiar from ancient Near Eastern art. Phoenician examples portray a creature with a human head, an animal body with four legs, and a pair of wings; they probably provide a close analogy to those produced by Solomon's Phoenician craftsmen. Cherubim also featured in a frieze carved around the walls, along with *palm trees* and *flowers* (29).

The lavish use of gold overlay sounds extraordinary but was in fact regular practice in the adorning of ancient Near Eastern temples. The motifs with which Solomon's temple was decorated (the gourds, open flowers, palm trees and cherubim) were also part of the common repertoire of ancient Near Eastern art, and even the basic ground plan of the building can be paralleled by a number of archaeological discoveries. Solomon's temple was unique in purpose but not in conception. In its architectural design and artistic decoration it very much reflected the conventions of the time. It is a striking example of how elements of a prevailing culture can be employed for the worship and glory of God.

The motifs used to decorate the interior of the temple may seem to infringe the second of the ten commandments, which prohibts the making of images 'of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath' (Ex. 20:4). Perhaps the commandment was understood to prohibit the making of likenesses only when there was a danger of them becoming objects of worship, and this danger was thought to be eliminated in a temple dedicated to the worship of Yahweh alone.

After describing the inner sanctuary (16, 19–21, 22b–28), the account moves outwards again, describing first the doors which closed off the inner sanctuary and then the doors between the main hall and the porch. Finally, we are led outside to *the inner courtyard* (36), a vague term which presumably refers to the immediate surroundings of the building.

A second chronological note rounds off the account, reminding us of when the temple was begun, telling us when it was finished, and giving us the total duration of the project.

We have not yet considered God's word to Solomon which lies embedded in this account (11–13). This word is said to concern *this temple you are building*, but it contains no further reference to the temple. What then is its purpose? The conditional nature of God's promise to David, already made clear by David in 2:4, is now restated by God himself in words which relate it to the temple-building project. God will *live among the Israelites* if Solomon will walk in God's statutes and obey his commands. In other words, the building of a temple will not guarantee God's presence among his people; God cannot be tamed and kept in a box, however magnificent the box might be. His presence depends on obedience and specifically now on the obedience of Solomon. While these verses stop short of criticizing the building of the temple, they do put the project in perspective by stressing the larger issue of obedience.

7:1–12 Solomon's palace. The account of the temple and its furnishings is divided into two parts of almost equal length by this short account of Solomon's palace buildings. As the temple was built first and then the palace (6:37 – 7:1; 9:10), we might logically expect the account of the palace to follow the dedication of the temple in ch. 8. But we will see that the writer had a particular reason for placing it here.

Immediately after the note that the temple took seven years to build (6:38) comes the information that Solomon spent thirteen years building *his palace* (lit. 'his house'). The Hebrew for 'his house' occurs twice in 7:1, highlighting the shift away from 'the house [*temple*] of the LORD' (6:37). Is there implicit criticism here of the fact that Solomon spent almost twice as long on his own house as he did building the house of God? Quite possibly, but the main purpose of this passage seems to be rather different.

David had already had a residence built in Jerusalem with materials supplied by Hiram of Tyre (2 Sa. 5:11), but Solomon required something on a much grander scale. Five distinct buildings are mentioned in vs 2–8: *the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon*, 'the Hall of Pillars' (*a colonnade*), *the throne hall* (also known as the *Hall of Justice*, for the king's throne was also his judgment seat, stressing that it was as ruler that he dispensed justice), Solomon's private residence and the private residence of the Pharaoh's daughter. (Since she is the only one of Solomon's wives whose residence formed part of this suite of buildings, the implication is that she was his chief wife. This is also suggested by the fact that she is mentioned so often: 3:1, 9:16, 24; 11:1.)

We are not told how these various buildings related to each other. They presumably joined to form a single complex, since they are referred to collectively as 'his house' in v 1. The palace complex was evidently adjacent to the temple with a passage connecting the two (*cf.* 2 Ki.

16:18). We are not given the dimensions of all these buildings, but it is clear that the *Palace of the Forest of Lebanon* alone was larger than the temple (2). The whole palace complex must, therefore, have dwarfed the temple spectacularly. In Jesus' day the massive temple built by Herod the Great dominated the whole of Jerusalem, but in pre-exilic times the royal palace must have been the city's most imposing building. And this is probably why the writer describes it where he does. Physically the palace dwarfed the temple, but in his account he dwarfs the description of the palace by surrounding it with lengthier descriptions of the temple and its furnishings. In the writer's view this restores the correct perspective; for the temple was the true heart of the city and of the nation.

7:13–47 The temple furnishings: the work of Hiram, craftsman in bronze. A namesake of the king of Tyre, the son of a Phoenician father and an Israelite mother, was brought from Tyre to Jerusalem to manufacture the bronze furnishings for the temple. His outstanding ability is mentioned at the outset and is amply illustrated by the descriptions of the objects which he made. As in the description of the temple itself, there are some details which are difficult to follow

The account of the work of Hiram for the temple parallels to some extent that of the work of Bezalel for the tabernacle (Ex. 36 – 38), and we are doubtless intended to note the broader parallel between the construction of the tabernacle and the building of the temple. However, while the tabernacle and its equipment were commanded in detail by God (Ex. 25 – 27, especially 25:9), no such claim is made here for the temple or its furnishings.

The purpose of the two huge pillars (about 27ft/8m high) is not clear. They did not support anything but were freestanding, located in front of the temple portico. They were topped with elaborately decorated, lily-shaped capitals. Their names, *Jakin* and *Boaz*, are something of a puzzle, but the most likely theory is that these were the opening words of two inscriptions. On the basis of the various expressions found in the Psalms it has been suggested that the inscriptions may have read roughly as follows: 'Yahweh will establish [*jakin*] thy throne for ever', and 'In the strength [*boaz*] of Yahweh shall the king rejoice.' If this is correct, the pillars may have commemorated God's promises concerning the Davidic dynasty. There are hints later in Kings that on taking the throne a king stood by one of these pillars to pledge himself to keep God's covenant laws (2 Ki. 11:14; 23:3).

Hiram's most impressive technological achievement was perhaps the huge bronze basin some 15 ft (4.5 m) in diameter known as *the Sea*. It was supported on twelve bronze bulls arranged in four groups of three, each group facing one of the cardinal points. According to 2 Ch. 4:6, its purpose was to hold water for ritual washing by the priests, but its size and design, as well as its name, suggest it was symbolic as well as functional. As God's power at creation had been displayed by his containment of the sea, the symbol of chaos (see the vivid word-picture in Jb. 38:8–11), so this giant bowl signified his upholding of the created order and his power over the forces of chaos which threaten it.

Hiram also made *ten movable stands*, decorated on the sides with *lions, bulls and cherubim*, and ten removable basins, which stood on them. These were also for ritual ablutions, and the fact that their locations are mentioned along with that of *the Sea* (39) suggests they were used in connection with it.

Vs 40–45 provide a summary of Hiram's work, adding some lesser items which do not deserve detailed descriptions (pots, shovels and sprinkling bowls). V 46 gives a tantalizing hint at the method used by Hiram to cast his products. The section closes with renewed emphasis on the greatness of his achievement: the weight of all this bronze work was never determined because there was so much of it!

7:48–51 The temple furnishings: items of gold. The list of gold items which Solomon had made for the temple (48–50) is very like the summary of Hiram's work in vs 40–45. It is as though we have here a similar summary without a detailed account to precede it. The craftsman is not named, unless the writer intends us to understand that Solomon made these items with his own hands (which seems unlikely). Solomon also contributed to the temple quantities of silver and gold which had earlier been dedicated to it by David. These were stored in the temple *treasuries* (perhaps in the outer rooms), though their intended purpose is not clear. In Jerusalem's subsequent history these treasuries were often the source of tribute for foreign kings.

8:1–66 The dedication of the temple

This long chapter divides naturally into seven sections. As in ch. 6, there is a mirror-image structure, which in this case spotlights Solomon's prayer as the heart of the account: A^1 introduction and gathering of the assembly (1–2); B^1 installation of the ark, with sacrifices (3–13); C^1 Solomon addresses the assembly (14–21); D Solomon's prayer (22–53); C^2 Solomon addresses the assembly (54–61); B^2 further sacrifices (62–64); A^2 summary and dissolution of the assembly (65–66).

8:1–2 Introduction and gathering of

the assembly. A huge assembly of people, representative of all Israel, was arranged for the dedication of the temple, which began with the installation of the ark of the covenant in the inner sanctuary. The setting was a feast in the seventh month, presumably the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles which, like the feast described here, lasted seven days (65; *cf.* Lv. 23:33–43).

8:3–13 The installation of the ark of the covenant. The ark was brought up from the old quarter of Jerusalem, which was known as *the City of David* (1) to distinguish it from the new royal precinct and temple area built by Solomon to the north. The ark had been housed there 'inside the tent that David had pitched for it' (2 Sa. 6:17), an expression which suggests this tent was not the same as 'the Tent of Meeting', the ancient relic of Israel's wilderness period which was brought to the temple with the ark. The account of the transfer of the ark to the temple, accompanied by sacrifices, is reminiscent of the account of its original transfer to Jerusalem by David (2 Sa. 6:12–19). But this time everything was on a grander scale; the ark's resting place was not to be a tent but the magnificent temple, and the sacrifices consisted of sheep and oxen beyond numbering (5).

The ark was eventually installed in the inner sanctuary. According to our writer, it contained only the two stone tablets bearing the ten commandments, but other relics were kept there (perhaps at an earlier period) according to Heb. 9:4 (*cf.* Ex. 16:32–33; Nu. 17:8–10). However, the importance of the ark did not lie in what it contained but in the fact that it signified the presence of God, or more precisely the presence of God's *glory*, with his people. Hence its loss to the Philistines in the time of Samuel was lamented with the words: 'The glory has departed from Israel' (1 Sa. 4:21–22), and the psalmist records the same event by saying that God 'delivered . . . his glory to the hand of the foe' (Ps. 78:61; RSV).

The connection between the ark and the presence of God's glory is also evident in the present passage. As the priests who had carried the ark and put it in place withdrew, *the glory of the LORD*, visibly manifested as a *cloud*, filled the building so that *the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud* (10–11). This echoes the first setting up of the tabernacle (containing the ark) by Moses: 'Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting . . .' (Ex. 40:34–35). In both cases, the phenomenon indicated God's acceptance and approval of what had been done; it provided a visible sign that God's glory had taken up residence. But the sovereign God was not bound to reside in the temple. Shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the prophet Ezekiel saw in a vision 'the glory of the LORD' leaving Jerusalem because of the gross iniquity of its people (Ezk. 11:23); this was later complemented by a further vision of God's glory returning to enter a future restored temple (Ezk. 43:4).

The significance of the cherubim with outstretched wings can now be more fully appreciated. A smaller version of these cherubim had been fitted to the top of the ark when it was first made, and the space between them was the place where God was present when he spoke with Moses (Ex. 25:18–22). Solomon's cherubim seem to have superseded the originals, indicating the place where God's 'glory' would reside. Hezekiah later spoke of God 'enthroned between the cherubim' (2 Ki. 19:15).

In response to the appearance of the cloud, Solomon prayed a brief dedicatory prayer in poetic form. The first line of this in the RSV ('The LORD has set the sun in the heavens') is taken from the longer Greek version and is not in the Hebrew; the NIV omits it. If we treat it as original, it may be saying two things. First, it can be seen to proclaim God as Creator of the sun and therefore superior to it (an important affirmation in view of the fact that the sun itself was worshipped by many ancient societies). Secondly, it supplies a contrast with the next line, which thus states that although God is the Creator of light he prefers to conceal himself in the darkness and obscurity of a cloud. The link between this and v 13 is unfortunately not clear. Solomon may have been expressing a wish that, in spite of his preference for obscurity, God would reside in his *magnificent temple . . . for ever*; or he may have been saying that the temple is entirely appropriate for a God who prefers to remain out of view. But neither interpretation fits happily with the view of the temple found in the longer prayer which follows and we must simply admit that the meaning is uncertain.

8:14–21 Solomon addresses the assembly. Solomon turned from facing the temple to face the huge crowd. The blessing he delivered (14) is probably to be understood as the whole of what is reported vs 15–21. In fact he began with the words 'Blessed be Yahweh . . .', a way of expressing praise for what God had done; namely, he had 'fulfilled with his hand what he spoke with his mouth' (a more or less literal rendering of the expression in v 15). In other words, God had shown his word to be utterly trustworthy. The rest of the speech expands on this, summarizing God's words to David through Nathan concerning a son who would succeed him on the throne and who would build the temple (2 Sa. 7:12–13).

Solomon declared that the moment of fulfilment had now arrived (20). Although he was not reticent about his own achievement ('*I have succeeded David . . . I sit on the throne . . . I have built the temple . . . I have provided a place . . .*'), Solomon acknowledged that it was ultimately God's doing, for it had all come about as Yahweh had promised. Human effort and divine sovereignty are here subtly interwoven.

A new concept of the temple is introduced in this speech. As well as being a place for the ark (21) it is 'a house for the Name of Yahweh' (17, 20; literal rendering, with related expressions in vs 16, 18–19). This becomes an important idea in the prayer which follows.

8:22–53 Solomon's prayer. Solomon signified the beginning of a new phase in the proceedings by taking up another position, standing before the altar and spreading his hands towards the sky. The introduction to his prayer (22–26) begins by echoing Dt. 7:9, but he speaks of God's covenant faithfulness specifically in relation to David. Taking up God's promise that David's dynasty would never end, he prays that this too would receive fulfilment. At the same time, he acknowledges that the promise is conditional on the conduct of David's descendants.

But the temple is the real subject of the prayer, and Solomon introduces that in vs 27–30. He recognizes the absurdity of supposing that Yahweh could *dwell on earth* (27); for even the highest reaches of the heavens are not sufficiently vast to contain him. Solomon is certainly under no illusion that Yahweh could somehow be contained in the temple he has built. His prayer is, therefore, not that God will take up residence in the temple, but rather that his attention will be focused on it to hear the prayers directed towards it. God will still be in '*heaven, your dwelling-place*' (30), but the supplications of king and people will be received in the temple. In other words, Solomon prays that the temple might be the meeting-place for human need and divine mercy. All this seems to be contained in the notion of God's *Name* being in the temple, a theme which recurs briefly in v 29. The concept of God's *Name* being in a place (Dt. 12:5 *etc.*) is, therefore, a way of expressing that God is present in a special sense, but without suggesting a crude picture of his limitation or containment. It is closely related to the concept of God's 'glory', which we found associated with the ark.

Some of the ideas in this passage find their NT counterparts in the person of Jesus, in whom God did indeed dwell on earth (Jn. 1:14), in whom the 'name' of God was made known (Jn. 17:6, 26), and who proclaimed himself to be the true and ultimate 'temple' (Jn. 2:19–22). In him, divine mercy met human need in the profoundest sense.

The next section of the prayer (31–51) consists of seven petitions which envisage particular circumstances in the life of individuals or the nation. These concern: oaths sworn before the altar (31–32); defeat by an enemy (33–34); drought (35–36); famine, pestilence *etc.* (37–40); the needs of a foreigner in the land (41–43); going out to battle (44–45); and captivity (46–51).

The first and fifth examples concern individuals, while the rest concern the nation. The second, third, fourth and seventh all involve the need for forgiveness and restoration.

What is the purpose of giving seven examples of circumstances in which people might pray towards the temple? We must note the significance of the number seven throughout the OT; it seems to signify completeness, fulfilment and perfection. (The number seven has an important role in the present chapter: the dedication of the temple, which took seven years to build, took place in the seventh month during a feast lasting seven days.) Probably, then, these seven examples are meant to represent all possible situations which could call forth the prayers of individuals and the nation. All contingencies are covered.

The first readers of Kings would not have failed to notice that the longest and final petition concerned their own situation: captivity in a foreign land (46–51). To them it urged repentance and held out the hope of God's forgiveness and the compassion of their captors. It did not, however, make any clear promise of return and restoration, nor did it mention the preservation of David's dynasty. The one meagre hint that return might eventually come about is contained in the reminder that God had brought them *out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace* (51). While this was mentioned primarily as a ground for God's forgiveness, it would perhaps have given the exiles a glimmer of hope that God would one day act in a similar way again.

This final petition begins with an acknowledgment that *there is no-one who does not sin* (46). Since this must include Solomon and his descendants, the phrase is pregnant with meaning: the captivity which is envisaged seems virtually inevitable, for what hope is there that a dynasty of fallible kings would live as God requires?

Solomon ended his prayer with a more general plea that God would always hear the petitions of king and people alike. The reason for his confidence in asking such a thing is then stated: God had called them out from among the nations to be his special people. God's

actions in the past, particularly those actions which clearly expressed his purposes, are his people's ground for confidence in his mercy in the present and the future.

8:54–61 Solomon addresses the assembly again. Solomon then turned back to the people to 'bless' them once again. He reminded them that God had fulfilled every one of the promises he had made to Moses and prayed that God would continue to be close to his people to maintain their cause. But Solomon's desire was not (or at least not solely) for the welfare of the people; he was inspired by an even higher motive – a longing to see God glorified in the world: *so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the* LORD *is God and that there is no other* (60). This sentiment is also expressed in the petition for the foreigner who hears of God's greatness and prays towards the temple (41–43). Finally, the people were urged to do their part by being wholly true to God's ways. It is by the willing obedience of God's people that the world will learn of God's character.

8:62–64 Further sacrifices. As befitted a momentous occasion, stupendous quantities of animal sacrifices were offered (apparently all in one day!). This took place in the middle of the courtyard that stood in front of the temple (the same as 'the inner courtyard' mentioned in 6:36?) because it was the only place where there was enough room. It is implied that Solomon took on a priestly role here, consecrating the court and offering the sacrifices, just as David had offered sacrifices when bringing the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sa. 6:17–18).

8:65–66 Summary and the end of the feast. All Israel had been represented by the assembly; and by sketching the northern and southern limits of Solomon's realm the writer takes the opportunity once again to glorify his reign. On the eighth day the people returned to their homes rejoicing.

9:1–14 Conclusion to the building of the temple

9:1–9 God responds to Solomon's prayer. Although this word from God is reported immediately after the dedication of the temple and is a reply to Solomon's prayer on that occasion, the writer dates it after Solomon had built not only the temple but the palace as well, which took a further thirteen years (9:10). Whereas in 6:11 we are told simply that 'the word of the LORD came to Solomon' (perhaps through a prophet), here God appeared to him once again in a dream-vision, as at Gibeon. The reference to Gibeon reminds us that the days of the high places are now over – or should be!

God tells Solomon that he has accepted his prayer and has put his *Name* in the temple for ever; the meaning of this is again explained in terms of God's attention being focused on the temple (3). This is followed by a third reference to the conditional nature of the promise to David. And it is the most sombre reference yet, for here the negative side is clearly spelt out. Solomon is told what will happen if he and the people (the *you* is plural, and see v 9) turn aside from God's ways and worship other gods: the nation will be removed from the land and even the temple will be cast out of God's sight (7) and become a heap of ruins (8). Clearly the promise that God's *Name* and *heart* would be there for ever was subject to the same conditions as the promise of an everlasting dynasty! By emphasizing the perils of disobedience, this solemn warning casts a shadow over the rest of the account of Solomon's reign.

9:10–14 Further dealings with Hiram. Just as the account of the building of the temple begins with Solomon's relations with Hiram of Tyre (ch. 5), so it is rounded off with a further note of their dealings. This time, however, the tone is not so positive, and this is not merely because it records a souring of the relationship between the two kings. Solomon's transfer of twenty cities in Galilee to Hiram (in exchange for a vast quantity of gold, 14) implies that Solomon's dues could no longer be raised by taxation. Had his building projects become too lavish? Furthermore, the cities given to Hiram did not meet with his approval and he called the district 'the land of good-for-nothing' (NIV mg.). The implication is that the immense prosperity enjoyed in Jerusalem did not extend to the northern parts of the kingdom.

9:15 – 11:43 Greatness and folly

9:15–28 Miscellaneous projects. Various building projects (administrative centres, store cities and military installations) throughout the kingdom are listed, all built by *forced labour* raised from among the foreign populations remaining within Israel's borders (15–23). Naval expeditions on the Red Sea also featured among Solomon's ventures, undertaken with the help of the seafaring Phoenicians. Their goal, *Ophir*, probably lay in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula or on the east coast of Africa (or may have included parts of both). A further note on these voyages for gold occurs in 10:11–12, where it interrupts the account of the visit of the queen of Sheba. There the fleet is called 'the fleet of Hiram', which suggests Solomon left his Red Sea trade chiefly in Phoenician hands. Nevertheless, the undertaking redounds to Solomon's glory, as does the quantity of gold, the precious stones and the *almug-wood* (apparently a type ideal for carving) which the voyages brought back.

The reference to Pharaoh's capture of Gezer (16) strikes a discordant note. In spite of Solomon's military might (4:26), Gezer (Jos. 21:21) had remained in Canaanite hands until conquered by the king of Egypt and handed over as a wedding gift to his daughter when she married Solomon.

10:1–13 The visit of the queen of Sheba. In this chapter the author returns to the related topics of Solomon's wisdom and wealth, bringing them to a climax before relating his fall into folly. The chapter shows how far news of Solomon's wisdom had spread, stresses the superlative nature of that wisdom, and illustrates the wealth which flowed to Solomon in the form of gifts and tributes from foreign rulers.

The queen of Sheba (in the south of the Arabian peninsula) made her long journey to visit Solomon because she had heard of his fame *and his relation to the name of the* LORD (1). A more straightforward translation would be that she had heard of 'the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD'. While this might refer to the temple, it more probably sums up everything which Solomon had achieved, for he had achieved it as the ruler appointed and empowered by Yahweh. The queen came to see the famous king for herself and to test him with riddles (a better translation than *hard questions*). The content of her questions is not revealed; the important thing is that Solomon was able to answer them all and there was nothing which he could not explain to her satisfaction. She was also vastly impressed by the luxury of the royal court and (lit.) 'the house that he had built'. (Does this mean the royal palace, as the NIV assumes, or the temple?) After praising him in lavish terms, she bestowed on him gifts of gold, spices and precious stones, thus adding further to Solomon's considerable wealth.

For comment on v 12 see above on 9:26–28.

10:14–29 More examples of wealth and fame. Solomon's revenues in gold are summarized, and we learn that the queen of Sheba was not the only Arabian ruler to heap riches on him; he received gold from *all the Arabian kings* (15). Solomon's empire was so located that he controlled the chief trading routes northwards from the Arabian peninsula, and much of his wealth in gold probably stemmed from that fact. Arabian merchants were forced either to trade directly with Solomon or to pay for access to outlets further north. We may guess that favourable trading arrangements were among the many unmentioned things which the queen of Sheba asked Solomon for (13).

To illustrate how common gold became during Solomon's reign, the writer tells of the 500 ornamental gold shields which he made, describes his elaborately carved and decorated throne overlaid with gold, and mentions the household objects of gold in the royal palace. Furthermore, the trading ships which Solomon operated along with Hiram brought back gold and silver from their three-year voyages, as well as ivory and exotic animals.

Solomon's wisdom and his fame in the ancient world are summed up for us in vs 23–25. Here we learn that the visit of the queen of Sheba was but one of many made by foreigners to Solomon's court; they came to hear his wisdom and showered him with gifts (including, of course, more silver and gold).

Finally, Solomon imported horses and chariots, exporting the latter to the kingdoms to the north of his economic empire and accumulating both for his own use (26).

All these snippets of information are woven into a vastly impressive tapestry. But the writer's handiwork also includes another thread. A strand of criticism runs almost invisibly through this whole section. The stipulations of Dt. 17 concerning the life-style of an Israelite king are subtly echoed here. 'He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold' (Dt. 17:17); this Solomon did. 'The king . . . must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them . . .' (Dt. 17:16); Solomon certainly did the former and probably the latter as well, for his horses *were imported from Egypt* (28). In other words, it seems that the writer of Kings is not only glorifying Solomon in this passage but also criticizing him. His greatness was partly achieved by overriding the stipulations of Deuteronomy. In view of the solemn warning given in the previous chapter, this passage rings loud alarm bells!

11:1–8 Solomon's foolishness. But this is only half the story. The writer now reveals that Solomon had many wives in addition to Pharaoh's daughter. Again this recalls a prohibition in Deuteronomy: 'He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray' (Dt. 17:17). The inobtrusive thread of criticism now becomes clearly visible. These were foreign women, from nations with which intermarriage was forbidden in Deuteronomy (v 2 summarizes Dt. 7:3–4). In the latter part of his reign Solomon built high places where his foreign wives could worship their native gods (7–8), and his own devotion to Yahweh became diluted (4–5). This is the ultimate irony: the king who built the temple, thus making the high places obsolete, went on to build high places himself – and for the worship of other gods! Twice in these verses we are told that in behaving this way Solomon failed to live up to the wholehearted commitment shown by David (4,

6) – a requirement clearly stated in 9:4. The stage seems set for immediate disaster.

11:9–13 God's verdict. Here God speaks to Solomon for the fourth and final time. We are reminded that God *had appeared to him twice*, stressing that Solomon had received very special benefits. But in spite of these personal encounters with the God of Israel, Solomon had strayed from following him. Disaster was indeed on its way. But *for the sake of David* it would be postponed until the reign of Solomon's successor, and when it came it would not deprive him of the whole kingdom. In other words, the commitments which God had previously made to David would still be honoured, but in a drastically altered form because of Solomon's disobedience.

11:14–25 Adversaries arise. Solomon had previously declared that he had no adversaries (5:4), but here he acquired two. (The Hebrew word translated *adversary* in 11:14 and 23 is the same as that in 5:4.) Although God had announced that calamity would not strike until after Solomon's death, the storm-clouds began to gather during his lifetime. The empire created by David began to fray at the edges as Edom in the south and Aram in the north became hostile states. The warm relationship between Hadad of Edom and the Egyptian Pharaoh strikes a further ominous note.

11:26–40 Jeroboam's rebellion. *Jeroboam* is introduced as an able leader, entrusted by Solomon with the entire labour force of the northern tribes. *Ahijah* is the first of a number of prophets in 1 and 2 Kings who intervened to alter the course of dynastic succession. His prophecy was acted out in a manner typical of OT prophets: he symbolically tore up his new cloak and urged Jeroboam to take ten of the twelve pieces. His words explained the meaning of his actions: God was going to tear the kingdom from Solomon's hand and give ten tribes to Jeroboam. The statement that *one tribe* would remain for Solomon's son to rule is puzzling; for when ten tribes are taken from twelve, there should be two left! A possible solution is that the *one tribe* is not Judah but Benjamin, which did continue to be associated with Judah when the kingdom divided. Judah itself does not require any mention because it was the tribe of the royal house anyway, and hence is assumed to continue in its control.

The worship of foreign deities is again given as the reason for the loss which was to befall the house of David, but here it is not Solomon alone who is guilty but *they* (33), implying that the people in general had fallen into the same sin. The Greek, Latin and Syriac versions have 'he' in place of *they*, referring back to Solomon in v 31 and so keeping to the tone of vs 9–13, where only Solomon is charged with unfaithfulness. These versions may preserve the original reading, but if the Hebrew 'they' is original we must conclude that Solomon's folly was part of a wider trend, which the king's example may even have started.

Ironically, Ahijah's prophecy to Jeroboam in vs 37–38 echoes the promise God had previously made to Solomon (9:4–5).

Either because Solomon somehow heard of Ahijah's prophecy, or because Jeroboam made some move to stake his claim to the northern tribes, Solomon tried to kill him and he escaped to Egypt. Jeroboam thus became an exile from his homeland, just as Solomon's other adversaries had been. The Pharaoh is now named as Shishak. He is Shoshenq I (945–924 BC), founder of Egypt's Twenty-second Dynasty, who later sent troops against Jerusalem (14:25–26).

11:41–43 The death of Solomon. Although Solomon's reign had been extraordinary, the notice of his death is of a simple form used commonly in Kings. It refers the reader to a source of further information and tersely gives the place and length of reign, notice of burial and the name of his successor.

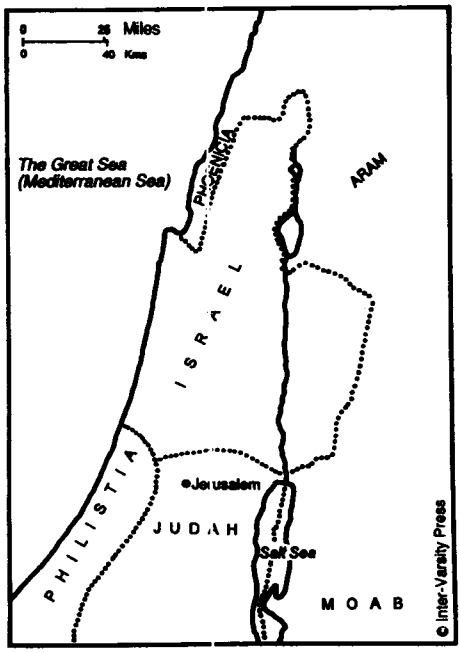
In one sense, Solomon's reign had begun a new era, for he had built the temple and so transformed the worship and life of the nation. But in another sense, he brought an era to an end; because of his own disobedience he was the last king to rule over all the Israelite tribes.

12:1 – 16:29 The two kingdoms: from Solomon's death to the reign of Omri in Israel

12:1 – 14:31 The birth of the two kingdoms

12:1–24 The kingdom divides. It would appear that Rehoboam had to be acclaimed king separately by the northern tribes before his accession ceremonies were complete. In this he was following a pattern established by David, who initially became king over Judah (2 Sa. 2:4) and was later made king over Israel (2 Sa. 5:3). We are reminded that neither David nor Solomon had tried to weld Judah and Israel into a single entity (see above on 4:20). Solomon presumably went through a similar process of being acclaimed by Israel, although there is no mention of it. By Rehoboam's day Shechem, in the heart of the northern hill country, was the location for the event.

The northern tribes required Rehoboam to meet a condition before they would accept him as their king. They also had an alternative ruler available in the person of Jeroboam, recalled from Egypt after the death of Solomon. We



The kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

learn that under Solomon the northern tribes had suffered *a heavy yoke* and *harsh labour* (4). (We previously noted various clues that this had been the case, and here we find it confirmed by Israel's spokesmen.) Israel would serve Rehoboam only if he agreed to lift this burden.

At first Rehoboam seems to act prudently. He makes no immediate response, but takes three days to consult his advisors. The older men, who have served Solomon, advise Rehoboam to concede to the people's demand. However, the men of Rehoboam's own generation give different advice, namely that he should meet the people's demand with the threat of even harsher treatment. The Hebrew word describing these *young men* (8, 10, 14) actually means 'young boys' or even 'children'; in the writer's view they deserve this description because their advice is so naive. And it is these 'children' whose counsel Rehoboam chooses to follow. By rejecting the advice of the older men who have served Solomon, Rehoboam turns his back on the last repository of Solomon's wisdom and embraced folly. The fate of the kingdom is sealed.

Rehoboam's tough, confrontational style was a show of strength which concealed weakness. Solomon's wisdom had had lapses, but Rehoboam displayed no wisdom at all. His attempt to regain the initiative was hopelessly mishandled, and Israel slipped from his grasp. The rallying cry which Israel had used during its abortive rebellion against David (2 Sa. 20:1) was flung in his face (16).

Whether *Adoniram* (18) was sent to negotiate further or to use force is not clear, but placing affairs in the hands of the man who was in charge of forced labour was at best a highly provocative act. Not surprisingly, it resulted in Adoniram's death. Jeroboam, meanwhile, was made king over Israel (20).

Returning hastily to Jerusalem, Rehoboam raised an army out of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and prepared to wage war. However, the prophet *Shemaiah* put a stop to the venture, bringing a word from God that forbade him to act (22–24). It was God himself who had separated Israel from Judah and, for the moment at least, it had his protection.

The narrative thus weaves together the human and divine dimensions of the drama. Rehoboam had acted stupidly and followed bad advice, and Israel was *in rebellion against the house of David* (19); but the ultimate explanation is that Yahweh stood behind the scenes directing events. *So the king did not listen to the people, for this turn of events was from the* LORD, *to fulfil the word the* LORD *had spoken* . . . (15). Human beings have the freedom to be obedient or disobedient, to act wisely or foolishly, but this freedom is contained within God's sovereignty. In particular, the writer stresses many times that events announced by God through his prophets always come about.

12:25–32 The error of Jeroboam. Jeroboam established his new kingdom in two ways. First, he strengthened two key cities, Shechem and Peniel (the latter to provide him with an administrative and defensive centre east of the Jordan). Secondly, he reorganized the worship life of Israel. His arrangements were motivated by a fear that if the people made regular visits to the temple in Jerusalem their loyalty would revert to Rehoboam. To forestall this he created alternative cultic centres within Israel, one at Dan and one at Bethel, marking the northern and southern limits of the kingdom. His fear showed a lack of trust in the promise of God given through Ahijah, that if he remained obedient God would establish for him an everlasting dynasty (11:37–38).

Jeroboam was, however, guilty of more than a failure to trust. The golden calves which he set up at Bethel and Dan led the people into idolatry (28–30). It is impossible to reconstruct Jeroboam's real intention in setting up these images. In the art of the ancient Near East it was not unusual for a deity to be portrayed standing on the back of a bull. It is therefore possible that Jeroboam intended the golden calves to represent the place where Yahweh was enthroned,

and that he never wished them to become objects of worship themselves. (In the same way, the cherubim in Solomon's temple were meant to signify the place where God was present; see above on 8:3–13.) His words in v 28 are as ambiguous as the calves themselves, for they can either be translated *Here are your gods* . . . or 'Here is your God . . .'. But whatever Jeroboam's original intentions, the writer reports everything in the light of the fact that *this thing became a sin.* Therefore, we are surely meant to see a connection between Jeroboam's words in v 28 and the invitation to worship the golden calf at Sinai in Ex. 32:4. Furthermore, in the view of the author there can be no legitimate place for the worship of Yahweh outside Jerusalem. Jeroboam further compounded his sin by setting up lesser shrines at *high places* and staffing them with an illegitimate priesthood (31–32).

12:33 – 13:10 The visit of a man of God from Judah. Among Jeroboam's cultic reforms was the creation of a festival in the eighth month *like the festival held in Judah* (12:32), which probably means it was Israel's version of the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated in the seventh month (Lv. 23:33–43). While Jeroboam may have been deliberately setting out to give Israel distinctive religious traditions, there may also have been a practical reason for the later date. The Feast of Tabernacles was meant to begin when the summer harvest was completed (Lv. 23:39), and this would have been later in Israel than in Judah because of slight differences in terrain and climate.

The arrival of an anonymous man of God from Judah took place while Jeroboam was instituting this festival with sacrifices at Bethel. However, the prophet's words were not against the festival but against Bethel's altar. There is not even a word of condemnation for the golden calf; perhaps it had yet to acquire its overtones of idolatry. The reason for the prophet's mission was simply that the shrine existed at all as an alternative to the temple in Jerusalem.

Bethel was a place with ancient associations in Israel's history (see Gn. 28) and became the more popular and important of Jeroboam's two shrines. But the prophet declared that worship at Bethel's altar would come to a violent end at the hands of one *Josiah*, a future member of David's dynasty. This prophecy was not to be fulfilled for over three centuries; then Josiah finally removed every trace of illegitimate and idolatrous worship throughout the territories of Israel and Judah. In short, the prophecy gives us a glimpse of the end of the affair, even as Israel's sad decline was beginning.

Confirmation of the truth of the prophecy was given instantly when the altar split and spilled its ashes. Jeroboam, pulled up short by this and the sudden withering of his arm, asked for the prophet's intercessions, and his health was restored. Jeroboam seems to have been profoundly affected by this demonstration of God's power over life and death and offered the man of God hospitality; but, in obedience to God's instructions, the prophet refused it in very strong terms. Was it to illustrate God's disapproval of what was being done in Israel that his servant was not allowed to eat or drink there? That is a possible reason, but an even more attractive explanation is that his resolute obedience was to be a further sign to the king, a reminder of the obedience that should have characterized his own life and reign.

13:11–34 The death of the man of God. The story of the man of God takes an unexpected turn with the appearance of the old prophet of Bethel. On hearing of events at the altar the prophet from Bethel made his own offer of hospitality, which was at first refused on the same grounds as before. But this prophet was determined that the man of God would spend time under his roof (we are not told why) and resorted to lying to persuade him to do so. He claimed that God had spoken to him and countermanded his earlier instructions.

The story gives us no reason to think that the prophet of Bethel was one of those who regularly 'prophesy lies', proclaiming their own fantasies instead of faithfully reporting the word of God (*cf.* Je. 23:16; 27:9–16). Indeed, this prophet received and delivered a genuine word from God in vs 20–22. In short, he is simply portrayed as a prophet who told a lie. But it was a lie which cost the man of God his life. The old prophet announced the death which would befall him as a result of his disobedience and his words were quickly fulfilled. The prophet of Bethel was then contrite and gave his own backing to the message of the man of God concerning the altar.

What are we to make of this strange and shocking story? We see a prophet delivering a word which was a lie, and another prophet believing it in spite of the instructions God had previously given him. On one level, the story clearly illustrates the difficulty which is sometimes involved in discerning the true word of God. On another level, it underscores the importance of unswerving obedience. In this connection the man of God continued to be a sign to Jeroboam and to Israel; for his tragic end was a warning that disobedience could lead to death – the death of the whole nation. On a third level, the story shows that prophecy is irrevocable; the word of God has creative power, shaping events and moving them towards its fulfilment. This is the lesson learned by the prophet of Bethel (32).

The lesson was, however, not learned by

Jeroboam. Events had shown beyond doubt that the altar at Bethel existed in defiance of God's will, but Jeroboam persisted in his sin (33), a sin which would eventually lead to Israel's total destruction (34).

14:1–20 Jeroboam and the prophet Ahijah. We learn here for the first time that Jeroboam had a wife and sons, and that his royal residence was at Tirzah (17), about 6 miles (10 km) north-east of Shechem.

To discover what would be the outcome of an illness afflicting one of his sons, Jeroboam sent his wife to Ahijah the prophet with a gift. It seems to have been quite normal for people to consult a prophet when desiring information and to pay for his services (*cf.* 1 Sa. 9:3–9). Jeroboam's wife was, therefore, not doing anything out of the ordinary and it is not clear why she needed a disguise for her journey to Shiloh. If it was meant to deceive Ahijah the stratagem was useless, partly because the old man could no longer see, but chiefly because God had told him in advance who was coming and why! In the context of the story the motive for the disguise is not so important as the fact that a blind prophet could 'see through it'. Here, as in the previous chapter, we discover that God's prophets are not to be trifled with.

Ahijah had a word from God for Jeroboam, and he delivered it before his visitor even had a chance to speak. Like David, Jeroboam had been raised up by God *from among the people* to be their *leader* (7) and, like David, he received a kingdom which formerly belonged to someone else (8); but there the comparison ends. Unlike David, he had not followed Yahweh with his whole heart. Indeed, he had done great evil, ignoring Yahweh (*you have . . . thrust me behind your back*) and leading the people into idolatry (9).

So much for the verdict. The sentence follows and has four parts to it. First, all the males of Jeroboam's family would be wiped out. The promise of an enduring dynasty was conditional (11:38) and was now revoked in terrifying terms. Secondly, the son who was sick would die. He alone of Jeroboam's sons would receive a proper burial and mourning because God had found some good in him. It is profoundly ironic that the only glimmer of light in this otherwise dark prophecy comes in the prediction of this son's death. Thirdly, God would raise up a new king for Israel who would execute judgment on Jeroboam's household. And finally, Israel as a whole was ultimately doomed because of the seeds of idolatry which Jeroboam had sown. The nation would be scattered in lands *beyond the River* (*i.e.* the Euphrates) and thus would cease to exist. (For the reference to *Asherah poles* in v 16, see below on vs 22–24.)

Ahijah's prophecy provides a sad picture of ruined potential. As the first king of an independent Israel, Jeroboam had the God-given opportunity to be a ruler of great stature; instead he was responsible for setting his kingdom on the road to disaster. The discrepancy between potential and performance is a recurring theme of the books of Kings.

Jeroboam's wife returned to Tirzah with the answer to her unspoken question – and much more. As soon as she got home the prophecy concerning the sick son was fulfilled. The previous chapter has left no room for doubt that the fulfilment of the rest will follow. The nation's doom, thus pronounced, was now certain. But we know it will not happen immediately, for Ahijah had mentioned a new king who would arise to put an end to Jeroboam's house (14a; the rest of this verse is unfortunately very obscure). In other words, the end of Jeroboam's dynasty and the end of Israel are two different things.

The notice of Jeroboam's death (19–20, providing a source for further information, length of reign and name of successor) follows a concluding formula typical of 1 and 2 Kings, except that the length of reign is normally noted at the beginning of a reign rather than the end. The same variation occurs in the case of Solomon (11:42) and probably for the same reason: in both cases the succession was not straightforward and the account left no place for the standard formula at the beginning of the reign.

14:21–31 Summary of Rehoboam's reign. Although we have already encountered Rehoboam in ch. 12, the real focus of that narrative was the transfer of Israel to Jeroboam. The writer now returns to Rehoboam to deal with his reign separately and so introduces him with a formula which is more or less characteristic from now on (21).

From this introduction we learn that Rehoboam was forty-one when he responded so foolishly to the demands of the northerners of Shechem. His rash advisors, who are said to have 'grown up with him' (12:8), were presumably about the same age. This confirms that the description of them as 'young men' (or 'young boys') is a comment on the quality of their advice and not on their real age (see above on 12:8).

We also learn that Rehoboam's mother was an Ammonitess, one of Solomon's foreign wives. It is surprising that Solomon's successor was not a son of Pharaoh's daughter, who seems to have been his chief wife (see above on 7:8). Perhaps she bore him no sons (or none who survived). Or it may be that, as in the case of Adonijah and Solomon, the normal rules of succession were overridden. A reason for this might lie in a changed relationship with Egypt,

caused when Shishak became king and gave asylum to Jeroboam (11:40).

Vs 22–24 reveal the religious situation in Judah to have been every bit as bad as in Israel. Under Rehoboam there was a proliferation of *high places, sacred stones* and *Asherah poles*. This last expression (lit. 'Asherim' as in the RSV) refers to some kind of image, probably wooden, of the Canaanite goddess Asherah. They were nothing new among the Israelites, for the tendency to worship Canaanite deities had been a feature of the Judges' period (Jdg. 3:7).

The only difference between the situations in Israel and Judah was that Rehoboam (unlike Jeroboam) was not condemned for being personally involved in the idolatrous practices. Nevertheless, the narrating of Shishak's invasion (25–28) immediately after this catalogue of evils is surely significant. The clear implication is that the Egyptian campaign was God's chastisement for Judah, and particularly for Rehoboam, for it struck at the very heart of his kingdom – the temple and the royal palace. The king did not have to be an idolater himself to be held responsible for the idolatry of his people. It was enough that he had not checked the spiritual decline of the kingdom. (See further on 15:3 below.)

Shoshenq I (Shishak) had a relief scene carved on the wall of the temple of Amun at Thebes recording his campaign into Palestine. From this it is evident that he did not simply invade Judah but Israel as well. However, the writer of Kings ignores the effect this campaign must have had on Jeroboam's kingdom and focuses on the losses sustained by Judah. The treasuries of the temple and the palace were both plundered. The account specifically mentions the loss of *the gold shields* Solomon had made (200 large ones and 300 smaller ones according to 10:16–17) and their replacement with bronze copies by Rehoboam. The decline of the house of David is neatly epitomized here. Rehoboam, ruling a reduced kingdom which was easy prey for Egypt, could only afford bronze where Solomon had used gold. Size, security and wealth were all greatly diminished.

Rehoboam's reign is rounded off with another standard formula (29–31).

15:1 – 16:28 Israel and Judah to the reign of Omri

15:1–8 Abijah of Judah. From this point onwards until the destruction of Israel (2 Ki. 17) the writer presents us with two parallel histories. The present chapter provides us with a good example of his method. First he treats the history of Judah during the reigns of Abijah and Asa (15:1–24), but mentions the contemporary rulers of Israel (Nadab and Baasha) wherever they impinge on the narrative. Then he backtracks to relate the reigns of Nadab and Baasha (15:25 – 16:7). This method can be confusing for the modern reader (particularly in sections where the rulers of Aram and Assyria also enter the arena, and unfamiliar names are scattered across the pages in bewildering profusion). In the present instance, for example, it means that Baasha appears in the narrative of Judah's history before we know where he fits into the history of Israel. When he is first mentioned in 15:16 we do not know whether he is the son and successor of Jeroboam or a later king. Only in vs 27–28 is his role explained. However, the method suits the aims of the writer of Kings because it allows him to present each king's reign in a self-contained narrative.

Rehoboam's successor, Abijah, is given a standard introduction (1–2). Two items in this deserve comment. From now on the writer inserts a note dating the accession of the king of Judah in terms of regnal years of the king of Israel and vice versa. In the case of Judah only he continues to give the name of the new king's mother (as he did for Rehoboam in 14:21); however, he omits this information for Jehoram (2 Ki. 8:16–17) and Ahaz (2 Ki. 16:1–4).

Abijah's three-year reign is given a very negative appraisal (3–8). The statement that he *committed all the sins his father had done before him* is intriguing because Rehoboam himself is not accused of any sins in the summary of his reign (14:22–24). However, as we noted in commenting on that passage, Rehoboam was at least guilty of not arresting his people's slide into apostasy, and here the verdict that Abijah's heart *'was not fully devoted to the LORD his God'* is applied by implication to Rehoboam as well (3). The following verse shows that the dynasty owed its continuing survival to the commitment God had made to David and not to the conduct of his successors. David is praised for his exemplary devotion to God's commandments, though on this occasion his murder of Uriah, husband of Bathsheba, does not go without mention (5). This is an interesting contrast with the previous reference to David (14:8), which was entirely positive. The writer does not want us to forget that all members of the dynasty, including David himself, were fallible – a fact loaded with implications for the future (see above on 8:46–51).

In v 6 we should probably read: 'There was war between Abijam [a variant of Abijah] and Jeroboam . . .' (with the RSV), since war *between Rehoboam and Jeroboam* . . . (as in the majority of Hebrew manuscripts) cannot have lasted *throughout Abijah's lifetime*.

A standard formula concludes the summary, reiterating that Abijah's reign was plagued by war.

15:9–24 Asa of Judah. The introduction of Asa's forty-one-year reign names his mother as *Maacah the daughter of Abishalom*, which is identical with the name of Abijah's mother in v 2! The NIV resolves the difficulty by translating *grandmother* instead of 'mother' in v 10 (and v 13).

For the first time the writer measures a king favourably against the standard set by David (11). Asa reversed the trend of the previous two reigns (and which had begun under Solomon according to 11:33), even deposing his own (grand)mother from her position as 'queen mother' (lit. 'mistress', *i.e.* over the royal court) because of her idolatry. Indeed, his only failing was that he did not abolish the high places. The meaning of v 15 is not clear, but it seems that Asa replenished the temple treasury which had been depleted by Shishak's invasion.

The rest of the account of his reign concerns the ongoing border war between Judah and Israel. The fact that Baasha of Israel was turning the town of Ramah into a fortress shows that his forces had penetrated south of Bethel into the territory of Benjamin (which belonged to Judah). Furthermore, his aim was to control the main route between Israel and Judah, effectively blockading Judah's northern border. The situation was so serious that Asa negotiated with Ben-Hadad of Damascus for help, even though this meant depleting the temple and palace treasuries again to secure the alliance (18–20). When Ben-Hadad pushed south into northern Israel, Baasha was forced to withdraw from Benjamin in order to concentrate his forces on repelling the invader. Asa then reclaimed the lost portion of Benjamin and dismantled the fortress at Ramah. He used the materials to fortify Geba and Mizpah, thus strengthening his northern border against further aggression.

The concluding formula adds that Asa was a builder of cities and that in old age he suffered from diseased feet. This latter item of information throws significant light on the writer's theology. He clearly does not regard all sickness and suffering as divine retribution or chastisement (as in the case of Jeroboam's withered arm; 13:4). He acknowledges that innocent suffering is also part of the fabric of life.

15:25–32 Nadab of Israel. Here we embark on a long section (1 Ki. 15:25 – 2 Ki. 10:36) which deals almost exclusively with events in Israel (see the Introduction). The bulk of this (from 1 Ki. 16:23) concerns the dynasty of Omri, but it begins with an account of the unstable period between the death of Jeroboam and Omri's accession. During twenty-five years, five kings held (or sought) power in Israel, and four of them met a violent death.

The character of *Nadab son of Jeroboam* is quickly sketched with the information that he *did evil . . . walking in the ways of his father . . . .* His brief reign ended with the fulfilment of Ahijah's prophecy concerning Jeroboam's house. He was assassinated by Baasha who seized the throne for himself. (The note that this happened while Nadab was besieging the Philistine town of Gibbethon reminds us that the writer's interests are very limited; the foreign policy of most kings receives only an incidental reference or none at all.) Baasha then wiped out Jeroboam's family.

While v 29 says this was in fulfilment of Ahijah's prophecy, in 16:7 Baasha's action is condemned by the prophet Jehu. The apparent contradiction is probably explained by the fact that Baasha had gone far beyond the meaning of Ahijah's prophecy, which mentioned only the killing of 'every last male' (14:10) belonging to Jeroboam. (A more literal rendering of this phrase in 14:10 is vividly given in the KJV: 'him that pisseth against the wall'; however, the KJV mistranslates the remainder of the verse.) The AV meaning is that Jeroboam will be left with no male descendants who could lay claim to the throne. The language of 15:29 implies that Baasha went further than this and slaughtered the entire family.

The concluding note on Nadab says there was constant war between Asa and Baasha, a puzzling reference in that it has nothing to do with Nadab. Either the note should refer to Nadab instead of Baasha or the reference has been displaced from the summary of Baasha's reign which follows.

15:33 – 16:7 Baasha of Israel. Baasha's reign is very briefly summarized because his accession and his war with Asa of Judah have already been narrated. The chief subject of the summary is his condemnation by the prophet Jehu. History was repeating itself. Like Jeroboam, Baasha had been raised up by God to be king over Israel; but Baasha had *walked in the ways of Jeroboam* and his house would suffer the same fate as Jeroboam's. The prophecy of Jehu to Baasha closely echoes parts of Ahijah's to Jeroboam (compare 16:2a with 14:7; and 16:4 with 14:11).

16:8–14 Elah of Israel. It is therefore not surprising that the fulfilment of Jehu's prophecy was almost a re-run of earlier events. Just as Jeroboam's son reigned for two years before being assassinated, so Elah, son of Baasha, reigned for two years; and just as Nadab's assassin succeeded him on the throne, so Zimri succeeded Elah. The structure of the summary of Elah's reign is patterned on the summary of Nadab's (*cf.* 16:9–10 with 15:27–28; and 16:11–13 with 15:29–30). However, there are some differences. Elah is not specifically said to have

walked in the ways of Jeroboam; instead this is implied by the reference to *all the sins Baasha and his son Elah had committed and had caused Israel to commit* . . . (13). A notable contrast illustrates a difference in character between Nadab and Elah. Nadab died while waging war on Israel's traditional enemies – a proper kingly pursuit (15:27); Elah died while carousing with the steward of his palace in Tirzah (16:9), even though the war on the Philistine border continued (see v 15). Finally, Zimri was more restrained than Baasha in putting an end to the house of his predecessor, killing only the males (11).

16:15–22 Zimri and civil war in Israel. The situation now deteriorated into civil war. The army of Israel, encamped against Gibbethon, would not accept Zimri as king and proclaimed Omri, their commander, king instead. In an ironic turn of events the army then withdrew from Gibbethon and attacked Israel's own capital. Zimri committed suicide after a reign of only seven days! We may think this was hardly long enough to test Zimri's character, but a week is a long time in politics and the writer has no doubt that he walked *in the ways of Jeroboam and in the sin he had committed* . . . (19).

Zimri's suicide did not immediately stabilize the situation, for Tibni son of Ginath emerged as a rival for the throne. War between the two factions ended in Tibni's death, leaving Omri king without challenger.

16:23–28 Omri restores stability in Israel. The events leading up to Omri's reign (16:15–22) were not directed by prophecy (in striking contrast to the events of 15:25 – 16:14). No prophet appears to announce the end of Zimri's reign or to designate Omri as the one raised up by Yahweh to be king over his people. We are therefore left wondering whether Omri's seizure of the throne is God's will. The question is never answered, but in subsequent chapters it becomes very clear that the rule of Omri's dynasty is certainly not beyond God's control. This is illustrated, as always in Kings, through the work of God's prophets.

The standard summary of Omri's reign, concluding with the fact that his son succeeded him, signifies Israel's return to dynastic stability.

The writer tells us nothing of Omri's political stature, which we glimpse only from Assyrian inscriptions and the Moabite stone. The only achievement singled out for mention is his creation of Samaria as Israel's new capital (24). Otherwise, he is noted only for sinning more than his predecessors and walking in the ways of Jeroboam (25–26).

1 Ki. 16:29 – 2 Ki. 10:36 The two kingdoms: the period of Omri's dynasty

16:29 – 22:40 The reign of Ahab of Israel

16:29–34 Introduction to Ahab's reign. These verses read like a standard summary of Ahab's reign without the usual concluding formula. In fact, the concluding formula is put on pause until 22:39–40. In between we have an unusual number of lengthy stories set against the background of Ahab's reign. Some of these involve Elijah (chs. 17 – 19, 21), while others concern Ahab's wars with Ben-Hadad and the words of other prophets (chs. 20, 22).

The summary which we have here functions as the introduction to the extended account. It tells us that Ahab was even worse than Omri, for he led Israel in a horrendous downward spiral of idolatry which made the sin of Jeroboam seem mild by comparison. His worship of the god Baal is specifically linked with his marriage to Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, successor to Hiram of Tyre. This suggests that the god in question was the patron deity of Tyre, Baal-Melqart. The fact that Ahab built a temple to Baal in the new capital implies that he attempted to make the worship of Baal the state religion of Israel, and this is confirmed by the attempts to destroy the prophets of Yahweh (see below). The image of Asherah which he set up was accompanied by the introduction of prophets of Asherah alongside prophets of Baal (18:19).

The note concerning the rebuilding of Jericho may do more than tell us that the words of Joshua were fulfilled after many centuries (Jos. 6:26). It might mean that the two sons of Hiel died as human sacrifices at the beginning and completion of the work. If so, it further emphasizes Israel's entanglement with idolatrous practices during Ahab's reign.

17:1–24 Elijah in exile. The appalling practices of Ahab's reign received their prophetic challenge. Elijah, who is to tower over the rest of the account of Ahab's reign, makes an abrupt entry into the story. Without being told that he is a prophet, or that the word of the Lord had come to him, we find him confronting Ahab with an ominous message. It is from the character of that message that we recognize Elijah as a man who acts and speaks with divine authority. Elijah's words are introduced and reinforced by an oath which also serves to identify him: he is the servant of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The words also indicate what was at issue. Contrary to what Ahab apparently believed, it was Yahweh, not Baal, who was *the God of Israel*. The withholding of rain was not merely a

divine chastisement, it was the first move in a contest which would reveal Yahweh's power and Baal's impotence.

Elijah's flight to an isolated ravine suggests that he was in danger, but it is only in 18:4 that we discover the nature of that danger: Jezebel had embarked on a systematic extermination of Yahweh's prophets. Elijah's hiding-place lay in Israel's territory east of the Jordan (a region which Elijah presumably knew well, since he was from Gilead; 1). The second half of v 4 could be read: '. . . I have ordered the Arabs to feed you there'. This would be consistent with a Phoenician woman caring for Elijah later in this chapter. However, *ravens* could well be the correct reading, for it is a theme of this whole narrative (chs. 17 – 18) that God has control over all aspects of nature.

When Elijah's brook dried up God gave him further instructions, sending him outside Israel's territory altogether to the Phoenician town of Zarephath. It is ironic that Elijah, fleeing the promoter of a Phoenician god, should find refuge in Phoenicia! The widow whom he met was willing enough to fetch him a drink of water, but when he asked for some bread as well she was forced to admit her abject poverty and near-starvation. She also appears to recognize him as a prophet of the God of Israel. (Was there something distinctive about the appearance of Yahweh's prophets in Elijah's time? See below on 20:41 and 2 Ki. 2:23–25.) Elijah assured her that she could afford to offer him hospitality, for God had promised that her meagre supplies of flour and oil would last until the drought was over. (Thus we learn that the drought announced by Elijah extended beyond Israel to Phoenicia.) The woman trusted him and obeyed (perhaps because she recognized the stranger as a prophet), and the truth of Elijah's words was borne out.

Some while later, the widow's son became sick to the point of death, though it is not completely clear that he actually died. The widow's first reaction was to think that Elijah, the *man of God*, had caused this tragedy as punishment for her sins (18). It was a common assumption that suffering and sin are connected in this way. Job's friends deduced that he must have sinned in order to be suffering (Jb. 8:4; 11:6; *etc.*) and Jesus' disciples leaped to the conclusion that a man's blindness was the result of his sin (Jn. 9:1–3). The modern sufferer's question: 'What have I done to deserve this?', expresses the same ideas as the widow's words in v 18. We need to remember that the book of Job overturns the thinking of Job's friends, that Jesus rejected the logic of his disciples, and that the widow in our present story was mistaken. The Bible does not assume an inevitable cause-and-effect connection between sin and suffering (or between righteousness and blessing), but leaves room for suffering which is undeserved and, from the human point of view, unexplained. Elijah himself clearly had no idea why this tragedy had struck. His prayer in v 20 shows him bewildered and angry. Then he prayed for the boy's restoration. His reason for stretching himself on the boy is not clear; perhaps he was simply trying to share the warmth of his body with the boy to encourage his return to life. But the boy's restoration was God's doing, in response to Elijah's prayer (22).

The widow's exclamation in v 24 contains exquisite irony: a Phoenician woman realized that Elijah spoke the word of Yahweh, while the Israelite king, worshipping his Phoenician gods, had refused to see it. Jesus cited the story of Elijah at Zarephath to support his comment that a prophet is not accepted in his own country – much to the annoyance of his hearers (Lk. 4:24–30).

18:1–19 Elijah's return. In the third year of the drought God instructed Elijah to return to Samaria and confront Ahab again. However, he presented himself first to Obadiah, the chief steward of the royal palace. This man, a worshipper of Yahweh from his youth (12), had remained loyal to his God. His loyalty was proved by the great personal risk he had taken, concealing and feeding a hundred faithful prophets in the face of Jezebel's campaign to wipe them out. He is a challenging figure, quietly living out his faith at the heart of the nation's apostasy. But he is also a very human figure, terrified that Elijah would vanish again before a meeting with Ahab could be arranged, and that he would be held responsible and executed. Elijah reassured him, again using an oath to underline his words (15), that he would meet with Ahab before the day was out.

Ahab and Elijah met and exchanged insults. Ahab's turning from Yahweh to *the Baals* (an expression which embraces the worship of several foreign deities) has changed Israel's king into Israel's *troubler*. Elijah threw down the gauntlet, calling for an assembly of the foreign prophets on Mt Carmel. The fact that these prophets *eat at Jezebel's table* indicates that she was ultimately behind the promotion of the new state religion.

18:20–46 Elijah on Mt Carmel. Mt Carmel is not a single mountain but a range of hills running inland from the Bay of Acre in a south-easterly direction for about 12 miles (20 km). It is impossible to know exactly where Elijah's gathering took place. The only clue we have is that the spot was not far from a vantage-point which gave a view of the Mediterranean (42–44). There is some evidence that the

Carmel range was a traditional site for the worship of Baal, in which case Elijah was giving the prophets of Baal the advantage of fighting on home ground.

Not only the foreign prophets but people from all over Israel were assembled on Carmel (21; *cf.* v 19). Elijah did not accuse the people of outright apostasy but of hesitating between two opinions. This suggests they had been trying to worship both Baal and Yahweh to secure the maximum advantages of both! Baal was primarily a weather-god and hence responsible for the harvest; Yahweh, on the other hand, may have been popularly thought of as a god from the desert regions of Sinai (*cf.* Hab. 3:3–7). Or perhaps, like the Arameans in ch. 20, they thought of Yahweh as 'a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys' (20:28). Either way, it would have seemed likely to the people that Yahweh was out of his depth where agriculture was concerned, so it made good sense also to worship Baal, the acknowledged expert in such matters. Elijah swept away such syncretistic thinking. The people must make a decision: Yahweh or Baal.

The verb used for the people's wavering can also mean 'to limp'. (A form of the same verb is used in v 26 to describe the dancing of the prophets of Baal.) There is a point to the double meaning. Elijah was telling the people that their attempt to have the best of both worlds had actually crippled them.

Elijah's claim to be the only surviving prophet of Yahweh is surprising in view of Obadiah's earlier words (13). We will examine the claim later when discussing ch. 19. He next gave instructions for the preparation of a burnt offering – but the fire was not to be lit. The true God was the one who provided his own fire to burn the sacrifice. The people (who had previously remained silent; 21) judged the proposed contest to be a fair one (24).

The prophets of Baal had the first turn. Elijah allowed them the best part of a day, *from morning* . . . (26) . . . *until the time of the evening sacrifice* (29). At midday Elijah relieved the tedium with some crude mockery, in one breath calling Baal a god and then suggesting some very human reasons for his lack of response. The word translated *busy* in the NIV is a verb meaning literally 'to withdraw' (RSV 'gone aside'), and Elijah was probably using it to mean that Baal was relieving himself. The dancing of Baal's prophets became more frenzied during the afternoon, but the three negatives at the end of v 29 emphasize that all was in vain (lit. 'no voice, no answer, no hearkening').

Elijah prepared his own sacrifice from scratch using a second bull. Taking twelve stones to symbolize the original unity of all Israel, he repaired a ruined *altar of the LORD* – one of the high places which the writer of Kings is keen to condemn in normal circumstances. But circumstances here were not normal, for the very survival of Yahweh's worship in Israel, indeed the survival of Israel itself, was at stake. The issue was no longer where Yahweh might be worshipped, but whether Israel would continue to worship him at all – whether Israel would remain Israel.

Elijah made sure that the cards were seen to be stacked against him, soaking the sacrifice and the wood with water which flowed into a trench around the altar. Since water would have been a rare commodity after three years of drought, the emptying of the jars over the sacrifice was a double act of faith. Elijah was trusting God for rain as well as fire.

His prayer (36–37) further shows his supreme faith at this crucial moment in Israel's history – a history whose beginnings were recalled by naming Yahweh as the God of Israel's ancestors. The prayer also shows Elijah's priorities: his petition that he would be vindicated as Yahweh's servant is framed by two petitions that Yahweh would be acknowledged as the true God of Israel.

The answer was dramatic and complete. Yahweh did what Baal, supposedly lord of sky and weather, had failed to do, producing lightning from a sky without clouds. The people finally decided (as Elijah had urged them to do in v 21) between Yahweh and Baal. Their words in v 39 were more than an acknowledgment that Yahweh was the god with power in Israel. The Hebrew phrase (lit. 'he is the God') proclaimed him the one and only God. The prophets of Baal, exposed as the promoters of a lie, were slaughtered at Elijah's command.

The writer relates the massacre without comment here, but Elijah is later rebuked for a train of thought that amounted to fanaticism (see on 19:1–18), and his all-out slaughter of the prophets of Baal should perhaps be seen as an outcome of his fanatical tendency. In v 41 Ahab is mentioned for the first time since v 20. He has become an insignificant character in this chapter, and the focus has been on the people. Here, as in v 20, he took orders from Elijah who had become the real leader of the people. Unfortunately, Ahab remained equally weak before Jezebel, and made no attempt to restrain her when she tried to kill Elijah.

Elijah's prayer for rain (42–46) contains some puzzling features but the meaning of the incident is clear. Wind, clouds and rain are not beyond Yahweh's control, for he is the Creator God who has power over everything he has made. It also shows again that Elijah was God's agent, for it fulfilled his announcement in 17:1

that rain would not return except by his word.

19:1–18 Elijah on Mt Horeb. Here we see another side of Elijah's character, altogether more human, frail and fallible. In terror of Jezebel he fled to the desert south of Beersheba, not merely outside the boundaries of Israel but beyond the southern border of Judah. There, in the depths of depression and despair, he prayed that he might die. There is no indication that he had planned to travel further than this. The journey which followed was only possible because *an angel* (or perhaps simply 'a messenger') ministered to him. The end of the journey was Mt Horeb, the place where God had commissioned Moses (Ex. 3) and later appeared in smoke, fire and thunder to give Israel the Ten Commandments (Ex. 19 – 20).

On Mt Carmel we saw Elijah the great spiritual leader, saving Israel by his faith and faithfulness. On Mt Horeb we see him weak, mistaken and in need of God's rebuke. God's opening question shows that, although God's own messenger had enabled Elijah to make the journey, Elijah should not really have been there. Elijah's answer completely devalued what had happened on Mt Carmel. He ignored God's victory over Baal as though it had achieved nothing. By implication, he dismissed the people as utterly faithless. He disregarded the faithful Obadiah and the possibility that there might have been many more like him. Perhaps he saw Obadiah's position in the royal court as a sign of weakness and compromise. Once again, he stated that he was the only prophet of Yahweh left alive (*cf.* 18:22), thus setting no value on the hundred prophets which he knew had been concealed in caves by Obadiah. Presumably because they had not stood up to be counted they were swept aside as hopelessly ineffectual. Elijah, now (ironically) sheltering in his own cave, conveniently overlooked the fact that he had lived in hiding himself for three years and had shown his own weakness by running away.

God's response was to *pass by* while Elijah stood at the entrance to his cave. Wind, earthquake and fire manifested themselves in succession, but God is said not to have been in any of these. Then a different phenomenon followed. The translations *a gentle whisper* and 'a still small voice' (RSV) do not do full justice to the enigmatic Hebrew expression, which may be better rendered 'a brief sound of silence'. Although the text does not explicitly say so, it implies that God was at last passing by in the silence which followed the storm.

These events provide a vivid demonstration that God is not always at work in ways which are visible and dramatic. He may choose to be present silently. Elijah's diagnosis of the situation he had left behind was therefore challenged, for God can work in ways which even his servants cannot detect.

However, when God repeated his opening question Elijah's reply was the same as before. God did not repeat the lesson but gave Elijah instructions to anoint three people who would, in their different ways, carry forward the work of purifying Israel. The instructions ended with the information that God had no less than 7,000 loyal followers in Israel (18)! The lesson of the silence was hammered home by this closing rebuke. Elijah had dismissed everyone's faith but his own and had failed to appreciate ways in which God was at work. This is an attitude which often leads to a divisive arrogance and even fanaticism among God's people today.

It is often suggested that Elijah was suffering from depression. Depression can have many different causes (from suppressed anger to vitamin deficiency) and we should not assume that when we are depressed our problem is the same as Elijah's, or his the same as ours. In his case, depression and discouragement seem to have stemmed from his skewed perspective. He both underrated his own achievement and undervalued the contribution of others. The answer, in part at least, was for him to be given a glimpse of things from God's point of view. We need such glimpses too, if we are not to become discouraged in the Christian life.

19:19–21 The call of Elisha. Although Elijah did not literally anoint Elisha, this incident fulfilled the third instruction of vs 15–16. Elisha understood the bestowal of Elijah's cloak as a call to follow him and asked for time to take leave of his family. Elijah's brief reply is rather obscure but appears to grant his request. The large farewell feast which Elisha gave for the whole household must have taken some time to prepare and consume. Jesus' call to discipleship in Lk. 9:59–62 echoes this passage in some respects, but is much more pressing and immediate.

20:1–21 Samaria besieged and saved. This chapter presents us with two contrasting pictures of Ahab. At first we meet him as a courageous leader, obeying God's prophets and winning victories. But at the close of the chapter his underlying disobedience emerges again.

The northern state of Aram re-enters the story, and is still ruled (as in 15:18–20) by a king called Ben-Hadad. This was probably Ben-Hadad II, the son and successor to the previous king of the same name. Besieging Samaria, he increased his demands on Ahab until the latter, advised by the elders of the city, refused to yield. Ben-Hadad then threatened to destroy Samaria so thoroughly that not enough dust would remain for his followers to take a handful

each. Ahab warned him not to count his chickens before they were hatched (11). It is not clear whether Ahab's words reflected genuine confidence (had he already received the prophetic assurance reported in vs 13–14?) or whether he was merely bluffing.

An anonymous prophet announced victory for Ahab, giving specific instructions as to who should lead the troops and start the battle. Victory would be granted so that Ahab *will know that I am the LORD* (13). Ahab was obedient, the Arameans were driven back and the siege was ended. However, we are not told that Ahab acknowledged God's role in saving the city.

20:22–34 Victory at Aphek. Once again, the anonymous prophet instructed the king, warning him that Ben-Hadad would be back. The truth of his warning was borne out as the Arameans strengthened their forces. When the battle lines were drawn at Aphek the Israelites were vastly outnumbered (27). However, the Arameans had seriously miscalculated. While not doubting the reality of Israel's God, they assumed him to be *a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys*, so that he could be of no help in a battle fought in the lowlands. The prophet announced the Arameans' defeat; they would discover that Israel's God knows no limitations, and Ahab also *will know that I am the LORD* (28; repeating the phrase in v 13).

Ben-Hadad's forces were crushed so resoundingly that he surrendered and pleaded for merciful treatment at Ahab's hands. After all, his father had once had an alliance with Baasha (before Asa of Judah persuaded him to break it; 15:19), and he had reached a trade agreement with Omri (20:34). In the language of international diplomacy, Ben-Hadad spoke of himself as Ahab's vassal (*servant*), but Ahab immediately referred to Ben-Hadad as his *brother* (32), as though they were already allies rather than enemies. The readiness with which he agreed to an alliance (34) suggests that he regarded it as the best guarantee of Israel's future security. For the second time, Ahab failed to acknowledge God as Israel's protector.

20:35–43 Ahab condemned. Ahab's underlying rejection of God's will is brought to light in the strange story which follows. Once again, it involves an anonymous prophet, but probably not the same one as in vs 13–28.

In order to get his message across to Ahab, the prophet had to be wounded. A man who refused to inflict the wound was killed by a lion, his death having been predicted by the prophet as punishment for his disobedience (36). This bizarre and shocking incident recalls the story in ch. 13, where another disobedient prophet was killed by a lion. Once again, we are shown the need for strict observance of the divine word and the inevitability of its outworking. The incident, however, points forwards as well as backwards, foreshadowing the prophet's exposure of Ahab's disobedience and the sentence to be pronounced.

After receiving his wound from someone more obliging, the prophet posed as a soldier fresh from the battle at Aphek. He told Ahab he had allowed an Aramean prisoner to escape and the king said that the agreed punishment must be exacted. It is not clear what the removal of the bandage revealed in v 41. Did it allow Ahab to recognize a man he already knew as a prophet? (He is surely not the same prophet who features in vs 13–28, for Ahab recognized him as *one of the prophets*, not as 'the prophet'.) Or did it uncover a distinguishing mark worn by the prophets of that time? (See also on 2 Ki. 2:23–25.)

The prophet's exposure of Ahab's sin resembles Nathan's exposure of David's in 2 Sa. 12. In both cases the king was guilty of a sin which he was quick to condemn in someone else. Ben-Hadad should have been executed, not released. Instead of remorse and repentance Ahab responded with resentment and anger.

21:1–16 Naboth's vineyard. The well-known incident of Naboth's vineyard is set in Jezreel, where Ahab and Jezebel had a second royal residence (1; see also 18:45–46). Ahab's offer to purchase the vineyard was reasonable enough, but Naboth had good grounds for refusing it. Apart from the fact that a vineyard represented an enormous investment of time and effort, selling his land would have gone against the grain of OT law. In Israelite society a family and its inherited plot of land were meant to be inseparable (Lv. 25:25–28; Nu. 27:1–11; 36:7). This explains the strength of Naboth's refusal in v 3.

Ahab sulked but accepted the situation. Not so Jezebel, who could not understand why a king of Israel should not get his own way (7). Here we see a head-on collision between two views of kingship. An Israelite king was bound by the law of Yahweh as much as any of his subjects (Dt. 17:18–20), but to Jezebel, the daughter of a Phoenician monarch, it was ridiculous that her husband's wishes should be thwarted because one of his subjects chose to abide by an ancient institution. However, she did not openly flout Israel's traditional religious values. Instead she arranged to have Naboth falsely charged and executed, leaving Ahab in a position to confiscate his vineyard. Naboth faced the trumped-up charge of breaking the commandment in Ex. 22:28, but in reality the commandments against coveting a neighbour's property, murder, theft and false testimony were all broken by Ahab and Jezebel in this sordid incident (Ex. 20:13, 15–17).

21:17–29 Elijah predicts the dynasty's downfall. Elijah re-enters the story, commissioned with the task of prophesying disaster for Ahab's house. Although it was Jezebel who had actually engineered Naboth's death, Ahab had acquiesced in the deed. He did not bother to ask what Jezebel intended to do when she promised him the vineyard, and he was content to fade into the background until Naboth was dead. Now he was told he had *murdered a man and seized his property* (19). This was the immediate reason for the prophecy, but it was merely the latest of Ahab's sins. He had *caused Israel to sin* (22), doubtless a reference to his *going after idols* (26).

The prophecy echoes those of Ahijah to Jeroboam and Jehu to Baasha, even using similar phrases (compare v 21 with 14:10; v 22 with 16:3; v 24 with 14:11 and 16:4). However, Jezebel's role was not overlooked and she received her condemnation too (23, 25).

Surprisingly Ahab, the worst yet of Israel's kings (16:30), showed the most contrition (27). In response, God told Elijah that judgment would not fall on Ahab himself, but on his son. The dynasty would survive for one more generation.

22:1–28 Micaiah and the war with Aram. In the third year of Ahab's treaty with Ben-Hadad hostilities broke out again. The initiative appears to have been Ahab's, and the reason was that he wished to regain control of Ramoth-Gilead, in the hills east of the Jordan.

First of all, he entered into an alliance with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (4). Jehoshaphat insisted that Yahweh's counsel be sought before any action was taken, and Ahab assembled 400 prophets who answered with one voice that the campaign would be a success. Jehoshaphat was evidently suspicious that these were nothing more than Ahab's 'yes-men', and asked pointedly if there was not *a prophet of the LORD* at Ahab's court.

Ahab admitted that there was one prophet he had not summoned because of his habit of telling the king what he did not wish to hear. The pious Jehoshaphat rebuked Ahab's attitude and Micaiah was brought. The story then takes a number of unexpected turns. When urged by the king's messenger to agree with the other prophets, Micaiah said that he could only speak what God told him to speak (13–14). Surprisingly his words did agree with the other prophets, who therefore seem to have been right all along (15). Even more surprisingly, Ahab then commanded him to speak the truth. He knew that a good word from Micaiah was not likely to be the genuine article (8). We are back among the difficult issues raised in ch. 13 – how can true prophecy be discerned? But this time there is an ironic twist to the story, because Ahab, the king who had been so resistant to the word of Yahweh, was quick to recognize the lie and demand a true prophecy. The result was that Ahab walked into a trap: if he dismissed Micaiah's encouraging words as a lie, he must also dismiss the encouraging words of the other 400 prophets!

Micaiah responded with an image which clearly pointed to Ahab's death on the battlefield (17). If Ahab rejected the previous prophecy, this was the alternative which he must accept! But another surprise follows, because Micaiah went on to relate his experience of standing in Yahweh's council – an experience which elsewhere distinguishes a true prophet from his false counterparts (Je. 23:17–18). He revealed that the words of the other 400 prophets (called *his, i.e.* Ahab's, prophets, not Yahweh's prophets) had been inspired by a lying spirit, sent by God to lure Ahab to his death! The result of Micaiah's words was to confirm the conclusion, which Ahab had just had forced upon him anyway, that the hopeful prophecy was a lie.

The intervention of Zedekiah (spokesman for the 400 in v 11) involves an obscure question (24). This was probably a sarcastic remark intended to deny that Micaiah had received a true word from God. Micaiah's reply was that Zedekiah would discover the truth when he had to hide to save his skin. But by denying the validity of Micaiah's words, Zedekiah had reopened the crucial issue: who had the truth, Micaiah or Zedekiah and his associates? Ahab faced a choice: to believe the prophet whom he hated, or to believe those whose words he had earlier discerned (indirectly) to be a lie?

He acted in accordance with his personal hatred of Micaiah and his deep-seated antagonism towards the word of God. Paradoxically, he also acted in accordance with that word, which had forecast *disaster* for him (23).

This strange story raises the quesion of whether a prophecy can be known to be true or false. There is no easy answer to this problem. The criterion offered in Dt. 18:22 can be applied only in retrospect; an alternative criterion, in Dt. 13:1–3, places the emphasis on whether the prophet leads people towards or away from serving the true God, and not on whether his words come true.

22:29–40 The death of Ahab. Ahab went out to battle determined to cheat death by disguising himself. But he could not escape his prophesied end, and a random arrow found a space in his armour, wounding him fatally. Even when he tried to defy the words of Micaiah, he ended by fulfilling them, because the events announced by Yahweh's prophets were in the hands of Yahweh himself. The earlier words of

Elijah were also fulfilled by the dogs licking up Ahab's blood outside Samaria, as dogs had licked up the blood of Naboth outside Jezreel (21:19; 22:38).

The concluding formula hints at the prosperity of Ahab's reign and his extensive building activities, now amply attested by archaeology.

1 Ki. 22:41 – 2 Ki. 8:29 During the reigns of Ahab's sons

22:41–50 Jehoshaphat of Judah. The summary of Jehoshaphat's reign in Judah comes as a brief interlude in the Israel-dominated narrative of these chapters. After a standard opening (41–42) Jehoshaphat is praised for continuing in the pious ways of Asa (43a) and completing his reforms (46), though it is noted that he also continued to tolerate the high places. The fact that reference to his alliance with Ahab (44) immediately follows the note concerning the high places suggests that this, too, was considered a failing. Judah's entanglement with Israel did indeed have serious consequences in subsequent reigns. Jehoshaphat's failed attempt to revive the Red Sea expeditions which were a feature of Solomon's reign (48) epitomizes Judah's decline since the golden age of Solomon.

22:51–53 Ahaziah of Israel introduced. As in the case of Ahab, so also in the case of his son Ahaziah: a standard summary without its concluding formula is used to introduce the new king's reign. The concluding formula is postponed until after a further story involving Elijah (2 Ki. 1). The account of Ahaziah's reign therefore resembles a miniaturized version of the account of Ahab's, reflecting the fact that his reign was indeed a brief echo of that of his father.

2 Ki. 1:1–18 Ahaziah and Elijah. The notice concerning Moab's rebellion (1) is picked up again in ch. 3 where it becomes the backdrop to the whole chapter. Here it hints at the decay and downfall of Omri's dynasty, predicted to occur in the reign of Ahab's son (1 Ki. 21:29).

Ahaziah's accident is not in itself portrayed as God's judgment on him. Rather it was his response in seeking an oracle from a foreign god which brought prophetic condemnation. The writer ridicules this god of Ekron by changing his name from the original Baal-Zebul ('Prince Baal') to Baal-Zebub ('Lord of Flies'). (Zebul also occurs in the name Jezebel, which means 'Where is the Prince?'.) Instead of returning with an oracle of Baal-Zebub from Ekron, Ahaziah's messengers returned with an oracle of Yahweh from Elijah! Ahaziah's failure to seek Yahweh in his sickness brought its own demonstration of Yahweh's power over life and death.

The horrific fate of the two captains and their companies in vs 9–12 is difficult to explain. Perhaps Elijah's life was in danger from Ahaziah as it had been earlier from Ahab and Jezebel. (The angel's words to Elijah in v 15 – '*do not be afraid of him*' – give some support to this view.) Or perhaps Ahaziah had to learn that a man of God, like God himself, was not to be ordered around. Certainly, the words of entreaty used by the third captain produced a different response.

Whatever Ahaziah had hoped to achieve in sending for Elijah, all he got was a repeat of the previous prophecy that he would die without recovering from his injuries (16).

In view of Elijah's earlier prophecy to Ahab (1 Ki. 21:29) we might expect Ahaziah to be the last king of Omri's dynasty. But on his death, Jehoram (or Joram), another son of Ahab (2 Ki. 3:1), became king. The fulfilment of Elijah's words is still awaited.

2:1–18 Elijah's departure. The journey in this narrative took in places which were heavy with associations with Israel's past. *Gilgal* (1) was the first stopping-place after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan. Male Israelites born during the wilderness years were circumcised there, and a Passover was celebrated (Jos. 5). *Bethel* (2), some 14 miles (24 km) into the central hills, was the place of Jacob's encounter with God (Gn. 28). *Jericho* (4), in the Jordan valley not far from Gilgal, was the first town to fall to Joshua (Jos. 6), and *the Jordan* (6) had miraculously stopped to let Israel enter the land (Jos. 3).

Apart from the detour to Bethel, the journey therefore focuses on places connected with Israel's entry into the promised land. The purpose of this, or at least of the writer's account of it, is to draw attention to the special roles of Elijah and Elisha in Israel's history. Previous events in Elijah's life recalled aspects of Moses' ministry, *e.g.* like Moses, Elijah received a revelation of God on Mt Horeb, and his slaughter of the prophets of Baal had echoes of the aftermath of the golden calf incident (Ex. 32:25–29). Now he crossed to the eastern side of the Jordan (in a manner similar to the crossing of the Red Sea under Moses' leadership), where Moses' ministry also came to an end. Indeed, the end of Moses' life was almost as mysterious as that of Elijah's (Dt. 34:6). The parallels between the lives of the two men are underlined in the NT when they both appear speaking to Jesus at his transfiguration (Mt. 17:3).

There is a theological significance to the parallels between Elijah and Moses. Moses was the mediator of the covenant at Sinai/Horeb, the prophet (Dt. 18:15; 34:10) through whom

Israel was brought in to that covenant relationship and made the people of God. Elijah was the prophet through whom the people were turned back to the Sinai covenant and Israel's special status was saved. In short, the parallels with Moses dramatically heighten Elijah's importance in Israel's history and in the books of Kings in particular. H. H. Rowley ('Elijah on Mount Carmel', *BJRL*, 43 [1960], 190–219) neatly summed up the relationship between the ministries of Moses and Elijah: 'Without Moses the religion of Yahweh as it figured in the Old Testament would never have been born. Without Elijah it would have died.'

If Elijah is identified as a second Moses, Elisha would appear to be in the mould of Joshua. As Joshua succeeded Moses as leader of the people, so Elisha succeeded Elijah, crossing the Jordan on dry land from east to west as Joshua did (14) and following in Joshua's footsteps by going on to Jericho (15–22). (Even Elisha's name recalls that of Joshua. Elisha means 'God is salvation', while Joshua means 'Yahweh is salvation'.)

Elijah's departure demonstrated the power and mystery of God. It was foreknown by Elisha and the groups of prophets at Bethel and Jericho (3, 5) and finally occurred in a way which defies a clear description (11). Elisha's request for a *double portion* of Elijah's *spirit* (9) reflects the inheritance-right of a firstborn son (Dt. 21:17), and we may see a connection between this and Elisha addressing Elijah as his *father* (12). It amounts to a formal request that he might be heir to Elijah's ministry. The condition which Elijah imposed (10) probably involved Elisha understanding his departure rather than simply witnessing it. Elisha's cry, *'the chariots and horsemen of Israel'* (12), showed that he perceived Elijah to be the true might and protection of God's people. He tore his clothes as a sign of mourning at the people's loss.

When Elisha approached the Jordan and it divided for him as it had done for Elijah, the event confirmed that the spirit active in Elijah now rested on him. The prophets from Jericho therefore acknowledged him as their new master (15). However they had not understood Elijah's departure as well as Elisha, for they insisted on searching for him. Elisha knew this to be useless (16–18).

In the fifth century BC, the prophet Malachi predicted that the return of Elijah would precede the 'great and terrible day of the LORD' (Mal. 4:5). In its context this indicates a prophet who would repeat Elijah's ministry of calling the people back to God (Mal. 4:6), but it led to much speculation that Elijah would return in person (*cf.* Mt. 17:10; Mk. 8:28). Jesus indicated that the ministry of Elijah had been resumed by John the Baptist, fulfilling the words of Malachi (Mt. 11:14; 17:11–13).

The companies of prophets at Bethel and Jericho were presumably among the 7,000 faithful Israelites mentioned in 1 Ki. 19:18. For further comment see below on 2 Ki. 6:1–7.

2:19–22 Healing the spring at Jericho. Jericho was one of the oldest towns in the world, with a history of settlement reaching back to about 8000 BC, and it owes this distinction to the abundant spring which watered the surrounding area and made it fertile. In Elisha's day, however, the water in the spring had turned foul. Elisha's action with the salt was merely symbolic, for salt thrown into the flowing water could not affect the spring at its underground source. It was the word of Yahweh spoken by Elisha which was the true purifier of the water. In this incident we may also see the curse which Joshua had pronounced on Jericho (Jos. 6:26) being revoked by the words of Elisha, the new Joshua. Significantly, the new Joshua was also following the route taken by the first Joshua when he led Israel into Canaan (Bethel being near Ai, to which Joshua moved after taking Jericho; Jos. 7:2).

2:23–25 Incident at Bethel. By travelling next to Bethel, Elisha retraced the journey he had made with Elijah (Bethel–Jericho–Jordan in vs 2–8; Jordan–Jericho–Bethel in vs 13–23).

The death of the youths who mocked Elisha is as sudden and shocking as the burning up of the soldiers in 1:9–12. It is even more shocking if the translation 'small boys' (RSV) or 'little children' (KJV) is followed. Two different Hebrew nouns are used in vs 23 and 24, both of which could be translated as either 'boys' or 'youths'. The NIV prefers *youths*, but does not translate the adjective in v 23 which describes them as 'small'. This certainly implies children, unless it should be translated as 'worthless' or 'unworthy' here. The fierceness of the judgment is best explained if Elisha was being mocked specifically as head of Yahweh's prophets. It is possible that the insult *baldhead* referred to some kind of tonsure which signified membership of the school of prophets. After this incident Elisha travelled north to the scene of Elijah's great victory over the prophets of Baal, and then to Israel's capital.

3:1–20 Preparations to regain Moab. The NIV consistently gives the name Jehoram in its variant form, Joram, in order to distinguish this king of Israel from Jehoram of Judah, who was his part-contemporary. The same practice will be followed here.

Joram is faintly praised for merely following in the ways of Jeroboam and not descending to the depths of Ahab and Jezebel. Although he disposed of an image of Baal which Ahab had

made (2), it is clear from ch. 10 that the worship of Baal was still allowed to flourish in Samaria. The significance of Elijah's contest on Mt Carmel was that the worship of Baal was no longer promoted as the official religion of Israel; but as long as Jezebel continued to dominate the royal court, Baal worship was a feature of life in the capital.

As we learn from the Moabite Stone (see the Introduction), Moab had become Israel's vassal in Omri's time. According to 2 Ki. 1:1 it rebelled in the short reign of Ahaziah. It therefore fell to Joram to try to regain control.

The account has several parallels with Ahab's campaign against Aram (1 Ki. 22). Both campaigns were undertaken to regain territory east of the Jordan; both involved an alliance with Jehoshaphat of Judah (who expressed his commitment in the same words; *cf.* 1 Ki. 22:4 and 2 Ki. 3:7); in both cases Jehoshaphat asked for a prophet through whom they might consult Yahweh; and both campaigns had an unclear outcome.

The king of Edom took part alongside Jehoshaphat (9). This is presumably the 'deputy' who was said to be ruling Edom in 1 Ki. 22:47, *i.e.* an appointee of Jehoshaphat rather than a member of a native dynasty. Thus Judah seems to have regained control of Edom since the days of Hadad (1 Ki. 11).

A severe shortage of water caused the kings to consult Elisha. We are reminded of the drought of Ahab's reign and of that king's search for Elijah (1 Ki. 18:1–15). However, in other respects the circumstances were very different.

Joram spoke piously and confidently of Yahweh initiating the campaign (10 and 13), though we have read nothing previously of him seeking guidance on the matter. Elisha dismissed his piety as shallow, if not utterly false (13–14). Joram had claimed God's sanction for his actions without attempting to discover God's will – an all too common error! Only when in dire straits did he do what he should have done earlier.

Elisha's use of a musician to aid his prophesying (15) recalls the use of musical instruments by the ecstatic prophets in 1 Sa. 10:5–13. He prophesied both water and military success, and the first part of the prophecy was fulfilled the very next day. Elisha plays no further part in the story.

3:21–27 The battle with the Moabites. It is rather surprising that the Moabite army should so misinterpret the sight of early morning sunlight on the water (22–23). We should probably understand this confused thinking as God's doing, the means by which he handed Moab over to the three kings (18). These verses contain word-plays on the similarity between the Hebrew words for 'Edom', 'red' and 'blood', which cannot be conveyed in English translations.

Joram and his allies defeated the Moabites, fulfilling Elisha's prophecy. However, when the king of Moab sacrificed his firstborn son on the wall of Kir Hareseth (27) the Israelites *withdrew* and did not pursue their victory. The exact reason for Israel's withdrawal is not clear from the text. Was there *fury against Israel* among the Moabites because their king had been forced by desperation to do such a dreadful thing? In other words, did the sacrifice renew the Moabites' determination to fight? Or did the fury (or possibly 'strife') come 'upon Israel' (RSV)? That is, were the Israelite troops so overwhelmed (with horror or superstitious dread) at the sight of a human sacrifice that they renounced the whole venture? Either interpretation is possible. The final outcome of the campaign is left in doubt; if Israel withdrew, did Moab remain free? The Moabite Stone celebrates a successful rebellion, but that does not settle the present issue as it could have been inscribed before Joram's campaign took place.

4:1–7 A miraculous supply of oil. Miracles characterized the ministry of Elisha. His healing of the waters at Jericho (2:19–22) was the first. A series of seven then followed (4:1 – 6:7). For their overall significance see the comment on the last of the sequence (2 Ki. 6:1–7).

It was an accepted custom in Israel that if a family could not pay off its debts by any other means, some or all members of that family would work as servants for the creditor (Lv. 25:39–41). This was the position a widow of one of the prophets found herself in, and she was about to lose her two boys. The situation was serious, for the widow would have no-one to work the family land. She faced a further downward spiral of debt if Elisha could not help.

The olive oil which unexpectedly flowed from its vessel recalls the miraculous provision of oil and flour for the widow who sheltered Elijah (1 Ki. 17:13–16), but here the oil is sold to pay off the debt.

4:8–17 A son for the woman of Shunem. Shunem lay somewhere near Jezreel (Jos. 19:18). *Shunammite* (12) is a feminine adjective derived from the name of the town and is used here to designate the woman who provided Elisha with hospitality. Her name is never given. In v 13 we learn that Elisha's relationship with the royal court was very different from Elijah's. He seems to have been held in esteem and to have had influence there. This verse anticipates the events of ch. 8, when Elisha's servant Gehazi did indeed speak to the king on the woman's behalf.

The promise of a son in improbable circumstances is similar to the promise God made to Abraham and Sarah (Gn. 18:10), and the woman's sceptical response recalls Sarah's on that occasion (Gn. 18:12). But the prophet's word proved trustworthy.

4:18–37 The Shunammite's son restored to life. This story has clear parallels with Elijah's restoration of the widow's son at Zarephath (1 Ki. 17). In both cases, the healing took place on the prophet's own bed in an upper room and involved a similar repeated action. But the present story is told in more detail than the earlier one and with much greater poignancy. And on this occasion it is stated unequivocally that the child had died.

The woman's action of placing the dead child on Elisha's bed and going quickly to search for him suggests she had faith that he would be able to restore the child to life. The child's return to life and his reunion with his mother are simply and touchingly told. Through the man of God, God had once more manifested his power over life and death.

4:38–41 The poisoned pot of stew. This incident is set in a time of famine (38), perhaps the one referred to in 8:1, which lasted seven years. As in ch. 2, we find Elisha associated with a community of prophets (lit. 'the sons of the prophets', as in the RSV), this time at Gilgal. Because usual supplies of food were short, one of the prophets collected an unknown fruit which turned out to be poisonous. Elisha's action of adding flour (like his action of putting salt in the spring at Jericho in 2:21) was probably symbolic. The action was effective because it was the action of the *man of God.*

4:42–44 Feeding a hundred. Presumably the *hundred men* (43) were once again a community of prophets. The twenty loaves would have been small and flat and, therefore, inadequate food for so many – hence the servant's amazed question. However, Elisha had received God's promise that there would be plenty, and so it proved.

5:1–27 The healing of Naaman. Israel's wars with Aram were interspersed with periods of peace between the two states (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 22:1). The story of Naaman is set in one such period. A theme which occurs at several points throughout the story is that Israel's God is the world's God; he is the only God and his power and interests are not local but cosmic in scale.

This theme emerges as soon as Naaman is introduced. He was an Aramean commander through whom *the LORD had given victory to Aram.* Yahweh was therefore in control of the rise and fall of nations other than Israel. The disease from which Naaman suffered was not necessarily leprosy, for the Hebrew word covers a variety of ailments affecting the skin.

Elisha's reputation as a healer reached Naaman through his wife's Israelite maidservant. In spite of the fact that Naaman had once defeated her own people and taken her captive, she showed a sincere concern for his welfare. Her simple faith that Elisha would be able to cure Naaman's disease was in stark contrast to the reaction of the king of Israel. His panic in v 7 is almost comical and full of irony. The king could not exercise God's power over life and death, but it did not occur to him to send Naaman to *the man of God* who could.

Naaman was at first outraged by Elisha's instructions to wash seven times in the Jordan (10–12). His servants, however, had more faith – just as the Israelite maidservant had shown more faith than the Israelite king. They sensibly pointed out that he would have been keen enough to do something difficult, so why not something easy? Obedience to Elisha's simple instructions produced healing. God is often asking for faith and obedience in small matters when we think he is requiring mighty deeds.

Naaman's response showed great humility and gratitude. Whatever he had previously believed about Israel's God, he now declared him to be the only God (15). From now on he would worship only Yahweh (17). His request for two mule-loads of Israel's soil need not mean that he thought Yahweh was somehow limited to Israelite territory. Rather, it probably reflected a belief that Yahweh's land was holy and, therefore, its soil was necessary for the creation of a sacred area for the worship of Yahweh in Aram. Naaman's request in v 18 did not mean that he wished to continue worshipping *Rimmon* (a title of the Aramean god Hadad) as well as Yahweh. This would contradict his declarations in vs 15 and 17. His problem was that, as a member of the royal court, he must go through the motions of worshipping Rimmon, even though his allegiance was now to Yahweh alone. Elisha's blessing assured him of the forgiveness he asked for. The whole passage should make us very sensitive to the difficulties of those who try to serve God among people of another faith.

Gehazi's attempt at deception (20–27) provides a sad and salutary appendix to the story. As a high-ranking official, Naaman had brought with him gifts of enormous value – all of which Elisha had refused to accept. The temptation to obtain some of these riches for himself proved too strong for Gehazi, who took cruel advantage of Naaman's gratitude and generosity. The service of God does not protect his servants from temptation. Indeed, it often places them in a position to abuse their status and take advantage of others. Elisha's words in v 26 implied that

there might have been times when it was right to accept gifts, but this (for a reason which is not explained) was not one of them.

6:1–7 A lost axe-head. The picture of *the company of prophets* becomes a little clearer in this story. They lived together as a community under Elisha's leadership. (The crucial phrase in v 1 reads lit. 'the place where we dwell in your presence'.) There seem to have been such communities at Bethel, Jericho and Gilgal (2 Ki. 2:3, 5, 15–18; 4:38), but it is not clear which of these, if any, is the subject of this narrative, or whether Elisha had equally strong ties with all of them. It would be wrong to think of them as monastic communities, like those which flourished in the Judean wilderness during the fourth to sixth centuries AD, as it is clear that the prophets married and raised families (4:1). In the present story we see a community building a new settlement to accommodate its growing numbers – a sign that it was flourishing under Elisha's leadership.

Elisha's action to retrieve the sunken axe-head is as mysterious as his earlier healing of the Jericho spring and his removal of poison from the stew. Like those stories, it shows him to have been a man possessing extraordinary powers, powers not possessed by the other members of the prophetic community. Such powers were his because of his special status as a *man of God* (6). The cumulative effect of these strange tales is to suggest what this phrase means: he was not simply a pious man who served God but a man whose relationship with God was unique among the prophets of his time. Like Elijah earlier, he was in a very special sense God's man for this moment in Israel's history.

6:8–23 Elisha and the Arameans. This story provides a touch of comic relief before the tension and tragedy which follows. When the king of Aram determined to capture Elisha because of his ability to warn the king of Israel of impending raids, the attempt was doomed to failure from the start. For if Elisha knew in advance of Aram's plans, he presumably knew of this one! The frustration of the king of Aram is humorously portrayed in vs 11–13.

Elisha does not take evasive action, but remains in Dothan while a huge Aramean force surrounds the city. In v 17 the servant sees the reason for Elisha's calm confidence: the horses and chariots of fire (which recall 2 Ki. 2:11–12) greatly outnumbers the Aramean troops. The spiritual sight given to him when Elisha prays is balanced by the blindness which strikes the Arameans when he prays the second time. The humour turns to farce when Elisha himself leads the befuddled troops off to Samaria. He then prays for their eyes to be opened in the same words he has used to pray for the servant's special sight. But what they see is not so reassuring: they are in Israel's capital, where Israelite troops presumably outnumber them.

The king of Israel recognized Elisha's authority to be above his own. In view of 1 Ki. 20:35–43, it is surprising that Elisha forbade the slaughter of the enemy troops. The reason is left unclear, except that different rules of war seem to have applied in this situation (22). Instead, the enemy was to be entertained with a royal feast and sent back to their king. Their discomfiture was enough to end the raids on Israel.

6:24 – 7:2 Samaria besieged again. The tone shifts from comedy to tragedy. After the conclusion to the previous story (23), it is surprising to find Samaria besieged by the Arameans in v 24. The apparent contradiction is because the stories about Elisha are not in chronological order (see below on 8:1–6).

The siege resulted in famine within the capital, and its severity is emphasized by the inflated prices charged for food (25). The king's helplessness is powerfully conveyed in v 27. The appalling news that starvation had led to a child being eaten was the last straw. The king tore his clothes as an expression of grief, revealing sackcloth beneath. This was worn as a sign of mourning in times of disaster (La. 2:10) and in times of penitence for sin (1 Ki. 21:27) or prayer for deliverance (2 Ki. 19:1–2). Any or all of these could have been the king's reason for wearing it in this crisis.

We are not told why his anger boiled over against Elisha (31) but the reason is not difficult to guess. Elisha, who had the power to warn against Aramean invasions and to thwart them, had not prevented this one; he also had the power to multiply oil and bread, but had not used it to ward off starvation.

A transfer of power is indicated in v 32. During the previous siege of Samaria 'all the elders of the land' assembled around the king (1 Ki. 20:7). Now, in a variation on that scene, we find the elders gathered in the house of Elisha. True leadership was acknowledged to lie with the prophet, not with the king (who remains nameless throughout, as though his identity is not important).

In the Hebrew of v 33 it is the king's messenger (as in the NIV) and not the king himself (as in the RSV) who comes down to Elisha's house, and the words quoted are the king's words as conveyed by that messenger (not spoken by the king himself as in the NIV). The king's attitude is understandable but mistaken; for even if Yahweh had sent the catastrophe, that was no reason why Yahweh might not be looked to for help. Furthermore, it was an attitude which could lead only to deeper despair, for the king himself was powerless to act, as he

well knew (27). If God is not our help in such times, there is no help at all.

Elisha replied that deliverance was at hand. In only twenty-four hours time, food would be so plentiful that prices would have dropped dramatically (7:1). Thus, Elisha implied (though he did not state it) that the siege would be lifted. In 7:2 the messenger is described as the officer 'on whose arm the king leaned' (not *on whose arm the king was leaning*, because the king was not present in this scene; see above on 6:33), meaning that he was the king's regular attendant. Naaman used a similar phrase to describe his service to the king of Aram (2 Ki. 5:18). The man's scepticism earned him a dire prediction concerning his own fate (2).

7:3–20 Samaria saved again. The miraculous means by which the siege was lifted is related in vs 6–7. But the people in Samaria might not have realized the truth in time to avoid starvation had not the outcasts at the city gate decided to throw in their lot with the Arameans (3–5). There is suspense in v 8 as we wonder whether the four men will ever take the good news back to the city and thereby save the starving population. The king was so deep in despair that he could only suspect a trap (12). As in the story of Naaman, it was a servant who provided the necessary sound advice (13). The provisions left behind by the Arameans were so plentiful that Elisha's prophecy about the price of food was fulfilled, and in the stampede through the gate the king's attendant met his predicted end (16–20).

8:1–6 The Shunammite's land. There are clear signs here that the stories of Elisha are not presented in chronological order. As this story involves Gehazi (who left Elisha's service in 5:27), it must have occurred before the healing of Naaman. The famine predicted in v 1 probably provides the background to 4:38–41.

The story shows Elisha's continuing care of the Shunammite woman and her family. The woman acts as the head of her household, perhaps because her husband (already elderly in 4:14) has died by this time. The king's treatment of the woman on her return shows his great respect for Elisha (4–6). God's providential care is also illustrated in the fact that Gehazi was relating the story of the woman's son at the moment she made her appeal.

8:7–15 Ben-Hadad assassinated by Hazael. Elisha's high standing in Aram is shown by Ben-Hadad's extraordinary deference to him in v 9. In Hebrew Ben-Hadad's question about his sickness is worded similarly to that of Ahaziah in 2 Ki. 1:2, inviting us to compare the two incidents. Both kings turned to a foreign god to discover the outcome, but whereas the Israelite king sought Baal-Zebul, the Aramean king sought the God of Israel!

Elisha's message to the sick king of v 10 can be read in two very different ways: either 'Go and say to him, "You will certainly live", but Yahweh has shown me that he will certainly die', or 'Go and say, "You will certainly not live", for Yahweh has shown me that he will certainly die'. The problem stems from the fact that in Hebrew the words 'not' and 'to him' differ only slightly. While the main text contains the former, the latter is offered in the margin as the correct reading. Most translators follow the margin here, on the basis that the more difficult reading is more likely to be correct. The change to 'not' can readily be explained by a copyist wanting to avoid the impression that Elisha had lied. A change in the opposite direction cannot be explained so easily.

The reason for the false message is left obscure, but v 10 probably expresses the tension between what Elisha knew of Ben-Hadad's illness and what he knew of Hazael's intentions: the sickness itself was not fatal, but Ben-Hadad would die nevertheless because Hazael planned to murder him and take the throne. Elisha did not say that God had chosen Hazael to be king in Ben-Hadad's place, merely that he would be, and that he would cause great suffering in Israel.

However we must not forget that Elijah was earlier instructed to anoint Hazael as king over Aram (1 Ki. 19:15), and although no actual anointing takes place in the present passage it must be seen as in some sense fulfilling that instruction. On the other hand, the two references to Hazael have very different emphases. In 1 Ki. 19:17 he was merely to play a part in removing the worship of Baal from Israel, whereas in Elisha's vision (and in subsequent events) Aram's oppression of Israel reached devastating severity under his rule.

8:16–24 Jehoram of Judah. In vs 16–29 we have the second of the two Judah-interludes contained in the account of Omri's dynasty. The Hebrew text of v 16 implies a co-regency between Jehoshaphat and his son Jehoram. In Jehoram's reign Jehoshaphat's alliance with Israel (1 Ki. 22:4; 2 Ki. 3:7) bore bitter fruit in Judah. Jehoram's sins, broadly defined with reference to *the ways of the kings of Israel*, are traced to his marriage to a daughter of Ahab (18). This verse introduces (but does not name) Athaliah, who plays a major role in ch. 11. V 19 echoes 1 Ki. 11:36 and 15:4 with its reference to God's promise *to maintain a lamp for David and his descendants for ever*. However, this is the last time the promise is mentioned – a fact which becomes ominous in the light of later developments in Judah.

Edom's successful bid for independence

(anticipated in 1 Ki. 11:14–22) and the revolt of the city of Libnah (presumably to the Philistines, since it lay near Judah's border with Philistia) are to be understood as consequences of Jehoram's wickedness (compare the invasion of Shishak in the account of Rehoboam's reign; 1 Ki. 14:25–28).

8:25–29 Ahaziah of Judah. Ahaziah of Judah continued in his father's (and mother's) footsteps (26–27). The note of his alliance with Joram of Israel introduces the events which led to the destruction of Baal worship in both Israel and Judah. There is also a first reference here to Hazael as Israel's oppressor, beginning the fulfilment of Elisha's vision. Ahaziah's death is not reported until 9:27–28.

9:1 – 10:36 Jehu and the end of Omri's dynasty

9:1–13 Jehu anointed king of Israel. With Hazael on the throne in Damascus only one of God's instructions to Elijah (1 Ki. 19:15–16) remained to be carried out. Once that was done events moved swiftly to a fulfilment of Elijah's prophecy concerning the downfall of Omri's dynasty (1 Ki. 21:20–28).

For some reason Elisha did not anoint Jehu himself, but sent an anonymous man from the community of prophets to do it. The instruction in v 1 to *tuck your cloak into your belt* ('gird up your loins'; RSV) means to prepare for action of some kind; here it means to put on clothes suitable for a journey. Jehu has not previously been introduced except in God's instruction to Elijah (1 Ki. 19:16), but we learn in the course of events that he was the commander-in-chief of Israel's army, as Omri had been (1 Ki. 16:16). (He is not to be confused with Jehu the prophet in 1 Ki. 16:1–7.) The army was defending Ramoth Gilead, presumably after capturing it in an unreported sequel to the campaign in 1 Ki. 22.

The prophet's words (7–10) recall those of Elijah in 1 Ki. 21:21–23, adding the note that God would avenge the blood of his servants (7).

The enthusiasm of the troops in v 13 suggests that Omri's dynasty was somewhat lacking in popularity. The time was ripe for a coup.

9:14–37 The deaths of Joram, Ahaziah and Jezebel. The information concerning Joram's and Ahaziah's presence in Jezreel on account of Joram's wounds (14–15) picks up the threads of the previous chapter (8:28–29) as the action converges on *the plot of ground that had belonged to Naboth the Jezreelite* (21). After a pattern of thrice-repeated questions which recalls 2 Ki. 1:9–14, Jehu declares his hand (22). Joram's action of wheeling his chariot around after realizing Jehu's intentions (23) resembles Ahab's action on being wounded at Ramoth Gilead (1 Ki. 22:34). The writer deliberately gathers up earlier themes and motifs as the action approaches its climax.

Jehu's killing of the wounded and fleeing Joram is shocking in its callousness (24), as is his treatment of Joram's body (25–26; *cf.* Dt. 21:22–23; 2 Sa. 21:10–14). Although Jehu quotes an earlier prophecy to justify this, it is a prophecy of which we have previously heard nothing and we are left wondering whether it is authentic or a convenient product of Jehu's imagination.

His killing of Ahaziah of Judah (27–29) was not commanded by the prophet in vs 7–10. Jehu presumably felt it was justified because Ahaziah was the son of Athaliah, granddaughter of Omri (8:26). The geographical details in these verses are not clear, but it is interesting that the forces of Judah (Ahaziah's *servants*) were stationed in Israelite Megiddo.

Jezebel, well aware of the direction events were taking, faced death with cool detachment and even ironic humour. She painted her eyes and arranged her hair, not because she hoped to seduce Jehu (her words show that) but because 'she wished to depart this life in style!' (T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* [Word Books, 1985], p.109). Her opening words repeat again the question addressed to Jehu in vs 18, 19 and 22 (lit. 'Is it peace?'), but this time the question was deliberately ironic. By referring to Jehu as Zimri she reminded him of another army commander who killed his king – only to die horribly himself seven days later (1 Ki. 16:9–19).

Her death was horrendously brutal. The deliberate trampling of her body by Jehu's chariot-team (33) went beyond Elijah's prophecy (1 Ki. 21:23), just as Jehu's quotation of that prophecy (36–37) went beyond the original in detail and savagery. Jehu's action of eating and drinking while the dogs disposed of her remains (34) highlights his own callousness.

10:1–17 The slaughter of Ahab's sons and supporters. The Hebrew text appears to be at fault in referring to letters to Jezreel in v 1, since Jehu was already there. The Greek text has 'to the rulers of the city [*i.e.* Samaria], to the elders . . .' *etc.* (as in the RSV). This was probably the original reading, since only a small error in copying the Hebrew of this phrase would produce the reference to Jezreel.

Jehu challenged the rulers of Samaria to choose a successor to Joram who could fight for the dynasty's survival (3). His ultimate aim was the death of all seventy potential successors, which he achieved through coercion. The arrival of the basketloads of royal heads at Jezreel provided gruesome proof that the deed had been done (6–8).

Jehu's question in v 9 ('. . . *but who killed all*

these?') is difficult to interpret. He appears to be denying direct responsibility for the slaughter of the princes, but it is not clear on whom he was trying to place it. Was he claiming divine sanction for all his actions and saying that ultimately Yahweh was responsible for this bloodshed? Or was he blaming the rulers of Samaria for the atrocity he had forced them to commit? If the former, his reference to Elijah's prophecy in v 10 continues the same theme; if the latter, the prophecy was cited to support the revenge he was shortly to take on Samaria. Whichever interpretation is correct, Jehu's aim was to win the support of *the people* (9), presumably the citizens of Jezreel and any soldiers stationed there.

The next stage of Jehu's bloodbath was the massacre of all the royal family's relatives and supporters in Jezreel (11). Then he moved on to Samaria to repeat the process there (17). On the way, however, he met and killed forty-two relatives of Ahaziah of Judah (13–14). He showed cruel caprice by murdering them after ordering his men to take them alive. And throughout he claimed to be motivated by *zeal for the* LORD (16) – a claim of which we should be suspicious in view of his cavalier use of prophecy to justify his atrocities (9:25–26, 36–37). Although his elimination of Ahab's family is said to be *according to the word of the* LORD *spoken to Elijah* (17), the writer's final verdict on Jehu (29) puts this in a wider perspective (see below).

10:18–28 The slaughter of the worshippers of Baal. The bloodbath continued with the wiping out of all Samaria's Baal worshippers. Jehu deceived them by claiming to be a more fervent Baal worshipper than Ahab (1) – after all, Ahab had hardly been an unswerving upholder of the new cult, and had even given two of his sons Yahweh-names (Joram and Ahaziah). Jehu's religious purge was carried out with typical callousness. Its exact scope depends on whether the Hebrew word meaning lit. 'servants' is translated 'worshippers' (as in the RSV) or *ministers* (as in the NIV). The former is probably correct, implying the comprehensive elimination of Baal worship and not just the removal of the officials of the cult.

10:29–36 Jehu evaluated. Chs. 9 and 10 provide an ambiguous picture of Jehu. On the one hand, he acted *according to the word of the* LORD *spoken to Elijah* (10:17); on the other hand, we have seen that he appears to go beyond that word and to manipulate it to support his brutal extermination of all who might oppose him. So in spite of his achievement in eradicating the worship of Baal from Israel (28) he is not portrayed as an exemplary character, but one whose ends were marred by his means. Like many leaders of revolutions, he indulged in excesses in his attempt to remove the evils which preceded him, committing evils of his own. His mishandling of prophecy also puts him among that breed of ruthless politicians who claim an almost prophetic authority for themselves, justifying their deeds by appealing to the will of God.

This is only implicit in the biblical narrative, but there is also explicit criticism in the concluding assessment of Jehu's reign. God's own approval of his achievement was qualified (30); he promised Jehu a dynasty of five generations in all (his own reign and those of four generations of descendants) – far short of the eternal dynasty (on the pattern of David's) which was conditionally promised to Jeroboam (1 Ki. 11:39). Significantly, the prophet Hosea was to speak of the end of Jehu's dynasty in terms of punishment 'for the massacre at Jezreel' (Ho. 1:4).

Furthermore, Jehu's professed *zeal for the* LORD (16) was undermined by his worship of Jeroboam's golden calves (29, 31). Divine disapproval of his reign is illustrated by Hazael's victories, described as Yahweh's reduction of Israel's territory (32–33). Jehu is a further sad illustration of the fact that divine appointing and prophetic anointing do not guarantee that the recipient will live up to God's calling.

11:1 – 17:41 The two kingdoms: from Jehu to the fall of Samaria

11:1 – 14:29 The period of Jehu's dynasty

11:1–21 Athaliah queen of Judah. We have already met Athaliah as the daughter of Ahab who married Jehoram of Judah (2 Ki. 8:18, 26). Her attempt to wipe out the Davidic dynasty can only be explained by her own ambition to seize the throne. Jehu's murder of her son Ahaziah and many of his adult kinsmen presented her with the opportunity she needed. More of her own relatives must have died in her attempted coup. In short, she emerges as a callous and calculating woman.

Her plans, had they succeeded, would have put an end to the Davidic dynasty. 2 Ki. 8:19 reminded us of God's mercy towards the dynasty because of the commitment he had made to David, and in this story we see that mercy in action. However, the dynasty's salvation is not told in terms of divine intervention; it was brought about through human courage, loyalty and cunning.

Jehosheba is described simply as the sister of the dead Ahaziah (2). She could, therefore, have been Athaliah's own daughter. However, since the Hebrew term could equally well mean 'half-sister', she may have been Jehoram's daughter by another royal wife. Other details are also

unclear. We do not know why she chose to save Joash (who can only have been about a year old when she hid him; vs 3–4, 21) rather than any of the other royal princes who were about to be murdered. (See also below on 12:1–3). The absence of the child's mother (named in 12:1) from the story is surprising.

Events are described in much more detail from v 4 when Jehoiada the priest (9) enters the story. (According to 2 Ch. 22:11, Jehosheba was Jehoiada's wife.) Unfortunately, many of the details of the deployment of the soldiers in vs 4–11 remain obscure because we are unable to understand some of the military and other terms. What is clear from the willing involvement of the troops is that Athaliah did not have their support (though she must have had some support to begin with or she could not have commanded the death of the royal princes). From the bewildering detail we gain an impression of Jehoiada's meticulous planning and watertight security arrangements.

Whether the seven-year-old Joash was actually crowned in v 12 depends on the correct translation of a Hebrew word which refers to some kind of symbol of the king's dedication. It is frequently translated *crown*, but its exact meaning is uncertain. A similar vagueness surrounds the covenant or 'testimony' (RSV) with which he was presented. Some kind of inscribed plaque seems likely, perhaps summarizing the requirements attached to kingship. There may be no direct connection with the covenants made by Jehoiada in v 17. The shouts of the people when Joash was anointed (12, 14) attest the popularity of the restored Davidic line in Judah.

Athaliah's death is told with stark economy (13–16). Her reign is given no formal summary, for the writer does not acknowledge her legitimacy.

The first *covenant* over which Jehoiada officiated (17) re-established the relationship between Yahweh and Judah's king, and the relationship between Yahweh and the people (*that they would be the LORD's people*). The second concerned the people's acceptance of Joash. The renewed commitment to Yahweh then expressed itself in the destruction of the trappings of Baal worship and the execution of the priest of Baal (18). Clearly Athaliah, from Baal-worshipping Israel, had introduced these into Jerusalem, though we do not know whether she did so after Ahaziah's death or earlier. The renewal of the kingship was completed by Joash's descent from temple to palace to take his rightful place on the throne of David (19–21). In v 21 his name is given in its longer form, Jehoash. However, to help distinguish him from king Jehoash of Israel (2 Ki. 13:10–25), whose name is sometimes given in the shorter form, the NIV consistently refers to the king of Judah as Joash and to the king of Israel as Jehoash. The same practice will be followed here.

12:1–3 Joash of Judah: introduction. It appears from v 1 that even though the writer did not acknowledge the legitimacy of Athaliah's reign of over six years, he did not include it within the forty-year reign of Joash. Instead he counted the years of Joash's reign from the time he was formally proclaimed king in the seventh year of Jehu of Israel.

Joash grew up under the instruction of Jehoiada the priest, and thus the influence of Athaliah on the royal family of Judah was broken. Was this why Jehosheba chose the one-year-old Joash, because he was too young to have learned anything from his Baal-worshipping grandmother? In v 2 the NIV has *. . . did what was right . . . all the years Jehoiada the priest instructed him*, in order to allow for Joash's later lapse into paganism as recorded by the Chronicler (2 Ch. 24:17–22). The RSV has '. . . did what was right . . . all his days, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him', in keeping with the fact that the writer of Kings seems to know nothing of this lapse. His only negative comment is that Joash failed to remove the high places (3).

12:4–16 Joash of Judah: repairing the temple. The reason for repairing the temple is not given here. In 2 Ch. 24:7 it is explained that Athaliah's sons had 'broken into' part of the temple precincts and taken them over for the worship of Baal.

The arrangements for the collection of money (4–5) are not clear. The NIV punctuates v 4 so that three sources of income are listed, the first phrase being taken as an inclusive description of all of them. It is likely, however, that four distinct sources are listed here. The diversion of money from all of these for the repairs indicates the seriousness of the situation. Further vagueness arises from the uncertain meaning of the Hebrew phrase rendered *from one of the treasurers* ('from his acquaintance' in the RSV). Another possibility is 'from his own funds' (NEB), which would mean that part of the personal income of each priest was also diverted to finance the project. This would further indicate the urgency of the undertaking. A similar expression produces the same uncertainty in v 7.

We are not told in what year of his reign Joash initiated the temple repairs, so we do not know how long had elapsed by his twenty-third year (6). The impression is that the project was delayed for a long time. This in turn suggests that the zeal and morale of the priests was at a low ebb. As a result, the project was taken out of the hands of the priests, and a new system for

funding temple maintenance was introduced. The power of the king over the priesthood at this time is clear from the way Joash was able to reorganize their affairs.

The money which was placed in the chest (9) would not have been coins, as coins were not introduced until around 650 BC (in Asia Minor). When payment was not made in kind, the normal exchange commodity was metal (usually silver or gold) in pieces of known weight.

The list of craftsmen involved in the repairs (11–12) suggests that the damage was extensive. There is a sad echo here of the original building project in Solomon's reign. The contrast between Solomon's apparently unlimited resources and the difficulty Joash had in raising money for the repairs is very striking.

The meaning of vs 13–14 is slightly unclear but seems to be that the manufacture of utensils for the temple was postponed so that the gold and silver could be used to finance the repairs (further evidence of the lack of resources). Had the utensils previously been lost, desecrated or misappropriated? Or were they among the precious things which Joash used to buy off Hazael (see below on vs 17–18)? Does the lack of replacements mean that normal temple worship lapsed, or did it continue with more mundane items? Such questions are left unanswered.

12:17–18 Joash of Judah: Jerusalem threatened. The opening phrase *About this time* places this event during the repair programme which began after Joash's twenty-third year (6) and therefore, during the reign of Jehoahaz of Israel (which also began in the twenty-third year of Joash; 13:1). Israel's extreme weakness during Jehoahaz's reign (13:7) allowed Hazael to penetrate as far south as Judah, placing Jerusalem itself under threat.

Joash does not seem to have had the military might to stave off Hazael's advance. Instead he bought him off with precious items from the temple and palace treasuries (18). The Chronicler paints an even bleaker picture of the invasion, tracing the diaster to Joash's lapse into paganism after the death of Jehoiada (2 Ch. 24:23–25).

12:19–21 Joash of Judah: assassination. The foregoing narrative implies that Judah was weak and impoverished during Joash's reign, and this probably explains the discontent which led to his assassination. Typically, the Kings writer shows no interest in the motive of the assassins and deals briefly with Joash's murder in the context of a standard concluding formula.

13:1–9 Jehoahaz of Israel. Jehoahaz resembled his father Jehu in *following the sins of Jeroboam* (2). As a consequence, Israel suffered oppression by Hazael and his successor (another Ben-Hadad; v 3). We glimpse something of Israel's dire emergency in v 7, which describes the meagre remnants of Jehoahaz's army. (By contrast, Ahab was able to field 2,000 chariots at the battle of Qarqar.) In this crisis, Jehoahaz turned to Yahweh (4), but there was no change of heart on the part of the people as a whole (6).

The account in vs 3–5 follows a pattern familiar from the book of Judges: Yahweh is angry with Israel; he hands Israel over to an oppressor; Yahweh's help is sought; he hears and sends a deliverer. There are also similarities with the summary of the Exodus found in Dt. 26:7–9.

The identity of the deliverer sent by Yahweh (5) is debated. This may be a reference to the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III, whose western campaign of about 805 BC reduced Hazael's power. Another and more probable suggestion is that Elisha is intended. This would place the deliverance in the reign of Jehoash, in keeping with vs 22–25 (see below).

13:10–13 Jehoash of Israel: summary of his reign. These verses provide a standard summary of Jehoash's reign. Like his two predecessors, he continued in the sins of Jeroboam (11). His war with Amaziah of Judah (recounted in ch. 14) is singled out for mention in v 12, but not his more important defeat of the Arameans (25).

13:14–19 Jehoash of Israel: Jehoash and Elisha. After the notice of Jehoash's death the narrative backtracks to relate an incident involving Elisha. This is the first time Elisha has appeared since the beginning of ch. 9, and here we find him on his deathbed after more than fifty years at the head of Israel's prophets. In spite of the criticism of Jehoash in the preceding summary, this story shows him respectfully devoted to the elderly man of God (*cf.* 2 Ki. 8:4–6).

The king's words in v 14 repeats Elisha's own exclamation on the departure of Elijah (2 Ki. 2:12, on which see the comment). With these words Jehoash acknowledged Elisha to be Israel's strength and protection and bewailed his approaching death. The cry was particularly poignant in view of the fact that Israel's literal 'chariots and horsemen' had been all but destroyed (7). Would Israel be left utterly defenceless at Elisha's passing?

The story involves symbolic actions, as in the earlier miracle stories concerning Elisha. On this occasion, however, they were performed by the king (though Elisha placed his own hands over the king's when he fired the arrow; v 16). Elisha's prophecy (17) confirms that the issue underlying this incident was Israel's survival of the Aramean oppression. The first action

symbolized victory and recovery. However, the king's failure to perform the second action often enough determined that his success against Aram would be limited (19). It presumably signified a lack of faith or determination.

The Aphek mentioned in v 17 is probably the same as that in 1 Ki. 20:26, 30. It lay east of the Sea of Galilee, and is not to be confused with Aphek on the coastal plain about 12 miles (20 km) inland from Joppa (1 Sa. 4:1, *etc.*).

13:20–21 Elisha's death and final miracle (in that order!). Unlike Elijah, Elisha underwent the normal processes of death, burial and decay. This incident must have occurred at least two years after his death, since only his bones remained. His posthumous miracle resembles nothing else in the Bible. The point of the story may be to underline once again the unique power of Elisha, by showing that even the dregs of power residing in his bones were enough to restore a dead man to life. More importantly, it symbolizes the fact that Elisha's action in the previous verses brought Israel new life after his death.

13:22–25 Jehoash of Israel: Israel's deliverance begins. Although Jehoahaz sought Yahweh's favour and Yahweh heard him (4), there was no deliverance from oppression during his reign (22). Relief came with the victories of his son Jehoash, after Hazael had been succeeded by his son Ben-Hadad (probably the third of that name; see above on 1 Ki. 20:1). Jehoash's three victories were those predicted by Elisha (18–19). This was the beginning of a revival of Israel's fortunes which reached its peak under Jehoash's successor.

Just as Judah's preservation has been linked to God's promises to David (1 Ki. 11:36; 15:4; 2 Ki. 8:19) so in v 23 Israel's preservation is linked to a much older covenant – God's covenant with the ancestors of the whole nation, which involved the promise of the land. Humanly speaking, Israel's survival at this time hung by a slender thread, but in truth it was guaranteed by a covenant made and upheld by God.

14:1–22 Amaziah of Judah. Amaziah is formally introduced (1–4) as a king who was as good as, but no better than, his father. He is the first king since Asa to be compared with David, but whereas in Asa's case the comparison is complimentary (1 Ki. 15:11) here it is critical (3). In executing his father's assassins he had regard for *the Book of the Law of Moses*, clearly a reference to Deuteronomy in some form (see Dt. 24:16). His defeat of the Edomites (7) did not amount to the reconquest of Edom, but it probably paved the way for his son Azariah to take Elath from the Edomites and rebuild it (22). Elath was at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, near Solomon's old Red Sea port of Ezion Geber (1 Ki. 9:26).

So much is reported positively, but Amaziah's war with Israel (8–14) does not show him in a good light. No provocation by Jehoash is reported (but see 2 Ch. 25:6–13). Although Amaziah's message in v 8 is described by the NIV as a *challenge*, the Hebrew text does not say this, and it may simply have been a request for a meeting. If so, some such incident as the one reported in Chronicles might be presupposed here and Amaziah may have been hoping to negotiate reparations peacefully. On the other hand, the final words of Jehoash's reply suggest that he understood Amaziah's message as a provocation to war. The fable which Jehoash quotes (or concocts) in v 9 puts Amaziah in the unfavourable role of the worthless thistle and thus shows utter contempt for him. It is possible that the reference to a marriage means that Amaziah was trying to negotiate a marriage-alliance with Israel at this time, but there is no other evidence for this.

Jehoash did not march directly on Judah's northern border but moved his army down to the western approaches to Jerusalem. Battle was joined at Beth Shemesh (distinguished by the phrase *in Judah* from another town of that name in northern Israel), and Amaziah suffered the ignominy of defeat and capture. Jehoash then entered Jerusalem itself by breaking down about 200 yds (180 m) of the wall on the north-western side. The temple and palace treasuries can hardly have been overflowing, since Amaziah's father had emptied them of precious items to pay off Hazael (12:18). The taking of hostages would have deterred further hostilities from Judah.

Vs 15–16 repeat almost word for word the notice of Jehoash's death found in 13:12–13.

Amaziah was probably released when Jehoash withdrew, as he is not said to have been among the hostages in v 14. He cannot have been a popular king after bringing such disaster on his country, and it is surprising that he survived for at least another fifteen years (17) before being assassinated (19). The death of two generations of Judah's kings in a palace coup (though on neither occasion was there an attempt to replace the dynasty of David) provides a pale but menacing reflection of Israel's bloody dynastic changeovers. Was Judah still following in the footsteps of Israel in spite of Joash's religious reforms? The violent deaths of Joash and Amaziah raise for the first time a question which becomes a key issue in the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah: can disaster be averted by reforming kings?

14:23–29 Jeroboam II of Israel. Only seven verses are devoted to one of Israel's most

important kings, a fact which once again illustrates the writer's sharply focused interests. It was in the reign of Jeroboam II that the recovery begun under Jehoash reached its peak. His conquests restored all of Israel's lost territories. The exact location of *Lebo Hamath* (or 'the entrance of Hamath', RSV) is unknown, but its significance here is that it had marked the northern limit of Solomon's kingdom (1 Ki. 8:65). The *Sea of the Arabah* is the Dead Sea, the southern end of which corresponded to the southern limit of Israel's holdings east of the Jordan (*i.e.* down to and including Moab).

We are told a little more of Jeroboam II's achievements in v 28, but the crucial clause is difficult to translate. Literally it says that he 'restored Damascus and Hamath to Judah in Israel', which does not make sense. Various solutions have been proposed. The RSV assumes that 'to Judah' means that Damascus and Hamath 'had belonged to Judah' – a reading which raises historical problems of its own. The NIV takes a similar line but prefers 'Yaudi' in place of 'Judah' (see also the NEB: 'Damascus and Hamath in Jaudi'). Yaudi was a small state in north Syria. No solution is entirely satisfactory. But if Jeroboam II's conquests reached as far as Damascus and Hamath, he must have restored Israel's influence in the north to something like its Solomonic extent.

V 25b says that his achievements were prophesied by Jonah son of Amittai – the prophet of the book of Jonah. Two prophets who preached a very different message in the reign of Jeroboam II were Hosea and Amos, and their books show that beneath the military and economic recovery all was far from well in Israel.

Vs 26–27 recall God's response in 13:4–5 and portray Jeroboam II's victories as the continuation and climax of God's act of deliverance. The fact that Jeroboam II walked in the sins of his earlier namesake (24) does not affect the outcome. Events are not decided by the obedience or disobedience of a king, but by the will of God.

15:1 – 17:41 The final decades of Israel

15:1–7 Azariah of Judah. This king's name occurs in a confusing variety of forms: Uzziah in vs 13 and 30; Uzziahu in vs 32 and 34; Uzza in 2 Ki. 21:18.

He receives the same kind of qualified praise as his two predecessors (3–4). This time the comparison with David is omitted. The only incident singled out for mention from his long reign is his skin disease (it may not have been leprosy, for the Hebrew word covers a range of ailments). The Chronicler's much longer account (2 Ch. 26) suggests that Azariah's reign saw a time of revival in Judah which matched that enjoyed by Israel under Jeroboam II.

His skin disease is not specifically said to have been a punishment, though it is attributed to Yahweh. It is possible that the writer simply wanted to affirm God's sovereignty over health and sickness and had no intention of implying retribution. On the other hand, the Chronicler gives an account in which the king's illness is clearly a punishment (2 Ch. 26:16–21), and if this story was widely known, the writer of Kings may have considered it too familiar to need repeating.

The disease required Azariah to retire from the normal duties of a king while Jotham ruled as co-regent. Perhaps his disease was more serious than Naaman's, which did not prevent him continuing his duties at the court in Damascus. Or perhaps the special role of king was felt to be impossible for one so afflicted.

15:8–31 Israel's slide to disaster. With the end of Jehu's dynasty Israel entered another period of instability, like that which followed the death of Baasha. But this time there was no light at the end of the tunnel.

Zechariah, successor to the illustrious Jeroboam II, was murdered after only six months on the throne (8–10). V 12 draws attention to God's word to Jehu that his descendants would rule for four generations (2 Ki. 10:30). In the context of Zechariah's violent death, this now reads more like a threat than a promise.

Zechariah's assassin, Shallum, fared no better as king, dying at the hands of Menahem after only one month (13–14). Shallum does not even receive the writer's usual assessment of a king's conduct.

Tiphsah's refusal to open its gates to Menahem (16) meant that its people would not acknowledge him as king. (The location of this city is unknown. It is not to be confused with a place of the same name on the River Euphrates mentioned in 1 Ki. 4:24. The Greek text, followed by the RSV and NEB, has Tappuah, an Ephraimite city listed in Jos. 16:8.) The atrocity Menahem committed there was a warning to any other city which felt the same way inclined.

Menahem's popularity rating cannot have been improved by the tax which he levied in order to give a vast quantity of silver to Pul (otherwise known as Tiglath-Pileser III), king of Assyria. Although the NIV says the Assyrian king had *invaded the land*, the Hebrew need not mean this. Assyrian texts also refer to Menahem's payment of tribute, but there is no suggestion in them that he was forced into submission by an invasion. The statement in v 19 that he gave Tiglath-Pileser the silver *to gain his support and strengthen his own hold on the kingdom* suggests a different situation. Menahem

submitted willingly because he needed Assyrian support against unnamed enemies. (Internal opposition is suggested by the incident at Tiphsah in v 16; or he may have been threatened by an independent kingdom arising east of the Jordan – see below on Pekah; or there may have been renewed danger from Aram.) Assyrian texts leave open two possible dates for the incident: 743 or 738 BC. The impressive initial gift would have been followed by a more modest annual tribute.

Whatever opposition Menahem may have faced, the chief cause of his unpopularity with the writer of Kings is that he adhered to the sins of Jeroboam (18).

Menahem's son Pekahiah receives the same verdict (24). His assassination after only two years (25) suggests that he enjoyed even less support than his father.

Pekah, his murderer and successor, is judged to have been no improvement as far as the sins of Jeroboam were concerned (28). The fact that he led a contingent from Gilead, east of the Jordan (25) has led some scholars to suggest that he had already established a rival kingdom there. This theory has the advantage of explaining his twenty-year reign (27), which is otherwise impossible to accommodate; it could have been reckoned from the beginning of his independent kingdom. Pekah and his supporters apparently wanted an end to Israel's subservience to Assyria. Pekah's anti-Assyrian policy explains Tiglath-Pileser's devastating campaign against Israel (29), which will be discussed further in connection with 16:7–9. Not surprisingly, the catastrophic results of Pekah's policy made him unpopular in his turn. He was assassinated by Hoshea, Israel's last king (30).

15:32–38 Jotham of Judah. Jotham receives the same faint praise as his predecessors on the throne of Judah (34–35). The only events of his reign singled out for mention are his building activity (on which 2 Ch. 27 says much more) and the attacks of Pekah and Rezin, which play a major role in the next chapter. Here (but not in ch. 16) these attacks are said to have been sent by Yahweh (37).

16:1–4 Ahaz of Judah: introduction. For the first time since the death of Athaliah the writer gives an unequivocally bad report of a king of Judah. Apart from Jehoram, Ahaz is the only king of Judah said to have *walked in the ways of the kings of Israel* (3). In the case of Jehoram this phrase referred specifically to the apostasy of Ahab (2 Ki. 8:18), and the same seems to be the case here, since apostasy (and even human sacrifice, never mentioned in criticizing Israel's kings) characterized Ahaz's reign.

16:5–9 Ahaz of Judah: war with Aram and Israel. Rezin is the first king of Aram to be named since Ben-Hadad, son of Hazael (13:25), who probably died around 770 BC. Rezin was on the throne in Damascus by 738, when Tiglath-Pileser III received tribute from him. Tiglath-Pileser's campaigns against Israel (15:29) and Aram (16:9) are also attested in Assyrian texts and occurred in the years 733 and 732 BC respectively.

Further light is thrown on these events by Is. 7:1–6. The picture which emerges is that Rezin and Pekah wanted to create an anti-Assyrian coalition including Judah. Unable to persuade Ahaz to join them, they proposed to remove him from the throne and replace him with their own nominee (Ben-Tabeel; Is. 7:6). Their success would have brought the Davidic dynasty to an end.

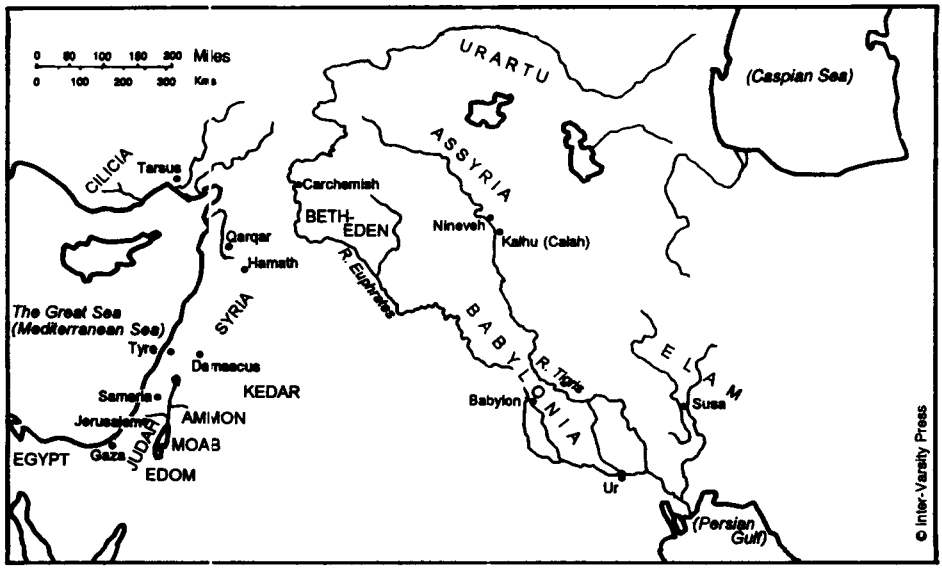
In v 6 Rezin's campaigning is said to have *recovered Elath for Aram*, a curious statement because Elath, at the head of the Gulf of Aqabah, is unlikely to have ever been under Aramean control. Reading 'Edom' instead of *Aram* (requiring a very small change to the Hebrew) would make good geographical and political sense. (The RSV makes a more drastic change, removing the reference to *Rezin king of Aram* altogether.)

Ahaz's response to the threat (much against the advice of Isaiah, according to Is. 7) was to appeal to Assyria for help, sending Tiglath-Pileser a gift of silver and gold from the temple and palace treasuries. By resorting to Assyrian aid Judah was following in the footsteps of Israel (*cf.* 2 Ki. 15:19) – a sinister development in view of Israel's eventual absorption by the Assyrian empire.

The Assyrian king's response was catastrophic for both Israel and Aram. Israel's fate is recorded in 15:29. The northern half of Pekah's territory was overrun and many of its people deported; it was then reorganized as an Assyrian province, leaving Pekah's successor on the throne of a much reduced kingdom.

16:10–20 Ahaz of Judah: the foreign altar. Ahaz's visit to Tiglath-Pileser presumably took place while the latter was reorganizing Aram as part of the Assyrian administrative system, after his conquest of Damascus in 732 BC.

There is no reason to think that Ahaz's decision to copy the altar which he saw in Damascus was an aspect of his subservience to Assyria. It does not sound like an altar of Assyrian type, and 2 Ch. 28:23 says it was for the worship of 'the gods of the kings of Aram' who had shown themselves powerful over Israel in the past. In short, the introduction of such an altar into the Jerusalem temple simply illustrates the irresistible attraction which foreign deities held



The Assyrian Empire in the ninth to seventh centuries BC.

for Ahaz. The compliance of Uriah the priest (10, 15, 16) shows that he was either as apostate as the king or else in a subservient role which allowed no open resistance. The latter seems the more likely, since he later had the approval of Isaiah (Is. 8:2).

Vs 17–18 list other changes which Ahaz introduced in the temple, and the last is said to have been *in deference to the king of Assyria* (18). The exact meaning is unclear. There is no reason to think that Tiglath-Pileser III forced Assyrian religious practices on Ahaz, or that he required him to suppress Judah's national religion. Perhaps *the royal entrance outside the temple* (RSV: 'the outer entrance for the king') symbolized a link between the king and the cult of Yahweh which was for some reason unacceptable to the Assyrian overlord.

17:1–6 The end of Israel. We know from Assyrian texts that Hoshea was appointed king (or at least confirmed on the throne) by Tiglath-Pileser III. He therefore began his reign as an Assyrian puppet-king and vassal.

He is said (2) to have been not so bad as his predecessors on the throne of Israel – a verdict which compares him favourably with Ahaz of Judah, in view of 16:3. It is therefore ironic that his reign ended with Israel's destruction.

Hoshea brought down the wrath of Assyria by withholding the annual tribute and negotiating an alliance with Egypt (4). The identity of *So king of Egypt* is uncertain. (He may have been the Libyan pharaoh Osorkon IV. An alternative rendering would make *So* a place name: '. . . to So [perhaps Sais?], to the king of Egypt'.) However, Egypt at this time was too weak to provide effective support, and Hoshea's bid for independence proved as catastrophic as the earlier one by Pekah.

By this time, Tiglath-Pileser III had been succeeded by his son Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC), who is said in v 4 to have seized Hoshea and imprisoned him. Since this is unlikely to have happened before the invasion and siege of Samaria reported in v 5, events are probably not related in chronological order. The three-year siege must have brought famine and its attendant horrors (as in 2 Ki. 6:24–30), but we are spared the harrowing details. Twice before Samaria had been besieged and saved (1 Ki. 20; 2 Ki. 6:24 – 7:20), but this time there was to be no help. The city fell in 722 BC, at about the time of Shalmaneser V's death. In Assyrian sources Sargon II, his brother and successor, claims credit for the city's capture. Those deported (6) were numbered by Sargon at 27,290. This figure seems too large for Samaria alone and probably includes people from other cities of Israel. The deportees were resettled in distant parts of the Assyrian empire (6), not all of which can be located with confidence.

17:7–23 Theological summary of Israel's history. The slight improvement of Hoshea over his predecessors is here set off against the recurring sins of Israel which made their disaster inevitable. Following *the practices of the nations the* LORD *had driven out* (8) is expressly forbidden in Lv. 18:3, 24–28, where

exile is predicted as the consequence of disobedience. The *high places* (9–11) were elsewhere places of worship which, in the writer's view, lacked legitimacy, especially after the building of the temple in Jerusalem. However, they were not places where idolatry was practised (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 3:3–4). Here the picture is different; the writer criticizes the building of high places for the worship of foreign deities. V 12 refers to the commandment against idolatry (Ex. 20:4–5).

V 13 summarizes the message of Yahweh through his prophets to both Israel and Judah. It is therefore likely that the plural verbs which follow in vs 14–17 (*they would not listen, they rejected, they followed, they forsook, etc.*) have Judah in mind as well as Israel. Indeed, the practice of human sacrifice (17) is only reported of Ahaz (16:3) and Manasseh (21:6), kings of Judah. However, the focus in v 16 is certainly on Israel, for it refers to Jeroboam's calves (1 Ki. 12:28–30).

When God is spoken of as removing his people from his presence (18, 20) the reference is to their being driven from the land. This is not because the writer thought of Yahweh as somehow restricted to the land of Israel, but because he regarded the land as the primary arena in which Yahweh's purposes for his people were fulfilled. Judah explicitly re-enters the picture in vs 19–20, and the expression *all the people of Israel* in v 20 clearly includes Judah (*i.e.* all the tribes descended from the ancestor Israel/Jacob). The passage compares the two kingdoms and thereby anticipates Judah's own exile.

The final summary (21–23) traces Israel's disaster back to the sins of Jeroboam and thereby recalls Ahijah's prophecy that exile would be the ultimate outcome of Jeroboam's actions (1 Ki. 14:15–16).

17:24–34a Subsequent events in Samaria. V 4 should not be understood to mean that Israelites were replaced by foreigners throughout the land. The number of Israelite deportees given by Sargon (see above on 17:6) cannot have been all or even the bulk of Israel's population. What v 4 describes is the replacement of Israelites with foreigners at Samaria and other selected towns. It was normal Assyrian practice to replace deported populations with groups from other parts of the empire. The purpose was to dilute nationalistic feeling and so make revolt less likely.

The cause-and-effect connections assumed in v 26 may sound crude and superstitious, but they are shared by the writer in v 25. As always he wishes to affirm Yahweh's sovereignty over historical events and to discern his purpose. In view of the writer's previous criticisms of religious practices in Israel, we might expect the priest sent back from exile to have been apostate. However, there is no hint of this in the account, and he is not blamed for the failure of the exercise. Indeed, the failure was only partial, for the foreign populations adopted the worship of Yahweh although they did not abandon their earlier idolatry (33). Like the Israelites in the time of Elijah, they covered all their options by worshipping Yahweh as well as their traditional gods (see the comment on 1 Ki. 18:21).

Although some translations (RSV, NEB) refer to 'the Samaritans' in v 29, the NIV is correct to prefer *the people of Samaria*. There is no evidence for any connection between the idolaters mentioned in this verse and the later (strictly monotheistic) sect of the Samaritans whom we meet in the NT. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the first century AD, for a long time influenced the translation and interpretation of this whole passage by claiming that the Samaritans of his own day were descended from the foreigners imported by Assyria (Ant. IX, 14, iii). His claim was historically unfounded and simply reflected the anti-Samaritan prejudice of his time. But in any case *the people of Samaria* in v 29 are not the imported foreigners but the Israelite inhabitants whose shrines the foreigners took over.

17:34b–41 Final comment on Israel. Although it is usual to translate v 34 as though it begins a further comment (continuing to v 41) on the imported population of the north, there is good reason to see here a transition to another subject. The first part of the verse certainly continues from v 33 (*To this day they persist in their former practices*), but it is better to translate the second part as beginning: 'No-one has worshipped the LORD (alone), nor adhered to the decrees . . .' *etc.* The thought expressed here is that the foreigners who settled in the north were not unique in failing to worship Yahweh exclusively, for no-one, not even *the descendants of Jacob, whom he named Israel*, managed to do that. Vs 35–39 paraphrase the requirements of Yahweh's covenant with Israel (echoing parts of Dt. 4 – 6). As in v 20 it is all Jacob's descendants who are in view here, and therefore vs 40–41 include Judah as well as Israel in the condemnation of those who failed to keep the covenant requirements and whose descendants still fail to keep them *to this day*.

The comparisons between Israel and Judah which we meet in this chapter (here and in vs 19–20) foreshadow the latter's own impending disaster.

18:1 – 25:30 Judah alone

18:1 – 20:21 Hezekiah

18:1–8 Introduction. The previous chapter

sounded an ominous note for Judah, for it carried strong implications that Judah would suffer the same fate as Israel. Here, however, the possibility of disaster seems to recede. Hezekiah reversed the policies of his father and led Judah back from the path of idolatry. Not only were the trappings of foreign worship removed, but even the bronze snake which Moses had made in the wilderness (Nu. 21:8–9) was disposed of because it had become an object of misguided reverence (4). The danger is understandable in the light of archaeological finds which show snakes to have been important symbols in the Canaanite fertility cult.

Hezekiah is the first king since Asa of whom it is said that he did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh *as his father David had done* (3; *cf.* 1 Ki. 15:11). Moreover, he was the first king to have removed the high places (4). Indeed, his unswerving trust and faithfulness receive unequivocal praise (5–6). We will see, however, that this generous assessment is modified slightly in ch. 20.

In the summary of Hezekiah's reign his rebellion against Assyria receives special mention (7). The bulk of the three chapters devoted to his reign is spent describing the consequences of this rebellion (18:13 – 19:37). His campaign against the Philistines (8) should be understood as an aspect of his anti-Assyrian stance. Gaza had been conquered by Sargon II, and Hezekiah's campaign, which extended *as far as Gaza and its territory*, was probably aimed at weakening Assyria's hold on the area. If so, it was probably undertaken soon after Sargon's death in 705 BC, before his successor, Sennacherib, had established a firm control over the empire.

18:9–12 Assyria against Israel. These verses appear at first to be a pointless repeat of ch. 17. However, here the events are dated according to the regnal years of Hezekiah (9, 10). The result is to invite the reader to compare and contrast the Assyrian invasion of Israel with the Assyrian invasion of Judah reported in vs 13 onwards. Thus the two accounts begin in similar words, literally: 'In the fourth year of king Hezekiah (which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel), Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria . . .' (9); 'In the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah . . .' (13). Hoshea was a slightly better king than his predecessors (17:2), but his rebellion against Assyria led to the destruction of Israel. Hezekiah was a much better king than Ahaz, and Judah survived his rebellion against Assyria – but only just, as we see below.

The chronological notices given in vs 9 and 10 are at odds with that in v 13. If the fall of Samaria in 722 BC occurred in Hezekiah's sixth year (10), then Hezekiah must have come to the throne around 728 BC. His fourteenth year (13) would then have been 715 BC, but we know that Sennacherib's campaign against Judah, recorded in Assyrian texts, occurred in 701 BC. Various solutions have been proposed, some assuming scribal errors, some involving coregencies. This is but one example of the complexities which the biblical synchronisms often present us with.

18:13–37 Assyria against Judah. Hezekiah's response to Sennacherib's attack seems to have been instant recapitulation accompanied by the payment of hefty tribute (14–16). However, in v 17 we find Jerusalem under threat once again. Some scholars have supposed that two different Assyrian campaigns are related here: vs 13–16 record the events of 701 BC, while vs 17 onwards refer to a later campaign (perhaps to be dated around 688 BC) of which we have no Assyrian record. An alternative is to assume that Sennacherib, having exacted tribute from Hezekiah, went on to press for the complete surrender of Jerusalem. This would compare with Ben-Hadad's increasingly severe demands on Ahab at the first siege of Samaria (1 Ki. 20:1–11). And just as Ahab drew the line and decided to resist, so Hezekiah refused to surrender the city.

Three high-ranking military officials were sent to Jerusalem from Lachish (17), which they were besieging (2 Ch. 32:9; the siege is known also from a series of impressive Assyrian reliefs found in the ruins of Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, and its devastating effects are clearly attested by archaeological finds at Lachish itself). Three equally high-ranking officials of Hezekiah's court went out to the city walls to hear Sennacherib's message (18), which was delivered by the Assyrian field commander (19; the NEB has 'the chief officer'; lit. 'the Rabshakeh' as in the RSV).

The commander's speech repeatedly uses the Hebrew for 'trust(ing)' (RSV 'rely[ing]'; NIV 'depend[ing]'; it also occurs in his opening words in v 19, though English translations obscure it). This is the theme of the whole speech: in whom does Jerusalem place its trust? The commander cleverly discounts all conceivable objects of trust, thus showing Jerusalem to be without defence. Egypt is dismissed with the striking image of a reed which, because it is broken, damages the hand which leans on it for support (21). Isaiah also criticizes reliance on Egypt (Is. 30:1–5; 31:1–3), but his alternative is to 'seek help from the LORD' (Is. 31:1). The commander goes on to dismiss Yahweh as a possible source of help, not

by claiming that Yahweh is weak or non-existent, but much more cleverly by suggesting that Yahweh will not respond because Hezekiah has removed the high places where he was worshipped (22). The exact logic of the argument in vs 23–24 is difficult to follow, but the gist is clear enough: Judah's army is too depleted to field an effective cavalry force, even if Sennacherib himself should supply the horses! Finally he returns to the idea that Hezekiah's reforms have offended Yahweh, claiming that Assyria has come to destroy Judah at Yahweh's own command (25).

The commander's logic is compelling and crushing: Egypt is too weak to help, Judah's own military force is useless and Yahweh has turned against his people; there is no-one from whom Hezekiah could expect help. It is not surprising that the officials of Judah ask the commander to speak in Aramaic (the language of international diplomacy) instead of Hebrew (26); they are afraid that his words will undermine morale in the city. The commander refuses, for his words are intended for everyone. In v 27 he gives a brief but vivid reminder of the horrors of starvation which are in store for the besieged city. Then he addresses the people directly (28–35), encouraging desertion with his promise of the good life for those who surrender willingly (31–32). He also returns to the religious aspect (33–35), but here with a different logic: the gods of other cities have not been able to save their people from Assyria's might, so how could Yahweh save Jerusalem? However, the context of the rest of the books of Kings undermines his logic, for it contains ample evidence that Yahweh is not like any other god.

The three officials of Judah returned to Hezekiah with their clothes torn as a sign of mourning and distress (*cf.* 2 Ki. 6:30).

19:1–7 Isaiah. On receiving the message, Hezekiah too tore his clothes and donned sackcloth; in v 2 we find the officials and leading priests also wearing sackcloth – an indication of the desperate straits Jerusalem was in (on the significance of sackcloth see the note on 2 Ki. 6:30). The point of the message to Isaiah was to ask him to *pray for the remnant that still survives* (4). Intercession was a traditional role among Israel's prophets (see Ex. 32:30–32; Je. 7:16; 15:1). The reference to a remnant reminds us that Judah's fortified cities were falling to Sennacherib's forces (18:13) and Jerusalem was becoming increasingly isolated (see Is. 1:7–9, which probably describes this time). Hezekiah pinned his hope on the fact that Sennacherib's message had ridiculed *the living God*; perhaps God had heard and would act to rebuke him (4).

The theme of 'hearing' recurs throughout the first twenty verses of this chapter. Hezekiah hears Sennacherib's message (1); he hopes that Yahweh will hear the blasphemy (4); Isaiah tells him not to be afraid of what he has heard (6); Sennacherib will hear a certain report (7); the field commander hears that the king has moved on from Lachish (8); Sennacherib hears of Tirhakah's advance (9); surely Hezekiah has heard what the kings of Assyria have done to other countries? (11). At the climax of the sequence Isaiah assures Hezekiah that Yahweh had heard his prayer (20).

The prophet Isaiah introduces the word of Yahweh into the situation (6), and the conflict moves on to a new level. Now, to set against *the word of the great king, the king of Assyria* (18:28) we have the word of the true Great King, the God of Israel. Isaiah's first prophecy was brief and to the point; Hezekiah was not to fear; God was sovereign over Sennacherib's actions and would cause him to return to his own land where he would be murdered. What is not clear is how this prophecy related to events as they actually unfolded. The *certain report* (7) would seem to be the news of Tirhakah's advance (9), but the latter did not by itself cause Sennacherib to return to Assyria. The ultimate cause of Sennacherib's discomfiture (35–36) is not mentioned here.

19:8–19 A letter and a prayer. The field commander's withdrawal (8) anticipates in miniature the prophecy's fulfilment: on hearing news of Sennacherib's progress he returns to him. He could not, of course, have withdrawn all his forces from Jerusalem, otherwise the city would have been able to replenish its supplies of food. We must therefore suppose that he left a sizeable force outside Jerusalem while he returned to inform Sennacherib of the continuing stalemate. If Libnah is to be identified with the site of Tell Bornat, it lay north of Lachish, and Sennacherib's move represents the advance of his main force towards Jerusalem. His departure from Lachish must have followed the successful completion of the siege there.

The Hebrew text of v 9 speaks literally of 'Tirhakah king of Cush'. The biblical Cush corresponds to the land immediately south of Egypt, *i.e.* modern Nubia or northern Sudan (not strictly 'Ethiopia' as in the RSV). In 701 BC the Cushite Twenty-fifth Dynasty ruled both Cush and Egypt. The biblical Tirhakah is Taharqa, penultimate ruler of that dynasty, who ruled 690–664 BC. The title *king* which he bears in this verse was therefore given to him in retrospect, for in 701 BC he was only a prince, heading an expedition for his brother Pharaoh Shebitku.

News of Tirhakah's approach prompted a further message from Sennacherib to Hezekiah. Sennacherib must now have been anxious to

bring Jerusalem to heel quickly so that he could reunite his army in the south to meet Tirhakah's forces. Although this message is similar to vs 33–35 it has a new twist. Sennacherib seems to have been aware of the essence of Isaiah's prophecy, for he refers to it (10). He does not deny that Yahweh exists or that he has spoken through his prophet; he simply brands Yahweh a liar! A further list of defeated cities illustrates the point that Assyria is invincible (11–13).

Hezekiah received this latest message in the form of a letter, which he took into the temple. He intended to bring its blasphemous contents to Yahweh's attention (16). His prayer began with an acknowledgment that although Yahweh was *enthroned between the cherubim* in Jerusalem's temple, his presence and power were in no way limited He was *God over all the kingdoms of the earth* and was the maker *of heaven and earth* (15). He also acknowledged that Sennacherib's boasting contained much truth: many peoples had indeed been conquered and their gods destroyed (17–18). But they were not true gods. He asked Yahweh to demonstrate to the world that he was the unique Creator and Sovereign by delivering Jerusalem (19).

19:20–34 Isaiah again. In contrast to his first, Isaiah's second prophecy is lengthy and in poetic form. After the opening statement assuring Hezekiah that God has heard his prayer, we have a prophecy in three parts.

The first part (21–28) is addressed to Sennacherib. The population (*Daughter*) of Jerusalem is depicted mocking him as he flees (21). He is accused of blaspheming Israel's God, not merely by his recent words but by claiming the credit for Assyria's widespread conquests (22–24). The truth he cannot acknowledge is that Yahweh himself ordained those conquests (25–26). Sennacherib's error is to think that he, and not Yahweh, is the shaper of world events. He has usurped God's place by claiming supreme power and demanding total allegiance. Now, because of his insolence, Yahweh will turn him back (27–28). Many of the same themes also occur in Is. 10:5–19.

The second part (29–31) is addressed to Hezekiah. Although Jerusalem will suffer the effects of the Assyrian siege, her recovery will follow. This would be a *sign* for Hezekiah (29), *i.e.* something in which he will clearly discern God's hand. The concluding phrase also occurs at the end of Is. 9:7.

The third part (32–34) concerns the fate of Sennacherib's campaign. The siege will not culminate in an assault on Jerusalem. Normally a siege by the Assyrian army ended with an assault on the target city. As a first step the Assyrians built siege ramps to enable battering rams to be brought against the walls, and while the ramps were being constructed archers provided covering fire from behind shields. These are the activities referred to in v 32. They will not be carried out because Sennacherib will return home. God's ultimate reason for saving Jerusalem is not Sennacherib's blasphemy nor even Hezekiah's own piety and prayers, but his own glory and his promise to David of an everlasting dynasty (34).

19:35–37 Sennacherib's fate. The sudden death of 185,000 troops is described laconically and in miraculous terms. The number is very high for only one section of the invading army, and perhaps we are meant to understand that the calamity was not limited to that force encamped outside Jerusalem but affected Sennacherib's forces throughout Judah. Not surprisingly, the humiliating disaster is not reported in the Assyrian account of the campaign. Sennacherib's version of events, found in two inscriptions, majors on the fact that he successfully brought the rebellion to an end and passes over his failure to capture Jerusalem. It ends on a positive note with receipt in Nineveh of the tribute mentioned in 18:14. When commemorating the campaign in sculptured reliefs, Sennacherib chose to highlight his successful siege of Lachish.

His assassination (37), fulfilling Isaiah's earlier prophecy (7), occurred in 681 BC. It is referred to in an Assyrian text but the details remain obscure.

20:1–11 Illness and recovery. The dating of Hezekiah's illness in v 1 (*In those days . . .*) is vague, simply suggesting a time near to Sennacherib's invasion of Judah. But a clearer chronology is provided by v 6: the promise of fifteen more years of life points to the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's twenty-nine-year reign (18:2), which was also the year of Sennacherib's invasion (18:13); and the promise of the city's deliverance indicates a time before rather than after the events of ch. 19. In short, events are not related in chronological order in these chapters. The reason seems to be that this incident and the one that followed (12–19) did not show Hezekiah in a very good light. They are deliberately separated from the rest in order to provide a contrast with the picture in chs. 18 – 19. And they are placed here rather than earlier because they provide a bridge to the reign of Manasseh and its consequences.

In the fourteenth year of his reign Hezekiah was only thirty-nine years old (18:2), and the news of his impending death must have been a terrible blow (20:1). But his reaction does not reflect well on his piety when compared with his reaction to the Assyrian threat. In 19:15–19 his prayer affirmed God's sovereignty and desired God's glory, but here he appeals to his own

devotion (3). God responded with mercy and sent Isaiah with a double promise of healing and deliverance, but this would be *for my sake and for the sake of my servant David* (6; note the similarity to 19:34) not because of Hezekiah's piety. The prophecy was worded in such a way as to correct Hezekiah's attitude. The earlier reference to David as Hezekiah's ancestor (5) also served to remind him of his context in the dynasty promised by God.

The use of a poultice of figs for the king's skin disorder (7) is typical of the practices of ancient 'folk medicine'. It would therefore be surprising if such treatment had not been tried on Hezekiah earlier. Perhaps we should assume that it had, but that it was ineffective until Isaiah delivered God's promise of recovery.

Hezekiah's request for a sign provides a further unfavourable comparison with the previous portrayal of his faith. Recovery within three days should have been sign enough that God would grant him another fifteen years of life. But Hezekiah wanted a sign to confirm the sign! The exact nature of the sign which followed is difficult to understand because the type of structure on which the shadow fell is not clear. The RSV refers to 'the dial of Ahaz' (11), assuming that the shadow moved back ten divisions on a time-keeping device. However, the reference is probably to steps on a stairway (NIV, NEB). Given a choice, Hezekiah opted for the more remarkable of the two signs on offer (9–10) and received it (11). Speculation on how the sign was effected has not produced a satisfactory answer.

20:12–19 Envoys from Merodach-Baladan. Merodach-Baladan (Marduk-apla-iddina in Babylonian texts) ruled Babylon independently for much of the period 721–709 BC. He was then banished by Sargon II, but on Sargon's death in 705 BC he began to work towards Babylonian independence again. He regained the throne briefly in 703–702 BC but was finally expelled from Babylon by Sennacherib and fled into exile in south-western Elam. The embassy to Hezekiah was doubtless part of his attempt to find western allies in his bid to throw off the Assyrian yoke. The visit would fit well in the context of Merodach-Baladan's brief revival in 703–702 BC. Since the immediate reason for the visit was Hezekiah's illness (12) this would imply that Hezekiah was ill for one or two years. This is a possible reconstruction of events. However, the parallel account in Is. 39:1 places the embassy after Hezekiah's recovery, *i.e.* in or soon after 701 BC (see above on vs 1–11). Although Merodach-Baladan was in exile by then, it is conceivable that he was still trying to influence events from behind the scenes. The chronological uncertainties cannot be resolved on present evidence.

Hezekiah's willingness to let the envoys see his supplies and armoury (13) implies his readiness to form an alliance with Merodach-Baladan. Since Isaiah was strongly opposed to foreign alliances (see Is. 30:1–5; 31:1–3) his powerful denunciation of the move (16–18) is entirely consistent. He predicted the day when Babylon would become an enemy, carrying away wealth and people. Hezekiah's response (19) was self-centred and unrepentant. He took comfort from the fact that Isaiah had spoken of disaster coming in the time of his descendants and not in his own reign. His assumption that there would be *peace and security in my lifetime* may also reflect satisfaction with the alliance he had made.

The chapter thus ends on a note of profound tragedy: Judah's greatest reformer so far receives warning of his kingdom's downfall and exile, and we are offered no hope that repentance might avert it.

20:20–21 Conclusion. Among Hezekiah's other achievements *the pool and the tunnel* by which water was brought into the city are singled out for mention. The project is also referred to, with some geographical details, in 2 Ch. 32:30. It was probably part of the preparations for Sennacherib's siege, designed to provide a reliable water-supply that was only accessible from inside the city (see also 2 Ch. 32:2–4).

21:1–26 Reversal under Manasseh and Amon

21:1–18 Manasseh. Manasseh reverted to the ways of his grandfather Ahaz, wiping out the reforms of Hezekiah as though they had never been. The high places were re-established, the cults of Baal and Asherah flourished as they did in Ahab's Israel and the temple was defiled with altars to the gods of the stars. Human sacrifice and other abominable practices were introduced. The remark that all this evil provoked Yahweh to anger (6) sounds an ominous note, and prospects grow even darker with the conditional promise quoted in vs 7–8. Since the condition of loyalty to the law of Moses has clearly been broken, the promise that the Israelites' feet will no more *wander from the land* is now seriously in doubt.

Vs 10–15 summarize the message of anonymous prophets of Manasseh's reign, and Judah's fate is predicted in stark and unequivocal terms. Jerusalem will be judged by the same standard as Samaria (13). The reference to *the house of Ahab* picks up the comparison between Ahab and Manasseh suggests in v 3. Judgment will be complete, symbolized by the vivid image of the bowl wiped clean. The *remnant of my inheritance* (14) may mean Judah

after the fall of Israel, but more probably it refers to the reduced population of Judah after Sennacherib's campaign. The forsaking and handing over of this remnant mark the end of God's special care for his people. The evils of Manasseh's reign are merely the latest resurgence of a disobedience which has proved endemic (15). In these verses the picture of coming disaster sketched briefly by Isaiah (20:17–18) takes on tragic dimensions.

The shedding of innocent blood (16) may indicate the persecution of those who opposed Manasseh's policies, just as Yahweh's prophets were killed during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel.

The *garden of Uzza* in which Manasseh was buried was probably an extension of the royal burial ground, created by Azariah/Uzziah ('Uzza' being a shortened form of his name).

21:19–26 Amon. Amon continued in the ways of his father and his only distinction is that he was assassinated (23). The meaning of the phrase *the people of the land* is uncertain; it may indicate a particular section of society rather than the people as a whole. This group fervently supported the restoration of the Davidic dynasty in the time of Athaliah (2 Ki. 11:14). Here they executed Amon's assassins and made his eight-year-old son king in his place (24; *cf.* 22:1). Amon had the same burial-place as his father (26).

22:1 – 23:30 Josiah

22:1–20 The Book of the Law found. After two appalling reigns we again meet a king who measures up to the standard set by David (2).

In vs 3–7 we find a programme of temple renovation in progress, reminiscent of that carried out by Joash (2 Ki. 12). On that previous occasion the repairs were needed because parts of the temple had been taken over for foreign practices in the reign of Athaliah. The abuse of the temple in the reigns of Manasseh and Amon provides a logical explanation for Josiah's activities.

In course of the renovations *the Book of the Law* was found in the temple by the high priest Hilkiah (8). When Josiah heard the contents of this book read out, his reaction was one of intense distress (10–11). As a result he introduced the measures described in ch. 23. However, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that Josiah became a reformer because of the discovery of *the Book of the Law* in his eighteenth year. The repairs to the temple suggest that religious reforms were already under way when the book was found, and the Chronicler's account confirms this (2 Ch. 34:3–7). In view of what follows most scholars agree that *the Book of the Law* was closely related to the book of Deuteronomy, if not identical with it.

Josiah's reaction showed that the contents of the book were very serious indeed. Its demands had not been met and the king feared the consequences (13). Ordered to *enquire of the* LORD, the high priest, secretary and attendant resorted to Huldah the prophetess, on whom these verses are our only source of information. She lived in the *Second District* of Jerusalem (14; lit. 'in the Mishneh'), probably the area north of the old city of David, a sector which had grown up around Solomon's temple and palace complex. The location and her marriage to a court official (14) indicate that she was herself part of the court establishment.

Huldah gave only cold comfort. She confirmed Josiah's own conclusion that Yahweh's anger was against Judah because the demands of the book had been ignored. (It would have been no defence to argue that the book had not been obeyed because it had been lost; the book had become lost in the first place because it had ceased to be important, presumably in the reign of Manasseh.) She twice spoke of looming disaster, apparently inevitable (16, 20). But Josiah would be spared the anguish of seeing it because of the depth of his own response to the book's demands (19–20).

23:1–3 The covenant renewed. Josiah assembles representatives of the whole people for a public reading of the book. *Elders* (1) were originally Israel's family chiefs, but by the late monarchy the term may have been used for any civic leaders. The religious establishment was represented by the *priests* and *prophets* (2). The book is now referred to as *the Book of the Covenant* because the reading of its contents is followed by king and people renewing their commitment to *the words of the covenant written in this book* (3). The requirements of this covenant are also referred to as Yahweh's *commands, regulations and decrees*, words used repeatedly in Deuteronomy (*e.g.* Dt. 6:17) to describe the laws of the covenant which God made with Israel at Sinai. In short, Josiah presides over nothing less than a renewal of the Mosaic covenant. He stands *by the pillar* (3), the location in which Judah's kings traditionally stood at their anointing (2 Ki. 11:14). The position probably signifies his dual role as leader and fellow-member of the covenant people (see 2 Ki. 11:17).

23:4–20 Reforms. These verses catalogue the removal and destruction of all the paraphernalia of the idolatrous practices introduced by Manasseh. The fact that the report of this follows the renewal of the covenant implies that all these actions were carried out in reponse to the lawbook. However, several of them involved

the temple precincts (4, 6, 7, 11, 12), which were already being renovated when the book was found. It therefore seems likely that the writer has put together reforms which occurred both before and after the discovery of the lawbook (a view supported by 2 Ch. 34:3–7).

Some of the items burnt must have been made of metal or stone, so the burning was in some cases symbolic rather than destructive, as was the removal of ashes to Bethel (4) and the scattering of the dust of the Asherah pole over tombs in the Kidron Valley (6 – so that even the dust would be defiled?).

It is not clear what action Josiah took against the idolatrous priests of Judah's high places in v 5. The verb (*did away with* in the NIV) may mean simply that he deposed them, or it could mean that he destroyed them. He certainly took the latter step with the priests of Samaria's high places (20). However, since v 5 does not use the same explicit verb as v 20, it is better to assume that they were merely deposed. These idolatrous priests were not the same as the priests of the high places referred to in vs 8–9. The Hebrew noun used in v 5 refers specifically to priests of foreign deities (*pagan priests*), and this is not employed in vs 8–9. The priests in the latter verses were priests of Yahweh who had officiated at the high places rather than in Jerusalem. V 9 is obscure but probably means (as in the NIV) that after being brought to Jerusalem they ate with the other priests there (lit. 'their brethren'), but did not take part in the temple sacrifices.

The *kings of Judah* in vs 5 and 12 are probably Manasseh and Amon, though it is also possible that earlier kings are referred to. Hezekiah's reforms may not have been far-reaching enough to remove all the abuses introduced before his reign; see below on vs 13–14.

Localities associated with idolatry were desecrated to deter their use for such purposes again. This was done at the high places throughout Judah (8) and at Topheth, a shrine located in the valley which bounded Jerusalem on the south (10). Jeremiah also refers to Topheth (the name seems to mean 'fireplace') as a place where human sacrifices occurred (Je. 7:31). The high places set up by Solomon on the hill east of Jerusalem were also defiled (13–14). Josiah's reforms must have been more thoroughgoing than any previous ones, for earlier reforming kings had evidently left the sacred stones and images of Asherah in place at these sites (14).

In vs 15–20 we find the reforms extended to parts of the old territory of the northern tribes. Since 721 BC, following the fall of Samaria, this area had been administered as a province of the Assyrian Empire. According to 2 Ch. 34:6 the reforms reached as far north as the tribal district of Naphtali, in the region which had become an Assyrian province in 732 BC. The reason Josiah was able to interfere in these areas without provoking the Assyrians is that from about 630 BC the Assyrian Empire began to crumble and its hold on its western provinces loosened. The Chronicler dates Josiah's measures in the north to his twelfth year (2 Ch. 34:3), *i.e.* 629/628 BC. At around that time Judah itself must have ceased to be a vassal of Assyria, gaining its freedom by default.

This part of the account focuses on Josiah's activities at Bethel, emphasizing his fulfilment of the words the man of God had spoken in the days of Jeroboam (1 Ki. 13). We are specifically reminded of the incident involving the man of God in vs 17–18. Josiah's other actions in the north are only mentioned in summary (19–20).

23:21–23 Passover celebrated. Josiah's Passover was not simply a jamboree to celebrate his reforms. The Passover itself was observed in obedience to the Book of the Covenant (21). These verses do not mean that no Passover had been celebrated at all during the Judges period or the monarchy; the point is rather that Josiah's Passover was unique in its scope and the way it was observed. Instead of the family festival celebrated at home, as envisaged in Ex. 12 – 13, Josiah held a national festival focused on Jerusalem, in keeping with Dt. 16:1–8. (According to 2 Ch. 30 Hezekiah had held a national Passover festival in Jerusalem, but that had been somewhat irregular since it had taken place in the second month instead of the first.)

23:24–27 Disaster not averted. Further reforms (specifically reversing trends introduced by Manasseh; *cf.* 22:6) are summarized, with emphasis on obedience to the requirements of the lawbook. Josiah's unique faithfulness is praised in terms reminiscent of those used of Hezekiah (25; *cf.* 18:5). Indeed the two verses would be contradictory if they were meant to be taken literally. But they are simply using similar hyperbolic expressions to lavish high praise on the two kings who came closest to the writer's ideal.

However, the disaster prophesised in 21:10–15 and confirmed by Huldah in 22:15–20 is once more reiterated. The momentum of sin and judgment unleashed by Manasseh was unstoppable. The fate of Israel now approached for Judah also.

23:28–30 Death of Josiah. None of Judah's reforming kings has a story which ends happily. Joash was assassinated (12:20), as was his son Amaziah who followed in his footsteps (14:19). Hezekiah received Isaiah's ominous warning of exile for Judah (20:16–18), and Josiah met sudden death on the battlefield.

Huldah's prophecy (22:20) had emphasized that Josiah would not live to see the tragic downfall of Judah and had contained no hint of his own violent end. The account of his death therefore comes as a shock, all the more so because of its terseness and its context in the concluding formula for his reign (compare the note of Joash's assassination in 12:20).

The year was 609 BC, and the political context was the last days of Assyria. The Assyrian cities of Assur and Nineveh had already fallen to the Babylonians and Medes, and Assyria's last king, Ashuruballit, had fled to Harran in northwest Mesopotamia. Preferring Assyria to a new and unknown potential enemy (Babylonia), Neco of Egypt set out to aid Ashuruballit against further attacks. Josiah wanted no resurgence of Assyrian power and therefore tried to stop the Egyptian army as it marched north through Palestine. He died in the attempt, but his intervention may have delayed Neco long enough to influence the outcome. Harran fell to the Babylonians and their allies and Assyria was no more.

23:31 – 25:30 The end of Judah

23:31–34 Jehoahaz. The three-month reign of Jehoahaz probably began a reversal of his father's reforms, for he *did evil in the eyes of the LORD* (32). But with Assyria gone, Neco of Egypt took the opportunity to seize control of Syria-Palestine. After his abortive attempt to save Harran, Neco had established a base at Riblah on the River Orontes in Syria. While there he deposed Jehoahaz and laid Judah under tribute (33). Jehoahaz was later taken to Egypt where he died (34) – as predicted by Jeremiah (Je. 22:11–12, where he is called Shallum, indicating that Jehoahaz was his throne-name). His brother Eliakim became king in his place, taking the throne-name Jehoiakim (34).

23:35 – 24:7 Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim came to the throne as an Egyptian vassal required to pay an annual tribute. The verb used for the exaction of silver and gold from the people (23:35) is a strong one implying stern and oppressive measures. Jehoiakim continued the evils begun in his brother's reign (23:37) and is strongly condemned by Jeremiah (Je. 22:13–23). His determined opposition to Yahweh's prophets (Je. 26:20–23; 36:1–32) may indicate apostasy, but the sin of which he is specifically charged is the promotion of social injustice (Je. 22:13–17).

Egyptian control of Judah lasted only four years, for in 605 BC the Egyptians were defeated in a battle at Carchemish by the Babylonians. Carchemish on the Euphrates had been an Egyptian outpost since 609 BC. Neco's forces were soundly defeated by Nebuchadnezzar, crown prince of Babylon, and Egypt lost control of Syria-Palestine (24:7; see also Je. 46:2). In the same year the Babylonian king Nabopolassar died and Nebuchadnezzar succeeded to the throne. Hence we meet him as *king of Babylon* in 24:1.

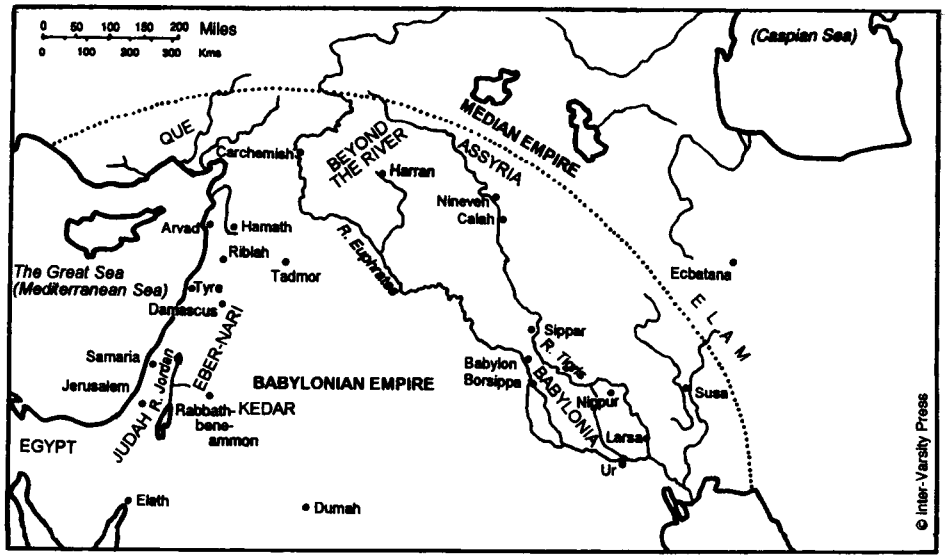
Jehoiakim probably became his vassal (24:1) in 605 BC in the immediate aftermath of Nebuchadnezzar's victory at Carchemish. (An alternative would be 604/603 BC when Nebuchadnezzar again marched into Palestine.) Thus Judah exchanged an Egyptian overlord for a Babylonian one.

The attacks on Judah mentioned in 24:2 were probably by mercenaries acting for Nebuchadnezzar after Jehoiakim had rebelled (1). But while we may find a political explanation for this turn of events, the writer has no doubt that it was Yahweh who *sent them to destroy Judah* in fulfilment of the earlier prophetic message (2–4). Although Judah's destruction still lay some twelve years in the future, the writer sees this as the beginning of an inexorable train of events.

24:8–17 Jehoiachin: the first siege and deportation. Like his uncle Jehoahaz, Jehoiachin reigned for only three months. On him fell the full force of Nebuchadnezzar's response to his father's rebellion (24:1). He too *did evil in the eyes of the LORD* (9), presumably continuing the oppressive and unjust policies of Jehoiakim.

His short reign was entirely taken up by the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, which began towards the end of 598 BC and lasted until February 597 BC (dates provided by the Babylonian Chronicle). After surrendering (12) Jehoiachin was taken prisoner and deported to Babylon (15), as Jeremiah had predicted (Je. 22:24–28). Other members of the royal family and the leading officials of Judah were also exiled.

The *craftsmen and artisans* ('craftsmen and smiths', RSV) mentioned in vs 14 and 16 were probably army personnel, since they are included among those who were *fit for war* in v 16 (though the NIV obscures this fact). A better translation might be 'military engineers and sappers' (*i.e.* builders of siege ramps and towers, and diggers of siege tunnels). In which case, v 14 refers only to military personnel and gives their total as 10,000. However, v 16 speaks of 7,000 fighting men and 1,000 builders and sappers, a total of only 8,000. A further difficulty is that in Je. 52:28 the number of people deported on this occasion is given as 3,023. Perhaps this figure refers to the civilian population. Added to the 7,000 fighting men of v 16 it would give a total of 10,000, which is the figure given in v 14. This, however, would leave the 1,000 builders and sappers out of the grand total, unless they



The Babylonian Empire at its height in the seventh century BC.

are included in the 7,000 fighting men of v 16 (*i.e.* reading: '. . . seven thousand fighting men, including a thousand builders and sappers, all who would be useful in warfare . . .'). No solution is free from difficulties and we must admit that we do not know how many were deported in all. It is clear, however, that those whom Nebuchadnezzar took to Babylon were the cream of the population, those who would be useful to him as administrators and soldiers. Those left behind were *the poorest people of the land* (14).

True to form, the writer emphasizes that by deporting the royal family and taking the contents of the treasuries Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilling prophecy (13), the reference in this case being to the words of Isaiah (20:17–18).

Mattaniah, a third son of Josiah and uncle to the exiled Jehoiachin, was appointed vassal by Nebuchadnezzar and acquired the throne-name Zedekiah (17).

24:18 – 25:7 Zedekiah: rebellion and the second siege. Zedekiah continued the policies of his predecessors (24:19). In translating v 20, the NIV and RSV begin a new paragraph with the statement that Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. An attractive alternative is to retain continuity between the two parts of the verse and to render the latter part: 'Yet Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon' (Hobbs *2 Kings*, pp. 345, 354). The meaning would then be that Zedekiah rebelled in spite of all that had already befallen Jerusalem; he had learned nothing from recent events.

We learn from Je. 27:1–11 that the rebellion was hatched early in Zedekiah's reign and involved Judah in an anti-Babylonian alliance with Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon. Jeremiah regarded the rebellion as foolish disobedience to the will of Yahweh and urged submission to Nebuchadnezzar, whom Yahweh himself had raised up (Je. 27:12–15).

The anti-Babylonian alliance was probably formed in 594 BC, when Babylonia was weakened by internal rebellion. Jeremiah records a visit to Babylon by Zedekiah in 593 BC (Je. 51:59) which may have been an attempt to convince Nebuchadnezzar of his loyalty. Nebuchadnezzar finally moved against Judah in 589 BC, laying siege to Jerusalem in the December of that year (25:1). The siege began in Zedekiah's ninth year and ended in his eleventh (1–2), but it did not last a full two years. The Hebrew of v 3 says that the end came 'on the ninth [day] of the month', but Je. 52:6 supplies the information that this month was the fourth (incorporated by the NIV, NEB and RSV into their translations of 2 Ki. 25:3). This points to the siege lasting eighteen months. (Je. 37:5–8 indicates that the siege was lifted briefly while the Babylonians dealt with an advancing Egyptian army.) It ended in July 587 BC with the breaching of the wall (4), but the city could not have held out much longer anyway, for the famine created by the siege had reached a desperate stage (3).

Zedekiah fled, using an escape route which is obscurely described (4) and taking with him the soldiers who had been defending the city. Once out of Jerusalem they went *towards the Arabah*,

or preferably 'by the Arabah road', the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Zedekiah was probably hoping to cross the Jordan and seek refuge in Edom, Moab or Ammon, all of whom were members of the alliance (Je. 27:3). But he was overtaken before he reached the Jordan. It appears from v 6 that Nebuchadnezzar had not been directing the siege of Jerusalem in person, for he was at the Babylonian headquarters at Riblah. Zedekiah's punishment was brutal but not unduly severe by the standards of the time (the Assyrians are known to have blinded their prisoners).

25:8–21 Deportation and destruction. About a month after the walls had been breached a Babylonian official arrived to organize the destruction of Jerusalem and the removal of its population. The reference to *the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar* drives home the fact that there was no longer a king on the throne of Judah by whose reign events could be dated. The Davidic dynasty had come to an end.

The city, including the temple, was put to the torch and the walls demolished (9–10). Those who had remained in the city and those who had deserted were all taken into exile. Je. 52:29 gives the total number deported on this occasion as 832. We saw above, however, that in the case of the earlier deportation the figure given by Jeremiah was not the grand total, and the same may be true here. The poorest were left to work the land (12). The fields and vineyards would now have produced more than the reduced population needed, and the task of those left in the land was to supply the king of Babylon with the surplus.

The list of the temple furnishings and utensils in vs 13–17 is poignant in its deliberate recollection of the golden days of Solomon. The reference to the bronze objects of unknown weight (16) recalls 1 Ki 7:47, and the description of the two pillars (17) summarizes 1 Ki. 7:15–22.

Various officials of the city were neither taken into exile nor left in the land, but taken to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah and executed. The reason is not given. Perhaps they were deemed untrustworthy.

The final sentence of v 21 (*So Judah went into captivity, away from her land*) precisely echoes a statement concerning Israel in 2 Ki. 17:23 (though the NIV translation of the latter obscures the similarity). The point is clear: Judah suffered the same fate as Israel, exactly as was prophesised.

25:22–26 Gedaliah. The Babylonians reorganized the land under the governorship of Gedaliah, son of Ahikam. Ahikam had been among the officials sent by Josiah to the prophetess Huldah after the discovery of the lawbook (22:12); in the reign of Jehoiakim his influence had saved Jeremiah from death (Je. 26:24). Gedaliah himself must have been a member of the Jerusalem establishment, one whom the Babylonians trusted and who had the respect of the people.

A number of army officers (perhaps those who had escaped from the Babylonians when Zedekiah was captured; v 5) rallied to Gedaliah at Mizpah, the new administrative centre 8 miles (13 km) north of Jerusalem. Gedaliah promised them asylum if they would live peaceably in submission to the Babylonians. His advice to *serve the king of Babylon, and it will go well with you* (24) recalls Jeremiah's earlier advice to Zedekiah (Je. 27:12). Indeed Gedaliah may have been influenced by Jeremiah, who settled at Mizpah after being freed by the Babylonians (Je. 40:5–6).

There were those, however, who viewed Gedaliah as a detestable collaborator with the Babylonians and plotted his death. He was assassinated by one Ishmael *who was of royal blood* (25), and a number of *men of Judah* and Babylonians who were with him at Mizpah were also killed. According to Je. 40:14 the king of Ammon was behind the plot; Ammon had been a member of the anti-Babylonian alliance (Je. 27:3). If Gedeliah was appointed on the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar's official in the fifth month (8), his governorship lasted only two months (25).

Fearing Babylonian reprisals for Gedaliah's death, the entire population of Mizpah fled to Egypt (26).

25:27–30 Jehoiachin in exile. In a sudden change of scene we leave the land of Judah, without government and in chaos, and move to Babylon.

Evil-Merodach (Amel-Marduk in Babylonian texts) succeeded his father Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC; in 561 he took Jehoiachin from prison, where he had lived as a royal hostage, and moved him to quarters in the palace, where he enjoyed relative freedom.

The purpose of these four verses has been much debated. Is this incident included merely for its historical interest, or does it convey something of the writer's message? If the latter, what exactly is it meant to convey? Some see Jehoiachin's release from prison as a chink of light in the darkness of exile, signalling the possibility of Judah's own release and restoration to her own land. Others feel that in spite of Jehoiachin's rehabilitation the narrative still ends on a downbeat, offering no real comfort. If the writer does intend to convey hope here it is unlikely to be an explicit hope of Judah's return from exile. As we noted in connection with 1 Ki. 8:46–51, restoration to the land does not enter

the writer's picture of a future beyond exile. Any hope to be found in these verses is of a much vaguer kind. The book ends ambiguously, without resolution. The hope offered is simply that exile may not be God's last word to Judah.

John J. Bimson

1 AND 2 CHRONICLES

Introduction

Originally Chronicles was a single book, and its Hebrew name was 'The events of the days' – *i.e.* in the strict sense, 'journals', though we should more probably have called it 'annals', the events of the years. The LXX, the Greek version of the OT called it 'Paralipomenon', the 'book of things left out', since at first glance it seems to retell the histories of the books of Samuel and Kings, adding information which they omit. As we read it we quickly realize that that is an inadequate name, because Chronicles clearly does more than fill in gaps. It also leaves out much that Samuel/Kings puts in, and where the two histories do tell the same story they often tell it very differently. Jerome, translating the Bible into Latin, said that this book was in fact a 'chronicle of the whole of sacred history', and from him comes our present English title. It does, as Jerome indicates, cover not only the span of time dealt with in Samuel/Kings but the entire OT story from Adam through almost to the people of the writer's own time.

Date and authorship

Following the rise to power of Cyrus, king of Persia, who conquered Babylon in 539 BC, many of the Jews living in exile in his territories returned to their own land. Since Chronicles more than once takes that event for granted, it must obviously have been written after it. Many have believed both that Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were all written by the same person, and that that person was Ezra himself, writing fairly soon after the return from exile. But there are also good grounds for dating Chronicles some time later, probably in the fourth century BC. If this is right, then we do not know who its author was. He is usually simply called 'the Chronicler'. His book was in any case intended for the Jewish community which had settled back in the area around Jerusalem, with a rebuilt temple and priests of Aaron's line (though no longer with a throne for the kings of David's line, since it was now part of the Persian empire).

Content

Although Chronicles covers a tremendous sweep of history, it concentrates on the period of the monarchy, when for about 450 years Israel was ruled by a succession of kings, from Saul (*c.* 1050 BC) to Zedekiah (*c.* 600 BC). Samuel/Kings was certainly its main source, supplemented by other books now lost to us. So far from romancing when he recounts events not found in the older history, as some have thought, the Chronicler may well be following different sources of considerable accuracy. In 1 Ch. 1 – 9 he has compiled name-lists, most though not all of them family trees, which bind together the story of God's people since the beginning of Bible times. 1 Ch. 10 – 29 covers the reign of David, and 2 Ch. 1 – 10 that of Solomon. 2 Ch. 11 – 36 deals with the royal line that descended from them – the kings, that is, of the southern Israelite kingdom of Judah – until it ends in exile in Babylon.

Purpose

Chronicles presents history differently from Samuel/Kings. The differences, the distinctive features of Chronicles, have to do with the Chronicler's theology – truths about God and the people of God which are his special concern. He assumes throughout that his readers know the facts already, and his object is to interpret them.

One of the most obvious of these features is his concentration on the royal line of David, and therefore on the kingdom centred on Jerusalem. (The kings who ruled the breakaway northern kingdom from 931/30 BC onwards do not in themselves interest him.) Another matter to which he devotes a great deal of space is Solomon's temple, its priesthood and its worship. This special interest, some have thought, arose from his desire to encourage his contemporaries to be wholeheartedly involved in the activities of the 'second temple', their own much less grandiose replacement for Solomon's. But when we realize how constantly he draws his readers' attention not only to the temple of Solomon (which did have a visible equivalent in their own day), but also to the throne of David (which did not), we are on the way to a wider and deeper understanding of his message. It is not really about religious observances, any more than it is about political structures. The Chronicler's twin emphases on throne and temple, on kingship and priesthood, are relevant in all ages, because the first is about how God governs his people, and the second is about how they relate to him.

This in turn helps to explain the Chronicler's

view of the divided kingdom. So far as everyday names were concerned, the north was called Israel and the south Judah. But the real 'Israel' meant all those for whom the true kingship was expressed through the sons of David and the true priesthood through the sons of Aaron. That meant southerners (unless they rebelled), but could equally include northerners (if they would return). 2 Ch. 13 is a key chapter in this respect (see especially vs 4–5, 8–12). The Chronicler therefore frequently uses the phrase 'all Israel', speaks of the possibility of its reunification and renewal, and presents a picture of an ideal Israel – not a photograph of the nation as it would have appeared at any given time, but a kaleidoscope or montage of glimpses pieced together from various times and sources.

In a similar way he pictures at the heart of the ideal Israel an ideal kingship, in the form of the successive reigns of David and Solomon. As we have noted, his first readers were very familiar with the stories of these two men, and knew how human they were, with great failings as well as great virtues. So we, like those earlier readers, are to understand the Chronicler's depiction of David and Solomon as the 'official' portrait, complementing (not contradicting) the warts-and-all human one in Samuel/Kings. It is not inaccurate – simply selective. It draws attention to those aspects of their reigns which show us something of God's regular ways of governing his people's lives.

The Chronicler's hopes for his own age and his message for later ages include all this, and three other features also. One is continuity. This is brought out by the name-lists of his first nine chapters, binding the people of God together across the generations, and at a deeper level by his constant interest in unchanging principles. He would want to tell us that there is no reason why (making allowances for changed circumstances) the same principles should not apply to the life of God's people now as then.

Another feature is what some call 'retribution', meaning that 'if I sin I shall be punished' (though also that 'if I obey I shall be blessed'). Scripture recognizes elsewhere, and so does the Chronicler himself, that in practice things are usually more complicated than that, but this principle of spiritual cause and effect remains true as a basic fact. One of its consequences is that there is always new hope for each new generation: to simplify this aspect of it also, that 'if I repent I shall be forgiven'. The NT simply clarifies the principle. The Christian, like his OT counterpart, finds that both obedience and disobedience have inevitable effects; and the unconverted person, for his part, will be punished for the basic sin of rejecting Christ, and blessed when he obeys the gospel.

Finally, there are the Chronicler's surprising statistics. Amounts of money, the size of armies, and so on, often differ from those in Samuel/Kings, and often appear to be improbably large. Many of the discrepancies can in fact be readily reconciled, and many of the seeming exaggerations may be due to a misunderstanding of words like 'thousand', which frequently means a fighting unit of much smaller size, or to the kind of copying error which in our own day might add an extra zero or miss out a decimal point. But a good many queries of this kind remain unexplained. It is quite proper to leave them that way, so long as we bear in mind that the Chronicler was in other areas an accurate writer; that his concern with the regular principles by which God works in the world was served better by fact than by fiction; and that both he and his first readers, well acquainted with the older history (Samuel/Kings) and much closer than we are to the world that both these histories describe, obviously took in their stride such matters as the figures we find difficult.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 – 9:34 Connections

The style of these opening chapters of Chronicles is so unfamiliar to modern readers that we may well be put off and wonder what possible value it can have for us. Because of this, we need to bear in mind that the book's contents, if not its style, are familiar to anyone who knows the rest of the OT, and would have been more so to the people for whom it was written.

The section 1:1 – 9:34 is a proper introduction to the rest of the book in that the Chronicler is doing here what he will be doing throughout. He is taking facts about the story of God's people which are already well known, and writing them up in a new way. He is also covering the entire span of the story, from the very beginning practically up to his own time; and, while naturally he has to leave out a great deal, he includes many real-life characters and incidents. So his view of history is both comprehensive and personal.

The first nine chapters are often described as 'genealogies'. They do indeed contain many family trees, and the reader may be helped to understand them by reflecting on similar lists in better-known parts of the Bible. Gn 5, for example, shows how God saw to it that the human race spread across the earth as he had planned it should, and how he preserved it in spite of its sinfulness. Mt. 1 shows how he saw to it that through the same race the man appointed to save it from its sin eventually came into the world. In the same way, one of the great themes of Chronicles is that God's purpose for the welfare of humanity never fails.

Even so, 'genealogies' is too narrow a word to describe these chapters, for they do include other types of list. What all these lists have in common is that the names in them are not just *collected*, but *connected*. Such connections, whether of the father/son kind or of other kinds, tell us that God is at work continuously throughout the story of his people.

1:1 – 3:24 Connections down the ages

The family tree of 1:1 – 3:24 is traced from the beginnings of human history down to perhaps 400 BC, when Chronicles was written. At one end is Adam, the ancestor of all mankind; at the other is one Jewish family which had settled again near Jerusalem after the exile, for whose

community the book was written. The connection is a continuous line (some of its branches drawn, some not) through Noah and Abraham and David.

1:1–3 The line from Adam. This list comes from Genesis (5:3–32) and is simply the names of the ten generations from Adam to Noah.

1:4–27 The lines from Noah. At the first branching of the tree, the families of Noah's younger sons are listed before that of Shem, whose genealogy is to be the main trunk, as in Gn. 10. That chapter is streamlined a little, and Gn. 11:10–26 a lot, to make vs 4–23 and vs 24–27. The Chronicler also copies from Genesis the little cameos of Nimrod (10) and Peleg (19), the first two of many such incidental comments that add vivid touches to what may otherwise seem such dull name-lists.

1:28–33 The lines from Abraham. Again, the main line will come last, so before Isaac's family we have Ishmael's (Gn. 25:12–16 abbreviated), and also those of their half-brothers, Abraham's sons not by Sarah or Hagar but by Keturah (Gn. 25:1–4).

1:34–54 The lines from Isaac. Once more Chronicles sets out the secondary line first, *the sons of Esau* (35) before the more important line of the younger brother Jacob. Again sources are streamlined (Gn. 36:10–14, 20–43), assuming that readers will know already from Gn. 36:9 why Esau (34), Seir (38), and Edom (43) are grouped together. The Edomite kings are listed not as a family tree but simply as a succession, and the chiefs may not even be that; no matter, so long as some connection is made between the names. These people are not names only; the little pen pictures of the two Hadads (46, 50), like that of Nimrod (10), hint at this by adding their touches of realism.

2:1–2 The lines from Israel. The central line which the Chronicler has traced from Adam through Noah and Abraham comes now to Esau's brother Jacob. In only one chapter of his book, where he is in fact quoting another writer (1 Ch. 16:13, 17; Ps. 105:6, 10), does the name 'Jacob' appear; he himself always uses the alternative, 'Israel'. The continuity of Israel, the nation still miraculously surviving in his own time, and the grace of God which has preserved it throughout, are his great theme; so from its very beginnings that is the name he opts for.

2:3–9 The lines from Judah. Most of these relationships are mentioned in Gn. 46:12 (*cf.* Gn. 38) and Jos. 7. The names of Heman and Ethan appear also in the headings to Ps. 88 and 89 (see also 1 Ki. 4:31), so this may be the first hint that the Chronicler is as interested in Israel's temple worship as in its throne and royal line. From here on he deals with the royal line not last but first.

He is equally interested in Israel as a whole, and in what it means to belong to the people of God. He makes the point through four of the names in this section. In *the daughter of Shua*, Judah marries a heathen, and his relationship with Tamar is incestuous, yet by the grace of God both women are drawn into the family tree, Tamar indeed in a specially privileged way (see Mt. 1:3). These are emphases unlike those of Ezra and Nehemiah; see Introduction, on authorship. On the other hand, Er and Achar are both born within the 'holy family', but that does not automatically assure them of God's favour.

2:10–17 The line from Judah through Ram. This is the line that brings us to Jesse and thus to David, who will stand at the centre of the Chronicler's whole view of history. The 'family tree' idea is particularly apt at this point; the tree of Jesse (see Is. 11:1, 10) is a familiar image in the religious art of the Middle Ages. Again, the Chronicler is equally interested in the main trunk of the tree (10–12) and in the spreading branches (13–17). There is no single source from which he has drawn this section as a whole, though most items in it are found elsewhere (Nu. 2:3; Ru. 4:19–22; 1 Sa. 16:6–13, where David is called Jesse's eighth son; 2 Sa. 2:18). He seems therefore to have pieced it together himself, and, as the generations listed here are not nearly enough to cover the nine centuries between Judah's migrating to Egypt and Solomon's building the temple (Ex. 12:40; 1 Ki. 6:1), we may take it that he is concerned much less with completeness than with continuity. (Note the general 'elasticity' of Bible genealogies, since in Bible language 'father' can mean any male ancestor and 'son' any male descendant.)

2:18–24 The line from Judah through Caleb. There are difficulties with the first and last verses of this section. They may mean that *by his wife Azubah* Caleb was the father of Jerioth (a daughter?) (18), and that 'after the death of Hezron, Caleb went in to Ephrathah, the wife of Hezron his father, and she bore him . . .' (24 RSV). At all events, this Caleb is not to be confused with the Caleb of Nu. 13 and 14, who was a contemporary of this one's descendant Bezalel. Bezalel's appearance here (20) again links the Chronicler's two great concerns of throne and temple – the man who masterminded the making of the original sanctuary (Ex. 31:2–5) alongside the royal line leading to David.

2:25–41 The line from Judah through Jerahmeel. After various branches (25–33), the line runs straight to Elishama (34–41). If it is complete, he will be roughly contemporary with David; if 'stretched', with some

generations left out and 'father' meaning 'ancestor', he may belong to the Chronicler's own time. More important is the appearance of another outsider, Jarha (34–35), brought, like the daughter of Shua (3), into the family of Israel without any hint of disapproval, though she represents Canaan and he, Egypt – Israel's two great enemies before and after the exodus. (In view of v 34, it may be that Ahlai in v 31 is either a daughter or a grandson of Sheshan.)

2:42–55 The line through Caleb (reprise). The appearance here of more Calebrites does not mean that the Chronicler has an untidy mind. This 'repeat of an earlier theme' points, on the contrary, to a particular kind of careful arrangement, as becomes obvious once we see that 2:10 – 3:9 deals in order with the families of Ram, Caleb, Jerahmeel, Caleb and Ram. This 'chiastic', or cross-over, pattern is found in many parts of the Bible. Hur links the two Caleb lists (19, 50), but this second one is generally concerned with something new. Ziph, Hebron, Kiriath Jearim and Bethlehem (42, 50, 51) are not people but places – *qiryaṯ* and *bêṯ* meaning 'city' and 'house' respectively – and 'father' may here be translated 'founder', as in NEB, or 'leader'. In the same way vs 52–55 are dealing not with individuals so much as with clans (like the nations in 1:11–16).

3:1–9 The line through Ram (reprise). Here is the family which came from David, to balance (in the previous Ram section) the family from which David came. The sources may be 2 Sa. 3:2–5; 5:5, 14–16, though for once Chronicles has the fuller account, listing no fewer than nineteen of David's sons.

3:10–16 The line from Solomon. This section covers most of the years of the kingdom, though the Chronicler barely mentions it (simply the word *reigned*, in v 4); his concern in these chapters is people and their connections. The mass of material he has brought together so far is now reduced to a single strand, the line of the kings. Even that does not include every Israelite monarch. Saul is not here, nor Athaliah, nor any of the kings who reigned in the north after the kingdom was divided. What matters is simply the line descended from David. The Chronicler's sources are of course the whole of the books of Kings – a drastic simplification indeed!

3:17–24 The line from Jehoiachin. Two major turning-points of Israel's history are practically ignored – the exile and the restoration. As the only hint of the monarchy was the phrase 'David . . . reigned' (4), so here the only hint of these events is the phrase *Jehoiachin the captive* (17). Much more important for the Chronicler is that the people of Israel, and the line of David in particular, have survived throughout, and the latest of the line, the sons of Elioenai (24), bring right up to date a story which began with Adam.

Note. Two small puzzles arise here. Elsewhere in the Bible Zerubbabel is the son of Shealtiel, not of Pedaiah (19); one suggested explanation is that Pedaiah married his brother's widow, and their son counted as Shealtiel's son (see Dt. 25:5–6). The unexpected word *six* (22) makes sense if the words *and his sons* have been inserted into that verse by mistake.

4:1 – 7:40 Connections within the family

The Chronicler included in chs. 1 – 9 more than one Judah genealogy and more than one Benjamin genealogy. Why? Judah appears in chs. 1 – 3 as part of the royal line of David, which is the theme of those chapters, and Benjamin will appear in chs. 8 – 9 as part of the royal line of Saul, the theme of those chapters. Both Judah and Benjamin figure in chs. 4 – 7 as two of the tribes into which the tree of Israel branches.

4:1–23 The tribe of Judah. This list is linked with that of ch. 2 at a few points, but generally it is not at all clear how the two are related. However, as before (1:10, 19, *etc.*), the Chronicler includes here points not only of interest but of importance. First, these are real people. Finding place-names such as Bethlehem and Tekoa (4, 5) among them – 'father' here must mean 'founder' or 'leader'; see on 2:42–55 – reminds his readers that the setting of his book is factual, not fictional. The meanings of these names and the occupations of the people give extra realism: Bethlehem is 'Bread House', Ir Nahash (12) is 'Bronze Town'; Ge Harashim (14) is 'Craftsmen's Valley', and in other towns linen-workers and potters flourish (21–23).

Secondly, these people illustrate spiritual principles. Jabez (9–10) is commended because his name, which sounds like the Hebrew for 'pain', would have been thought unlucky; but prayerful faith in God does away with such superstition. Mered (17–18) married an Egyptian wife – these verses have caused debate, but that much is clear – and is another instance (*cf.* 2:3, 34–35) of the drawing into membership of God's people of unlikely outsiders, and thus of the Chronicler's breadth of vision. Caleb the Kenizzite (v 15), afterwards so prominent (Jos. 14:6–15), may himself have been another foreigner, adopted rather than born into the tribe of Judah.

4:24–43 The tribe of Simeon. Next comes Simeon, always closely linked with Judah, whose extensive territory he shared. Jos. 19:1–9 mentions this in the list of places reproduced here in vs 28–33. These geographical notes, with much less genealogy than

in 4:1–23, indicate a decline in this tribe's land and population of which the Chronicler's readers are well aware (Shimei, v 27, is the exception that proves the rule). On the other hand no tribe of Israel can simply wither away, and vs 38–43 give examples of vitality even in Simeon.

5:1–26 The Transjordan tribes. As with Simeon, geographical notes are given for the next group of tribes. Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh settled east of the Jordan, in the regions mentioned in vs 8b–11 and 23, known collectively as Gilead. The Chronicler notes that Reuben was *the firstborn of Israel* (1), even though the rights of the firstborn were transferred to Joseph (and so to Ephraim and Manasseh) and the dominant place became Judah's (Gn. 35:22; 48; 49:4, 8–12, 22–26). As with Simeon, we have notes of warfare. All these Gileadite tribes both took part in the campaign of vs 19–22 and suffered the invasion of v 26. If the Hagrite war is the same as that of v 10, the two events answer to each other from either end of the three-centuries-long occupation of Transjordan (10, 26; obviously very many generations have been omitted from Reuben's line in vs 3–6). They illustrate a basic spiritual law: in one, victory is due to believing prayer (20); in the other, defeat is due to faithless rebellion (25–26).

6:1–81 The tribe of Levi. With 81 verses and a central position given to it, this tribe is clearly of great importance. Its history (vs 1–30) shows the reason at once. From Levi's second son Kohath descend the high priests of Israel. Priesthood and kingship together form the chief theme of Chronicles. So the line is here taken as far as the exile (15); again continuity is more important than the great events which punctuate it, and in this chapter there are no other such events (not even the exodus; Moses himself gets the barest mention, v 3) except, significantly, the building of the temple (10). If that note really belongs, as many think, in v 9, it comes at the centre-point of the list, so here too there is a formal arrangement which underlines the centrality of temple and priesthood. Other branches of the family follow, one of them including the great Samuel (27–28), as little emphasized as Moses was.

The function of the tribe (31–53) is similarly related to that central point, the reigns of David and Solomon, when the three leading musicians Heman, Asaph and Ethan were appointed, one from each of the Levite families (33, 39, 44). To the same point come the twelve generations from Aaron, the high priests who make sacrifices and offerings (49–53).

The extent of the tribe (54–81) is nationwide. Levi has no tribal territory of its own, but is given towns and lands by every other tribe. It is typical of the Chronicler that he should write like this at a time when conditions were quite different; as if to say that whatever happens the *principle* of a representative priesthood is to be maintained.

7:1–12 The military tribes. A new thing appears here: notes of the military strength of a tribe. With so few names in comparison with those in earlier lists (a mere handful for the 900 years separating Issachar and David, vs 1–2), it may be that the Chronicler's genealogical information was scanty, and he used army census lists to fill it out. The numbers of fighting men in David's time do however help to make again the point that Israel in the past was very different from the sorely reduced nation that she is in the Chronicler's own time, and one has to look below the surface to see what is meant by real strength.

Notes. For the large numbers in this section, see Introduction.

The tribe of Dan is not mentioned here unless v 12b should read (*cf.* Gn. 46:23) 'The sons of Dan: Hushim, his son, one'.

Some think that the whole Benjamin section (6–12) is really that of Zebulun, who otherwise (like Dan) does not figure in the list, while the real Benjamin genealogy is ch. 8, balancing Judah's in ch. 4. On the other hand, the Benjamin/Dan/Naphtali sequence in Gn. 46: 21–24 may mean that that is what we have here also in 7:6–13.

7:13–40 The rest of the tribes. The Manasseh and Ephraim sections are difficult. In the first, the mention of Gilead (place or person? *Cf.* Nu. 32:39–40) makes it unclear whether vs 14–19 deal with the whole of Manasseh or with one of its halves (see 5:23), and the mention of Maacah is odd unless we are to omit some words from v 15 and read *took a wife* ... (whose) *name was* .... It is equally unclear in the next section whether the Ephraim of vs 22–23 is the founder of the tribe, Joseph's son (born in Egypt, Gn. 41:50–52), or a descendant of the same name. The other two sections are straightforward.

We are not to despise these tribes, even though they were to become part of the renegade northern kingdom. The Chronicler points out that in these lists, as in earlier ones, non-Israelites are welcomed into the line of Israel (14), illustrious men are born of it (27), and women take a distinguished place in it (15b [see Nu. 36] and 24).

8:1 – 9:34 Connections of throne and temple

Perhaps Benjamin in ch. 8 is the last in a sequence of five, balancing Judah in ch. 4 – a royal tribe at either end and the priestly tribe of Levi

(ch. 6) in the middle (see note on 7:6–11). Ch. 9 would then set out once more a largely Levite section (1b–34) and a Benjaminite one (35–44), one priestly and one royal, to lead into the next main division of the book. Or we could take chs. 4 – 7 as a survey of the tribes, and 8:1 – 9:34 as the Benjamin (royal) and Levi (priestly) setting for what follows, while 9:35–44 is a repeat of the appropriate part of the Benjamin lists to lead in to the story of Saul.

8:1–40 From Benjamin: the throne prepared. The list in vs 1–28 is comparable in scope with those of Judah and Levi. It differs considerably from other Benjamin lists (*e.g.* 7:6–11; Nu. 26:38–41), and its section seems to be unconnected; here, as elsewhere, the reason may be that 'sons' may mean descendants in another time or place. We are still to see them all as bound together by their tribal ties.

The particular line within the tribe which occupies vs 29–40 is here because it is Saul's line. It will be repeated in 9:34–44 as the immediate introduction to the Chronicler's history of the kingdom. Yet as with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua and Samuel, no attention is drawn to Saul, still less to the crucial events of his time. As always, Chronicles is interested more in continuity than in change.

Gibeon (29) is a place, like Jerusalem (see on 4:1–23). The relationships of the family based there are clarified and harmonized with 1 Sa. 9:1 by the NIV's inserting of Ner in v 30 (see 9:36), by assuming that he had both a brother and a son named Kish, and by recognizing that neither history is necessarily giving a full genealogy. If however the line beyond Saul *is* complete, it would end roughly at the time of the exile; if incomplete, it would last longer still, even though it ceased to be a royal house in the events of 10:6.

9:1–34 From Levi: the temple maintained. If chs. 4 – 8 do form a unit, 9:1a rounds it off effectively, and 9:1b–2 introduces the next section with yet another surprising understatement: Chronicles gives just one verse to the exile before embarking on lists of the post-exile community. They run parallel to Ne. 11, and are mostly of the tribe of Levi, though the first of the four sections (*Israelites, priests, Levites and temple servants,* v 2) includes Ephraim and Manasseh as well as Judah and Benjamin (3–9). The Chronicler never abandons his ideal of 'all Israel', the north revived and reunited with the south. The priests (10–13) are the family of Aaron, offering the sacrifices of Israelite religion; the Levites (14–16) have other religious duties; and the temple servants, or gatekeepers (17–34), have general duties.

If 8:1 – 9:34 forms a unit, its two parts flank the period of the book's interest, the Benjamin part leading into the monarchy and the Levi part leading on from the exile, thus again stressing continuity.

9:35 – 29:30 David

David, to whom practically twenty chapters are next devoted, is clearly of central importance in the Chronicler's scheme of things. With the overlap of father and son, however, the story of Solomon (who is first introduced in ch. 22) will cover almost as many chapters, and we should see the two kings side by side as forming jointly the ideal. Because the two great themes of the book are kingship and priesthood, we might say that David establishes the throne, while Solomon will build the temple. One is presented as a man of war, and the other as a man of peace. Even so, both themes (throne and temple) figure in both reigns.

The time of David and Solomon is being set forth as an ideal so their portraits here differ from the ones in Samuel/Kings. Those are human and fallible, 'warts and all', while these are the official portraits of two great monarchs. The Chronicler is not whitewashing them; everyone knows their sins and follies. He is simply being selective, to bring out the principles behind their greatness.

9:35 – 12:40 King and people

Against the background of the failure of his predecessor Saul, the first king of Israel, David is given the kingdom and becomes the focal point of a united nation. Though now long dead (for the Chronicler and his readers as for us), he embodies the enduring principles around which the life of God's people must always be shaped.

9:35–44 The first king's line. Up to now, 'chronicles' has meant genealogies and other name-lists. From now on it will mean something new – narratives, the history of the kingdom of Israel – and the first king is introduced by one final genealogy, his family tree repeated from 8:29–38.

10:1–14 The first king's failure. Of the twenty-three chapters which 1 Sa. devotes to the reign of Saul (9 – 31), the Chronicler omits twenty-two. He simply tells the story of Saul's death, and adds two verses of his own (13–14). For him, neither the gradual decline in Saul's own fortunes nor those of Saul's family after his death (2 Sa. 1 – 4) matters; so far as the kingdom is concerned, Saul's house came to an end at Mount Gilboa (6). Saul's disloyalty to God (13–14) is important in more ways than one. It highlights David's loyalty. David, in contrast to Saul, is the man after God's own heart (1 Sa. 13:14; the Chronicler does not quote the phrase, because his whole portrait of David will

illustrate it). It is only David's obedience which can reverse for Israel the bad effects of Saul's disobedience. So if more recent experiences (that is, for the Chronicler's readers, the exile) parallel those of Saul's reign (7; 5:25–26; 9:1b), then the way of restoration is to be learned from David's reign (2 Ch. 33:8).

11:1–3 The new king's people. 2 Sa. 5:1–3 is the source. Fulfilling the old prophecy (Gn. 49:10), the people gather unitedly in obedience around the ruler from the tribe of Judah. In significant pre-echoes of his greatest descendant Jesus, David is presented as the same flesh and blood as his people, their victorious saviour, the one appointed to this by God, and the maker of a covenant (3, RSV, rather than *compact*) which they accept.

11:4–9 The new king's city. Jerusalem will be the place of the throne. David's powerful rule over his people's life will mean praise, peace and prosperity (*cf.* Ps. 122). Such is in all ages the meaning of God's government (Heb. 12:22). This city will, even in David's time, be the place where his son's temple is to be built (17:12; 22:1) and much sooner still the place where Israel's worship of God will centre on the ark of the covenant (15:3–28). But even before that it is the place where through his viceroy *the LORD Almighty* (9) rules his people.

11:10 – 12:22 The new king's warriors. These lists come much later in 2 Samuel (23:8–39), and are brought forward here to show how from the outset 'all Israel' in its great variety unites around a king of the right kind. Like the lists of chs. 1 – 9, these may be drawn from several periods in order more effectively to make the point.

Outstanding among David's *mighty men* are 'the Three' (11:11–14); so 2 Sa. 23:8–12 calls them, giving a full account (something is missing in Chronicles; a copyist's eye must have slid from *for battle* (12; 2 Sa. 23:9) to *at a place* (12; 2 Sa. 23:11). Next come the Thirty, three of whom have given us another of the unforgettable incidents so dear to the Chronicler (11:15–19). This one comes from very early in David's career (1 Sa. 22:1). Abishai and Benaiah (11:20–25) were apparently equal to the first Three, and Benaiah's exploits were especially memorable.

Like so many of the people in chs. 1 – 9, most of the 'mighty men' in 11:26–47 are no more than names to us. It is not clear how they relate to the Thirty, and several have been added to the list of 2 Sa. 23. Paradoxically, the recording of nothing but their names (except for the occasional extra touch; 11:32, 39, 42) makes them real, in all their variety.

Four groups are now mentioned which joined forces with David during Saul's reign, when he was at Ziklag (1 Sa. 27:6) or in his desert stronghold (1 Sa. 23:14). (Note again the 'chiastic' arrangement, Ziklag/stronghold/stronghold/Ziklag. See on 2:42–55.) First a group from Benjamin (12:1–7): David is to be acclaimed by 'all Israel', even Saul's tribe. These come from Saul's own clan and town. Perhaps their famous sharpness of eye (12:2; Jdg. 20:16) goes with a political and spiritual acuteness which leads them to back David when tribal loyalty would have ranged them with Saul. The closing comments on the Gadite group (12:8–15) could mean simply that they were '*over* a hundred/a thousand' (RSV), and that it was the flooding Jordan, not they, that drove out the valley-dwellers; but in both verses, 14 and 15, the NIV is more in keeping with the Chronicler's wish to stress the valour of David's supporters. The combined Benjamin/Judah group which joined him in that early period (12:16–18) for some reason raised his suspicion. Perhaps he had in mind Doeg's treachery (1 Sa. 21 – 22). Nothing could have been more reassuring than the inspired response as God's Spirit clothed himself with Amasai (12:18, as in Jdg. 6:34; 2 Ch. 24:20) and made plain once more that God's blessing is for his chosen king and for those who rally to him. From the end of Saul's reign (1 Sa. 29 – 31) comes the fourth group (12:19–22). These Manassites had shrewdly left their decision till Saul's doom was practically certain, but they were still welcome.

12:23–40 The gathering at Hebron. This is to anoint David king before he sets up his capital at Jerusalem (11:1–9). Individuals are named (27–28); tribal contingents are described in a variety of ways. For once the tally of tribes is not kept carefully to twelve (a geographical sweep from south to north then east includes Levi, both Joseph tribes, and both Manasseh territories, to give a grand total of fourteen – 'all Israel' indeed!). Not only the variety but also the unity of Israel is stressed (38), in strong contrast to its disunity in the days of the judges. God's people united under God's chosen ruler have great cause for joy (39–40).

13:1 – 14:17 David at Jerusalem

Saul's reign and David's reign at Hebron (mentioned briefly; 12:23, 38) are simply the preludes to the story of the kingdom proper. First the ark, the symbol of God's covenant of grace, must be installed in David's new capital (13:1–14); then God will speak 'from his sanctuary' (Ps. 60:6–8) to proclaim David's blessings at home (14:1–7) and his fame abroad (14:8–17). There is a backward look to the contrasting case of Saul, and a forward look to the twin themes to be developed throughout the

book, worship/temple/priesthood and government/throne/kingship.

13:1–14 Bringing back the ark. The greater part of this chapter (6–14) comes from 2 Sa. 6:2–11, while 2 Sa. 5:11–25 is left for the next chapter; the ark is of prime importance, as the introduction (1–4) shows. Its description (Ex. 25; 37) and its recent history (1 Sa. 4 – 7) are already known; the crucial thing here is that during Saul's reign Israel *did not enquire of it* (3 or 'of him'; the ark, or the God of the ark, 10:14), but that in contrast David and all Israel with him *will* do so.

'All Israel' is stressed further as v 5 rewrites 2 Sa. 6:1, noting also a north–south extent even wider than the usual 'from Beersheba to Dan' (21:2). The first assembly decides, and the second one acts, to bring the ark into the heart of the nation's life.

Uzzah's and Obed-Edom's experiences both illustrate the 'goodness' of the ark. It is a 'terrible good'; Uzzah had shared a house with it for twenty years (1 Sa. 7:2; 2 Sa. 6:3), so his overfamiliarity was understandable, but it was fatal. Where treated with proper respect, it brought positive good.

14:1–7 David established at Jerusalem. Having got the ark on its way to David's capital (the next chapter will pick up the rest of 2 Sa. 6), Chronicles now reverts to 2 Sa. 5:11–25, and stresses further a vital contrast. First, in these verses David is given a notable 'house' in Jerusalem, in more senses than one, whereas with Saul's death at the battle of Mount Gilboa 'all his house died together' (10:6).

14:8–17 David renowned abroad. The contrast continues with military victories and again ch. 10 is in view. Each king in turn confronts the Philistines; Saul loses, David wins; in the one case the pagan gods are honoured (10:10), in the other they are abased (14:12); Saul neither sought nor obeyed the Lord (10:13–14), while David did both (14:10–11, 14–16). Both God's answers to David were memorable. His 'outbreak' here was a matter for praise (14:11; contrast 13:11), and the mysterious sound in the treetops meant that the onslaught was his, and David simply had to fall in and follow (*cf.* Jdg. 5:4; Ps. 68:8).

15:1 – 17:27 The ark of the covenant

The ark represents the covenant of grace, *i.e.* God's initiative in making Israel his people for ever. How they respond to that grace in faith and worship is one of the Chronicler's chief themes. He has a great interest in the temple, certainly, but it is more than that: he returns repeatedly (1 Ch. 13; 15 – 17; 23 – 28; 2 Ch. 3 – 7; 29 – 31; 35) to the proper honouring and housing of the ark, who and what is involved in this, and the religious observances which will centre on it. Hence his treatment of 2 Sa. 6:11–12. Between those two verses – into the three-month gap, as it were – he inserts both the establishing of David's kingdom (ch. 14) and the planning of the religious festival with which the ark would be brought to its proper home (15:1–24). The liturgy which David appoints tells the same story (ch. 16), and the prophecy and prayer of ch. 17 again set forth the real relation between what God does for David and what David does for God.

15:1–15 Proper ceremony. The ark's journey to Jerusalem is now resumed, in a style no less joyful, but now more considered. The ark is to be carried, not carted, and that of course by Levites (2, amplifying 2 Sa. 6:13; indeed the whole of vs 1–24 is an addition to the earlier account). This is because David has again, in contrast to Saul, 'enquired', and has been answered not by some mystical experience but by the law of Moses (13, 15; Dt. 10:8). Reverence for the ark means not respectful feelings, but practical obedience to God's word.

Again representatives of *all Israel* are involved (3), with three further divisions of the tribe of Levi besides the normal three (4–10; Ex. 6:16, 18, 22). The 'consecration' required of the priests and other Levite leaders is no doubt that described in Ex. 19:10–15, but the important thing is not so much the rites in themselves as the attitude of heart and the relationship to God which they picture.

15:16 – 16:3 Proper praise. David's appointing of music for the festive journey looks back to his own special interest as 'Israel's singer of songs' (2 Sa. 23:1), and to the lists of leading musicians, one from each of the three great clans of Levi, already given in 6:31–47, and forward to the place that music would hold in the temple. It is not clear how many of the Levites in 15:17–18 were gatekeepers as well as musicians, though Obed-Edom seems to have been one of them; nor is it clear whether he is the Obed-Edom in whose house the ark had been staying (15:25; see on 26:4–8). But the group formed a well-organized choir and orchestra (15:19–24). (*Alamoth* and *sheminith* may mean high voices and low voices; the words figure in some of the headings to the Psalms.)

The Chronicler adds to 2 Sa. 6:13 a note of God's approval (15:26) because David had 'enquired' and obeyed, but reduces the quarrel between David and his wife (2 Sa. 6:20–23) to a mere note of her disapproval (15:29): the representative of Saul's house is still not in tune with the mind of God, as David is.

16:4–36 David's psalm of thanksgiving. The psalm which Asaph's group is to use in worship is especially apt, because it is to be

sung before the ark of God's covenant, to *the* LORD (4) (which is God's covenant name), the ark having now been brought into the centre of Israel's life. That is the setting (4–6, 37) and the theme of the psalm. It combines parts of Pss. 96, 105 and 106. The first part (Ps. 105:1–15) sets forth what it means to praise the Lord (8–13), and why, namely because of his covenant (14–18). It is a covenant of grace – *i.e.* in his undeserved love he has chosen and rescued his people when they could do nothing for themselves (19–22). The second part (Ps. 96) praises him as God over all the nations, and therefore over their gods (*cf.* 10:10; 14:12), and indeed over the whole earth (23–33). The final verses (Ps. 106:1, 47–48) call God's people as a whole to join the Levites' praise (34–36): they are a cry to God the Saviour, and the word for '*Save us*' is 'Hosanna' – to be taken up, significantly, by the crowds surrounding the last King of David's line as he rides in triumph to the temple (Mk. 11:9–10).

16:37–43 Ark and altar. Only Asaph's group stays at Jerusalem, while those of Heman and Jeduthun (probably another name for Ethan, 6:44) are sent to Gibeon.

17:1–27 A house for the ark? By and large, this chapter reproduces the earlier account. But the changes to 2 Sa. 7:11 and 14 are significant. Here, v 10 has *subdue* instead of 'give rest from', because, for the Chronicler, rest is characteristic of Solomon's reign rather than of David's, and because after the turmoils of David's time it will be Solomon's privilege to build the temple. In the same way, v 13 omits the possibility of Solomon's going wrong (though he would do so). In the Chronicler's view Solomon and David are to be seen as joint founders of the kingdom, the ideal figures of the golden age.

It is clear that David intends to build a house for the ark, and equally clear from the reply of Nathan, who is a man of God, that there is nothing wrong with such a desire in itself. But God's reply will teach David's 'faint desires to rise', and to stretch them by new understanding. A permanent house for the ark is something God has never asked for (4–6); indeed he designed the ark to be portable (Ex. 25:14). What God does for David takes precedence over anything David can do for God (7–10); noté the repeated 'I' in these verses. And in the days of David and Solomon he will set up a house and a kingdom (11–14) which, though theirs, will also be his, and therefore eternal, and therefore something greater than a political kingdom destined to perish four centuries later (another pointer, like 16:34–36, to the NT kingdom of Christ). The chapter thus develops from the 'ark' theme (1) into both the 'temple' and 'throne' themes (12).

David, going in *before the* LORD (16; presumably before the ark), responds with a model prayer. First (16–22) he praises the God whose plan of blessing for his people embraces both the past (especially the making of Israel at the time of the exodus) and the future. Then he asks (23–27) that God will do what he has said he will do (12), the true prayer of faith which rests on firm ground and is therefore assured of an answer.

18:1 – 20:8 Israel among the nations

These three chapters condense no fewer than fourteen chapters of the earlier history (2 Sa. 8 – 21). The Chronicler omits the stories of the surviving members of Saul's family (2 Sa. 9; see 1 Ch. 10:6), and of David's adultery (most of 2 Sa. 11 – 12) and the evils that followed it (most of 2 Sa. 13 – 21; see 1 Ch. 3:1–9). David's wars remain, and are highlighted. It may seem odd that the Chronicler should not want to portray a lustful David yet be happy to portray a bloodthirsty one. But David's military success is to be seen as a positive sign of blessing (18:6, 13). These wars were the necessary preparation for the time of 'rest' when the temple will be built.

The background to some incidents in David's conflict with the Ammonites and the Philistines has been omitted in Chronicles; *e.g.* Nahash (19:2) as an opponent of Saul in 1 Sa. 11, and Goliath (20:5) killed by David in 1 Sa. 17. Background which *has* been painted in is the success both at home and abroad, with neighbours both friendly and antagonistic. Against this the achievements of 18:1 – 20:8 are paraded.

18:1–13 Foreign affairs. The Philistines, David's enemies from ch. 14, begin and end the next three chapters (18:1, 20:4–8). Ch. 18 briefly mentions Israel's traditional opponents east of the Jordan, Moab and Edom (2, 12–13), but is mostly about the nations north of Israel, in the region of modern Syria and Lebanon. Nearly all are hostile, but one (Hamath, like Tyre in 14:1) is friendly. In either case David's reputation grows, and his successes prepare for the peace during which Solomon will build the temple. In the same way, both friend and foe contribute to the store of valuables which will be David's gifts for the Lord's house (7–11). David is in a sense 'disqualified' from building the temple because he is a man of war (22:8–9), but that is not a mark of God's disapproval. For example, Abishai can be commended in the Edomite campaign (contrast 2 Sa. 8:13) because the victory is clearly one given by the Lord to David (12–13).

18:14–17 Home affairs. A note of David's

'establishment' follows, as in 2 Sa. 8:15–18. The Chronicler's own background chapter mentions David's household in Jerusalem (14:1–7). The *Kerethites and Pelethites* were foreign soldiers from Crete and Philistia who formed David's bodyguard.

19:1 – 20:3 Ammonite campaigns. The Ammonites were another nation east of Jordan (see 18:2, 12–13). The only hint of an earlier friendship between David and Nahash (19:2) is the enmity between Nahash and Saul in 1 Sa. 11, even before David came on the scene. Ammonite opinion about David (19:3) shows that whether neighbouring nations cultivate him or oppose him, he is a force increasingly to be reckoned with. When war breaks out, Aramean armies related to those of 18:5 are drawn into the conflict. The brothers Joab and Abishai, David's nephews (2:13–17), were partners-in-arms in the leadership of his armies (which may hint how 18:12 is related to the heading of Ps. 60). The Aramean allies are disposed of in two campaigns (19:14–18; the figures of 2 Sa. 10:18 differ – see Introduction). The Ammonites themselves are finally defeated in 20:1–3, but nothing is said about David's adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband (2 Sa. 11:2 – 12:25); the Chronicler is concerned to present David's successes, not his sins.

20:4–8 Philistine campaigns. This section on 'Israel among the nations' comes full circle with a note of Philistine enemies once more *subjugated* (4; *cf.* 18:1). The Chronicler is careful not to say, even now, that David has yet been given 'rest' (see on 17:10, and 2 Sa. 7:11); for him that will be Solomon's privilege. *The brother of Goliath* (5): see on 2 Sa. 21:19.

21:1 – 22:19 The house of God

The Chronicler has taken ch. 21 almost entirely from 2 Samuel, but ch. 22 is his own. The account of the census which David ordered, and of the plague with which God punished him for doing so, is in 2 Sa. 24 simply part of the narrative, but for the Chronicler its importance lies in something which that chapter does not mention: the place where the spread of the plague stopped was to be the site of the proposed temple. *The house of the LORD God is to be here* (22:1) is the hinge of this section. To this verse ch. 21 moves, and from it ch. 22 directly follows. Practically everything is now ready for the building of the temple – the initial idea, the confirmation from God, the restored ark, the beginnings of a store of materials, and now the site – so ch. 22 introduces Solomon as its eventual builder. Construction will not start until David's warlike reign gives way to Solomon's peaceful one. The rest of 1 Ch. will be devoted mainly to detailed administrative plans (23:1 – 29:30).

21:1–17 Census and plague. For once the Chronicler records a sin of David's. The reason he departs from his normal practice of showing David as an ideal king is that this particular *evil in the sight of God* (7) leads (as noted above) to the fixing of a site for the temple. The inciting of David to commit this sin results in a punishment which according to 2 Sa. 24:1 is primarily due to some previous sin on the part of the nation. Having in mind perhaps the principle of Jas. 1:13, the Chronicler brings in unexpectedly the figure of Satan (1). He is the one who, as in Jb. 2:3, actually causes the trouble, although only by God's permission and within God's limits.

It is not clear why taking a census was wrong. The law allowed it, with certain provisos (Ex. 30:11–16); a census gave the book of Numbers its name, and the early chapters of 1 Chronicles itself contain similar lists. Perhaps as this one was a military list (5), David's motives were wrong. Chronicles often makes the point that Israel's real security lay in trust in its God, not in the size of its army (*e.g.* 2 Ch. 14:11; 16:8). Not David but Joab is here presented in a good light, though in the earlier history he is not a pleasant character (1 Ki. 2:5–6). He carries out the census under protest, and draws the line at Levi and Benjamin presumably because of Nu. 1:47–50 (perhaps both tribes were regarded as custodians of the tabernacle, which was in Benjaminite territory, 16:39). The resulting numbers differs from those in 2 Sa. 24:9; again, see Introduction.

An angel with a sword appears also to Balaam (Nu. 22:31) and to Joshua (Jos. 5:13–15), and there as here the place where he appears is reckoned holy. Here he is the plague-bearer (11). David, when he sees him, is apparently on his way northwards out of Jerusalem with a group of elders, perhaps going to Gibeon to offer sacrifices in penitence (see vs 29–30). The possible reading of v 17 in NEB makes this more poignant: 'and I am a shepherd' (instead of *and done wrong*).

21:18–21 The place where the plague stopped. Araunah (the Chronicler's version of the name is actually 'Ornan') is one of the original Canaanite inhabitants of Jerusalem (see 11:4–5), but obviously he recognizes the Lord's angel and the Lord's anointed king (21:20–21). Knowing that the honour of the Lord is enhanced, not diminished, by these events, David is quite happy to ask for the use of this pagan's threshing-floor for the site of altar and temple.

The price noted here (21:25) may be for the entire temple site, as against the much smaller price noted in 2 Sa. 24:24 perhaps for the altar site alone. The Lord confirms the rightness of all this by sending fire from heaven (21:26) just as the angel confirmed Gideon's call (Jdg.

6:20–24). A more significant parallel is the fire that falls on the altar when the tabernacle is first set up (Lv. 9:24) and when the temple is finally consecrated (2 Ch. 7:1). The Lord's 'answer' (21:26, 28) explains his plan for the blessing of his people. Here are to be both *the house, i.e.* the place of the ark, representing divine grace, *and also the altar,* representing human response (22:1). As with Job, out of Satan's evil intentions comes great good (Jb. 42:12).

22:2–5 Materials for the house. This section, and indeed the rest of 1 Chronicles, has no parallel in Samuel/Kings. Since Solomon comes on the scene here and David does not leave it till the end of the book, the next eight chapters bind together the two reigns as the double foundation of the 400 years of the monarchy. At the same time they are all about the temple, stressing again the Chronicler's twin themes of priesthood and kingship. For the temple David gathers exceptional amounts of material; in it will be found contributions from a variety of non-Israelite nations (see on 21:20–21); by it the fame of the Lord will be made known far and wide. All these aspects underline the importance of this building.

22:6–19 Instructions for the house. David speaks at some length to Solomon about the building of the temple, then briefly to *all the leaders of Israel* (17). Ch. 28, with almost exactly the same subject matter, will be a public address, with closing words to Solomon. This draws a revealing parallel with the transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua long before. The command '*Be strong and courageous*' is an exact repeat (13; Jos. 1:9) within two passages full of similarities. Moses had guided God's people through a period of turmoil and change, in which they became a nation; Joshua would lead them into the land of rest (Jos. 1:12–15). In the same way David has had to be a man of war (8; see 28:3 RV), but is not blamed for it, while Solomon will be a *man of peace* (9), merely a statement of fact (see on 18:13). In truth, NIV's *man of peace* is misleading. RV should be followed in v 9: he will be a 'man of rest', meaning rest from all his enemies, though following his accession God will also give Israel 'peace' (*šālôm*, like Solomon's name) and 'quietness' (a word used in Jos. 11:23, 14:15; Dt. 12:10 is another close parallel). The blood shed in David's wars may indeed have disqualified him ritually from too close an involvement with the temple (8b), but the point is that his work is *to provide for the temple* (14), not only building materials, but, following his victories, a time free from war; while Solomon's work is *to build the sanctuary* (19). The relation between the two reigns is summed up in David's address to *the leaders of Israel* in vs 17–19.

23:1 – 27:34 Organization for temple and kingdom

These chapters are daunting both at a casual reading, which sees only unhelpful name-lists like those in chs. 1 – 9, and at a careful one, which notices apparent discrepancies in them. They are in fact family lists of the tribe of Levi, with other information inserted, setting out the Levites' involvement in the services of the temple. Much of this section seems to be related to periods other than David's, some even to the Chronicler's own time. But it is all thought of as 'Davidic', just as all OT law centres on Moses and all OT wisdom on Solomon. As David prepared materials for the building of the temple, so Israel likewise was a people prepared for God's service.

23:1–6 The assembly of leaders. V 1 should be taken as a general heading to the rest of 1 Chronicles (not as the first of the two ceremonies implied by 29:22). These remaining seven chapters, bracketed between this verse and 29:28, bring David's reign to a splendid climax. The OT uses the formula *old and full of years* for great men who deserve honour, such as Abraham or Job. The Chronicler omits the sins and troubles of David the man because they would disfigure his official portrait of David the king. The impression that there were two assemblies as well as two 'coronations' may be correct; *gathered* (2) is less formal than the later 'summoned' (28:1).

The division of the tribe of Levi into *priests and* (other) *Levites* (2) is dealt with later in this chapter, while the fourfold division of the 'Levites' (4–5) is the basis of this and the next four chapters. The fact that the Levites' lower age limit is 30 here (3) and 20 elsewhere (24, 27) is one of the indications that this section (like much in the early chapters of the book) is a collage of pictures of Israel from various periods.

23:7 – 24:31 Sanctuary staff. Levite family lists (23:7–23; 24:20–31) frame two central sections, dealing with the duties of the Levites (23:24–32) and the divisions of the priests (24:1–19).

The three sons of Levi head the first lists of names (23:7–23); 23:6b is probably meant as a title for this section. The Gershonites of 23:7 may be a later generation than those of 6:17, and the dating of the people in 23:9a may be different again. Chronicles distinguishes the duties of the priests from those of the rest of the tribe of Levi (23:13).

The latter duties are detailed in 23:24–32. In some respects they change, of course, once the movable tabernacle is replaced by a permanent sanctuary (23:25–26), and they seem to relate to

the Levites generally (*i.e.* all the divisions noted in 23:4–5). *Twenty* (23:24, 27); see on 23:3.

The divisions of the priests (24:1–19) are yet another kind of classification within this tribe. Looking back, the death of Aaron's two eldest sons is noted (24:2), though not the shameful reason for it (Lv. 10:1–2). The curious phrase *officials of God* (24:5) may be another way of describing *officials of the sanctuary* (*and* meaning 'even', or 'that is'), or perhaps the two descriptions simply mean that these leaders were 'holy' and 'outstanding'. Looking forward, some of the twenty-four *heads of families* reappear in later times, *e.g.* Jehoiarib (24:7) in 1 Macc. 2:1, Hakkoz (24:10) in Ezr. 2:61 and Ne. 7:63, and most famously Abijah (24:10) in Lk. 1:5.

The final list of Levites, 24:20–31, corresponds to that of 23:12–23, but takes it one generation further. Again the Chronicler's picture of Israel is seen to be a many-layered one, pieced together from the records of many different periods.

25:1–31 Musicians. After the lists of sanctuary staff comes the second division of the Levites, that of the musicians. It is further divided in two ways, first according to the three families of Asaph, Jeduthun and Heman (1–6), and then according to the twenty-four 'courses' headed by their sons (7–31). Heman is called *the king's seer* here (5), and Asaph and Jeduthun are similarly styled elsewhere (2 Ch. 29:30; 35:15); there is clearly a connection between prophesying and music-making, though the word *supervision*, which like 'prophesying' is mentioned three times in vs 1–3, shows that in biblical times (*cf.* 1 Cor. 14:26–33) speech or song could be inspired without being ecstatic or uncontrolled.

The first five names of Heman's sons (4) are followed by nine others of unusual form, which sound in Hebrew like psalm-verses: *Hananiah, Hanani* = 'Be gracious to me, Lord, be gracious to me,' and so forth. Perhaps Heman named his sons after his favourite Psalms!

The courses of singers, like the courses of priests in 24:7–18, number twenty-four. A complete list in each case, like the sense of v 8 (*cf.* 24:31, 26:13) is characteristic of the Chronicler, and his conviction that in God's plan all his people are to be drawn together.

26:1–19 Gatekeepers. The basic framework for this set of lists is vs 1–3, 9–11 and 19. Of the three great families of the Levites (6:1) only the Kohathites (1, Korah being a Kohathite according to 6:22) and the Merarites (10) are represented here; the Asaph of v 1 is not the famous one of 25:1, who was a Gershonite (6:39–43), but the Ebiasaph of 9:19. Where we might have expected a list of Gershonite gatekeepers we find the family of Obed-Edom (4–8). This intriguing character is not given a Levite pedigree, but if all the references are to the same person, then he is a Levite in 15:18, which would qualify him for this list, as would the special blessing of v 5 and 13:14 (and see on 15:17–25).

Though Obed-Edom's generation might have been gatekeepers in David's time, long before the temple was built (15:17–18), his name figures also here (15) after it has been built, therefore at least as late as Solomon; while 9:17–32 (which has spelt out for us some of the gatekeepers' actual duties) lists some of the same names even after the temple's rebuilding four centuries later still. This is all part of the Chronicler's many-layered technique of putting together information from different ages to create an in-depth picture of the life and worship of God's people. One gatekeeper's reputation for wise counsel (14) and the mention of the *court* (?) where others were on duty (the meaning of 'parbar', v 18 RSV, is in fact unknown) suggest the realism and accuracy of the parts, however artfully the whole may be put together.

26:20 – 27:34 Officials. The four Levite divisions in 23:4–5 were listed in order of size. The order of the detailed lists has been different, working from the centre outwards, as it were – sanctuary staff, then musicians, then gatekeepers, and now finally various officials, some of whom have *duties away from the temple* (26:29), indeed throughout the land, and duties secular as well as religious (26:30, 32). The lists in ch. 27 go well beyond the tribe of Levi.

The section 26:20–32 deals with officials in charge of the *treasuries*, or storehouses (20; same word in 27:25). Some (26:21–22) seem to be curators of the 'articles of the sanctuary', as in 9:28–32; others (26:24–28) of such valuables as the spoils of war. The duties of others again are judicial (26:29) or fiscal (if religious and secular taxes are in view in 26:30, 32). Once more the picture is built up from various periods: the extensive lands described in 26:30–32 belong to early times; Levite involvement in administration figures only in later times (2 Ch. 19:8–11). As Israel's history can be grasped only when it is seen as a whole, so its character can be grasped only when we bring together all its significant people, even Saul (26:28).

The movement in 26:29–32 away from the religious and into the secular sphere brings us to something quite non-Levite, an army list (27:1–15). This too is Israel at its most complete. The commanders are the best examples of leadership history can provide, namely twelve of David's mighty men from 11:10–31, and the statistics are perhaps what their forces were ideally intended to be – twelve regiments each of twenty-four 'thousands', recalling the

twenty-four courses of priests and especially the twenty-four courses with twelve musicians in each (24:7–18; 25:6–31). So although Asahel had died even before David became king of all Israel, his name stands at the head of a regiment (27:7; 2 Sa. 2:18–23), whereas the army's organization is much more in Solomon's style.

The section 27:16–24 lists the officers presumably involved in the census of 27:23–24. Twelve 'tribes' are mentioned, if Manasseh is counted as one, though it is a very odd list, and we can only guess why Gad and Asher are omitted and Aaron added. The census is probably that of 21:1–8; the account there does not necessarily conflict, as some suggest, with this one.

The section 27:25–31 is another list of twelve, this time the royal stewards – the heads of the civil service. Again the Chronicler is happy to include non-Israelites who have been drawn into the service of the God of Israel (Obil and Jaziz, 27:30–31).

Finally David's inner cabinet (27:32–34) contains some we cannot identify, such as his 'uncle' Jonathan, and others familiar from elsewhere (18:14–17; 2 Sa. 15–17). The famous names and the masterly ordering which we find in these lists tell us again that we are being given an idealized picture of God's people. In particular chs. 23 – 27 display a 'David' type of organization for the temple of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Israel such as God's chosen king would have wanted to achieve, to hand it on to succeeding generations.

28:1 – 29:30 The succession

These two final chapters look back to ch. 23, where v 1 ('David ... made his son Solomon king') forms a heading for the whole long section (23:1 – 29:30) which ends the first book. A 'gathering' of Israelite leaders isn introduced at 23:2; 28:1 introduces a second, larger and more formal 'assembly' for what will be in effect Solomon's coronation (29:22–24). We are also looking back to ch. 22, for what is said here both to and about Solomon amplifies in a public and formal way what David had already said more personally there. Of particular interest is the fact that David, in so many ways Israel's ideal king, is about to step down, and God's people in every subsequent generation need to know how the Davidic ideals are to be kept alive when he is no longer there. His parting instructions to Solomon and to Israel are therefore far-reaching.

28:1–10 The Lord's directions. The formality of this public speech contrasts with what has gone before, but its content is very like that of the less formal conversations in ch. 22. It also recalls Moses' words in commissioning Joshua, 'in the presence of all Israel, "Be strong and courageous"' (Dt. 31:7; *cf.* here vs 8, 10, 20).

For all the Chronicler's interest in *a house ... for the ark* (2), God's gracious plan for his people (which the ark expresses) is even more important. According to *that plan* David is the man of war and Solomon the man of peace (3; 22:9). *God* has chosen this father and son out of all Israel to sit on his throne and build his temple (4–6). The promise of an everlasting kingdom is in one sense unconditional (17:12–14), but in another sense it depends on human obedience (7). A vital part of David's 'bequest' to his descendants is the principle set out in v 9 – '*If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you.*' This is a classic statement of Chronicles' 'doctrine of immediate retribution', which will reappear frequently in 2 Ch.

28:11–21 The temple plans. All that David has said in vs 1–10 has emphasized the initiative and action of God. Now this is to be translated into action by Solomon. It is related to what God gave Moses to do when the original tabernacle was in view – *plans* (11) is the same word as 'pattern' in Ex. 25:9, 40 – and it covers the people as well as the things that are involved in the service of God's house (13). God's plan for Moses is thus renewed for David (19) and so for Solomon (20–21). God expected Solomon's active collaboration, and Solomon did not find God's plan in any way irksome or restrictive. V 20 is even closer than vs 8 and 10 to the encouragements of Dt. 31:6–8 and Jos. 1:5–7, echoed also in Heb. 13:5–6.

29:1–9 The challenge to commitment. David has already put to his people the need for obedience to God (28:8); now he challenges them to be generous and wholehearted. He sets the example (2–5a) and they rise to the challenge (5b–9). The amount of wealth noted here is enormous (see Introduction), but it shows a generosity like that seen when the tabernacle was constructed (Ex. 35:20 – 36:7), like that demanded by the prophets of the days of the second temple, not long before the Chronicler's own time (Hg. 1:3–4; Mal. 3:8–10), and like that of the NT church when a new kind of 'temple' was being built (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 8–9; Acts 11:27–30). It is made real for the Chronicler's first readers by the use of the term *daric* (7), a coin known in their day but not in David's. The Chronicler, not the cold man some think him to be, notes here as elsewhere the joy, liberality and wholeheartedness which David's challenge evokes (9).

29:10–20 The great thanksgiving. Those living in the Chronicler's times may have had no hope of ever experiencing such a splendid occasion as this, but he wants to bring out

the underlying principle: this God is real in all ages (10, 18) and to him belong all things (11, 14). Naturally therefore *all this abundance* (16), everything that any generation sees when it counts its blessings, comes from God too. This truth arouses once more wholehearted joy and generosity (17, 19).

There are parts of this memorable prayer which God's people have made their own ever since. Even the solemn words of v 15 should, paradoxically, inspire confidence: the golden age of David has no more permanence than any other, and that age, like every age, finds its *hope* (its 'abiding', RSV) only in David's never-failing Lord.

29:21–30 Solomon made king. *The next day*, a day of both sacrificing and feasting (those who give to God receive from him!), is the occasion of Solomon's official accession. This was his second enthronement (22); readers are expected to know about the earlier one, hastily arranged to forestall his brother's seizing the crown (1 Ki. 1). Since the Chronicler assumes that the older history is well known, the different picture he paints of his two central characters is obviously quite intentional: the opposition Solomon had to quell before *all Israel obeyed him* (23), like the troubles David went through before *he died at a good old age* (28), are left out, because in Chronicles the two men represent jointly the ideal of kingship. Solomon's magnificence puts him on a par with his father's greatness, and behind both of them is God's eternal kingship (28:5; 29:11). The throne and the kingdom are unshakeable, because they are the Lord's (23).

1:1 – 9:31 Solomon

David was celebrated as the greatest of the kings of Israel, and his reign was its golden age. Chronicles stresses this (1 Ch. 10 – 29). So as the great king now disappears and is succeeded by his son Solomon, what follows is of special interest to all God's people who have not had the privilege of living under his rule.

Two things in particular we should look for in 2 Ch. 1 – 9. Where the two reigns resemble each other, we may see principles laid down by David which Solomon, and all others who care for God's people, must follow. Where they differ, this is not because of failings on Solomon's part (the Chronicler leaves out such things), but because David's achievement was actually incomplete. The son does what the father did not do, and becomes the other half, as it were, of God's ideal king. The golden age comprises both reigns together. Above all, this means the building of the temple, forbidden to David as a man of war but enjoined on Solomon as a man of peace.

1:1 – 2:18 Solomon established

God is at work through Solomon as he was through David (1:1). The two reigns combine to form a blueprint of how God governs his people. 'Man of rest', however, does not mean that Solomon's is a passive faith, which assumes God will do everything; on the contrary, these opening chapters show him as very active in his relations with God, with his people, and with neighbouring nations, and supremely in his enthusiasm for the temple project.

1:1–6 Solomon seeks the Lord. At once the Chronicler signals that his Solomon is to be seen as a model figure alongside David: all the unpleasantness which surrounded Solomon's establishing himself (1 Ki. 2) is omitted (1). *All Israel* (2) will rally to the new king as it did to the old (1 Ch. 11 – 12). Alongside the Solomon who will illustrate God's rule over his people is the Solomon who seeks the Lord (5), as any needy believer should. As with David, the ark representing divine grace and the altar representing human response are in two different places (1 Ch. 15:1–3; 16:37–40), and the Chronicler pointedly mentions only the altar-sacrifices which Solomon offered (contrast 1 Ki. 3:15). He also reminds us that the tabernacle and altar in question were those made by Bezalel in the time of Moses; Solomon will replace both (see 4:1–11a).

1:7–13 Solomon asks a blessing. With Solomon's vision the grace/faith pattern is plain. To God's offer Solomon makes a model response, a prayer which takes account of God's own nature (what he has done, what he has said he will do, and what only he can give, vs 8–10); of Solomon's own inadequacy, and of his people's need. God's answer (11–12) anticipates the words of Jesus in Mt. 6:33 that we should seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

1:14–17 Solomon prospers in the world. The note of Solomon's diplomatic and commercial relations with other countries comes near the end of his reign in Kings (1 Ki. 10:26–29); it has been brought forward here as one element in the establishing of his power, before he begins on his main work, the temple. It also establishes the character of his reign as one of 'rest', in which hostilities have given place to trade, and war to peace. These contrasts with David's reign help to set Solomon alongside his father as the two sides of the ideal kingship.

2:1–18 Solomon prepares to build the temple. The building of both a temple and a palace is in view, but by omitting the details of the second (1 Ki. 7:1–12) the Chronicler again focuses on the first. Chronicles also omits 1 Ki. 5:3–5, having already given the reasons David

could not build the temple (1 Ch. 17; 22:7–10; 28:2–3).

Between two notes of the labour force which Solomon mobilized are the two letters that passed between him and Hiram of Tyre. The work in which Hiram is being asked to help is something new, on the grandest scale; but what it is for is not new at all – namely, the ancient religion of Israel. The old observances are there (4; *cf.* Ex. 30:7–8; 40:23; Nu. 28 – 29), the same materials as before (7; *cf.* Ex. 35:35), and even a counterpart to the original supervisor-craftsman Oholiab (13–14, *cf.* Ex. 35:34). (Details, *e.g.* in vs 10, 14, 18, differ from the parallels in 1 Ki. 5:11, 13; 7:14; the Chronicler does from time to time seem to be using different sources. On the question of whether Solomon used Israelite forced labour, see on 1 Ki. 5:13–18.)

It is one more characteristic of the Chronicler's that he gives us Hiram's words in vs 11–12: like those of the queen of Sheba in 9:8, they show the outside world recognizing that the presence and blessing of God are in Israel when it is ruled by God's chosen king.

3:1 – 5:14 The making of the temple

According to Chronicles, it is by the temple (rather than by any of the other things that Kings says about him) that Solomon is to be remembered. As his doings generally are abbreviated here, so the making of the temple is reduced from the longer description of it in 1 Ki. 6 – 7, for the Chronicler, as so often, assumes that his readers know that. The aim of the whole project is to prepare a worthy setting in which God's glory and presence may be known among his people. It is as though this whole section is leading up to 5:13–14, and saying, 'When Solomon had done this, and this, and this, then the glory appeared.'

3:1–17 The building. The site (1) is full of meaning. There David had seen both the wrath and the mercy of God (1 Ch. 21:16). So had Abraham long before (Gn. 22:14 RSV, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided,' or (mg.) 'he will be seen'; Gn. 22:2 is the only other mention of Moriah in the Bible). There too, long afterwards, Simeon would hold the baby Jesus and say, 'My eyes have seen your salvation' (Lk. 2:30).

The brief account of the building in which God was going to show his glory (see the last verse of this section, 5:14) begins naturally with the entrance (4). This might just conceivably have been a tower, the height six times the breadth (so RSV), but more probably both figures should be *twenty*, as in NIV. The portico leads to the Holy Place, the *main hall* (5–7), and that in turn to the *Most Holy Place* (8) where the cherubim stand (10–13). The quantity and quality of the ornamentation are both stressed; *Parvaim* (6) is a place-name now unknown, but its gold was obviously highly regarded, like the *pure gold* and *fine gold* of vs 4 and 5; *six hundred talents* (8) is an enormous amount; the *fifty shekels* of v 9 may mean the amount of gold leaf used for gilding the heads of the nails (nails actually made of gold would not be very practical!) There was also a *curtain* between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle (Ex. 26:31–33); Solomon's structure clearly follows the same principles as that of Moses; however, it differs in detail. Finally, outside the building, the free-standing pillars Jakin and Boaz are mentioned (15–17).

4:1–11a The furniture. Here too the emphasis is on principles. As both tabernacle and temple have a curtain in the Holy Place, so both structures must be furnished with an altar (1). The old one was 5 cubits square and 3 high (Ex. 38:1–2); the new one is 20 cubits square and 10 high.

The altar is the first thing one would notice as one emerged from the building. Next would be the 'Sea' (2–5), standing slightly to one side (10); then the ten washbasins (6); then, as one turned back to look inside the Holy Place, the ten lampstands (7) and the ten tables (8). The tabernacle had only one of each of these, and the Chronicler elsewhere speaks in similar terms (2 Ch. 13:11); hence the Jewish tradition that the temple contained both the new ten and the original one of each.

4:11b–22 Summary of the work. This passage follows 1 Ki. 7:39–50 in detail. It includes items not mentioned earlier, notes the vast quantity of bronze as well as gold that was used (18), and draws attention to the cooperation between Solomon and Huram-Abi. Each is in a sense the maker of *all these things* (18), much as Moses and Bezalel were equally responsible for the making of the tabernacle (Ex. 33: 22–23).

5:1–14 All come to the temple. The achievement is Solomon's: only when he has completed the temple are David's contributions brought in (1). The initiative has been God's: the central feature of this place of worship is that the ark, the symbol of his grace, presence and covenant, will be there (2–10). The time of the temple's inauguration is, fittingly, the seventh month (3), *i.e.* the Feast of Tabernacles, when 'all is safely gathered in' and God is praised for his faithful provision. The old tent is now literally taken up into the new temple (5), showing that this is the new embodiment of the original principles. *They are still there today* (9) probably means only 'from then on' (the ark had in fact disappeared by the Chronicler's time),

but it aptly describes these spiritual principles. Heb. 8 – 9 shows their continuing NT significance.

Nearly all this section comes from 1 Ki. 8:1–11, though vs 11–13 have been added, tying in these ceremonies with David's when he brought the ark to Jerusalem in 1 Ch. 15 – 16. The word *all* appears repeatedly: in the ideal Israel, all will be drawn together around these principles (3), and among them God's glory will be seen, as when both temple (vs 11–13) and tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–35) were completed.

6:1 – 7:22 The dedication ceremony

These chapters, like ch. 5, follow 1 Ki. 8 – 9 closely. The events they describe interest the Chronicler even more than the temple as a building. Two-thirds of the account of those events is a record of prayer and the answer to prayer. From one point of view Solomon is following out principles which were laid down by David. God's people find blessing where they unite around the faithful ruler whom God has chosen (6:3; 1 Ch. 16:2). But he is also doing what David could not do, for where David fought to establish the kingdom, captured Jerusalem, and brought the ark there, Solomon's rule is centred on the continuing presence of the ark in its permanent home.

6:1–11 The dedication begins. Solomon's work has plainly been approved by God, since the divine glory has filled the temple (5:13–14); the note of this (1–2) leads into his opening statement (4–11), which in turn will lead into his long prayer (14–42). The darkness of the windowless Most Holy Place represents the fact that God cannot be seen (1; *cf.* Ex. 20:21). In the same way the ark, symbol of his presence in the temple (2, 11), shows that though he dwells in heaven he is always available on earth to those who pray (14–42 throughout).

Solomon has no other blessing to give his people than a proclaiming of the greatness of their God. This is a God who keeps his promises, particularly those to David (4). His choice of this city and this king is a covenant on a par with the one he made with Moses at the time of the exodus (5–6, a rare reference; often when the Chronicler might be expected to refer to the exodus he does not do so – that covenant has for him been swallowed up in this one, as the tabernacle has in the temple). God planned, and has carried out, the David/Solomon succession (7–10). And not surprisingly the ark is at the heart of this new age, as it was in Moses' time (11).

6:12–21 The prayer of approach. The beginning of Solomon's prayer is full of this incomparable God (14), repeats *to* him many of the things the last section has said *about* him, adds that he requires obedience (16), and makes plain how Solomon understands him to be dwelling *on earth with men* (18): in line with the picture of his hands and mouth (4, 15), we now have his eyes and ears always open to his people's prayers (19–21). This explains why the chief purpose of the temple is both the housing of the ark (God's covenant-promises of grace, 11) and the burning of incense (which stands for prayer; compare vs 18–21 with 2:6 RSV).

6:22–42 The prayer of intercession. This momentous prayer is offered by Solomon, with his God-given wisdom, for God's people as a whole, and covers a wide range of situations both actual and possible. Like nearly all of chs. 6 – 7 it is taken from 1 Kings, but is specially apt for later generations like the Chronicler's when the situations envisaged have come true. It is a prayer about prayer. Solomon is praying that Israel may be a people not passively receiving blessings, but itself actively praying for them. Temple and ark will remind every generation of its need for a personal 'practice of the presence of God'. Each must learn to *pray towards this place*, not necessarily physically, but always in heart and mind focusing on the meaning of it.

The seven situations listed may be defined as the administration of justice (22–23), defeat in war (24–25), drought (26–27), shortage from a variety of causes (28–31), the non-Israelite seeking God (32–33), a just 'crusade' (34–35), and sin leading to exile (36–39). Several are of course special to the geography and history of Israel, but all have equivalents for God's people in any culture, climate or age.

7:1–10 The answer of fire. Though the appearing of God's glory is mentioned at each end of Solomon's prayer, it does not mean that it appeared twice (in both vs 1 and 3 we could read something like 'the fire as well as the glory'), but v 3 does indicate that it was now above as well as in the temple, so that everyone could see it. It confirmed that Solomon's plans had been carried out as God meant them to be. But the fire was something more. What God was approving now was the first use of the temple as he had intended, *i.e.* for an encounter between himself and his people by way of Solomon's prayer. Hence there is a public sign for Israel to experience and remember, in contrast to the personal answer which God is about to give to Solomon (12–22). At other equally crucial encounters between God and Israel the fire fell: in the times of Moses (Lv. 9:24), David (on the same spot as on this occasion, 1 Ch. 21:26), and Elijah (1 Ki. 18:38). David and his son are again bracketed as equal partners in God's plan (10).

The 'festival in the seventh month' (5:3),

which was Tabernacles, was apparently preceded by this extra week of celebration for the dedication of the temple (9).

7:11–22 The answer of revelation. In contrast to God's fire, which was public but temporary, the vision – we might say, the interview – which he gave to Solomon was private, but has become enduring common property. It is an answer, concise but meaningful, to the whole of ch. 6. V 12 confirms what Solomon said about the temple in 6:1–11. Vs 13–14 accept the entire sevenfold prayer of 6:22–42 (and take for granted a people who are both called by God's name and possessed of a land; a passage not therefore to be applied thoughtlessly in our NT times). Vs 15–16 confirm that God's eyes, ears and name are indeed there in the temple (6:18–21, 40). Vs 17–18 confirm 6:14–17; the *you* is Solomon (singular), and while in Kings he did sin and his throne did in the end fall vacant, in the Chronicles sense he fulfilled God's will, and Israel has never lacked a ruler. But in vs 19–22, which pick up Solomon's seventh request (6:36–39), the *you* is plural and means Israel, and whether or not Solomon disobeyed God, Israel certainly did. What is more, the Chronicler and his readers have actually seen both the threatened loss of land and temple (20) and the prayed-for restoration (6:37–39). These closing verses are a summary also of the fundamental rule of cause and effect which is so much a part of the Chronicler's teaching: if you obey, you will prosper; if you disobey, you will suffer; if you repent, you will be forgiven.

8:1 – 9:31 Solomon's greatness

At most points this section follows 1 Ki. 9:10 – 10:29 closely. But the Chronicler ignores 1 Ki. 11, for the follies and hostilities of Solomon's later years would detract from the picture of an ideal reign. He did the same with David (see on 1 Ch. 29:21–30); again, father and son are two sides of the same coin. It is to be noted that neither stands as an individual, but that both are seen in solidarity with the people of Israel, who are blessed through them (*cf.* 7:10).

8:1–10 Solomon's power. Granted that 1 Ki. 9:10–14 (where these towns are given by Solomon to Hiram) was known, and the Chronicler was not here trying to make sense of a damaged version of Kings (as some suggest), the simplest explanation of vs 1–2 is that they describe Hiram giving the towns back. It is clear from that passage that he did not like them, and from this one that Solomon admitted they needed renovating.

The verses introduce a section which shows Solomon's power being used for the benefit of the nation. Vs 3–4, the only military campaign recorded for the 'man of peace', show frontiers being established in the far north (the developing of a port on the Red Sea, in the far south [vs 17–18], may be meant as a counterpart to this, and the extent of Solomon's domains has already been hinted at in 7:8). The places mentioned in vs 4–6 indicate a country well armed, defended and provided for. The use of the surviving Canaanites for forced labour shows up by contrast the freedom and independence of true-born Israelites (7–10). God's people are blessed under the rule of so powerful a King.

8:11–16 Solomon's worship. This section describes more fully than 1 Ki. 9:25 *all Solomon's work* for *the temple of the* LORD (16). That verse may answer to 2:1, and thus conclude the main part (nearly seven chapters long) of the story of Solomon the temple builder. His Egyptian queen is mentioned here because of the danger she would incur by being too close to the 'holiness' of the temple, for 'everything connected with the ark is holy' (rather than *the places the ark . . . has entered*, v 11); the perils of holy things were illustrated in David's time by the story of Uzzah (1 Ch. 13). Chronicles does not specify whether her peril would lie in being a Gentile, or a woman, or just (like Uzzah) someone unauthorized; it is making a point not about her but about the temple. Solomon, however, though not a priest, is authorized to do a great deal in respect of the temple (12–15). He defers to the command of Moses (13) and the ordinance of David (14), but the mention of these august names simply shows that his own commands (15) are to be ranked with theirs. All that he sets up is intended as a framework for his people's worship of their God.

8:17 – 9:12 Solomon's fame. Ezion Geber (8:17) certainly indicates the reach of Solomon's power (see on 8:3–4), but it is also one of the ports of entry for his great wealth (Ophir, like Parvaim in 3:6, is now unknown, but its gold was famous), and 8:17–18 also reminds us of Solomon's standing with surrounding nations such as Edom and Tyre. The visit of the queen of Sheba also may have had commercial motives, since Solomon's authority straddled the trade routes of many of these nations. But the stated reason for it was his *fame* (9:1), in particular the fame of his *achievements* and his *wisdom* (9:5). What is recorded about her visit is the splendid speech she makes in praise of Solomon – not for his own sake, but to exalt the Lord who has made him what he is, and to compliment the people for whose benefit (once more) he has been made so great (9:8). Again Hiram is mentioned, his servants being involved in the importing of valuables into Israel (algum is an unknown variety of wood, but it was obviously precious), but also no doubt to recall

that he had made a similar comment to the queen's at the beginning of this long section (2:11).

9:13–28 Solomon's riches. Gold represented the wealth of Solomon's kingdom. Once the temple was finished, and the royal throne-room and household sufficiently gold-plated (17–20), the surplus went into a display of ornamental shields for *the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon* (15–16). The Chronicler is not yet saying that this magnificence will last barely a generation (see 12:9–11), and he is not saying what the building in question was (see 1 Ki. 7:1–12); he is concerned merely to point out that the value of the display was colossal. The range of exotic imports brought by the Israelite-Tyrian merchant fleet (21) puts the finishing touches to this account of the great king's wealth, wisdom and power (22–28). Whether the fifth item is *baboons* (21) or 'peacocks' (AV), and whether 'ships of Tarshish' (21, RSV) actually went to Tarshish (Spain) or were simply long-distance traders, we do not know. Chronicles reminds us again, picking up 1:15, that Solomon's wealth enriches his people also (27).

9:29–31 Solomon's death. The final verses of the Solomon story are taken from 1 Ki. 11:41–43, and they do three things. They go straight to the end of that chapter, omitting the bulk of it (the tale of Solomon's moral downfall), and thus end his reign on a high note. They refer to other accounts, not only as a check on accuracy but as giving the extra authority that belongs to the writings of prophets. And they link Solomon yet again with his father, for David too was given this kind of epitaph (1 Ch. 29:29).

10:1 – 36:23 The kings

Solomon is scarcely cold in his grave before the glorious kingdom falls apart. It does so along the old tribal fault-lines: an east–west line above Jerusalem leaves to its south Judah and Benjamin, along with Simeon (long since absorbed in Judah), and also of course those of the tribe of Levi who happened to live there. But the split was popularly seen as David's tribe versus the rest, so the southern part became known as 'Judah', while the majority thought of itself as 'Israel' (10:16).

This leads to complications in the use of the name Israel in the rest of Chronicles. At its broadest, it is used in a good sense to mean the people of God, north as well as south. In a political sense it is the northern kingdom. Where that means the people, it is not necessarily bad, for true Israelites continue to be found there (11:13–17; 28:9–25; 30:11; 1 Ki. 19:18), and even Jeroboam, first king of the north, is doing God's will in rebelling against Rehoboam (10:15; 11:4). But it *is* bad when it means, as it normally does, that the system and its rulers are determined to remain independent of David's throne and Solomon's temple even when they are no longer justified in doing so (13:8–12), and still more when kings like Ahab and his family not only desert the David/Solomon ideal but introduce foreign gods (23:17; 1 Ki. 16:30–33).

However, the north is referred to by the Chronicler only when its history ties in with that of the south, for that is where David's line will continue for the next 300 years and twenty reigns. His object will be to show how the ideals of David and Solomon were either followed or ignored by their successors, and how blessing or punishment resulted accordingly.

10:1 – 12:16 Rehoboam

So great was the folly of Rehoboam at the start of his reign that the Lord says the north was right to rebel against him (10:15; 11:4). 1 Ki. 12:1–24 and 14:21–31 present only his bad points. The Chronicler adds material from another source which says that after the initial disaster came a time of successful rule, then a second disaster followed by repentance and restoration. Much intermarrying within the family of David (11:18–21) could not of itself make Rehoboam a David-like ruler, and Kings is right in implying that by and large his reign was not a success. But the Chronicler's more even-handed account, though coming in the end to the same conclusion (12:14), sets forth a pattern for the rest of the book: sin brings trouble; repentance leads to blessing.

10:1–19 The kingdom divided. Shechem had been a place of political and religious importance since ancient times, and was a suitable central site for a king-making assembly of 'all Israel' (1, RSV). The first of three factors which bring about Rehoboam's discomfiture (for all of which the reader is expected to know the background in 1 Ki. 11:26–40) is there in the person of Jeroboam son of Nebat, a name to conjure with (2). With him as their natural leader the tribes bring forward the second matter, taxation and forced labour (4). The latter was supposed not to affect trueborn Israelites (8:9), but it seems it did (18; 1 Ki. 5:13–14; 11:28).

Rehoboam consulted advisers both senior and junior, and the headstrong counsel of the latter carried the day. He was running counter to the biblical principle of respect for maturity (*cf. e.g.* Is. 3:4–5), though, to do him justice, since the *young men* were his contemporaries (8) they must have been in their forties (12:13). Seeing they would gain no concessions,

Jeroboam and the northern tribes revolted, and the third factor, the prophecy of Ahijah (1 Ki. 11:29–39), came back to mock Rehoboam. God had said this would happen, and so it did (15). The cry of revolt (16) is an ironic reversal of 1 Ch. 12:19. Rehoboam, not yet willing to accept it, sends (of all people) his labour minister to enforce the hated system, with dire results (18).

11:1–23 Rehoboam's obedience. One more try at reuniting Israel by force is forbidden by God, and to his credit Rehoboam withdraws (1–4). This obedience must be the reason for the blessing that follows: a programme of fortifications (5–12), an upsurge of religious life (13–17), and a flourishing royal family (18–23). The fortified towns (6–7) seem to form a line of defence not against the northern kingdom (though *there was continual warfare between Rehoboam and Jeroboam,* 12:15), but against invasion from the south (see on 12:1–4). Just enough is said about the alternative religion set up by Jeroboam (see 1 Ki. 12:25–33) to explain the general exodus of God-fearing Israelites from north to south. A calf representing the Lord (*cf.* Ex. 32:4) was bad enough, but a goat representing some local demon was too much (15). Rehoboam's family is not only large but by our standards inbred (18, 20); here, however, that is no doubt seen as a virtue, in view of Solomon's laxity in the matter (1 Ki. 11:1–8), and in v 23 *took many wives for* his sons is more likely than 'consulted the many gods of his wives' (JB).

The obedience and therefore the blessing lasted for all of three years (17) – not enough to affect the final verdict, *He did evil* (12:14).

12:1–16 Rehoboam's later years. It is not hard to see in v 1a a pride and self-confidence, the opposite of humility and trust, which led directly to the sin of 1b and in turn to the punishment of vs 2–4. Shishak, founder of the twenty-second dynasty, had reunited Egypt (ironic in view of what Rehoboam had done to Israel) and was now extending his power north-eastward, no doubt with the collusion of Jeroboam and the rulers of Edom and Aram (1 Ki. 11:14–40). The details of the invasion do not come from Kings (3–8); the Chronicler's source describes an army which is very large, even though *sixty thousand* (3) should probably read 'six thousand', and Shishak's own record of the campaign lists more than 150 towns captured. Jerusalem is not one of them, so the prophecy of v 7 was fulfilled and Shishak was bought off by the plunder from temple and palace (9).

The most far-reaching event of Rehoboam's reign was the division of the kingdom (ch. 10). Chronicles adds, first, facts about him that illustrate the principle that 'obedience leads to blessing' (ch. 11) and now facts that illustrate the principles that 'disobedience leads to punishment' and 'repentance leads to restoration'. Ch. 12 contains all the classic terms with which Chronicles regularly teaches these things, *unfaithful* (2), the tit-for-tat *abandon* of v 5 (see also v 1), *humbled* (6, 7, 12); and v 6b shows the meaning of true confession and repentance – '*The Lord is just*', or 'right', *i.e.* 'We are wrong.' The foundation for this teaching was laid in Solomon's prayer (6:24–25) and God's answer (7:14). The fact remains that for all the blessing of ch. 11 and the restoration of ch. 12 (due perhaps as much to the *good in Judah* [12; 11:13–17] as to the king's repentance), Rehoboam is remembered as the king who split the kingdom and who *did evil* (14).

13:1 – 14:1 Abijah

Chronicles gives three times more space to Abijah than Kings does; Kings dismisses him briefly as a bad king (1 Ki. 15:1–8). Certainly the queen mother's influence cannot have been good (15:16). He would have been quite undistinguished, except for the incident Chronicles relates.

War between north and south was a matter not so much of who should rule the whole nation, as of relatively small-scale land-grabbing, in which at this time Judah seems to have been the more successful (4a, 19). But Abijah looked like losing the battle described here; the point of the figures in v 3 is to show how much he was outnumbered (see Introduction). He took the opportunity for a remarkable speech which sets out some of the basic principles of Chronicles' theology.

First, it appeals to *all Israel* (4); Jeroboam, though addressed at the outset, is soon rudely demoted to the third person, as if he were not there (6, 8). The important thing is the allegiance of the people, and if their allegiance is to the Lord, they must recognize that he has delegated his rule to the family of David, by *a covenant of salt* (5; presumably meaning 'eternal' – see Nu. 18:19). In the previous reign this went wrong, through rebellion on one side and folly on the other. (Whether the *scoundrels* of v 7 gathered around Rehoboam and 'persuaded' him, or gathered around Jeroboam and 'opposed' Rehoboam, Abijah's point remains the same.) In the circumstances the revolt was part of God's plan. But now things are back to normal: there is a true king on David's throne, true worship in Solomon's temple, and no excuse for any substitutes (8–12).

On this occasion Judah has not only the right theology but the right attitude (14b, 18), so the Chronicler omits the conclusion in Kings (1 Ki. 15:3) and ends with positive points indicating God's blessing (19–21).

14:2 – 16:14 Asa

As with Abijah, the Chronicler's account of Asa is three times as long as the one in Kings (1 Ki. 15:9–24). It also has complications which puzzle the modern reader. These are largely to do with dates, though they also have implications for theology. For convenience, the tables that follow are dated from the division of the kingdom.

The account as it stands seems to give these dates:

Year 20 Asa's accession (12:13; 13:2)
Year 30 Ten years of peace end (14:1)
Year ?? Zerah's invasion (14:9)
Year 35 Covenant ceremony (15:10)
Year 55 War begins (15:19)
Year 56 Baasha's attack (16:1)
Year 59 Asa's illness (16:12)
Year 61 Asa's death (16:13)

The problem with this is that according to 1 Ki. 16:6 and 8, Baasha died in Year 46. So an alternative outline assumes that the years mentioned in 15:19 and 16:1 are years not of Asa's reign but of the divided kingdom:

Year 20 Asa's accession (12:13; 13:2)
Year 30 Ten years of peace end (14:1)
Year 35 War begins, = Zerah's invasion (14:9 = 15:19); covenant ceremony (15:10)
Year 36 Baasha's attack (16:1)
Year 59 Asa's illness (16:12)
Year 61 Asa's death (16:13)

This fits together very well, but has problems of its own: of the kind of dating used here (years of the divided kingdom), 15:19 and 16:1 would be the only examples moreover they do plainly state that these are years not of the kingdom but of Asa's reign. The question remains unresolved. Other related matters will be touched on below (see on 15:11, 19; 16:12, and 'Note on chronology' under 16:1–14).

14:2–15 The heart of the king. After the note from 1 Ki. 15:11 that *Asa did what was ... right* (2), the Chronicler will be spelling out that righteousness in 14:3 – 15:15 with material taken from a different source. Matters religious (2–5) and military (6–8) show both Asa's obedience and God's blessing, and twice the classic word *rest* is used (6, 7; see on 1 Ch. 22:9). So too is the Chronicler's favourite word *seek* (4; *cf.* v 7), and the Lord who is sought is spoken of as Asa's personal God, Israel's historic God, and the nation's corporate God (2, 4, 7).

The army he has mobilized is put to the test when Judah is invaded by a larger one. The numbers seem immense (but see Introduction); God's people are outnumbered and have to trust in him. The enemy has not been identified – a variety of suggestions include that of an Egyptian army (*cf.* 16:8) led by a Nubian general. The memorable words of v 11 show how in a supreme crisis, as at every other time, the king's heart is set on the Lord, and it is very clearly the Lord who wins the victory (12–14).

15:1–19 The word of the Lord. Most of this chapter (15:1–15) again comes from a source other than Kings. On the face of it, Azariah's prophecy follows Asa's victory; it seems to lead to renewed reform, over and above that of 14:3–5, and the renewal ceremony includes *plunder* (11). On the other hand, vs 1–15 could be meant as a spelling out of what had been involved in the general movement of 14:2–7.

Azariah's message is first a statement in the plainest terms of Chronicles' so-called 'retribution' teaching (2). Although it is called a *prophecy* (8), the verbs in the main part of it (3–6) could be either future or past, and are usually taken as a look back to the book of Judges, which not only fits the descriptions but majors on the 'retribution' theme: then (4) as now (2) it was a matter of seeking and being found. It is noteworthy that the God who speaks through Azariah is clearly the God of the king, of his people, and of their fathers (see 14:2–7). The resulting covenant ceremony in Asa's fifteenth year (10) is all-embracing (notice the words *all* and *whole* in vs 8–15), and again a matter of seeking the Lord (12, 13, 15).

The closing verses, where the Chronicler takes up Kings again (1 Ki. 15:13–15), raise two questions. V 17 may seem to contradict 14:3; however, 14:2–8 is all about Judah, whereas *Israel* in this verse may well mean northern territory Asa later gained (*cf.* v 8). V 19 seems to contradict 1 Ki. 15:16 and 32, but those verses refer without doubt to the continuous 'cold war' between Asa and Baasha, which did not flare into open conflict until the attack of 16:1. (The word *more* should be omitted from 15:19. This of course favours the second of the alternative timescales suggested above for Asa's reign.)

16:1–14 The voice of the world. Baasha's attack (1) is a test for Asa, and one he will fail. The northern kingdom and its own northern neighbour Aram are hostile to each other through much of this period; a deal between Judah and Aram is politically astute, Asa can pay for it (though where from?), he has a precedent for it, and it works (2–6). The world around would say that this was the obvious thing to do. But it is the beginning of his failure to *seek ... the* LORD (12). From what follows (7–10), note the coming of yet another prophet; the lesson that Asa's wisdom seemed to produce a good result, but trust in God would have produced a better; the repetition of that simple

lesson of trust, so basic to biblical teaching, and the appeal to past facts to confirm it; the assurance of retribution; and for the first time such rebelliousness that God's king actually persecutes God's prophet. This is of a piece with the stubbornness of v 12b.

Note on chronology. If 16:1 means what it says (Asa's Year 36; timescale 1 above), his illness (Year 39; v 12) is a relatively speedy retribution. But this does not explain the problems raised by that timescale, nor what happened in Year 35 (15:19), nor why Hanani predicted war, not illness, as Asa's punishment (16:9). If on the other hand 16:1 means *the kingdom's* Year 36 (timescale 2), these questions are answered; this timescale's problems do remain, but it may show that cause leads to effect less quickly and less obviously than is sometimes supposed.

17:1 – 21:1 Jehoshaphat

The account of Jehoshaphat's reign is in some ways very like that of his father's, but it does not have the downbeat ending of prolonged rebellion, or the chronological framework (however confusing) that Asa's is given. It is also much fuller, and presents two striking features. The first forty verses of 1 Ki. 22 tell the story of Jehoshaphat's alliance with Ahab (2 Ch. 18), and ten more verses giving general notes about his reign complete the Kings account; the Chronicles version runs to twice the length, showing his importance. What is more, neither of the main incidents which Chronicles takes from Kings, the long and the short (1 Ki. 22:1–40, 48–49), shows Jehoshaphat in a good light, and the Chronicler even adds to both the disapproving comments of the prophets, yet on balance he sees him as a great and good king, even a second Solomon.

17:1–19 Jehoshaphat's greatness. After half a verse of introduction from 1 Ki. 15:24, the Chronicler depicts the goodness and greatness of Jehoshaphat. The two are typically interwoven: strength and prosperity, as always, are seen as a blessing, which results from a faithful seeking of God (2–6); v 3 should probably read 'he walked in the earlier ways of his father', *i.e.* Asa (RSV). (The *third year*, v 7, was when Asa died, and after the joint reign of father and son Jehoshaphat began to rule alone; see 'Note on chronology' below.) Thus the religious teaching programme (7–9) extends to his people his own love for God and his law (4), his riches and honour are famous among the nations (10–11) as well as within Judah (5), and army lists (12–19) fill out the military notes of v 1–2. A similar development may be seen in Jehoshaphat himself. He clearly fostered his own personal faith in God, and it was a 'faith that works' (see Jas. 2:22), an active, not a quietist, religion: he *sought . . . God . . . and followed his commands* (4), and did so in such a way that his people were blessed by his rule.

Note on chronology. Jehoshaphat's reign here (17:7; 20:31) is dated from Asa's illness and the 'co-regency' beginning in 873/872 BC; the shorter reign implied by 2 Ki. 3:1; 8:16 is dated from Asa's death in 870/869 BC.

18:1 – 19:3 The campaign against Ramoth Gilead. This follows the storyline in 1 Ki. 22, but the mentions of Jehoshaphat's greatness (18:1) and of the feast given in his honour (18:2) are only the first of a number of small changes which make the southern king rather than the northern one the central figure; this account ends with events and a prophecy relating not to Ahab (as in 1 Ki. 22:36–39) but to Jehoshaphat (19:1–3).

18:1a looks back over ch. 17, a very positive introduction; 18:1b looks forward to its very unsatisfactory sequel. The marriage alliance, from which endless trouble would come, was between Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram and Ahab's daughter Athaliah. The military alliance (18:3) was equally ill-advised. By the end of the story it will transpire that Aram is the enemy into whose hands the town of Ramoth Gilead has fallen (18:30), so we realize that the Chronicler sees the pattern of Asa repeated in his son: a good beginning, a foolish sequel, and a prophet who says in the first case, 'You should not have joined Aram against Israel' (*cf.* 16:1–9, Hanani), and in the second case, 'You should not have joined Israel against Aram' (*cf.* 19:1–3, Hanani's son Jehu).

But Jehoshaphat is more than merely Asa writ large. His personal character is hinted at by Micaiah's prophetic words in v 16. He has a shepherd's concern for *all Israel*, and believes that the way to exercise it is, literally, to go along with Ahab (18:3) and assume that the differences between them do not matter. The prophecy of Zedekiah says this is correct, though in the event he is proved wrong (18:10, 34); that of Micaiah says it will not work, and reveals something much more ominous going on behind the scenes (18:16–22); that of Jehu tells Jehoshaphat that his big heart needs to be more discerning and ruthless (19:2 *cf.* Mt. 10:16).

There are two other points in 19:1–3 about these prophecies. Concerning Micaiah's, Jehoshaphat did indeed *go home in peace* (the words here, *returned safely to his palace*, are the same as in 18:16). Concerning Jehu's, we have to ask when and how the Lord's wrath actually came.

19:4–11 Jehoshaphat's legal reforms. These verses seem of a piece with ch. 17. Neither passage comes from Kings, and both concern Jehoshaphat's achievements as a great

and good king like Solomon; this one concerns the exercise of wisdom in government. Why are the two separated? Perhaps this project is an attempt to avert the wrath threatened in 19:2; perhaps it is meant as a further parallel to the account of Asa, where also a second reforming enterprise apparently followed a prophetic message (15:8–15).

Vs 6–10 here are generally in line with the provisions of Dt. 16:18 – 17:13. Jehoshaphat's personal interest in the matter recalls Samuel's, in 1 Sa. 7:15–17; and his own character as a man deeply concerned for the welfare of his people also shines through.

20:1–30 Judah invaded. This account is found in Chronicles only; there are similarities, but also important differences, between it and the events of 2 Ki. 3. The invasion described here can hardly be the 'wrath of the LORD' announced in 19:2, but it seems to have been allowed by God as an opportunity to prove his salvation rather than to have been sent by him as a punishment.

There is some confusion over who the invaders were and where they came from, but there was at all events a *vast army* (2) approaching from the direction of the Dead Sea. Significantly, the first thing noted about our hero (for that is what he is) is that Jehoshaphat was *alarmed* (3). The story has already shown how difficult he found it to be tough; perhaps it was because he lacked that kind of strength that he is clearly not much of a hero to the writer of Kings. But his fear leads him to 'seek the LORD', and moreover to find that the entire nation rallies round him to *seek the LORD* also (3–4, RSV) – no doubt the result of his diligent pastoral care for his people as evidenced in chs. 17 and 19.

In front of the assembly he prays a prayer rooted in the facts of the past, referring to Solomon (9; 6:28, 34), David (6; 1 Ch. 29:11–12), Joshua (7a) and Abraham (7b), and applies them to the facts of the present (10–11). At the climax of the prayer Jehoshaphat's weakness comes into its own as the indispensable way of blessing (12). Equally memorable is the inspired answer from the mouth of the Levite Jahaziel – another reference back, in this case to Dt. 20:2–4: 'Stand still, and see the victory of the LORD on your behalf' (17, RSV). The events of the next morning show on Jehoshaphat's part the same 'faith that works' which characterized Asa in similar circumstances ('We rest on thee, and in thy name we go', 14:11 AV), and on the Lord's part a victory bringing great glory to his own name (20–26).

20:31 – 21:1 The end of Jehoshaphat's reign. With 20:31 Chronicles again converges with Kings (1 Ki. 22:41–50), though there are some differences. Four points in this section raise queries. V 31 seems to differ from 2 Ki. 3:1 and 8:16; but see 'Note on chronology' following 17:1–19. V 33 differs from 17:6, though writer and readers at the time saw nothing odd in this; Jehoshaphat was a remover of 'high places', though 25 years later particular examples were evading his eye. The *book of the kings of Israel* (34) is probably not the 'Kings' of our Bibles. Vs 35–37 reads differently from 1 Ki. 22:48–49, but may be simply the first half of the story – yet another foolish alliance with the northern kingdom, so that the triumph of trust in 20:1–30 is followed by a reminder of Jehoshaphat's continuing weakness. Kings takes up the story at the point where the ships are wrecked, and shows a king who had at last learnt his lesson and would make no further agreements with the house of Ahab. Enough damage had been done already, as ch. 21 will go on to show.

21:2–20 Jehoram

The Chronicles account is twice as long as that of Kings (2 Ki. 8:16–24), underlining the badness of a bad king. The contrast with what has gone before is well made in vs 2–4; the large and prosperous family given to good king Jehoshaphat as a sign of God's blessing is the first casualty of his son's wicked reign (4; Jdg. 9:1–6 is a precedent, but not a justification). The throne Jehoram had inherited was 'Israelite' in the good sense (2, 4), but became 'Israelite' in the bad sense (6; see Introduction and introduction to 10:1 – 36:23). Whence this change? Crucial was his marriage with the *daughter of Ahab*, Athaliah; with it went much intercourse between the two royal houses (note how the same royal names became confusingly fashionable in both kingdoms), and in particular the adoption in the south of the pagan religion that had already infected the north. Rather than imitate his father's goodness (12), Jehoram chose to exploit his weakness, for it was Jehoshaphat who had unwisely fostered all these alliances.

Despite Jehoram's faithlessness, the Lord's covenant prevents his destroying David's descendants as they deserve (7). But there is still recompense for sin, and it is the Lord who brings it. The letter from Elijah (11–19) is not found in Kings and is surprising. Elijah was not a 'writing prophet', nor did he prophesy in the south. Yet the letter does address a very 'northern' situation in the southern kingdom. Plainly about retribution ('You have sinned, so you will suffer'), it is flanked by instances of it: vs 8–11 and 16–17 describe the disasters that resulted from Jehoram's own sin and his leading

others astray. All that he might have wanted – power, family, health, respect, the very things that mark God's blessing on the obedient – he lost. He received neither honour nor mourning after his death, and the Chronicler assumes that no-one will want any more information about him (contrast 16:11 and 20:34).

22:1–9 Ahaziah

This time the Chronicler has greatly abridged 2 Ki. 8:25 – 9:29. The NIV clarifies points which may be misleading in other translations, by giving *Ahaziah* in 21:17, and *twenty-two* and *granddaughter* here in v 2.

This story of a second successive 'bad king' highlights what was so damaging to Judah at this period, the influence of the north (3–4), in particular the influence of Athaliah. Her position first as queen and then as queen mother, allied to her own forceful personality, gave her enormous power. And in spite of the parallel between the enterprise of v 5 and the one in which his grandfather had nearly lost his life (ch. 18), Ahaziah like Jehoram is to be seen as a contrast to Jehoshaphat (9; *cf.* 21:12). Perhaps the most striking event in both reigns is the *downfall* (7) of Ahaziah. Nemesis overtakes him in the form of Jehu, who according to Kings wipes him out together with his retinue as a bloodthirsty encore to his main project, the cleaning up of the north. But from the southern point of view, Jehu's dealing with the house of Ahaziah is as significant as his dealing with the house of Ahab: the sort of massacre for which Jehoram had been responsible in 21:4, and which his family had suffered in 21:16–17, is now happening again. That plus Ahaziah's own death means that there is no son of David capable of ruling (9), and God's eternal covenant with David (21:7) is within an ace of failing. But as Jehoram's story shows the Lord in control throughout such events, so here in Ahaziah's they are 'ordained by God' (7 RSV). In fact for *downfall* we should perhaps read a 'turn of events' brought about by God, as in 10:15 (and *cf.* 1 Ch. 10:14).

Vs 8–9 differ from the Kings parallel. To some extent the two can be harmonized: Ahaziah's death may have happened before those of his family and entourage, as 2 Ki. 9 – 10 says (v 9 here should not have the word *then*), and readers may be assumed to know that his burial took place in Jerusalem (2 Ki. 9:28).

22:10 – 23:31 Athaliah

This section begins with the death of Ahaziah and ends with the death of his mother Athaliah. But her 'reign' is an anomaly. It is neither introduced nor concluded with the usual forms of words. So far from belonging to the house of David, she does not even belong to the kingdom of Judah. Unknown to her, while she occupies the throne a child in the temple is already the true king (23:3, 7, 10). Her six years' rule is dismissed in half a sentence, while an entire chapter is given to the day of her death.

Judah's decline through the reigns of her husband and son now reaches its lowest point. The same thing is happening as in the time of Saul, two centuries earlier, and it is a perennial danger; God's people selling out to the values of their pagan neighbours, till only the house of David can rescue them. For the fourth time all but one of the royal family are slaughtered (22:10–11; *cf.* 21:4, 16–17; 22:8), but this wickedness also means that in God's plan the last and unlikeliest person will turn out to be his chosen one, as with David (1 Ch. 2:15). The parallel with Lk. 1 also should not be missed.

Ch. 23 is largely drawn from 2 Ki. 11, but the Chronicler has points of his own to make. Jehoiada's coup is more far-reaching than one might have thought. He gathers round him influential leaders (23:1), calls an assembly from all Judah (23:2), claims the Lord's authority for what he is doing (23:3), and presents Joash as king already (23:11) – all a heightening of the Kings version. What has been abandoned by three rulers in succession, but preserved in secret (like Joash himself) by God and his faithful people, is now brought out again: *a covenant* is made three times over (23:1, 3, 16), to reaffirm that basic relationship with the Lord. Popular support for the coup (23:12) spells the end for Athaliah, and the foreign ways of thought she brought with her are rejected in favour of a return to the principles of David and of Moses before him (23:16–18). So both throne and temple are again what they should be, and the revolution brings (to use the classic words) joy and quiet (23:18–21). But humanly speaking it has been a near thing.

24:1–27 Joash

With the accession of Joash we see once more 'the kingdom of the LORD in the hand of the sons of David' (13:8, RSV), having under the last three rulers been effectively in the hand of the daughter of Ahab. Joash's is the first of three reigns all of which begin well, though not until the third of them, that of Uzziah, do we again see anything like greatness.

24:1–16 A good beginning. The first half of Joash's reign is summed up in the opening verses, for a family (3) is, as often in Chronicles, God's reward for obedience (2). In this case it is something else besides: the royal family, four times threatened with extinction, begins to be established again.

Joash's successful temple project is at once

his service for God and his reward from God. The background to this section is 2 Ki. 12. Leaving aside for the moment the curious passage in vs 5b–7, the restoration work is described straightforwardly and in some detail. Three verses call for comment: the tax (9) is that of Ex. 30:11–16 and 38:25–26; the note of joy (10) confirms that this work is of the same kind as that on the tabernacle in Moses' day (Ex. 36:4–7) and that on the temple in David's and Solomon's (1 Ch. 29:1–9), as well as repeating the public reaction to Joash's accession (23:1); the utensils (14) were made only after the building was finished – until then all money had been devoted to that main work (2 Ki. 12:13).

In vs 5b–7, the reason for the Levites' reluctance to collect the tax may have been that since Joash had taken the initiative they expected him to prime the pump with royal generosity, as David had done. The temple could not be looked to for funds, thanks to the depredations of Athaliah and her *sons* (7; *i.e.* associates; see 22:10). Apparently a compromise was reached: the 'collection' (5) became an 'offertory' (8–9). With the idea of 'seeking the Lord' so central to Chronicles' theology, it is perhaps to Joash's credit that he expected a 'seeking' spirit in Jehoiada (*required*, v 6).

24:17–27 A bad ending. Again Chronicles is based on 2 Ki. 12. It is also tracing a repeated pattern in Israel's history; Athaliah, then the Joash of 24:1–16, then the Joash of 24:17–27, lead Israel through the same ups and downs as Saul, then David and Solomon, then Rehoboam.

The loss of Jehoiada's influence marks the change in Joash (17, *cf.* v 2). The *officials of Judah*, presumably the old Athaliah party (7), re-emerge and lead king and people astray (17–18). Jehoiada's son is inspired to bring as plain a message as any prophet's, in a cluster of words characteristic of the Chronicler. The most obvious is *abandoned/forsaken/left* (one word in the original): v 18 leads to v 20, then to v 24, then to v 25, all with 'tit-for-tat' connections. Similarly, Joash having 'conspired' against Zechariah (21, RSV) and killed him (22) himself falls victim to a conspiracy and is killed (25). Even the 'seeking' which Joash had enjoined on Zechariah's father (see on 6) comes home to roost: 'seek you out' is the phrase translated *call you to account* in v 22. But the Lord's vengeance is not inevitable; retribution is more complex than that; it is to remind Israel of the possibility of repentance that the prophets are sent (19).

25:1–28 Amaziah

Like his father's, Amaziah's is a 'good start/bad end' story. It has a helpful variation: while Joash needed a strong guide, Amaziah had God's plain words through a prophet. It is found in 2 Ki. 14, but Chronicles' version (15–16) is much fuller.

25:1–13 A good beginning. *Not wholeheartedly* could mean Amaziah's doing right at first and wrong later; but more probably, as hinted in vs 6 and 9, his trust in God was not very secure even from the outset. He was certainly careful to keep within the law in v 4 (Dt. 24:16), but that would have ironic echoes (see below on v 13).

2 Ki. 14:7 is a springboard for the detailed account here of Amaziah's war against Edom. Reckoning that his army is not large enough (*cf.* 14:8 mg.; 17:14–18), he hires mercenaries from the north, and is rebuked for doing so by the first of this chapter's two prophets. Abijah (13:8–12) and Asa (14:11) could have told him why. His complaint that he would be out of pocket if he did the right thing is perhaps a sign of his half-hearted faith, but at any rate he did it. The result is instructive. Generally the Chronicler's examples of cause and effect are simple and swift, and so here obedience results in victory (11–12). But often life is not so simple, and Amaziah's obedience also leads to the mercenaries, balked of the loot from Edom which would have been their main incentive for signing on, taking it out on Judah instead (10, 13). However, such apparently undeserved trouble (see on v 4), a Job-like exception to the simple answer Amaziah was no doubt expecting (7–9), may have made him more cynical about listening to the next prophet.

25:14–28 A bad ending. The rebuke of the second prophet is for the importing of foreign gods (15). It seems to blame Amaziah for being not only sinful but unreasonable (why adopt gods who have just let their own nation down?), but perhaps his victory showed that they had changed sides. He turns from unwelcome to congenial advice (16–17; *cf.* Rehoboam, 10:8, and Ahab, 18:7), and embarks on a second war, this time against Israel. This has a combination of causes: Amaziah's desire to avenge the damage done by the dismissed Israelite mercenaries (13), his over-confidence after his victory in the previous war (19; this is how Jehoash of Israel sees it), and punishment from God for his 'seeking' of *the gods of Edom* (20; *cf.* vs 15–16). In consequence Amaziah suffers invasion, defeat, capture, and destruction and pillage in Jerusalem (21–24).

The curious and unique note in v 25 (dates in the south related to those in the north) reflects a unique situation. Amaziah was held hostage in Samaria for the next ten years, and only then, *after the death of Jehoash*, did he return to Jerusalem for the remaining fifteen years of his

reign. Meanwhile the people of Judah, faced with the unprecedented problem of both having and not having a king, made his son Uzziah regent; see on 26:1. Those who conspired to murder him were repeating the doom of his father Joash (24:25), and also showing how retribution is not always immediate – in this case the conspiracy seems to have been brewing for at least twenty-five years (27).

26:1–23 Uzziah

Uzziah's name in Kings is Azariah, which means 'Lord/help'; the name here, 'Lord/strength', is especially apt for the Chronicler's version of the story, which, though it has much about help, has even more about strength (*cf.* v 8). Regent at sixteen when his father was taken captive, co-regent after he returned ten years later, and sole king at last when Amaziah was killed fifteen years after that, he then began the remaining twenty-seven years of his long reign with the capture and restoration of Elath (1–2). This event, and his being stricken with leprosy towards the end of his life (21), signs of God's approval and disapproval respectively, are practically all that Kings has to say about Uzziah (2 Ki. 14:21–22; 15:1–7). This points to his being another 'good start/bad end' reign, like the previous two, and a further echo of Joash's is the influence of Zechariah (like that of Jehoiada, *cf.* v 5 with 24:2) in the good first half. Yet Uzziah was a greater king than either Joash or Amaziah. History tells us that he and his northern contemporary Jeroboam II, profiting from a decline in the fortunes of the super-power Assyria, gave to both kingdoms real prosperity and power. Scripture tells us that the vision of the Lord seated on the throne, given to Isaiah 'in the year that king Uzziah died' (Is. 6:1), marked the end of his fifty-two-year reign as the end of a significant era.

26:1–15 A good beginning. The building of Elath was a sign both of God's blessing and of the qualities in Uzziah which brought blessing. It meant that both the territory and the trade of the kingdom now reached further than they had done since the time of Solomon (8:17–18). It marked Uzziah as a man of vision.

Chronicles describes the character underlying such achievements: the comparison with Amaziah (4) is not a snide comment on the latter, but a focus on the right that he did do; his 'seeking' of God (5) is the Chronicler's word for his personal devotion; and the instruction of Zechariah in the same verse shows him humble enough to accept good counsel. The result is many blessings that come to his people through this far-sighted man. They are not only military, but wide interests in agriculture – the basis, of course, of the nation's economic life (6–15). Behind it all are the three key words, twice affirmed (7–8, 15): *helped, fame, powerful* (or full of strength).

26:16–23 A bad ending. The power of Uzziah ('Strong-in-the-Lord') *led to his downfall* (16). Kings tells of his leprosy; Chronicles adds the reason for it. The burning of incense in the temple (16) was the priests' prerogative (Ex. 30:1–10). It was precisely for flouting this rule that the first king of the northern kingdom had been condemned (1 Ki. 12:28 – 13:5). To attempt the rite was bad enough (18); to be angry at being rebuked for it was what brought the punishment (19).

Retribution could scarcely have been more immediate. But there are features which set this one apart from previous examples. Far from 'forsaking' the Lord, like so many before him, Uzziah had come to the heart of Israel's religion, and it was by his action there, of all places, that he showed himself *unfaithful* (18). Nor could he blame youth and immaturity; he was a man of great experience. His affliction was almost certainly not leprosy in the modern sense, but one of a range of skin conditions any of which would debar a man from public life in Israel. His punishment was exclusion from both temple and palace (21), and from the service of his people, for the rest of his life. Paul's words carry an apt warning (1 Cor. 9:27).

27:1–9 Jotham

Jotham did *just as his father Uzziah had done* (2), except for Uzziah's resounding failure at the end; in his general life and righteousness, and in the resulting power (6) to build in town and in country, to win wars, and to receive tribute, his reign parallels his father's closely. The Chronicler stresses these signs of blessing, and omits the negative note of attacks by Israel (*cf.* 2 Ki. 15:37), so that everything he says about Jotham's reign is positive, making him the first king for 170 years – since Abijah – of whom nothing bad is recorded. After the last three reigns, each of which had a good beginning and a bad ending, Jotham's is the first of three which are monochrome; his, being all good, contrasting with his son's, which was a total disaster.

The people, however (2), were already providing a contrast to their righteous king. Chronicles is much more than a record of monarchs whose careers illustrate the simple principle that obedience is rewarded and disobedience is punished. Already in the reigns of Jehoram (21:19–20) and Athaliah (23:21) good people have disapproved of bad rulers; now there is corruption among the people in spite of the king's righteousness. So the nation is blessed for Jotham's sake and continues to sin without

punishment until 'the one who now holds it back . . . is taken out of the way' (2 Thes. 2:7) and the accession of Ahaz reveals the bankruptcy of throne and people alike. Theirs is the generation foreseen by Moses, which 'thinks "I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way"' (Dt. 29:19), but which will find it has been grievously mistaken (see below).

28:1–27 Ahaz

The Chronicler rewrites the account in 2 Ki. 16:1–20, and heightens the contrast between father and son. From Jotham, with no fault, he turns abruptly to Ahaz, about whom there is not a positive thing to be said; he is even worse than the three rulers of Athaliah's time a century before. This account underlines his unfaithfulness (22) and tells how the worship of the Lord has been actually replaced by the worship of foreign gods (24–25). The people's faithlessness also now comes out into the open, and the result, in the words of Moses' prophecy quoted above, is that they find themselves 'uprooted . . . and thrust . . . into another land' (Dt. 29:28). So the reign of Ahaz both recalls the infidelities of the northern kingdom when it first broke away, and anticipates the deportations to come in 130 years' time.

Meanwhile, in one of his rare forays north of the border, the Chronicler shows two things that are happening there. Having repudiated the rule of the house of David so long before, the kings of Israel have at last been defeated and deported by Assyrian invaders. The Chronicler does not even mention the event, but simply describes a north now without kings. The people of the north, however, as distinct from their kings, are still 'family', and they even repent of sin when God sends them a prophet.

So the south is now in as bad a way as ever the north was, while the north is now as open to restoration as ever the south has been. The way is prepared for the coming of Hezekiah, the new Solomon, and the restoration of 'all Israel'.

28:1–8 Captivity. No previous southern king has been as bad as Ahaz. Without any preliminary but vila, the first four verses list his sins in increasing order of infidelity. Since they include the *detestable ways* for which the Lord had driven out the Canaanite nations when Israel first came to Canaan (3), it is no wonder that Judah begins to experience the same driving out (5, 8).

The attacks by Aram and Israel, not particularly successful in 2 Ki. 16:5–9, were effective enough to make the Chronicler's points. For one thing, the resulting captivity was a foretaste of the greater one to come. For another, vs 5–6 seem to be a deliberate reflection of the words of Abijah back in 13:11–12 and 15–17: forsaking the Lord, the God of their fathers, leads to defeat with great slaughter and to being given into the hands of their enemies – as with Israel, so with Judah.

28:9–15 The neighbours. The scene in Samaria is a remarkable one in several respects. First, not only is there a true *prophet* there, but he is actually heeded (9, 13). Next, the reversal of Abijah's words to show that Judah is as guilty now as Israel was then (see on vs 5–6 above) does not mean that Israel is now blameless – far from it: God is angry with both kingdoms (9, 11, 13). Then the appearance of *leaders* in Samaria (12) suggests that the line of northern kings has come to an end; so the way is open for the common people of the north to reunite with their 'brothers' (8, 11, 15; NIV's *kinsmen* and *fellow countrymen* weaken the point; *cf.* 11:4) in the south. V 13 seems to show regret not just for this incident, but for the general guilt of the north. Finally, the good deed of v 15, involving people from Samaria and Jericho, foreshadows Jesus' parable in Lk. 10:25–37. Both incidents show how the working of God's grace may startle and confound his people.

28:16–27 Ahaz's appeal to Assyria. There is hope then for the north. But meanwhile Ahaz's Judah has yet to sink to its lowest depth. Philistine onslaughts (18) recall the days of Saul, and a situation from which only God's true king (then David, now Hezekiah) can rescue his people. But people and king together have rebelled (19), and since they refuse to seek *help* from the only one who can give it, they can hardly be surprised when Assyria gives Ahaz *trouble instead of help* (16, 20, 21). His final appeal to the foreign gods, even closing down the temple altogether (22–25), brings the southern kingdom where the northern was (13:8–9). One gleam of hope is left, in that when he dies someone at any rate has the discernment to deny him a burying-place among the kings (27).

29:1 – 32:33 Hezekiah

Scripture tells Hezekiah's story in two quite different ways. As the Chronicler rewrites Kings, he expands four verses on Hezekiah's religious reforms (2 Ki. 18:3–6) into eighty-four (2 Ch. 29 – 31), and reduces the rest (2 Ki. 18:7 – 20:21) to a third of its length (2 Ch. 32). This is not just because of his great interest in the temple. He has hinted in ch. 28 at the growing menace of Assyria; the days of its weakness, when Uzziah's power had a chance to grow, are long gone, it has been overrunning the smaller nations of the Near East, including Israel, and the Chronicler's first three chapters on Hezekiah are to be read with an eye to the threat of imminent invasion (32:1).

The reign of Ahaz saw Judah on the brink of

ruin and Israel destroyed. Hezekiah's reign is the opportunity for a new start for both kingdoms, not unlike that at the end of Saul's reign. Much here will recall those days, from the phrase *as his father David had done* (29:2) – no mere formula – to the whole of chs. 29 – 31, which show many parallels to Solomon's work in chs. 7 – 9. For the Chronicler Hezekiah is the greatest of the Davidic kings since that golden age.

29:1–19 The temple cleansed. Where Jotham was compared to Uzziah, and Uzziah to Amaziah (27:2; 26:4), Hezekiah is compared to David thirteen generations earlier (2), and from v 3 onwards his work plainly resembles Solomon's. It begins probably on the first 'new year's day' of his reign, rather than immediately after his accession (3, 17), with a formal address to religious leaders – *Levites* (5) must include priests, who were of course of the tribe of Levi – requiring them to make good the ravages wrought in the temple by Ahaz. Ahaz had feared trouble and so turned to other gods, but Hezekiah is clear that the infidelity was there first and was the cause of the trouble, which by now includes both the *dread and horror and scorn* (8) spoken of in Je. 29:18, and a first experience of exile for both north and south (9). Now that responsible people occupy both throne and temple, God's anger will be averted (10–11). All that has defiled the temple is taken to the valley east of the city to be burnt (16; 15:16). The work has taken sixteen days (17; see below on 30:3).

29:20–36 Temple worship re-established. The ceremony for the reopening of the temple begins with sacrifice (20–24). The *sin offering* means cleansing for the past, and the *burnt offering* consecration for the future. Vs 21 and 24 may indicate that the former was going to be offered for the sins of throne, temple and (southern) nation, but that Hezekiah included both halves of the nation. Next the worshippers' praises are described (25–30), though they took place simultaneously with the burnt offering (27). After that the whole assembly brought its offerings (31–36). As on equivalent occasions in the times of Moses, David and Solomon, one cannot miss the note of willingness, abundance and joy. The popular movement was set in motion by Hezekiah; he in turn was 'preaching' what the prophets (including David!) had said, which was itself the word of the Lord (25); all stemmed ultimately from *what God had brought about* (36).

30:1–12 Invitation to the Passover. After the reopening, the first regular festival to be held in the temple was to be the Passover. Kings does not mention this, and some think it an invention of the Chronicler's to justify the temple practices of his own day and to enhance his picture of Hezekiah. But the point is far from proved, and this chapter is entirely consistent with the rest of this king's story as he seeks to unite north and south around the festival which more than any other is appropriate for a new beginning for God's people (5). The decision to hold it in the second month was not arbitrary, like Jeroboam's invention of an alternative religion for his northern kingdom when it first broke away (1 Ki. 12:32–33). All agreed with Hezekiah that since in a number of ways they were not ready on the proper date (3; 29:17), they should use the concession the law allowed to hold Passover a month later (Nu. 9:9–11). This had been designed for those who were ritually 'unclean'; for example, through contact with a dead body, or who were too far from home – very fitting for a nation which had wandered from God, and been contaminated by the deadly touch of pagan religion.

The invitation (6–9), in terms very like those of the king's address to religious leaders (29:5–11), is to 'all Israel' (6, RSV) both north and south. A positive aspect of the Chronicler's emphasis on speedy retribution is that each generation can have a new start (8). The response from the north is mixed, but in all who do gather, it is again as in 29:36 the grace of God which has brought them (12).

30:13–27 Celebration of the Passover. Unleavened Bread and Passover belonged together; the name of either feast might be used for both combined. Whatever may be the reason for the priests' shame (15), it emphasizes the need for royal leadership, and is a reminder that both kingship and priesthood are necessary in God's economy. The irregularities in the ceremony of vs 15–20 (which incidentally the Chronicler would have been unlikely to invent; see on 30:1–12), were to be expected in such a novel situation, *i.e.* a restored temple and a reunited nation. But they were overridden by Hezekiah, who (as another Solomon) saw beyond the letter of the law to its spirit, and prayed for his people in the terms of the great prayer of 7:14, which is recalled also in the climax at v 27. The extra seven days of v 23 recall that original ceremony (7:8–10), and there were representatives from all Israel for the first time since Solomon's days.

31:1–10 Generous giving. The false gods, which had promised prosperity and failed to deliver, are at last repudiated (1). It is a return to the true God which enables the generosity of this chapter. What Hezekiah has in view here is the continuing of the worship of God, so auspiciously begun. Like David and Solomon (1 Ch. 23 – 26; 2 Ch. 8:12–14) he appoints the priests' and Levites' divisions, and provides

what they need for their religious duties (1 Ch. 29:3; 2 Ch. 9:10–11); and he requires the people to supply their stipends (2–4). As on the previous historic occasions, generous giving follows, and does not flag as the year goes by. The temple is reopened, first month; Passover, second month; beginning of grain harvest (Feast of Weeks), third month, to end of grape harvest (Feast of Tabernacles), seventh month (5–7). Hezekiah blesses Israel, as his great predecessors had done (8; 6:3; 1 Ch. 16:2), for a liberality such as they too had witnessed (10; 1 Ch. 29:6–9; *cf.* Ex. 36:2–7).

31:11–21 Faithful administration. Once the principle of 'providing for the ministry' has been accepted, Hezekiah turns to the practicalities of storage (11–13), distribution in the towns (14–18), and distribution in rural areas (19). This administrative work, mundane though it may seem, is as much a part of the *service of God's temple* (21) as anything else he has undertaken, and is carried out with care and thoroughness. It is easy enough for bureaucracy to be the enemy of spiritual life, but there is a difference between structures which hinder the flow and those which channel it.

32:1–23 The Assyrian invasion. Hezekiah has 'come to the royal position for such a time as this' (Est. 4:14), in two senses. Nationally, it is the providential time for the renewal of north and south alike. Internationally, the Assyrian war-machine is at the gates, and the campaigns of 2 Ki. 18:17 – 19:36, simplified here into a single attack, threaten the political destruction of Judah. The latter threat is the subject of this chapter, and is seen in the light of the religious reforms of chs. 29 – 31: where Kings dates it in Hezekiah's fourteenth year (2 Ki. 18:13), Chronicles says rather that it came *after all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done* (1).

It meets strong resistance (2–8). 2 Ki. 18:14 indicates not fear, but the buying of time for the defensive works described in vs 1–8. For some in Jerusalem these were an alternative to trust in God (Is. 22:8–11), but for Hezekiah they were an expression of it. Sennacherib's message (9–15) showed how little he understood his enemy, for the supposed insult to the Lord was actually obedience to him (12). It is the Assyrians who really insult God (16–19, recalling Ps. 2:2), encouraging God's people to believe that now he will certainly not act to vindicate his own name. Hence the prayer of v 20, answered by the destroying angel (*cf.* 1 Ch. 21:15; Ex. 12:12) with an unspecified disaster; both this and Sennacherib's murder are recorded in secular history. Note how recompense both good and bad works out, and how it is reported, in the case of each king. Hezekiah's blessing, the lifting of the siege, was a reward for reforms begun (as noted above) fourteen years earlier; and Sennacherib's punishment, assassination, took place twenty years after his campaigns in Judah. Chronicles foreshortens the whole story, ending it with the characteristic signs of God's approval, rest for Israel (22 mg.) and fame for Hezekiah (23).

32:24–33 The end of Hezekiah's reign. These incidents may run parallel to the events just described, rather than following them: 'In *the course of* those days Hezekiah *had become* ill . . . .' Like the last section, this general picture of the greatest king since Solomon should warn us not to oversimplify the doctrine of rewards and punishments. We are told of no sin that might have led to his illness (24a); on the other hand, prayer led to his healing, with a *sign* to show it was coming (24b; it is assumed that we know 2 Ki. 20:1–11). Pride led to *wrath* (25), perhaps the invasion just described; humility led to the invader's withdrawal – though another would be successful later (26). Hezekiah's greatness was like Solomon's (27–29). The divine resources he drew on are aptly symbolized by the famous tunnel which brought right into the city a never-failing water supply, the 'waters of Shiloah' which his father Ahaz, unwilling to trust God, had rejected (30; Is. 8:6). He was still capable of failing the test, as when a Babylonian embassy came, ostensibly with an astronomical interest in his 'sign', probably also sounding out possibilities of a political alliance (31; 2 Ki. 20:12–19). But his final epitaph is that of a pre-eminently great and good man.

33:1–20 Manasseh

2 Ki. 21:1–9 shows all the weakness of Manasseh, and what Chronicles adds merely underlines it. He and his father form a stark contrast, like that seen immediately before them in Jotham and Ahaz: good then bad, then very good and very bad. But the Chronicler's picture is different. His addition of the story of Manasseh's repentance alters the above pattern; instead of the long-term consequences of an entirely evil reign, he shows the immediate consequences of its evil first half; and within this one lifetime he sees the pattern of Ahaz followed by Hezekiah, which reflects also from earlier times that of Saul followed by David, and from later times that of the exile followed by the restoration.

33:1–9 Manasseh's sin. Such a long reign, even longer than Uzziah's, would normally be thought a mark of God's blessing. Its length would seem out of keeping therefore with a story of such unrelieved wickedness as the Kings account of Manasseh. It is not surprising that the Chronicler adds vs 11–20 to the Kings

account in vs 11–20. But first he portrays the king as even worse if possible than his grandfather Ahaz, with sorcery and occultism, and the temple, previously closed, now actually desecrated (*cf.* Dt. 18:9–13). No doubt practices of this sort were not mere perversity, but were seen as religious means to a political end, the securing of Manasseh's position. He would not learn from history that that was the way to lose the land (2, 8), and even outdid the Canaanites in this self-destructive folly (9).

33:10–20 Manasseh's repentance. So great was Manasseh's sin, says Kings, that in the long term it made the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, fifty years after his death, inevitable (2 Ki. 23:26–27; 24:3–4). The Chronicler, interested in the more immediate consequences, climaxes it with a refusal to heed God's warning (10), and then at once follows that with the humiliation of 11. This obviously foreshadows the time when Babylon would itself be the imperial power which would take many Israelites into exile for many years. Various occasions have been suggested when Manasseh, forced for much of his reign to recognize Assyria as overlord, might have stepped out of line and been punished.

The reforms which followed his repentance are the typical signs of blessing (14–17). His *prayer* (18–19; *cf.* v 13) is now lost; the Prayer of Manasseh in the Apocrypha is a much later composition. A closely related passage in the NT is Paul's description of God's mercy to the 'chief of sinners' in 1 Tim. 1:15–16.

33:21–25 Amon

The account of this reign is the briefest in Chronicles, and is little more than an appendix to the previous one. Here Amon undoes the good of Manasseh's later years, and the task of his son Josiah will be to put right the wrongs of Amon's reign; in Kings Amon simply adds to Manasseh's sins, and Josiah has to right the wrongs of both reigns. Nothing more is known about the conspiracy of v 24, and nothing certain about *the people of the land* in v 25.

34:1 – 35:27 Josiah

This account of Josiah, similar in length to the one in Kings (2 Ki. 22:1 – 23:30), has different emphases, though both books regard him as a very great man. In Kings all his reforms are related to the discovery of the 'Book of the Law'; his famous celebration of the Passover is mentioned only briefly, but he is portrayed as the greatest of Judah's kings and the climax of her history (2 Ki. 23:25). For the Chronicler, Hezekiah's is the more important reign, and since then Judah has been on the downward slope. At the same time he cannot praise too highly all Josiah's *acts of devotion* (35:26), and they begin long before the finding of the book in the temple.

The dating given here in 34:1–8 (Years 8, 12, 18 of Josiah's reign) have raised the question of whether Kings and Chronicles differ over when his reforms began. Commentators differ as to which book sets out to be chronological and which to be schematic. In either case the background to the story is a decline in the power of Assyria, which gives Josiah greater freedom of action, relieves the pressures on Judah (for good or ill; the 'all-Israel' solidarity which Hezekiah enjoyed Josiah will lack), and leads to a realignment of the major powers so that Egypt and Babylon will soon become forces to be reckoned with (35:20–21; 36:5–6).

34:1–13 Josiah the reformer. The Chronicler has filled out 2 Ki. 22:1–7 in two ways: Josiah's pious character before he began on the temple repairs, and his thorough methods once he did. Not even Hezekiah is credited with this undeviating godliness (2). The words *while he was still young* no doubt indicate a personal seeking for God, before he came of age at twenty (*in his twelfth year*, v 3). His early reforms were far-reaching (4–7); the Assyrian overlords of northern Israel were being assailed on other fronts and could not dispute the northward spread of Josiah's authority (6). The Chronicler characteristically sees the work of both *labourers* and musicians as belonging equally to the Levites' service in God's house (9–13).

34:14–33 Finding the book. The discovery of *the Book of the Law* may be a reward for Josiah's devotion, but it is an uncomfortable one. We do not know during which period of neglect the book had been mislaid, nor indeed what exactly it was; the majority view is that it was part or all of Deuteronomy, of which chs. 12, 16, 27 and 28 are closely related to what follows here. Perhaps more of the Torah, the first five books of our Bible, may have been included.

Another mark of Josiah's outstanding character (*cf.* v 2) is that he actively seeks a word from the Lord (21). The response from the prophetess Huldah (23–28) is unusual in that the curses the book pronounces (Dt. 27 – 28; perhaps also, *e.g.* Lv. 26) are about sins committed before Josiah's time (25) and punishment which will fall after his time (28). It was in the sense of being spared the experience of Jerusalem's fall that Josiah would be *buried in peace*, although he died of wounds sustained in battle (35:23–24). But the nation would not so be spared; its heart was not like the heart of its king. *All the people* (30), a phrase often used in earlier reigns to show a united willingness, now

have to be *made* to commit themselves to God's service (32–33).

35:1–19 Celebrating the Passover. There are only three verses in the older history (2 Ki. 23:21–23) about this remarkable event. For Josiah it would have followed naturally from the covenant he had just renewed between Israel and the Lord (34:29–32). He was eager that proper dates and duties be observed (1–4). The curious note (3) about putting the ark in the temple (When had it been taken out? Why had it not been returned sooner?) may mean a deliberate re-enacting of the original inauguration of tabernacle or temple. Hezekiah may have been seen by the Chronicler as a greater king, but Josiah's provision of animals for sacrifice was even more lavish than his (6–9), and the ceremonies went right back to Moses (12), not simply to David (15); it was an occasion unique in the whole history of the monarchy (18).

35:20–27 The death of Josiah. In another addition to the Kings account (2 Ki. 23:29–30), the death of Josiah thirteen years later is here connected with disobedience on his part, though in strange circumstances. Carchemish (20) was to be the rendezvous between the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies, trying to withstand the growing power of Babylon. Whether or not Josiah was right to take sides, the Egyptian king's words are described as a message from God (22; for similar words through unlikely mouthpieces, *cf.* 36:23; 2 Ki. 18:25; Jn. 11:49–52). In some way this message must have been confirmed to him as one he should have heeded. His death was deeply mourned.

36:1–23 The last kings

Chronicles ends with a streamlining of the Kings account of the last four reigns of the monarchy. In Judah Josiah was succeeded by three sons and a grandson. All are here given 'throne-name' alternatives (*cf.* 1 Ch. 3:15–16; 2 Ki. 24:17). Nothing more is known of the eldest son, Johanan. It seems that the fourth, Shallum, came to the throne first as Jehoahaz; 3 months later he was replaced by the second, Eliakim/Jehoiakim, succeeded after eleven years by his son Jeconiah/Jehoiachin; finally came the remaining son of Josiah, Mattaniah/Zedekiah. These changes were related to developments on the international scene. Assyria was in terminal decline; Babylon was eager to hasten it; Egypt wanted to delay it. In the space of a few months in 609 BC Josiah was killed, Jehoahaz deposed, and Jehoiakim installed, all by the Egyptians. But at the battle of Carchemish four years later Egypt was defeated by the Babylonians, and it was they who three months after the death of Jehoiakim in 597 BC deposed his young son Jehoiachin, and put Zedekiah on the throne for the last few years of the monarchy until he too rebelled and was removed.

Where the Chronicler leaves out so much, it is worth noting what he leaves in. No king's death is recorded, but the disappearance from the scene of each in turn, and thus the downfall of the Davidic monarchy, is. So is the looting and final ruin of Solomon's temple. And it is made plain that whatever long-term punishment all this represents, it is also the immediate retribution for the sins of that final generation. Yet through it all Israel survives, both nation and land, as is plain from the book's closing verses even if it ends at 36:21 without the added note of the restoration under Cyrus.

36:1–4 Jehoahaz. By the time of Josiah, the Assyrian empire had dominated the Near East for well over a century. But it was being shored up in its final years by Neco of Egypt, at whose hands Josiah died (35:20–24). For some reason Josiah's three elder sons were passed over (perhaps Johanan was already dead) and the fourth was made king as Jehoahaz. The tribute demanded in v 3 almost certainly made inroads into the treasures of the temple (see vs 7, 10, 18), and after three months Neco removed Jehoahaz from the throne and replaced him with his brother Jehoiakim. Priesthood and monarchy were both nearing their end. The exile of Jehoahaz in Egypt was one more foretaste of the great exile to come.

36:5–8 Jehoiakim. It was during Jehoiakim's reign that Babylon took control of the region from Egypt (2 Ki. 24:7). Jehoiakim's subjection to the Babylonians (6) may not have been at the end of his reign, as v 6 might be thought to suggest, and he may not even have gone to Babylon, let alone died there (2 Ki. 24:1, 6). But the Chronicler twice uses the doom-laden words *to Babylon*, in v 6 about the king and in v 7 about the temple treasures. Exile, and the end of temple and throne, are looming larger.

36:9–10 Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin's reign is here abbreviated even more than the previous two. His being *sent for* had involved a rebellion against Babylon, it seems, and the arrival of the king of Babylon in person (2 Ki. 24:10–12). The only important thing for the Chronicler is the removal, once again, of temple treasure and of the occupant of the throne *to Babylon*.

36:11–21 Zedekiah. The account of Zedekiah's reign merges into the story of the kingdom's final downfall. His sin is noted (12) but it represents the sin of the nation (14); Josiah's reforms, as hinted at the time, had no real effect, and the last straw was the people's refusal to hear and trust God's messages (16). In the often-recalled terms of 7:14, there is no humbling (12), no turning (13), and consequently no

healing (*remedy*, 16). It is stressed that all this is God's doing (15–17), and that what he is doing is taking *to Babylon* (18, 20) all that remains in Solomon's temple and the whole population of David's kingdom. 'The poorest people . . . were left' (2 Ki. 24:14), but the Chronicler's picture is of a land practically depopulated.

However, vs 20–21 show that God intended to preserve the remnant in Babylon as his people, that his land too would survive, its devastation being in fact its long-overdue sabbath, and that his word (Je. 25:11) was not belied but confirmed by these events.

36:22–23 Postscript. These are the opening verses of Ezra, added here (it is not known by whom) to link the two histories. Chronicles does not in fact need them to complete its message, as the promise of restoration is already there in the previous two verses.

Michael Wilcock

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

Introduction

Although the books of Ezra and Nehemiah appear as two separate works in our English Bibles, they were originally two parts of a single work, and they should be studied together as a single whole. Not only is ancient Jewish tradition clear about this (the division into two books being probably an innovation by the Christian church), but more importantly the contents of the books themselves demonstrate it. In particular, the second half of Nehemiah serves as a climax to all that has gone before, not least the work of Ezra, as his prominence in Ne. 8 makes clear. Although Ne. 1:1 obviously starts a new section in the work, it marks no more of a break in the narrative than does Ezr. 7:1, where Ezra himself is first introduced.

It is less certain whether in addition the books should be regarded as an integral part of the work of the author of the books of Chronicles. Clearly, they serve to continue his narrative, as the repetition of the ending of Chronicles in the opening verses of Ezra shows, but that does not by itself necessarily require the same author. Again, both works demonstrate a number of interests in common, most notably their attention to the workings and personnel of the temple in Jerusalem. But since they are both the products of a relatively small community which was itself dominated by the temple, such common interests are hardly surprising. Scholars therefore differ on this question. Fortunately, however, there are not many places where a decision one way or the other makes a great deal of difference to the interpretation of Ezra and Nehemiah. They will therefore be discussed here without further reference to the books of Chronicles.

Historical background

Since the books of Ezra and Nehemiah take the form of a historical narrative, we need to know something of their background and the wider course of events to which they refer in order to understand better their contribution to the unfolding of the biblical story as a whole.

The books of Kings tell the long history of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Israel's separate existence came to an end in 722 BC when the Assyrians finally absorbed the country into their empire (2 Ki. 17). For about another 150 years, the small kingdom of Judah, with its Davidic king and its capital in Jerusalem, continued to exist as a separate state which enjoyed very mixed fortunes. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that whatever we know of Israel in earlier times must have reached us through this channel.

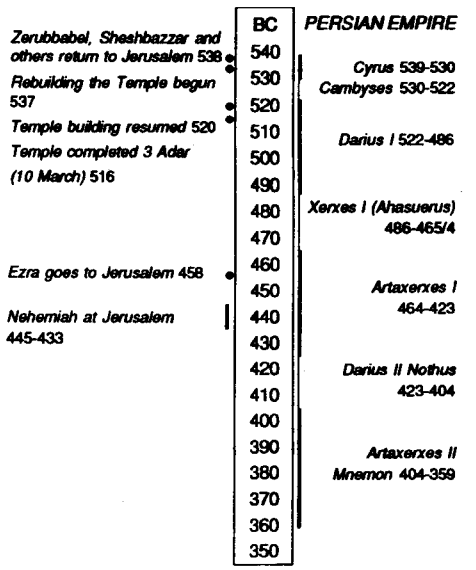
In 587 BC, Judah suffered a similar fate to that of its northern neighbour Israel, though this time at the hands of the Babylonians, who had in the meantime replaced the Assyrians as the dominant world-empire of the day. It is difficult to exaggerate the radical disruption which the Babylonian conquest brought about. Many of the people, and in particular the leaders and ruling classes, were taken into exile in Babylon. The temple, which had stood for so long as a focal point for the religion and unity of the people, was razed to the ground and its valuables removed to the temple of the victorious Babylonians. The king too was removed (2 Ki. 25:7), as his predecessor had been (2 Ki. 24:15), so that the monarchy, in which such high hopes had been vested since the time of David (2 Sa. 7), simply ceased to exist. The country itself seems to have become nothing more than a somewhat remote province of the Babylonian empire. With this wholesale dismantling of all the major institutions of state, it must have appeared to many that Judah, and with it the religion to which it alone bore witness, had been consigned to the pages of history, a fate which several of the neighbouring states also suffered at this time. The book of Lamentations captures this sense of helplessness and despair.

We do not know enough about the situation in either Judah or Babylon during the next fifty years, the period commonly referred to as the exile. What is clear, however, is that among the exiles there were those who not only worked out a strategy for physical and social survival, but who, more significantly, also came to realize that God had not finished with them. Indeed, a major theological breakthrough was the appreciation that far from being outside his control, these catastrophic events were in fact his doing. By taking that awareness on board and seeking to learn its painful lessons, some at least of the community in exile learned to read, preserve and eventually to add to their sacred writings from the standpoint of this new perspective.

The year 538 BC, the point at which the book of Ezra begins, heralded a major change not only in the fortunes of the Jewish community in

exile, but in the whole history of the ancient Near East. Cyrus the Persian, who had risen rapidly to power in his homeland and begun a series of wider conquests in the immediately preceding years, entered Babylon in triumph, and thereby became the undisputed ruler of the whole of the previous Babylonian empire. The Persian empire which he thus established became the major world power for the next two centuries or so. Its kings at various times controlled an area extending from Egypt as far as India. Of course, their fortunes fluctuated. There were periods of major internal unrest and rebellion; Egypt was by no means always under their control and some of their conflicts with neighbouring powers such as Greece have become legendary. Nor were all the Persian kings as able as Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, the three of whom we read particularly in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

SYNOPSIS OF THE MAIN EVENTS AFFECTING THE HOLY LAND



Despite this, two important points emerge which need to be borne in mind. First, the territory of Judah was more important to the Persians than might initially be supposed because of its strategic position near the troubled border with Egypt. It was a matter of concern to them to ensure that the loyalty to the empire of this area was preserved. And secondly, when it suited their interests to do so, the Persians practised the policy of seeking to win such loyalty by granting a degree of local autonomy to their subject peoples in both religious and legal affairs. Of course, they could be as oppressive and cruel as the Assyrians and Babylonians when they felt they needed to be, but alongside this the more liberal policy of repatriation which we see illustrated in the book of Ezra had its place in their method of government.

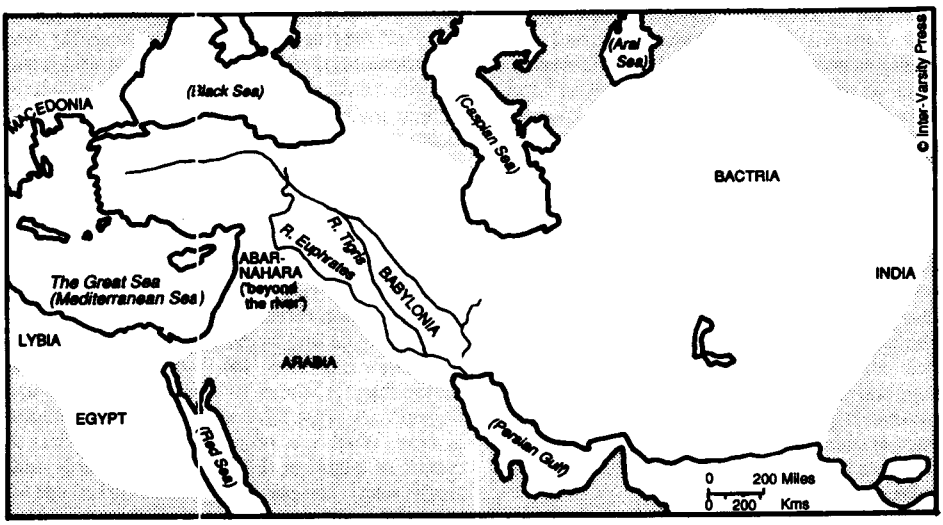
As we shall see shortly, the biblical writers do not focus primarily on such wider concerns. Nevertheless, these concerns colour much of their attitude towards international politics and, perhaps more significantly, they provide the framework within which the characters they write about were able to operate. The realities of the situation constrained them in what it was practical to do and to expect, so that as we read we must not look for more than it was reasonable for them to deliver. National independence must have seemed a remote dream at best. What was required at the time was a means of adapting the religious standards and truths which had previously been worked out in very different circumstances to the new situation of a small religious community in the shadow of a major foreign world-power.

Setting

Against this general background, where do the books of Ezra and Nehemiah fit in? For several reasons, the question is not as easy to answer as might be supposed.

As with many biblical books, it is necessary to keep two different levels in mind. First, there is obviously the level of the setting of the events which are described, and this is the more straightforward of the two. Most of the necessary information for dealing with this will be referred to at the relevant points in the commentary below. One point which will not be discussed, however, is the date at which Ezra travelled to Jerusalem. According to Ezr. 7:7, this happened in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, but we are not told which of the three kings who bore that name this was. Since Ezra's story is told before Nehemiah's, it is usually supposed that it was Artaxerxes I, so that the date in question is 458 BC. Readers should be warned, however, that a number of scholars think rather in terms of Artaxerxes II (so dating Ezra in 398 BC) and that he came to Jerusalem *after* Nehemiah. This view, which may be found in other commentaries, obviously involves a good deal of rearranging of the material at this primary historical level. It is not as popular as it once was, however, and it is not followed here. (I have discussed the matter more fully in the works cited in the Further Reading list.)

Secondly, it is always worthwhile, when reading a historical book, to ask about the setting and purpose of the writer or editor who compiled the work in its present form. Obviously, this took place later, sometimes much later,



The Persian Empire in the fifth century BC.

than the events which are being described. For example, when reading the gospels it is normal to investigate the particular emphases of each individual evangelist, and this is helped by the fact that we can compare his presentation with that of the others. We can note what has been included and omitted, where the order of presentation differs, and so on. We want to know both what each author teaches us about Jesus himself, and why he has done it in this particular way.

In principle the same is true of Ezra and Nehemiah. It is clear that the writer has used various sources, and equally that he has not always used all the material with which they provided him. Similarly, we shall note places in the commentary where he has arranged the material in his own order for his own good reasons. Study of these matters helps us to see what the writer was most concerned to emphasize to his own readers.

This, however, is where other problems arise, principally that there is no certain way of determining exactly when the author wrote and therefore of quite who he was writing for. One probable view is that the accounts of the work of Ezra and Nehemiah (*i.e.* roughly Ezr. 7 – Ne. 13) were combined around 400 BC and that Ezr. 1 – 6 was added to bring the books into their present form about a century later. If that is right, then, as we know from other sources, a likely concern of the opening chapters, for instance, would be for the legitimacy of the Jewish community's form and expression of worship in the face of rival claims, principally the developing group who we know of later as the Samaritans. We must therefore note how the restoration of the temple is presented as being in a true line of continuity with earlier forms of Israelite worship and how the community established its sense of identity in the face of rival claims. From this, there are helpful lessons to be learned today for places where the church too is struggling to maintain its true identity in a hostile environment, especially as we live so long after the events that are at the foundation of our faith.

Some principal themes

It is possible, in the light of these considerations, to pick out a number of themes which run through the two books. The reason for mentioning these here is not to try to say everything that the books teach about these matters, but rather to raise questions and issues which it will be helpful to bear in mind when reading the text itself.

A theological view of history

The first point to emphasize is that these books are highly selective in what they choose to tell us. The phrase 'after these things' at Ezr. 7:1, for instance, covers a period of more than fifty years. Ezra's activities mostly fit into a single period of twelve months, and of Nehemiah's work we know nothing after his first year or so of frenetic activity until his second term as governor, more than twelve years later. Similarly, the references in Ne. 12:26 and 47 seem to link the generation of those who returned at first directly with the work of the later reformers two or more generations later. Clearly, this is not a

modern scientific history. Rather, the period being covered is viewed from the standpoint of God's overall control of the process by which his people were first re-established and then reformed in their land. Only those things which contributed to that are included. We too need to learn sometimes to lift our vision from the narrow flow of day-to-day events, which can often be discouraging, in order to discern God's greater purposes in our lives and in our world. In the light of that broader view, we come to appreciate better our own contribution to the whole.

Continuity

In the light of the perplexing circumstances of the exile outlined above, it was important for those who returned to Jerusalem and those who followed them to be reassured that they stood in the same line of faith as their forefathers. Could they still rely on the same promises of which we read in earlier OT books? Could they depend on God to aid and direct them as he had the former generations? Since their situation was so different from that which preceded, could they even claim to be the same people of Israel? Many examples of attention to such issues will be mentioned in the commentary, and no doubt there are more to be discovered. The way in which the return from exile is described, the processes by which the temple was rebuilt, the way in which it was furnished and the people who ministered there – these are just a few of the means by which the author sought to reassure his readers and give them a sense of religious bearing.

Perhaps most important of all was the attention he gave to the book of the law, the law of Moses (he uses many different titles, but they all refer to the same thing). Of course, much of the law, which we call the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy), was written for a people living in a quite different situation, where as a sovereign nation they could regulate their own affairs entirely. Perhaps for that very reason many had come to regard it as a dead letter. It was Ezra's particular contribution, as we shall see, to develop methods of interpretation which taught them to draw out the underlying principles of Scripture so that they could be applied anew in their own later day, something which is as necessary for us as it was for them. Adherence to the teachings of this book (which of course is as much about God's grace and salvation and the nature of faith as it is about 'law' strictly defined) gave them, as it does us, the major means of access to the knowledge of God. It is this which is uppermost in establishing continuity with the faith of those who have preceded us.

The progress of restoration

The first three major sections of the books (Ezr. 1 – 6; 7 – 10; Ne. 1 – 7) each have a similar pattern: permission is granted to an individual or a group to return to Jerusalem from Babylon with a specific task to perform; as they set about it they encounter opposition of one sort or another but eventually they overcome this to complete at least the main part of the task in hand. This pattern in itself can serve as an encouragement to patience and faithfulness and as a warning against being deflected by external problems.

The last part of the work (Ne. 8 – 13), however, is rather different. At its heart is the reading of the law, followed by confession and a pledge to keep God's law (Ne. 8 – 10). But then, despite celebration of what has been achieved (Ne. 12:27–43), we read of the attempts, not always successful, to translate the values of such a high point into the more humdrum routine which inevitably must follow. From this, we may draw out two points. First, the 'covenant renewal' of Ne. 8 – 10 is firmly located as the climax of God's work through the reformers, not as the condition for it. Later readers may learn that the faithful obedience which is expected of them is not a means to win God's favour, but is rather the response which they may cheerfully render in view of the way in which he has already restored and transformed their community existence. Secondly, the people of God cannot expect to be sustained for ever on a high plateau of spirtual excitement. Indeed, such moments lose their value if they are not translated into a life of regular, daily faithfulness and obedience even in such 'ordinary' matters as financial contributions for the service of God. The somewhat disappointing way in which the books come to a close in Ne. 13 suggests that, unaided, this indeed is the harder part.

Relationships

Almost throughout (Ne. 9:32–37 is the only major exception) the books paint the Persian kings in a positive light. From the first verse of Ezra, where Cyrus moves in response to God's prompting, through Darius's confirmation of the permission to rebuild the temple (Ezr. 6:6–12; *cf.* v 14) and Artaxerxes' commissioning of Ezra (Ezr. 7:12–26) and his support for Nehemiah (Ne. 2:6), they are the principal human agents of the divine will at the official level. By contrast, the *political* importance of the principal Jewish actors receives very little attention. In tracing this theme, it becomes clear that the writer was attempting to sketch a programme that took full account of reality and

sought rather to press home the lessons of what faithfulness would entail within this framework. Since the dominant power was disposed in a friendly manner towards the Jews, they should concentrate on the opportunities for service which God has given to them rather than agitating for a major change in the *status quo*. Only the close of Ne. 9 serves as a reminder that God's best is yet to be.

By contrast, the immediately neighbouring officials are cast in a uniformly negative light, with Sanballat chief, but by no means alone, among them. And here, the threat is all the more serious in that these neighbours shared to some extent in the religious values of the Jews themselves (see, for instance, Ezr. 4:1–3). We need not doubt that there is a strongly apologetic note in the resolute way in which the treatment of such opposition is described. To many, this is one of the less attractive aspects of these books, especially when part of the resolution of the problem is shown to include the dissolving of mixed marriages (Ezr. 9 – 10; Ne. 13:23–28). Here again, however, it is necessary to bear in mind the circumstances which the Jews confronted, and not to seek to avoid the problem by 'spiritualizing' it away. It was vital for the continuity of the community, the purity of its religion and hence of its legacy to us that at this formative period there should be no compromise either of their legal status under Persian law or of the integrity of their self-identity. (In addition, it should be remembered that they were willing to receive individuals who wished to join with them in sincerity; *cf.* Ezr. 6:21.) There are times, and this was undoubtedly one of them, when priority has to be given to a focus on the purity of the 'light' and 'salt' qualities of the people of God lest by being dissolved completely their witness to the love and saving grace of God is lost completely from view.

These, then, are some of the distinctive themes of these books which may serve as guidelines for informed reading. This is not to deny, of course, that many other points will also repay attention. Among others might be mentioned the sovereign nature of God in view of the wider political realm in which these books are set by comparison with the earlier history books of the OT, the nature and practice of prayer, the characters of the principal actors, the qualities of leadership which they exemplify, and so on. All in all, it is clear that there is much of abiding value to be learned from these all too frequently neglected books.

Further reading

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EZRA

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Commentary

1:1 – 6:22 Return from exile and rebuilding of the temple

The first six chapters of Ezra cover a period of just over twenty years (538 – 515 BC), during which time a number of the Jews returned from their exile in Babylon and, after some delay, rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem which had been destroyed by the Babylonians fifty years before.

These events have not been written, however, in the form of a continuous narrative, but rather certain particular moments have been highlighted while other historically important matters, such as the actual journey back to Jerusalem, are not described at all. This is because the author lived at a time much later than the events he was recounting and so was limited by the written sources, such as copies of letters, lists and other documents, which were available to him. By the way in which he has arranged these and by the connecting comments which he has added, he has drawn attention to the religious and theological significance of these events for his later readers.

First, he emphasizes that although what happened might have appeared to be insignificant within the larger affairs of the mighty Persian empire, these events were in fact governed by the sovereign God of heaven, who used even pagan kings such as Cyrus and Darius to achieve his will for his people (*e.g.* 1:1 and 6:14). This encourages the reader to view international affairs in a different perspective from the normal, where a small and remote religious community might otherwise easily become discouraged.

At times of political change, the Christian learns to look beyond the surface of major upheaval to discern the opportunities which God may be offering for renewed evangelism, for instance, or for a change of direction in church strategy which will make its service and witness more effective in the new climate of society's expectations.

Secondly, there is a strong emphasis throughout this section on the continuity between the old institutions of Israel and those of the renewed Jerusalem community. The readers are thus reminded that they are the legitimate heirs of all that God had promised to his people long ago; theirs is no new religion but the direct continuation of that revealed to such leaders as Moses, David and Solomon.

There may also be a negative point involved here, namely the rejection of rival claims, such as those of the newly emerging Samaritan community in the north. If these chapters were compiled at the time when the Samaritan temple was being built (about 300 BC), then such reassurance would have been necessary. Thirdly, therefore, the author makes plain in chs. 4 – 6 that opposition to God's work is best overcome by faithful continuation in the tasks assigned by him rather than by compromise or confrontation. All these themes will be developed further later in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

1:1–11 Cyrus orders the return of the exiles and the temple vessels

This first chapter focuses on the first two points just described. The setting is the year in which, following his rapid rise to power, Cyrus captured Babylon (538 BC), so replacing the previous world empire of Babylon with that of the Persians. Persian imperial policy differed from that of its predecessors. Whereas they had sought to establish their authority by such harsh measures as the wholesale movement of subject populations (exile), the Persians preferred to accommodate the interests of local peoples when that also best served their own purposes. The need for loyalty among the inhabitants of the western extremity of the empire, which included Palestine, was necessary before the Persians could contemplate further expansion into Egypt, and this turned out much to the favour of the Jews.

1:1–6 The proclamation of Cyrus. While the secular historian seeks to explain events in terms of the imperial policies of the day, the biblical author sees these as but the means which God used to work out his purposes. Thus the prompting of Cyrus (1) and of the people of God in faithful obedience (5) can be described with exactly the same language. Furthermore, Cyrus is said to have been used to fulfil earlier prophecies, reference probably being made to Je. 50:9 and 51:11 read in the light of Is. 44:28 and 45:13. In line with this, what may originally have been a fairly localized announcement (the form of the proclamation in vs 2–4 is that of an oral message, probably to the Jewish leaders) is now to be seen as having universal significance, *a proclamation throughout his realm* (1).

The proclamation (2–4) concentrates on permission to return. The details concerning the rebuilding of the temple were the subject of a separate edict (*cf.* 6:3–6), because they affected others, not just the Jews. The two passages should not be taken as variant forms of the same edict.

The response of the people (5) is followed by a note (6) which is meant to remind us of the

exodus from Egypt. The financial support given by *all their neighbours* includes not only that from Jews who decided not to return (*cf.* v 4), but also from non-Jews. The language of this verse recalls the theme of the 'despoiling of the Egyptians' in Ex. 3:21–22;11:2;12:35–36. This is the first of a number of such allusions to the exodus which together invite the reader to view in a new light what otherwise might have been written off as an obscure and insignificant event within the history of the Persian empire. To the eye of faith, this return is no less momentous than the events surrounding the very birth of the nation of Israel itself. It was equally an act of divine deliverance and even of national rebirth.

Note. 2 The title *the God of heaven* makes its first appearance in the Bible here. It is most commonly used in contexts where Jews are in contact with Persians. It may initially have been adopted as a title acceptable to both parties (the Persian deity, Ahura Mazda, was a celestial god).

1:7–11 The return of the temple vessels. This paragraph is doubtless based on an inventory of the returned temple vessels which would have been preserved in the temple archives. The author's purpose in including it was far from antiquarian, however, as his own comments about it make clear. First, several points again recall aspects of the exodus from Egypt. It is clear from Is. 52:11–12 that the return of these vessels had become part of the established expectation of what would be involved in the 'second exodus'. In addition, v 11 uses a formula which is common elsewhere as a description of the exodus ('were brought up from . . . to', rather than NIV *came up*; *cf.* Gn. 50:24; Ex. 3:8, 17; and especially 33:1). Finally, it is possible that the unique title for Sheshbazzar, *the prince of Judah* (8) may be a reflection of Nu. 7:84–86 (and *cf.* Nu. 2:3–31; 7:1–83; 34:18–28, in all of which NIV translates the same word as 'leader'), where the 'princes' of the various tribes are associated with such vessels during the wilderness period.

Secondly, v 7 emphasizes that these vessels are the very ones which had been taken from the first temple in Jerusalem (*cf.* 2 Ki. 24:13; 25:13–15; 2 Ch. 36:7, 10, 18). Symbolically, they perhaps took the place of the idol gods of other nations which Nebuchadnezzar captured and placed in his temple as a token of his superiority. Their return and, by implication, use in the second-temple ceremonies of the author's own day thus helped to establish a strong line of continuity with the temple of Solomon. They served to focus attention on the unity of the people of God, so relativizing the break in worship at the temple caused by the exile.

Notes. 8 *Sheshbazzar* was the first governor of the Persian province of Judah (*cf.* 5:14). Nothing more is known for certain about him. It is likely that he was a prominent leader of the tribe of Judah, but suggestions that he was from the Davidic family or that he is to be identified with Zerubbabel are speculative. **9–10** The specific translation of the various types of vessel is highly uncertain, as a comparison of the various English versions will show. 11 The total, 5,400, does not equal the sum of the parts. This may be due to mistakes in the course of copying the signs for numerals or be a simple accounting error. There are many examples of the latter in the texts of the Persian treasury at Persepolis.

2:1–70 The list of the exiles who returned

It appears from the closing verses of the chapter that this list was compiled some time after the return itself. Quite why and when is not certain, but an attractive suggestion is that it provided the answer to the later official inquiry as to the names of those who were engaged on the building of the second temple (5:4). If this is right, then the list may include not only those who returned immediately after Cyrus's proclamation but others who may have followed them in the subsequent ten or twelve years. The list is repeated at Ne. 7:6–73, where 'the first to return' (v 5) should be understood in a general sense, contrasting with later returns such as that led by Ezra (*cf.* Ezr. 8). The slight differences between the two versions of the list, which mainly concern the numbers, have been explained as due to problems in later copying of the complicated system for recording numerals at this time.

Following the names of twelve leaders (*cf.* Ne.7:7), the order of the list is lay families (3–35), priests (36–39), Levites (40) and minor cultic officials (41–58). It is followed by notes on those who could not establish their pedigree (59–63), a concluding summary (64–67) and other brief notes. The long section on the laity appears not to be a unity, however, since some are registered by family and others by place of residence. It is possible that the latter refer to those who never went into exile, but who nevertheless joined with those returning in the rebuilding of the temple.

The main theological purpose for the inclusion of this list is to emphasize once again the continuity between the post-exilic community and the former people of Israel. This is indicated especially by the notes in vs 59–63 concerning those who could not at this stage establish their genealogy to public satisfaction, and by the number of leaders (twelve), which recalls the number of the tribes of Israel. Furthermore, the emphasis at the start and

conclusion of the list on each person returning to their own town (vs 1 and 70) points to the close association elsewhere in the OT between people and land, so that the chapter functions rather in the manner of the lists in the second half of the book of Joshua. There is thus a hint at a partial fulfilment of the foundational promise to Abraham (Gn. 12:2–3).

Of course, the sense of exclusivity which this chapter conveys needs to be balanced by the inclusive nature of God's purposes attested elsewhere in Scripture, including the OT itself (and as suggested even in this chapter by the large number of foreign names, especially in vs 43–58). But in the present context of a crucial time of transition, it was inevitable that the emphasis should fall on the importance of the community's sense of identity and on the maintenance of a tangible form of continuity with the past.

Similarly, Christian communities must learn to be sensitive to the priorities which their situation demands. The overriding vision remains that of reflecting the welcoming grace of God himself. There are times, however, when moral or doctrinal failings result in a church which is almost indistinguishable from the surrounding society. In such cases it may be that for a time the emphasis will need to revert to reform and a redefinition of the boundaries, a process which looks rather exclusive. Its purpose, however, should be to recreate a vibrant Christian centre which can once again function effectively to draw others into an experience of the love of God.

3:1 – 4:5 The restoration of worship

This section divides into three paragraphs. The first describes the restoration of the altar and of the worship associated with it (3:1–6), the second the preparations for rebuilding the temple (3:7–13) and the third the first note of opposition to the work, which was delayed in consequence (4:1–5). On the face of it, this portrayal does not seem to square with the impression given by the prophet Haggai, who later (about 520 BC) castigated the people for their complete neglect of the temple, and who prompted what appears to be a wholly new beginning on the work of building under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (or Joshua).

Various ways round this difficulty have been proposed; for instance, that by the time of Haggai the small start made earlier had been more or less forgotten. Alternatively, however, it may be that we should not read the present passage as referring wholly to the first days of the return. Vs 7–13 and 4:1–3 might date from the time of Haggai himself (*their arrival at the house of God* in v 8 will then refer to the time when rebuilding commenced, not the date of the initial return from Babylon), with 4:4–5 put in afterwards to explain why such a delay had occurred in the first place (*cf.* 4:4 with 3:3, and note the time span mentioned in v 5). Whatever solution is adopted, however, the writer's main point is clear, and it is intended to be exemplary: the priorities of the people were right in restoring some form of worship as soon as was practical – even before the temple itself was completed (3:6).

3:1–6 Restoration of the altar and worship. This paragraph at least refers to the first days of the return from exile. The altar was restored *on its foundation* (3), that is, on the site of the original altar which had been destroyed. Continuity with the worship of pre-exilic Israel was assured by centring on the very spot which God had revealed should be the sacrificial altar (*cf.* 1 Ch. 22:1). Similarly, the particular (4) and the general (5) sacrifices were resumed *in accordance with what is written*. The forms and expressions of their worship are precisely those which had been instituted by Moses and David.

Notes. 2 Jeshua was the high priest (*cf.* Hg. 1:1), an office which assumed increased importance after the end of the monarchy, and so here appropriately named first. Zerubbabel apparently succeeded Sheshbazzar as civil governor (*cf.* Hg. 1:1). Though he belonged to the Davidic family (1 Ch. 3:19), no significance is attached to that fact in the book of Ezra.

3:7–13 Preparations for rebuilding the temple. Almost every statement about the temple building in this paragraph is consciously intended to underline its similarity to that of the first temple. For instance, v 7 clearly echoes 1 Ch. 22:2–4 and 2 Ch. 2:15–16; the date in v 8 recalls 2 Ch. 3:2, while if the two years of preparation be added to the five years of building (*cf.* 6:15), then the total of seven years may be compared with 1 Ki. 6:38. The role of the Levites in supervising the work (8–9) is the same as 1 Ch. 23:4, and the description of the accompanying celebrations (10–11) recalls the dedication of the first temple (*e.g.* 2 Ch. 5:11–13; 7:3). Finally, an explicit comparison is drawn in vs 12–13, where the sound of joy at the restoration at least matched the disappointed weeping of those who were old enough to have seen the first temple. Again, therefore, an emphasis on continuity and legitimacy is the primary aim of this paragraph, while the note of joy with which it concludes is another challenge to the later generation of the author's contemporaries.

4:1–5 First signs of opposition. If the incident in vs 1–3 dates to the time of Darius, as suggested above, it may well explain why shortly afterwards the whole project became the

subject of an official inquiry in ch. 5. Those who were rebuffed soon started to take reprisals. Although individuals could be received into the community from outside (*cf.* 6:21), it would have jeopardized the legal authority for rebuilding the temple if other groups had joined in as equal partners. The wisdom of standing firm on this point was vindicated by the subsequent inquiry (*cf.* 5:3). *The enemies of Judah and Benjamin* (1) was probably written with the wisdom of hindsight; they may not have appeared as such at the time.

Vs 4–5 were added as a separate explanation for the delay between altar dedication (3:1–6) and temple rebuilding.

Notes. 2 Esarhaddon, king of Assyria's settlement of the old northern kingdom with foreigners is not mentioned in the historical books (2 Ki. 17:24–41 concerns Sargon II), but is alluded to in Is. 7:8. 5 Darius succeeded Cambyses as king of Persia in 522 BC, and he reigned until 486 BC. The first two years of his reign were marked by many rebellions (not mentioned in Ezra, but of possible significance as background to the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah), but thereafter he is represented in Ezra as having resumed the policies of Cyrus.

4:6–24 Open opposition

In this section, there is reference to three letters of accusation against the Jews, one written to Xerxes (6) and two to Artaxerxes (7–16). These two kings reigned after Darius, but chs. 5 – 6 revert to his reign. Unless our author was completely muddled in his chronology of the period, we must assume that this section is a digression or excursus and that v 24 is intended to show that we resume the narrative which was broken off at v 5 (whose wording it explicitly picks up). In favour of this solution is the fact that the accusations relate to the walls of Jerusalem (12–13), not the temple, which is the subject of the remainder of Ezr 1 – 6.

The reason for this digression is clear enough. The writer has just recounted the rebuff of an offer of help. This apparently harsh decision was justified by these later events, when the groups concerned revealed their true colours as indeed 'the enemies of Judah and Benjamin' (1). Since this is only the first of many accounts of opposition to the work of God in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it serves as a warning that there is a constant need for vigilance, and that opposition is best dealt with while it is still 'outside' rather than allowing it to gain a foothold within the community, where it could be even more destructive.

Only one of the accusations is given in full (8–16), and the king's reply (17–22) may be helpful later in explaining the background to Nehemiah's mission. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that the charge of planned rebellion was correct, but in view of the unrest which frequently characterized parts of the western provinces of the empire, Artaxerxes could be forgiven for having 'acted first and thought later'.

Notes 8 As v 7 indicates, the language here switches from Hebrew, the usual language of the OT, to Aramaic, and continues so as far as 6:18. Aramaic was used as a 'diplomatic language' in the Persian empire, and it is probable that many of the official sources on which our author drew were written in it. As it was well understood by the Jews, he chose to retain these sources in their original language and to use it also for his brief narrative connections. 10 Trans-Euphrates was the official name of the western satrapy (province) of the empire. Several of the other names and titles in these verses are obscure. 12 It is possible that those who returned with Ezra are referred to here. 20 The *powerful kings* are not Judeans (such as David and Solomon) but Artaxerxes' predecessors, such as Cyrus and Darius. He is anxious not to be compared unfavourably with them.

5:1 – 6:22 The rebuilding of the temple

The bulk of this lengthy section is clearly focused on one incident which occurred during the rebuilding of the temple, namely the inquiry of the Persian official Tattenai (5:3–17) and the favourable response to it from the court (6:1–13). The author has framed this material with balancing comments about the overruling prompting and providence of God (5:1–2 and 6:14) before briefly rounding off the whole with notes about the celebration of the temple dedication and the Passover (6:15–22). It is worth observing that, as on previous occasions, many details that we might expect to be included are omitted; nothing is said, for instance, about the actual process and progress of the building itself. The author is concerned to tell only as much as he knows from his sources (primarily the copies of the correspondence between Tattenai and the king) and to comment on its theological significance.

In this connection, two points stand out. First, the positive attitude towards the Persian authorities as instruments of God's purposes is again emphasized (see on 1:1 *etc.*). The author adopts the attitude that so far as possible, and in the particular circumstances of his own time, clashes between 'church and state' should be avoided; the rule of God is not compromised by the community which seeks to exploit its rights under civil law since, as their ultimate sovereign, God is well able to work through them for the benefit of his people. He does not

propose that the re-establishment of political independence is in itself a necessary condition for the liberty of the people of God. Indeed, he happily refers to state support for prayer and sacrifice on behalf of the royal family (6:9–10).

Secondly, the theme of continuity, which has been repeatedly noted in the previous chapters, is continued here, both with regard to the temple building itself (*e.g.* 5:8, *cf.* 1 Ki. 6:36 and 7:12; 5:11, 13–15; 6:3–5), and its attendant ceremonies and institutions (*e.g.* 6:17–18).

Although Christianity is not dependent in the same way on such external institutions, it is important for us to be reminded that the 'universal church' includes not only all true believers now, but also all those who have lived before us. We share with them the same Bible, sacraments, many forms of worship and sense of values. It is often an encouragement to reflect upon this 'communion of saints' as well as a healthy exercise to examine our present situation in the light of their example. Without in any way downgrading the full authority of Scripture, we ignore the experience of other Christians ('tradition') at our peril.

5:1–2 Rebuilding the house of God. In line with the depiction in the books of Haggai and Zechariah 1 – 8, the primary stimulus for the work comes from the God of Israel himself, mediated through the prophetic word which evoked an enthusiastic response.

5:3–17 Tattenai's inquiry. Whether this was prompted by the rebuff of 4:1–3 or not, there is no hint that Tattenai himself came to Jerusalem with hostile intent. Since the authorization for the work given nearly twenty years previously by Cyrus (*cf.* vs 13–16) was probably unknown to him, he needed to be sure that all was in order, especially as public funding may have been at issue (*cf.* v 15 with 6:4, 8). V 5 suggests that he was inclined to believe the Jewish account, an attitude which again the author ascribes to divine providence.

Notes. 10 The list of names is not included here, though it may have been used in ch. 2. Clearly, therefore, the author has abbreviated the copy of Tattenai's letter which he was copying. **12** It is worth noting the extent to which this generation had made their own the teaching of the pre-exilic prophets, however unpalatable. Confession of past failure is an important element in renewal. **16** The second half of this verse is not strictly true, since whatever start had been made on the reconstruction under Sheshbazzar had long since ceased. What mattered, however, was that legally the Jews were claiming that their present activity was the direct continuation of the earlier authorization. Hence, they referred to the names that would have been recorded in the state archives, not their present leaders. **17** Quite reasonably, this is the very point of which Tattenai seeks confirmation. The fact that the relevant document was not found at Babylon, as expected, but at one of the other Persian capitals, Ecbatana (6:2), is a strong pointer to the accuracy of this account.

6:1–12 Darius's reply. Darius incorporated a copy of the original decree of Cyrus in his reply (3–6). The Jews' claim was fully vindicated, and Darius went on not only to reaffirm it, but to add certain provisions of his own with strong penalties for disobedience (7–12). Recent discoveries of Persian administrative texts, though not themselves referring to the Jews or the Jerusalem temple, have shown that such support for local cults was widely practised in the empire.

Note. 3 The last part of this verse should probably be emended to read 'thirty cubits high, sixty cubits long and twenty cubits wide', *i.e.* approximately 45ft (13m) high, 90ft (27m) long and 30ft (9m) wide.

6:13–18 Completion and dedication of the temple. As at the start of this section, the author again emphasizes the overruling hand of God in the political process. To the importance of the prophets (v 14; *cf.* 5:1) is added the identity of God's command with that of the kings. Artaxerxes may be included here in anticipation of his support of Ezra in the next chapter; at any rate, the reference cannot be to the wholly negative role assigned to him in ch. 4.

The dedication of the temple presents the community in a very positive light. They regarded themselves as representative of the whole of pre-exilic Israel (v 17), and appropriately the ceremony was reminiscent of the dedication of Solomon's temple, when the whole nation was still united (*cf.* 1 Ki. 8). Though this may seem far removed from the actual circumstances of the post-exilic period, it serves to hold before the reader the inclusive ideal which any religious community, then or since, should adopt.

6:19–22 Celebration of the Passover. The author here reverts to the use of Hebrew to round off the whole of Ezr. 1 – 6. The Passover was an appropriate festival with which to conclude his account of what we have seen was a series of events which he regarded in many ways as a second exodus. V 21 again stresses that the community was open to any who were willing to join without preconditions.

Note. 22 *The king of Assyria* is a superficially curious way of referring to a Persian king (Darius) and is perhaps to be explained in terms of Assyria being regarded as symbolic of an oppressive power (*cf.* Ne. 9:32), a role later ascribed to Babylon (*cf.* 1 Pet. 5:13; Rev. 14:8; 18:2).

It was not wholly inappropriate, since Persia inherited the Babylonian empire, who in turn had inherited it from Assyria. There is also some evidence that the Persians were conscious of this inheritance.

7:1 – 10:44 Ezra

Material about Ezra is found in Ezr. 7 – 10 and Ne. 8. Part of this is told in Ezra's own words, and it seems probable that the remainder has been rewritten from this account by a later editor. Assuming that the king in question is Artaxerxes I, there is a gap of some fifty-seven years between Ezr. 6 and 7. Nothing speaks louder of the writer's theological rather than purely historical interest than his casual bridging of this gap by the words *After these things* (7:1). Clearly, he is not going to tell just about the next thing that happened, but about the next significant event in God's overall plan for the renewal of the Jewish community after the dislocation of the Babylonian exile.

7:1–10 Introduction to Ezra

Ezra is introduced as a priest and a scribe. His genealogy (1–5) shows that he was a member of the priestly family, a descendant of Seraiah, the penultimate high priest of pre-exilic Judah (1 Ch. 6:14). In post-exilic times, however, the teaching role of the priests was increasingly assumed by the scribes, of whom Ezra is presented as an outstanding example (vs 6 and 10). This was inevitable once written Scripture became the primary religious authority. He thus stands at the transition point in the manner in which God's law was mediated to his people, and we are prepared for the important part which the interpretation of a now fixed scriptural text plays in his narrative.

His journey to Jerusalem is summarized in vs 6–9; more detail follows in ch. 8. *The first day of the first month* (9) points to the Passover festival (*cf.* Ex. 12:2), and this is in line with the later interpretation of Ezra as a second Moses. Writing such as this draws personalities and events into a pattern of familiar saving-history, leading to a fuller appreciation of God's ruling over the affairs of all his people, and enabling later readers too to trace comparable patterns in their own experience, however superficially insignificant. It is along these lines that many OT characters can still serve as an example for us today (*cf.* 1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

7:11–28 Ezra's commission

This copy of Ezra's commission by Artaxerxes, which may have been drafted in response to a specific request by Ezra himself (*cf.* 7:6), is written in Aramaic (see on 4:8). He is given four tasks to perform.

First, he is to lead a return from Babylon to Judah (13). (This is the subject of ch. 8.) Secondly, he is to transport various gifts and grants for the temple (15–20) as well as an order to the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates to make certain supplies for the temple services. A copy of the latter is included in the text of the commission (21–24). Perhaps to guard against any suspicion of irregularity in the handling of this sensitive measure, its fulfilment is carefully spelt out at 8:24–30, 33–34 and 36.

Thirdly, he is to *enquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God* (14). In the context, this seems most likely to refer to the need to ensure that the grants for the temple were being used according to the Jewish law, which, in line with their custom elsewhere, would have been recognized by the Persians as the properly authorized constitution for the religious life of the province. This may underlie the treatment of the question of mixed marriages, which dominates chs. 9 – 10, since obviously such marriages would have caused problems of determining under which jurisdiction a couple lived.

Finally, Ezra is to teach conformity to the Jewish law to those Jews who lived outside the province of Judah (25–26). This would have been a delicate issue, since there would have been many possible points of conflict between *the Law of your God* and *the law of the king* (26). The Jews in Babylon must already have faced this issue and come to terms with it. Who better than one of their leading teachers to give such instruction to other groups in a similar situation? It is a problem which many believers in various situations have faced since then, so that Ezra's approach would have been most instructive. Unfortunately, the silence of the following chapters suggests that he never got round to this part of his commission.

Momentous as the document was in terms of the history of the development of Judaism, Ezra's prayer in response (27–28) sees here only further provision for the temple, the centre of his people's worship, and an expression of God's steadfast love. The conditions might have changed radically over the centuries since the first call of Abraham with all its attendant promises, but God was still *the God of our fathers*, who could move even a Persian monarch and his officials to further his purposes.

8:1–36 Ezra's journey to Jerusalem

Most of this chapter is a relatively straightforward account which, as already noted, draws attention to Ezra's obedience to his royal commission. Nevertheless, its three principal themes are attributed not just to his own abilities, but to *the gracious hand of our God* [*which*] *was on us* (18; *cf.* vs 22 and 31).

First, Ezra was anxious that among those who returned with him (1–14) there should be some Levites (15–20). Their subordinate role in the service of the temple may have meant that such a return would have been unattractive to them, but their presence on the journey may have been felt necessary if it was to conform symbolically to the wilderness journey following the exodus (*cf.* Nu. 10:11–28). On that occasion too they had been especially responsible for the transport of the sacred vessels.

Secondly, the safe journey itself was attributed to God's gracious hand when Ezra had refused the offer of an armed escort (21–23). This seemingly rash boast drove the people to their knees, and their faith was rewarded. The different attitude of Nehemiah (*cf.* Ne. 2:9) reminds the reader, however, that God is able to work for his people through 'normal' as much as through extraordinary means, a principle which reaches its climax in the incarnation itself.

There is sometimes a tendency for Christians to fall into the trap of thinking that God is only at work in miracles and special events and to write off as 'unspiritual' such mundane procedures as, for example, committees. However, since for our salvation God chose to become man in the person of Christ, we may expect to find him at work just as much in the consecrated use of human means as in the bypassing of them. He is the God of our whole lives, and we should beware of compartmentalizing his activity. Ultimately, that road leads only to excluding him from much of our lives, or, in other words, to hypocrisy.

Thirdly, the transportation of costly offerings (see on ch. 7) without interference from bandits was also ascribed to God's gracious hand. Here again, however, the elaborate accounting procedures which Ezra followed demonstrate that it would be a mistake to argue that a 'spiritual' as opposed to a 'practical' approach was being advocated.

Not surprisingly, the travellers offered sacrifices of thanksgiving once they had arrived in Jerusalem and rested (35). Coming so long after the first return, they had discovered that the idea of a second exodus was not a solitary event, but an experience which successive generations might enjoy. Its promise and hope were not exhausted by the first group to return, nor was blame attached to those who chose to go later. Rather, the prospect of deliverance and new life is seen to confront each new generation with its challenge for decision.

9:1–15 A report of mixed marriages and Ezra's confession

Four months passed (*cf.* 10:9), and we must suppose, as 10:3 hints, that Ezra had in the meantime begun his teaching ministry, as illustrated by Ne. 8. From this chapter and elsewhere, we learn that he was able to reapply what might have been thought to be outdated laws to new situations, in particular by linking together different passages of Scripture in order to dig out the theological principles which underlay the specific older laws.

The result was that the people came to appreciate that marriage with an unbelieving foreigner was no different in principle from marriage with the local inhabitants of Canaan which had been forbidden to their ancestors. Most of the peoples mentioned in v 1 no longer existed, but by drawing on a variety of other material (including Lv. 18; 19:19; Dt. 7:1–4 and 20:10–18) the contemporary relevance of the laws was appreciated.

Ezra's prayer is pure confession. It contains no request for forgiveness or other petition. Its climax is *O LORD,... you are righteous!* (15). Even if God should destroy his people, Ezra acknowledged that he would be justified. This may be said to constitute the highest form of worship: God being praised solely for who he is, and not merely for what the worshipper hopes to gain from him.

Appropriately, therefore, Ezra adopted the stance of one in mourning for the dead (3), and he prayed representatively on behalf of all the people. His prayer (6–15) again draws on a variety of earlier biblical sources as it moves through individual and communal lament (6–7), reflection on God's present mercies, which only underline the people's ingratitude (8–9), specific confession (10–12), statement of future intent (13–14) and concluding general confession (15).

10:1–44 The problem of mixed marriages resolved

Ezra's style of leadership repays study. As elsewhere (*e.g.* 9:1; Ne. 8:1), so here, he waited for the people to approach him. By teaching, patience and example, he was thus able to bring them without coercion to make for themselves the decisions he considered beneficial.

The narrative proceeds in a straightforward manner, leading, after due consideration of all the attendant circumstances (14), to the divorce of their wives by a number of men who are listed in the second half of the chapter. The poignant reference to women and children in the first and last verses of the chapter suggests that the narrator was not unaware of the human cost involved. The main difficulty a reader is likely to face is not in understanding what happened so much as why it happened.

The chief point that should be appreciated is that in its precarious situation the Jewish

community in Judah needed a strong sense of its own identity if it was to survive at all. Artaxerxes's commission (7:12–26) had provided Ezra with a mandate to develop Judaism as a strictly religious community. The qualifications for membership thus had to be redefined; otherwise there was a danger that the distinctive elements of the faith would be watered down, perhaps beyond the point of recognition. As a principle for the people of God, that point retains its validity (*cf.* Mt. 5:13–16), though the specific means which Ezra adopted to achieve it are explicitly ruled out for the Christian (1 Cor. 7; 1 Pet. 3:1–7).

For this reason, it would be unwise to see in this particular set of historical circumstances a direct parallel to the vexed question of a Christian deliberately entering into marriage with a non-Christian partner. (2 Cor. 6:14 is not directly addressing this issue, though its principle is often thought to apply to it.) Nevertheless, this whole episode serves to remind us of the primacy of doing all that we can to strengthen our own faith and that of our fellowship and not to lay ourselves open to situations which might lead in the opposite direction.

NEHEMIAH

For Futher reading list see Ezra

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Commentary

The first half of the book of Nehemiah (chs. 1 – 7) is devoted almost entirely to Nehemiah's work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This forms to some extent a political or social counterpart to the more religiously oriented reforms of Ezra just recounted, though of course the two spheres are by no means to be kept isolated from each other. The narrative is largely based on Nehemiah's own first-person account. The second half of the book (chs. 8 – 13), which draws on a wider variety of source materials, then presents the combined climax of the two reformers' work in the spiritual renewal of the community and related matters.

1:1 – 7:73 Nehemiah restores the walls of Jerusalem

The events recounted here are to be dated to the years 446 – 445 BC (*cf.* Ezr. 1:1), some twelve or thirteen years after Ezra came to Jerusalem. We can only speculate about what had been happening in the meantime (see on 1:4 below). Once again, the editor's purpose is to concentrate on what he regards as the theologically important moments in his people's salvation-history, focusing on divine cause and effect rather than on the more familiar means for linking events together that are appropriate in a secular history.

1:1–11 Nehemiah's vocation

As a *cupbearer to the king* (11), Nehemiah held a position of trust at court. He would have been expected to serve as a tactful companion, who could thus wield considerable influence by informal counsel and discussion. There is no indication at the start of the narrative that he had any intention of abandoning this privileged position in order to throw in his lot with his fellow-Jews in the remote and insignificant Jerusalem.

By means of what may have been no more than a casual inquiry (2), he received news of some recent disaster. The effects on him were so overwhelming (4) that this cannot refer to the Babylonian destruction 140 years previously. More probably, we should see a reference here to the events narrated in Ezr. 4:7–23, which are included in that passage out of strict chronological order. We do not know whether Ezra himself was still present in Jerusalem at that time (his participation in the abortive attempt to rebuild the walls seems unlikely), but if he were we could understand how it would have proved impossible thereafter to complete the terms of his commission (see on Ezr. 7:25).

Nehemiah's response to hearing the news is indicative of his awareness that God was calling him to a completely new sphere of service, for which his position and training had uniquely prepared him. This is shown in particular by his sense of identity with his people (4, 6–7) and the fact that he prayed about the situation for four months (2:1). (Clearly, the account we have here is but a summary.) Such a period of waiting is indicative both of faith in the reality of the call and of sustained commitment.

Nehemiah's prayer (5–11), which draws heavily on Israel's rich liturgical tradition, focused first on *the God of heaven*, and this led immediately to confession of both personal and national sin (6–7). Only then does he turn to a summary of God's covenant promises (8–9) as a basis for his twofold petition, in general for restoration of his people's fortunes and in particular for the right approach to the king. If we are right in seeing Ezr. 4 in the background, then v 21 of that chapter shows both the potential danger which such an approach might entail as well as an opportunity that might be exploited. With so much at stake, Nehemiah, otherwise supremely a man of action, wisely left the details of timing and manner of approach in God's hands.

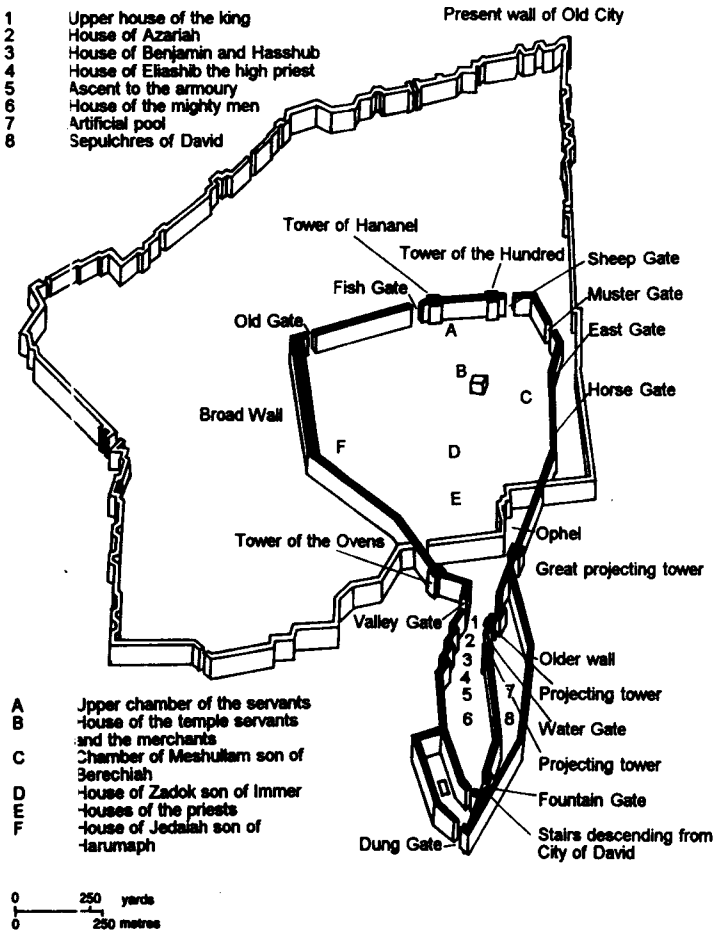
2:1–20 Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem

The parallel references to Nehemiah's enemies in vs 10 and 19–20 clearly divide this chapter into two parts. In the first, Nehemiah acts with a confidence born of the assurance that God is moving to answer his prayer; in the second, where he begins to encounter the unknown, he shows commendable caution.

2:1–10 Nehemiah and the king. It is not clear whether Nehemiah deliberately adopted a morose expression as a means of inviting the king to open a personal conversation (1–2). At all events, his initial response (3) was sufficiently non-committal to test whether this was indeed God's timing. Taking the king's further question as a sign that it was, he gathered up his prayers of the previous months (4) and simultaneously presented his request. When this was received favourably (6) he pressed on boldly to state his other needs in specific terms. It is a fine illustration of the balance between confidence in the sovereignty of God, with prayer as its proper response, and human responsibility, with its counterpart in thoughtful planning. We should note too that Nehemiah had no doubts that God could use human channels to supply his needs (8).

Notes. 10 *Sanballat*, Nehemiah's arch-rival, is known from a document discovered in Egypt to have been the governor of Samaria and to have given his sons good 'Yahwistic' names. We may speculate that, following the debacle of Ezr. 4, he had been given temporary jurisdiction over Judah and that this may account for his jealousy of Nehemiah. *Tobiah* had close personal links inside Jerusalem (*cf.* 6:17–19; 13:4–5); was he perhaps Sanballat's deputy in Jerusalem during the 'interregnum'?

2:11–20 Nehemiah inspects Jerusalem's walls. After arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah tested his vocation with caution. First, he engaged physically, but in secret, with the task which confronted him (11–16), no doubt 'counting the cost' of so momentous an undertaking *cf.* Lk. 9:57–62; 14:28–32). Secondly, with more than a hint that he believed that God had sent him, he invited the co-operation of the people in the fulfilment of his call (17–18). Their unanimous response confirmed that he was on



Probable reconstruction of Jerusalem as rebuilt by Nehemiah in the fifth century BC.

the right path. Individual vocation generally finds such confirmation by the community of faith (Acts 13:1–2). Finally, he was not deflected by opposition, but rather responded with a positive assertion of what he had been called to do, and left the outcome to the God who had initiated the task (19–20).

Note. 19 We learn from inscriptions that *Geshem the Arab* was a powerful desert king whose influence extended round much of the southern and eastern borders of Judah. The motivation for his opposition is not so clear as in the case of Sanballat and Tobiah, and he is mentioned less frequently than they.

3:1–32 Rebuilding the wall

This list of those engaged in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem looks back from the standpoint of the completed task, a point which, strictly speaking, is not reached in the narrative until 6:15. Though there is no direct reference to Nehemiah, we need not doubt that it illustrates his skills of organization and leadership. It moves section by section round the wall in an anti-clockwise direction from and to the Sheep Gate (1, 32) in the north eastern corner. From v 16 onwards, the nature of the description changes somewhat. This is probably because up to that point the builders had been following the line of an earlier wall, whereas from this point on they plotted a new line. The destruction along the steep eastern slope of the city,

overlooking the Kidron Valley, seems to have been so severe (*cf.* 2:14) that, for the sake of time, the wall was pulled back to a line higher up the slope; note the references to those who in consequence found themselves building beside their own houses (23–30).

The overall picture to emerge is instructive. It demonstrates first a unity of intention by the people, some forty sections apparently working simultaneously. This could not have been achieved had there not been good supervision, close co-operation and an eye open for what was being done in neighbouring sections. Secondly, however, the interests and motives of those involved differed considerably. Some worked on the basis of family association, others as individuals, some in district associations, some on the basis of their position in society and yet others because of professional association. Moreover, in many cases the people were employed at that point in the wall where they had a vested interest. These first two points serve as a useful illustration of the unity and diversity which should characterize the work of the church (*cf.*, for instance, Rom. 12:3–8;1 Cor. 12:4–27; Eph. 4:1–13). Finally, it is challenging to note the varying degrees of involvement. A few refused to participate at all (5); most appear to have completed the task allotted to them; but some even managed a second section (1, 19–21, 24, 27 and 30).

4:1–23 Further opposition

It is noteworthy that each stage of Nehemiah's activity was met with opposition, every time introduced with the formula 'when so-and-so heard'; (*cf.* vs 1, 7; 2:10, 19; 6:1, 16.) As the work progressed, so the opposition grew more fierce and the description of the response more elaborate.

4:1–5 Ridicule. Sanballat and Tobiah here amplify their mockery of 2:19 in an attempt both to demoralize the builders (5) and to reassure their own supporters (2). Nehemiah's response (4–5) was to commit the problem to God in prayer, which is commendable, for he thereby recognized that the insults were directed as much against God as against himself and that vindication should come from his LORD rather than his own efforts. Nevertheless, the sentiments he expressed have been superseded for the Christian (*cf. e.g.* Mt. 5:43–48; 18: 21–22; Rom. 12:14–21), for whom the work of Christ has provided an assurance of the final victory of love which Nehemiah could not possibly have known.

4:6–23 Intimidation. As the work reached the half-way stage, Nehemiah faced a twofold crisis. On the one hand, his workforce was in danger of becoming demoralized both by the scale of the task (10) and by the pleas of family members who, living in outlying villages, were aware of the enemy's preparations and so kept trying to urge their menfolk to return home (11–12). On the other hand, the augmented forces of the enemy were threatening to attack (7). It is difficult to say whether this was a genuine threat (its legality within the Persian empire is questionable), but for those who had recently experienced the debacle of Ezr. 4:23 even the appearance of history being about to repeat itself would have been severely unsettling.

Nehemiah's response to these problems is a model of perceptive leadership. He displayed common-sense flexibility in interrupting the work briefly in order to rally his people (13–14; see below) and in setting in place new arrangements for security (16–20). Then he encouraged the people by an appeal to tradition, using methods and words which had proved effective in the past history of Israel. This cannot be documented in full here, but for examples compare v 14 with Ex. 14:13–14, v 15 with Ex. 15:14–16, and v 20 with Ex. 14:14 and Jdg. 6:34. By thus imposing a familiar interpretative framework on his people's sense of confusion, Nehemiah was able to turn even their fear and sense of weakness into a ground for faith. Finally, he led by example, as the concluding verses of the chapter underline.

Notes. 12–13 The translation of these verses is uncertain. It would be clearer to read 'When the Jews who lived near them came and said to us time and again from all sides "You must return to us", then I took up a position in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall in an exposed place and I made the people stand by families with their swords . . .' In other words, Nehemiah rallied the people in the manner of Israel's ancient conscript army and addressed them in a way similar to that used by Moses, Joshua and Israel's other great leaders when faced with apparently overwhelming odds. **16** *my men* refers not to the builders in general, but to a smaller group of trained men who, for whatever reason, owed personal allegiance to Nehemiah (*cf.* 5:10 and 16).

5:1–19 Social and economic problems

Though not explicitly stated, it seems probable that the need of some from the countryside to work on the walls during the summer (*cf.* 6:15) brought to a head an economic crisis which may have been developing for some while previously. The final paragraph of the chapter (14–19), however, is from a very much later period, but has been included here because it relates to the same theme.

5:1–13 Debt problems resolved. Three

separate complaints are detailed in vs 2–4, while v 5 probably serves as a summary of all three. The reference to *their wives* (1) may indicate that they were most conscious of the approaching calamity because they were having to manage at home during their husbands' absence in Jerusalem.

The first group (2) were families who owned no land, and so were first to feel the effects of lack of income from labouring while engaged on the wall-building. The second group (3) were already mortgaging their land and would lose their security altogether if they could not repay their debts from the annual harvest, while the third group (4) were apparently having to borrow in order to pay their taxes. For all of them, the sense of social injustice was aggravated by the facts that their creditors were fellow-Jews (1, 5) and that they were reaching the point of having to sell themselves into debt-slavery.

Though not illegal as such, such practices were permitted only as short-term measures, and the law was concerned to protect the longer-term interests of the very poor (*e.g.* Ex. 21:2–11; Lv. 25; Dt. 15:1–18). This could not help in the present sudden emergency, and, besides, what was happening was contrary to the whole ethos of what Nehemiah was attempting to achieve (6–8). He therefore brought moral pressure to bear on the creditors by confronting them in public and by candidly acknowledging his own shortcomings in the matter (10). In this way he cut straight through any legalistic arguments in order to uphold the moral spirit of the law, very much in the manner of some of the earlier prophets.

5:14–19 Nehemiah's personal example. In order to illustrate the principle that within the community generosity is to be preferred to personal gain, Nehemiah reflected on his practice throughout what we now learn for the first time was his twelve-year term as governor (14). This is considerably longer than the period envisaged at 2:6, and we know next to nothing about what happened after the first year. The highly selective nature of the biblical record is thus again emphasized.

Note. 19 This is the first of Nehemiah's distinctive 'remember me' prayers; *cf.* 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31. They mostly date, as in the present case, to a time long after the wall-building and seem to indicate that, as he looked back after many years, Nehemiah had come to feel that justice had not been done to him by the community which he had sought to serve.

6:1–19 The wall completed despite personal threats

The three paragraphs in this chapter are clearly marked and shown to be dealing with a similar theme by the references to intimidation in their concluding summaries (9, 14, 19). Unlike ch. 4, however, Nehemiah himself came under personal threat. Despite this, the work was brought to a triumphant conclusion (15–16).

6:1–9 Sanballat tries to eliminate Nehemiah. When Sanballat's initial attempt to secure a meeting with Nehemiah failed (2–4), he resorted to a lightly disguised form of blackmail (5–7). There is no reason whatever to suppose that his accusations carried any substance, but again he may have reckoned that the recent events of Ezr. 4 would have been sufficiently fresh in the memories of Nehemiah's associates to get them to bring pressure on him to compromise.

6:10–14 Tobiah seeks to discredit Nehemiah. Tobiah's close contacts in Jerusalem (17–19) fitted him to act as the chief protagonist in this episode. Several of its details are obscure, but the aim seems to have been to entice or frighten Nehemiah into entering not just the temple but the very sanctuary itself. Even if he had emerged alive, his trespass as a layman into the holy place, which was reserved for the priests, would have driven a wedge between him and the influential priesthood. Apart from the fact that the proposed course of action would have been out of character for a man like Nehemiah (11), its improper suggestion (13) was sufficient to warn him that such a prophetic word could not possibly have come from God.

6:15–19 The wall is completed. The main point of this paragraph comes in vs 17–19, whose chronologically vague introduction (*in those days*) shows that it marks a point of transition from the account of the wall-building to the remainder of the narrative which deals with reforms internal to Judah. Appropriately, the chief protagonists here, therefore, were *the nobles of Judah*, who may have wished to maintain good relations with their neighbours for purposes of trade as well as more personal social reasons.

Nonetheless, we cannot overlook the scale of the achievement modestly introduced in v 15. The proper reaction is suitably reserved for the surrounding nations (16), which points to the fulfilment of Nehemiah's appeal in 2:17. There is no pause for self-congratulation here, however. The wall is regarded as no more than an institutional framework; what counts are the attitudes and activities of the people who live behind it, and already the close of the chapter indicates dangers in this regard. The narrative thus points us forward to the need for the reforms which are to follow.

7:1–73 The need to populate Jerusalem

Recognizing the dangers just mentioned, Nehemiah first adopted short-term measures in

order to maintain the security of the city (1–3). In the longer term, however, what was required was a thriving population of those committed to the standards and principles which Nehemiah stood for. He therefore resorted to what may seem to be the somewhat drastic measure of organizing the movement of a sizeable body of people from the countryside into the city. As a basis for this, he decided to make use of the list of those who had returned to Jerusalem at the first (*cf.* Ezr. 2). While we know that others had also returned in the meantime, the repetition of the list in the present context makes the important theological point that those who should populate the city of God stand in direct continuity with the community who had earlier experienced God's redemption in the 'second exodus'.

8:1 – 10:39 Covenant renewal

The narrative of ch. 7 is not resumed until ch. 11. In between come three important chapters which deal with the spiritual restoration of the community under the shared leadership of both Ezra and Nehemiah. If ch. 7 has already shown that bricks and mortar are not in themselves sufficient to secure the future, then these chapters further indicate that it is not enough either just to fill the city with people of any sort. Only a people which has experienced God's redemption and renewal, a people to whom is entrusted the law of God (ch. 8), who recognize their dependence upon him (ch. 9) and who are fully committed to a life of faithful obedience (ch. 10) can ensure that the institutional structures which have been set in place serve their true purpose.

8:1–18 The reading of the law

The reappearance of Ezra in this chapter raises a problem. The narrative has reached a point some thirteen years after his journey to Jerusalem with the book of the law, and nothing has been heard of him in the meanwhile. Are we to suppose that only now, after the main work of Nehemiah had been accomplished, was he able to undertake the principal purpose of his mission, or should we look for some other explanation?

There is room for difference of opinion here, and so any suggestion must be advanced with caution. It is noteworthy, however, that at this point we also take leave of Nehemiah's own account (it is resumed at 12:31) and that the account in this chapter has some features which connect it rather with the Ezra source of Ezr. 7 – 10. It is therefore attractive to suppose that this account of Ezra's reading the law once belonged with the rest of the Ezra material. Its original location may have been between Ezr. 8 and 9, and it could have been moved to its present setting by the compiler of the books as a whole in order both to emphasize the theological points outlined above in the introduction to Ne. 8 – 10 and to demonstrate how the work of the two great reformers should ultimately be seen as parts of the single divine act of the restoration of the people of God. The giving of the law should be seen as an act of grace at the climax of the restoration programme, not a condition for the restoration in the first place. We saw in Ezr. 4 how these books sometimes allow considerations of theme to override a strict chronology.

However its origin is to be explained, the chapter as it now stands has important lessons about the teaching and reception of the law by the community of faith.

8:1–6 Reading the law. This paragraph shows the happy combination of a people eager to be taught and a teacher willing and able to meet their need. The people took the initiative in inviting Ezra to bring out the law (1); the whole community, v 2 emphasizes, gathered to hear it; they anticipated the reading with a sense of reverent expectancy (6); and they listened attentively throughout the lengthy exposition (3). As the sequel shows, such an attitude allows God's word to have its maximum impact on the hearers.

For his part, Ezra not only responded at once to the people's request (2), but he chose to do so not in the temple courts, but in an easily accessible place (3) and in full view (4) so that none should be barred from attending. Moreover, he chose to associate lay people with him in the enterprise (4). It seems that he was anxious to avoid any impression that the law was the private preserve of the religious professional.

8:7–12 Interpreting the law. There is a striking contrast between the two parts of this paragraph, the 'understanding' of the law (8, 12) first causing the people to weep (9) and then to celebrate with joy (12). The initial reaction is probably not to be explained by the fact that the law was unfamiliar to them so much as that the interpretation which Ezra and the Levites provided (7–8) brought home its relevance to their situation in a fresh way. As we saw to be the case at Ezr. 9:1–2, Ezra (perhaps for the first time) developed a means of interpreting Scripture whereby parts which had been thought to be out of date were shown to reveal the underlying principles of God's will which were of timeless relevance. The result of this was to stir the people's consciences as they came to realize how far short of God's standards their lives had fallen.

This, however, is neither the sole nor the dominant message either of the OT law or of Scripture as a whole. By reminding them that

this day was *sacred* (9, 11) – a day on which they were especially to recall God's past acts of grace and salvation towards Israel – and that *the joy of the LORD* was the source of their strength (10) as they linked themselves by faith with the experience of their ancestors, Ezra set their legitimate sense of failure within the wider context of God's grace and invitation. Confession would have its proper place (ch. 9), but the first response to hearing God's word should be of joyful acceptance (10–11). It is a pattern of response not unlike that in Acts 2:37–39. It also illustrates the truth that an orthodox doctrine of the authority of Scripture is not enough. If it is to be effective it needs an interpretation which is true to the tradition from which it derives. It also requires the reverent application of reason in working through its abiding relevance to the changed circumstances of any given contemporary community.

Note. 10 The NIV has *Nehemiah said* whereas the Hebrew text states only 'he said'. In the context, Ezra is the more probable subject.

8:13–18 Applying the law. From the community's general acceptance of the law, the leaders turned to Ezra for more detailed instruction (13). In view of the time of year, the most immediately relevant passage would have been Lv. 23, which legislates for the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (*booths*, 14). The requirement to *proclaim this word* (15) indicates interpretative work on Lv. 23:4. The trees listed are not mentioned in the law (the phrase *as it is written* qualifies only the words *to make booths*), but testify to a desire to give a practical application to the generalized commandment of the law. In all this, the people found great joy in enthusiastically following the detailed requirements whose relevance had been freshly brought home to them (16–18). V 17 again suggests that part of this joy was a renewed appreciation of their historical tradition.

9:1–37 Confession

In the overall structure of chs. 8 – 10, the reading of Scripture (ch. 8) is followed by confession (ch. 9) as a preparation for a renewed pledge to keep the law (ch. 10).

9:1–5 Assembly for confession. The striking point about this paragraph is the absence of the names of either Ezra or Nehemiah. The emphasis is on each individual accepting a share of responsibility in word, attitude (1) and deed (2) for the past sin and present plight of the community. Appropriately, therefore, it was two groups of otherwise unknown Levites who led the congregation in their worship and confession (4–5).

9:5b–37 Prayer of confession. True confession arises from a renewed appreciation of who God is, and that is very much the starting point for this prayer. From the beginning of time, God has revealed himself as one who is worthy of *all blessing and praise* (5b). He alone is the LORD, as shown by creation (6); he chose Abram, freely promised him a land and proved that he is *righteous* by keeping that promise (7–8); and he proved himself worthy of such a reputation (*name*, 10) by the deliverance of his people in the exodus and at the Red Sea (9–11). These first three sections of the prayer, therefore, speak in unqualified terms of God's goodness and grace, and they provide the basis for the sharp contrast which the community felt in its present circumstances as outlined in the closing verses of the prayer (32–37), where several key terms from this opening section are repeated.

With the journey through the wilderness (12–21) a new note is sounded. Alongside the continuing gracious provision of God (12–15), the people began to rebel (16–18). This, however, only revealed another aspect of God's character, his mercy (17b), for despite everything he continued to supply and sustain them (19–21), and eventually brought them to the land which he had promised so long ago (22–25).

The portrayal of life in the land (26–31) is very much influenced by the pattern which recurs throughout the book of Judges and to a lesser extent Kings. We cannot identify specific events here; rather the focus is on the underlying rebellious nature of the people and God's response to it. Three times we are told that they were disobedient and so were handed over to their enemies (26–27a; 28a; 29–30). In the first two cases, they then cried to God, who delivered them in his compassion (27b; 28b). That element in the pattern is not repeated the third time, however, probably because vs 29–31 are speaking of the Babylonian conquest and exile, a state which theologically speaking was still in force at the time of this prayer; the restoration could not yet be regarded as complete because foreign oppression continued (36–37).

Instead, in a most powerful move from the point of intercession, the expected report of the people's cry to God is replaced by an actual prayer to that effect, starting at v 32. Against the background of all that has gone before, this breathes a strong atmosphere of hope that God will again move to liberate his people from their present experience of bondage, and that he will again allow them to experience freedom in the land which he had given them in faithfulness to his original promise. The people's confession is thus a vital step towards their restoration which is the subject of these chapters as a whole.

9:38 – 10:39 A pledge to keep the law

In this chapter, the community enters into a binding agreement (1) to observe various aspects of the law, mostly, though not entirely, related to the support of the temple and its services (29–39). In its present setting as part of the climax of the combined work of Ezra and Nehemiah, it serves to demonstrate the earnestness of the people to live a life worthy of those who have experienced the restoring grace of God. It is a response to what he has achieved on their behalf, not a condition of restoration in the first place.

Like the two chapters which precede it, its original historical setting is uncertain. Many scholars have noted that most of the specific points of the agreement appear to put on a permanent basis the avoidance of abuses with which Nehemiah dealt in piecemeal fashion in ch. 13, and so conclude that the pledge of this chapter must have been formulated later. If so, the final editor of the book would again have been grouping his material according to theme rather than in strictly chronological order. See the introductory comments to chs. 8 – 10 and to ch. 8 above, and note that the narrative which was interrupted after ch. 7 is only resumed at ch. 11, indicating that chs. 8 – 10 as a whole are to be treated separately.

10:1–28 The list of signatories. This list (which in the Hebrew text actually interrupts a single sentence made up of 9:38 and 10:28–29) comprises a comprehensive accumulation of most of the names and titles for the people who are known from elsewhere in these books to have been in good standing in the community. The point seems to be that each individual has a responsibility to accept for himself or herself the values which characterize the whole.

10:29–39 The details of the agreement. V 29 states in a general way that the people intended henceforth to observe the law of God, and the following verses spell out in detail what this will mean in various specific instances (doubtless those which had recently been particularly neglected). A vague statement of good intentions is not sufficient: a confession of faith needs to be translated into a practical and visible change of life-style and practice.

The details of the individual clauses of the agreement and their relationship with the laws of the Pentateuch are complex and cannot be described in full here. The general point to note is that they all have links with the written law but again display the kind of interpretative activity by way of clarification and updating which we have seen to have been a mark of Ezra's teaching. It is thus clear that the leaders of the community had made their own the new style of teaching which he had introduced.

11:1 – 13:31 Consolidation

11:1–20 The new residents of Jerusalem

The opening of this chapter resumes the narrative which was broken off at the end of ch. 7. It does not, however, appear to come from Nehemiah's own account, but from some alternative source. This indicates that although much of the book presents the course of events very much from one man's point of view, many of the chief elements of his programme were also shared or adopted by a number of his contemporaries.

The problem of the previously reduced population of Jerusalem was resolved by lot (a system which, under priestly direction, was believed to reveal God's will; *cf.* 10:34). A tenth (or tithe; *cf.* 10:37–38) of the people agreed to move in from the countryside (1–2). Their names were then recorded with some gratitude (3–19), for in many cases it must have involved considerable inconvenience. V 20 is an obvious conclusion for this particular list.

Most of the list is paralleled in 1 Ch. 9:2–17, and a close comparison shows that neither has preserved the whole of the original. Beyond observing the general order (men of Judah, 4b–6; men of Benjamin, 7–8; secular leaders, 9; priests, 10–14; Levites 15–18; gatekeepers, 19), we should therefore be careful about matters of detail. It is interesting to note, however, that part of the vocabulary used in the description has a military flavour (*e.g.* in vs 6, 9 and 14); the defensive purpose of the operation was apparently not forgotten.

11:21 – 12:26 Supplementary lists

After the natural conclusion of the main list in 11:20 (and note that it leads naturally into the next narrative item at 12:27), the opportunity has been taken to add a number of other lists which are not directly associated with the question of the population of Jerusalem. 11:21–24 are supplementary to the main list, 11:25–36 catalogue some of the settlements outside Jerusalem, and 12:1–26 combine several lists of priests and Levites. Though this material is thus not strictly related to the general story-line of this part of the book, it contributes in its own way to the portrayal of a community which was ordering itself anew.

Detailed analysis of this section is too complex to be attempted here, but a couple of broader matters deserve comment. First, the list of settlements in 11:25–36 is more extensive than the actual province of Judah at the time. It seems to look wistfully back to former, more

glorious days (*cf.* Jos. 15) and thereby to stimulate hopes for a greater future yet to come. The discrepancy between present reality and the broad sweep of the promises of God is a vital element in the faith of the people of God in any age, as Heb. 11:13–16 makes clear.

Secondly, 12:1–26 presents us with an initially curious telescoping of historical perspective in which the generation of the first return and that of Ezra and Nehemiah are set right alongside one another. This lies on the surface in v 26 (Jeshua was the high priest when the second temple was built; *cf.* Ezr. 3:2 and 5:2), but in fact the lists of priests and Levites which precede also come from these two generations. Such a compression in the presentation of lists for theological purposes was something of a convention at the time, and it occurs in the NT as well (*cf.* Mt. 1:1–17). It suggests that behind the complexities of the historical process when viewed from a human perspective the eye of faith can discern the orderly progression of the outworking of the divine will.

Note. 12:22 *Darius the Persian*: this unparalleled title seems to be a reference to Darius I (in whose reign the temple was rebuilt) designed to distinguish him from the somewhat mysterious figure of 'Darius the Mede' of Dn. 5:30 who apparently preceded 'Cyrus the Persian' (Dn. 6:28).

12:27 – 13:3 The dedication of the wall and its sequel

At last we reach what appears to be the climax of Nehemiah's career, the dedication of the wall whose construction so dominated the first half of the book. Material from Nehemiah's own personal account has been joined with an alternative source in order to present this combined version of the united celebration by the people. Two balanced processions were formed (31–36, 38, 40–42), and after leaving the city through the Valley Gate on the west of the city they proceeded in opposite directions, each going halfway round the city before re-entering and joining up for a united service of praise in the temple (40). The emphasis on their joy in v 43 is unparalleled in its intensity, a healthy reminder of the biblical truth that the prospect of such joy may legitimately serve to strengthen us during times of hardship (*cf.* Rom. 5:2–5; 8:18–25; Heb. 12:2).

Unlike a fairy story, however, this 'happy ending' does not mark the conclusion of the book. The text hurries on (*At that time*, 12:44; *On that day*, 13:1) to deal with matters which we might too quickly dismiss as mere routine, namely financial provision for the regular temple services (12:44–47) and purification of the congregation in obedience to the law of God (13:1–3). Without such routine, the author seems to imply, the joy of a single day can never be sustained. Although it is usually the high-points of success which impress themselves on the memory, the true gauge of spiritual progress in the individual as much as in community life is the extent to which what might be passed by as 'the normal' has been transformed. The form of the narrative at this point emphatically asserts that without such progress in regard to the ordinary, the climaxes and celebrations will fade all too quickly into tarnished memories.

13:4–31 Concluding reforms

The book of Nehemiah seems to peter out in what might be considered a somewhat unsatisfactory manner, not so much with a bang as with a whimper. All the abuses referred to in this final chapter have been the subject of earlier treatment, but they rear their heads again here despite the best efforts of the reformers to eradicate them. Only by way of an aside do we learn that the setting is Nehemiah's second term as governor (6–7), so that perhaps as much as fifteen years have passed since the main part of the book (*cf.* 5:14), even though the chronological notes in vs 4, 6, 15 and 23 seem to gloss over this. It is as though the book is pointing to its own failure, reminding us that, however important good structures and routines may be (as was pointed out immediately above), nothing can substitute for the renewal of the naturally perverse inclinations of the human heart.

The ideal description of 12:44 – 13:3 had dealt with the proper care for and maintenance of the temple chambers, services and personnel and with the purity of the community. The rest of ch. 13 mostly focuses on the shortfallings in these same two areas, the former in vs 4–14 and the latter from v 15 on (although admittedly the question of Sabbath observance, vs 15–22, is less closely linked than the remainder). The style of writing is as colourful and forceful as ever, and on the whole the narrative stands in little need of additional comment. Only with regard to the recurrence of mixed marriages (23–27) is it necessary to point out that the problem seems to have been quite localized, the children who *spoke the language of Ashdod* (24) suggesting that it may have been confined primarily to those who lived on the western borders of the province of Judah. The basic issues had been dealt with previously by Ezra (and briefly summarized by Nehemiah in v 25; *cf.* Ezr. 9:2, 12). This enabled Nehemiah here to deal on an *ad hoc* (if characteristically forthright!) basis with cases of individual abuse.

Behind this chapter lies again a concern for the distinctive identity of the community. In the

face of strong external pressures it had been in danger of compromise to the extent that its witness would have been diluted and rendered ineffective. A firm and solid focus at the centre of the community, proper worship of God at his designated sanctuary, was essential.

The Christian church continues to face these issues, albeit in different forms. The principles for appropriate response remain the same: a strong core of leadership and a clear line of demarcation at the fringes. From a position of strength and security it is possible to extend a hand of welcome and forgiveness to those outside. From a position of weakness both parties would sink together.

H.G.M. Williamson

ESTHER

Introduction

Esther, like Ezra and Nehemiah, lived during the period when the Persians dominated all of western Asia and Egypt and imposed a high degree of organization on their vast empire. Cyrus, their great empire-builder, had permitted exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem from Babylon in 539 BC (Ezr. 1:1–4), and from then on exiles did go back to rebuild, first their homes, then the temple and later, under Nehemiah, the walls of Jerusalem. They were a minority, however, and large numbers of Jews remained, scattered throughout the area we now know as Iran and Iraq (see map on p. 422).

At the time of Esther, Susa, the Persian royal city (modern *Shush* in SW Iran), was enjoying its heyday under King Xerxes, known in Hebrew as Ahasuerus, who came to the throne in 486 BC. He enjoyed the lavish buildings put up during the reign of his father, Darius (521–486). Little remains of them, but *Shiite* Muslims visit the village to venerate the alleged tomb of the prophet Daniel. Archaeological excavation of the ancient city in the mid-nineteenth century identified the main features of the palace, including the throne room, the harem and the 'enclosed garden' mentioned in 1:5.

The book of Esther tells of the favourite of King Xerxes, the courtier Haman, who had a grudge against a Jew call Mordecai. For this reason he plotted to kill all Jews living within the Persian empire. Such was the extent of the empire at that time that virtually the whole race would have been wiped out if he had been successful. Providential intervention came through Esther, the Jewish girl who had been chosen by the monarch as his queen. Circumstances so worked out that Haman became the victim of his own plot, whereas the Jews escaped. Their enemies were liquidated and Mordecai replaced Haman as the king's right-hand man. Such a remarkable role-reversal provided a gripping theme for the story-teller. For the Jews, whose history was to include many tragic incidents, the book became a source of hope, and the events it records are celebrated annually in the festival of Purim. Throughout the centuries the public reading of this book at Purim has kept alive nationalistic expectations. Even today, every time Haman's name is mentioned in the Purim liturgy congregations respond with loud banging, shouting and stamping of feet, and 'Haman's hats' (triangular cakes) are eaten during the celebrations. Not surprisingly the story of Esther is better known to the ordinary Jew than any other part of the Old Testament.

The book of Esther in Christian history

This is one of the books of the Bible that is often passed over by Christians. In the early Christian centuries the book was best known in Greek versions. These had extra passages added, which had the effect of building up hostility towards Gentiles and keeping Jews isolated, whereas Christians were trying to integrate believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Understandably, therefore, Christians did not make use of the book in the form they received it because it worked against their purposes.

It has often been pointed out that the name of God does not occur in the book of Esther. A superficial reaction to this omission is to question the book's inclusion in the Bible. The great Reformation expositors, Luther and Calvin, left no commentaries on Esther, and those who write the history of the Old Testament period rarely refer to this book. This is because its claim to be a factual report of events tends to be treated with scepticism. Why then should Christians study it today?

In practice most Christians accept the book because it is bound together with the other sixty-five books that make up the Bible. It deserves attention because it is there, and part of our heritage. Historically it helps to fill in the picture of post-exilic life among Jews of the dispersion during the fifth century BC, and explains the origins of one of the festivals that Jews have observed annually from pre-Christian times to the present day. Anyone who wishes to understand the culture of our Jewish neighbours will want to read this account of the origins of Purim.

These, however, are educational rather than personal reasons, and though they are important, they do not necessarily satisfy the readers' desire to find a light for their path and understanding of God. Indeed, can the book have a theology in view of its omission of the name of God?

Theology in Esther

Esther is a book of theological inferences rather than plain statements. It speaks of fasting, but not of the prayer that always accompanied fasting, nor does it mention the answers to prayer that are clearly part of the story. Again, when Mordecai challenged Esther to rescue her people he told her that if she failed to act, relief and deliverance for the Jews would arise 'from another place', implying that God was sure to work out deliverance for his people. Faith in God can be implicit in people who, for whatever reason, scarcely ever let their faith be known.

Life in Persia under the rule of King Xerxes was oppressive for minority groups like the Jews and, according to the writer of Esther, perilous. It may seem unlikely that a ruler would decree at a whim the execution of a whole people, as Xerxes did (3:9–11), but Herodotus, the contemporary historian, confirms that Xerxes was cruel and despotic towards his own household, not to mention foreigners. The author, conscious of the need to be diplomatic lest history should repeat itself and his people be put in jeopardy of their lives again, was careful to be factual and objective, avoiding references to supernatural help. Nevertheless, he found ways of indicating that God was directing events. Indeed the events spoke for themselves; he simply needed to narrate them.

The book describes life at the Persian court with all its extravagance. King Xerxes ruled over 127 provinces, but he did not succeed in ruling his wife, Vashti. Perhaps the author had his tongue in his cheek when he ended the first episode with the king's decree that, 'every man should be ruler over his own household'. The implicit question, where does authority ultimately lie, raises a theological issue.

Haman made an ambitious bid for power, successful at the start, except that Mordecai the Jew would not bow down to him. Haman wished to use his authority, and his influence with the king to eliminate not only Mordecai but all his race. All that was needed was one decree sealed with the king's signet ring, and the plot could be put into effect. There was only one precaution: the date needed to be auspicious or fate could thwart his plan. The author pits fate against the authority of the one worshipped by the Jewish people.

The idea of a predetermined fate, operating in all aspects of life, from that of the individual to the decisions of a country's rulers, was widespread and persistent. A die from the reign of Shalmaneser (858–824 BC) survives as a reminder that each new year's day the year's diary was drawn by casting the lot to determine auspicious dates. This die bears the inscription *pur*, so confirming the meaning of the word *purim* given in 9:24. The people of these Near-Eastern lands not only believed in fate but acted accordingly. What happens when those who believe in the Creator God live among those who live by fate? The writer of Esther expects his readers to observe and take note.

Not everything in the outworking of the situation could be attributed directly to God, for each of the main characters took initiatives. Mordecai entered his ward, Esther, for the selection contest, hoping she would be chosen as the new queen. Only later when she was queen did the advantage of her status provide opportunity for her to record Mordecai's loyalty in the king's annals and discredit Haman before the king. Mordecai could not have foreseen that such a need might arise. Esther, for her part, had to risk her own life in order to petition the king, and used guile by inviting him and Haman to her private dinner party, not once but twice. She could not have known how the episode would end, but since her action had been preceded by fasting (and prayer), she evidently expected an opportunity to arise for her to plead the cause of her people. Human initiative alone would not have provided the necessary opportunities, but divine providence together with human watchfulness and timely action brought about the desired end.

In short, the book of Esther strongly supports and illustrates the doctrine of divine providence, as it operated at a particular time of danger to the Jewish people who lived under Persian domination. Mordecai's question, 'And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?' (4:14), posed at the moment of crisis, leads the reader to expect Esther to intervene successfully, because providence had already been at work in her selection as queen. This impression is confirmed when the king extended his sceptre to Esther and received her request. As events unfolded and Haman was hanged on his own gallows, while Mordecai was promoted to high office, the dramatic reversal is so unexpected as to require supernatural explanation. Even people of other nationalities came to the same conclusion (8:17), which involved them in accepting that the God who worked justice for his people must be the true God. They therefore declared their faith in him.

Mysterious though the implications of belief in divine providence undoubtedly are, God's sovereignty involves care for all his creation, but especially for his people who put their trust in him. Jesus confirmed God's fatherly care for the natural world (Mt. 6:26–30), and urged his followers to count on their Father to supply every need. That did not mean that disasters

would be ruled out. Betrayal, hatred and death awaited Jesus, and he warned his disciples that they could expect no less (Mt. 10:21–25). Pain and conflict do not cancel out the providential care, for God's concern for the sparrow is declared in the same breath as 'even the very hairs of your head are all numbered' (Mt. 10:29–31). In the book of Esther the death of the Jews was replaced by the death of their enemies. Jesus stated that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Mt. 10:34). God's providence embraces his justice and his love as he orders the affairs of this far-from-perfect world, hence the part played by the sword.

The book of Esther is one to ponder in any attempt to relate biblical values to life in an increasingly secular world. Belief in an inflexible fate survives today, as witnessed by the popularity of horoscopes. This book demonstrates that fate is not unchangeable when it runs counter to God's eternal purpose.

Literary features

The book of Esther is the work of a literary artist who uses his gifts as a vehicle for his deepest convictions. His introductory episode effectively depicts King Xerxes as ruler of his vast domain but unable to control his wife. Implicitly a question is raised about leadership and authority. The king appointed as his deputy Haman who was totally taken up with his own importance, so presenting another aspect of leadership. The partnership did not work well for the empire because the king left power in the hands of his deputy, without bothering to check what was happening. All this is conveyed without any hint of disapproval. A very different concept of responsibility is presented in Mordecai the Jew, who weighed up the worth of those in authority, saved the king from an assassination plot and refused to submit to self-important Haman. The contrast between the two men raises the question, (see Fowler p. 496[2]) how right can prevail when those who do right have no power.

The contrast between Haman and Mordecai becomes more marked as each pursued his chosen strategy. Mordecai fasted and lamented while the king and Haman sat down to drink (3:15; 4:1). Mordecai revealed his faith (4:14) while Haman completed his happiness by building a gallows for Mordecai (5:14). Thus a life-and-death struggle developed. The turning point was the king's sleepless night (6:1), when he was reminded of his debt to Mordecai and determined to reward him. From this point on a dramatic reversal begins. Haman was forced to bestow honours on Mordecai and then was hanged on the gallows he had prepared for him. Mordecai took Haman's place at the king's side, and a new edict was issued. Suddenly justice has prevailed. The threat to the Jews raised in the first five chapters fails to materialize and their fortunes are reversed in the last five; the structure of the book thus matches the message of the contents.

This artistic awareness is apparent also in the skilful characterization. Both male and female characters are finely drawn, and consistently act according to type. The king impressed his subjects by his wealth rather than by a concern for just rule. He enjoyed his privileges, passed new laws without a second thought and handed over his authority to a deputy, whom he trusted implicitly. Queen Esther was in many ways the antithesis of the king. Early on she was subject to Mordecai, but when danger threatened she was the one who suggested that all the Jews should fast for three days. Esther acknowledged a power greater than her own, and found assurance to take an initiative. She approached the king with her invitation, but could not have known how she would achieve her goal. Her concern was for her people, and for justice. The fact that the people were delivered and, under Mordecai, prospered brings the book to an end, and the reader is left to ponder on the outcome. Has divine providence been at work?

Both Mordecai and Esther faced a conflict of loyalties, arising out of their faith. Mordecai could not pretend to accept Haman's unprincipled leadership, and Esther risked disobeying the king for the sake of her people. Civil disobedience is justified in the greater cause. The author makes frequent use of irony, drawing attention to the king's ostentatious feasting, his stupidity in passing laws without due attention (1:21–22) and his abdication of duty (3:8–11). The author also uses particular words and phrases to call attention to certain themes. The feasts in the book have dire consequences, whereas the fasts (4:1–3, 16) work for good, so that ultimately the Jews themselves feast. This is an example of the way the author seeks to 'tie up the ends'.

Fact or fiction?

Such artistic features could be thought to suggest that the book is to be classified as fiction, and some scholars have argued that the story is improbable in several details. They cite the 180 days of the king's feast (1:4), the queen's refusal to attend (1:12), the appointment of non-Persians like Esther and Mordecai to positions of importance in the land, and the king's permission for a whole people to be wiped out. In addition, the characters are said to be recognizable role-types rather than individuals. Such judgments, however, are made from a modern standpoint. In view of the lack of literature surviving from this period in Persia it

is impossible to verify what happened or to appreciate the account in its literary environment. Historians have verified the author's accurate knowledge of Persian royal palaces and customs, and independent evidence has come to light that a certain Marduka (?Mordecai) was in authority in Susa, serving as an accountant in the early years of the reign of Xerxes. Evidence of the use of lot-casting or 'pur' has also tended to support the historicity of the narrative. The part played by irony and satire in the author's narration accounts for some of the book's 'improbable' aspects.

When might the book have been written? There are no known references to it in other literature, so a judgment has to be based on internal evidence. The subject matter and the frequent occurrence of Persian words in the Hebrew suggest a date in the Persian period, some time after the reign of Xerxes, which is referred to as if it were in the past. The author was concerned that Jews should never forget their deliverance from empire-wide massacre, hence his book establishing the annual observance of Purim, duly authorized by royal command. This could well have been needed early in the reign of Artaxerxes I, say around 460–450 BC, after the death of Xerxes. The author evidently had access to the annals of the Persian kings (6:1; 10:2), and was a Jew involved in affairs of state in Persia and its empire.

The place of the book in Scripture

In our English Bibles the book of Esther follows the history books, and adds its contribution to the history by illustrating life in the fifth century BC among Jews in western Asia. In the Hebrew canon it is among the 'Writings', and is usually the last of the 'five scrolls' allocated to festivals. Esther is the text for Purim, celebrated in the twelfth month of the Jewish year, and therefore the last. The popularity of this festival caused many copies of the book to be needed, and early translations contain a variety of readings different from the Hebrew. The LXX, probably translated as early as the second century BC, contains over 100 verses that are not in the Hebrew. They were probably added to introduce a more obviously religious emphasis, and can be found collected together in the Apocrypha.

The amazing deliverance of the Jewish people from death in the time of Xerxes has been instrumental, through the annual Purim celebration, in keeping Jewish faith alive through many another persecution, even to the present day. Jewish identity has been preseved amid the multitude of other cultures, and has survived despite the holocaust. God has not cast off his ancient people, but continues to be gracious to them. His plan is to save the world, however, and Gentile Christians owe their salvation to God's covenant, initiated with Abraham, and fulfilled in Christ. The book of Esther should stir a spirit of thanksgiving in Christian as well as Jewish hearts, and remind Christians of their debt to faithful Jewish leaders like Mordecai and Esther. As Christians enter into the aspirations of the Jewish people in the light of their past sufferings, and repent of cruel misunderstandings and victimization on the part of the Christian church in the past, they may earn the right to commend to Jews the Lordship of Jesus Christ, 'who is the Head over every power and authority' (Col. 2:10).

Further reading

(See the booklist on Ezra and Nehemiah)

J. G. Baldwin, *Esther*, TOTC (IVP, 1984).
G. A. F. Knight, *Esther*, TBC (SCM, 1955).

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Commentary

1:1–22 King Xerxes deposes his queen

1–3 The narrator first introduces King *Xerxes*, his empire and his capital. His difficult Persian name Khshayarsha was transliterated *Ahasuerus* in Hebrew (so AV, RV, RSV), whereas the NIV has adopted the Greek transliteration *Xerxes*, better known in secular history. His empire, extending from the Indus River in Pakistan to the Upper Nile in northern Sudan, comprised an impressive 127 provinces. *Susa*, the ancient capital of Elam, had been rebuilt by Darius, father of Xerxes, as one of his capital cities. The *citadel* was the central acropolis, elevated above the remainder of the city, and fortified to protect the king. *The third year of his reign* (483 BC) marked the end of opposition to the new reign, and was an appropriate time to consolidate the empire by assembling its leading figures in the capital.

4–8 For six months the king displayed his royal treasures. Though his vast wealth had resulted from conquests, taxation and tribute, no voice was raised to question the justice of the king's acquisitiveness. Since wealth could be translated into military might, it inspired awe, but the writer of Esther implicitly passes judgment on the king's self-aggrandisement by painting his extravagances in vivid colours. The banquet was the culmination of the festivities, intended to impress all the leaders of civil and military affairs whose loyalty was essential to the well-being of the empire. The king's lavish hospitality extended to *all . . . in the citadel*, his retinue, officials and visiting dignitaries. The draped linen in the royal colours of white and purple, together with the gold and silver against the background of marble pillars and mosaic floor, provided a fabulously rich setting. Some of the *goblets of gold* from the period survive, and are works of art, individually designed. Stress is laid on the abundance of the supply of wine and on the freedom of each guest to drink as he pleased.

9–12 Why the women were entertained separately is not explained, nor is any reason given for Queen Vashti's refusal to attend at the king's command. Any excuse would have been considered irrelevant as she had no rights. The *seven eunuchs*, whose names support a Persian source, were permitted access to the royal harem (*cf.* Acts 8:27). The queen's defiant refusal to appear at the king's feast made him look foolish, hence his fury.

13–20 Something had to be done, and the seven advisers were responsible for devising a punishment. (Note the importance of the number *seven*; 10, 14; *cf.* Ezr. 7:14.) Memucan spoke on behalf of the seven nobles in reply to the king's question. He was astute in generalizing the problem, implying that because Queen Vashti would be influential over other women of the nobility, every man present was at risk of losing his control over his wife. He called for solidarity and advised the king to issue a decree banishing Vashti (her title is omitted from this point on). The published decree would restore the king's authority, and ensure that every husband would enjoy due respect from his wife. Meanwhile, someone better than Vashti should be appointed in her place. How the new queen got her way with the king is a theme that is explored in the rest of the story.

21–22 Since there was unanimous agreement that Memucan had given good advice, the decree was framed forthwith and translated into the many languages represented by the company present at the feast. There is irony in the contrast between the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces (1), and the banality of his proclamation that every man should be ruler over his own household. Despite all the great show of wealth and power, King Xerxes had decided limitations in his own home. There is irony also in the reference to the laws of Persia and Media, which could not be repealed, and yet which could be passed at a whim by a monarch in high spirits from wine.

2:1–18 Esther is chosen to be queen

1–4 The king, sober once more, recalled the events on the last night of the feast. However much he regretted them he could not change his own legislation. Here was yet another limit to his great powers. The suggestion that the search for a new queen should begin, and the thought of all the most beautiful young women of the empire being assembled in his harem, restored the king's spirits. Interestingly, the name *Hegai* occurs as an officer of Xerxes in the *Histories* of Herodotus (ix. 34).

5–11 The author now introduces Mordecai, *a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin*. (Though the word *Jew* derived from 'Judah', it became a generalized term for any Israelite during the post-exilic period.) Mordecai had distinguished names among his ancestors: *Kish* was the father of King Saul (1 Sa. 9:1), and *Shimei*, his relative, had fiercely supported him (2 Sa. 16:5). The fact that the family had been deported to Babylon with King Jehoiachin in 597 BC is another indication of its importance (2 Ki. 24:14–16). The name *Mordecai* was connected

with Marduk, the state god of Babylon. At least two common names were so derived, and there is even mention of a man named Marduka in a text of about this period who served as an accountant on an inspection tour from Susa. Mordecai was evidently a man to be reckoned with. He had adopted his orphaned cousin, *Hadassah*, 'myrtle', also known as *Esther*. This Persian name meant 'star', a reference to the star-like flowers of the myrtle, perhaps, though there is also a resemblance in sound between the two names. The fact that she was *lovely in form and features* was a key factor in the outworking of God's purpose, and is seen as his good gift.

Having introduced Mordecai and Esther, the author resumes the account of the king's orders and their implementation. Of the many girls who arrived in Susa, only one, Esther, is mentioned by name. Even before the king had set eyes on her, Esther had won the *favour* of Hegai. The Hebrew word is *ḥesed*, familiar as the covenant word expressing God's faithfulness and love, but used here in a secular context. Hegai gave Esther preferential treatment, promoting her to first place by selecting for her the best attendants and the most attractive quarters. Esther did not permit such favours to go to her head, but kept her own counsel with regard to her nationality. Unlike Xerxes, Mordecai was able to rule his household. The fact that he cared enough about Esther to check daily on her well-being provides a clue to his secret. Esther obeyed because she loved and respected Mordecai.

12–18 All who aspired to be queen had to submit to twelve months of beauty treatment, using the aromatic products for which these countries of the east had always been famous (*cf.* Gn. 37:25). Fumigation, hair plucking, lightening of the skin colour as well as perfuming played a part in the beautifying process. The sad part was that, despite all this luxurious indulgence, most of the girls would spend only one night with the king, and then live among the concubines, neglected wives who spent their days in idleness. The harem system was inhumane and grossly devalued women as people.

By God's goodness Esther was spared the worst fate. She had not made demanding requests for her adornment, but had been prepared to be guided by Hegai, and the inference is that Esther won approval by her good sense as well as by her beauty. *The seventh year* of the reign of Xerxes (16) records that four years had passed since the king had banished Vashti (1:3). *Tebeth*, the tenth month, was usually cold and wet but despite this disadvantage, Esther met with the king's approval. So much so that he made her his queen there and then, crowning her, proclaiming a banquet for her and marking the occasion with a public holiday and gifts to all. Consequently the whole population had cause for rejoicing.

2:19–23 Mordecai uncovers a conspiracy

When the virgins were assembled a second time is problematic because no such previous gathering has been mentioned. The reference would seem to be to v 8, and to suggest only a short time after the choice of Esther as queen. The fact that *Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate* implies that he had been given, perhaps at the nomination of Esther, a place in the judiciary of Susa, for 'the gate' was the traditional court of law (*e.g.* Ru. 4:1–10). At the gate of the citadel Mordecai kept his ears open and overheard the palace gossip. *Bigthana*, maybe the Bigtha of 1:10, and Teresh, trusted retainers who guarded the royal apartments, were plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai reported this through Esther. The culprits were tried and put to death, either by being impaled or hanged, and the case was officially recorded in the presence of the king, who, however, took no action to reward Mordecai.

3:1–15 Haman plots against the Jews

1–6 Some years passed (7) and when the king decided to promote one of his nobles to the highest office in the land, he chose, not the man who had saved his life, but a certain Haman, an *Agagite*. The name *Agag* recalls the reign of Saul the son of Kish (1 Sa. 9:1–2), who failed to fight this Amalekite king to the death, so incurring condemnation by the prophet Samuel (1 Sa. 15). Jewish readers would see a recapitulation of this battle in the confrontation between Mordecai (also a 'son of Kish') and Haman the Agagite. It was a battle Mordecai determined to win. Since King Xerxes, who does not seem to have been a good judge of character, had to command his nobles to bow down to Haman, it appears that he was not highly thought of by his fellow courtiers. Mordecai disapproved of the appointment and so refused to prostrate himself before Haman, though he must have known that he was asking for trouble, especially when royal officials reported him to Haman. The fact that Mordecai was a Jew would not have prevented him from honouring those in authority, but adherence to the law of God gave Jews an allegiance higher than mere human jurisdiction, and tended to develop independence of judgment. This was interpreted as insubordination by Nebuchadnezzar (Dn. 3:12–23) and by officials of King Darius (Dn. 6:5–9). Resentful and vindictive, Haman took his time in planning his strategy for revenge. Not content with

taking the life of Mordecai, he plotted against the whole Jewish people, so setting a precedent in anti-Semitism. Such a bloodthirsty intention reveals that Haman was totally unscrupulous.

7–11 The court diary of Persia was drawn up in the first month of each year with the help of dice which indicated the propitious dates for various events. The word *pur*, meaning 'lot' has come to light on a die from the reign of Shalmaneser III of Assyria (858–824 BC), so confirming the detail given in v 7. Dependence on belief in fate continued over the centuries, good and bad omens determining when action could be taken. For Haman's purposes the lucky month was the last of the year, so permitting time to publish the king's decree (already determined by Haman) throughout the empire. In his approach to the king, Haman carefully avoided naming the Jews, implying instead some obscure but dissident racial group, intent on ignoring Persian law. It was true that the Jews had their own customs, but they had been expressly commanded by Jeremiah to live peaceably in the lands of exile (Je. 29:7) and they did so. Haman, pleading the king's best interests, made out a plausible case for ridding the empire of this dangerous element and financial interest added a further incentive. The sum Haman promised represented a huge fortune, implying that he was extremely wealthy, even though he intended to benefit from plundering the property of those he put to death (13).

King Xerxes could not raise sufficient interest to investigate the details so he appointed Haman to work on his behalf, and by handing over his signet ring declared Haman's executive authority to do whatever he saw fit. The author, by giving Haman his full title, *son of Hammedatha the Agagite*, and adding *the enemy of the Jews*, makes a cryptic comment on the prestige of a cunning strategist. The king was indifferent to both the proffered money and the execution of an indefinite number of his subjects, but no judgment is passed on his lax abdication of duty nor on his misplaced trust in Haman.

12–14 Without delay the edict was drawn up, copied, translated, sealed with the king's ring and sent out to all parts of the empire by means of the postal system inaugurated by Cyrus. This system depended on relays of horses, stationed throughout the empire to ensure swift communication (see Herodotus v. 14; viii. 98). The decree was repetitious and specific. It was to be made public so that no-one could plead ignorance of the law. Haman was pleased with his work, and relaxed over a drink with his monarch, while the people of Susa wondered what was happening behind the scenes.

4:1–17 Esther agrees to intercede

1–5 Mordecai had every reason to grieve at the edict of Haman because his refusal to acknowledge Haman's promotion had jeopardized the whole Jewish race. By wearing a mourning garb and making loud wailing the Jews made known their plight, identified themselves and drew attention to the inexplicable edict. Mordecai, however, could no longer make contact with Esther because sackcloth was not permitted within the citadel. When Esther heard he was in mourning she sent him suitable clothing to replace his sackcloth, but to no avail. Esther's *great distress* indicates genuine love and concern. Her trusted attendant *Hathach* went to find out the facts.

6–11 Mordecai had left no stone unturned in order to assemble all the relevant details, and he told Hathach what he knew, including the exact amount of silver promised by Haman for the royal treasury. Hathach took back a copy of the edict, so that Esther had the exact wording, and the urgent request that she should approach the king for mercy. Esther's response is revealing. She did not have right of access to the throne, nor had she been summoned to the king for thirty days. Like everyone else, if she approached the king without being summoned she would be put to death unless the royal sceptre was extended to her.

12–17 Mordecai still gave Esther her orders and told her that, though she was queen, she need not think that she would escape death. If she failed to act, deliverance for the Jews would arise *from another place*. Mordecai undoubtedly implied that God would protect his people and that he had purposed to use Esther by causing her to be chosen as queen. This is a theological high point in the book. Mordecai believed that God guides in political events and in individual lives, even though those in power do not acknowledge him. Esther's call for a three-day fast revealed that she shared the faith of Mordecai in the God who answers prayer, though she did not mention his name. Her need was for courage to fulfil her destiny by interceding for the life of her people, though it could cost her her own life.

5:1–8 Esther takes the lead

1–4 *On the third day* Esther put her resolve into action, strengthened by the knowledge that the Jewish community in Susa was solidly behind her. The days of fasting had resulted in the formation of a plan, and Esther was composed and queenly as she stood robed in the hall of pillars at a distance from the throne. The king extended his royal sceptre to his consort and she approached him and disclosed the problem which had caused her to enter his presence. She

touched the tip of the sceptre to acknowledge her acceptance. When the king invited her to ask *up to half the kingdom* (an idiom not intended literally), Esther was content to issue an invitation to a private dinner party for the king and Haman, which would present an opportunity to make the authentic request. It was a wise but daring move to invite the king's favourite, Haman.

5–8 The alacrity with which the king summoned Haman indicates that Esther's invitation had pleased him. Esther for her part had had to make advance preparations for the banquet, anticipating acceptance by the king. The king was in a relaxed mood, addressing his wife as *Esther* (contrast 'Queen Esther' in v 3) and prepared, after being feasted, to give her anything she asked. Even so, Esther was not in any hurry. Let them first enjoy another such occasion, and then she would make her request.

5:9–14 Haman plots against Mordecai

Haman's happiness was short-lived. The sight of Mordecai, scorning to make any acknowledgement of his presence, turned his rapture to rage; he would have to get even with Mordecai. But first he boasted to his friends of the honours bestowed on him at court, in addition to all the other signs of fortune's special favour. It is perhaps significant that Haman gave first place to his wealth. He was so convinced of his importance that he never dreamt that Esther could have anything against him. Mordecai the Jew was his one enemy, depriving him of satisfaction. Though Haman had already made certain of the death of all Jews, he readily accepted the suggestion of his wife and friends that a gallows should be built especially for Mordecai (*cf.* 2:23). Haman assumed that the king would pass the death sentence on Mordecai, and his delight at the thought completed his happiness. The exaggerated height of the gallows (75 ft) was in keeping with the grand scale on which Persian building was done.

6:1–14 The king honours Mordecai

It is fascinating to observe the series of coincidences, none of which could have been foreseen, that brought about the answers to the prayers made by the Jews during their fast days. Esther's moves, calculated as they appear, reflected the more-than-worldly wisdom given to her during the fast.

1–3 *That night the king could not sleep.* This unremarkable state of affairs became the turning point in the sequence of events, because the king heard read to him the record of Mordecai's exposure of the plot to assassinate him. The reversal of fortune that follows resulted from the king's obligation to decide upon a suitable reward for saving his life. It was natural that he should consult with his chief minister in making so far-reaching a decision.

4–14 Haman arrived early at the palace because he needed the royal assent for the execution of Mordecai, but before he could voice his petition the king had raised quite another issue: how to honour a deserving subject. Imagining that he was to be the recipient of the honour, Haman eagerly described his own ambition. He wished to receive the prestige and acclaim due to a man honoured by his sovereign; to wear the king's clothes, ride his horse and, in effect, impersonate him and receive royal homage.

The misunderstanding was total. The king was unaware of Haman's hopes and of the bitter irony of Haman's plight in being asked to honour Mordecai instead of hanging him. Most odious of all was the public loss of face, for all his friends were aware of the gallows looming high over the citadel, and of Haman's plot against Mordecai. Instead of being hanged Mordecai returned to the king's gate, unmoved by events, but fascinated, no doubt, by the volte-face of his enemy. Haman for his part was mortified, and received no comfort from his wife; the mood at home had changed. Superstitious minds read the signs, and lost their confidence in him. Events now moved swiftly. Messengers from the king were already on the doorstep to summon Haman to Esther's second banquet. Time had caught up with him.

7:1–10 The king has Haman hanged

1–4 Suspense builds up as the king puts his question a third time to *Queen Esther.* There is nothing of the informality of the previous occasion, and in reply Esther addressed her husband using his royal titles, and courtly phrases. Nevertheless the truth must be told. *Grant me my life . . . spare my people*: these petitions were startling in their implications, and guaranteed the king's closest attention. Using the passive to avoid naming Haman at this point, Esther referred to the large sum which virtually *sold* the Jews. To have been sold into slavery could have been tolerated, but they were sold *for destruction and slaughter and annihilation*, the very verbs used in the decree (3:13) though the English here requires nouns. The meaning of the last clause of v 4 is uncertain, as the NIV margin indicates, but its marginal reading conveys the most likely sense. No amount of money could compensate for the loss the king would suffer if the Jewish people were to be put to death. Esther appeals to the king's best interests, and suggests that people are far more important than possessions.

5–10 The king was about to receive one further shock. He discovered it was Haman who was responsible for plotting to destroy his queen and her people. Esther's wisdom in inviting Haman to the banquets now becomes apparent: he was there to face directly the fate he deserved as the enemy, not only of the Jewish people but also of the king. Esther could not have known for sure how the king would react to the news that she was Jewish. The king in his rage took a breathing space as he decided how to control so volatile a situation. Haman in his extremity thought only of pleading the queen's mercy. Forgetting the usual conventions he approached too close to the queen, and further antagonized the king. The court retainers moved in and by covering his face virtually arrested him. *Harbona*, mentioned in the original list of courtiers (1:10), informed the king of Haman's gallows, intended *for Mordecai who spoke up to help the king*. King Xerxes needed no further prompting. Haman had, unknowingly, made preparations for his own execution, which took place forthwith. The king's wrath was appeased because justice had been done. Whereas Haman's edict had caused bewilderment (3:15), the total reversal of his fortunes, ending in his death on the gallows he had intended for his enemy, restored ease of mind to both king and people.

8:1–17 Haman's edict is reversed

1–2 Despite the death of Haman, much remained to be done if Persia were to prosper, and the author carefully ties up the loose ends in the closing chapters. The property of condemned criminals reverted to the crown in the ancient Near East (*cf.* Jezebel's assumption in 1 Ki. 21:7–16), hence the ease with which King Xerxes could bestow the possessions of Haman upon Queen Esther. She for her part informed the king of her relationship to Mordecai, and of her indebtedness to him. When the king summoned Mordecai to court it was with a view to honouring him appropriately for the services he had rendered. The charade dreamed up by Haman (6:7–9) had been ludicrous. This time, however, Mordecai was presented with the king's signet ring and entrusted with the affairs of state. Whereas Haman had misused his power, Mordecai was expected to continue loyal service to the king, a hope reinforced by Esther's choice of Mordecai to administer Haman's estate. The sequence of events piles irony upon irony, as Mordecai takes over both the status and property of the enemy of the Jews.

3–8 One major problem remained to be solved: Haman's edict remained on the statute book and needed to be negated. It had gone out in the name of the king, who alone could authorize any alteration, and it had been published in every province of the empire. Of necessity, Esther had to approach the throne once more as a suppliant to plead for the life of her people. This time she was bold enough to bow at the king's feet, weep, and request the king to end Haman's *evil plan . . . devised against the Jews*. Once again Esther chose her words carefully, omitting any reference to legislation, because, as the saying went, 'the laws of Persia and Media cannot be repealed' (1:19), and the king could not be expected to lose face. The king rewarded her wisdom and courage by extending his sceptre, so bidding her rise.

Even now Esther prefaced her request with due deference, recognizing that any decision must be owned by the king, though for the present time she stood high in his favour. The edict had gone out in the king's name, but Esther contended that the wording had been devised by Haman, and therefore she argued in favour of *an order . . . overruling the despatches of Haman*. This was a master-stroke on her part, reinforced by the double reference to her own agony of mind, *how can I bear . . . my people . . . my family*. Since Esther had spoken on behalf of Mordecai and herself, the king included both in his reply. First, King Xerxes justified himself by his drastic punishment of Haman, and went on to sanction another decree *in the king's name*, though the wording was left once again to his second-in-command. The words that Esther had so carefully avoided about the impossibility of revoking decrees of the king he now repeated. Once again the writer has a little dig at royal inconsistencies.

9–14 The wording echoes 3:12–14, where Haman's edict is recorded, only the content of the edict is entirely reversed. So much for laws that cannot be changed, and for the great men who frame the laws. Haman had fallen as swiftly as he had risen to power. His edict of the first month was overturned in the third month by order of his enemy, Mordecai, who added Hebrew to the list of languages in which the new edict was published. *Fast horses* from the royal stud ensured speedy delivery.

It is important to note the NIV translation of v 11, which captures the sense, as opposed to the NEB, JB and GNB. There is no question about the first clause, permitting Jews to organize themselves; question arises over the object of the verbs *destroy, kill and annihilate*, quoted from 3:13, Haman's decree. There the object was 'all the Jews – young and old, women and little children', whereas Mordecai's decree made *any armed force . . . that might attack them* the object. Permission was given to plunder property but even that was limited to the one

specified day, which Haman had regarded as propitious. The Jews would be ready to retaliate if they were attacked, whereas Haman had intended that they should be slaughtered in cold blood.

15–17 Back in Susa, where the decree originated, there was an enthusiastic welcome for the new regime and all it stood for, in contrast to the consternation occasioned by Haman's edict in 3:15. Mordecai's kingly regalia was not resented because he was judged to be worthy of trust. His good understanding won favour (Pr. 13:15) with the population as a whole, as well as with the Jews, who had every reason to celebrate their rise to favour instead of living under threat of death. Under Mordecai's leadership people of other nations, anticipating that it would be advantageous to be Jewish, 'Judaized themselves', a complete reversal of attitude on the part of the public almost overnight, and an encouraging sign for the future of the Jews.

9:1–19 The Jews are seen to triumph

1–4 When the fateful day came, the thirteenth of Adar, *the Jews got the upper hand* over their enemies. The writer summarizes the outcome of the day's events so that the reader is in no doubt: the victims had become the victors. In fact, he gives the impression that much of the opposition melted away because of the support for Mordecai at both popular and leadership levels. His stress on the fear inspired by Mordecai and his people implies some more-than-human intervention, as though fear of God had seized the population at the swift reversal of Jewish fortunes. The impression spread that Mordecai would not soon be removed from power. He had to be reckoned with, hence the eagerness to support him.

5–10 Nevertheless bloodshed could not be altogether avoided, and the casualties are recorded. The numbers are no doubt far less than would have been the case if the Jews had been the victims, or if there had been no widespread sympathy for the justice of their cause. Haman evidently still had his loyal followers, ready to back such leadership as his sons might provide. This core of potential resistance within the citadel of Susa was the first to be eliminated. To list the names of Haman's dead sons was to reinforce Haman's total defeat. Not one remained to support his cause. But the family property remained intact. Three times the writer states, *they did not lay their hands on the plunder* (10, 15, 16). In accordance with the example of Abraham they preferred not to enrich themselves through the fall of their enemy (Gn. 14:23). Such unusual self-restraint would not go unnoticed, and would commend the Jews in the estimation of the people.

11–17 The matter-of-fact way in which the king referred to the loss of five hundred men, Haman's sons and an unknown number of men in the provinces, only to offer his queen the opportunity to extend the bloodshed, is gruesome. Esther in turn proved to be an 'iron lady', concerned to demonstrate the demise of Haman by having the bodies of his sons publicly hanged, and to complete the execution of further enemies of the Jews in the city of Susa, beyond the acropolis. For this Esther requested one more day, on which another three hundred men died. Elsewhere in the empire the total of 75,000 killed by organized Jewish resistance fighters implies that Haman's decree had been implemented. Assuming that all 127 provinces were involved, each would have lost about six hundred men, less that the city of Susa alone. Thus the Jews got *relief from their enemies*. Their deliverance from destruction had to be celebrated, hence the institution of a holiday on the fourteenth day of Adar, when the dreaded thirteenth had safely passed. In Susa, however, the fifteenth was celebration day because of Esther's extra request. Everywhere there was joyour sharing of festive meals, ensuring that no-one was excluded. Thus the intention of Haman to wipe out the Jewish race had the effect of strengthening the bonds between its members, and increasing the communal spirit among them as they remembered their shared danger and deliverance.

9:20–32 The origin of Purim

20–22 A festival which was to endure needed written authentication. Passover, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) and Tabernacles were established in the liturgical calendar by the Law of Moses (Dt. 16:1–17); Mordecai added the Feast of Purim. He decreed both the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar to be kept each year as a time of thanksgiving for deliverance from the threat of extinction, which had parallels with salvation from the pharaoh at the exodus (Ps. 106:10; Lk. 1:71). Passover and Purim both speak of sorrow turned to joy and mourning to celebration. Mordecai ordered that generous hospitality, with special mention of caring for the poor, should mark the festival with lavish bounty.

23–28 What the author has not yet explained is the name Purim, therefore he gives a summary of Haman's plot. It involved his casting the *pûr* or 'lot', a word not found in Hebrew, hence the bracketed translation in the text. The finding of a die bearing the word *pûru* (see Introduction) has now confirmed the meaning of the word, so vindicating the accuracy of the

author of the book. The casting of lots for fixing dates was a long-established practice in the ancient Near East, but on this occasion it did not work out as the would-be winner had intended. The adoption of the word *Purim* (*pur* with the Hebrew plural ending, – im), 'lots', was therefore a defiant repudiation of fate, because fate had not delivered the right answer to the one who believed in fate. The Jews had proved again that they knew a better way of life. For this reason it was imperative that the festival should be celebrated by every family in every generation, and never be allowed to die out.

29–32 The weight of Queen Esther's authority was added to that of Mordecai: Queen Esther . . . *wrote* or 'decreed'. By this time written authority was required for legislation throughout the empire. Every province had its authentic copy of the royal edict, duly sealed, so that no one could plead ignorance. *Fasting and lamentation* had not been referred to since 4:16, but this is a reminder of one of the themes of the book, and the means whereby Esther found confidence to accept her leadership role. So fasting gets a mention in the recapitulation at the end of the story, but it is unlikely that fasting was observed as part of the original Purim liturgy. The stress is too emphatically on feasting. Nevertheless, without the fasting there would have been no feasting. *It was written down in the records*, presumably this time the legal reference books of Susa. The events recorded were well authenticated and documented.

10:1–3 The success of Mordecai

The book closes with a reference to King Xerxes, with whom the book opened. There mention was made of the extent of his empire (1:1); here the point is made in the most factual way that not even the most distant places escaped paying tribute, such was the power of the king to impose his will. Under such a regime who would have thought that a Jew would become right-hand man to the king? King Xerxes himself had raised Mordecai to greatness, and the circumstances surrounding this appointment were written in the royal annals of *Media and Persia*. (*cf.* 'Persia and Media' in chapter 1. Since the Median empire was founded before that of Persia the royal annals would begin with those of Media.) Mordecai was therefore well-placed to represent his people, and secure their best interests, whereas earlier in the reign of King Xerxes they were at the mercy of the tyrant who would have exterminated them. Thanks to Mordecai the empire was enjoying normal life once more, and the Jews felt secure though they were under foreign domination.

Paul's assurance that '*God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled*' (2 Thes. 1:6–7) could have been prompted by a reading of Esther. In both books the 'trouble' is persecution of God's people, who are in no position to defend themselves. Powerful opposition has continued over the centuries, and 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood' (Eph. 6:12). God sometimes intervenes with spectacular providences, as he did in the time of Esther, but whether he publicly vindicates the believer or not, the church's task is to stand firm. Paul found his vindication in the growth of the church.

In the centuries before Christ the survival of the Jewish people was essential if there were ever to be a church. The book Esther, which relates a story about that survival, is therefore an integral part of the Bible for Christians as well as for Jews.

Joyce Baldwin

POETRY IN THE BIBLE

Introduction

In modern translations of the Bible more than a third of the OT is set out as poetry. The Psalms, the wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) and much of the prophets are poetry. There are also a few poems in the Pentateuch and the historical books. The power and popularity of many of these passages suggest that poetry is able to get to the heart of our relationship with God. Understanding biblical poetry is therefore no mere technical exercise, but a way to understand the spiritual significance of these scriptures, which mean more to us than ordinary prose could ever express.

Biblical poetry is different from most western forms, but similar poetic compositions have been found in the cultures that surrounded Israel, such as Ugarit and Mesopotamia. Later Jewish writings continue this tradition, illustrated by the hymns of the Dead Sea Scrolls (the Hodayot, 1 QH). We shall focus primarily on OT poetry, since NT poetry (*e.g.* Lk. 1:46–55, 68–79) is rare and largely derived from OT patterns.

What makes biblical poetry?

There are three common features to poetry in the Scriptures: *rhythm* (or meter), *parallelism* and *concentration of meaning*. These need not all be present together, though they often are, and there are occasional passages where we are not sure whether we are reading poetic prose or prosaic poetry. Passages such as Phil. 2:5–11 and Col. 1:15–20 may reflect earlier Christian poems, but it is also possible that the majesty of the subject compelled the writer to use poetic language to express it. In most cases, however, it is fairly clear whether a passage is poetry, even in English translation.

Rhythm and meter

Since we do not have a recording of King David reciting the Psalms, discussion of the sound and rhythm of biblical poetry is bound to involve some guesswork. Some scholars think that the number of syllables in a line of poetry is significant; most consider that a better guide is the pattern of accented syllables in a line, reflecting the stresses of the speaking voice rather than the mere quantity of sound. In either case biblical poetry tends to comprise distinct phrases of about the same length. This may often be seen in translations that stay close to the original form. In terms of the stress theory, lines of poetry usually have two balanced phrases, with two or three accents in each (2 + 2, *cf.* Ps. 29; or 3 + 3, *cf.* Is. 40–55; Jb.; Pr.).

From time to time there are exceptions to this rule of balance. A number of laments display an unbalanced rhythm, called the *qinah* meter (from the Hebrew word meaning 'lamentation'). A phrase with three stresses is followed by one with two (3 + 2), as if the despair of the writer has so consumed his strength that he does not have the energy to repeat the line in full.

He-spread a-net for-my-feet;
he-turned-me back (La. 1:13, NRSV).

This is not a rigid rule, however (the other lines of this verse do not keep this pattern), and it is difficult to be sure of the psychological basis for word patterns.

In the past scholars sometimes suggested that the text should be changed to fit the meter when a phrase or line seemed too short or too long. Today the importance of meter as an aspect of biblical poetry has diminished. We are more aware of our ignorance of the conventions of the past and the freedom that poets have to vary their style.

Parallelism

The second major feature of biblical poetry is parallelism, where two brief phrases (A, B) are similar or parallel in some way. It is only in modern times that scholars have recovered the significance of parallelism. James Kugel (*The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History.* [Yale University Press, 1981]) speaks of the 'forgetting' of parallelism by the rabbis, who did not recognize the importance of repetition. They tended to make each word and phrase clearly distinct, as in Dt. 33:10 (Kugel's translation):

Let-them-teach your-statutes to-Jacob
your-teaching to-Israel

The 'statutes' and the 'teaching' were regarded as completely different bodies (the written and oral Torahs). In fact, the rabbis were not

completely mistaken, since phrases are rarely exactly synonymous. Nevertheless, the remembering of parallelism is generally traced to two works by Robert Lowth, originally published in Latin in 1753 and 1778 (translated as *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* [Buckingham, 1815] and *Isaiah: A New Translation with a Preliminary Dissertation and Notes* [Wm Tegg, 1848]). It is helpful to describe the basic two-phrase line as: *A/ B//*, with a slight pause (/) at the end of the first phrase, and a full pause at the end of the complete line (//). So in Ps. 2:3 (my translation):

Let-us-burst their-bonds, A/
and-let-us-cast-away from-us their-cords B//

The phrases can also be broken up into two or three smaller elements, often single words in the Hebrew (as hyphenated). These can be represented by lower case letters a, b, c *etc.*, with a', b', c' *etc.* as their parallels. For example (Ps. 147:8):

He covers the sky with clouds (a, b, c)
He supplies the earth with rain (a', b', c').

Lowth described three main types of parallelism. Ps. 2:3 illustrates *synonymous parallelism*, in which the first phrase is repeated in similar terms in the second (a b/ a' b'//). A development of this, *external parallelism*, (A/ B// A'/ B'//) occurs *e.g.* in Ps. 27:1:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;	A
whom shall I fear?	B
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;	A'
of whom shall I be afraid?	B'

If instead of two phrases saying something similar, they have an opposite meaning, we have *antithetic parallelism*. So in Pr. 10:1 (my translation):

A wise son makes glad his father
but a foolish son is the grief of his mother.

Lowth defined a third type, *synthetic parallelism*, as follows: 'The parallelism consists only in the similar form of construction; in which word does not answer to word, and sentence to sentence, as equivalent (synonymous parallelism) or opposite (antithetic parallelism); but there is a correspondence and equality between different propositions, in respect of the shape and turn of the whole sentence, and of the constructive parts . . .'

Ps. 2:6 for example displays neither synonymous nor antithetic parallelism:

I have installed my King
on Zion, my holy hill.

Lowth's classification can be refined and extended in various ways:

(i) Complementary parallelism – the two phrases express complementary truths:

The LORD is my shepherd
I shall lack nothing (Ps. 23:1).

Yahweh and the Psalmist ('I') are the complementary partners in the relationship of faith. The result of having a shepherd is an absence of want.

(ii) Staircase parallelism – the second phrase repeats only one of the basic units in the first line and so progresses the thought (a b/ a' c//):

Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength (Ps. 29:1).

Another way of looking at it is in terms of 'ellipsis' (leaving one element out). The heavenly beings are addressed in the second line as well as the first, but they are not explicitly mentioned. Staircase parallelism is a special effect, often occurring for a particular reason. It is used to open poems (Ps. 29:1; Ec. 1:1) or close them (Ec. 12:8), and can occur as a refrain (Ps. 67:3, 5).

(iii) Chiasmus – the sequence of the parallel elements in a line is reversed (a b/ b' a'//). This produces a 'crossover' effect (the word is derived from the Greek letter 'chi', which is cross-shaped).

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish (Ps. 1:6).

At the lowest level this technique adds variety and interest, but it can also contribute to meaning. The contrast between the ways of the righteous and the wicked is clearly emphasized by the chiastic shape of the verse above. Sometimes it is used to emphasize the central element. Extended chiasmus is also found (*e.g.* a b c c' b' a' in Am. 6:4b-6a; a b c b' a' in Is. 55:8–9).

(iv) Merismus – the expression of totality using the two extremes (which can be described as $a^{-}a^{+}$):

In his hand are *the depths of the earth*;
the heights of the mountains are his also (Ps. 95:4).

The totality of the world is represented by

the two vertical extremes (a b^+/ b^- a' // − note the chiasmus). The following verse of the Psalm adds the horizontal dimension, embracing the sea and the dry land. Another merism representing the whole universe is 'the heavens and the earth' (Gn. 1:1), used in the opening line of the Babylonian Creation epic (Enuma Elish I,1):

When above (+) the heavens (+) were not named,
and below (−) the earth (−) was not given a name

Recent developments

Lowth's third type of parallelism ('synthetic') has evoked much debate. What do 'correspondence' and 'equality' mean? Is 'synthetic parallelism' merely a net to catch all the cases that are not covered by the other two? Helpful clarification has come from the work of Adele Berlin (*The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, [Indiana University Press, 1985]), who suggests that there are no fewer than four different levels of writing through which the poet can create parallelism. These are the levels of sound ('phonological parallelism'), word ('lexical parallelism'), sentence structure ('grammatical parallelism'), and meaning ('semantic parallelism'). The interplay between these levels is what gives biblical poetry its enormous flexibility and power, yet without abandoning form and stability.

(i) Sound. The poetry of the Hebrew Bible, and from time to time the prose as well, regularly features similar sound between words near to each other. This contributes to the unity of the poem and can also be shaped to emphasize other levels of meaning. The repetition of sound may be at the beginning of words (alliteration), between words (assonance), or between the ends of words or lines (rhyme). Translation usually loses this sound-play element, a particularly sad loss for proverbs, which often depend on brevity and sound-play for their effect. In the Hebrew Pr. 13:24 consists of only seven words, displaying assonance and rhyme (*cf.* the traditional English proverb 'spare the rod and spoil the child'). The NIV needs no less than eighteen words and has no sound effects:

He-who-spares the-rod hates his-son,
but-he-who-loves-him is-careful to-discipline-him.

Fortunately, the patterns of sound often highlight points that are made in other ways as well, but appreciating the sound of biblical poetry is a major reason for learning Hebrew! The prophets often employ similarity of sounds between words to reinforce their point (*e.g.* Is. 5:7; 7:9)

(ii) Words. 'Lexical parallelism' in Ps. 2:3 is illustrated by the way that 'burst' and 'cast away', 'bonds' and 'cords' are similar in meaning. Words close in meaning that are often found in parallel lines are called word-pairs. They are sometimes so close in meaning as to be indistinguishable (synonyms), but there are few, if any, absolute synonyms in a language, and we need to look for difference as well as overlap in meaning.

(iii) Sentence structure. The exact grammatical parallelism of the two phrases of Ps. 2:3 is evident (verb-pronoun-noun). Other verses often vary the grammar slightly (*e.g.* singular/plural, masculine/feminine, perfect/imperfect form of the verb), to add variety and sometimes to contribute to meaning. In Pr. 10:1, (see above) the only grammatical difference is that a noun ('the grief of') replaces a verb ('makes glad') in the second phrase. The words and sentence structure are similar in this case, which highlights the contrast in meaning of what does change, wisdom to folly.

(iv) Meaning. Parallelism at the level of word and sentence structure leads inevitably in Ps. 2:3 to 'semantic parallelism', the highest and most complex level. Both phrases are similar in meaning, expressing how the kings of the nations are planning to rebel against the God of Israel and his Messiah. However, we shall see in the next section that complete semantic parallelism is rare.

Berlin's fourfold analysis can help us to see the value and the limitations of Lowth's work. The main difficulty for Lowth's classification is that very many verses do not seem to conform to his scheme. Kugel stressed the enormous number of exceptions, and instead suggested that we should understand the relation between the two phrases as (*ibid.*, p. 51): 'B, by being connected to A − carrying it further, echoing it, restating it, contrasting with it, *it does not matter which* − has an emphatic, "seconding" character, and it is this, more than any aesthetic of symmetry of paralleling, which is at the heart of biblical parallelism.'

We might summarize by suggesting that the early Jewish view was 'A is not equal to B', the traditional approach is 'A equals B', and Kugel's theory is 'A, and what's more B'. Kugel regards parallelism as an unhelpful concept, and indeed questions whether there is any difference in kind between poetry and prose. However, he is chiefly concerned with 'semantic parallelism', and parallelism at other levels and the other characteristics of poetry are often more evident.

A proposal similar to Kugel's is made by Robert Alter (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*

[Basic Books, 1985], p. 19): '(Where) semantic parallelism does occur in a line, the characteristic movement of meaning is one of heightening or intensification (as in the paradigmatic case of numerals), of focusing, specification, concretization, even what could be called dramatization.'

Along similar lines, David Clines suggests that phrase A tends to be general or ambiguous, but B specifies the particular force of a word or symbol or statement in phrase A ('The Parallelism of Greater Precision: Notes from Isaiah 40 for a Theory of Hebrew Poetry', in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. E.R. Follis [JSOT Press, 1987], pp. 77–100). Is. 40:3 (NRSV) reads:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

The second phrase makes it clear that 'way' is a literal road, not a metaphor for manner of life, and that it is for God himself.

What is clear is that an author can move from A to B in a variety of ways. Some of Alter's suggestions (using his translations) are:

Saul has slain his *thousands*,
David, his *ten thousands*. (1 Sa. 18:7)

Saul was not at all pleased with this intensification of numbers. A noun and adjective following a noun illustrates grammatical intensification (Pr. 4:3):

for I was a *son* to my father,
a *tender only child* to my mother.

In Je. 7:34 the second phrase specifies more precisely where people are and who they are:

I shall put an end in the *cities of Judea*
and in the *streets of Jerusalem*
to the sound of *gladness and joy*,
the sound of *bridegroom and bride*.

Dramatization occurs when a literal phrase is topped by a hyperbole:

Face to the ground they will *bow to you*,
they will *lick the dust of your feet* (Is. 49:23).

A metaphor or a simile can be used to the same effect:

You will smash them *with an iron mace*,
like a potter's vessel shatter them. (Ps. 2:9)

One further class of movement is of particular significance. Alter points out that, even though the biblical writers were masters of story-telling in prose, there are no biblical epic poems such as the Iliad or the Gilgamesh Epic. Alter's solution to this puzzling gap is that (*ibid.*, p. 39) 'what the poets give us is not narrative but narrativity – which is to say, the narrative development of metaphor'. The phrases of a verse are not so much parallel as developing, telling a story that is not a literal experience of the poet but nevertheless truly interprets his experience:

See how they *conceive* evil,
and are *pregnant* with mischief,
and *bring forth* lies (Ps. 7:14, NRSV).

Here the slow but sure production of evil is understood gruesomely in terms of the process that leads to birth (for similar examples see Pss. 7:5, 14; 18:7–15; 23).

Concentration of meaning

Poetry can say many things in brief compass. Parallelism already contains infinite possibilities, but biblical poetry is also dense with metaphors. Images and metaphors shift rapidly, correcting, reinforcing and complementing each other. Sometimes the metaphors are stock ones that reinforce fundamental beliefs about God (*e.g.* the LORD as shepherd). Elsewhere the development can be surprising (*e.g.* Ps. 39:11; God as a moth) or extraordinarily detailed (*e.g.* Jb. 14; Ho. 14:4–8). The practical and theological value of metaphors cannot be overestimated. They are a means by which we may interpret our experience and the maps by which we may navigate our lives. It is therefore worth the effort for readers of the Bible to learn something of the culture of the ancient Near East, so as to feel the force of the truths so often presented in vivid pictorial language.

The use of metaphors in biblical poetry helps it to speak forcefully to believers down the ages. A proverb or a psalm is designed to apply to all kinds of people in many circumstances. Illness, enemies and divine absence can all represent the forces that beset the people of God (*e.g.* Ps. 6). A rod may not be handy (Pr. 13:24), but a sharp word or a detention will do. We naturally derive general principles from a particular example, and then find a particular application of the general.

In the prophets we often find that oracles are adapted or recycled to apply to different historical occasions (*e.g.* Is. 13 and Rev. 18). There is an openness in poetry that encourages the reader to broaden his or her mind in finding many interpretations. In law or doctrine, on the other hand, it is often important to decide on one single meaning.

This openness is one reason why reading poetry is harder work than reading narrative. We have to fill in gaps and make sense of the poem for ourselves. We have to make an effort to relate a poem to our own lives as we explore its mystery, complexity and vivid imagery. This increases our involvement and challenges us to make the poet's view of the world our own. This does not mean that reading poetry is purely subjective and arbitrary. Careful analysis of a poem should enrich and discipline our exploration of the meaning the text had for the original author and hearers, and now has for ourselves.

The composition of a poem

So far we have focused on the poetic character of the line or small section. This is sufficient to understand many of the proverbs and isolated poetic fragments, but in longer compositions poetry can be seen to be organized in a coherent and satisfying way. In terms of structure we can often detect several sections in a poem that show a unity of meaning or grammar. One or more sections may also be linked in some way as *stanzas*.

Each poem has its own unity, but common compositional features include:

(i) Use of longer and shorter lines. The majority of poetic verses contain two phrases. But from time to time a phrase will be on its own, or a line will have three phrases. These often open (*e.g.* Song. 6:19; Je. 10:12) or conclude a section (*e.g.* Je. 14:9; Gn. 49:27), and a three-phrase verse often brings a section or poem to a climax (*e.g.* Ps. 16:11).

(ii) 'Anacrusis.' Sometimes an element of a line (a conjunction or a phrase) stands outside the regular pattern of the phrases. Anacruses are often used to link lines (*e.g.* for, now, woe) or introduce an important statement. Ps. 1:1 (my translation) has three phrases displaying partial chiasmus and prefaced by an anacrusis (a). It is an appropriately weighty beginning to the Psalter:

Blessed is the one (a)
  who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked (b c)
  or in the way of sinners does not stand, (c' b')
  or in the seat of scoffers does not sit (c" b")

(iii) Refrain. This is a periodic repetition of a verse, like a chorus sung between verses of a hymn. In Pss. 42–43 the refrain comes three times and sums up the theme:

Why are you downcast, O my soul?
  Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God,
  for I will yet praise him,
  my Saviour and my God. (42:5, 11; 43:5).

This is one of the reasons why scholars are sure that these two psalms were originally one and should be read together.

(iv) Keyword. A poem, or a section, is often unified by the recurrence of significant words, such as voice in Ps. 29 or various words for time in Ps. 90.

(v) 'Inclusio.' This refers to a word or phrase that occurs both at the beginning and the end of a unity of prose or poetry (*e.g.* 'Praise the LORD, O my soul', Ps. 103:1, 22). Inclusio holds a passage together and indicates to listeners the end of a section. The meaning of the repeated phrase is often enriched by what comes in-between (*e.g.* Ps. 8).

(vi) Acrostic. Each element of an acrostic begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. Acrostics can be found at the level of the phrase (Pss. 111; 112), the verse (Ps. 25), two verses (Ps. 37), or three verses (La. 2). The ultimate acrostic is Ps. 119, where the eight lines of each of the 22 sections begin with the same letter. The constraints of the scheme explains why verses are often only loosely connected.

(vii) Variety of poetic style. Synonymous parallelism is a balanced form and appropriate for objective and reflective expression, but this can become boring and abstract. Variation and narration provide interest and new insight, but too much of it can be superficial and not allow us time to absorb the significance of an affirmation about God or ourselves. Taken as a whole, the poetry of the Bible is a healthy combination of story and interpretation, action and reflection.

Conclusion

David is called the 'the sweet Psalmist of Israel' (2 Sa. 23:1, AV/KJV), and thanks to him and others we have in the Bible some of the greatest poetry ever penned. The poetry of the OT is often echoed or quoted in the words of Jesus. To ignore it would be to ignore its specific contribution to the inspired humanity of the Scriptures. This article has aimed to introduce the artistry and subtlety with which the biblical poets communicated their share of the full counsel of God. Admittedly, a focus on technique and beauty can blind us to the ultimate realities (1 Cor. 13:1). Yet the Scriptures bear ample witness that God's people down the ages have considered that only poetry can adequately express our highest and deepest experiences of God and the world his people inhabit (*cf.* Ec. 12:10; Col. 3:16).

Philip Jenson

For further reading see over.

Further reading

R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Basic Books/T. and T. Clark, 1985).

L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (Yale University Press, 1981).

D. L. Petersen and K. H. Richards, *Interpreting Biblical Poetry* (Fortress, 1992).

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JOB

Introduction

The theme of the book

We all know, in reading this magnificent book, that its theme is the problem of suffering. But what exactly *is* the problem of suffering? To many people it is the question: Why does suffering happen? What is its origin and cause? Or, to put it more personally: For what reason has this particular suffering happened to me? But perhaps these ways of putting the question mainly reflect our obsession, in the modern world, for discovering the origins of things – as if by that means alone we can come to true understanding.

To the question of the *origins* of suffering, serious though it is, the book of Job does not give any satisfactory answer. The question is certainly raised and partial answers to it are given by Job's friends. Suffering, they say, is usually a punishment for sin and sometimes a warning against committing sin in the future. The book as a whole adds that sometimes, as in the case of Job himself, suffering comes for no earthly reason at all but simply in order to justify God's claim that humans can serve him without thought of reward. But just because the book offers these different reasons for the origin of suffering, readers cannot learn from the book what is the cause of their own suffering; they are in the same position, then, as Job himself, who never becomes aware of the origin of his suffering. To him it remains a mystery to the last. We may conclude that the book does not regard this question of origins as the primary question about suffering.

There is a second problem about suffering: Do innocent people suffer, or is suffering always deserved? Now this is a question that is both raised and convincingly answered by the book. It speaks out clearly against the idea that suffering is always a punishment for wrongdoing by insisting that the Job who suffers is a righteous man. It is not only the narrator (1:1), and not only Job himself (*e.g.* 6:30; 9:15) but also God (42:7–8), who affirms that Job is an innocent man. All the same, it is a very natural human tendency to ask, when one is suffering, 'What have I done to deserve this?' The book of Job admits that suffering may sometimes be fully deserved, but its main response to this question is to say that perhaps you have no need to blame yourself; suffering is not always what *ought* to happen to you. But even this question and its answer are not the essential point that the book wants to make about the problem of suffering.

The third, and essential, problem of suffering that is addressed by the book of Job is a more personal one. It is: How can I suffer? What am I to do when I am suffering? In what spirit can I go on suffering? By comparison with this question of how we can actually respond to suffering, the first question (about the *origin* of suffering) seems merely an academic one, and the second (whether there is *innocent* suffering) can be quite easily answered. This third question is the hardest one; it takes the whole book of Job to answer it.

The book of Job gives two different but complementary answers to the question as it portrays Job's reactions to his suffering. The first answer is expressed in the prose introduction to the book in the first two chapters. Job reacts to the disasters that come upon him with calm acceptance of the will of God; he can bless God both for what he has given and what he has taken away (1:21), both for good and for harm (2:10). If sufferers can identify with Job's attitude of acceptance, they are fortunate indeed. If, like him, they do not try to ignore the reality of their suffering by escaping into the past, and if they do not become so burdened with the present grief that they forget past blessings they have had, they have gained a benefit from the story of Job. Many sufferers, however, do not come to acceptance so easily; they are rather a blend of Job the patient and Job the impatient.

The second answer to the question, What am I to do when I am suffering? emerges from the distress and turmoil of Job's mind as it is revealed in his poetic speeches (between ch. 3 and ch. 31). When he can no longer simply accept what is happening to him, and he becomes bitter and angry as a sense of isolation from God overwhelms him, and he even feels he is being persecuted by God, Job does what he must do. He does not try to suppress his hostility towards God for what has happened to him; he says that he will speak out 'in the anguish of [his] spirit' and 'complain in the bitterness of [his] soul' (7:11). And he does not complain or shout into the air to express his anger and frustration; his bitterness is directed towards God.

Even though Job is at times rash and unjust in the way he speaks of God, his protests are

spoken in the right direction; for he realizes that it is God himself with whom he has to do. It is just because he keeps on addressing himself to God that in the end God reveals himself to him (chs. 39 – 41). Job's suffering does not cease because God responds to him. He discovers that he has misjudged God, but his anguish has in some way been calmed by his encounter with God. And, despite Job's bitter words against God throughout the book, at the end, amazingly enough, God actually praises him for speaking of him 'what is right' (42:7–8). That can only mean that Job has directed himself to God in his suffering and has demanded an explanation.

If the book could be heard as speaking to sufferers in Job's position (people who are suffering, that is, for no reason they themselves can think of), what it would be saying is: Let Job the patient sufferer be your model, so long as that is possible for you. But when you cannot bear that any longer, let your grief and anger and impatience direct you towards God, for he is ultimately the origin of the suffering, and it is only through encounter with him that the anguish can be relieved

Job is, of course, the central character in the book, but he is not the only one. What have the friends of Job to offer him in his suffering? What help for themselves can other sufferers reading their words find? Eliphaz says that if you are innocent your suffering can only be temporary and asks, 'Who, being innocent, has ever perished?' 'Where were the upright ever destroyed?' (4:7). If Job is basically a godfearing man, he has a right to confidence that he will not suffer for long. Bildad, a firm believer in the doctrine of retribution, finds his theology confirmed by the deaths of Job's children, who must have been great sinners (8:4). Job himself still lives, so the sin for which he is being punished cannot have been so severe, and he may take comfort from the fact that his life is spared. Zophar believes suffering is always the result of sin, but believing also that God is merciful, he can only suppose that Job's suffering is less than he really deserves from a just God (11:5–6). Elihu wants to value suffering as a channel of divine communication, a warning against future sin.

No-one in the book of Job says that the friends are entirely wrong. Even when God reproves them (42:7), it is because they have 'not spoken of me what is right' – in Job's case, that is, for Job was not a sinner, and his suffering was in no way God's punishment. What the friends say about suffering in general may well be true in other circumstances. But where they fail Job is that they take their cue from their doctrine instead of from the evidence of their eyes and ears. They know that Job is a good man, and they wrong him by thinking that his suffering is a witness against his goodness. The book of Job is not against the friends, but it wants to say that suffering happens to good people who do not deserve it as well as to people who deserve all that happens to them.

The origins of the book

We cannot put a date on the composition of the book of Job, except for the outer limits, perhaps the seventh and the second centuries BC. A folk tale of a righteous sufferer probably existed long before the present poem came into being. The theme of the suffering of the innocent is found also in texts of Jeremiah and Isaiah stemming from the sixth century. So it is possible that the suffering of Job was intended to be symbolic of the suffering of the Jews in the time of the exile.

The author of the book was no doubt an Israelite. Job's own homeland is depicted as northern Arabia; his story is set in a distant patriarchal age; and Job himself does not know God by his distinctive Israelite name, Yahweh. The author, however wants to suggest the universal character of Job's questions, even though it is obvious that the influences on his thought and literary style are Hebrew through and through.

Among modern students of the Bible, the book of Job is reckoned to belong to the group known as 'Wisdom Literature'. It is doubtful whether there was a common social setting of the 'wise' from which these books (Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes) originated, but it is useful to compare them theologically. Proverbs is a stalwart defender of the doctrine of retribution. Its basic principle is that wisdom leads to life and folly to death, and it takes for granted everywhere that righteousness is rewarded and sin is punished. Ecclesiastes does not doubt the value of the quest for wisdom, but it in effect inscribes a challenging question mark in the margin of Proverbs. For it asks what happens to wisdom at death? Death cancels all values, including wisdom, and the meaning of life cannot lie in gaining something that is going to be lost. It is better, says Ecclesiastes, to regard life as an opportunity for enjoyment (Ec. 2:4); for enjoyment is not a cumulative possession that can be ultimately destroyed, it is used up and spent in the process of living. The book of Job also confronts the ideology of Proverbs but in a different way. In the thought of Proverbs, a man like Job is an impossibility. If he was truly righteous, he would find life, wealth and health. The book of Job, however, depicts someone who is both righteous and a sufferer. And at the same time it shows that a truly religious attitude is not passive resignation to misfortune, but includes the courage to enter into dispute with God.

Further reading

D. Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, BST (IVP, 1991).
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1:1 – 2:13 Prologue

In this prose prologue there are five scenes, artistically arranged: the first, third and fifth (1:1–5, 13–22; 2:7–13) take place on earth; the second and fourth (1:6–12; 2:1–6) in heaven. Job and the other characters on earth remain ignorant of what happens on the heavenly plane; it is only we, the readers, who are let into the secret of why Job is suffering.

1:1–5 Scene 1: Job and his integrity

Job is not an Israelite, he is one of the 'people of the east', that is, east of the Jordan (Uz is Edom, south-east of Israel). He is, however, a worshipper of the true God, though he calls him Elohim (*God*), not 'Yahweh', the personal name of God. Job is a *blameless* man; this means he is beyond reproach, not that he is sinlessly perfect. A consequence of his goodness is that he has an ideal family: the numbers seven and three, adding to ten, symbolically suggest completeness (the same symbolic numbers are found also in the count of his possessions). In the patriarchal world, the female donkeys, valuable for their milk, and their foals were more precious than male donkeys. It was a different story, however, with sons and daughters! Job's sons each live in their own house: for with a father as wealthy as Job they can live like royal princes. When they gather for celebration on their birthdays, Job takes care that nothing improper happens among all the partying. As head of the family, Job acts as priest, offering sacrifices in case his children had accidentally said or done anything irreligious. The whole scene is of domestic harmony and tranquillity, but the picture of extreme wealth, extreme comfort and extreme scrupulousness already carries a dark hint of some violence that will soon disturb this perfection.

1:6–12 Scene 2: the heavenly gathering

Contrasted with these innocent family gatherings there is taking place in heaven a far more momentous gathering, that of the sons of God. They are God's courtiers, the angels (*cf.* also Is. 6:1; Je. 23:18, 22), and among them is 'the Satan' (not just 'Satan'). He is not the personal devil but one of the servants of God (the name means 'adversary', see the NIV mg.). The Satan is certainly Job's adversary, but in this scene he is not an enemy of God; for everything he does is approved of by God, and he cannot act without God's authorization. His normal task is to act as God's eyes and ears on earth.

Job is someone God can boast about; there are few in the OT who are called by the dignified title *my servant* (*e.g.* 2 Sa. 7:5; Is. 42:1). The Satan does not doubt Job's goodness; what he questions is whether Job is righteous for the sake of righteousness or for the sake of the reward that comes from being righteous.

1:13–22 Scene 3: the first trial

In this central scene four messengers come to Job, announcing four disasters. The disasters (two natural, two inflicted by humans) strike from all directions: *the Sabeans* (15) come from the south (Sheba); *the Chaldeans* (17) from the north; the lightning (*fire from God*, 16) is from the storms that sweep in from the Mediterranean in the west; and the *mighty wind* (19) comes from the desert in the east. We see Job so overwhelmed by the calamities that he has no time to recover from one shock before the next messenger arrives.

Job's reaction is not to blame natural events or human enemies (*the LORD has taken away*), not to forget God's blessing (*the LORD gave*), not to close his eyes to reality (*has taken*), but to praise the Lord for both good and evil (21). Yahweh's confidence in Job has proved justified.

Job's *mother's womb* to which he will return at death is probably to be understood as mother earth, out of which humans were created.

2:1–6 Scene 4: the heavenly gathering again

Yahweh's report on Job is that he *still maintains his integrity*, *i.e.* his life continues blameless as ever. The Satan now accepts that Job will suffer any external hardship piously provided he is not physically afflicted; it will be a different matter if he is personally harmed, he says. *Skin for skin* (4) may mean that Job has saved his own skin by piously accepting the death of his children; but more probably that if God now attacks Job himself, he will find that Job will attack him, by cursing him.

2:7–13 Scene 5: the second trial

The narrative hastens to its climax, as the fourth scene dissolves into the fifth. The Satan's exit *from the presence of the LORD* ends the fourth scene, and his afflicting Job begins the fifth; there is no interval of time between God's authorizing the suffering and the Satan's afflicting Job.

Job had gone to sit on the ash-heap outside his city to perform his rituals of mourning. To express his sense of desolation and isolation, he had removed himself from society and identified himself with the rubbish. While he is sitting there *painful sores* are inflicted upon him (7), and he uses broken pieces of pottery from the rubbish heap to scratch himself to relieve the irritation. These sores are obviously some skin disease (*cf.* 7:5; 30:30); more specific identifications like elephantiasis or leprosy cannot be proved. Job has many other symptoms as well, such as loss of weight (19:20), fever (30:30), nightmares (7:14) and sleeplessness (7:4), but these may well be psychosomatic expressions of his depression rather than effects of the skin disease. Other references to his suffering are probably metaphorical, as when he complains that his bones are rotting (30:17) or burning (30:30).

Job's wife must have felt herself terribly

wronged by her husband, for the result of all his piety has only been to rob her of her ten children, her social standing and her livelihood. And she is expected to maintain her loyalty to him despite the guilt by association that now attaches to her. Whether out of hatred of God for what he has done to Job, or out of a desire that her husband's misery should be soon ended, she urges Job to *curse God* (9) and so bring death upon himself. Job does not reproach her for suggesting blasphemy, but for speaking like *a foolish woman* (see the NIV mg.). By this he probably means low-class, irreligious women, unable to understand the truth behind events. Job is something of an aristocrat, and though he is at this moment deprived of his wealth, he has little real understanding of the plight of the permanently poor (*cf.* 30:2–8). Job's response to his wife is that God is as free to send *good* and *trouble* as he is both to give and to take away (*cf.* 1:21). This is not fatalistic resignation to the will of an unknowable God, but a kind of trustfulness that God knows what he is doing. In saying that Job *did not sin in what he said* (10), the narrator does not mean that he sinned in what he thought; he means that Job has disproved the claim of the Satan that he would sin with his lips by cursing God if he was physically struck down.

Job, being a chieftain of great importance (1:3), has friends in various countries, though we cannot with certainty identify their homelands. Their intentions towards Job are kindly, we need not doubt; but strangely enough, when they see how badly he is suffering they do not offer him any consolation. They do not address a single word to him, but begin to treat him as if he were already dead. They believe they are expressing their sympathy (and our silent listening to someone in trouble can be very beneficial), but their silent mourning *for seven days and seven nights* (13) is inevitably alienating. As their later words will show, they cannot believe that Job does not deserve, in some degree, the suffering that he is now enduring. They uncritically accept the orthodox theology that attributes all suffering to human sinfulness.

3:1 – 31:40 The dialogue

3:1–26 Job's first speech, in which he expresses his grief

With this monologue of Job's, we are suddenly plunged out of the epic grandeur and deliberateness of the prologue (chs. 1 – 2) into the dramatic turmoil of the poem (3:1 – 42:6); from the external description of suffering to Job's inner experience. In the speech there is a movement from the past (3–10) to the future (20–26), and from the experience of the man Job (3–19) outwards towards the experience of humankind in general (20–22).

In this speech there is no reference to the meaning of the suffering, no question about whether it is deserved or not, no wondering about the origin of it. Job does not blame himself for it, nor does he blame God. That will come later, but here we have simply the man Job in the violence of his grief.

3:3–10 He curses the days of his conception and birth. A curse is usually directed to the future, but Job is in such despair that he utters his curse upon the past. It is a completely futile curse, of course, for the past cannot be changed. He wishes that the day of his birth and conception (viewed poetically as one event) could have been blacked out (4–6a) so that it would not have entered into the calendar of the year (6b, c); he wishes that the sorcerers who put a curse on days could have made it one of the unlucky days, in which it would have been impossible for his parents to have conceived him or for his mother to have given birth to him (8a, 10a). 8 Some ancient magicians obviously believed they could *rouse Leviathan*, the sea-monster (*cf.* Ps. 104:26; Is. 27:1) and dragon of chaos, who would perhaps swallow up the sun, so causing the darkness of eclipse.

3:11–19 He wishes that he had died at birth. Job moves in this speech from despair to questioning. Since the curse on the day of his birth had obviously never been uttered, he goes on to ask why, if he had to be born, he could not have died at birth (11a) or, at least, have been *stillborn* (16). Death has for him now become sweeter than life, and he compares the quiet peacefulness and restfulness of the underworld (Sheol) to his present troubled and anxious lot (13–19).

14 Near Eastern kings frequently boasted that they had rebuilt the ruins of famous cities of the past.

3:20–26 The riddle of suffering existence. Job goes on to a wider question. Now he does not only ask why, since he has been born, he himself has to go on living, but why people in general cannot simply die when they are ready for it (20–23). In the last verses (24–26) he again speaks directly of himself. The whole poem ends with the note that has sounded throughout it: unlike the restfulness of the underworld, which is what he desires, Job's life has no *peace*, *quietness* or *rest*, but only *turmoil* (26).

23 Previously, God's hedge of protection about his life (*cf.* 1:10) had ensured his well-being; but now that he wants to die, he can think only of God's preservation of his life as an artificial prolongation of his misery; the hedge has

become a prison wall rather than a wall of defence. 25 Job's previous fear of future disaster explains his extreme care to ensure that no sin attached to his household (1:5; *cf.* 15:20–26).

4:1 – 5:27 Eliphaz's first speech: 'Be patient; all will be well'

Eliphaz, like all Job's friends, intends to sustain him in his suffering, and no-one brings a more comforting message than this friend. But there is also an irony here, as with all the speeches of the friends; for the author does not accept their dogmatic view that suffering is always deserved, and he means to portray their so-called comfort as cruelty.

The essence of Eliphaz's first speech to Job is: You are a pious man, as we know well. There is, therefore, no need to lose heart; for the innocent never finally suffer. You are suffering now because you are not perfect and you need some 'correction' and 'discipline' (5:17); but that will soon come to an end because you are basically a good man (4:6). In brief, his message to Job is, 'Only be patient; all will be well.'

4:2–6 'You are a pious man'. Eliphaz's genuine concern for Job is heard in his opening words; he is deferential and almost apologetic (2a). He is not scornful when he reminds Job how much comfort he has given to others in a similar position (3–4); it is the mildest of reproaches when he says, '*But now trouble comes to you, and you are discouraged*' (5). Job's encouragement of others, as an act of true *piety*, is a good reason why he may expect that God will soon restore him.

4:7–11 'The innocent never perish'. By describing the wicked, Eliphaz does not mean that Job is one of them. On the contrary, he is telling Job that he has no reason for anxiety since he is *not* one of the wicked, who sow trouble and reap it (8; *cf.* Ho. 10:13; Gal. 6:7).

4:12–21 'However, even the pious are not perfect'. To support his argument that even the righteous are not perfect, Eliphaz recounts his night vision (12–16) and draws conclusions from it (17–21). Eliphaz thinks himself quite adventurous in having this prophetic insight. The author perhaps means us to be a little amused by Eliphaz's claim to divine revelation of what most normal people who have not been theologically educated would take for granted: '*Can a mortal be more righteous than God?*' (17). Even though the words should be translated, 'Can a mortal be righteous [that is, absolutely without sin] in the sight of God?', the idea is still obvious and banal. What is more, it is quite inappropriate for Job. He is not suffering some little affliction because he has fallen short of absolute moral perfection; he has been completely devastated. And though he has not been killed (*destroyed* like the wicked of v 9), he is in some ways worse off than the wicked; for he desires to be dead, but God insists on keeping him alive (3:20–23).

14 Eliphaz's dream or waking vision frightened him because he was aware of the presence of the supernatural. 18 Even God's heavenly *servants*, his *angels*, are not infallibly trustworthy (there is no thought of 'bad' angels here); how much less are mortals, who, unlike the angels, can die within a single day (20a), and who can be so insignificant (compared with angels) that they can die without anyone else noticing (20b) and without ever gaining the kind wisdom Eliphaz and the other friends live by (21).

5:1–7 'Suffering has to be expected'. Eliphaz cannot believe that Job really wants to die (as he has said in ch. 3), and he now supposes that Job must be looking for some way to be delivered from his suffering. Eliphaz says that if that is what Job is seeking, he might as well forget about it, for there is no power, not even among the heavenly beings, that can release Job from his punishment. Suffering is natural for humans; they always bring trouble upon themselves (v 7 should probably be translated, 'It is man who begets suffering for himself').

This cycle of cause and effect is especially clear in the case of the foolish man (2) whose *resentment* and *envy* bring him to ruin. Eliphaz does not mean Job is a fool, but we wince at Eliphaz's insensitivity to Job's misfortune when he speaks of the fool's house being cursed (3; *cf.* 25)! All that he means to say is that not even the righteous Job can hope to escape entirely from such suffering – affliction does not produce itself (6) but is produced by people (7).

5:8–16 'All you can do is commit your case to God'. Eliphaz takes up his earlier theme that Job is essentially a pious man and so should not lose heart (4:2–6), and now recommends patience to Job: If I were you, he says, I would leave my *cause* in God's hands (8), for he is the great reverser of fortunes (11–16). In this powerful description of God's workings, Eliphaz gets carried away a little by his own rhetoric. Much of it does not apply at all to Job; the only point of connection is that Job, like the *lowly* or the *needy* (11, 15), can have hope that God will dramatically change his current misfortunes.

8 At least Eliphaz says one sensible thing: '*if it were I, I would appeal to God.*' This is the one piece of the friends' advice that Job does follow, though he hardly needs Eliphaz to encourage him to do so. His *cause* is both his present misfortune and his 'case' in a more legal sense, which we shall several times hear Job laying before God in future speeches (*cf.* 7:20–21;

10:18–22; 13:20–23). **11–16** Here the destructive acts of God (12–14) are enclosed within the frame of his saving acts (10–11, 15), so the chief effect of this picture of God's working is to give *hope* to the *poor* (16; *cf.* Lk. 1:51–53).

5:17–27 'If you do so, God will restore you.' Eliphaz advises Job that if only he will wait patiently for God to act, he will find that the suffering he is experiencing is disciplinary suffering (17), and that 'he who wounds is he who soothes the sore' (18; JB). Eliphaz is determined to end this speech on a positive note. He thinks (and this too is ironic) that he is doing Job a favour by telling how well off he is in fact! '*Blessed is the man whom God corrects*', he says (17), as if he had any right to tell Job what a blessing it is to be suffering the loss of his family and of his livelihood.

The picture is, however, not entirely rosy: there are conditions Job must meet. He must *not despise the discipline of the Almighty* (17) and he must *hear* Eliphaz's advice and *apply it* to himself (27). These do not seem on the surface to be difficult conditions to meet, but of course they are impossible for Job to accept. How can he accept God's 'discipline' if he does not regard his suffering as discipline but as cruel injustice? And how can he apply Eliphaz's advice to himself when he knows it is the product of theological reflection and not in the least true to lived experience?

6:1 – 7:21 Job's second speech: 'God, leave me alone'

Eliphaz's speech has not touched Job's problem at all. So Job ignores it, on the whole. This is quite a typical feature of the book, with the various contributors speaking past one another, and it is obviously something the book is wanting to say about the difficulties of bringing theology into communication with real life.

In this powerful speech there are three movements. In the first (6:1–13), which is a soliloquy addressed to no-one in particular, Job goes well beyond his position in ch. 3. There he had wished that he had never been born, and asked why, since he has been born, he is compelled to go on living. But now he yearns for immediate death (6:8–9). In the second movement (6:14–30), Job addresses the friends, complaining they have cheated him of the one thing he might have expected from them: an understanding sympathy. In the third movement of the speech (7:1–21), he surprisingly directs himself to God. For the moment, he asks of God nothing except that he should leave him alone so that he can live out his remaining days free from pain. But of course there is more to this than meets the eye; for in the very act of begging God to desert him he is in fact approaching him.

6:1–13 'May God strike me dead!' At the beginning of this speech Job is not actually addressing God but expressing a forlorn wish that God would bring his suffering to a rapid end. The key passage in this section is vs 8–9: '*Oh, that I might have my request that God would grant what I hope for, that God would be willing to crush me.*' Job feels that if he could die now, before his suffering leads him into blasphemy, he could at least have the *consolation* of not having *denied the words*, the commandments, *of the Holy One.*

Eliphaz has called on Job to be patient, but patience needs a *strength* that Job does not have (11–13). Eliphaz has not recognized what a burden lies upon Job. If his misery could be weighed it would *outweigh the sand of the seas* (3); no wonder then that his words have been *impetuous* (or rather, 'desperate'). Job is apologizing for nothing, confessing to nothing. Just as in the prologue (1:21; 2:10), he recognizes that his suffering comes ultimately from God; here in the poem his pains are the result of the poisoned *arrows of the Almighty* (Shaddai) while the *terrors* of God his enemy are set in battle array against him (4). It is not the physical pain or the mental torment that weighs him down; it is the consciousness that he has become God's enemy.

5–6 Job's cries have their reasons, just as *donkey* or *ox* complain only when their wants go unsatisfied. Job's needs have not been satisfied – least not by Eliphaz, whose words are insipid and whose advice cannot be swallowed any more easily than can the *white of an egg* (6).

11–13 The feeling of weakness that returns to Job is not so much a physical as a psychological weakness. He has no inner resources left; his self-worth has been undermined because he sees that there is no reason in himself why God should be treating him so mercilessly.

6:14–30 'You have been undependable friends'. Job has just complained that he has no strength left (13), but now he moves to a bitter and sarcastic attack on his friends. His depression has become anger. He begins indirectly, with the image of the seasonal stream or wadi that never has water in it when it is wanted. He charges his friends with having failed to pay him friendship's debt of *devotion* or 'loyalty', the loyalty of friendship and unqualified acceptance through thick and thin. The friends mean something different by 'loyalty'. They offer sympathy and support, but only as much as is realistic. They cannot say 'my friend, right or wrong' when Job's sufferings plainly prove he is in the wrong and being punished by God for some wrongdoing or other. Are they to disregard the evidence of their eyes and their learning and prop Job up in what they believe to be a falsely self-righteous position?

21 The friends, says Job, are *afraid* that if they identify themselves too closely with him they too will come under God's judgment. They treat him not as a friend but as someone who has asked for a loan: they offer plenty of advice, but no hard cash (22–23)! **24** Job asks the friends to point out what the crime is for which he is suffering. That is all it would take to make him *quiet*.

7:1–21 'Why, O God, do you let me go on living?'. Job's death-wish again asserts itself, but this time it is interwoven with his experience of the futility and misery of human life generally and with an appeal to God to let him alone so that he may die in peace.

1–10 Job here projects his own despair upon human existence generally: the common lot of humankind is *hard service* (1). His depression now leads not so much to anger as to a lament over the fruitless drudgery of life. His *days* that are *swifter than a weaver's shuttle* (6) are also the days of humankind at large; the life that is *but a breath* (7) is the human lot; and the fact that *he who goes down to the grave does not return* (9) is common to humanity. And yet, paradoxically, life that is so brief can seem so tedious: the one event Job longs for – death – seems infinitely delayed, so that he is like *a slave longing for the evening shadows* (2). The only changes he knows are in the condition of his scabs, one day hardened over, another broken out with oozing pus (5).

11–16 Job has had two reasons for his astonishing request that God should let him alone (16). The first has been the misery of his life filled with pain (1–5); the second, the certainty of his approaching death (6–10). He has nothing more to lose. But what he has to complain of is that God, far from letting him alone, treats him like one of the legendary monsters of the deep, Yam (*the sea*) or Tannin (*the monster of the deep*), who had to be muzzled by God (*cf.* 38:8–11; Is. 51:9). It is ludicrous for God to imagine that Job poses any threat to his universe, yet he receives the same attention as did those forces of chaos (12).

17–18 In this bitter parody of Ps. 8, Job returns to the theme of disproportion (12). In the psalm, 'What is man?' expresses a thankful wonder that humans, apparently so insignificant on the scale of the universe, are the objects of the Almighty God's concern. In Job, 'What is man?' begins a reproof to God that God's *attention* to humans has not been for their benefit but has been a merciless scrutiny, a perpetual examination, an inexplicable cruelty, a sadistic torment.

19–21 Job is nothing but one of these insignificant humans. Suppose he really has sinned? Can that have done God so much harm that he must punish him so severely? In any case, Job will soon be dead. What harm can come to God if he defers the execution of punishment for a little? Not that human sin is trivial, but the supposed sin for which he is suffering cannot be worth so much of God's attention. Why does he not 'overlook' (rather than *pardon*) any offences Job is supposed to have committed? Job, we should notice, is not confessing to anything.

8:1–22 Bildad's first speech: 'If you are innocent you will not die'

Bildad, like all the friends, believes that suffering is punishment and that the death of Job's children is proof of their sin. Eliphaz assumed that Job was essentially a righteous man, though one being temporarily chastised by God for some fault such as mortals cannot avoid. But Bildad has less confidence in Job's righteousness. All of his encouragement to Job depends on the condition '*if you are pure and upright*' (6). Bildad is not hostile to Job, but he urges him to search his conscience; for it is only through innocence that Job can be delivered from his calamities.

Most of Bildad's speech (8–19) develops the theme that there is no effect without a cause; the death of the wicked illustrates the theme. The speech concludes on a comparatively cheerful note (20–23), and his message to Job is: 'If you are innocent, you will not die.'

8:2–7 'Your children's death and yours'. Bildad's basic view is that God does not *pervert justice* (3). If God has sent suffering, there must have been some sin to deserve it. The case of Job's children proves Bildad's point: '*When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin*' (4). By contrast, Job himself is not dead, so he must be innocent of anything deserving of death. Job has only to *look to God* in prayer (5) and if he is *pure and upright* his prayer will be heard. Everything is straightforward for Bildad: human destinies are entirely in accord with human merits.

8:8–19 'No effect without a cause, as the case of the wicked shows'. Bildad appeals to tradition (as Eliphaz does in 5:27) because his own experience cannot handle the theological problem of Job's suffering. In two scenes (11–13, 14–19), each concluding with its own inbuilt summary, he depicts the fate of the godless with an image from the world of nature, meaning to say that where there is punishment there must also have been guilt. In the first, the papyrus plant that dries up from lack of water proves the point, and it is also at the same time a metaphor for the fate of the wicked. In the second, there is the image of the spider's web as a symbol of the impermanence and unreliability of the confidence of the wicked (14–15), and

that of the uprooting of a plant as a metaphor for the destruction of the godless person.

8:20–22 'There is still hope for you'. Bildad ends on a hopeful note: '*God does not reject a blameless man*' (20). And he obviously believes that Job may yet prove to be such a man. But Bildad's wisdom is too shallow for Job's situation. And there is a cruel irony here too. For if Job does what Bildad recommends and 'pleads with the Almighty' (5) and uses his piety to get himself out of his suffering, will he not unwittingly have proved the Satan right, that Job does not fear God without thought of reward?

9:1 – 10:22 Job's third speech, in which he acknowledges he cannot compel God to be just

In these chapters we reach a deeper level of intensity. In them we hear the strongest statement Job has made so far of his feeling of powerlessness (*e.g.* 9:3–4, 14–20, 30–31) and his sense of being trapped (9:15, 20, 27–31). Above all we see his belief that all God's apparent concern for him throughout his life has not really been for his benefit but in order to fasten guilt upon him: *this is what you concealed in your heart* . . . [that] *If I sinned, you would be watching me*' (10:13–14). Not surprisingly, Job concludes this speech by repeating his wish that he had never been born (10:18–19; *cf.* 3:3–13) and by calling upon God to leave him alone in the few days that remain before his death (10:20–22; *cf.* 17:16).

Yet this speech is no mere repetition. For here Job also begins to open up the question of how he is to be vindicated, *i.e.* shown publicly to be in the right after all. He admits it is a quite hopeless task to make God declare him innocent (9:2), and the hopelessness of it throws him, by the end of the speech, into black despair (10:15–16). But it has become an ambition that he will not now reject, and its attraction for him only grows stronger as the book progresses (*cf.* 13:13–23; 16:18–21; 19:23–27; 23:2–14).

Job does not mean that God is unjust, though some lines could be read that way (9:16, 20, 22, 24, 30–31; 10:15). Rather he means that it is hopeless to *compel* God to do anything – even to give him the vindication that he is owed. His present suffering is a silent proof to his neighbours that he must be a terrible sinner; for they, like the friends, believe in the doctrine of retribution, that suffering is due to guilt. So the vindication that Job needs, and desires, is not some verbal proclamation that he is innocent after all, but a public restoration of his place in society, healing from his illness and the return of his possessions.

9:2–13 'I cannot compel God to vindicate me'. In asking, '*how can a mortal be righteous before God?*' Job is not speaking as Paul would, of how a sinner might be 'justified' or declared righteous before God but of how a righteous person can be 'justified' or publicly vindicated by God. That is because God is God and not a human; he has limitless wisdom and power (4), as is shown by his control of the universe. Job focuses upon the more negative aspects of God's power – he *moves mountains, shakes the earth, seals off the light of the stars* (5–7) – not in order to picture him as a God of chaos but to emphasize his freedom to act, whether for good or ill. The freedom of God makes him incomprehensible (his *wonders* cannot be *fathomed*; 10), unaccountable ('*Who can say to him, "What are you doing?"*'; *12)* and uncontrollable (he does not *restrain* his *anger*, if that is his decision; 13). 3 The picture here is of the lawcourt, where the plaintiff lays charges and the defendant counters with questions. If Job were to bring God to court, metaphorically speaking, he fears he would not be able to stand up to God's counter-questions and arguments.

9 The four star-groups here cannot be identified with certainty, but they are obviously among the most splendid of the stars. 13 *Rahab* is a name (like Leviathan) for the legendary sea-monster of chaos with whom (according to some Hebrew folklore not found in the Bible) God did battle at creation (see also 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Is. 51:9).

9:14–24 'Even in court, God would not vindicate me'. Job imagines bringing God to court in order to force him to deliver a public verdict of 'Not guilty' upon Job. But that is really an impossibility; for how could a mere mortal choose *words* or 'arguments' against God? And how, if one did manage to enter into legal argument with God, could one be sure that God was really listening, since he is at this moment crushing Job with a tempest (16–17)? Even though he is innocent, Job feels sure that he would in some way speak improperly, and so his own *mouth would condemn* him (20).

9:25–35 'Does it have to come to a trial of law?'. Now the monologue becomes an address to God. Beginning with a reflection on the misery of his days (25–26), Job recognizes that his sufferings are a constant reminder that God regards him as guilty (27–28) and will go on doing so, regardless of what Job does to prove his innocence (29–31). So what can he do? He can try to banish the sense of suffering from his mind (27), or he can try to clear himself of his supposed guilt by taking an oath of innocence (28–31). But neither of these moves offers much hope of success, and he is driven back to the idea of the legal dispute with God (32–35).

32–35 The problem with a legal confrontation with God is that the two parties cannot be on the same level (32). What Job needs is an arbitrator who can mediate between the two, who would *lay his hand* upon both parties as a gesture of reconciliation (or perhaps, as a symbol of his power over them both). But of course there is no such arbitrator. 'Very well,' says Job, 'I shall have to conduct my lawsuit myself. But I do not have the courage to begin such a dispute with God unless he promises not to terrify me with his superior strength' (34–35). In ch. 10 Job speaks the words he would use (or rather, the words he *does* use) in the dispute he imagines here.

10:1–22 'I will speak in the bitterness of my grief'. Like so many of Job's speeches, this one ends with a passionate appeal directly to God. Job is not content to talk *about* God in the third person, but knows that since his dealings are with God himself, it is *to* God that he must direct himself. There are four parts to the speech: its intention (1–2); the review of God's motivations for his treatment of Job (3–7); the contradiction between God's real and apparent purposes in creating Job and keeping him alive (8–17); and an appeal for release from God's oppressive presence (18–22).

1–2 Job intends to make this a legal controversy with God. Like the defendant in a court case, he asks for an account of the *charges* against him (2).

3–7 In three questions, Job speculates about the motives that lie behind God's behaviour towards him. Has it been in any way to God's profit (3)? Surely God has had nothing to gain from his ill-treatment of Job. Is God's vision only that of a *mortal*, that he acts so short-sightedly in his treatment of Job (4)? Has God so little time left to live that he must act with such urgency against Job (5–6)?

8–17 Here we have a beautiful description of God's creation of Job and preservation of him (8–12): he has been *moulded like clay*, curdled like *milk* being made into *cheese*, *knit... together* like the work of a weaver and granted *life*. Yet all the time, it appears, God has had a quite different and totally sinister purpose (13): to fasten guilt upon Job. Job is not admitting that he is guilty; he means that whether he is wicked or innocent (15), God's 'care' for him has been to make him a target for his attack (*cf.* 7:20).

18–22 Was it for this that Job was born? He is doubly hopeless now; he cannot find out how to approach God to win vindication from him (9:11), and he feels he is in the grip of an angry God who will make him suffer whether he is innocent or not (10:7). Not surprisingly, then, Job lapses into his mood of despair we first heard in ch. 3, mingled with the appeal for the absence of God that we met with in 7:16, 19.

11:1–20 Zophar's first speech: 'Repent!'

Zophar is the least sympathetic of the three friends. His message to Job is simple: you are suffering because God knows that you are a secret sinner (6), therefore repent (13–14)!

11:1–6 'God knows that you are a secret sinner'. Zophar is a man of principle, who agrees with Job that the real issue is the question of sin. It is not obvious that Job is a sinner; so he must be a secret sinner, whom God has found out. Job claims that his *beliefs are flawless* and that he is *pure* before God (4), but God knows otherwise – and somehow Zophar too has been let in on the knowledge – that Job is really an evildoer. Probably, his sin is so great that even with all this punishment God has *forgotten* or overlooked *some of your sin* (6). It may well be that Job is getting off lightly!

11:13–20 'Therefore you must repent!' Zophar now tries to persuade Job of the blessings of repentance. Where Eliphaz was tentative, Zophar is peremptory. And he makes clear that restoration depends entirely on Job's complete repentance: it is only if Job follows his advice that he can have anything to hope for. Job must *devote* his *heart* to God, direct his mind to God with full concentration and not rest content with outward symbols of repentance, and he must pray (13) and renounce his present evil behaviour.

The result will be a clear conscience (*you will lift up your face*) and a sense of security (*you will stand firm*; 15). But the reader notes the irony in all this; for everything Zophar recommends to Job has been Job's constant practice all his life (1:1).

12:1 – 14:22 Job's fourth speech: the friends' 'wisdom' and God's justice

This important speech of Job stands at the end of the first cycle of the speeches, after each of the friends has addressed him. There are two main sections: in the first, Job addresses his friends (12:2 – 13:18), and in the second, God (13:19 – 14:22). The movement of thought, even within the first section, is constantly away from the friends and towards God. The essence of the whole speech is: I want nothing to do with you *worthless physicians* (13:4); *I desire to speak to the Almighty* (13:3).

12:2 – 13:19 The friends' wisdom compared with God's. Job here addresses all the friends, not just Zophar, who has spoken last. He denies that his friends are any wiser than himself (2–12), and contrasts their wisdom with God's (13–25). For the first time he is contemptuous of them. 'No doubt', he begins

sarcastically, '*you are the people* with whose death wisdom will cease, but *I am not inferior to you*' (3). That really means he thinks he is superior, and that is because he has by his experience gained a higher wisdom than theirs. He knows something they do not know: that it is possible for a righteous man to be afflicted and, equally, that the deeds of the wicked can go unpunished (4–6).

7–12 Here we do not have Job addressing the friends but Job ironically imagining what they might say to him. He says they have a very simplistic view of God's ways of working; they think everything about sin and punishment is so straightforward that even the animals know it. It is the friends who speak the bland and obvious words of vs 10–11, and it is they who assert that *wisdom* is *found among the aged* (12).

13–25 This hymn to the destructive power of the Almighty presents Job's new wisdom (3). The God he has now experienced is no calm governor of a well-ordered universe, but an eccentric deity; he cannot be comprehended and he cannot be tamed. What is most characteristic of this God is his reversal of stable order. In other hymns (such as Eliphaz's in 5:9–16) the purpose of such reversals is to bring salvation and to correct injustice. But here there is no moral or beneficial purpose in these upheavals performed by God.

13:1–3 What Job desires above all is to *argue* with God; he uses the language of the lawcourt. But his aim is not so much to win a case against God but rather to settle a disagreement. He does not propose a lawsuit in which he will accuse God of injustice in withholding vindication from him; rather, he invites God to accuse him, so that he may hear what it is that God has against him (13:23).

4–12 But still he has something to say to the friends. The way they have been behaving, he says, still using the legal language, is as false witnesses on behalf of God. And though Job has many doubts about God's justice, he does not doubt that God will punish the friends for their *partiality* towards himself (13:10) and their lack of objectivity. They would do better to listen to him (6), not so much to the words he will direct to them personally (7–12) but to the words of his dispute with God (13:13 – 14:22). But before he begins that dispute in earnest, he wants to let them know that God would not be pleased to find out (9) that in trying to justify his ways to Job they have turned to lies about sin and punishment. Any theology that does not have room for Job's experience, that of a righteous man who is suffering, is a lie, and it is shocking that lies should be spoken about God. In a series of rhetorical questions (7–9, 11) Job expresses his amazement that anyone will use lies in the service of the truth.

13–19 Finally, Job wants to explain to the friends the meaning of his new speech to God (13:20 – 14:22). In ch. 7 he had asked God to stop paying attention to him, and likewise in chs. 9 – 10. But here he sets out on a riskier path and deliberately calls God into disputation with him (22). It is dangerous (14), suicidal, in fact (15); but Job is sure that right is with him (18).

13:20 – 14:22 What is it God has against Job? There are two thrusts in Job's address to God here. The first (13:19–27) is a demand that God will bring out into the open what he has against Job; the second (13:28 – 14:22) is, quite paradoxically, that he will leave Job alone to die in peace. These two pleas have been heard before from Job.

19–27 Job first summons God to enter into a lawsuit with him with the purpose of pronouncing a verdict of 'innocent' upon Job (19). He sets two conditions for fairness (20): first God must *withdraw* his *hand* from him, and secondly, he must *stop frightening* him with his *terrors* (21). Only then may God begin the proceedings, or if he prefers, Job will do so (22). In the language of the lawcourt, Job asks for a list of charges against him (23). He is, of course, not admitting to any crime but means 'what you claim are my sins'. It seems to Job that God is making much ado about nothing (25), punishing him for childhood errors (26) and, as we have heard before (*e.g.* 3:23), constricting and confining him (27).

14:1–22 The focus changes here from Job himself (as in 13:20–28) to humankind generally. Job is, of course, still speaking of himself but, as he has done before, projects his own feelings and experiences onto all humanity (*c.f.* 3:20; 7:1–10). The point of this chapter is that human beings are too insignificant to deserve the kind of divine scrutiny Job himself is experiencing. Since humans are so short-lived, God could reasonably overlook their sins; they can hardly challenge the world order (4).

7–12 The contrast between the *hope* of a tree and the hope of humankind for a life beyond death underlines the thought of v 5. Human life has a fixed end and cannot be extended. A tree can hope for new life (7); for humans there is none *till the heavens are no more* (12), which is never, as far as Job knows. Job's thought trembles on the edge of a hope for resurrection: if only Sheol could be not a final resting place from which there is no exit but a hiding place from God's scrutiny and anger (13), a place of *hard service* which would one day come to an end (14)! If only it could be a place from which God would gladly bring human beings back, having stopped searching for any sins they might have

committed, and having *sealed up* their *offences in a bag* (16–17). But the hope is an empty one, says Job, and he asks, *'If a man dies, will he live again?'* (14). No! As mountains are worn down and the soil is washed away, even the firmest hope of humans is eroded by the bitter reality of death (18–19). Humans have no hope but to be 'overpowered' finally by God (20) and brought to Sheol in loneliness, not even knowing what goes on above the ground, even if their children come into honour (21). In their isolation they feel *only the pain* of their *own body* (22). The Christian hope of the resurrection, in its own way, fulfils Job's trembling wish. Even though Job would have been prepared to wait an eternity for his vindication, in his story it is what happens in this life that matters.

Something dramatic has happened in this speech. After all Job's demands to be put out of his misery as soon as possible, and after all his assertion that it is hopeless to dispute with God, he finds himself doing the dangerous and the impossible thing. Job now formally obliges God to give an account of the crimes for which he is being punished. And that demand, now that it has been made, cannot be taken back. Job has not gone to court to plead for his life or to beg for mercy, but to clear his name. He has no faith in the goodness of God and little faith in God's justice, but he believes so strongly in his own innocence that he is convinced that sooner or later he will be vindicated.

All this language of lawsuits is metaphor, of course. But that does not mean it is just decorative language. It is the language of feeling, of the feeling of what it is like to be out of harmony with God. After a lifetime of godly living, Job has found his life shattered, and he has to learn a new and more bitter language to give voice to the discord in his universe. Now it must be the language of compulsion and division, of contest and defeat.

15:1–35 Eliphaz's second speech: 'Beware the fate of the wicked'

In the first part of this speech (2–16), Eliphaz addresses Job directly; in the second (17–35), he speaks more indirectly of the fate of the wicked. In this second section Eliphaz means to imply that Job is *not* such a man and so has no reason for fear. The whole speech is, therefore, meant as an encouragement to Job, and Eliphaz's position is the same as in his first speech (chs. 4 – 5).

In Eliphaz's view, Job has two faults: an intellectual and a moral one. The intellectual mistake is not to see that even the most perfect human is tainted in God's sight (14–16). Job does wrong in thinking himself above the ordinary (9) and in undermining the traditional theology in favour of his own experience (4). The moral fault is not to bear his suffering with bravery and patience. Whatever fault it was that earned him his suffering in the first place, it was minor compared with the wrong he is now doing in behaving as he does. It is a sin against himself (6) and against God (13) to speak so one-sidedly and bitterly about God. The very passion of Job's speech is proof that he is in the wrong (12–13); the truly wise person is calm in speech. Eliphaz does not reject Job as a person, but he cannot see that Job is not a man to be reasoned with. Job is a hurt and angry person; to invite him to patience is to demand him to be dishonest. If Job were to suffer in silence, he would be accepting God's judgment against him, and he can only do that if he abandons his integrity.

15:2–16 Job's folly and sinful speech. Job is not behaving like a wise man with his multitude of *empty notions* (2). What is more, in demanding vindication from God and in speaking of God's destructive power as he has (perhaps Eliphaz is thinking of 12:13–25), Job is being irreligious (*you even undermine piety*; 4). It is this error (*your sin*; 5), rather than true theology, that determines what Job is saying.

7–16 Eliphaz says again that Job is not behaving wisely but is letting his tongue lead him into sin. For all his claim to knowledge (*eg.* 12:3; 13:1), he is not wise like the first man, Adam (for references to the wise first man on the holy mountain of God see Ezk. 28:12–14). Nor has Job been a listener in the heavenly *council* of God (8) like the prophets who know God's secret plans (Je. 23:18, 22); nor does he have the wisdom that the friends have because they are older than him (10). It is no shame to be a little imperfect; not even the angels (*holy ones*) are perfect (15); but because he cannot be absolutely perfect, Job must expect a certain amount of suffering. **16** Eliphaz is not insulting Job personally when he speaks of humans as *vile and corrupt*; it is simply a generalization, however extreme, about the human race compared with God's purity.

15:17–35 The miserable life and the fearsome fate of the wicked. In this picture of the life history of the wicked man, the first section (20–26) concerns his anxiety as he lives in fear of death, and the second section (27–35) deals with his final destiny, that he will die before his time (31–33). All along, Eliphaz has been maintaining that Job is not one of the truly wicked, and so this description is precisely what does not apply to him. Job has not suffered *torment all his days* (20), and he is not, like them, hatching *trouble*, *evil* and *deceit* (35). He ought to recognize, then, that he does not belong to the *company of the godless* (34) and take care that he

does not join them by his hostility toward God (25). There is, of course, a good deal of wishful thinking about both main themes in this picture.

16:1 – 17:16 Job's fifth speech: 'Shall I die without vindication?'

This is the most disjointed of Job's speeches so far. His previous speeches had built to a climax in chs. 12 – 14, and from that point onwards he has nothing really novel to say. In this speech we hear again several themes we have already met with: he addresses the friends with criticism of their speeches (16:2–6); he then speaks in soliloquy, lamenting the attacks of God (16:7–17); he imagines his possible vindication (16:18–22); he makes a lament about the friends (17–1–10); and laments that he will probably die without being vindicated (17:11–16). Unlike chs. 12 – 14, the subject here is always Job himself, and not humanity in general.

16:2–6 The leading theme here is 'words' and their lack of power. There was a similar opening in ch. 12, but the mood is now less aggressive, and it is mainly the feeling of disappointment at the friends' words that comes to the surface.

7–17 The mood changes from a mere sense of grievance to a feeling of oppression, as Job recounts the hostile acts of God against him. He thinks of God's assaults as if they were the attacks of various kinds of opponents: a wild animal (9–10), a traitor (11), a wrestler (12), an archer (12c–13a), and a swordsman (13b–14). It is like a rapid succession of still photographs in a film, one scene merging into the next.

18–22 God has, of course, not answered Job's demand that he tell him the charges that he holds against him (13:23). Job is still waiting, but in the meantime he tries a second line of argument. He has been wrongfully attacked by God, and he will probably die from the attack. So he appeals to the earth to take blood revenge for him once he is dead – upon God! The cry, *'O earth, do not cover my blood'* (18), is the same kind of cry as Abel's who was unlawfully killed (Gn. 4:10). The earth can respond only after Job is dead, of course; but even now, while he is still alive, he has a *witness*, an *advocate*, and *intercessor* in heaven (19–20). This can hardly be a reference to God, for Job believes God has been nothing but his enemy (7–14). What stands in heaven on Job's behalf is his protest that he is innocent, together with his demand that God should give an account of the reasons why he is assaulting him (13:18–19, 22–23). Even though he does not expect to be answered during his lifetime, the truth about his innocence has been placed on record in the heavenly court. His murder by God, when it happens, will be the final piece of evidence that he has been the victim of a miscarriage of justice.

17:1–16 Job is confident that he is in the right, but he does not expect he will live to see his innocence vindicated. As in his previous speeches, he moves here finally to consider his death; for that is the one certainty in his future, and he feels that it is approaching nearer. The whole of this chapter revolves about the contrast between 'hope' and 'death'. But there is also mixed in with these expressions of hopelessness some biting criticisms of the friends.

1 Job is not literally at death's door (*cf.* 16:22), but psychologically he is already in the grip of death; it feels as if his grave is already dug. **2** It is because of the mockery surrounding him that he is in depression. The mockery is very specifically the charge that he deserves what he suffers. **3** Since no-one will guarantee his innocence, he must ask God to accept his own person as his guarantee (*pledge*, *security*). **5** This obscure sentence seems to picture God as a boaster who summons his friends to a banquet while his children (Job in this case) are starving.

8–10 The point of view here is the friends'. Upright men as they are, they are appalled at Job's present condition, and are roused to denounce the ungodly (Job).

11–16 Job falls again into despair, but it is not a despair that robs him of his belief in his own innocence; it is despair that he can ever be shown to be innocent. What has he to look forward to? He has lost his family and can expect only to join the family of worms in the underworld (14). If that is his expectation, it can hardly be called *hope*, can it? It is not because he is suffering a fatal illness that he is so depressed, but because there is no sign of the vindication he demands.

18:1–21 Bildad's second speech: more on the dreadful fate of the wicked

After an opening address to Job, this speech contains nothing but a description of the fate of the wicked. This could be read as Bildad's prediction of Job's future; but it is more likely that we should read Bildad's second speech in the light of his first and see him as describing the kind of person that Job is *not*. He continues to assert the familiar teaching, but his description is so extreme, so black and white, that we can only be meant to find it and his doctrine unconvincing. Bildad wants the world to be predictable and tidy. He can see in Job, who is fighting a battle between doctrine and experience, only someone who is tearing himself to pieces. And he finds Job's demand for a new theology deeply disturbing: *'must the rocks be moved from their place?'* (4).

Eliphaz, in his description of the fate of the wicked (15:20–35), had focused on how the wicked person experiences terror and insecurity

all through his life. Here Bildad concentrates on the final days of the wicked, describing how he is trapped by death (8–10), torn from his dwelling, and brought before the lord of the underworld (14). **13–14** Death was represented in ancient mythology as a king ruling over the underworld. *Death's firstborn* will be one of his offspring, such as disease, and the *terrors* are his agents who drag people from life down into his kingdom.

Throughout Bildad's picture of the wicked man there are several parallels to the experience of Job (*e.g.* 13, 15, 19, 20). Though these parallels are in bad taste, their purpose is not to stress that Job is a sinner, but rather to warn him of what will happen if he does not change his behaviour (as Bildad had advised him in 8:5–7). Job can choose whether this description of the fate of the wicked will be true of him or not.

19:1–29 Job's sixth speech, in which he reacts in anger

In this speech there is an address to the friends at beginning, middle and end (2–6, 21–22, 28–29). Between these addresses there is a complaint (7–20) and an expression of wish, knowledge and desire (23–27).

19:1–6 'What you need to know, my friends, my enemies'. Job speaks here less in sorrow than in anger. He does not mean that he does in fact feel 'crushed' by the friends (2), but that he begins to recognize them as his enemies, who are trying to *crush* him with their arguments. They have been trying to humiliate him (rather than the NIV's *have reproached me*), but without success (3). He does not admit to any sin, but protests that, if he had sinned, it would not have been a sin against them; so it is unfair of them to attack him (4). If they intend to treat him as an enemy by arguing that his *humiliation* by suffering is proof of his sin (5), they should know that it is not he who is in the wrong, but God who has *wronged* him (6).

19:7–20 'The wrong that God has done me'. 7–12 Job depicts the wrong God has done him with an astonishing range of images of assault: the townsman who has been robbed but finds no one to help even when he shouts out (7); the traveller who finds his path blocked and nightfall overtaking him (8); the prince who is humiliated by a foreign ruler (9); the plant that is pulled down or pulled out of the ground (10); the person who finds his friend has become his enemy (11); and the king or city besieged by enemies (12).

13–20 In vs 7–12 there was nothing but images of physical violence; here no-one raises a hand or even a voice. This is the literal truth of what Job is experiencing; vs 7–12 are his expression of what that literal truth *feels* like. Job looks around at those who know him; his vision moves inward, from his kinspeople and acquaintances (13–14) to his household servants (15–16) and his wife and brothers (17), and outward again to the children of the neighbourhood (18) and all those who know him (19). Wherever he looks he finds himself isolated and alienated. And it is God who has caused this, not directly but through making him suffer. For Job's suffering means to everyone who knows him that, despite everything they thought they knew about him, Job has been a dreadful sinner. It is dangerous to associate with such a wicked person. The result of all God's attacks on him is that 'my bones hang from my skin and my flesh' (rather than the NIV's '*I am nothing but skin and bones*', 20). Normally the bones are the framework of the human body, and the flesh and skin 'hang' on them; but Job is so weakened emotionally that he is in a state of collapse, as if his bones had no more strength left in them.

19:21–22 'Pity me, my friends!'. It seems strange that Job should now ask the friends for pity, after so often attacking them previously (*e.g.* 6:15–17; 12:2–3; 13:2). It makes more sense if we realize that he is not asking them for sympathy in general, but simply to stop persecuting him with their speeches.

19:23–27 Job's wish, knowledge and desire. The main emphasis in these famous words of Job is on his desire that while he is still alive (*in my flesh*: 26) he may see God face to face, as his legal opponent in some court of law, so that his claim for vindication of his good name may be heard.

Job does not believe that God will accept his plea to come to court, so his wish is that his claim to innocence could be recorded in some permanent form that would last beyond his death, and might perhaps be settled some day. But it is a hopeless wish, that his words, his legal claims, could be *written* 'in an inscription' (rather than the NIV's *on a scroll*) *with an iron tool* (24); for the only permanent record of his claims is his oath of innocence that he has uttered in the ears of heaven (*cf.* 16:19–20).

What Job *knows* is that God is his enemy (*cf.* 6:4; 10:8–14; 13:24; 16:7–14; 19:7–12), that he will never again see good (7:7), that he will soon be dead (7:21; 10:20; 16:22), that he will be murdered by God (12:15; 16:18) and so on. But what he *desires* is to enter into dispute with God (13:3, 22) in the hope of winning vindication before his death. It is for this that his *heart yearns within* him (27). He has never before believed that he will in the end be vindicated; but now he says that *I know* (25), even though the vindication will only come after his death.

25–27 These key verses should probably be translated: 'But I know that my champion lives

and that he will rise last to speak for me on earth, even after my skin has thus been stripped from me. Yet, to behold God while still in my flesh – that is my desire, to see him for myself, to see him with my own eyes, not as a stranger.' Job's 'champion' can hardly be God, who has only been his enemy; it must be his own assertion of his innocence that testifies for him in heaven (16:17). As in an earthly lawcourt, where the last person to speak is the victor in the dispute, he believes that his own oath will have the last, decisive word. But that, of course, is only likely to happen *after my skin has been destroyed* (26), *i.e.* after his death. That is what Job *expects*. But what he *desires* is to see his name cleared while he is still alive.

19:28–29 'Why you, my friends, should be afraid'. There is a note of exasperation here, not unlike his impatience in 25–27. Job has not drifted off into some peaceful haven of trust in God but has been vigorously asserting his belief, yet again, in the rightness of his cause. It is not surprising that he should speak severely against all those who doubt him. The friends continue to 'persecute' (NIV, *hound*) him, which must mean, accuse him of wrongdoing, saying that *the root of the trouble lies in him, i.e.* he is the author of his own misfortunes. These are lies, so the friends *should fear the sword* themselves; Job has done nothing worthy of punishment, but the friends have! They have accused him unjustly, and that is a crime; they are in danger of discovering for themselves that *there is a judgment*.

20:1–29 Zophar's second speech: 'You must repent or be destroyed'

Like the second speech of Bildad, Zophar's second speech is mostly devoted to the theme of the doom of the wicked (4–28). But unlike Eliphaz (for whom the fate of the wicked is a picture of what Job is not), or for Bildad (for whom it is a picture of what Job may become), for Zophar it is a picture of what Job will not avoid unless he changes radically.

20:1–3 A response to Job's claims. Zophar claims to be *troubled* by Job; and even if his language is only conventional, his claim rings true. For if Job is right, everything that Zophar stands for is wrong.

20:4–11 'How thorough is the destruction the wicked faces!'. Job argued that the friends were trying to humiliate him (19:3), and now Zophar declares himself humiliated or 'dishonoured' (3) by what he calls Job's 'instruction' of him (NIV, *rebuke*). He responds with an appeal to 'reason' (NIV, *understanding*), but in fact his argument is only an appeal to tradition, as his very next words show (4).

The basic image here is of 'absence' or 'disappearance' (especially in vs 7–9). The wicked man ceases to exist, like fuel for the fire (7a), like a dream that can never be found (8), or like someone who disappears from the sight of family and friends (7b, 9). It does not matter how prominent or visible the wicked man has been, even if he has been as high as heaven (6). *The wicked* in this chapter is someone who does wrong to others in the community, not especially someone who is not religious or moral in himself.

20:12–23 'There is no lasting profit from wrongdoing'. The key image here is that of 'eating'. Mouth, tongue, palate, stomach, innards and belly are referred to; there is savouring, swallowing, vomiting, sucking and eating, and also there is food, sweetness, oil, honey and cream. But all of the objects that the wrongdoer takes into himself bring him no lasting benefit. The food he eats leads not to his nourishment but to his death. One image is of food that is pleasant to taste but that sours the stomach and is vomited up (12–15). Another is of food that turns out to be deadly poison (16–19). In a third image, the wrongdoer is so greedy that he consumes all the food that is available and then starves to death (20–22).

20:24–29 'The final doom of the wicked is inescapable'. Here several images crowd together, as in a nightmare, to illustrate how impossible it is for the wicked man to escape his final doom. There is a military image (if he escapes one weapon, he will fall to another, more fatal one; 24–25b), and a legal one (he is sentenced to death by the combined testimony of heaven and earth; 27). He is consumed by God's anger (26); and a flood carries him and his household away (28).

Does Zophar still have Job in mind by the end of his speech or has he allowed his rhetoric to carry him away? He certainly has an eye for the dramatic picture, but does he think he is terrifying Job with all these images? Job has been living through a nightmare just as horrifying as the scenes described by Zophar, and he does not need to be told that this is the conventional fate that righteous people expect from the wicked. He does not need to be told either, though Zophar does, that the picture here is not very true to real life.

21:1–34 Job's seventh speech: 'The wicked prosper and the righteous suffer'

All three speeches of the friends in the second cycle concentrated on the theme of the fate of the wicked; and Zophar, in the last speech, even claimed that the wicked enjoy the fruits of their sin for only a brief period. 'No', says Job, 'the wicked *spend their years in prosperity, and go down to the grave in peace*' (13). Job's position is equally extreme, but it seems closer to real life.

21:2–6 'Hear me, my friends'. Job must make himself heard on this subject; for the friends have all been in agreement against him. To be listened to for once will be better *consolation* for Job than any amount of speeches (2). No doubt they will *mock on* (3); for his *complaint* is not *to man* but against God, and he can expect no sympathy from the upright when that is the case. If they will really hear what he has to say (*look at me*; 5), they will be so shocked at what he will tell them about the way the universe is being run that they will *clap* their *hand over* their *mouth* in a gesture of amazed silence. It is awful enough for Job himself to contemplate this truth that in God's world the wicked are allowed to prosper (6).

21:7–16 'The wicked prosper; why so?'. Job denies all that the friends have said. The wicked live to old age (7), *they see their children established* (8), their animals suffer no accident (10), and they even blaspheme God (14–15) and survive. Job cruelly parodies Eliphaz's picture of the prosperity of the righteous (5:17–27). Within three verses Job contradicts Zophar (7; *cf.* 20:11), Bildad (8; *cf.* 18:19) and Eliphaz (9; *cf.* 5:24). Job does not want the wicked's kind of prosperity (16), and with every sentence he speaks about it he means to say: 'Why is this allowed to happen?' (7).

21:17–21 'How often do the godless suffer?'. 'It is only rarely that the wicked suffer', says Job (7), contradicting Zophar (20:5). He imagines the friends replying, 'Well, if the wicked themselves do not suffer, their children do.' But Job answers, 'If there is going to be a principle of retribution, it ought to strike the people who deserve to be struck!'

21:22–26 'Being good or bad makes no difference'. Perhaps v 22 is (like v 19) another unmarked quotation from the friends, who are implying that Job is criticizing the wisdom and justice of God. Job replies that in fact it seems to make no difference whether a person is good or bad; the same fate happens to all. He does not appear to be contrasting here the prosperity of the wicked (23–24) with the *bitterness of soul* of the righteous (25). Rather, he seems to be saying that just as in death no moral differences between humans explain their common fate, neither in life are such differences significant.

21:27–34 Human experience proves Job right. Job knows what his friends have been thinking (27) while they have been describing the fate of the wicked: the wicked suffer – Job is suffering – therefore Job belongs with the wicked. Yet the friends' belief is proved false by common human experience. Job says that if you ask any traveller, you will hear of the wicked being *spared from the day of calamity* (30). No-one *denounces his conduct to his face* (31), no-one repays him for his deeds. In death, as in life, he is honoured by thousands, and his tomb is even guarded against grave robbers.

22:1–30 Eliphaz's third speech: Job's great wickedness

In the first cycle of speeches, the friends had their individual points of view; in the second, they all concentrated on the fate of the wicked; now in the third cycle (22:1 – 31:40), it is harder to see any logic in the speeches. Eliphaz apparently contradicts his original position, Bildad delivers only the preface to a speech (25:1–6) and Zophar makes no speech at all. Perhaps something has been lost from the original text, but as it stands now it seems that the friends have little that is new to say.

22:2–11 'Is not your wickedness great?' In one respect Eliphaz's message here is the same as in his first speech (chs. 4 – 5): he believes that Job *will be delivered through the cleanness of* his *hands* (30). His advice is for him to *submit to God* (21). But in another matter, Eliphaz seems greatly at variance with his former position: he apparently accuses Job of untold wickedness (5), mainly social injustice (8–9). These are the most specific, most harsh, and most unjust words spoken against Job in the whole book, and it is strange to find them on the lips of Eliphaz, out of all the friends. Now Eliphaz cannot have spoken chs. 4 – 5 if he believed that Job had really *demanded security* [pledges] *for no reason*, *stripped men of their clothing* (6), withheld *water* and *food* from the *weary* and *hungry* (7), rejected the pleas of *widows* and the *fatherless* (9). What Eliphaz must mean is that, since Job is suffering for some cause, and since the cause cannot be found in any wrong that Job has done, his sin must lie in what he has *failed* to do. It is not that Job has stripped the poor of their clothing, but that he must have failed to offer clothing to some needy person; and so on. It is not for Job's righteousness (which Eliphaz does not doubt) that God *rebukes* Job (4), but for leaving undone those things that ought to have been done.

22:12–20 'God can see your secret sin'. It was Zophar originally who accused Job of being a secret sinner (11:5–6), but now we find Eliphaz warning Job that God must know of his sins of omission Eliphaz has just referred to. Job cannot hope to escape the penetrating insight of God (13). Evil men have not found it possible to escape God's judgment; even though temporarily their houses were *filled . . . with good things* (18), they have been *carried off before their time* (16), to the pleasure of the righteous (19–20). Their sins were detected by God; so too are Job's.

22:21–30 'How you can be delivered'. Eliphaz speaks again as in chs. 4 – 5. He is basically on Job's side and hopeful that Job can *be at peace* with God. Borrowing a theme from Bildad's first speech (*cf.* 8:5–6), Eliphaz calls Job to *return to the Almighty* (23), *i.e.* repent, *find delight in the Almighty* (26), *pray* and *fulfil* his *vows* (27). Then everything Job does will prosper (28), and he will even bring blessing to others, as he did in the past (4:3–4). Unlike the recent speeches of the friends, this speech ends on an uplifting note – to which Job responds with even deeper despair.

23:1 – 24:25 Job's eighth speech: 'God should be available regularly'

There are two main themes in this speech. The first is Job's repeated appeal to God for vindication, together with his renewed sense of how hopeless it is to gain access to God (ch. 23). The second is the plight of the innocent poor compared with the prosperity of the rich, a situation that God seems to do nothing about (ch. 24). All in all, though Job believes that if he could gain access to God he would be vindicated, he despairs of ever receiving such vindication, since God plainly does not hold regular *times for judgment* when wrongs are righted.

23:2–17 'Oh, that I knew where I might find him'. If only he could gain access to God, the problem of his vindication would be solved, Job believes. God would not be violent with him but would listen to his protestations of innocence (6) and would acquit him (7). But God is inaccessible: he is neither forward nor backward, neither on the left hand nor on the right hand (8–9). And yet, if Job cannot find God, he knows that God can find him (*he knows the way that I take*; 10) and that if God chooses to put him to the test he will come forth as gold, vindicated as innocent (10–11). But God is not acting fairly or legally; *he does whatever he pleases* (13), and that is only for Job's suffering. He is fighting in the dark against an unassailable and an inaccessible opponent, but he will go on fighting (17).

24:1–25 'Why are times for judgment not kept by God?' Job sees that he is not the only troubled person on earth. Looking beyond himself to people in general, both innocent and guilty, he wonders why God does not hold regular assize days (*times for judgment*; 1), at which the injustices in the way the world is governed could be cleared up.

First, why is the injustice of the suffering of the innocent poor allowed to go on for so long? The poor have their landmarks removed (2; *cf.* Dt. 19:14), and their flocks seized (2b–3); they are insulted (4), reduced to gleaning the corners of the field (6), to sleeping without enough covering (7–8), to working for less than a living wage (11). It is a moving picture; but it does not move God, apparently, for he pays no attention to the cries of the poor (12c).

Secondly, why is the injustice of the successful evildoer allowed to continue (13–17)? Murderers and adulterers who love darkness rather than light are allowed to live, even though their friends are only *the terrors of darkness* (17) and they should by rights be with them in the underworld. In these questions, Job is thinking not simply of himself but of the way the world as a whole is governed by God.

18–25 Some of this section is so unlike Job's argument that we have to assume that it must really be the friends who are speaking here. It is the friends who say that the guilty are nothing but *foam on the surface of the water* (18), that the underworld soon snatches them away (19), that they are not remembered long (20), that however important they seem, they are soon cut off like ears of corn (24). Perhaps these verses were originally the missing end of Bildad's speech (ch. 25), or perhaps Job is here quoting his friends (*cf.* the RSV, which adds 'You say' at the beginning of v 18 and takes vs 18–25 as the friends' words).

25:1–6 Bildad's third speech: 'How can a man be righteous before God?'

Something seems wrong with the text at this point. Bildad's speech begins without the usual address and is only five verses long. There is no speech from Zophar at all, and there are three speeches of Job in a row (chs. 26, 27 – 28, 29) without any words from the friends. Some of the passages in Job's speeches here do not sound like him at all. Perhaps Bildad's speech was originally 25:2–6 plus 26:5–14. As Bildad's speech now stands, it is rather like some of the thoughts of Eliphaz, especially the idea that as compared with God there is nothing in the world that is perfectly clean (4–6; *cf.* 4:17–19). The gulf that separates humans from God is highlighted by Bildad's opening words about the power of God, whose armies are without number (2–3). The same theme of God's all-powerful rule is continued in 26:5–14, if these verses also are really Bildad's.

26:1–14 Job's ninth speech: 'Your advice has been useless'

We seem to have in ch. 26 only the opening fragment of a speech by Job, a taunt against Bildad that says he has been of no help. Job's reply is all the more appropriate if Bildad's previous speech had included 26:5–14, stressing the power of God. It is all very well, Job would then mean, to tell me about the majesty of God, but of what use is that to one like myself

who is *powerless* (2)? And how can your praise for the wisdom of God (7, 12) possibly help someone like myself who is supposed to be without wisdom (3)? Perhaps Job's speech continues in ch. 27.

5–14 These verses are perhaps really part of Bildad's third speech. They reflect on the wisdom and power of God. God is the one who could create the universe by hanging the earth upon nothing (7). Various aspects of the creation are mentioned, many of them not in Genesis, *e.g.* building the pillars of heaven (11) and marking out the *horizon* in a circle (10). There are references too to other creation stories, in which creation was spoken of as a victory by God over the monsters of chaos (*Rahab*, 12; *the gliding serpent*, Leviathan, 13). God's creative power continues even now, of course. He *wraps up the waters in his clouds* (8), the waterskins of the sky, and *covers the face* of the *moon* (9) during its different phases. But the main point is that these proofs of God's greatness that are visible and known to humans are but the *outer fringe of his works*, and convey only a *faint whisper* of the *thunder of his power* (14). Humans cannot hope to comprehend the real God, but can catch only a glimpse of him.

27:1 – 28:28 Job's tenth speech: the wisdom of God

Again we face the problem of who is really speaking in these chapters. There is no doubt that in 27:2–12 we have the genuine voice of Job, but perhaps the rest of chs. 27 and 28 are not from his lips. He surely is not repeating the same stale ideas on the fate of the wicked that the friends have uttered (27:13–23). Perhaps 27:13 – 28:28 was originally the third speech of Zophar; for the themes we find here, the fate of the wicked (27:13–23), the secret wisdom of God (28:1–27) and the duty of humans to do righteousness and avoid evil (28:28), have previously been made by Zophar in 11:7–20.

27:2–12 'I will never abandon my integrity'. God has denied Job justice (2), and though his friends continue to judge him to be in the wrong (5), Job intends to maintain that he is righteous (6). Anyone who attacks Job's innocence lies under Job's curse and will suffer the fate of the wicked (7–10). Job now knows so much about the hidden *ways of the Almighty* that he can teach anyone what he has learned from experience. Yet the friends themselves ought already to have learned from listening to Job all that he has to teach them (12). Considering what they have heard so far, the surprising thing is that their speeches have been so *meaningless* (12).

27:13–23 The fate of a wicked man. After Job's passionate self-defence, this section reads rather dully. It contains only the traditional ideas we have met before about the fate of the wicked. This fact suggests that it is no longer Job's speech but perhaps Zophar's. The fate of a wicked man is here pictured as what happens to his family, his wealth and his own person. His children are destined to be killed by the sword or plague (14–15), his wealth is left to other more righteous people than him (16–19), while he himself is carried off as if by flood, whirlwind or devastating east wind (20–23). Obviously, much of the fate of the wicked man has already happened to Job. This fits with Zophar's attitude throughout the book: 'God has even forgotten some of your sin' (11:6).

28:1–28 'Where may wisdom be found?'. The theme of this majestic poem is that 'wisdom' is unattainable by humans. That is not the practical kind of wisdom taught by the book of Proverbs but rather full understanding of the world and the order according to which it runs. This use of 'wisdom' would make sense to the author of Ecclesiastes, who stresses that humans 'cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end' (Ec. 3:11; *cf.* 8:17). This poem sounds somewhat strange coming from Job, since it is only after God has spoken to him at length (chs. 38 – 41) that he comes to accept its ideas (*cf.* 42:3). This is another reason for thinking that it was originally part of Zophar's speech.

There is a great gulf between human and divine wisdom, but we do not need to belittle human wisdom in order to magnify the wisdom of God. The poem begins as a hymn of praise to the ingenuity of humankind (1–11) and only then goes on to say that even so true wisdom is beyond their grasp and is known only to God (12–27). What is given to humans is not 'wisdom', but the knowledge of God's law: what is wisdom for humans is to live in the fear of the Lord (28).

1–11 Just one example of the wisdom of humans is chosen: their ability to mine metals hidden beneath the surface of the earth. Four mined metals are noted (1–2). Lamps are used underground (3). It is a dangerous and isolated job the miner does: he *dangles and sways* (4) as he descends the shaft. There is a paradox in mining: on the surface peaceful farming goes on, while underneath there may be a violent overturning of obstacles to get at the metal (5, 9). Through their wisdom, humans have created beneath the earth paths unknown to birds and beasts (7–8) and have made themselves masters of the earth (11).

12–28 Plainly the 'wisdom' that cannot be found by searching is something different from human technological wisdom. The poet does not tell us immediately what he means but

allows a suspenseful climax to build up which increasingly shows the impossibility of obtaining this wisdom. Its place is unknown (12), and so too the way to it (13); it cannot be valued in gold or silver or precious stones (15–19). The world itself does not know where it is to be found (14). Even the supernatural powers of *Destruction* (the underworld) and *Death* know no more of it than a *rumour* (22). But God knows all about it (23); for it is his own wisdom, which he used in establishing the creation (24–27). This supernatural knowledge of the universe and its purpose and the laws that govern it is inaccessible to humans. What has been given to humans, however, is another kind of wisdom, one which is more manageable and practicable. It is a wisdom that consists in doing: to *fear the* LORD, *i.e.* true religion, and to *shun evil* (28) is what constitutes wisdom for humans. Assuming that this chapter is Zophar's final address to Job, its meaning is to deny Job's claim to understand the 'ways of the Almighty' (27:11) and to recommend to Job not a search for wisdom but a quest for righteousness.

29:1 – 31:40 Job's eleventh speech, in which he reflects upon his woes

Job's powerful concluding speech has three sections. In the first he surveys, in nostalgic mood, his former happy life before the hand of God fell upon him (ch. 29). In the second he portrays, in pathetic mood, his present isolation and degradation (ch. 30). In the third he utters, in defiant mood, a series of self-curses that come to a climax with a desperate appeal to be heard and vindicated (ch. 31). The presence of the friends is ignored completely, and God is not addressed. Job is speaking entirely about himself, and it is his concentration upon this one theme that makes this one of the most impressive and moving parts of the book.

29:2–25 'How I long for the months gone by!'. This nostalgic glance to the past fills in some details about Job's life we did not learn from the prologue. It also conveys the atmosphere of the life that is now over, a life of warm and dignified relationships. They were the days when God watched over him (2), the days when he was in his *prime* (4), when his flocks were so plentiful that his steps were *drenched with cream*, his olive trees so fruitful that the presses in the rock *poured out . . . streams of olive oil* (6). In those days, he was respected as the chief man, or sheikh, of his village, whose opinion carried most weight at the meeting of elders in the *public square* (lit. 'the gate') (7–10). In those days he could help the underprivileged, *the poor* and *the fatherless* (12), the *dying* (13), the *widow* (13b), *the blind* and *the lame* (15), *the stranger* who needed a legal protector (16b). The same two themes of his own security and of his prominent and positive role in society are then repeated in vs 18–20 and 21–25. We notice that for Job the blessings of his former life did not include only material prosperity and social honour but, equally importantly, the possibility of doing good to those in need (contrast Eliphaz in 22:6–9). No doubt, there is no-one who could be called righteous compared with God (Rom. 3:10), but it is wrong to pretend that people are as bad as they can possibly be or that they can never be described as innocent and righteous.

30:1–31 'But now they mock me'. When Job compares his present lot with his past life, the contrast could hardly be more extreme. His former life consisted of a network of harmonious relationships (with God, his fellows and the underprivileged) but now all those relationships have been destroyed. People now treat him with contempt (1–15, 24–31) and God has cast him off (16–23). In a way, however, these are one and the same experience; for it is God's doing that he suffers the contempt of humans.

1–8 Three times we read *But now, and now* (1, 9, 16); for the contrast in Job's life is extreme. Job's attitude to those who despise him seems at first rather patronizing: they are *a base and nameless brood* (8), the poor of the land who live on leaves and roots. Are these not the very people that Job would in former days have taken care of? Yes, and it is just for that reason that he is so scornful of their contempt now. Even those whom he previously treated with generosity have turned on him and have regarded him as beneath themselves. It is their ingratitude that makes him angry.

9–15 Job is now the object of the scorn of those whom he had once helped and they attack him (12, 14). It is not a physical assault, but the treatment he receives makes him feel like a besieged city (14).

16–23 In addition to the disgrace he now endures is the sheer physical suffering that has tormented him from the beginning. Day and night it grips him as if it were a wild animal (16–17). All of this is God's doing (19), yet appeals to him fall on deaf ears (20); for God too, like the humans, has turned cruel to him (21) and will unfailingly bring him to death (23).

24–31 Though he is convinced no good will come of it, Job must cry out *for help* (24). He deserves help, since he has given it so freely (25), but when he *hoped for good, evil came* (26). This part of his speech ends with a repetition of his disgrace in human eyes, the theme with which it began. He is rejected by the assembly of his townspeople (28) and left to the company of wild animals (29). His skin becomes black from his disease (28, 30), and the music of his former life has turned to mourning (31).

31:1–40 'Oh, that I had my opponent's charges!'. This final section of Job's speech is in the form of a 'negative confession', in which he denies any crime that may be laid to his charge. He can utter these self-curses only if he is completely convinced of his own innocence; and not surprisingly the chapter comes to a climax (35–37) with Job's bold appeal for God to hear him and punish him for anything he deserves. He asks for God to at least let him know the charges that he holds against him as he would be proud to carry about with him a list of accusations to which he could give such convincing answers. In every case except one (that of idolatry; 26–28) the crimes Job imagines are sins against his neighbour, yet they are also sins against God.

1–4 Though the sin of adultery is mentioned below (9–12), here Job says he has not sinned by desiring a virgin, a well-known habit of owners of many servants such as Job was. He has *made a covenant with* his *eyes*; sin lies in the inward intentions of the heart, and not just in the outward act.

5–8 Again, sin is something that first occurs in the heart (7). The reference to the *scales* (6) and to the failure of his crops as the punishment for dishonesty (8) suggests that Job is thinking primarily of falsehood and deceit (5) in business transactions.

9–12 Adultery was judged in patriarchal societies to be a serious crime (*shameful, a sin to be judged*), since it disregarded a man's property rights and could create problems over inheritance. The text shows its age in regarding male adultery as due to being *enticed by a woman* (and so in some way the woman's fault) and in making the degradation of the wife somehow a punishment of the adulterer. We ourselves would rather emphasize the values of loyalty and demand that only the offender be punished.

13–15 Job claims that he has gone beyond the customs of his time and has treated his servants as having rights like fellow human beings when contemporary society would have allowed him to treat them as possessions.

16–23 Job has already pictured his sympathy for the poor, the widow, the fatherless and the stranger, *i.e.* the typical underprivileged persons of ancient society (29:12–16). Here he says he has even taken orphans into his own household (18) and asks that if he has ever raised his hand against orphans, thinking he could get away with injustice to them, may retribution fall upon the hand lifted in injustice and may his arm be broken from its socket (22).

24–28 Job now turns to further inward sins (*cf.* vs 1–4): the secret love of riches (24–25), the worship of the sun and moon (26–27), pleasure at the downfall of his enemies (29:30), any deliberate overlooking of the needs of others (31–32) or any other hypocrisy (33–34). He means a curse upon himself if he has failed on any of these points. Although he has been exceedingly rich, he claims that his wealth never became an idol in the place of God.

26–27 Idolatry is the only religious sin in Job's catalogue of crimes. It was normal in the ancient world to worship the heavenly bodies, but to Job such worship would have been to serve the creature rather than the creator.

29–30 It was not unethical at Job's time to *rejoice at my enemy's misfortune*. The psalmists sometimes are glad at the punishment of the wicked (*e.g.* Ps. 54:7; 118:7; 137:8–9), but Job has followed the spirit of the law that recommended giving help to one's enemy (Ex. 23:4–5; *cf.* Pr. 20:22; 24:17–18; 25:21–22).

31–32 Job seems to be thinking here of occasions when he might have pretended not to know of cases of need. He has been generous to the needy not only in cases of obvious need (16–21) but also in cases when he has been the only one to know the need.

33–34 Job is not admitting to any sins of hypocrisy. He means, 'If I have ever sinned and then tried to hide it' (as Adam did) (see the NIV mg.).

35–37 Job ends this very formal oath of innocence by saying, *I sign now*, as if it were a written document. He longs to have the list of charges that God has against him, to match his own declaration of innocence. He would not be humiliated by the *indictment* of his *accuser*; he is so sure that it would prove his innocence that he would *put it on like a crown* (36). He would approach God not as a criminal but as an innocent man who could give an account of anything that might be laid to his charge (37).

38–40 Job's final self-curse comes, a little strangely, after the summary and climax of his speech in vs 35–37. In it he calls down punishment if he has acquired his land through oppression of its rightful owners (39).

32:1 – 37:24 Elihu's speeches

32:1 – 33:33 Elihu's first speech: 'Suffering is a warning from God'

Most scholars think that the four speeches of Elihu are a later addition to the book of Job. It is strange that Elihu is not mentioned in the prologue, but the author may possibly have intended to introduce him later unexpectedly. But it is even more strange that he is not mentioned in the epilogue either (42:7–17), though the other friends are. Furthermore, the Elihu speeches also delay God's reply to Job, which we might have expected immediately after ch. 31, where 'The words of Job are ended' (31:40). When

God does reply (chs.38 – 41) he speaks as if nothing had intervened. So it is often thought that Elihu is the creation of a later pious author who was unhappy with the failure of Job's friends to answer his arguments and unhappy also with the way the divine speeches come to no definite conclusion.

Perhaps Elihu's speeches can be understood as offering a middle way between the position of Job and his friends. The friends have argued that God is just and that Job's suffering proves he has sinned and that God is punishing him for it. Job denies both arguments, insisting that his suffering is not the result of sin, and that therefore God is unjust. Elihu says he is against both Job and the friends (32:10–12; 33:1–12; *cf.* 32:2–3), and he argues that suffering is discipline. That means that suffering need not be the penalty for sin already committed but may be a warning, given in advance, to keep a person back from sin.

32:1–5 Elihu introduces himself. The young Elihu is obviously very *angry* (the word is repeated four times in vs 2, 3, 5; one of the occurrences in v 2 is omitted by the NIV). He is angry at Job because he had 'made himself out to be more righteous than God' (2; NEB). This is a much more serious criticism than appears in the NIV, which has him *justifying himself rather than God.* Elihu means that the logic of Job's claim, that he is in the right in his dispute with God, is that God must be in the wrong. Job had never said exactly that, but it is a reasonable conclusion. Elihu is also angry at the three friends because they *found no way to refute Job* (3), *i.e.* they had been unable to convince Job that God was not in the wrong.

32:6–22 Elihu's right to speak. The whole of this section is only Elihu's wordy introduction of himself and explanation of why he has joined in the conversation. Elihu confesses he is young and he voices his respect for the wisdom of age (6–7), but he has taken courage from his belief that all are created with an equal capacity for wisdom (8). Therefore it is not only the old that are wise (9). So he is not afraid to declare *what I know* (10). He has also been encouraged to enter the conversation by the feebleness of the friends' speeches (11–12). It seems to Elihu that they are rather overwhelmed by Job's arguments and are starting to think that only God can refute him (13). He turns to Job (15) and says he is ready to speak (16–17) as he is *full of words* (18) and his mind is ready to burst with its multitude of thoughts (19) and needs relief from its frustration (20). Finally, he promises he will not treat anyone – and it is Job who has most to suffer from his tongue – with special respect (21); he does not even know how to flatter, so Job had better be prepared for some straight talking (22).

33:1–33 'Why God brings suffering'. **1–7** Elihu's wordy introduction of himself continues. He claims no special wisdom apart from what can be acquired by every living person, those with *the breath of the Almighty* (4; *cf.* 32:8). He invites Job to answer him (5). It will not be too difficult, since he, Elihu, will use none of God's strong-arm tactics; he too is a mere human, formed from a piece of *clay* (6). He is not being patronizing to Job when he says *no fear of me should alarm you* (7) but is contrasting his own weakness with the power of God from which Job has been suffering.

8–13 Job has been saying that God has denied him justice; he has refused to accept his innocence, and he has behaved as an enemy (10–11) rather than an impartial judge. Elihu intends to show that Job is not right (12), not by arguing – as the friends have – that Job is a sinner, but by showing that God sends suffering for other purposes, notably to warn humans from committing sins in the future. In this way, Elihu thinks he can maintain both God's justice and Job's innocence (*cf.* 12, 32).

14–18 Elihu illustrates his interpretation of suffering by using the example of nightmares. They are one way God has of speaking to people, even though they do not always recognize it (14). God uses dreams to terrify people with warnings against future *wrongdoing* and *pride* (17); they are a form of suffering used by God to prevent greater suffering and death (18).

19–28 Physical suffering (21–22) is also used by God for the same purpose: to 'chasten' or warn a person against sin (19). It needs only a word on the sufferer's behalf by one of the many intercessory angels (23–24) and the person is healed and offers public thanksgiving for restoration to health (*cf.* Ps. 22:22–25). That person then makes a confession of sin (27), even though it may have been only a sin that was planned not a sin that was actually committed.

29–33 Elihu invites Job to reply (32) or else continue listening (31, 33). His purpose, he says again, is not to accuse Job of being a sinner but to justify him (32b) by explaining his suffering as God's discipline.

34:1–37 Elihu's second speech: 'Job is wrong to accuse God of injustice'

Elihu no longer speaks to Job directly; he now appeals to the *wise men* (2), who could be the friends (in which case Elihu is being ironical) or a larger group of bystanders. His main point in this speech is that since God is just (10), any criticism by Job of what God does or fails to do is unjust. Elihu has now ignored Job's particular situation and is trading in generalities.

1–9 Elihu takes up Job's claim, '*I am innocent*'

(5a; *cf.* 27:6) and '*God denies me justice*' (5b; *cf.* 27:2). He asks the audience to say if they have ever met a man like Job who drinks up the scorn of his friends like water (7) and who, by claiming that God is denying him justice, puts himself in the company with evildoers who also charge God with injustice. According to Job, Elihu says very unfairly, '*It profits a man nothing, when he tries to please God*' (9). Job *has* said that the wicked can escape judgment (21:7–34) and that trouble falls on good and bad alike (9:22–24), but he himself has held fast to virtue even when it has brought him no profit.

10–15 Here Elihu is saying that God will not be unjust (10–12) and so Job is wrong to charge God with any form of injustice. God's justice is, for Elihu, an automatic consequence of his being the almighty Creator (13–14). But that is a dangerous position, for it amounts to saying that 'might is right'.

16–30 Elihu continues arguing that the governor of the universe cannot be unrighteous. God is righteous and mighty (17). He has the power to judge kings and nobles (18), to shatter them without need of investigation (24) since he already knows their steps (21). He can overturn them in the night (25). His works of might are in strict accord with his justice. He shows no favouritism to princes or the rich (19), he rewards people according to their deeds (25) and strikes wrongdoers down for their wickedness (26) because they have disobeyed his laws (27) and oppressed the poor (28). So if ever God is silent and does not offer a vindication when it is called for, who can condemn him and say that what he does is unjust? (29)

31–37 Job's constant demand for vindication adds rebellion to sin (37), for it puts God in the wrong. Elihu now imagines someone who has been punished for his sin and then repents of it (31–32). According to Elihu, Job's theology does not allow God to forgive such a repentant sinner, for Job expects anyone who has suffered at God's hand to demand vindication and reject forgiveness (33). But this is unfair to Job, since Job does not claim that all suffering is innocent.

35:1–16 Elihu's third speech: 'Job should not have complained but called to God'

1–8 Elihu here seems to be taking up again the claim he put in Job's mouth in 34:9, that it 'profits a man nothing, when he tries to please God'. That is not Job's view, nor is it Job who asks, '*What profit is it to me, and what do I gain by not sinning?*' (3). Elihu only imagines this to be Job's question. But he answers it for him by saying it is wrong to expect to gain from being righteous (7). Since God is so great, what happens on earth is of little concern to him (5), even if it is wickedness that happens (6, 8).

9–16 Since Job's complaint has been that God has taken away his right (27:2), Elihu asks why Job has not been delivered from his affliction. He takes the case of oppressed people who cry out because of their *load of oppression* (9). They are not always delivered. Why not? Because something is lacking in their cry. It has been an involuntary cry and they have not addressed it to God their *Maker*, who can reverse fortunes by giving *songs in the night* (10) and who can give greater wisdom to humans than to the beasts and birds (11). They are not answered because they have neglected to cry to him (12); such cries are empty, and disregarded by God (13). The same is true of Job, says Elihu. He has been merely complaining of his suffering and not addressing himself to God (14–16). Once again Elihu misses the mark; for Job has often been addressing God directly!

36:1 – 37:24 Elihu's fourth speech: in praise of the power and wisdom of God

There are two sections here. In the first Elihu repeats that suffering is discipline; and in the second, he praises the power and wisdom of God in creation, which is why God is entitled to be moral governor of the universe.

36:2–25 Elihu still wants to speak on God's behalf (2) and to ascribe righteousness to his *Maker* (3), *i.e.* to prove that there has been no miscarriage of justice in Job's case. Since God is so far above humanity, Elihu must fetch his knowledge from afar (3). Somehow this seems to enable him to claim that he is *perfect in knowledge*, *i.e.* absolutely correct, not omniscient!

5–16 Elihu begins by stating the usual doctrine of retribution (6). His own contribution comes when he considers the righteous who fall into suffering, a theme very close to Job's own situation. In such cases, the righteous (8) are being reproved for their transgression and commanded to return from iniquity (10). So suffering is divine discipline (as he has said in 33:15–30). If the righteous respond to such warnings, well and good (11), but if they do not, they suffer the fate of evildoers and die without knowledge, *i.e.* without having learned anything from the divine disciplining. The ungodly, when afflicted, are simply angry and do not cry to God for help (13); they die young and in shame (14). The godly, on the other hand, whose ears are opened to what God is teaching them by their adversity, are delivered (15–16).

17–25 Elihu hopes that Job is among the righteous but fears rather that he is among those who do not learn from their suffering and so is *laden with the judgment due to the wicked* (17). A mere cry of distress (rather than *wealth*, as the NIV has in v 19) will not bring Job deliverance

(*cf.* 35:9, 12); it needs to be directed to God, and Job must *remember to extol* God's *work* while he is praying for deliverance.

36:26 – 37:24 This fine hymn to the creative power and wisdom of God makes sense here only because Elihu believes that it is God's creative power that gives him the right to be moral judge of the world (*cf.* 34;10–15).

27–33 The wonders of rain and lightning are that they are one of God's means of judging between peoples (31a); for the same rain can be both beneficent (31b) and destructive (33b).

37:1–5 Thunder also is not just a natural phenomenon but the voice of God, mysterious, unpredictable and terrifying.

6–13 The winter storms, which stop people working and keep wild animals in their dens (7–8), do not reveal only God's might in controlling (12) these forces that tame both humans and beasts but also show his wisdom in using the forces of nature for various purposes, whether for correction or blessing (13).

14–24 The power and wisdom of God are also displayed in the phenomena of summer: in the lightning of summer storms (15), the clouds so delicately balanced (16), the hot south wind (17), the blazing sky as hard as bronze (18) and the blinding light of the summer sun (21). God's wisdom is so much greater than Job's that Job cannot even understand how these phenomena work (15–16, 18), let alone control them. So great is the terrible majesty (22) of God, that he is effectively unapproachable. Elihu asks Job, ironically, to teach us what we shall say to God (19) but denies in the same breath that it is possible to do so, 'for all is dark, and we cannot marshal our thoughts' (NEB). This is a position that Job has denied all along by repeatedly demanding that God should personally answer his complaints. And it is effectively refuted by the personal appearance made by God in the very next chapter.

38:1 – 42:6 The Lord's speeches

These divine speeches are important, not just for their contents but because they happened at all. The point is that Job, who has determinedly called upon God (even out of anger and frustration), finds himself eventually in a conversation with God that leads to the resolution of his tension. But the speeches are remarkable also both for what they omit and what they include. First, it is surprising, but also significant, that God makes no reference to any faults on Job's part. Clearly, then, God holds nothing against Job; not even his 'impetuous' words (6:3) are a matter for reproof. But, secondly, these divine speeches are also striking for what they contain. Far from justifying the ways of God to humans, they deal wholly with the natural order, the world of creation. In speaking of the cosmic order and the animal creation, God's purpose is not to give Job lessons about nature and certainly not to dazzle him with signs of his power and intelligence (which Job has never for a minute doubted). It is rather to reconsider the mystery and complexity of the world that God has created. Job is meant to realize that the natural order is parallel to the moral order of the universe. Much of it is beyond human understanding, some of it seems hideous, futile, or fearsome, but all of it is the work of a wise God who has made the world the way it is for his own purposes.

38:1 – 40:2 The Lord's first speech: 'Consider the mystery of creation'

God's long series of questions to Job is not intended to humiliate him but to challenge him to reconsider what he already knows about the world that God has made and to ponder its mystery afresh. God points Job to ten features of the natural order (38:4–38) as examples of its mystery and to nine species of animals (38:39 – 39:30) to illustrate the mystery of created life. The final note (40:2) reminds us that the dialogue between God and Job is cast in the form of a legal case (*cf.* also 38:3), since that is what Job has demanded (*e.g.* 31:35). The purpose of the dialogue is, however, not to establish guilt or innocence but to enquire after the truth about life as a creature of God's.

38:1–3 Introduction. Job at last receives the reply he has so desired (*cf.* 31:35). Job had, of course, imagined the comparatively peaceful setting of a legal trial, but it is out of the whirlwind that God speaks. The whirlwind is an old symbol of divine revelation (*cf. e.g.* Ps. 18:7–15; Na. 1:3; Zc. 9:14), and although it is terrifying it means for Job that God does not intend to ignore his demands any longer. God does not belittle Job's intelligence, saying he has no understanding of the divine plan (*my counsel*; 2) for governing the universe. Neither does God pour scorn upon Job, but he encourages him to *brace* himself *like a man* (it being supposed that men are stronger than women!) and use all his mental strength to understand God's intentions, which will be expressed in this speech only indirectly.

38:4–38 Phenomena of earth and heaven. 4–7 Here the world is portrayed as a building with a *foundation* and a *cornerstone*, built to plan with a *measuring line* to the accompaniment of the music of the *morning stars*, the angels.

8–11 The *sea* is pictured as born from the *womb* of its mother (8) and *wrapped* by God in *clouds* (9). But it is also a threatening force that must be kept in its place, shut in with *doors and bars* (10).

12–15 Even the coming of *the dawn* is beyond Job's understanding (12). The NEB is probably correct in removing from these verses the inappropriate references to *the wicked* (13, 15) and in finding allusions to various heavenly bodies like the 'stars of the Navigator's Line' that 'go out one by one' (15) as the dawn breaks.

16–18 Beneath the earth is a whole realm of creation unknown to humans: *the springs of the sea*, the fountains of the great deep (Gn. 7:11) which feed the waters of the sea, and the land of death, pictured as a city with gates and 'doorkeepers' (17; NEB), the 'janitors of Shadowland' (JB), the underworld (rather than *earth*) with its *vast expanses* (18).

19–21 *Light* and *darkness* are here viewed as beings who have their own dwellings, to which they return at the due times. Job does not know how to 'escort' each 'on its homeward path' (20; NEB).

22–23 Also beyond Job's knowledge are the storehouses of the *snow* and *hail* (22), reserved for the day of battle (23; *cf.* Ex. 9:22–26; Jos. 10:11; Is. 30:30).

24–27 The *channel for the torrents of rain* from the heavenly storehouse (25) reminds us of the 'windows' of heaven that were opened at the time of the flood (Gn. 7:11). A new point, which will be developed further in ch. 39, is introduced in vs 26–27: much of what goes on in the created order does not happen for humans' sake but for the sake of other parts of God's creation, or simply because God wills it. Here it is the rain that falls on uninhabited land (26).

28–30 *Rain*, *dew* and *ice* must have an origin, but Job doesn't know it.

31–33 How do the seven stars of the *Pleiades* come to be bound together? Why do the stars of *Orion*, a hunter with belt (*cords*) and sword, stay fastened together? (31). Whatever may be the influence of the stars, Job has no influence over them, nor even any comprehension of the *laws* of nature that determine their movements (33).

34–38 Job cannot influence the coming of the lightning or of rain, when God tilts the *water jars of the heavens* (37).

38:39 – 39:30 The animal creation. The focus here is not on animals well-known and useful to humans (like sheep, ass and camel) but to those that are, rather, useless, mysterious or hostile. These too are part of God's creation. It is the same with suffering: sometimes indeed it may have a recognizable purpose, but sometimes it may be just as enigmatic and hurtful to humans as the wild animals can be. Nevertheless, it is part of God's order for the world, and he knows what he is doing in creating it.

39–41 The point is not that Job cannot satisfy the appetite of the young *lions* (39), or even that it is God who provides the raven's prey (41), but that there is a whole realm of God's creation that exists utterly independently of humans.

39:1–4 *Goats* and *does* are untouched by human interference. They *give birth* and their young grow up without human assistance or knowledge.

5–8 The wild ass, exempted by God from human service (5), leads a free though hard life and is totally useless to humans. This is unlike its domesticated cousin, the tame ass, which is driven through the noisy city streets (7).

9–12 An even greater gulf separates the domesticated ox from the *wild ox* (or aurochs), the most powerful of hoofed animals (extinct since the seventeenth century AD). It is ludicrous to think of it as useful to humans.

13–18 Some animals are wild and free and untameable; others, like the *ostrich*, are simply ridiculous. It is the popular view of the ostrich as a cruel and careless parent that is used here. In fact, it is only during the day that its eggs are abandoned; at night both cock and hen take turns at keeping the nest warm. God has even created animals whose behaviour makes no sense – not by human standards, at any rate.

19–25 The war horse is not completely useless to humans, but it has a strength and courage that clothe it with mystery. Even a creature so close to humans can be basically incomprehensible to them. Who can say what gives the horse its strength (19), how it can laugh at fear (22) and be eager to rush into battle (25)?

26–30 The hawk and the eagle are creatures that dart into human awareness occasionally (30) but who mostly live in places humans cannot reach (27–28). They are useless, predatory and unclean, yet they are created by God and their natural instincts (*wisdom*; 26) are implanted by him. If Job can accept that, he can accept also the fact that at least some cases of human suffering arise simply from the unfathomable wisdom of God.

40:1–2 Conclusion. The Lord is never contemptuous of Job, nor does he seek to argue him into submission (*cf.* 38:3). He concludes his first speech by simply inviting Job, as his opponent in the lawsuit, to respond to him.

40:3–5 Job's first reply: he has nothing to say

Job does not express submission, humiliation or defeat. He agrees that he is *unworthy*, since he realizes the limitations of his understanding that the Lord's speech has highlighted. But as yet he has nothing to answer, his case still stands. The Lord has called upon him to reply, and Job in effect invites the Lord to continue his speech. Job puts his hand over his mouth (4), for he has nothing yet to add.

40:6 – 41:34 The Lord's second speech: 'Consider the power of creation'

40:6–14 Introduction. The Lord cannot be browbeating Job with his superior power; for Job has always agreed that God is stronger than him (*e.g.* 9:15–19), and the point is God's justice, not his power. The Lord means that Job cannot of himself win vindication. Only one with power (*arm*; 9) like God and in physical control of the universe can have the authority to make judgments in the moral sphere also. Vindication of a human being is a divine task, and Job has been trying to do God's task by demanding vindication.

40:15–24 The behemoth. The theme is continued from ch. 39, but instead of brief snapshots of the animal creation, here are presented two loving descriptions of the behemoth, the fiercest of the land animals, and the leviathan, the most dreadful of the sea creatures. Previously, the focus was more on the mystery of the animal creation; now the theme is the terror, and yet the splendour, of two of God's creatures. The behemoth ('the great beast') has been identified as the crocodile, the wild buffalo, the hippopotamus or a mythical creature. The description of the behemoth and the leviathan has much poetic exaggeration, but it seems that real creatures are intended. They are also symbolic of chaos, and the fact God has created them shows he controls any chaotic powers that may threaten his universe.

The behemoth was *first among the works of God* (19), a reference to Gn. 1:21, where the 'great sea creatures' are the first animals mentioned. His main diet is *grass* (15); his habitat the reeds and marshes by the river (21). It is a little strange that the mountains yield food for him (20), though hippopotami are known to scramble up steep slopes in search of food. His strength is legendary (16–18), and he cannot be conquered by humans (only *his Maker can approach him with his sword*; 19) or be caught with a rope attached to him by his nose (24). A river in flood holds no terrors for him, and 'a Jordan could pour down his throat without his caring' (23; JB). Even his tail, though short and small, has the strength of a cedar (17).

41:1–34 The leviathan. The leviathan has been thought to be a dolphin, a tunny fish or a whale, but the general view is that it is a crocodile. Figured in Canaanite mythology as Lotan, a seven-headed monster of the deep, allusions to that mythological being are made in the OT (*e.g.* Ps. 74:13–14; Is. 27:1). So the leviathan here, like the behemoth, is a symbol of chaos.

1–11 The leviathan has no practical usefulness for human beings. He cannot be caught (1) or tamed (2) or made docile and domesticated (3); he cannot be used in human service (4) or as a pet to entertain the children (5). He cannot serve as food (6), for he cannot even be caught (7). Anyone so reckless as to lay hands on him would not do so a second time (8)! The mere sight of him is enough to turn away hopeful hunters (9). Verses 10–11 may suggest that if a courageous person is frightened away by the sight of a crocodile, only a fool would be reckless enough to approach God himself. But it is probably better to take these sentences as referring to the leviathan: 'No one can face him in a fight. Who can attack him with impunity? No one beneath all heaven' (JB).

12–34 The language here is highly poetical and fanciful, and we should not look for exact descriptions. The *outer coat* is his hard scales (13); his underparts, especially of the tail, are like *jagged potsherds* (30), and his motion in the water does indeed make the sea *churn like a boiling cauldron* (31). But perhaps his breathing out fire (18–21) is meant less literally. The main point in this poem in honour of the *king* of all proud animals (34) is the awesomeness and grandeur of this creature that is so repulsive and hostile to humans. This is the climax of the Lord's speeches to Job, and Job does not miss the point: suffering is a crocodile, a hippopotamus, terrifying and mysterious, yet part of God's creation and with its own splendour.

42:1–6 Job's second reply: his demands turn to worship

Unlike his first reply (40:2–5), which was really a refusal to reply, this speech resolves Job's dispute with God. For Job recognizes God's right to do what he does – even, though Job does not say so, to the extent of bringing suffering upon an innocent person. So what is new about Job's knowledge that *you can do all things* (2) is not that God is almighty, but that God has an inescapable purpose in whatever he does. Job's suffering makes sense to God, even though God has in no way explained or justified it to him. Job's mistake has been to demand an answer to the problem of suffering, which is to intrude into an area beyond human comprehension: '*I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know*' (3).

Job receives his vindication from God in vs 10–17, but more important to Job is the fact that through his cries for a confrontation with God he has in reality met with God face to face. That God should actually have broken through the silence and have addressed Job is better than any vindication. The personal experience of God (*now my eyes have seen you*; 5) transcends the suffering, the isolation and the sense of injustice as much as it transcends mere theory about God (*My ears had heard of you*; 5).

Does Job *despise* himself (6)? *Myself* is not in the Hebrew, and it is more probable that Job despises the words of abuse he has hurled at God. And what does he *repent* of (6)? It cannot be some sin, because we have known from the beginning that Job is no sinner, he can repent only of the extreme language he has used or of his ignorance. But perhaps it is better still to take the word translated *despise* as 'melt', *i.e.* 'I melt into nothingness', the feeling of a creature before his Creator, and to take the word for *repent* as 'comfort', *i.e.* 'I am comforted, though still sitting upon dust and ashes' (*cf.* 2:8). Job is still suffering, still upon the ash-heap, but his bitterness is relieved and his tension is resolved by his encounter with God.

42:7–17 Epilogue

Why is the story of Job not over now? It is because Job has been asking for vindication, *i.e.* for a public demonstration by God that Job is righteous and undeserving of his punishment. Some readers think the happy ending spoils the book of Job, for it seems to support the old doctrine of guilt and suffering. Is not the theology of the friends, that the righteous prosper, proved by this epilogue to the book? No, for the friends insist that the righteous always prosper and the wicked always perish. The case of Job shows there is no 'always'. What the epilogue shows is God's delight in showering blessings upon one who serves him faithfully. This is by way of a bonus, it is God's act of grace and not something he is compelled to do.

42:7–9 Vindication before the friends

In this charmingly ironic scene Yahweh stresses to the friends that it is Job, and not they, who have truly been *my servant* (repeated four times!) and that it is Job, and not they, who has *spoken of me what is right* (7). It is an almost comic reversal of roles when punishment for the friends' folly is only turned aside by the prayer of the righteous and still suffering Job (8–9). Those who had felt so superior to Job are the ones who stand in need of forgiveness themselves; and Job is not only vindicated before them but becomes their champion. How can the friends' respectful talk about God be called folly? It can only be that the friends spoke of God entirely in the third person, as an object, whereas Job insisted on addressing God personally. In a time of suffering, talk merely *about* God is folly.

42:10–17 Vindication publicly

Job is already vindicated in the eyes of the friends, but in the eyes of his relatives and fellow-citizens the sign of his vindication by God must be the restoration of his fortunes. They are restored in double measure (12); perhaps that implies compensation for the undeserved loss Job had suffered (*cf.* Ex. 22:4). The comfort Job has received from his encounter with God (see on v 6 above) is enriched by the comfort he receives from his relatives (11). The gifts of money and a ring of gold (11) are signs of esteem rather than gifts to restore his wealth, for he is already *prosperous again* (10). So wealthy does he become that there is enough inheritance for even his daughters to have a share (daughters usually inherited only when there were no male heirs; Nu. 27). The epilogue concludes on a note typical of the patriarchal narratives of Genesis: death at a ripe old age, *full of years*, is the final blessing of God. With this scene we are returned to the idyllic pastoral mood with which the book opened. Within that stylized world, so far removed from our own, there has gone on beneath the surface a human drama that belongs to every age.

David J. A. Clines

THE PSALMS

Introduction

The window into the Old Testament

What was it like to be a member of the OT church? What did they believe? What was their experience of God, personally and corporately? Did their religion make them happy or was it a burden? Were they aliens in another age or our brothers and sisters of long ago? As we look through the window of the Psalms we discover that here indeed is the same God, now disclosed to us in Christ, and here are people of the same nature as ourselves facing the same kind of life as we and finding that their God enhances their joys and bears their burdens.

Their commitment, prayerfulness, zeal, knowledge and delight rebuke our hesitances, unwillingness to pray, and cool responses. But they are our brothers and sisters. Their songs show us that just as in the NT God's grace prompts obedience to God's law, so in the OT obedience to God's law rests on his work of grace. But what a people of song they were! Great leaders like Moses (Ex. 15), Deborah and Barak (Jdg. 5), David (2 Sa. 1) and Hezekiah (Is. 38), ordinary folk like Hannah (1 Sa. 2) and prophets like Habakkuk (Hab. 3) marked their significant moments in song. The Psalms themselves reveal a religion overflowing in song. No wonder that from such people and such a religion this great anthology of psalmody should have emerged!

The Psalms as a book

It may be more appropriate to think of the psalms as a collection of books.

(i) It seems certain that within the Psalter as we have it smaller, once separate, collections have been preserved (*e.g.* 93 – 100 [Jerusalem Praise]; 113 – 118 [A Salvation Cantata]; 120 – 136 [Pilgrim Praise]; and 146 – 150 [The Endless Hallelujah]).

(ii) There is evidence too of an earlier anthology which has been absorbed into the Psalter in a more diffuse fashion. Many psalms are inscribed 'For the director of music' (*e.g.* 31, 47, 51 – 62). Was there then a 'Master of Temple Music' who at some point compiled his own hymnbook? If so he was careful of copyright for, apart from Pss. 66, 67, his inscription is always coupled with a personal ascription, 'To David'/'To Asaph', *etc.* For example, on taking Ps. 88 into his anthology he indicated that 'This psalm was included in the Korahite Collection and was composed by Heman the Ezrahite.'

(iii) Korah and Asaph were leaders of choirs (1 Ch. 6:31–33, 39ff; 15:16ff; 16:4–7). The 'Korahite' collection, with its delight in Mt. Zion, is represented in Pss. 42 – 49, 84, 87, and the 'Asaph' collection, emphasizing both divine judgment and shepherding care, is represented in Pss. 50, 73 – 83.

(iv) Other individuals appear more sparsely: Jeduthun (39, 62, 77), Ethan (89), Heman (88), *cf.* 1 Ki. 4:31, and Moses (90). But the majority of the Psalms are ascribed to David (3 – 32, 34 – 41, 51 – 65, 68 – 70, 101, 103, 108 – 110, 122, 131, 133, 138, 139, 140 – 145).

(v) Specialist opinion has usually been sceptical about the value of the psalm-titles. In the days when it was fashionable to date as many psalms as possible in the Maccabaean period (1st century BC) the headings were dismissed as an editorial fancy. More recently there is a greater willingness to allow pre-exilic dating, though opinions differ as to which and how many psalms may belong to the Kings period. It is agreed that the ascription 'To David' implies authorship but few follow M. G. Goulder (The Prayers of David: Psalms 51–72, *Studies in the Psalter II*, [JSOTS 102, Sheffield, 1990]) in taking Davidic authorship seriously. Yet there is no serious reason for not doing so. Certainly the headings have been added editorially to the Psalms (as their use of a third-person form indicates) but already by the time of the LXX (second or third century BC) many of the terms used were no longer understood, and how far back this editorial work goes no one knows for certain. They come to us as part of the Massoretic Hebrew Text (where they are included as verse 1 of the psalm in question) and in the NT, the Lord Jesus, Peter and Paul argue on the basis of their veracity. Against taking the headings seriously, it is urged that the historical notes which link some psalms to the life of David (3, 7, 18, *etc.*) are editorial guesses inasmuch as there is little or nothing to link the psalm and the occasion. Leaving aside the fact that an ancient editor is unlikely to have acted with crass

ineptness, this charge overlooks the nature of the psalms themselves as meditations, not descriptions. In each instance a satisfying case can be made out that either within the incident mentioned or in subsequent reflection David could well have voiced these sentiments.

(vi) Further evidence of editorial hands at work in the Psalms is afforded by what is called 'the Elohistic Psalter'. In Psalms 42–83, 'Elohim' ('God') occurs far more frequently than 'Yahweh' ('The LORD') and it looks as if the noun Elohim has been deliberately substituted for God's Name. (Cf. Pss. 14 and 53; 40:13–17 and 70.) Presumably this was done before the collection as a whole was assembled. But to us it is one of the many unexplained steps by which the psalmody of the centuries gradually became the Psalter of the Bible.

(vii) The Psalter is sometimes called 'The Hymnbook of the Second Temple', referring to the House built by the returned community in 520 BC (*cf.* Ezr. 5:1, 2; 6:15; Hag. 1:14, 15). Without a doubt such an event could have motivated the creation of a new hymnbook and, agreeing with Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (George Allen and Unwin, 1961), p. 311 that 'there is no psalm whose plain sense . . . requires a dating later than the exilic Psalm 137' all our present psalms would have been available for selection. The collection was probably then given its present division into five 'books' by adding doxologies at 41:13; 72:18–20; 89:52 and 106:48. But again we face an unsolved puzzle: was the fivefold division adopted in order to match the five books of the Law with five books of song? It is not certain.

The Psalms in worship

The father of modern specialist psalm-study is Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1926) who set out to relate each psalm to the life-situation from which it emerged. He distinguished certain main categories: (a) Hymns, poems like 8, 19, 29 which dwell on the greatness and attributes of God. Sub-groups here included Enthronement Psalms, celebrating the Lord as King (*e.g.* 47, 96, 98) and Zion Psalms (*e.g.* 46, 87); (b) Communal Laments such as 74, 79, 80; (c) Royal Psalms, centring on the king, (*e.g.* 2, 45, 110); (d) Individual Laments, by far the largest category, (*e.g.* 3 – 7, 140 – 143); a sub-group here were Psalms of Confidence in which assurance was expressed of coming divine deliverance (11, 16, 23); (e) Individual Psalms of Thanksgiving (*e.g.* 30, 32, 116) following deliverance. In addition to these main groups, smaller categories were discerned: Communal Thanksgiving (*e.g.* 124), Wisdom (49), Pilgrimage (120 – 134), and Liturgies (15, 24).

Gunkel's work was unsatisfactory in that it offered no consistent basis on which one category might be distinguished from another. Sometimes he emphasized form or structure, sometimes content, but at least he rescued psalm-study from arid discussions of date and introduced a living appreciation of what the psalms were attempting to be and do. Where he led others have followed, building on and developing his category-approach but in particular agreeing with him that the chief setting in which the psalms are to be understood is the cult, Israel's round of temple-worship.

Cultic setting and terms

The Psalms themselves delight in the Lord's House (84); they see the 'holy hill', the 'tabernacle' and the 'altar' (43) as affording entrance to his presence; they are full of the inward piety that accompanied and gave meaning to outward acts (116:13–19), insisting that the ritual of sacrifice only becomes a 'sacrifice of righteousness' (4:5) when it springs from a right attitude.

Much of the material in the headings, mysterious though it remains to us, bore on the way in which a psalm was to be used in public worship. The word 'psalm' (4, 55, *etc.*) indicates musical accompaniment, though it is not clear how this differs from 'song'. Some difference must have been intended as the use of the two words together (*e.g.* 30) indicates. 'Prayer' (*e.g.* 17) 'Praise' (145) and 'For teaching' (60) suggest the function a psalm might serve, rather like subject-divisions in modern hymnbooks.

There are musical directions regarding strings (4), flutes (5), 'sheminith' (an eight-string instrument, or an eight part arrangement, 6); notes of tunes to be used: 'The Death of a Son' (9); 'The Doe of the Morning' (22); 'Lilies' (45); 'A dove on distant oaks' (56) *etc.* 'Gittith' (8, 81, 84) means 'wine-press' and may be a known joyful melody.

There are also words which now defy understanding but which, with varying certainty, can be said to bear on the cultic use of the psalms: 'shiggaion' (7, *cf.* Hab. 3:1); 'miktam' (16, 56–60); 'maskil' (32, *etc.*); and 'selah' (3:2, 4, 8; *etc.*) 'Miktam' may be related to the verb 'to cover' and since enemies figure in the psalms where it occurs, it could recommend the use of these psalms when protection is needed. 'Maskil' may mean 'didactic' but why these psalms in particular merit this note is not clear. 'Selah' occurs internally in the psalms and may have indicated some division of the material, a meditative/musical interlude when the psalm was sung in worship. But both its meaning as a word and its significance as a directive are now unknown.

Since the work of S. Mowinckel (*cf. The*

Psalms in Israel's Worship, [Blackwell, 1962]) many have believed the Feast of Tabernacles included an annual celebration of the Lord's kingship. The expression 'The Lord reigns' (93:1; 97:1; 99:1; *etc.*) then should be 'The Lord has become King', a cultic cry acclaiming the ritual reassertion of divine kingship over all the earth, ensuring the welfare of his people for the coming year. Certainly at a later date (Zc. 14:16ff) Tabernacles was linked with kingship and prosperity, but for pre-exilic days the evidence is less clear.

When Jeroboam needed to detach his newly separated kingdom from the Lord's house and the Davidic king, we read that he appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month 'like the feast that was in Judah'. No feast in the eighth month is known but Tabernacles was on the fifteenth of the seventh month. Was it on this that Jeroboam modelled his feast? If so then Tabernacles too was a festival of kingship. It has to be recognized that the 'enthronement psalms' (47, 93, 96 – 99) are an amalgam of matching themes, not least Kingship and Creation and the Lord's sovereignty over spiritual forces of disorder, and it makes sense to think of an annual celebration with an 'Ascension Day' theme and focus.

On the other hand, the attempt by A. R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (University of Wales Press, 1967) and J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (SCM, 1976) to derive from some psalms (*e.g.* 2, 18, 89, 101, 110, 118) a ritual of the annual renewal of earthly/Davidic kingship has not met with widespread acceptance. At its widest this theory identifies many, if not all, psalms of Individual Lament with the king, humbled by his (worldwide) foes and cast on the Lord for deliverance. More specifically psalms like 22 are set within this ritual of humiliation and its denouement in dramatic divine intervention to reinstate the king. Appeal is made to verses like 46:8 ('Come, see. . .!') and 48:9 (translated 'we have portrayed/dramatized your love within your temple') to justify thinking in terms of a cultic ritual drama.

Equally, A. Weiser's theory of an annual ceremony of Covenant Renewal, *The Psalms* (SCM, 1962) has not found wide support. He contended that the dominant theme at Tabernacles was not the Lord's enthronment but national renewal of the Covenant. While Weiser found psalm after psalm speaking to this point, it is generally agreed that he allowed enthusiasm to replace realism and that while psalms like 50 and 81 need a ritual setting with a focus on the Commandments and the Sinai events, this is far from establishing the existence of a major annual festival. The seven-year law-reading of Deuteronomy 31:9ff is a sufficient background.

The Psalms as Scripture

As we consider the continuing vitality of the Psalms in today's church we can but touch on a few topics of importance.

(i) The Lord. One of the remarkable features of the Psalms is that though personal testimony abounds, the clearest impression left is not of people but of God. In this respect the Psalms are the OT in miniature: the Lord is the Creator (8, 104). But this is no abstract concept of how the world began; it is the ground of his present sovereign rule over all things as King (29, 96 – 99). The righteousness of his rule is predominant (11, 75) but in the great rhapsody of divine Kingship (145) righteousness is only one strand in a threefold cord along with greatness and grace. The goodness of God (34) is inseparable from his holiness (103) and finds its counterpart in his wrath (38). He is universal in his rule (67) and particular in his choice of Israel (87), two aspects of truth which find their unity in the messianic David, king of Israel and of the world (2, 72, 110). Both to his people as a whole (80) and to the individual (23), the Lord is Shepherd, the basis of confidence in looking to him for deliverance (16, 25, 31), recognizing his attentiveness to his people's needs (*e.g.* 3, 27). At the same time there is the problem of divine providence, the frequent adversities of God's people, individual (*e.g.* 10, 12) and collective (44, 74). It is this frank admission that suffering is ever part of the experience of the Lord's people that provides a proper perspective for understanding the link between righteousness and prosperity (*e.g.* 1). This is not a description of experience but a statement of faith (as when we affirm belief in 'God the Father, Almighty' in a world which challenges both his fatherliness and his almightiness). Since God is good and there is no other God, the outcome for his people is guaranteed.

(ii) The King. In the portrait of the King in the Psalms we have either the most blatant, unrealistic flattery of the successive kings of David's line, or else the expression of a great ideal, a mirror of the truth held up before each king in turn, awaiting the One in whom all will be fulfilled. The King meets world-opposition (2:1–3; 110:1) but, as Victor (45:3–5; 89:22f) and by the Lord's activity (2:6, 8; 18:46–50; 21:1–13; 110:1f), he establishes world-rule (2:8–12; 18:43–45; 45:17; 72:8–11; 89:25; 110:5ff), based on Zion (2:6) and marked by morality (45:4, 6; 72:2–4, 7; 101). His rule is everlasting (21:4; 45:6; 72:5); prosperous (72:7, 16) and undeviating in reverence for the Lord

(72:18–19). Pre-eminent in gifts, graces and dignity (45:2–7), he is also friend of the poor and enemy of oppression (72:2, 4, 12–14); under him the righteous flourish (72:7). He is remembered for ever (45:17); possesses an everlasting name (72:17), and is the object of unending thanks (72:15). In relation to the Lord he is recipient of everlasting blessing (45:2). He is heir of David's covenant (89:28–37, 132:11f), and of Melchizedek's priesthood (110:4). He belongs to the Lord (89:18) and is devoted to him (21:7; 63:1–8, 11). He is his son (2:7; 89:27), seated at his right hand (110:1) and is himself divine (45:6).

The commentary should be consulted on the references listed above, but the exalted dimensions of the picture are clear. While much of the portrait can be traced in principle to Nathan's foundational oracle in 2 Sa. 7, the steps by which those hopes became the expectation of a perfect, righteous, human, divine, everlasting and universal king cannot be traced. The older view is needless that it was only when the monarchy ceased with the Babylonian exile and showed no signs of recovery that such hopes developed. The failure of monarchy goes back to David himself! The bright hopes implied in Jdg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25 had not been fulfilled; the historian in Kings might swing his spotlight on the constitutional, dynastic, covenant monarchy of Judah or on the charismatic 'do-it-yourself' monarchy of Israel, but the longed-for king was not to be found. This failure was the seedbed of one of the OT's greatest expectations.

(iii) Imprecations. The vigour with which enemies were denounced within the Psalms has ever been a source of difficulty. Has the desire for the sudden destruction of foes (35:8), their death (55:15), the breaking of their teeth (58:6), the destitution (109:10) and massacre of their children (137:9) anything in common with the mind of Christ? There are about 25 psalms which contain such passages and commentators have been quick to dismiss them as 'Old Testament morality', condemned and outmoded by the revelation of God in Christ. There are three reasons why this is unsatisfactory: (i) Similar sentiments are expressed in the NT (Gal. 1:8, 9; Rev. 6:10; 18:20; 19:1–3) and by the Lord Jesus (Mt. 11:20–23; 23:13–36). If there is a problem, it is biblical not OT; (ii) The OT like the NT urges love (Lv. 19:17–18), God's hatred of violence (Ps. 5:6), the duty of returning good for evil (Pss. 7:3–5; 35:12–14) and the rejection of vengeance (Dt. 32:35; Pr. 20:22); (iii) In almost every case the imprecation which we find objectionable sits alongside a spirituality we would envy, *e.g.* Psalm 139. One commentator who classes the imprecations in general as 'the very opposite of the spirit of the Gospel' finds, in 139:19–22, 'the duty of keeping alive in the human heart . . . burning indignation against . . . evil' (Kirkpatrick, *The Psalms* [Cambridge, 1910]) – simply because it is impossible to impute a low spirituality to the author of vs 1–18.

More positively, we note that they are all prayers (except 137:9, see Commentary). There is no suggestion that the psalmists planned vengeful action, nor even that they entertained vengeful thoughts. Their reaction to hurt was to commit the matter to the Lord and leave it there. As J. R. W. Stott remarks (*The Canticles and Selected Psalms* [Hodder & Stoughton, 1966], pp.11ff.), 'I do not find it hard to imagine situations in which holy men of God do and should . . . cry to God for vengeance . . . and that without any feelings of personal animosity.' Living as we do in a savage age when personal vengeance is an assumed right, and communal problems, real and fancied, 'justify' violence, terror, bombing and torture, we ought at least to be prepared to say that even if we deplore their prayers their approach was preferable to ours. But there is no need so to judge: their prayers shock us because of their realism. We would find ourselves at home with 143:11 but hesitate over its realistic corollary (12) just as we pray with a glad heart for the second coming of the Lord Jesus (2 Thes. 1:7), but would hesitate to frame our prayer in terms of the scriptural realities of that event, by asking for flaming fire to consume those who do not obey the gospel (2 Thes. 1:8). If we were holier – and certainly if we were less comfortable and knew more of the persecutor's power – we would more readily identify than condemn.

The following commentary has attempted to major on the structure of each Psalm as the key to its meaning. It is seriously suggested to every psalm-student (indeed to every Bible student) that 'the medium is the message' and that the first objective in study should be to discover and clarify structure. See the article, Poetry in the Bible.

Further reading

J. Day, *Psalms* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).
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A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, CBSC (Cambridge, 1910).
W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, EBC (Zondervan, 1991).
P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC (Word, 1983).
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Book 1

Psalm 1. The decisive contrast

Psalm 1 introduces the whole book of Psalms. First, it is a psalm of faith (3d). This promise of prosperity is not a pledge of good fortune in return for good behaviour – the Psalms know life too well for that! (*see* 42, 73). Rather, just as we continue to say 'I believe in God the Father Almighty' yet find that life often seems to deny both his fatherliness and his almightiness, so also v 3 professes a 'creed': this world is God's world and those who side with him will surely and ultimately enjoy blessing (6). Secondly, it is a psalm of commitment: to a distinct lifestyle (1) and to the word of God (2). Indeed 'distinctiveness' is the theme around which the poem is structured.

A^1 (v 1) The way of blessedness
  B^1 (v 2) Continuance in the Lord's law
    C^1 (v 3) The enduring fruit tree
    C^2 (v 4) The impermanent chaff
  B^2 (v 5) No standing in the Lord's judgment
A^2 (v 6) The way of perishing

1 The way of blessedness: present life. Depending on context *Blessed* can mean under God's blessing, happy or fulfilled, or intrinsically right. All three meanings suit here. But the blessing and happiness are by-products of commitment to the life that is right. *Walk ... stand ... sit.* Our distinctiveness must show in our life-style.

2 Continuance in the Lord's law. *Law*, 'teaching', such as a caring parent offers to a loved child (Pr. 3:1). *Delight ... meditates.* Behind the active obedience of v 1 lies the inward godliness of emotions and mind exercised *day and night* in the word of God.

3 The enduring, fruitful tree. *Planted* (lit.) 'transplanted', *i.e.* a new position into which one has been brought (80:8; *cf.* Col. 1:13).

4 The impermanent chaff.

5 No standing in the Lord's judgment. *Judgment ... assembly.* At the final divine assessment those who are right with God (*righteous*) contrast with those who followed their own counsel and, by implication, did not bring their lives within the parameters of divine revelation.

6 The way of perishing: ultimate destiny. *Watches over* (lit.) 'knows', enters into an intimate and loving care of. *Perish*, the last word, compare this with the initial *blessed* (1) – a decisive contrast indeed!

Psalm 2. The world's king

The theme is developed in four balancing sections: the *kings* who oppose *the* LORD and *his Anointed One* (1–3) are invited to *take refuge*, serving *the* LORD and paying homage to *the Son* (10–12). In between two voices are heard: the Lord speaks of the appointment of his Son to reign (4–6), and the Son speaks of the divine promise of world rule (7–9). The psalm is rooted in 2 Samuel 7, the promise to David of a supreme name, a relationship of sonship to the Lord, and an enduring line. Possibly the psalm was used to greet each succeeding Davidic king on his accession as a reminder of the ideal, but its fulfilment came in 'great David's greater Son' (Lk. 1:31–33), just as the ever-pervasive refusal of the world to have 'this man reign over them' (Lk. 19:14) reached its climax at Calvary (Acts 4:25–26; 1 Cor. 2:8). The age in which we live, however bland and accommodating it may at times appear, essentially hates, opposes and rebels against God in Christ. Historically, the Davidic king was always under threat from the surrounding world; essentially, this reflects the world's rebellion against God; prophetically, the psalm speaks of the rejection of Jesus.

1–3 *Plot in vain* (lit.) 'murmur'. The picture here may not be so much of rebellion as of restlessness. What deprives the world of peace? V 2 replies: there can be no peace while the Lord and his anointed are rejected. Enmity against God is at the heart of the fallen nature (Col. 1:21). *Anointed* (*cf.* 1 Sa. 16:13; 24:6; Is. 11:1–9). *Chains ... fetters.* It is Satan's delusion (Gn. 3:1–5) to represent divine conditions of blessing as hostile restrictions holding mankind back from proper freedom. **4–6** The Lord neither negotiates with rebels, nor adjusts himself to suit their demands, but simply reaffirms his royal plan: His king is *installed* and that is the end of the matter – just as in Genesis 3 the great rebellion did not alter divine sovereignty one iota! *Anger ... wrath*, respectively the snort of anger (anger felt) and burning force of wrath (anger expressed). *Zion*, literally the site of the Davidic monarchy; prophetically the centre of God's new creation in Christ (Heb. 12:22–24). **7–9** A relationship of sonship, a promise of *inheritance* and an enduement with power. *My Son.* God figuratively adopted the kings of David's line. *Today*, their accession day, the beginning of the relationship. When used of Jesus at his resurrection (Acts 13:32–37) the meaning rather is that God has made publicly plain what had always been the case. *Ask of me.* In distinction from the rebellious king, the Son lives by submissive reliance on the Father. At this point he was tempted (Mt. 4:8–10) and prevailed (Mt. 26:39). *Iron sceptre ... like*

pottery, the contrast of absolute power with total helplessness. **10–12** *Serve . . . kiss.* There can be no service to the Lord without submission to the Son! *Fear . . . rejoice . . . trembling.* There is a distinction between confidence and presumptuousness. Those who kiss the Son remain ever aware of the *fear* rightly due to him and the *wrath* that is inseparable from his holiness. *Blessed* (see 1:1). *Take refuge.* 'There is no refuge from him: only in him' (Kidner).

Psalm 3. Prayer and confidence: a psalm for a new day

Here is a psalm with a clear focal point *i.e.* that prayer brings confidence to face life (4–6). The movement in this psalm is first towards and then out from these verses.

A¹ (vs 1–2) Need: no deliverance
  B¹ (v 3) Affirmation: divine protection
    C (vs 4–6) Prayer brings confidence
  B² (v 7) Appeal for divine deliverance
A² (v 8) Solution

This psalm is set in 2 Samuel 15:13–17:24. The initial flight from Absalom covered two nights, the first of which could understandably have found David despondent (1, 2). But the antidote to despondency is, first, to assert divine truth (3), and secondly to seek divine aid (4). The consequence is the blessing of a night's sleep (5) and fresh confidence for the new day (6). Just as one day ended in prayer (4) so the new day begins in calling on God to *deliver* (7), for he has ever been the foe of David's foes: thus, confident prayer draws on past experiences of grace and begets assurance for the future (8).

1,2 Need: no deliverance. *God will not deliver.* This is the killing blow: an attitude (*foes*) has become action (*rise up*) and reflects public opinion – not even God can help David now!

3 Affirmation: divine protection. *But you*, is emphatic. The breakthrough from the gloom of vs 1, 2 is to grasp afresh what God is. *My Glorious One*, (lit.) 'my glory': David has been stripped of all earthly pomp but cannot be deprived of God. *My head* (*cf.* 2 Sa. 15:30).

7 Appeal for divine deliverance. *Arise, O Lord.* (*cf.* Nu. 10:35). By using Moses' great cry David expresses confidence that even in apparent defeat he and his fleeing company are in fact under divine guidance. *Jaw . . . teeth.* Striking the cheek is an act of rebuke (1 Ki. 22:24); breaking the teeth is to render harmless.

8 Solution. 'To the Lord belongs deliverance'.

Psalm 4. Praying, knowing, trusting, resting

This is a night-time psalm (8), probably belonging to the time of David's flight from Absalom (see Ps. 3), as he faces a second night sleeping rough and under threat. Like Ps. 3, this is a psalm of prayer and we note that to come into the place of *prayer* (1) is to find oneself in the place of *peace* (8) – even though the pressures remain the same ((2) those who denigrate; (6) those who despair). But the centrepiece of this psalm is not prayer but knowing (3) and trusting (4, 5). The former is what David imaginatively addresses to the denigrators in Absalom's court, the latter, to the despondent in his own camp as they prepare for bed.

1 True prayer is urgent (1a), resting on the righteousness of God (1b), specific (1c) and dependent on divine mercy (1d). **2** An imaginative appeal to those gathered to Absalom to stop denigrating his *glory* as king, to abandon their *delusions* of power and their 'falsehood' (not *false gods*). **3** *Godly*, a complex word meaning those whom God loves with an unchanging love and who love him back (*cf.* 2 Tim. 2:19a). **4, 5** A word to the discouraged in David's camp. *In your anger*, rather 'Tremble and'. There is no point in denying fear, but the right response is to use the night hours for quiet prayer (4c, not *search* but 'speak in'), approaching God (5a) in the spirit of the *sacrifices* in consecration, (burnt-offering), confession (sin-offering), fellowship (peace-offering), and in *trust* (5b). **6** Counter despondency with appropriate prayer. **7, 8** David's testimony: prayer brings greater joy than the world affords, through the *peace* and *safety the Lord alone* provides.

Psalm 5. The moral context of prevailing prayer

Possibly this psalm meditates on the second morning of David's flight from Absalom (see Ps. 3). There is no historical title to guide us but the psalm is concerned with prayer *morning* by *morning* (3) and alternating paragraphs dealing with those who seek God in righteousness and the wicked whom he rejects could well reflect the morally 'black and white' situation in which Absalom placed David.

A¹ (vs 1–3) Confidence in the Lord
  B¹ (vs 4–6) The Lord's rejection of the wicked
    C (vs 7–8) Commitment to the Lord's righteous way
  B² (vs 9–10) The Lord's banishment of rebels
A² (vs 11–12) Joy in the Lord

The psalm centres on holy, reverential worship and prayer for a righteous life (7, 8). David thus adopts a position contrasting with those who do wrong (4, 5) and speak wrong (9), and displays the commitment of one who expects

prayer to be answered (1–3) and divine protection (11, 12).

1–3 Confidence in the Lord who hears prayer. Prayer (a) is putting the problem (*sighing*) into *words* (1) (b) carries with it a guarantee of being heard. Note the sequence (2) *Listen . . . for (because) . . . I pray.* (c) comes first in the day: *morning by morning* (v 3ab) is simply 'in the morning'. The thought is not so much regularity (*cf.* Is. 50:4), as priority in the day (d) is watchful for an answer (3c).

4–6, 9, 10 The Lord's rejection of the wicked and banishment of rebels. Each of these sections begins with 'For' (omitted by NIV), *i.e.* David (1–3) can expect prayer to be answered 'because' he is not like the wicked (4–6) and prays for a righteous pathway (8) 'because' he wishes to be distinct from the rebels whom the Lord will *banish* (9, 10). This is the moral commitment of the praying person, covering character (4, 5a), conduct (5b), speech (6a), relationships (6b), truthfulness (9a), integrity (9b), and speech again (9cd). **10** Is such a request as this proper? Like most of the imprecations (see Introduction) it asks God to do what he has asserted he will in any case do – expose and punish sin and sinners (10a, c); do to false accusers what they would have done to the object of their spite (10b; *cf.* Dt. 19:16–19); leaves action to God, not proposing to take personal vengeance (Pr. 20:22; Rom. 12:19); and is motivated by the hurt done to God (10d), not personal animosity. 7 How can David speak of a *house* when the temple was not yet built? Because (1 Sa. 1:9, 24) these were the common designations of the place where the Lord dwelt even though it were but his tent (1 Sa. 2:22; 2 Sa. 7:2). Note how *great mercy* brings us with *reverence* into the place of holiness.

11, 12 Joy in the Lord who protects. *Righteous*, those who are right with God.

Psalm 6. Great need, great reassurance

The reference to human enemies (7, 8, 10) suggests that the setting of this psalm could be the same as Ps. 3: considering the toil of the journey, the threat of attack and responsibility for the mixed company (2 Sa. 15:16, 18, 22) who fled with him, it is no wonder that David experienced times of exhaustion (2 Sa. 16:14; 17:29). (On the other hand, v 2 more readily points to an actual time of illness.) In a low ebb of physical, mental and emotional energies David sounded the depths here recorded. Human enmity has breached his defences (6, 7) but, at a deeper level, there is the *anger* of *the* LORD bringing weakness (*faint*, 2), terror (*agony*, 2, lit. 'are terrified') and *anguish* (3), lit. 'terrified' as (2). For in his depression perhaps David recalled that if he had not sinned with Bathsheba (2 Sa. 11, 12) he would not have been powerless when his eldest son raped Absalom's sister (2 Sa. 13). If he had not mishandled Absalom's case, leaving his turbulent spirit to fester (2 Sa. 14, 15), the rebellion might never have occurred. Well might David feel that the Lord had turned away from him in anger (4)! But the greatest of all perils yields to the simplest of all remedies: the cry *be merciful* (2) brings assurance, *the* LORD *has heard my cry for mercy* (9). If the greatest need is dispelled by prayer, then will not lesser needs be met in the same way (10)? Through prayer David's terror (1–3) becomes his enemies' terror (10) *dismayed*, lit. 'terrified', as (2, 3); the return of the Lord in answer to prayer (4, 5) is the signal for the enemies to go (8, 9); when he was weak (6, 7) David found that he was strong.

Notes. 4 *Turn*, 'turn back'. **5** is often quoted as indicating that the OT lacked hope after death (see 49, 73), but David is here speaking of death from the point of view of one who feels himself to be astray from God, the object of divine wrath. On this matter, the NT goes far beyond anything the OT was able to reveal (Mt. 10:28).

Psalm 7. The blessing of a good conscience

We do not know who Cush was but we do know that Saul, the Benjamite king (1 Sa. 9:1), surrounded himself with Benjamites (1 Sa. 22:7); also that he was incited against David by slandering tongues (1 Sa. 24:9; 26:19). A situation like 1 Samuel 18:10–24 would have given plenty of scope for the 'Cushes' of this world to inflame Saul's paranoiac dread of David. But David knew that no accusation of disloyalty against Saul was true; even before God's judgment seat (6, 7, 10–13), his conscience was clear (8b, 9) and these verses are the heart of the psalm and a summons to preserve in all things 'a conscience as the noonday clear' (Acts 24:16; Heb. 13:18; 1 Pet. 3:16).

A^1 (vs 1–2) Present shelter and prayer
  B^1 (vs 3–5) Sin and its reward
    C^1 (vs 6–8a) The God of Justice
      D (vs 8b–9) A clear conscience
    C^2 (vs 10–13) The God of Justice
  B^2 (vs 14–16) Sin and its reward
A^2 (v 17) Envisaged thanks and praise

The overall movement of the psalm is the familiar theme that prayer resolves crises and issues in praise for their solution. Vs 3–5 and 14–16 recognize that sin and reward belong together and in the present instance David is willing to expose himself to the full rigour of

justice. This is the way sin 'works' (14–16): it has a boomerang quality as if it were a living agent in its own right. But if sin appears to return on the head of the perpetrator it is because there is a just (6–8a), wrathful (10–13) God before whom all will one day stand, but who is the same *every day* with resources at the ready for the punishment of the unrepentant. In the light of such a view of sin, and before such a God, David asserts his innocence: such is the nature and blessing of a clear conscience.

1, 2 Present shelter and prayer. *Take refuge.* Deliverance is still in the future (17) but protection is a present reality. *All* (1) becomes a singular (2), (lit.) 'or he will', *i.e.* David has many foes but one in particular, as the title indicates.

3–5 Sin and its reward: David's testimony. *At peace* (4), bound by a treaty of friendship. *Or without cause* (4) may be '. . . actually I have delivered him who without cause is my adversary'. Far from repaying evil, David has a record of returning good for evil (*cf.* Mt. 5:43–48; Rom. 12:17–21). Long after Saul had tried to kill David, David still ministered to the demented king by his music and gave him other devoted service (1 Sa 18:10–13; 19:9; 1 Sa. 20:1; 24:10f, 17; 26:18, 23f). *Make me sleep* (5), (lit.) 'make my glory dwell', ruin my reputation publicly.

6–8a The God of Justice: the final judgment. The reference to the *assembled peoples* indicates that David is referring to the last judgment. The Lord mercifully may overlook sins now, but not then. But so confident is David of innocence that he asks for the last judgment now!

8b–9 A clear conscience before God. *Righteousness* (8), not sinless perfection, but equivalent to a plea of 'not guilty' in relation to a specific charge. *Integrity* (8), *i.e.* his righteousness is no mere conformism but a state of the whole man, *Cf. minds and hearts* (9) – which refers to thoughts, imagination, feelings and reactions.

10–13 The God of Justice: Saviour and Judge. (Lit.) 'My shield is upon God' – he is my shield-bearer/defender. *Relent* (12), 'repent'. Even before such a God (9, 11) penitence averts judgment.

14–16 Sin and its reward: an inevitability. V 14 opens with 'Behold!' – 'Look, it's like this!', the nexus between sin and reward.

17 Envisaged thanks and praise. A clear conscience makes David confident of a different future.

Note. Title, *Shiggaion*, see Introduction.

Psalm 8. The God of the insignificant

If vs 1c–2 were removed from the psalm, what would remain is a balanced poem with a coherent theme. The opening and closing acclamations of the *majestic name* bracket two stanzas of equal length dealing with the Lord's condescending recognition and honouring of humankind (3–5) and the ruling place he has given them over all creation (6–8). In this the NT sees the Lord Jesus Christ in his present reign (Eph. 1:22; Heb. 2:5–9) and coming triumph (1 Cor. 15:27), to be shared with his purchased people (Rev. 5:9, 10).

But what prompted this line of thought about God's condescension, and man's dominion in the world? The answer is found by restoring the first stanza to its place. The transcendent God (1c, d) sovereign power in his hand, chooses to use *the lips of children and infants* (2). Are we to take this literally – a foe silenced by a child? Or does David use 'infant' figuratively of what is tiny, weak and powerless? There is no way of knowing, but it is plain that he experienced some notable instance of powerlessness overmastering power. When, at night (3), he pondered this he saw it as typical of the Lord's ways. Humankind, dwarfed by the immensity of the universe, is yet taken up by the Lord, given glory and made its master – a principle perfectly realized in the Lord Jesus Christ and yet still to be realized in redeemed humankind (Heb. 2:5–9). This principle is truly expressed in the wonder of the divine choice (1 Cor. 1:26–28) and at hand to be experienced by every believer (2 Cor. 12:9, 10).

Notes. 1a *Our Lord*, (lit.) 'our Sovereign One'; also in v 9. **1c, 1d, 2** *Ordained praise* should be 'founded strength', set your strength on a sure foundation. *Avenger* can mean one taking reprisals for wrong suffered (Je. 5:9) but can also simply mean, as here, one acting for his own advantage (*see* 44:16).

Psalms 9, 10. Wrestling faith

Psalms 9 and 10 form a broken alphabetical acrostic (see Poetry in the Bible). Four letters are missing, two are transposed and one appears in the second word of its stanza. Attempts have been made to restore a perfect acrostic but the broken acrostic falls into three sections of six letters each: 9:1–12; 9:13 – 10:6; 10:7–18. The theme is the opposition of the *wicked* (9:6, 17, 18; 10:2, 3, 4, 13, 15). Section 1 (9:1–12), beginning and ending with praise (1–2, 11) is a calm statement: the wicked are about but God is on the throne. But in section 2, (9:13 – 10:6) the actuality of life is turbulent, giving rise to a cry for divine *mercy* (9:13) and counteraction (9:19). The Lord is distant (10:1), the wicked rampant (10:2–6). The end is sure (9:15, 16) but this does not necessarily bring the comfort needed here-and-now. Yet in section 3, (10:7–18)

prayer is the sufficient resource. Wickedness (7–10) assumes that God does not care while prayer seeks divine action, for God is not as they say but will destroy and judge finally and universally (11–16). Prayer will be heard; the helpless will get their rights; and oppressors will cease (17–18).

9:1–12 Confident faith

A[1] (vs 1–2) Praise
  B[1] (vs 3–4) The just king
    C (vs 5–6) The final judgment
  B[2] (vs 7–10) The just king
A[2] (vs 11–12) Praise

The ultimate overthrow of the wicked and the end of their opposition is not our only comfort but it is where we start (5–6). 'God is still on the throne'. David first imaginatively takes his stand in the day of judgment (3, 4) and, using past tenses, records the rout of his *enemies* and his own vindication, whereas in the matching verses (7–10) he looks forward to the work of the same reigning Lord.

1, 2 Praise 'give thanks to'; *wonders*, acts which require a cause beyond humankind. *You.* Joy moves from the deed (*wonders*) to the doer. *Name*, all that the Lord has revealed himself to be. Even though life is troubled and the final settlement of all things has not yet come, there is still matter for praise in what the Lord is and what he has done.

3, 4 The just king, overthrowing and vindicating. *Before you.* The presence of the Lord is sufficient (Rev. 6:16).

5, 6 The final judgment. The judgment of the Lord deals with character (*their name*), achievement (*their cities*) and place in history (*memory*).

7–10 The just king, judging and sheltering. Repeating the themes of *throne, righteousness* and *judgment*, found in the matching vs 3, 4, these verses elaborate the Lord's vindication of his own (4) into a rich statement of their security. In other words, what will be supremely true in the day of Judgment (because God is on the throne) is in due measure true now (because he is always on the throne). **9, 10** what the Lord is and what we may do. He is a *refuge* and *stronghold.* The same word, stressing (inaccessible) height, 'top-security'. *Have never forsaken*, perfect tense to express the fixity of divine character, *i.e.*, 'never do and never will'.

11, 12 Praise. The Lord is *enthroned.* The final judgment will make the Lord's kingship all too clear (4, 7), but he is king now, reigning among his people. *The nations* need to be told. *Has done*, his works of creation, redemption, preservation.

9:13–10:6 Buffeted faith

The cry for mercy (9:13) and the question *why?* (10:1) announce the theme of the second section of the psalm. Faith has not ceased to be confident. It is not based on fluctuating earthly fortunes but on the God who is still on the throne. Earthly buffetings, however, are also real and often the world we live in seems to belong to the godless and the hostile.

A[1] (vs 13–14) Present need: trouble is near
  B (vs 15–20) Future certainties
A[2] (10:1–6) Present need: God seems far away

13–14 Present need: trouble is near. *And lift me*, 'You who lift . . .', as much a description of character as of action. The confident *I will tell*, 'recount' (1) modulates into *that I may declare*, 'recount' (14). Present adversity muffles the voice of praise. Certainty remains that God *will* act – but a bit of action *now* would help! How realistic this psalm is!

15–16 Sin will be rewarded. *Have fallen . . . caught* (15) The perfect tense of certainty, 'are sure to'. By divine providence, sin is a boomerang. *Are* (16), present tense, the wicked are already (unknowingly!) self-ensnared.

17 The wicked removed. *Return*, future tense, 'will return'. *Grave*, Heb. 'Sheol', the place where the dead live on.

18–20 God does not forget. Future certainties of doom (15–17) and deliverance (18) are no answer to present adversities. Consequently, the need of prayer (13).

10:1–6 God seems far away. The question (1) expresses not theological reality (see 9:10) but personal feeling. We often may feel bereft of God's presence but the proper reaction is not gloom but to bring the problem to the Lord. **2–6** Here is the heart of the tension between faith and experience. Faith says that the wicked are sure to be caught in their net (9:15). But all too often in life (2) it is the *weak who are caught* while the wicked go on, with impunity, with false values (3), practical atheism (4), prosperity without morality (5ab) and blissful self-assurance (5c–6).

10:7–18 Praying faith

7–11 The Problem: the wicked person is hostile in speech (7), murderous in intent (8, 9), pitiless in strength (10), a practical atheist (11).

12–16 The Resource: Prayer for divine intervention to defend the weak and the truth (12–13); based on divine knowledge, intent and commitment to the needy (14); and requesting the end of the power of the wicked, his trial (15), and the final judgment (16).

17, 18 The Assurance: prayer is heard (17), deliverance is total (18).

Such vigour of prayer is striking *Arise* (9:19;

10:12), as though accusing the Lord of 'lying down on the job'; *do not forget* (12) – as if he had done so. Equally striking is that nothing is done except through prayer. Deadly though the threat is (9:13; 10:8), mighty though the opponent (10:9), prayer is enough, because the Lord is king (9:4, 7), he knows our needs (10:14), and he is pledged to shelter (9:9, 10), uplift (9:13) and help (10:14).

Psalm 11. Faith and truth

A background such as 1 Samuel 18:8 – 19:7 illuminates this psalm. David's life was daily in danger. The psalm is in three parts.

1–3 The Lord's protection. The advice to flee is well founded: because of actual danger (2); and because the sheer instability of society makes it impossible to steer a safe course. David, however, asserts the way of trust as against the case for flight; *Foundations* (3), the 'ground rules' on which society operates. In such a situation as Saul's dementia the rules are changed from moment to moment and it would be impossible for David to know how to avoid offending. But the case for trust is well argued too: the words *in the Lord* (1) are emphatic. Since he is trustworthy, trust is a logical way of life.

4–6 The Lord's providence: from his throne he observes and examines (4). Trust does not guarantee a life of ease. Rather it brings testing to *the righteous*, those who are 'right with God (5a) but *the wicked* experience his opposition (5b–6).

7 The Lord's favour. To *see his face* is to experience the Lord 'lifting up his face', *i.e.* accepting one with favour into his presence. Thus faith is three-faceted: the faith that flies for security (1); the faith that accepts the testings of life as the Lord's purpose (5a); and the faith that awaits a blessed outcome. For the righteous, God's testings are the way forward into his immediate presence (7).

Psalm 12. The war of words

This psalm balances two 'words': all around David heard falsehood, flattery and duplicity (2); but by contrast there is a word that is total in its purity (*flawless*, 6a), its value (*silver* 6b) and its freedom from any imperfection (*seven times* 6c). This is the choice which always confronts the believer: to be distracted and disorientated by the word of man or to rest upon the word of God. For society can at any moment seem as in vs 1, 2: without spirituality, reliability and veracity and we need a sure standing ground (6).

The response to the collapse of values in society (2) is prayer (1, 3) for personal deliverance (1, *help*, 'save') and for divine judgment upon rampant untruth (3–4). It is correct to pray for just such divine action to purge society (3), indeed the Lord validates such a prayer by commitment to act (5).

The response to the word of the Lord is trust. Because his word is flawlessly pure, he will stand by it, pledging action in response to need and against wrong (5). In return we affirm confidence (7) even though the problem is still as virulent as ever (8).

Notes. 1 *Godly*, *see* 4:3. **2** Sins of speech (*cf.* Is. 6:5; Ps. 34:12–13; Rom. 3:13–14; Jas. 3:2–6.) *Deception*, 'with heart and heart', we would say 'two-faced'. **5–8** Since what the Lord promises (5) is part of his flawless word (6), trust him (7) even while the problem remains (8). **5** *weak* . . . *needy*, respectively, the underdog and the exploitable. **6** *Flawless*, specifically such purity as God can accept. **7** *For ever*, or 'O you who are for ever'.

Psalm 13. New dimensions for old: transformation by prayer

This is the same scenario as Psalms 9 – 12: David is surrounded by foes, but here a single foe is in mind (2, 3). That David does not pray for his destruction fits either the Saul (1 Sa. 26:9ff.) or Absalom (2 Sa. 18:5) situations. The three stanzas of this poem are respectively 5, 4 and 3 lines long: the dimensions of distress (1, 2) merge into urgent prayer (3, 4) and come to quiet rest in transformed experience (5, 6). Agitation is brought into the place of intercession and emerges in exultation.

1, 2 The dimensions of distress are spiritual (Has the Lord forgotten?), personal (inward wrestling and sorrow) and circumstantial (dominant enemy). **3, 4** Identical dimensions of prayer: spiritual (*Look*, restored divine favour, no longer the hidden face) (1), personal (*light*, renewal), circumstantial (*enemy* . . . *foes*). True prayer takes every side of need to the Lord. **5, 6** Dimensions of transformation: spiritual, the hidden face (1) is replaced by *unfailing love*; personal, heart-sorrow has become heart-joy; circumstantial, the rampant foe is replaced by divine sufficiency: *good to me* 'has made full provision for me', better understood as 'perfect of certainty', '. . . has determined to make . . .'.

Prayer thus brings a full-orbed solution to the problem fully shared with the Lord.

Psalm 14. Voices: atheism and experience

The emphatic *There* (5 lit. 'There, they were truly afraid') recalls the occasion which gave rise to this psalm – some situation where atheism came face to face with the reality of the presence of God among his people. What this occasion was we have no means of knowing. Was the psalmist meditating on Ex. 14:10–28? The

atheism in question is more practical than theoretical, not so much denying God's existence as his relevance.

1 *Fool*, a person without any sense of moral values or social obligations (Is. 32:6; *cf.* 1 Sa. 25, esp. v 25), in character *corrupt*, spiritually *vile* ('abhorrent [to God]'), in conduct careless of *good*. 2 since such do not *seek God*, the consequence follows that, 3, deliberately (*turned aside*) they have *become corrupt*, 'gone to the bad', treat the Lord's people as prey and themselves feel no need of God (*do not call*). It is equally clear that the answer to such people is not argument but the unmistakable reality of God's presence among his people (5b) and their experience of finding him a sufficient *refuge* in every need (6b). The reply to unspirituality is true spirituality.

The psalm records three voices, each followed by a comment: *The fool* (1a, b), comment (1c, d); *the Lord* (2–4), comment (5); Israel (7a, b), comment (7c). The concluding prayer asks that what happened once (5, 6) should become a permanent reality (*salvation*) but its accompanying comment is realism itself: the task of the people of God is to rejoice in him here and now.

Psalm 15. The Lord's guest: May I come and stay?

This is often called an 'entrance liturgy' with a would-be worshipper asking the conditions of entering and a priest replying. The point of the psalm is residence ((1), *dwell . . . live*): how may one dwell in his (not *sanctuary* but 'tent'), enjoying hospitality as a guest in his home. Here is the holiness without which no one sees God (Heb. 12:14), covering conduct, conversation and relationships (2–3), values, integrity and financial contentment (4–5).

Notes. 1 *Dwell*, 'stay as a guest'. 2 *Walk*, lifestyle; *blameless*, 'perfect'/all of a piece; *righteous*, right with God. 5 'Contentment' expresses the fact that this person is not motivated by money: giving without thought of making (Lk. 6:35), refusing tainted money. 6 *Shaken, i.e.* out of his place in the Lord's tent.

Psalm 16. Eternal security

It is not certain what prompted David to cry out for preservation (1), but the focus on *the grave* (9–11) suggests that some close brush with death, through illness or danger, drove him to probe the question of personal security, its nature and extent. In any case this is the theme of the psalm whose structure proclaims its message:

A^1 (v 1) Security in God: a plea
  B (vs 2–4, 5, 8) The evidences of security
    a^1 (v2) The Lord my total good
      a^2 (v 5) The Lord my portion
    b^1 (v 3) Delight in the people
      b^2 (v 6) Delight in the inheritance
    c^1 (v 4) Commitment: negative
      c^2 (vs 7–8) Commitment: positive
A^2 (vs 9–11) Eternal security in God: a possession

1 Security in God, a plea. Security begins when we ask for it and seek it in God (1). 2–8 There are three evidences of possessing security: First, delight in the Lord: (2) *apart from you*, 'my good/wellbeing is not beyond you/does not lie outside you', 'you are all the good I need' – 'Thou, O Christ' art all I want'; (5) lit. 'The Lord is my share of the portion'; *cup*, translated *lot* (11:6), personal fortune, good or ill, in life. To say *The Lord is . . . my cup* is to affirm that in sorrow or joy he is the overriding reality (73:25–26). Secondly, delight in the Lord's people and kingdom: (3) *saints*, 'holy ones', those whom the Lord has 'set apart' for himself; (6) *delightful*, synonymous with *delight* (3), here the object is the *inheritance* which the Lord has allotted. Thirdly, delight in the Lord's truth. Refusing devotion to other gods (4c) or what they claim to be (4d, *names*), David delights in the Lord's teaching ((7) *counsels . . . instructs*) and, in its light, makes the Lord his constant goal in life ((8) *set . . . before*) and experiences his presence (8b, c).

9–11 Eternal security in God, a possession. Security has an eternal dimension: the whole person, inwardly (*heart*) and outwardly (*flesh*), can *rest secure*, even in the face of death (*grave*/ 'Sheol', where the dead live on); beyond Sheol there is a *path* to *life* leading to (lit.) 'satiation of joys' *in your presence* (See Introduction, 'Hope').

Even when David wrote this psalm he was going beyond his own personal experience: he did not, for example, always set the Lord before him, nor was he always unshaken. Both he and his contemporaries would recognize the psalm as an unrealized ideal. Rightly, therefore, the NT finds here a foreshadowing of the Lord Jesus Christ in whom its ideals and hopes were fulfilled (Acts 2:24–32) and through whom the identical hope awaits us (Rom. 8:11).

Psalm 17. Appeal to the supreme court

1 Samuel 23:25ff. provides a suitable background to this psalm. The narrative matches the psalm where the psalmist is surrounded by enemies among whom one is notably hostile (v 12 is singular). There are links with Psalm 16 and maybe the danger reflected here is the brush with death on which that psalm is based.

The psalm consists of three appeals: *Hear* (1),

Give (6), *Rise* (13). The first (1–5) pleads the righteousness of the psalmist; the second (6b–12) is against ruthless foes; and the third (13, 14) asks for divine action. The first and third are followed by personal affirmations (6, 15) (each begins with an emphatic first person pronoun, 'As for me . . .') respectively confident of a present hearing and a future vision of God (*cf.* 16:1, 9–11).

1–5 Appeal based on righteousness. David is not, of course, claiming sinlessness in general, but that in this particular situation he has maintained righteousness, as the narrative of his relationship with Saul bears out. He comes to God with a clear conscience, (*cf.* Ne. 6:8–9; Acts 24:16) *my righteous plea* (1), 'Hear righteousness', (*cf.* Dt. 1:16, (lit.) 'and judge righteousness', in passing judgment bring the full weight of righteousnes to bear). So here, 'hear in the full light of (your) righteousness'. *At night* (3) at a time when thoughts readily wander and false courses are entertained (*see* 16:7; *cf.* 36:4). *My mouth*, biblical emphasis on the importance of speech (4). In relation to Saul, the divine word which pronounced the king the Lord's anointed proved to be David's safeguard when others counselled a different course (1 Sa. 24:3–7; 26:8ff.). David's clear conscience arose from following God's revealed way, his *paths*, without deviation (*not slipped*) (5).

6 The motive for dealing with a crisis by prayer is that God will (always) *answer. God, ēl*, the most transcendent of the God-words. Prayer brings our needs right to 'The Deity' himself. We must remember that there are other grounds for prayer than a clear conscience. We appeal with equal certainty on the basis of our needy state (86:1), of divine forgiveness (86:4, 5), and of the name of Jesus (Jn. 16:23).

6b–12 David makes his needs known to God. Though our Father knows our needs we still must pray (Mt. 6:6–13). Jesus, who knew the need, asked, 'What do you want me to do?' (Mk. 10:51). 7 (lit.) 'Make your love wonderful': the adjective alludes to God's supernatural power, the noun to the unchanging love he pledges to us. 8 *Apple*, 'pupil'. Just as we instinctively move to protect our eyes, so David expects an immediate instinctive divine reaction protecting him. *Wings* (61:4; *cf.* Ruth 2:12) 9 *mortal*, 'life-threatening'. 11 *me . . . me*,/ 'us . . . us'. Kidner, 'David's companions are never far from his thoughts.' 12 (lit.) singular, either 'Each is like' or 'he is like'. (See Introduction above).

13, 14. The third appeal: for divine action. David looks solely to the Lord's *sword* (punitive power) and *hand* (personal action). 14 *This world . . . this life, i.e.* people solely governed by wordly values etc., therefore from whom no tenderness can be expected. 14c, d may be as NIV but the switch from the Lord's foes (14a, b) to his protected ones destroys the contrast with v 15. Probably, 'And what you have stored away, oh fill their belly with it! May their sons have more than enough! May they leave their surplus for their children!' What the Lord has 'stored away' is the punishment they deserve and which, according to the biblical family principle (Ex. 20:5), passes on to their descendants. David does not pray vengefully: he disclaims sins of speech, (1). Rather he identifies himself, righteously, with the righteous anger of the Lord in all its revealed aspects.

15. The emphatic opening *I*, 'As for me' contrasts with what has preceded. The future of his foes is in God's hand. They 'will be satisfied/ sated' ((14) *have plenty*) with stored up punishment; he *will be satisfied* with the visible presence (*likeness*) of God (*cf.* 11:7). *Awake*, used here of resurrection (*cf.* Is. 26:19; Dan. 12:2; see also 49:15; 73:23–24; 139:18).

Psalm 18. God in the shadows: God in control

Reading from the title into the psalm we say, but it wasn't like that at all! When, in David's story, did the Lord come swooping to his aid, riding on a cherub (10)? Storms (12) were sent to deliver (Jos. 10:11) but not in David's story; the Lord's wind (15) carved a path through the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21; 15:10), but no such incident is recorded for David. David was delivered by different means: a Philistine raid (1 Sa. 23:26f), the wildness of the terrain (1 Sa. 24:1–3), Saul's impressionable conscience (1 Sa. 24, 26), even by flight (1 Sa. 27:1).

But this seeming contrast between the terms of the psalm and the terms of the story is in fact the whole point. When David looked back from the vantage point of deliverance (*Title*), he knew that it could only have been done by the Lord of Sinai (7–8; *cf.* Ex. 19:18), of the judgments on Egypt (9–12; *cf.* Ex. 9:13ff; 10:21ff), and of the Red Sea (15), respectively, the Lord acting in holiness, judgment and deliverance. This is the meaning of the vivid imagery: behind all his circumstances lies the supernatural working of God. David took refuge in the cave of Adullam (1 Sa. 22:1) and the rocks of the wild goats (1 Sa. 24:2), but by hindsight he saw that it was always the Lord who was his rock and refuge (2, 46), concealing his glory, to be sure, behind the dark veil of circumstances, but reigning from his throne in the interests of his servant.

Yet that is not the whole story. There was a link between his desperate need and the Lord's delivering power: 3, *I call . . . I am saved*; 6 (lit.) 'I kept calling . . . kept crying . . . my cry for

help kept coming before him' **16.** *He reached down* . . . prayer made all the difference. Did David ever stop to think that this almighty Lord could just as easily have kept him safe had he stayed in the eye of the storm in Saul's palace (1 Sa. 19:9–10), and avoided all those bleak wilderness years?

The purpose of vs 1–19 is that we might catch the vision of sovereign power waiting to be 'triggered' by prayer. In vs 20–45 David sets out to state plainly the lessons of this past experience, for the Bible teaches us by hindsight in order that we may live with foresight. These verses divide themselves into four sections, marked out by differences in wording: 'the Lord and me' (20–24, 30–34) and 'You and me' (25–29, 35–45). Broadly the former tell how the Lord works and the latter how this working applied to David. The principle is stated that the Lord rewards righteousness (20–24), and David found that in a situation where he could rightly claim righteousness the Lord turned his darkness into light (25–29). We must not, therefore, simply assume that the Lord will bless us, but actively set ourselves in the pathway of righteousness so as to inherit his blessing (Acts 5:32). In vs 30–34 we learn that the Lord whose *way is perfect* (30) purposes to make *my way perfect* (32). David shares how this worked out for him in empowering and victory in the midst of travail (35–45). But in all things the Lord is working to make us like him (*cf.* Rom 8:28; Heb. 12:7–11). The psalm ends (46–50) as it began (1–3) with an ascription of praise to the divine Rock and Saviour.

This psalm is virtually the same as 2 Samuel 22. The psalm includes, in the Title, the significant words *the servant of the Lord*, suggesting that the psalm is later than the form in 2 Samuel and that the words were added, editorially, in devotion to David (or his memory).

1, 2 (A^1) Summary: Personal devotion to the saving God. 1 *Love*, passionate love (*cf.* 1 Ki. 3:26 *filled with compassion*), often used of God's surging love for his people (*e.g.* 103:13, *compassion*), only here of human love for God. 2 *Rock*, 'cliff, crag', *rock* . . . *stronghold*, 'top-security' (9:9), all alike suggest being placed high, out of reach of enemies. *Horn*, symbol of conquering strength, contrasting with *shield*, defensive strength. Kidner, 'In this rush of metaphors and David re-lives his escapes and victories . . . probes into their meaning.' *Take refuge.* There is no point in having a fortress if we do not run there for safety.

3–19 (B^1) The hidden ways of God. In every circumstance (see Introduction above) the mightiness of God was at work on David's behalf, even though the divine glory was concealed. Even when life seems most humdrum, the supernatural presence of God is there. **3–6** The unfailing effectiveness of prayer: *I call* . . . *I am saved* (3). The 'timeless present tense' expresses an unchanging principle. **4, 5** The deadly crisis; **6** The particular effectiveness of prayer in dealing with the crisis because it is made to the Covenant God (*LORD*), intimately known (*my God*), who makes himself accessible (*temple*) and listens personally (*ears*). **7–15** Prayer summons the awesome God to our side, who responds in anger (7, 8), in person (9–12), and in power (13–15). See introduction above for the use of the motifs of Egyptian plague, Sinai and the Red Sea. **16–19** All this because one individual was precious and important to him – note how *me/my* occurs twice in each verse.

20–45 (B^2) The revealed ways of God. 20–29 The key-words (20, 24) *according to my righteousness* . . . *according to my righteousness* 'bracket' the first stanza in the section. This is then generalized (*to the faithful* . . . *faithful* . . . *blameless* . . . *blameless*, 25) and particularized (*my lamp* . . . *my darkness*, 28) in the second stanza. In other words we are taught to recognize the moral rectitude of our God and deliberately to put ourselves in the way of blessing by doing that which pleases him. This is not salvation by works, for David is already the Lord's, but blessing through obedience, which is still the position of the redeemed. **20** *Dealt with*, 'dealt fully with/completely met my need/brought me a full reward.' **21–23** The reward has not come without a consistent and determined commitment to holiness, positively (*kept* . . . *before me* . . . *blameless*) and negatively (*not done* . . . *not turned* . . . *kept from*). **25** *Blameless*, 'perfect'. *Sin* 'my iniquity', some sin which was a special snare to David. **27** *Humble.* Often, as here, the Lord's people who are made the underdogs by oppressive arrogance. **28, 29** The Lord guaranteeing personal continuance (*lamp*), transformed circumstances (*darkness* . . . *light*), power over people (*troop*) and things (*wall*). **30–45** turn to another truth about the Lord's revealed ways. He who acted righteously (20–29) also acts purposefully: *Perfect* in his ways (30). He aims to make *my way perfect* (32).

The psalm now alternates between what the Lord does (30–31, 35, 39, 43) and what David does as empowered by the Lord (32–34, 36–38, 40–42). In other words, in order to enter into the perfection the Lord purposes, it is necessary to live responsively to his work for us, (*cf.* Phil. 2:12–13). This explains the reference to the pure *word of the Lord* with which the section starts (30). As the Lord reveals his will, so we are called to obey. **37–45** run beyond the Saul episode, for in that situation David did no

pursuing, fighting back, *etc.* Most likely the perfect tenses throughout are 'perfects of certainty', looking forward from the inception of his kingship after his deliverance from Saul to its victorious course and culmination.

46–50 (A^2) Summary: Personal devotion to the saving God. David's great assurances of victorious kingship were not fulfilled either in him or in his line, nor will they be completely fulfilled until 'Great David's greater Son' returns in universal triumph (Phil. 2:9–11).

Psalm 19. Three voices in counterpoint

1–6 The voice of creation: paradox. Throughout space (1), time (2) and earth (4) the created order 'recounts' ((1) *declare*) how glorious is the God whose handiwork (1b) they are. **4**, *Line* (mg. NIV) means 'allotted dominion'/'sway'. This dominion is exercised (Gn. 1:16) by the *sun* (5–6), rising in fresh fulfilment each day, traversing the skies in huge strength, penetrating everywhere. But, paradoxically, though they *pour forth speech* (2) *there is no speech* (3). The created order both tells and does not tell: it speaks to our intuitions, that there is a glorious God who created such marvels, but its message is limited – it cannot tell about him – and confusing, for the beauty of the hills tells one truth and the storm and volcano another.

7–10 The voice of the word: perfection. The Lord has not left us to the uncertainties of natural religion: he has spoken his word which has here six titles: *law* (7), 'instruction'; *statutes*/'testimony', what the Lord bears witness to as valid; *precepts* (8), applicable to the small details of life; *commands*, intended for obedience; *fear* (9), worthy of reverence; *ordinances*, authoritative decisions.

It has nine qualities: *perfect* in every part and in its wholeness *trustworthy* (7), reliable; *right* (8), upright, of moral rectitude; *radiant*, 'pure', free from contaminant; *pure* (9), (*see* 12:6), of purity acceptable to God; *enduring*, changeless; *sure* . . . *righteous*, 'true . . . right', corresponding to the objective norms of truth; *precious* (10), 'rightly desirable', full of intrinsic value; *sweeter*, full of true enjoyment.

It has four results: *reviving* (7), (35:17; *cf.* Ru. 4:15; La. 1:16), restoring true life whether threatened by danger or diminished by sorrow; *simple* has the bad meaning of 'gullible/credulous' (Pr. 7:7; 14:15; 22:3), lacking guiding moral principles, and the good meaning of 'teachable' (116:6; 119:30; Pr. 1:4). *giving joy* (8), educating the emotions (*heart*); the *eyes* are the organs of desire, what is wanted out of life. The word of God instils true objectives, worthy values.

11–14 The voice of the sinner: praying. Here is one who has come under the influence of the divine word. He finds himself *warned*, 'enlightened' and enriched (*great reward*) through obedience (11); convicted of sin and ready to seek forgiveness (12), given new aspirations and longing to be *blameless* (13), 'perfect', in every part and integrated as a whole – just like the word itself (7) and in particular (14) acceptable to God in speech. If he is known by the word he speaks (7–10), should not we be also? The creation is silent but we must not be. How is such a life of obedience to be sustained? Only by resorting to *the* LORD himself in his *Rock*-strength and reliability and in his graciousness as the *Redeemer*, the next-of-kin who takes all our needs as his own (Ru. 3:13).

Notes. 3 *Where* is not in the Hebrew. The point is that the created order cannot vocalize (*speech*), verbalize (*language*, 'words') or communicate (*not heard*). The notion of a Creator is conveyed but there is not the verbal revelation we need. **11** should begin with 'Indeed', *i.e.* introducing an application to a specific case. **12, 13** sin as a lapse (*errors*), a hitherto unrecognised *fault*, a deliberate flouting of God's word (*wilful*). *Transgression*, wilful rebellion against a superior. **14** *Mouth* . . . *heart*, outwardly . . . inwardly.

Psalm 20. Before battle: The victory of prayer and faith

This psalm suits the occasion of a service of prayer and sacrifice on the eve of battle (*cf.* 1 Sa. 7:7–9; 13:8, 9). Different voices speak: one prays to *the* LORD about *you* (masc. sing. 1–4, 5c) or *the king* (9a); the other voice affirms, speaking of *I* and *we* (5a, b, 6–8). It is possible to hear also a third voice of priest and people alternatively in prayer and response (1–4, 9). As the king prays silently, priest and people ask that his prayer may be heard (1, 2). As the sacrifice is offered, they pray for its acceptance (3), and then ask that the king's plans may succeed (4). The king's confidence on behalf of himself and his army (5a, b) is answered by priest and people (5c) asking that his prayer may be answered. To this the king responds with another affirmation of confidence that prayer (6) and faith (7, 8) are the way to victory. Priest and people end the service by praying respectively (9) for the king's welfare and for God's answer.

Notes. 1 The first line, (lit.) 'the day of distress' matches the last line, (lit.) 'the day we call'. The way of assurance and victory is to meet distress with prayer. **2** Security is in *the name of the Lord* (1, 5, 7), all that he has revealed about himself. *From Zion* becomes *from heaven* (6): the Lord who lives among his people does so in all his heavenly glory, power, resources.

3 Prayer must happen in the context of the sacrifices God has authorized, *i.e.* for us, prayer resting on Calvary. 7 Victory comes not through earthly resources but through all that the Lord has revealed himself to be – his *name. Trust in*, 'bring the Lord to remembrance by invoking his name'.

Psalm 21. After battle: The Lord's victory, past and future

Psalm 20 affirmed that *we will shout when you are victorious*; now there is *joy* (1) and glory (5) *through your victories.* Thus earlier prayer and trust have been answered and the present psalm meditates on the experience. Its opening affirmation that *the king rejoices in your strength* (1) is matched by its concluding prayer, *Be exalted, O Lord, in your strength* (13). This past and future reference is reflected respectively in vs 2–7, looking back on victory, and vs 8–12 looking forward to victory. It is easiest to hear the king himself speaking throughout (using in vs 1–7 a third-person form). In 2–7, prayer has been answered in personal (3, 4) and national (5) blessing, and trust has been vindicated (7). Vs. 8–12 speak of a coming divine victory that is total, supernatural, final, and irresistible.

1 *The victories* . . ., 'in your salvation', here, physical deliverance in whatever danger (Ps. 20 reflects). 2 *Request*, 'longing', *cf. desire* (previous line). The king's prayer was heartfelt. *Lips*, longing was not left vague but was carried over into intercession. 3 *Welcomed.* The verb, 'to get ahead of/get there first', is used here of the Lord 'anticipating' our needs, awaiting us with prepared blessings where we expected trouble. *A crown*, (*cf.* 2 Sa. 12:30). 4 *For life*, the danger was deadly. *For ever* . . ., in the usual metaphorical sense of 'may the king live for ever', but as so often in royal psalms an unconscious preview of the actual endless reign of the Lord Jesus. 6 *Presence.* Contrast the same word ('face', personal presence) in v 9 (*appearing*): what is life to the king is death to his foes. The presence of the Lord is both vitality and victory. 7 *Unfailing love*, pledged love. *Shaken, i.e.* from his kingly position. 8–12 Some understand that the voice which in vs 2–7 speaks about the king now addresses him regarding his future victories under God. The meaning is hardly affected but it is simpler to hear the king's voice speaking here of the Lord's coming triumphs just as he ascribed past triumphs (2–7) to the same divine source. But the world's enmity is alike against the Lord and his Anointed (*cf.* Ps. 2). These sentiments are natural in the mouth of David who was promised universal kingship (*cf.* 2:7–9) and, for us, are one with NT expectations (2 Thes. 1:7–10; Rev. 19:11–21). But equally the truth of divine victorious power covers all our future, not just the events of the last day. The divine *hand* (personal action, 8), *appearing* (personal presence, 9, see 6) and *wrath* (anger personally felt, 9) are, moment by moment, on our side. 13 True rejoicing (1) issues in prayer that the *LORD* will *be exalted* but when he is *exalted*, then to *sing* and *praise*, 'make music', is the natural consequence.

Psalm 22. One forsaken, many rejoicing

'No Christian can read this psalm without being vividly confronted with the crucifixion' (Kidner) – indeed so, for this is not a description of illness but of execution. Acts 2:30 ascribes Psalm 16 to the prophetic stature of David and this is the best explanation also of Psalm 22. If, as may be the case, some personal experience of suffering prompted the psalm, David multiplies it by infinity in order to plumb something of the suffering awaiting his Greater Son. Yet, at the same time, what arose from suffering, and then prophetically explored a unique suffering, can now reach down to our often desperate trials. We too can learn to cry out to God (1–8, 11–18), to find comfort and assurance in what is true about us (9) and what we have learned of the truth (10), and to face the future with confidence (22–31) because he will prove himself faithful. The whole gamut of our experiences is here: desolation, hostility, pain, death – for he was tested in every way just as we are (Heb. 4:15).

1–10 Perplexity in suffering, falls into two parts: (a) Unanswered Prayer (1–5). Urgent prayer is met by unbroken silence (1, 2). This is contrary both to the nature of God (3) and to the experience of former generations (4, 5).

1 The Lord Jesus understood this cry as descriptive of himself (Mt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34) and so must we. He is our example in that, in the deepest distress, faith was maintained and the Lord is still *my* God. But the experience itself was unique to him. Rightly the psalmist said (37:25) that he had never seen the righteous forsaken but this wholly righteous One was *forsaken*, becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). 3 (lit.) 'You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel'. The thought is compressed: in himself he is holy (so how is it that he does not come to succour his suffering one?); his enthroned dignity is acknowledged as his people praise him for the mighty things he has done (so where are his mighty acts now?).

(b) Unrewarded trust (6–9). The reference to the *fathers* trusting as well as praying (4, 5) prompts the sufferer to note that he too trusted, but without result. Rather trust made him an object of mockery (6–8), yet it was lifelong, created by God himself (9, *You made*

me trust) and receiving a ready response (10, *my God*).

8 *He trusts* (Mt. 27:43) **9, 10** What experience lies behind this? For some reason, from the earliest days he knew himself to be *cast upon* God. Does this reflect the early consciousness of the Lord Jesus (Lk. 2:49) that the Father's house was his true home?

11–21, Plea for divine nearness. This section consists of two appeals for God's nearness and aid (11a, 19–21a); the first is followed by a description of the straits into which the sufferer has come: trouble is near, help missing (11), enemies savage (12, 13), suffering intense (14, 15), evil in the ascendancy (16–18). The second appeal acknowledges the Lord's *strength* (19) but death looms (*sword*, 20), bringing personal loss (*my precious life*, 20) and a cruel end (*dogs . . . lions . . . oxen*, 20, 21) Then, dramatically, everything changes (21b, *see* NIV mg.) in a sudden realization of divine response: prayer has been answered! When God seems absent – or even when, as in the present case, he has indeed, judgmentally, withdrawn his presence (1) – prayer still avails. The answer to *Why have you forsaken me?* (1) is *Do not be far from me* (11).

12–18 (i) Suffering pictured (12, 13): the 'beast' motifs tell of an assault lacking any constraints of humanity – only the irresistible strength of the *bull* and the pitiless savagery of the *lion*. (ii) Suffering experienced (14, 15): strength ebbing, a body literally racked apart (14), all vital force (*heart*), gone and replaced by incapacitating dread (*cf.* Jos. 2:11; Ezk. 21:7), gross dehydration and divine hostility (*you*, 15) bringing the finality (*dust*) of death. (iii) Suffering inflicted: *evil* unleashed, the body mutilated (16), gloating (17), dividing the spoils (18). **16c** Both in general and in particular it is hard not to see the sufferings of Christ in this passage. John 19:23–24, 28 puts the matter beyond doubt. The translation *they . . pierced* is not beyond doubt but avoids extensive alteration to the Heb. text, is supported by LXX, and suits both context and fulfilment.

21 The sudden awareness of a divine response (lit. 'You have answered me!') is dramatic. The sufferer is framing the prayer 'Save me from the lion's mouth and from the oxen-horns rescue me' but even as he prays a transformation comes '. . . and from the oxen-horns. . . . You have answered me!' The petition has been heard; all is well.

22–31, The universal festival of praise. Suddenly it is festival time for Israel (22–26) and for the world (27–31): prayer has been answered (24), the *poor* are invited to the feast (25), all are invited (29) and the word will go out to future generations (30, 31). Hebrews 2:12 quotes v 22 as messianic and indeed what, other than the death of Jesus, could have such results as these? – Israel and the world summoned to the messianic banquet (Is 25:6–10a; Rev.19:9), world-dominion (Mt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9–11) and a message of divine *righteousness* (31, Rom. 1:16–17). **25–28** *From you.* The Lord is the source and the subject of praise. *Vows . . . poor.* The fulfilling of a vow was accompanied by a peace-offering with its accompanying feast, to which the poor came as guests (Lv. 7:11, 16; Dt. 16:10–12). **29** The general meaning is that all alike, summed up by the contrast between the *rich* and the resourceless (29), are welcome. The question remains whether *dust* is a metaphor for poverty (113:7; *cf.* 1 Sa. 2:8) or for death (30:9; *cf.* Jb. 7:21). The sequence of thought in the verse suggests the former; the reference to *the dust of death* (15) suggests the latter. **30–31** *About the Lord . . . he has done it.* At the end of v 21 the Lord validated all the suffering one had been doing. Hence the Lord was his theme of praise, (25). The message going out to *posterity* is therefore 'the wonderful works of God' (Acts 2:11).

Psalm 23. Shepherd, companion and host

The threefold testimony, *I shall lack nothing* (1), *I will fear no evil* (4) and *I will dwell* (6) encapsulates the psalm, dividing it into three parts: the sheep and the Shepherd (1–3), the traveller and the Companion (4) and the guest and the Host (5, 6), respectively teaching the providence of God, appointing life's experiences, his protection over life's pathway, and his provision now and always.

1–3 These verses major on experiences of plenty (*green pastures*), peace (*waters*, lit. 'of every sort of rest') and renewal (*restores my soul, see* 19:7). The principle behind our experiences is that he chooses *paths of righteousness* for us, paths that are 'right with him', making sense to him. In this he acts *for his name's sake*, in accordance with his revealed character.

4 In contrast with the joyous experiences of the sheep (1–3), the pilgrim pathway traverses harsher terrain. *Shadow of death* is really 'deepest darkness' which includes, of course, the darkness of death. But in these experiences the *he* of vs 1–3 becomes the *you*, significant of closer personal touch, and the leader (2) comes alongside (*with me*). The darker the shadow, the closer the Lord! And he brings every strength, *rod and staff.* The duplication denotes completeness. *Rod* (Lv. 27:32) possibly signifies protection; *staff*, possibly, support (Ex. 21:19).

5, 6 *A table . . . in the presence of . . . enemies, cf.* 2 Samuel 17:27–29 when David could have discerned the hand of God in Barzillai's care in

the face of Absalom. By alluding to both hostile circumstances (4) and hostile people (5) the psalm affirms care in every emergency. The anointed head speaks of the Lord's welcome; the overflowing cup his lavish provision. But this *goodness* and *love* will continue as long as life lasts (lit. 'to length of days') and beyond there lies *the house of the Lord for ever. Dwell* is a traditional adjustment of the Hebrew text and may be correct, but lit. 'I will return to the house', *i.e.* when earth's *paths* (2, 3), *valleys* and threats (5) are over, there comes the real return home.

Psalm 24. Right of entrance

For background *cf.* 1 Samuel 5, 6; 2 Samuel 6, David's restoration of the ark to Zion. More important is the theological unity of theme: by what right do we enter the Lord's presence (3–5) and by what right does he come among us (7–10)? We can only come by right of holiness (4); he comes by right of sovereignty, glory, power and redemption (7–9).

1, 2 set the scene by affirming the Lord's mastery of his world. Because he is what he is, no one dare intrude uninvited or propose their own conditions of entry. *The* LORD is emphatic, 'It is to *the* LORD the earth belongs!' The physical earth and the peopled world (1) are his by creation (*founded*) and maintenance (2, 'continues to maintain'), for who but he could bring a stable earth out of turbulent seas or maintain it in the face of their tidal forces (*waters*)? (Gn. 1:9–10).

3–6 *Ascend*, go up where the Lord is (Ex. 19:3); *stand*, 'rise' to worship (Ex.33:10), to plead a cause (1:5), to hold one's ground (Jos. 7:12) before such a God. The qualifications are comprehensive: personal, spiritual and social (4, lit. 'swear with deceitful intent', *i.e.* make knowingly false promises); they cover activity (*hands*) and character (*heart*), loyalty to the Lord alone (*not lift* ...), and relationships with others without a hidden agenda of personal advantage. Such people receive *blessing* (5), acquittal before the Judge. But the God before whom we come is *Saviour, i.e.* the root of the matter lies not in us but in his will to save. **6** *Generation*, a group united by common characteristics.

7–10 Picture the procession of 2 Samuel 6:12–15. The demand for entrance is met by a request for credentials, eliciting the reply that it is *the* LORD, who redeems his people and overthrows his foes (Ex. 3:5–15; 6:6, 7; 20:2), the *King* in all his *glory*, the God of total effective power (8, *strong ... mighty ... battle*) and total intrinsic power (10, *almighty* 'of hosts', holding within himself every potentiality and power).

Psalm 25. An ABC for a day of trouble

In form, this psalm is a broken acrostic. Two letters are missing; one is established only by altering the punctuation of the Hebrew text as we have received it; and v 22, referring to Israel, lies outside the scheme altogether. This brokenness reflects the way troubles break the pattern of life itself. Yet a pattern remains.

A^1 (vs 1–5) Trusting, hoping, praying
  B^1 (vs 6–7) Prayer for forgiveness
    C^1 (vs 8–10) Guidance for sinners
  B^2 (v 11) Prayer and forgiveness
    C^2 (vs 12–14) Guidance for God-fearers
A^2 (vs 15–21) Trusting, hoping, praying

1–5 Trusting, hoping, praying. Surrounded by hostile, unscrupulous people (2c, 3d, *cf.* 19a), David's reaction is to express trust by prayer (1, 2a), to make prayer specific (2bc), resting on what is true about God (3). But he prays as one committed to the Lord's *ways* (4), desiring an informed mind (4, *show*, 'make me know'; *teach*) and a conformed life (5, *guide*).

1 *Lift up*, (24:4) the Lord alone is seen as the solution of every need. **2** *Shame, cf.* v 3, to be disappointed of hope. **4, 5** Right conduct requires divine truth ('Make me know'), readiness to learn (*teach*) and to obey (*ways ... guide*).

6, 7 Sin and forgiveness: the past. There can be no commitment to divine truth and life (4, 5) without penitence and reconciliation. When the Lord remembers what he is (6) he is prepared to *remember not* (7) what we have been. **6** *Great mercy*, 'compassion', love in the heart of God (18:1) whereas *love*, is love in the will of God, what he has obligated himself to do. Here it is a plural noun signifying pledged love in all its fulness. **7** *Sins*, specific shortcomings; *rebellious*, the deliberate wilfulness of sin. *For you*, 'for the sake of your goodness'. The essential moral worthiness of the divine nature finds its satisfaction in cancelling the past.

8–10 The divine teacher. Further recollection of God brings assurance that prayer (4) will be answered and that God's revealed way will prove to be full of his love. The divine condition of all this is the nature of God; the human condition is that *sinners* become *humble* (9, those who bring themselves low before him) and covenant-keepers.

11 Sin and forgiveness: the present. Since God guides those who come low before him, David takes the lowest place. Sin is not just past (6, 7) but present. In vs 6, 7 he appealed to the compassion, love and goodness of the Lord; in v 8 to his moral rectitude; now, in summary, to his *name*, all that he has revealed of himself. His heart and will (6), his moral integrity (7) and uprightness (8) are all at one in the forgiveness of *iniquity* (the corrupt, fallen nature) however *great*.

12–14 The divine teacher. The blessings

accruing to anyone (12, *Who, then*) who *fears the Lord*: instruction in God's way; personal fulfilment; family security; fellowship with the Lord and instruction in the meaning of the covenant-relationship.

15–21 Trusting, hoping, praying. 15, 16 are linked by the thought of the LORD as the sole solution: he only is kept in focus; there is no other with David. 17–19 elaborate the need in which he finds himself: inwardly, upwardly and outwardly. 20, 21 respectively affirm trust and commitment. Thus 'none but the Lord' (15, 16) is set beside 'all my need' (17–19) and an attitude of prayer, trust, moral determination and expectation is adopted.

22 The wider perspective. This verse lies outside the alphabetical scheme altogether. As king, David can never forget his wider responsibilities, however demanding his own troubles may be. But, as with his own cares, his care for his people is brought into the place of prayer. It is the first thing and the least people should expect from their leaders. Prayer is the comprehensive solution: *all . . . troubles.* The Lord is able to find the solution: *redeem* translates the verb 'to ransom', *i.e.* to find the payment which will completely settle the debt, release the captive, terminate the threat.

Psalm 26. The appeal of a good conscience

A good conscience constitutes a ground of appeal to God, not because we can earn blessing by goodness, but because the Lord graciously delights in us as we walk in purity. Faced (9) by *sinners*, determined upon his life (*bloodthirsty*), hatching plots and unscrupulous in their ways (10), David finds himself guiltless in the face of their charges or indeed of any cause for such a situation. It is reasonable to assume that the self-examination evident in the psalm reflects accusations brought against him: concerning his life-style (*walk*, 3b), the company he keeps (4) and the reality of his religion (6–8). But his conscience is clear personally (3), socially (4–5), and spiritually (6–8). The psalm begins and ends on the note of blamelessness (1, 11–12), invites divine examination (2) and divine action (9, 10), and centres on confessions of innocence, negatively regarding his life among people (4, 5), and positively, regarding his life with God (6–8). What David could sincerely claim in a specific set of circumstances should be our constant ambition.

1 *I have led* 'I have walked in my integrity' – a perfection touching every part and characterising the whole. A virtually identical claim concludes the psalm (11) saving that the Hebrew there has a different tense: probably v 1 looks back and v 11 looks forward ('I will lead . . .'). One aspect of a good conscience is its aspiration for the future. 2 *Test . . . try . . . examine.* If any distinction is proper, the first is to test for purity (assay), the second to test in and by life's circumstances, and the third to test for impurity (refine). 6 *Wash.* Handwashing was a public declaration of innocence (Dt. 21:6). *Innocence*, not the medium but the spirit in which the handwashing is done. *Altar.* Priests washed before entering the sanctuary (Ex. 30:17–21). David accepts priestly standards for himself. 11 *I lead* (see 1) *Redeem* (see 25:22) *Merciful*, gracious, undeserved, freely-given divine favour. 12 *My feet stand.* This may be a confident statement of future security ('My feet are sure to stand') after the present turmoil is over, or a commitment to 'straightforward' living, a 'Here I stand' affirmation. *Great assembly*, the probable meaning of a word unused elsewhere, envisaging the day when the worshipping congregation gathers and the private spirituality of v 1c, d will find expression in a public testimony of *praise.*

Psalm 27. The essential ingredient: faith working by prayer

Evil men, enemies, foes (2), *trouble* (5), *enemies* (6), *oppressors* ('insidious watchers' (11), *foes* (12), as well as a continuing delight in the Lord's *house* (4; *see* 26:8), suggest that this psalm belongs to the same emergency as the last. The confidence which breathes throughout could be the aftermath of the self-examination which Psalm 26 reflects, but it is confidence in the Lord, not in self-righteousness.

A^1 (vs 1–3) Confidence in the Lord affirmed
B^1 (vs 4–6) First prayer for security in God
B^2 (vs 7–12) Second prayer for security in God
A^2 (vs 13–14) Confidence in God encouraged

1–3 Confidence in the Lord affirmed. 1 *Light*, metaphorically, in contrast to the 'darkness' of surrounding trouble (Is. 50:11; Jn. 8:12). *Salvation*, deliverance in and from trouble. *Stronghold . . .*, the place where my life dwells in safety 2. David faces people bent on evil (*evil men*/'evil doers'), full of savagery (*devour*, like beasts of prey) and hostility (*enemies, foes*). It is in this situation that he finds faith (1) and prayer (4–5, 7–9) sufficient. *They will*, emphatic, 'It is they (not me!) who will stumble'. 3 enlarges the scope of faith-security. *Will I be*, 'I remain trustful/confident'. Faith is sufficient even when enemies become armies and enmity open warfare.

4–6 Seeking God for himself. It is not faith that keeps one secure, but the Lord in whom that faith is reposed. David's prayer (*ask*) and objective (*seek*) is to be where the Lord is

(*dwell in the house*) and to see him as he is (*gaze*). *Seek him* (4), a word of disputed meaning; most probable is 'to come morning by morning', to frequent his presence, giving him the beginning of each day. His *house* is his *tabernacle* (5, 'tent', *cf.* 1 Sa. 1:7, 9, NIV mg.), the place where he lives among his people (Ex. 29:42–45). Flimsy though it may seem, it is a *high . . . rock*, a place of inaccessible safety and personal triumph (*head . . . exalted*).

7–12 Seeking God for his blessings. The prayer to be with the Lord (4) is now developed into a prayer for those blessings which the Lord alone can give. Prayer rests on a divine invitation. (8) (*see* NIV mg. lit. 'To you my heart has said, "Seek my face", Your face, Lord, I do seek'), *i.e.* David begins by reminding the Lord of his invitation to people to seek him. *My heart*, not just my mouth, because David treasures this divine invitation. Prayer begins with getting right with God: seeking his favour (9, *face*) and acceptance (*not reject*). Prayer seeks to know, in order to do, the will of God within the existing circumstances (11, *Teach . . . way . . . oppressors*) before asking for safety within circumstances (12; *cf.* Acts 4:29). Prayer is impregnated with confidence: *my helper, my Saviour* (9). *Though my father.* Even if the strongest human love should reach its limit, the Lord's love remains.

13–14 Confidence in God encouraged. *I am still confident* (lit.) an exclamation, 'Except I had believed!', *i.e.* Just think what would have happened without faith! **14** Personal assurance is the basis for strengthening faith in others.

Psalm 28. A plea for evenhanded justice

Links between this psalm and 26, 27 suggest that David is still in the same life-threatening situation, *e.g.* vs 3–5; *see* 26:9, 10; 27:2, 12. The Lord's house is prominent in all three: 26:6–8, the focus of David's religion and 27:4, 5, of his fellowship with the Lord; 28:2, the source of help. Each ends (26:12; 27:14; 28:9) with some reference to, or concern for, the wider company of God's people. For David, a time of trouble was a time for concentration on the Lord and care for people. But Psalm 28 throws its own light on David's situation: his plight will end in death unless the Lord acts (1), and his circumstances are such that his death at this time would identify him with the *the wicked* (3). His fear is not of death as such but 'of death with unmerited disgrace' (Kidner).

The beginning and end of the psalm are linked by *my cry for mercy* (2, 6). In vs 1, 2, prayer for a hearing (1) is followed by the *cry* (2); in vs 6–9, the heard *cry* prompts praise (6, 7) and leads to prayer for the Lord's *people* (8, 9). In the middle verses, David prays that he may be kept distinct from the fate of *the wicked* (3), that they may receive what they merit (4), affirming (5) that this expresses divine retributive justice.

1 *The pit*, death under the wrath of God (30:4; 88:4), with God's face hidden (143:7) (*cf.* Is. 14:15, 19; Ezk. 32:18, 23). So here, see v 3. 2 *Place*, 'shrine', the word which became customary, in Solomon's temple, for the Holy of Holies (1 Ki. 6:16, *etc.*). David appeals right into the very presence of the Lord, as is the privilege and power of prayer. 3–5 Just as David shunned the company of the wicked (26:4) and sought escape from their clutches (27:12), he desires separation from their disgrace. The Lord's justice is retributive and a pure conscience like David's (Ps. 26) naturally identifies with God's holiness and guiltlessly prays that justice may have its way. To find ourselves offended by this vigorous prayer is not a measure of our refined sensitivity but of our less than mature conscience. It is as right to pray for the overthrow of the wicked as it is to pray for the blessing of the church (9): it demands greater holiness if we are to do the former without sin.

Psalm 29. The God of holy glory

It is best simply to let the wonder and awesomeness of this psalm sweep and swirl around us until we are so possessed in spirit by the majesty of the Lord that we too cry *Glory* (9). But, like all true poetry, to achieve its desired effect, the psalm comes to us with shape and coherence.

A^1 (vs 1–2) The Lord in heaven
  B (vs 3–9) The wonder of God in the storm
    b^1 (vs 3–4) The storm at sea
    b^2 (vs 5–7) Storm in the north
    b^3 (vs 8–9b) Storm in the south
    b^4 (v 9c) The cry of *Glory*
A^2 (vs 10–11) The Lord on earth

1, 2 The Lord in heaven: the object of heavenly worship. Even beings so exalted and *mighty* that they are called (lit.) 'sons of God' (*cf.* Jb. 38:7) or 'sons of supreme power' must acknowledge *the Lord's glory*, because of all he has made himself known to be (*name*) and must (bow in) *worship* before his *holiness.* Thus they recognise in turn his position as God, his revealed nature and his holy character.

3–9 The wonder of God manifested in the storm. The storm at sea, power and majesty (3, 4); the storm comes ashore to the north (Lebanon) (5–7); the storm sweeps to the south (Kadesh) (8, 9ab); those who know the Lord cry of *Glory* (9c). **6** *Sirion*, Mount Hermon, in the anti-Lebanon range, at 9,000 ft (2,774m) the highest in Palestine. Even the solid fabric of the

world seems to rock under the impact of the storm. **8** *Kadesh*, in the extreme south of Judah (Dt. 1:19, 46). Thus the whole land, from end (5) to end (8) is dominated, not just by the storm but by what the storm symbolizes, *the voice of the Lord.* **9c** To many a storm is a storm, but to those to whom the Lord has revealed himself, it is a display of one aspect of his *glory*. The sentimentalist says 'One is nearer God's heart in a garden'; more realistic, the Bible affirms we are also nearer his heart in a hurricane.

10, 11 The Lord on earth: the eternal king in holy judgment. *The flood* is 'the Flood' for the word is only used in Genesis 6–9. As the Lord is supreme in heaven in holiness (1, 2), so on earth he is sovereign (10) in holy judgment on sin. But this is not the whole story (any more than the storm tells all the truth about God; the garden also has its say!). He has *his people* (11) who, in a world deservedly under judgment, live by his *strength* and under his blessing of *peace*, *i.e.* peace with God, within a fellowship of peace, and in personal peace or wellbeing.

Psalm 30. Grace from first to last

The word *temple* in the title should be 'house'. This could be a reference to David's house (2 Sa. 5:11), the house of the Lord (2 Sa. 7:5; 1 Ki. 6:1) or to the use of the psalm at the temple-rededication after its desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes in 165 BC. At the time of David's own house his sense of security (6) would have been enormous: Zion was captured and fortified (2 Sa. 5:6–7), power was increasing (2 Sa. 5:10), his army strong, his family increasing (2 Sa. 5:13ff.), possibly also the Philistines were defeated (2 Sa. 5:17–25) while the house was still in building. If, in this pride-inducing period, the Lord in grace humbled David by a sickness which dashed the cup from his hand before he had time to drink it, the terms of the psalm are most perfectly suited and David learned that, as grace had brought him safe thus far, only grace can lead him home. It was when he felt secure (6) that he needed to cry out for mercy (8).

1–5 Deadly danger: responsive praise for answered prayer. There would have been plenty of Saul-loyalists, resentful of what they would see as David's usurpation of the throne. How they would *gloat* to see him disappointed of success! But he *called* and was *healed* and *spared.* **4, 5** David summons the *saints* (the Lord's beloved who love him back) to *praise*, not for what he had experienced, but for what had been revealed of the Lord: within the holy nature of God (*holy ... anger*) there is that which quickly moves to enduring *favour.*

6, 7 Deadly arrrogance and complacency. To feel *secure* (6) (on easy street) has its own peril, turning assurance into self-assurance, confidence into conceit (7). Divine favour had brought David prosperity, but it only needed the shadow of a cloud to cover the Lord's face and David was *dismayed*, 'terrified'.

8–12 Deadly danger: answered prayer and responsive praise. *Called ... cried* are continuous verbs, 'kept calling ... crying'; *mercy* – 'grace' (also 10). Since David felt that he was dying out of favour with God (9 *cf.* 5, 7) he entertained no eternal hope (*cf.* 73:24). But the only way to flee from God is to flee to him and prayer for grace issued in praise and transformation (11), inner joy and a true sense of a permanent standing with God (*my God ... for ever*) (12).

Psalm 31. The day of stress, the place of prayer

Twice (1–8, 9–17b) David recalls how in a sharp trial he resorted to trustful prayer and commitment and how the Lord heard and acted on his behalf (21, 22), giving him cause to call others to a similar *hope* (23, 24). The psalm, therefore, not only instructs us to meet crises with prayer (1–18) but assures us of the effectiveness of doing so (19–24).

1–8 The fortress versus the trap. Enemies laid a *trap* (4) but the Lord is a *fortress* into which David has entered in trust, prayer and committed loyalty. Here in principle is the antidote to a crisis; prayerful and trustful, devoted seeking of God. **2, 3** *Rock ... strong ... rock*, 'rock ... house of fortress ... cliff', a strong place to stand, a secure place to enter and an inaccessible place to occupy. *Name.* The prayer rests on all the Lord has revealed about himself, which, as *the God of truth* (5) he can never deny. **5** *Redeem*, provide whatever my rescue requires (25:22, 26:11). **6** True *trust* and sole-loyalty to the Lord are inseparable. **7** Out of trust and prayer springs confidence: all will be well for from the start the Lord *saw* and *knew* (Ex. 2:25; 3:7). **8** *Have*, 'have determined to', perfect tense expressing assurance for the future.

9–18 'Your hands' versus 'their hands'. David now enters into the details of his plight: the crisis has drained him (9, 10), despised as he is by opponents and deserted by friends (11); he has become yesterday's man (12) encircled by frightening conspiracy (13). But his reply, once more, is trust (14, 15) and prayer (16, 17). For the confidence that *my times are in your hands* enables him to pray (15, lit.) 'deliver me from the hand of my enemies'. The hand of God is not the place where we are immune from life's troubles; it is the place where they happen to us (Jn. 10:28–29); our security is not from trouble but in trouble. **10** *Affliction*, NIV mg.,

'guilt'. This was not a case where David could plead innocence. In some undeclared way, sin was a contributory factor, but he could still turn to the Lord in trust, prayer and commitment. We can cry to God not only because of what he is (3) and knows (7), but because of what we are (10–13); we can expect prayer to be answered simply because it has been voiced (17). Furthermore, when *the righteous*, those who are 'right with God', the Lord's people, are under threat, it is right to pray for the downfall of their adversaries (17–18). The psalms refuse vengeful action but affirm prayer for vengeance, the overthrow of ungodly persecutors by the just action of God. In such situations our action is governed by Lv. 19:18; 1 Sa. 26:10–11; Pr. 20:22; 25:21–22; Rom 12:18–21.

19–24 Alarm versus hope. David is now looking back on the crisis and drawing conclusions. The Lord shelters those who trust (19, 20), responds to those who call (21, 22), and is available to *all his saints* (his beloved who love him back), preserving and giving assurance of hope (23, 24).

Notes. 21 *In a besieged city.* Such a situation as 1 Sa. 23:7–29. The reference is not, however, to that time for David had no need then to allude to any inquity of his own (10). The 'besieged city' is metaphorical (see 13), of being hemmed in on every side, not knowing which way to turn. **24.** *Hope* in the Bible is confidence about what will happen coupled with ignorance about its timing.

Psalm 32. Groaning or praying?

If prayer is sufficient to deal with the most serious problem of all – the sin which could be counted against us before God (1–5) – will not prayer solve every problem of life (6)? Such is the theme of this psalm, presented through alternating statement (1–2, 6, 10) and testimony (3–5, 7–9) or appeal (11). It may belong to the time of David's adultery with Bathsheba. If it does, vs 3, 4 reveal David burdened by a guilty conscience and v 5 corresponds to the remarkable 2 Sa. 12:13, 'David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin."' At the very least the incident illustrates what the psalm affirms: a prayer of confession brings instantaneous forgiveness.

1, 2 The blessedness of sin forgiven. *Transgressions . . . sins . . . sin*, respectively 'rebellions' (deliberate flouting of God's known will), 'sins' (specific items of wrongdoing in thought, word, deed), 'iniquity' (the inner moral distortion of the fallen nature). *The Lord . . . whose spirit*, the Lord has no residual charges; the sinner has concealed nothing.

3–5 Groaning replaced by confession and forgiveness. Note the same three words as in vs. 1, 2: acknowledgement of *sin*, the wrong I did; owning up to the wilfulness of my rebellion – and the Lord reached right into the well-spring of corruption and *forgave* 'the iniquity' *of my sin.*

6–9 Prayer is the answer for everyone. The ready response of the Lord is wider than the single person and than the sole problem of sin: *everyone* can pray in every emergency. **6** *Therefore, i.e.* even sin can be dealt with by prayer. *Godly* (*saints*, 31:23), 'those whom he loves and who love him back.' **8, 9** The context in which v 7 comes true: when the word of God is given conscious obedience. *And watch . . .*, 'and my eye (will be) on you' – not a threat, but a promise of watchful care. The Lord's teaching is not an impersonal dictat but the loving word of a caring God. Just so, our response should not be the forced compliance of the uncomprehending beast but a correspondingly loving obedience.

10, 11 Unfailing love surrounds the trustful. There are three facets to the enjoyment of a protected status: the ongoing activity of trust, the basic relationship of being 'right with God' (*righteous*, 11), and the moral reality of an *upright* character. Such are not immune from *woes* (*cf.* the rising waters of v 6), but when they come they are encompassed by the love that never fails.

Psalm 33. Unfailing love in creation and election

This stylish poem begins and ends with six-line stanzas (1–3, 20–22) which enclose four eight-line stanzas (4–7, 8–11, 12–15, 16–19). The opening and closing stanzas respectively call for, and affirm joy in the Lord. The eight-line stanzas are in pairs: the first pair focuses on God's work in creation, with *unfailing love* (5) as its all-pervading factor, and his sovereign rule over the nations (10) as its corollary; the second pair focuses on election (12) and the special place within divine providence of those who set their hope on his *unfailing love* (18). Suitably, it is with a prayer for this *unfailing love* that the psalm ends (22), for to live fulfillingly in God's world and as God's people we need to be at one with the Spirit which animates both.

1–3 The praising voice. Song and praise, thanksgiving (*praise*, 'give thanks'), instrumental music, and loud acclamation (*shout for joy*, 'with a loud shout') – all make their contribution to a *fitting* response to the Lord from those who are right with him (*righteous*) in heart and *upright* before him in life. *New song*, not so much novel as fresh, prompted by a fresh awareness of who and what he is. True praise requires this fresh sense of God as

much as it needs the fervour of joy and the skill of good musicianship.

4–11 God in creation. *For* explains the foregoing call to praise: (i) the character of the Lord's word, of the Lord, and of the earth (4–5); (ii) the work of the Lord in creation (6, 7); (iii) the reverence due to the Creator (8, 9); (iv) The Lord's sovereignty, overruling (10) and ordaining (11). The two stanzas of this section (4–7, 8–11) unite in the theme of the supreme ease with which the Creator dominates alike the physical and the personal creation. He is master of *the waters* (7) and *the peoples* (10): *the waters* do his bidding; *the peoples* are at his disposal. **4, 5** Before we can understand the world around we must meet its Creator. His *word* (the instrument of creation (6) is *right and true, i.e.* straightforward in expression and intent, perfect in moral worth and impeccable in truth. *Faithful.* Many aspects of the created order remain a puzzle to us: why earthquakes? Why 'nature red in tooth and claw'? In everything, we are assured, the Creator is faithful to his own character and faithful to the welfare of his creation. *Unfailing love*, manifested in the order, beauty, lavish richness, stored up treasures, recurring seasons, etc., of the earth. **6** *Word . . . mouth.* The heavens are the exact expression of his mind (*word*) and the direct product (*mouth*) of his will. *Breath*, 'spirit' or 'Spirit', what the Lord says is full of the Lord's energy to bring it to effect (*cf.* 9; 104:7, 30; Gn. 1:3, 6). **7** The *waters*, as the unruly component of creation, are chosen to exemplify the ease of the Creator's sovereignty (93:3, 4) **8, 10, 11** In OT thought the Creator is more than the initiator; he remains sovereign over his creation, worthy of the reverence of all its people and in directive management of all its affairs, restraining and dominant, purposive and irresistible.

12–19 God in election. Within his creation the Creator made choice of one *people* to be his *inheritance*, 'possession' (12), and, as he brings all who live on earth under review (13–15), he notes the uselessness of worldly provisions for security (16, 17): neither position (*king*) nor power (*army*), neither prowess (*warrior*), *strength* or equipment (*horse*) can *save*. But as compared with this pomp of state, armed force and material of war, how simple is the protection he extends to his own! His *eyes* and his *love* (18), are sufficient for and superior to eternal (*death*) and temporal (*famine*) threat (19), and are brought into our lives by reverential *fear* towards him and *hope* (confident expectation) that *unfailing love* will look after us (18).

20–22 The Trusting Heart. The testimony of the Lord's people is one of (a) constancy of *hope* (confident expectation), not just of the final outcome – future and eternal hope – but the hope which assures us that in every circumstance *he is our help and our shield* (20); (b) joyfulness of trust. The rejoicing heart is the product of *trust* which rests on what the Lord has revealed about himself (*name*) and on his character (*holy*), whereby he can never deny himself (21); (c) dependency of prayer (22). *Love* is intrinsic to all he does (5) and the specific portion of his elect people (18). To pray that this love may *rest upon us* embraces all our needs in one petition.

Psalm 34. An ABC for a crisis

The title places the psalm in 1 Samuel 21:10–14. Fleeing from Saul, David sought refuge with the Philistine king of Gath, called by his personal name, Achish, but in this psalm by the royal name of the Philistine kings, Abimelech (Gn. 20:2; 21:22; 26:8). Soon, however, safety changed to detention (1 Sa. 21:13, 'in their hands') for they recognized David and realized what a valuable hostage they had. By pretending madness, David secured his release and escaped. Thus, if we only had the Samuel-account, we would say that the crisis was overcome by astuteness. But, on reflection, David saw that it was not at all so: the secret of his escape was *I sought the* LORD (4) . . . *This poor man called* (6). Cleverness did not open the door, rather *he delivered* (4) . . . *he saved* (6).

The psalm is a broken alphabetic acrostic (see Introduction): one letter is not used and another is used twice. Life's troubles cannot be completely catalogued, we do not see the whole pattern. But in so far as the whole story can be told, here is an ABC for a crisis.

The psalm falls into two parts: vs 1–10, the lessons of experience, mainly David's own testimony with conclusions drawn; vs 11–22, the teaching of the truth, how to manage life and face crises.

1, 2 Commitment to ceaseless praise. *At all times* – even in Abimelech's clutches – the true response is (not astuteness but) to *extol* 'bless' the Lord, *i.e.* acknowledge the glories which make him who he is, to *praise*, *boast*/ 'engage in praise of the Lord. This is the message for *the afflicted*, those at the bottom of life's heap.

3–6 Testimony shared to the glory of God. Prayer was answered with total deliverance (4) – and this is not peculiar to David, for *those who look to him* find an inner radiance (5); they never reap *shame*, *i.e.* are never disappointed as a result of looking to the Lord. Nor is this experience due to anything special about David, for it was as a *poor man*, himself 'at the bottom of the heap', that he *called* and was *heard* (6).

7–10 Lessons drawn. One person's

testimony is only valuable to others if it rests on a changeless truth about God. So why was David able to enjoy such experiences? Because *the angel of the* LORD is the ever-present, rescuing agent (7). Appearing to Hagar, the Angel of the Lord spoke about the Lord (Gn. 16:11) and yet was the Lord (Gn. 16:13; *cf.* Ex. 3:2, 4; 14:19, 24; 23:20–21; Jdg. 6:21, 22; 13:21, 22). The Angel is particularly associated with occasions when the Lord wishes to show himself to chosen people and is one of the OT indications of diversity within the unity of the Godhead. Thus David's testimony can be anyone's testimony because the Angel *encamps* (lives in a mobile home so as to move with the people of God in their earthly pilgrimage) with all who *fear him.* Hence, all are invited to *taste and see,* to take *refuge* (8), and find sufficiency (9–10).

11–14 The secret of the good life. *I will teach* sets the tone for the remainder of the psalm. Here are the lessons David wishes to share. First, the surprising clue to a good life: guard your tongue (13) and set and keep negative and positive moral objectives (14). At the court of Achish David had wangled his freedom by falsehood and compromise, but a life of reverential *fear of the Lord* respects his truth and honours his values.

15–18 The secret of facing trouble. The onset of trouble must be matched by the onset of prayer and the prayer of *the righteous* summons the God of deliverance to our aid (17). Since *the righteous* are here contrasted with *those who do evil* the description covers both a right relationship with God and commitment to righteousness of life, hence (a) in the context of righteousness, prayer is effective: (15, *cry*) specifically 'cry for help'; *cry out* (17), in alarm, urgency; but (b) the Lord automatically identifies with those overwhelmed by life's sorrows (18). *Close*, a 'next-of-kin' relationship, not just being near at hand but actively making our woes his own (Lv. 21:23; Ru. 2:20; 3:12).

19–22 The secret of deliverance. These verses may be taken as a commentary on the 'next-of-kin' relationship. Realistically there is acknowledgement that being *righteous* (right with God and committed to righteousness, 19) is no guarantee of a trouble-free life (*many troubles*) – but in his closeness to us the Lord *delivers* (19), safeguards (20), sides with us against our opponents (21), pays whatever price will meet our need (*redeems*, 22a; 31:5), and offers himself as an available refuge (22b).

Psalm 35. Responses to undeserved suffering

An outpouring rather than a coherent, organized poem, this psalm belongs to a time when enmity and suffering were seemingly endless. The long period of Saul's paranoiac hatred is suitable, the sad figure of the king attracting round him, as he did, many who sycophantically identified with him and gratuitously aggravated David's sufferings. As in Psalm 34, prayer alone is seen as the solution, but in that crisis the answer came with the prayer: the *poor man cried and the* LORD *heard him* (34:6). Now, notwithstanding persistency in prayer, the agony is prolonged and the answer is deferred. Prayer submits our needs to the Lord's resources and also our timetable to his.

The three sections of the psalm are marked off by promises of responsive praise when the cloud is lifted (9–10, 18, 27–28). Within each section thought races here and there over the same topics: (a) calls for divine intervention (1–3, 17, 22–24a), (b) prayers for retribution (4–6, 8, 24b–26) and (c) reasons why retribution is merited (7, 11–16, 19–21); the keynote of each section is found in the latter verses: the suffering is *without cause* (7), a strange return for David's behaviour (13, 14), and full of personal animosity (19–21). As always in such psalms as this, we are surprised at the vigour of David's praying and its element of counter-attack against his opponents. We need to recall that there is such a thing as pure anger, evidenced in the Lord Jesus Christ (Mk. 3:5), in the saints of Rev. 6:9–10, and noted in Eph. 4:26. The whole psalm (as are all similar psalms) is a prayer without any suggestion that in either word or deed David expressed any animosity towards those who sinfully and guiltily plagued him. As in Psalm 34, the crisis, though here prolonged, is met by prayer, leaving all to the Lord.

1–10 Prayer in uncalled-for danger. A plea for divine intervention (1–3) is followed by a prayer for retribution (4–6) and the explanation that such behaviour is *without cause* (7). The retributive theme is repeated in v 8 followed by a promise of exultation in God for his saving power (9, 10). The reference to war and weapons (1, 2) points to the strength of the Lord, which is more than a match for all the strength of the enemy. 1 *Contend.* The word applies to law-suits. David's first appeal is that what is right should be done. The Lord cannot be asked to do what is unjust. *Fight.* Though in mortal danger, David does not propose to take up arms. This is the Lord's business. 2, 3 *Shield . . . buckler*, synonyms, *i.e.* every necessary defensive weapon. *Spear.* The Lord is called to attack as well as defend. And to deal with the inner need of *the soul* for reassurance too. 4 *Disgraced . . . shame*, reap shame, be publicly disappointed of their expectations. 5 *Chaff*, a picture of helplessness before divine judgment. *The angel* (better, 'Angel'), see 34:7.

The Angel of the LORD appears in Psalms only in these two places, to rescue (34:7) and to scatter (35:5–6). **7, 8** Retributive prayers always follow the revealed will of God. He declared (Dt. 19:18–19) that wrongful accusers must themselves receive what they wrongly sought to inflict. In such a circumstance we blandly pray 'May your will be done'; the psalmists, with more realism, spelled out what that will is known to be! **10** *Who is like you? Cf.* Ex. 15:11; Mi. 7:18.

11–18 Prayer in undeserved danger. The long opening section (12–16) in which David laments that he is receiving evil in return for good is followed by a plea for divine intervention (17) and the promise of praise for deliverance (18). This is the sad heart of the psalm: to find that people who were considered friends are the source of false report, gloat over misfortune and seethe with hatred. In this section the Lord is addressed as the 'Sovereign One' (17) with the added question *How long?* Certainly he is stronger than any foe, but the praying saint must be prepared to submit to the Sovereign's timetable. **13** *When my prayers* ... 'And my prayer kept returning to my bosom', which may imply unanswered prayer but is an unusual way of expressing the idea. If 'bosom' is metaphorical for 'heart' (Ec. 7:9) then 'but my prayer kept coming back into mind', *i.e.* notwithstanding their treatment of him, he still found himself praying for them (Mt. 5:44). **16.** *Ungodly*, profane in mind and conduct, abhorrent to God, religiously apostate: here, people acting as if no divine sanctions of conduct existed. *They maliciously* ... Probably (NIV mg.) 'Like ungodly mockers, all around, they gnashed ...' **17** *Lord*, 'Sovereign One'. **18** The Lord delights to be thanked (Lk. 17:15–16). The promise of praise and thanks unites this psalm (9, 28).

19–28 Prayer in malicious danger. David's foes are full of gloating and malice (19–21). Will the Lord remain silent (22–24)? If only he will hear the appeal for intervention (24–26) the day will come when David's real friends with David will magnify the Lord (27–28). The new stress in this section is the *righteousness* of the Lord (24). Since he is a righteous God he must act for one so sorely tried. **19** *Without cause* (*cf.* Jn. 15:25). *Wink.* The mischievous innuendo. **22** *You have seen.* Note the connection with v 21, *we have seen.* Whatever they may claim, the Lord knows the rights of the matter. *Lord*, 'Sovereign'. In v 17 the title pointed to his control of the timetable; here, his mastery of the foe. **27** David had enemies in plenty but did not forget that he had friends too – a great antidote to the loneliness created by false accusation. And the day will come when they will be foremost in praising God for David's deliverance.

Psalm 36. One God, two attitudes

The structure of this psalm displays its message:

A[1] (v 1) The wicked: his philosophy
  B[1] (vs 2–4) The wicked characterized
    C (vs 5–8) The Lord characterized
  B[2] (vs 9–11) Those who know the Lord
A[2] (v 12) The wicked: their fate

In this psalm, there is a choice to be made which determines the sort of life we experience now and the destiny that awaits: the choice is how to react to the revelation of God. To reject it is to be condemned to listen to our own hearts and to a life without values; to embrace it is to enjoy life, light, provision and protection.

1 The philosophy of the wicked. Lit. 'The word of rebellion to the wicked within my heart'. *Oracle*, authoritative word, is usually used of what the Lord speaks. Here the speaker is rebellion (*sinfulness*). *Within my heart*, either 'I know it intuitively' or 'I know it personally'. The former underlines conviction of truth; the latter, which is more attractive, testifies that he is not immune from this inner voice himself. **1c, d** The issue is not whether God exists but whether he matters; not his reality but his relevance. It is the position of many people all the time; it is the position of believers some of the time – not as a stated creed but in practice.

2–4 The wicked characterized. Inwardly, listening to himself and morally complacent (2); outwardly wicked in word and deed (3), in plans, objectives and values (4). **3, 4** Without reverence for God there are no objective standards for life. *Wicked*, a word ranging from mischievous to apostate. *Wise*, the wise conduct of life issuing in true success. *Reject*, 'spurn', mental as well as practical rejection.

5–8 The Lord characterized. 5. *Love*, the love which issues from a commitment of the will, 'unchanging love'. *Reaches to*, 'is in', not remoteness but towering height, something far bigger and higher than anything on earth. *Faithfulness*, consistency of revealed character, reliability in his promises. **6.** *Righteousness* ... *justice*, the expression of his holiness respectively in moral principles and just practices. **7–8** The universal benevolence of God in love (*cf.* 5) protection (7), lavishness and delight (8, like the rivers of Eden, Gn. 2:10).

9–11 Those who know the Lord characterized. Description (5–8) becomes testimony: *life*, in contrast to the decaying life of vs 2–4, true, divine life shared; *light*, all that makes life fulfilled and unanxious. *See*, experience and enjoy. **10** *Know*, enjoy intimate union with. *Love* ... *righteousness*, the attributes of God himself. Those who know him pray that

he will share himself with them (2 Pet. 1:3, 4). **11**, *Foot . . . hand*, respectively symbols of conquest and personal power. We live in a world that wills to subdue and dominate. *Drive . . . away*, make homeless, make life unsettled.

12 The fate of the wicked. *See how*, 'There'. Does some instance of the downfall of *evildoers* lie behind the psalm? Or, as is more likely, is David pointing dramatically to the day of divine judgment?

Psalm 37. An ABC for personal spiritual conflict

An almost complete alphabetic acrostic (see Introduction), Psalm 37 can act as a commentary on the final verses of Psalm 36 – the prayer against the hostile 'foot and hand' and the affirmation that wherever they assault they are doomed to fall. It opens up the often agonizing tension in the life of faith prompted by the contrasting fortunes on earth of the 'righteous' – those who would live out their relationship of being 'right with God' – and the 'wicked', the practical atheist for whom God may exist but only as an irrelevance. The psalm falls into four sections of comparable length, the second, third and fourth being marked off by parallel beginnings. *The wicked plot* (12), *The wicked borrow* (21), *The wicked lie* (32).

1–11 Prospering wickedness: responses. The scene is set by noting that there are different approaches to life (1 contrasted with 3), and that it seems to be the devious who succeed (7) whereas those who would do good are often vexed by life and tempted to envy (1), to get agitated about it (8) and to wonder if there is any substance in talk of the meek inheriting the earth (9, 11). The response is commanded of calmness and contentment (1, 7, 8), trust and moral commitment (3, 5), quiet patience (7), and confidence in the outcome (10, 11). The basis on which these commands rest is the transience of the wrongdoer (2), the sure blessing of God (4–6), the ultimate setting of all to rights (9–11). **3** *Enjoy safe pasture*, or 'tend faithfulness', cultivate being faithful (to God and his way) like a shepherd tends his flock. **4** *Desires*, 'requests', desires turned into prayers. **5** *Do this*, *i.e.* 'take action'. **6** *Your righteousness*, the fact that you are in the right; *your . . . justice*, the judgment of the divine court in your favour. **7** *Be still . . . wait patiently.* The 'stillness' (in word and action) of a confident trust, coupled with (lit.) 'writhing', on tenterhooks with expectation. **9** *Hope*, the confident waiting of hope. **11** *Meek.* Those who are at the bottom of life's heap but face their situation calmly because they know that they are under the sovereign hand of God.

12–20 Hostile wickedness: insights. The observation of vs 1–11 that life is unfair is now given another setting: the practical atheists in their success turn to oppose and assault the righteous (12, 14). In this situation of dire threat, however, things are not quite what they seem: the Lord is not an idle spectator; he has taken sides and has already fixed the doom of the wicked (13), guaranteeing that their hostilities will boomerang on themselves (15), for they are also his enemies and doomed to perish (20). On the other hand, even here and now the righteous is wealthier than the wicked (16) whose power will be broken but the Lord is the present strength of the righteous; they are in his intimate fellowship and care (18); no earthly calamity can destroy them for they have their own sources of satisfaction (19). The directive of this section is that we should practise living in the light of these insights rather than acquiesce in the outward appearances of life. **14** *Poor . . . needy*, respectively the underdog and the exploitable. **17** *Power*, 'arms', personal abilities and strengths. **18** *Blameless*, the person whose life is an integrated whole, inwardly, outwardly, and in all its parts. *Known* (*cf.* 1:6), under his intimate surveillance and care.

21–31 Impoverished wickedness: commitment. One insight of the last section was the greater wealth of the righteous. This is now explored further. Generosity distinguishes the righteous from the wicked (21, 26). They can afford openhandedness because (22 begins with 'For') their future is secure, their pathway firm (23) and their present provided for (25, *cf.* 28, 29). Behind all this ease of mind in life's demands and threats lies the hidden factor of divine blessing, delight, upholding love and fidelity which they experience in the context of their commitment to the way they live (27), the character they cultivate (28) and the quality of their speech and heart (30–31). As contrasted with the grousing, envy and anger against which we are warned in vs 1–11, it is this commitment which should be our priority when life tests us by its inequalities. **22** Restore the initial 'for'. The righteous are liberated into generosity because their sure hope makes them unanxious for the future. **23, 24** Though his steps have been made firm he is not immune from stumbling. The pathway still contains trip-wires and pitfalls, but the securing hand never relaxes its grip. **25** This may very well have been the unbroken experience of the psalmist but more likely we must take it in the same sense as v 24, *i.e.* with the unspoken words 'in the long run'. **26.** On the inclusion of *children* in the outflow of blessing, see Ex. 20:6; Pr. 20:7; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor. 7:14. **28** *Faithful*, related to *love* (36:5), those whom he loves and who respond by loving him. **31** *Law*, 'teaching'.

32–40 Impermanent wickedness: assurance. A principle is asserted that the Lord guarantees a blessed outcome for the righteous (those 'right with him'); be the threat never so deadly in the end it is the wicked who will perish (32–34). Consequently the simple trust which looks confidently to the outcome (*wait*), coupled with the obedience which keeps *his way*, is the road to secure possession of *the land* (34). A particular example from experience (35, 36) is seen as typical of what will ultimately be the case (37, 38). In the meantime the Lord gives *salvation* (deliverance), protection, help and rescue to those who *take refuge* in him (39, 40). **34** *Inherit the land* (*cf.* 9, 11, 22, 29, 34). The same verb is used throughout and the translation *possess* is preferable to *inherit*. The Lord gave his people a promised land but their tenure of it was frequently under threat, nationally from outside foes, individually from grasping and oppressive exploiters. To have a guaranteed security and enjoyment of tenure was something greatly desired. This is the first meaning of the psalm, but its larger meaning points to the messianic day and the new creation. **37** *Blameless*, the person of true integrity (see v 18). **38** *Sinners*, 'those rebelling', wilfully flouting the known will of God.

Psalm 38. Divine anger, divine salvation

The first and the last two verses summarize the theme and wonder of this psalm. When *the* LORD is offended, and his *anger* (exploding rage) and *wrath* (flaming anger) loom (1) and his *arrows* begin to fly (2), it is to the same Lord that we appeal, for his presence, nearness (21), *help* and salvation (22). Only the Lord's favour can deliver us from the Lord's disfavour. If ever a psalm was designed to warn us off sin by exposing its consequences, this is it. Sin offends the Lord and burdens the sinner, replaces wellbeing by wounds, induces lowspiritedness, with pain of body and disquiet of heart (1–8). It saddens and devitalizes, isolates us from friends, and excites enmity (9–12); it leaves us without excuse (13, 14). But it does not close the door of prayer, nor exclude us from the place of repentance (15–18).

1–12 The way down. David sinks lower and lower under the burden of sin. The Lord is his enemy (1, 2); David is without strength (5–10) and without friends (11). His enemies plot against him (12). **1–4** The symptoms of sickness (3, *cf.* 5–8, 10. 17) may be the way in which David describes his shattering feelings of guilt, but the details are so vivid and the sense of bodily pain so acute that it is best to understand that in this case he was visited with actual disease in punishment for sin. **1** *Anger* ... *wrath*, see above. 2 Divine messengers of wrath (*arrows*) – sickness, pain, abandonment (11), opposition (12) – and personal divine opposition (*hand*) alike 'come down' on David. *Pierced*/'drop themselves down'. **3** *Wrath*, 'indignation', the sense of outrage. *Health*, 'wholeness'. *Soundness*, 'peace/wellbeing'. *Sin*, specific items of wrong-doing. **4** *Guilt*, 'iniquity', the inner warp and corruption of nature. *Overwhelmed*, 'gone over my head', as of drowning.

5–8 This description of the tormented body is an elaboration of v 3. Not all sickness comes as punishment for sin, but some does. Every case of sickness is a time for self-examination. In this case, the connection was apparently undoubted. The description alternates between bodily and mental symptoms. **5** *Fester* ... *loathsome*, 'stink ... septic'. *Folly*, 'silliness'. The corresponding noun means 'downright fool'. **6** *Bowed*, 'convulsed (with pain)'. **8** *Feeble*, 'numbed'. *Groan*, 'roar' (like an angry lion). *Anguish*, 'disquiet/unease'.

9–12 1–4 concentrated on sickness evidencing divine hostility; the subject now is the human desertion and threat which the sickness has prompted. At the same time, though the prayer is inarticulate, there is a turning to the Lord. **9** LORD, 'Sovereign One', as in 15, 22. The Lord 'declares his almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity' (Book of Common Prayer). **10** Further symptoms of illness: palpitation, ebbing vitality and loss of clear vision. **11** A vivid touch. Often the things which proclaim the need for sympathetic friendship make people back away. We do not know what to do or say and self-concern overcomes concern for the needy. But the troubled person does not need long speeches – just the pressure of a friendly hand, the company of an understanding heart. *Friends*, 'my loving ones', a closer relationship than *companions*, 'peers'. *Neighbours*, 'next-of-kin' (*cf.* 34:18), those whose right it is to make their kinsman's trouble their own. **12** There are, sadly, those who watch for opportunities for spite, anticipate the worst and plan with deceitful intent.

13–22 The way up. The same pattern is repeated as in vs 1–12 but the psalm is moving progressively into a new arena. The appeal against divine wrath (1, 2) became the inarticulate appeal of v 9. But now, though the situation is unchanged, a positive mood is taking over: one of trustful waiting for an answer (15), actual confession of (not just moaning about) sin (18) and a call for saving help (22).

13–16 To all the talk against him he makes no reply (12–14) but speaks only to God (15–16). He tells *the* LORD (15, 'Yahweh', the God of covenant love, saving and judging power) about his silences (13, 14) and about his confident

hope (15); he knows that the *Lord* ('Sovereign One') who is *my God*, will answer (*cf.* La. 3:19–33). **14** Not *can offer*, but 'does not offer'. The choice to remain silent has been freely made. **15** Replace 'For' at the beginning of this verse. Silence has been chosen (14) 'because' the way of trust, confidence and prayer has been adopted (15–16). *Wait, i.e.* with confident hope.

17–20 The prayer recorded in v 16 came with urgency 'because I am sure to stumble . . .' (17). First, he is urgent because endurance cannot hold out much longer; and secondly, because of his ever present 'pain/sorrow' (17, the word combines both meanings). This, in turn (18 begins with 'for') is constantly his experience because he 'keeps confessing' and 'being anxious about' his *iniquity* (*see* 4) and *sin* (*see* 3). The very act of bringing all this to God keeps his sense of oppression alive. Besides, there is *vigorous* opposition, unjust hatred and unmerited slander (19). But at the same time there is not now the heavy self-pre-occupation of vs 5–8; the air is clearer – surely because he has reached the place of confession.

21, 22 The name of the covenant Lord (21, *cf.* 1, 15), the personal God (21, *cf.* 15) and the Sovereign Lord (22, *cf.* 9, 15) cluster in this final appeal. The Lord who came to Egypt because he knew his people's pain/sorrow (Ex. 3:7, same word as 17) has not changed; the God who has allowed himself to be personally known and owned will never be false to that relationship; the Sovereign Lord will save.

Psalm 39. The burning question

The situation matches Psalm 38: silence in the presence of onlookers (38:12, 13; 39:2), divine action against sin (38:1–3; 39:9–11), hope in the Lord alone (38:15, 21, 22; 39:7). But the focus is different. In Psalm 38 sickness has exposed sin, bringing need of forgiveness; in Psalm 39 sickness has exposed the brevity of life, bringing longing for a period of brightness (13) before life's transience runs its course.

The brevity of life and the sadness of death run throughout the Bible and the full revelation of the immortal world does not remove them. This life is precious. Its joys and loves may be transcended but they cannot be replaced. To be bereaved is 'sorrow upon sorrow' (Phil. 2:27); our own leaving of this life cannot be contemplated with unmixed equanimity, even though heaven is sure. David lamented the death of his little boy though knowing they would meet again (2 Sa. 12:22–23) and here he laments the possible curtailment of his own earthly tenure.

1–3 A strained silence. Fear of saying the wrong thing in a time of stress. However the pressure may mount (2, 3) the matter of testimony before *the wicked* is important (*cf.* 73:15).

4–6 The burning question. Poetically v 4 asks 'Am I going to die?' This was the question he felt he should suppress before those who did not share his faith, for, with a heavenly prospect (49:15; 73:24) ahead why should he fear or resent dying? But the question will out and David faces the acknowledged brevity, insubstantiality and uncertain point of earthly life (5–6).

7–11 God is my hope. *Look for* and *hope* are synonyms. David has been asking anxiously, 'Am I going to die?' (4), but now he sees the future in proper perspective. Maybe he has a terminal illness (10, lit. 'I am finished') but he has exactly the same amount of earthly time as anyone else, namely what the Lord allocates. This is his confident expectation – short or long, life is what the Lord wills. **8** *Save . . . do not make.* In his crisis David relied solely on prayer. If prayer goes 'unanswered', his critics will gloat (38:15, 16) and *fools* (people without moral and spiritual perception) will jibe. **9** Acceptive silence under the hand of God (*cf.* 2). **10, 11.** Divine judgment on sin is one cause of the curtailment of the earthly span (*cf.* 90:5–9), hence David's concern is not for healing but forgiveness (8).

12–13 Prayer for light. The end of earthly existence must come; meanwhile he longs to *rejoice*, 'brighten up'. **12** *Prayer* brings our needs to God; *cry*, our helplessness; *weeping*, our urgency. *Alien . . . stranger* The Lord made his people 'aliens and tenants/strangers' in his land (Lv. 25:23); *alien*, one who has sought asylum; *stranger*, 'tenant' is one without freehold. The Lord loves his 'aliens' (Dt. 10:19) and gives protection and tenure.

Psalm 40. Waiting past . . . and waiting still

In Psalms 38, 39 David was prayerfully waiting (38:15; 39:7) in a crisis of sin (38:3; 39:8) and of public maliciousness (38:16; 39:8). The waiting is now over (1–3); trust has been vindicated (4–5) personal commitment to do God's will follows (6–8); public testimony is pledged (9–10) but personal inadequacy and the need for speedy divine help remain (11–13). There is need too for some public act of God rebuking (14–15) and giving joy (16). Facing this future, David again takes up a waiting position: whatever the Lord has done in the past, there is an ongoing, urgent need for his concern and liberating action (17).

1–3 (A^1) Fruitful waiting. Simply waiting (in hope and confidence, 1) leads to personal deliverance, security, renewal and effective public impact (2–3). **1** *Waited patiently*, rather 'I only waited.' **2** *Slimy*, meaning

uncertain, maybe 'noisy'/'desolate'. 3 *New*, 'fresh', responding to 'new' mercies. *Many.* How we react to life constitutes a potent testimony and nothing is more powerful than to maintain a simple attitude of waiting trust. It is noted (*see*), prompts reverence for the God who responds to faith (*fear*) and brings others to faith (*trust*).

4–5 (B^1) Past divine action recorded. Blessedness follows in the wake of trust because of the abundance of the Lord's deeds and plans. 4 *Proud . . . false gods* (lit. and better 'falsehood'). Two impermissible responses: respectively to pretend to competence and to lie one's way out of trouble. *Wonders*, things with the mark of the supernatural upon them, pointing to a divine agent. *No-one can recount.* Rather, 'There is no comparison with you!'

6–13 (C) The all-important disposition. Three stanzas (6–8, 9–10, 11–13) are linked by references to the inner disposition: the obedient heart (8), the testifying heart (10), the failing heart (12). Such wonders of God (5) demand a response. No ritual will suffice (6), only serious commitment to God's will (7, 8). This cannot be left as a matter of interior piety; it must be a public testimony (9, 10). But in undertaking this the thought comes unbidden, 'Can I keep it up?' for life will still threaten, sin is still a menace and resoluteness a diminishing quantity (12). But v 12 is bracketed by vs 11, 13: the place of prayer is still open.

6 *Cf.* 51:16–17. *Not desire . . . require.* David was enabled to see that such a deliverance (1–3) can only be met by total personal response. *Ears . . . pierced cf.* Is. 50:4 (different verb), the creation of; an ability to receive divine revelation. 7 *Scroll.* Some coronation decree (2:7; *cf.* Dt. 17:14–20) or oath (*cf.* 101) enacting the nature of the Davidic kingship. In a solemn reaffirmation David asserts his commitment to this ideal. In the ultimate, only the Messiah can make such a commitment and Hebrews 10:5–10 rightly sees both the setting aside of ritual sacrifices and the acceptance of the whole obligation of the law as fulfilled in the Lord Jesus. 9, 10 express determination for the future, following the affirmations of vs 6–8. Hence 'am determined to proclaim . . . will not seal . . . determined not to hide . . .' *etc.* The blessings that come through trust (1–5) look forward to a holy life (6–8) and an opened mouth (9–10). But these require dependent prayer (11, 13) because personal weakness (12) can so readily spoil all our obligations and promises.

14–16 (B^2) Future divine action sought. The Lord acted for David personally (4, 5); now he desires divine action to set the community to rights. Human opposition (14, 15) could mar all his bright intentions and the godly, who have, in measure, endured with David, need like him to enjoy fresh mercies. 14 *Shame . . . confusion . . . disgrace*, synonyms for disappointment and public discredit. It is as right to pray against (14) as to pray for (16). David offers us a model, but such praying demands purity of spirit.

17 (A^2) Still waiting. Aware of lack of strength (*poor*, under life's burden, crushed) and of resoluteness (*needy*, easily swayed) David knows that, great as past mercies were, while earthly life continues we are ever in need of fresh mercies in heaven (*cf.* Heb. 7:25) and on earth.

Psalm 41. Blessedness in principle and in experience

The topics of sickness, sin, hostility and estrangement link this psalm with Psalms 38–40 and it probably recollects one facet – maliciousness and betrayal – of the same prolonged trial. But in particular it tests out a principle (1–3) against experience (11, 12): is it in fact the case that a caring attitude towards the weak prompts a reciprocal divine care?

1–3 (A^1) Divine favour, in principle. Concern for the needy is inculcated in the OT (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lv. 19:10, 33; Dt. 10:18). Proverbs 14:21; 19:17 promise blessing in return (*cf.* Mt. 5:7; 18:33). Here the promise covers rescue in trouble (1), protection and restoration, temporal blessing, shelter, strength and comfort in sickness (2–3). 1 *Weak.* Mainly lack of worldly resources but also other aspects of disadvantage. 1 Samuel 30:13ff. exemplifies David's attitude in this matter but plainly he feels himself in a position to expect the blessing promised to one who cares. 3 *And restore . . .*, 'And you will change all his bed in his illness', a lovely picture of divine care.

4 (B^1) Grace sought in respect of sin. Having asserted divine blessing resting upon the one who is concerned for the weak, David first asks for the blessing of healing in respect of sin. *Mercy*, 'favour/grace'. *Heal me*, 'my soul', my whole personality. Sin is like a disease in the sinner, but it is also offensive to God, *against you.*

5–9 (C) Hatred, falsehood, gossip, betrayal. In two stanzas (5–6, 7–9) the central problem to which this psalm is addressed is clarified: human opposition and, most of all, the treachery of a trusted friend. 'Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Take it to the Lord in prayer.' 8 *A vile disease, (*lit.) 'a matter of Belial'. The word 'belial' is used of moral deviance, social misdemeanour, and spiritual apostasy. It must always be understood according to context. The sense best suited here is of some offensiveness to God occasioning divine wrath.

10 (B^2) Grace sought in respect of opponents. The divine mercy that restores life will open an opportunity for vengeance. But the psalms insist that vengeance is the Lord's business and David is elsewhere careful to avoid it. While, therefore, he could fall into the sin of vengeance (1 Ki. 2:5–6) it is hard to believe that in a solemnly composed psalm he would blandly seek grace in order to pursue a forbidden thing. He could, however, as king ask God to give him renewed life in order to perform the royal duty of purging the land (101:8).

11–12 (A^2) Divine favour, in experience. David has received the promised blessing (*cf.* 1–3). His *enemy* has not been allowed to have the last word; rather in response to his *integrity* he enjoys divine favour.

Notes. 11 *Triumph*, 'shout in triumph'. **12** *Integrity*, not sinless perfection but integrity on the point at issue, concern for the needy (1). **13** An editorial conclusion to the first book of Psalms (see 72:18f; 89:52; 106:48, and Introduction).

Book 2

Psalms 42, 43. From faith to faith

These two psalms are certainly one and we cannot tell why they were divided. A balanced refrain unites three stanzas of similar length (42:6, 12; 43:5); there are links of wording, *e.g.* in the first two stanzas, 'while they say' *etc.* (3, 10); in the second and third, 'mourning' (42:9; 43:2); and there is unity and development of theme. (a) In 42:1–5 ('faith longing'), past memories sharpen present pain. The metaphor of drought (1, 2) expresses a deep longing for God. (b) In 42:6–11 ('faith reviving'), the metaphor of storm (7) expresses present distresses but faith sees the *breakers* as the Lord's breakers, his love remains (8), he is still *my Rock* (9). (c) In 43:1–5 ('faith responding') the metaphor of a search party (3) expresses assurance for the future. The God who is even now a *stronghold* will bring him back home (3–4).

Many situations can be imagined for this psalm. The writer recalls temple services as things of the past (42:4); he is now in the far north of Palestine (42:6); only an act of God can bring him back (43:3); he is surrounded by triumphalist, taunting foes (42:3, 9–10). Any occasion when an enemy took and deported captives (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 14:14; 24:14), would be appropriate.

42:1–5 The lost past

With an intensity of longing that rebukes our feeble love (1, 2), the psalmist brings his sorrows to God, along with memories of better days (2–4). **2** Questions are not wrong: *When*? ... *Why*? (9, 43:2) ... *Where* (3, 10), expressing respectively a wish for the ordeal to end, puzzlement that it is there at all and inability to see God in it. But the question 'Who?' in Isaiah 42:24 points us in a more believing and reassuring direction. **5** (with 11; 43:5). He deals with suffering by talking to himself of the God who guarantees the future – for, as always in the Bible, *hope* expresses certainty of outcome. NIV follows many in making small adjustments to 42:5 so that the refrain (5, 11; 43:5) is the same in each case. Here, (lit.) '... I will praise him for the salvation of his face'. ('My God' begins v 6) – *i.e.* God has only to look up with favour for the whole distress to be transformed into deliverance.

6–11 The troubled present

Circumstances threaten (7) but faith is reviving: God is still *My God* (6), the storm is *your waterfalls ... your waves* (7); his love is still real; praise and prayer continue (8); the questions which seem to complain, which express our distress and which have no answer become occasions, not of self-pity, but of prayer (9–10). **6** Restore the opening words, 'O my God' – personal faith maintained in the midst of depression by deliberate focusing of memory on God. **7** Sufferings are not the touch of an alien hand. They are *your breakers*. **9** Faith says 'my Rock', experience says 'forgotten'. Everything depends on which voice is heeded. **11** (Lit.) '... praise him, (who is) the salvation of my face and my God', lifting up the downcast face (also 43:5).

43:1–5 The expected future

Prayer continues, for rescue and restoration; realism continues, balancing the problems of the present with the prospect of the future. **1** *Vindicate*, pronounce judgment in my favour. **2** The fact of *stronghold* and feeling *rejected*: sure about God, battered by life, see v 9 above. **3, 4** *Light and truth* are figuratively seen as a search and rescue party. The reality is that to live in God's light and cherish his truth is the true way through life's difficulties to a blessed outcome. Note the progression of increasing closeness: *mountain ... place ... altar ... God* – a full homecoming, step by step.

Psalm 44. When life is unfair and God is asleep

As in Psalms 42–43, faith faces the calamities of life without any sense of an inward cause meriting the suffering (17–19). But whereas 42–43 is individual, 44 is national, possibly composed for a national day of prayer.

A[1] (vs 1–3) The God of the past
  B[1] (vs 4–8) Testimony: true faith
    C (vs 9–16) Lament: the distressing present
  B[2] (vs 17–22) Testimony: correct conduct
A[2] (vs 23–26) The God of the future

God's ways are a mystery. The afflictions of life are often inexplicable to the human eye, and contrary to what God has already proved himself to be. The only recourse is to fly to God in prayer.

The psalm can be arranged as an antiphonal, with voices answering each other or speaking together. Since the singular voice (*e.g.* 4, 15) speaks of *my sword*, it may be the king leading his gathered people in prayer.

1–3 The God of the past: a memory of blessings. The whole assembly speaks of the past with one voice: ancestral memory told of God in action, of nations routed, not by human enterprise but by the divine hand. 2 *Hand.* The symbol of personal action. At the start of the enterprise, the land in front of them was 'the land that the LORD . . is giving you' (Dt. 4:1); and at the end 'the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers' (Jos. 21:43; *cf.* 80:8–11; Am. 2:9, 10). 3 To be sure they fought for the land, for what the Lord promises is enjoyed by obedience to what he commands. Yet they knew it was *not . . . their sword* but his *hand* (personal action), *arm* (personal strength) and *your face*, the shining of divine favour towards his people. *Loved*, 'accepted with favour'.

4–8 True faith has been maintained. King (4, 6) and people (5, 7) alternate and join in common (8) in a testimony that they have not deviated from a true understanding of what the Lord is (4) and their dependence on him (5); their understanding of the uselessness of earthly power (6) and the efficacy of divine salvation (7). Consequently, it is of him they have boasted (8). 4 They do not rest on an ancestral faith but make it their own: personal allegiance (*King*), personal devotion (*God*). *Who decrees*, see NIV mg. 'Command', a direct appeal to the divine King. *Victories*, 'salvations', plural signifying 'every sort of deliverance'. 6, 7 Both begin with 'For'. The reliance on the divine King expressed in 4, 5 rises from a disavowal of personal ability (6) and an avowal of divine efficacy (7). *Give us victory over*, 'save us from'.

9–16 The distressing present. The antiphon continues: the voice of the king in 9, 11, 13, 15 and of the people in 10, 12, 14. All unite in a final lament (17). Divine rejection has led to human defeat; the attitude and acts of God (11, 12) are matched by those of hostile people (13, 14). Humiliation is complete (15, 16). It all seems purposeless (9–12), good repute is totally gone (13, 14), only embarrassment is left (15, 16). The second singular verbs in each verse, 9–14, stress that life comes direct from the hand of God. It is in this way we are to understand experiences, good or ill. Some find it helpful to distinguish between the 'directive' will of God and the 'permissive' will of God, but the OT does not encourage this. Since God directs all things, our course in life is to trust him when we do not understand and to run to him for help when we are overwhelmed. 12 Not only does there seem to be no human justification for the divine hostility they have endured, there seems to be no divine advantage gained through it. *For a pittance* 'for no return'.

17–21 Correct conduct has been maintained. The confession of personal faith (4–8) is now balanced by a testimony of loyalty in heart and conduct (18) – yet only disaster has followed (19); true religion of hand and heart has been rewarded by a death sentence (20–22). The king speaks in 17, 20; the people in 18, 21; and all together in 19, 22. We are right to be troubled by the inequity and unfairness of life. Worth and reward by no means keep in step (73:2–14). Sadly human reaction all too often is to deny the existence of a good and loving God; the reaction of the king and his people was to come to God, here in testimony, voicing their disquiets, and soon in intercession (23–26). We should learn to make trouble and perplexity drive us to our God not away from him. 17 *Covenant* here, the obligations of obedience which the covenant relationship imposes on us. 19 *Jackals* inhabited ruins and scavenged amongst the dead on the field of battle. 22 *For your sake, i.e.* as a result of our loyalty to you.

23–26 The God of the future: a cry for help. All unite in an urgent cry for help. They pray against apparent divine idleness and forgetfulness (23–24); they plead the extremity of their need and call for action because they know that his love remains unchanged (25–26). 23 The boldness of prayer. 25 We are so personally precious to the Lord that we can come pleading our need. 26 *Redeem*, 'pay the price', *i.e.* provide out of your own resources whatever is required to meet our need. *Unfailing love*, love centred in the will, the love to which the Lord has obligated himself.

Psalm 45. The bridegroom king and his royal bride

A truly *noble theme* (1) – a *king* who is king indeed, and on his wedding day! The psalm is in seven sections:

A[1] (v 1) The poet's enthusiasm for the king
  B[1] (v 2) The king's beauty

C[1] (vs 3–5) The king's progress
D (vs 6–9) The king in all his glory
B[2] (vs 10–11) The bride's beauty
C[2] (vs 12–15) The bride's procession
A[2] (vs 16–17) The poet's wish for the king

Composed for an actual royal wedding and motivated by devotion to an earthly king, this psalm, like all royal psalms, runs beyond what any earthly king could be, to the longed-for Messiah in whom all the glories are true. Likewise it speaks tellingly to the Bride of Christ of her true position, beauty and dedication (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:27; Rev. 14:4; 19:7; 21:9).

1–2 The poet's enthusiasm for the king. *The king*, or 'a king!', *i.e.* a king who is king indeed. 2 *Excellent* or 'beautiful' – evidenced primarily in graciousness of speech (Lk. 4:22; Jn. 7:46). *Since*, 'Therefore', *i.e.* his speech demonstrates that he has been blessed by God.

3–5 The king's progress: world dominion. Kings conquer by war, hence the military terms here, just as of the 'prince of peace' in Isaiah 9; 4, 5, 7, but in the ultimate reality (see 149) the fall of the nations to the true David is by the sword of his mouth (Rev. 1:16; 19:11–16) and the weapon of the gospel (Eph. 6:15–17). *Truth* (Jn. 18:37). *Humility and righteousness*, in the Hebrew 'humility-righteousness', nouns in apposition, 'righteousness in its essential humility' (Zc. 9:9; Mt. 11:29; 2 Cor. 10:1; Phil. 2:7–8).

6–9 The king in all his glory. The seven glories of the king: (i) His divine nature (6). Many emendations have been suggested for the text here, not because there is textual uncertainty but to avoid the ascription of deity to the king. But the text is sound and the OT enigma of the Messiah who is God and who yet worships God (7) awaits its resolution in Jesus (Eph. 1:17; Heb. 1:8); (ii) His upright rule (6, 7): officially (*sceptre*) and personally (*love ... hate*) the king is holy, (Is. 11:3–5); (iii) His human superiority (7). Outwardly a man among men (*your God ... companions*), there is also the inner secret of his divine anointing (Lk. 4:18); (iv) His fragrant person (8, 2 Cor 2:14); (v) His rich situation (8) where everything outward speaks of royal wealth and everything within is for the delight of the king. (vi) His honoured attendants (9), the kings of the earth gladly providing for the staffing of his household. (vii) The seventh glory of the king is his bride (9). The list began with the king on his throne (6); it ends with the shared throne, the bride beside the king (9).

10–11 The bride's beauty, devotion to the king. Gn. 2:24 requires that, from marriage onwards a son should become primarily a husband; great stress is laid here (*Listen, consider ... give ear*) on a daughter becoming a wife. King's daughter though she is (13), now her whole devotion must be for *the king*, responding to his love (*enthralled*, 'desires for himself'), sensitive to his dignity (*honour*) and acceptive of his status (*lord*).

12–15 The bride's procession to the palace. Submissive to him (11), but what dignity is now hers! The subjects of the king (12, *cf.* 5) are her subjects, she enjoys glory and splendour (13) but, above all, she is united intimately with the king (14) and shares his palace (15). The homage of *Tyre* (12) is a messianic motif (*see* 87:4; *cf.* Is. 23). Tyre came to typify the world in its proud independence and self-sufficiency, its accumulation of wealth without scruple. But one day the kings of the earth will bring their wealth to the feet of the king (Rev. 21:24).

16–17 The poet's wish for the king. However glorious the past may have been, the king is orientated to the future and to the children who will effect his rule over the whole earth.

Psalm 46. Faith and fact

Many link this psalm (and 47, 48) with the suggestion of an (annual) drama enacted in the temple, celebrating the Lord's kingship over all the earth (like Ascension Day, *cf.* 47:5). Such a festival would be grounded in the Lord's victory over the 'world' at the exodus and look forward to the final and climactic Day of the Lord (See Introduction.) Others point out that *Come and see* (8) sounds more like an invitation to survey an actual victory than to watch a drama (*cf. walk ... count ... consider*, 48:12–13). In this case an event like the Lord's victory over Sennacherib (Is. 36, 37) provides an excellent setting: the combined nations of the Assyrian Empire came against Zion and met their match.

The psalm consists of a profession of faith (1–6) and the facts which vindicate faith (8–10).

1–6 (a) Faith in divine help (1, 2): even were the world to collapse, God is present to protect (*refuge*) and *help*. (b) Faith in divine purpose (3, 4): even earth-shaking catastrophes are *a river*, contained within bounds, designed for the joy of the city where the Lord dwells. (c) Faith in divine sovereignty (5, 6): as soon as the Lord speaks the storm of the nations is stilled. 1 The *refuge* to hide in, the *strength* to bear the trial, the *help* that stands at the ready. 3, 4 *There is* adds interpretatively to the Hebrew text. Rather understand v 4 as a comment on v 3: what are these surging, destructive waters but *a river*. Even a cosmic disaster is totally controlled and purposeful (5, 6). The same is true of human foes, the *uproar* of *nations*. It is enough for the Lord to speak, so total is his sovereign sway. 5

Break of day, 'when morning comes', *cf.* the references to 'morning' in Ex. 14:24; 2 Ki. 19:35. **7** *With us . . . fortress.* The refrain (*cf.* 11) encapsulates the movement of the preceding stanza. Since he is our *refuge* (1) we run to him; as the God *within* (5), he comes to us. So we sing that he is *with us* and is also *our fortress* (an inaccessibly high place, a 'top-security') to which we run for safety.

8–10 The Lord has effectively disposed of the threat: the war is over and the means of making further war destroyed. The voice which rules all (*cf.* 6) now commands rest (10a) and offers reassurance (10bc) (*see* 48:12). Psalm 46 invites inspection of an enemy destroyed; Psalm 48 of a city intact. **9** *shields*, 'wagons', the supply wagons bringing the material of war or the circle of wagons (1 Sa. 17:20) encircling the enemy camp. **10** *Be still*, 'relax'. *I will be*, better 'I am', is the present reality of a sovereign God that enables rest.

Psalm 47. One God, one king, one people

The Lord's victory over the earth (46:8, 9) is not intended to end in international despondency but joy. Psalm 47 calls for universal acclaim of such a God (1). This summons is explained (2 begins with 'For') by the Lord's worldwide status as *King*. The evidence for this is what he has done for Israel in power (3) and love (4). Consequently the truth of the exalted God can be reiterated (5). The same sequence is now repeated: invitation to praise (6, *cf.* 1), explanation, the universal King (7–8, *cf.* 2), the favoured people (9, *cf.* 3–4) and the exalted God (9, *cf.* 5).

But, second time round, the emphasis is different: Israel is exalted over *the nations* by providence (3) and election (4); in v 9 *the nations*, represented by their *nobles*, are incorporated *as the people of the God of Abraham*, the Abrahamic promise is fulfilled and all nations find blessedness (Gn. 12:1–3). If *God has ascended*, 'gone up'. *i.e.* having 'come down' to gain the victory, suggests a background to the psalm, we may think of the exodus (Ex. 3:8) or maybe the divine victory over David's foes (18:9) or (best of all) the Sennacherib incident (Is. 31:4). But in any event in this psalm the OT looks gloriously forward to the greater 'coming down' of God in Christ to gather into one the scattered children of God (Jn. 11:52: *cf.* Is. 19:23–25; 60:1–3; 66:20), and to a greater ascension to universal kingship, actual (Eph. 1:20–23) and ultimate (Phil. 2:9–11).

Psalm 48. This is our God

The theme of elation after a great deliverance is continued but with this difference, that while Psalm 46 focuses on the threat that was removed and Psalm 47 on the Lord's purposes of grace for the enemies that were overthrown, Psalm 48 stresses how unscathed is the city that had been in such danger (12, 13).

A^1 (vs 1–2) The great God and his joyful city
  B^1 (vs 3–7) Divine greatness in action
  B^2 (vs 8–10) Divine greatness in experience
A^2 (vs 11–14) The joyful city and its great God

It is easy to see how this psalm could be presented dramatically within a temple festival (see 9), but it is impossible not to feel the freshness of close experience in the description of the rout of the kings (3–7), in the claim *we have seen* (8) and in the invitation to survey the intact city (12, 13). This is a psalm of danger past and full deliverance present, an experience not unknown to us who live in the present, true Zion (Heb. 12:22) as, time and again, we find that our approaching dreads meet their match in our ever-present God.

1, 2 The great God and his joyful city. Not, 'How blessed we are to live in a well-fortified city on its mountain site!', but 'How great the Lord is in his *city*, on his *mountain*,' a *great king* indeed! *His holy mountain*, 'mountain of his holiness', where he dwells in holiness. *Whole earth*, that which will bring joy to the whole earth, in the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise (47:9). *Like*, should be omitted. *Zaphon* was the dwelling of Baal. To say that (lit.) 'Mount Zion (is) the topmost peak of Zaphon' neatly claims that the Lord overtops all gods and that Zion is the genuine place of divine dwelling.

3–7 Divine greatness in action. An affirmation of divine indwelling and protection followed (3) (4 begins not with *when* but 'For, behold') by a proof: the fact of the rout of the kings (4, 5) illustrated by travail (6) and storm (7). **3** *Fortress*, 'top-security' (46:7). **4** *Kings* (2:2), figurative of the ceaseless hostility of the world to the people of God but here typified in the advance of the multinational army of Sennacherib (Is. 10:8). **5** *Astounded*, here, 'bewildered' so that 'they hurried off in terror'. **6, 7** an illustration of inner feeling followed by one of external force. *Ships of Tarshish*, capable of braving the 'open sea', man's greatest maritime achievements, but as nothing before the winds of God.

8–1. Divine greatness in experience. *Cf. they saw* (5) with *have we seen* (8): same sight, different reactions! They saw what terrorized; we see our security in God. **9** *We meditate.* It is possible to translate 'we portray' (as in dramatic presentation) but the meaning 'to form a mental picture/to meditate upon' is well-exemplified (50:21; *cf.* Is. 10:7); **10** *Hand*

symbolizes personal action. *Righteousness*, all that is right as God sees it.

11–14 The joyful city and its great God. A dramatic ending: the city joyful, and unscathed (11–13), but then nothing more about the city – a testimony to the God who is ever his people's guide (14). **11** *Judgments*, what God 'judged right to do'. **14** 'For such is God – our God for ever and ever! He it is who will guide us even to death.' The reference to 'death' is (as NIV) a strong expression of divine constancy: he will never leave us; but also it affirms that he who delivered us from the threat of death at the hand of foes will surely also deliver from death itself.

Psalm 49. Divine redemption and eternal hope

Psalm 49 may well owe its position here to the last words of Psalm 48. Is it true that when death itself threatens we may rely on the Lord to be our Guide? The triumphant answer comes that *God will redeem my soul from the grave* (15). Verses like 6:5; 30:9; 88:4–5 are frequently quoted to show that the OT entertained no hope after death, but the verses in question are all spoken by people who understood themselves (rightly or wrongly) to be dying under wrath, alienated from God. In such a death there is no hope, but in fact they were speaking not of all death, only of their particular experience.

Psalm 49 (*cf.* 73) puts the alternatives clearly: there is a death without hope (13, 14) and there is a death full of hope (15). Man can die like the beasts (12) or he can die with understanding (20). This is the solution to the universal riddle (1–4) which the psalmist sets out to solve. First (5–12) he faces the fact that death comes to all. The starting point of his thoughts was the oppressiveness of those whose wealth gives them power to threaten others (5, 6) and he began to comfort himself with the thought that wealth cannot buy everything (7–9): death marks the point at which human ransom-money ceases to have currency. All alike, wise or foolish, die (10) and then earthly wealth achieves no more than a lasting tomb (11). But, secondly, (13–19) death is not the end: there are destinies beyond the grave to be taken into account. Self-reliance, however much admired on earth, leads to death and decay, while those who are right with God can look forward to redemption and the presence of God (13–15). Consequently, do not be agitated by life's inequalities (16); death is the great leveller and in contrast to their earthly experience, there is no light for such beyond the grave (17–19).

2 *Low and high*, better 'all mankind alike'. 3 *Understanding*, 'discernment', the word to which the psalm returns in v 20 – the discernment that there is another life in which earthly notions of power and influence do not operate; a life denied to the self-reliant (13) and enjoyed only by divine redemption (15). 4 *Ear . . . expound.* Hearing before speaking. Such knowledge as can solve the riddle of life and death must come from hearing the word of God. 6 For the first time (*see* also 13) the key idea of *trust* is mentioned. Self-reliance is the foe of a blessed destiny after death. **7–9** *Redeem . . . ransom*, the first word emphasizes finding the price, the second, covering the need. But no payment is sufficient to buy eternal life. *Life of another.* The Hebrew says 'even a brother', *i.e.* even in a case where love would hold nothing back. There is a case where payment can commute the death penalty (Ex. 21:30) – but Death itself cannot be bought off! **10** *The foolish*, one who acts lightheartedly towards life and its obligations, who is self-centred and never looks beyond short-term advantage. *Senseless*, insensitive to spiritual realities. **11** *Their tombs.* Hebrew 'Inwardly to them', 'their inner assumption is'. Their horizons are those of this world so that even – Oh the irony of it! – (lit.) 'They named lands after themselves!' **13** See v 6. **14** *Grave . . . grave* 'Sheol', the place where the dead live on. *Feed on* 'shepherd'. *The upright.* Those who can die right with God (Nu. 23:10); whose life conforms to God's way (1 Ki. 15:5); acceptable to God (Jb 1:1); those whom the Lord saves (Ps. 7:10). *Rule*, heavenly reversal of the earthly relationships of v 5 (*cf.* Lk. 16:22–25). *Morning* (17:15), on awakening after death. **15** *Redeem*, God will find and pay the price impossible for man (7). *Grave*, 'from the hand of Sheol', the power of Sheol to receive and hold the unredeemed (14). *Take* as in Gn. 5:24; 2 Ki. 2:1; Ps. 73:24. **20** Throughout the psalm the wealthy have been a case in point but the truth applies to all: it is not wealth that disqualifies for a blessed eternity but lack of true discernment (see 3).

Psalm 50. Let off with a caution!

The scene is Judgment Day, with the whole *earth* (1) summoned before God. In particular the covenant people (4, 5) are called before the divine *judge* (6). They are arraigned in two companies: those who love religious rites (8) but neglect thankfulness, obedience and prayer (14, 15), and those who recite the law (16) but do not keep it (17–21). The psalm ends (22, 23) by calling these two groups to amendment. The central section (7–21) has the same 'shape' as the Covenant Service in Exodus 24:3–8 where the ritual of sacrifice and blood (vs 4–6) is followed by the recital of the law (vs 7, 8). The psalm is thus very suited to a festival of covenant renewal, providing as it does a framework for personal self-examination.

1–6 The court convened. When the Judge, the defendants and the place of session have been announced (1–2), three voices speak in turn: that God is coming to speak (in judgment 3); that he is coming as the holy God of Sinai in fire and storm (*cf.* Ex. 19:16–18) and that judgment is to begin at the house of God (4; *cf.* 1 Pet. 4:17). When the court is thus in session, the Judge summons his people (5, 6). **1** *The Mighty One, God, the* LORD This triple formula is only elsewhere used in Joshua 22:22 when the transjordanian tribes were accused of apostasy and used it in affirmation. As such it suits this psalm where reality of loyalty is in question. **3** *Not silent.* Judgment will not be by an unexplained act where people might or might not recognize it as the work of God. All will be openly stated. **4** *Heavens . . . earth.* (*cf.* Dt. 4:26; 1 Ch. 16:31; Ps. 69:34f; Is. 1:2; Je. 2:12). Here, the created order comes as a witness for the prosecution, having silently observed all that has been done (*see* 6). **5** *Consecrated.* The word blends 'beloved (by God)' and 'devoted (to God)'. *Covenant . . . sacrifice.* (Ex. 24:3ff.) **6** If the heavens have witnessed human faults (4), they have also witnessed divine *righteousness* and can affirm the Lord's fitness to be *judge.*

7–21 The charge. The summons (7) is followed by two arraignments (8–15, 16–21). **7** is full of Exodus-themes: *My people* recalls Ex. 7:16, the chosen people; *Israel* is the Lord's 'first-born', the object of redemption (Ex. 4:22); *God, your God,* reflects Ex. 20:2, the title of the redeeming God.

8–15 *Ritual formalism,* those who revelled in the sacrifices (8) but mistook their purpose, thinking that by them they were somehow enriching God (9–13) and failing to live responsively to God in thanksgiving, obedience and reliant prayer (14, 15). **8** The Lord cannot *rebuke* what he commanded and as far as the material of sacrifice is concerned there is nothing to rebuke. The ritualist is always punctilious. **9–13** But they fell into two traps: that God needed what they had (9–11), and that God depended on what they gave (12, 13). They thought that religion is man reaching out to God, serving him and ministering to him, the deepest of all religious errors. **13** Pagan religions around Israel thought that their gods were nourished by the sacrifices that were offered. The same error is committed whenever the mere round of religious life becomes important in its own right. **14, 15** *True religion,* however, is responding, thankfully (for his grace, goodness, *etc.*), obediently (in fulfilment of the covenant vow to keep his word, Ex. 24:7), prayerfully (relying on him to prove sufficient for every trouble) and worshipfully (giving him the honour that is his due).

16–21 *Credal formalism,* people who are careful to say all the right things (16) but whose life contradicts their profession (17–21). They *hate* the word of God (17) and disobey his commandments (18a [eighth commandment], 18b [seventh], 19 [ninth]); they offend him by empty formalism in church, wilful disobedience in life, compromise in relationships, corruptness in speech and lovelessness in the home. And to crown it, they build their theology on the forbearing silence of God (21), holding the Lord to be as morally indifferent as they are themselves.

22, 23 The caution. Divine mercy forbears. The deserved sentence is still future and the door of salvation still open (21–23). **22** addresses those (16–21) whose lives belie their profession. Their problem is not that they disregard the law but that they *forget God* – as one present with them, aware of their offensive conduct, as the holy One, commanding his people to be like him (Lv. 19:2). **23** addresses those (8–15) whose religion is mere punctiliousness: they are reminded that true religion is responsive to what God has done (*cf.* 14), and thoughtful in life-style (23, 'he who acts thoughtfully in [his] way [of life]'). Finally, the psalm which began with the Lord calling to judgment (1–6) ends with him offering salvation (23).

Psalm 51. The marvel of repentance

The psalm and its title belong together like hand and glove. The efficacy of repentance (1–4) is an exact commentary on 2 Samuel 12:13. The problem of v 16, which appears to deny that sacrifices are acceptable to God, is solved by recalling that David's sins of adultery (2 Sa. 11:4) and murder (2 Sa. 11:14–17) were not covered by sacrificial provision. It is often urged that vs 18, 19 are later additions designed to make the psalm suitable for congregational use and to counter the rejection of sacrifice in vs 16, 17. But (apart from the fact that the psalm cannot be adapted by making it self-contradictory!) David, as king, could not sin simply as a private individual: his sin threatened the fabric of public life. Consequently, he would be as anxious for the building up of Jerusalem (18) as for his own restoration.

1–6 God and the individual: repentance and forgiveness. In God there is *mercy,* free, unmerited favour (Gn. 6:8); *love,* unchanging love based on solemn commitment; *compassion,* surging, passionate love (1). Sin is *transgression,* deliberate 'rebellion' against the known will of God (1); *iniquity* (2), the inner 'warp' of the fallen nature; *sin* (2), specific wrong. The sinner desires God to *blot out* his sin, 'wipe clean' the stain God can see; *wash,*

reach into the fibres of his nature to purge ingrained filth; *cleanse*, remove sin as a barrier to fellowship with God. (2).

3–6 *Repentance; its effect and necessity.* The prayer for cleansing (1, 2) rests on the simple fact of acknowledgment (*know*) and awareness (*before me, i.e.* subjectively felt, 38:17) of sin (*cf.* 32:3, 4). **4** *Against you.* Whatever hurt sin brings to self or others the heart of sinfulness is that it offends God (2 Sa. 12:13). *So that*, 'in order that'. Were the sinner to cry, 'You are sovereign. Why did you not stop me?' the Lord would reply, '*In order to* bring you to recognize your sinfulness and my righteousness. It is my *purpose* that you should know me as I am, the righteous God and the just judge. Only then will you fly to me for cleansing.' **5** The inheritance of a sinful nature does not, biblically, excuse the sinner but sets him in the place of mounting guilt (Mt. 23:34–36). *At birth . . . conceived.* This does not question the holiness of the processes of conception and birth, but rather affirms that from the moment of conception there existed a moral human person, the infant at birth, the foetus at conception. Thus repentance must take into account both actual sins (1–3) and this infection inseparable from human nature. **6** In all of human nature sin is without excuse because it is contrary to God's *desire*, and contrary to the *wisdom* of God taught by the all-pervasive voice of conscience.

7–15 The dimensions of true repentance. **7** seeks divine dealing with sin; **8** with the sinner as *crushed* by divine wrath; **9** with the offence given to God by sin. *Cleanse*, 'de-sin'. *Hyssop*, the sprinkling instrument effecting propitiation of divine wrath (Ex. 12:12, 22, 23), ending exclusion and alienation (Lv. 14:6), purifying from defilement (Nu. 19:16–19). David knows of no sacrifice that will suffice (16) but he is confident that the Lord does. *Joy . . . gladness*, the restoration of the sinner to the joyful songs of the sanctuary (42:4); *bones*, restoration to personal wholeness. *Hide*, deal, within your own nature, with your holy abhorrence of my sin. *Blot out*, both from your memory and from my record (1).

10–12 *The true penitent longs to be rid of sin* through the creation of a new nature bringing the power of constancy, the continuing favour of God and the presence of his Holy Spirit (10–11), the joy of deliverance and the gift of a spirit/Spirit ready to do God's will (12). Saul had lost the immediate benefits (1 Sa. 16:14) but not the ultimate reality (1 Sa. 28:19) of salvation and, doubtless with this example in his mind, David feared lest the same experience might be his – just as we too can grieve (Eph. 4:30) and quench (1 Thes. 5:19) the Holy Spirit, losing the joys but not the reality of his indwelling. **13–15** Teaching about God promotes repentance (13), but the teacher must take his own need of repentance seriously, exemplifying in himself what he desires to see in them. Only as a penitent can he sing of God's *righteousness* (14) – that wondrous righteousness whereby he is both just and the justifier (Is. 45:21; Rom. 3:26). But testimony must rest, too, upon prayer that the Lord will grant the opening of the mouth.

16–19 God and the community: what pleases the Lord. The renewed community is composed of penitent individuals (16, 17), seeks its security in God's favour and delights him with its religious observances (18–19). These verses share the themes of the Lord's delight, his pleasure, and sacrifice and burnt offering. The sin offering is not mentioned but only sacrifices speaking of commitment to God (the burnt offering, Gn. 22:2, 12) and fellowship with God and his people (where *sacrifice* is used with *burnt offering*, it means 'peace offering'). David's own experience taught him that getting right with God was a matter of the *heart* (17). This is the message he wished to share with others (16 begins with 'For') and now to make a foundational reality in the new community. *Build . . . the walls* is metaphorical, 'to make the community secure'. *Then, i.e.* when penitent sinners (16, 17) rest on God for their security (18), religion becomes delightful to the Lord: *righteous sacrifices*, sacrifices which are all that God meant them to be.

Psalm 52. The uprooted tree and the flourishing tree

The NIV enlarges and alters the Hebrew text of v 1, which simply reads: 'How you boast of evil, big man! The unfailing love of God is the same every day.' The self-made man, Doeg (1 Sa. 21–22), seized his opportunity, and by being 'economical with the truth' and ruthless in action could *boast* of his own success. But as compared with the self-sufficient Doeg, David asserts that nothing will ever make God anything but on his side. The correctness of restoring the Hebrew text in v 1 is proved by vs 8, 9 which recapitulate the same topics in reverse order: the *boast* of *evil* (1) is matched by the *praise* of the name that is *good* (9); the unfailing love which continues *all day* (1b, Hebrew) is elaborated into the unfailing love that lasts *for ever* (8). The message of the psalm is, then, that God's love is sufficient even against triumphant ruthlessness, constant through the *day* of pressure (1) and the same *for ever* (8).

A^1 (v 1) Alternative securities
B^1 (vs 2–4) The destructive tongue

C (v 5) Divine action
B² (vs 6–7) The triumphant tongue
A² (vs 8–9) True security

1 (A¹) Alternative securities: human strength or divine love. *Boast*, self-satisfaction and self-confidence.

2 (B¹) The destructive tongue. *Tongue*, always a primary indicator of character. 3 The character behind the tongue: in respect of ethical values and standards of truth. 4 *Deceitful* (*cf.* 2), an intent to mislead. Doeg told the truth only up to the point where it could do most harm.

5 (C) Divine action. *Surely*, 'also', *i.e.* a parallel act of God, an exact requital directed at personal (*you*), domestic (*tent*) and earthly (*land*) sides of life.

6–7 (B²) The triumphant tongue. *Laugh*, not vindictively or maliciously (Jb. 31:29; Pr. 24:17) but a joyful response to the intervention of divine justice (6, *fear*) and the proof that apart from God there is no *stronghold* (7).

8–9 (A²) True security. The flourishing tree, in contrast to the uprooted tree (5), is settled in the presence of God, marked by trust, assured of divine unfailing love (8); characterized by a tongue of *praise* (9, contrast 1, 2), ever-expectant (*hope*) that God will be true to his *name*, and bearing testimony among God's *saints*, those whom he loves and who love him back (9).

Psalm 53. No need to be afraid

Though parallel to Psalm 14, Psalm 53 focuses the same truth on a different subject. The key variation comes in v 5. 14:5 remarks on the dread which seized the foes of the Lord's people when the realization dawned that the Lord was *in the company of the righteous*; 53:5 rebukes needless fear felt by God's people when faced by their foes (4), since God *scattered* their opponents. Together, therefore, the psalms exhibit contrasting facets of the same situation: when danger threatens, their enemies have everything to fear and God's people have nothing to fear. For some detailed comment, see Psalm 14.

5 Restore 'for' before *God scattered.* The past tense indicates that David is drawing a lesson from an incident that has taken place but it can express a 'settled characteristic', *i.e.* 'God scatters'. Fear is always groundless (*nothing to dread*) because he always takes counteraction.

Psalm 54. The saving Name

Ziph was in the remote south of Judah and it was surely a deeply hurtful thing to David to find his own people turned against him, right though their loyalty to Saul was. As is usual in psalms with historical headings, the topic raised by the heading is generalized. David does not mention the Ziphites here, any more than he mentions Doeg in Psalm 52 but, in both psalms, takes the opportunity to record how such situations should be faced: (i) by prayer (1, 2). *By your name*, by acting according to your revealed nature. *Save . . . vindicate*, respectively the immediate threat, and the fundamental issue – that David was being wrongly regarded and treated as a treasonous person. (ii) By recollection of the truth (3–5). First, the character of his opponents (3), secondly, the character of his God (4), and finally, prayer for divine retributive action. *Strangers* actually were David's fellow-Judahites but they were acting like *ruthless* aliens, because where there is no *regard for God* there can be no reckoning on fidelity or humanity. *Lord*, 'Sovereign One'. *Recoil . . . destroy*, the former refers to the 'boomerang' aspect of sin, a retribution built into the nature of things; the latter to direct divine moral providence. (iii) By commitment for the future (6, 7). This is not to be understood as bargaining with God (If you do this for me I promise to . . .) but as a spiritual response to divine goodness. As he stands by his *name* (1), so we should *praise* his *name* (6). *For he has delivered* or 'It', the Lord's name in action. *Looked*, not gloating, but observing that he has been preserved in life to see his deadly foes routed.

Psalm 55. Solutions, deceptive and real

The sequence *I said* (6) . . . *I call* (16) . . . *I trust* (23) expresses the movement of this psalm. In dire straits (1–5), David would gladly flee from the whole situation (6–8) but chooses to counter ceaseless opposition (10) by ceaseless prayer (17) and so rests in trust (23).

A¹ (vs 1–3) Prayer because of the enemy
B (vs 4–21) Solutions
b¹ (vs 4–8) A solution in flight?
b² (vs 9–21) The solution in prayer
A² (vs 22–23) Trust in the face of the enemy

1–3 At the end of my tether there is a place called Prayer. *Thoughts trouble*, (2) 'I am at my wits' end'; *distraught*, demoralized. 3 *Stares*, better 'pressure'; *revile*, 'bear a grudge': what they say (*voice*), their pressuring, the 'trouble' (*suffering*) which they *bring down* ('make to slip [like an avalanche]', *cf.* 22), the animosity they cherish (*anger*). Such may be the experience of the believer. The lesson David learned was to make the pressure of people press him to prayer.

4–8 Getting away from it all. 4, 5 outline the problem; 6–8 offer an attractive solution. 4 *is in anguish*, 'writhes'. 5 *Horror*,

'shuddering'. We do not know what situation David refers to but NIV's five nouns and three verbs leave us in no doubt of its deadly, terrifying nature. **6–8** contain all the appeal of solving problems by flight – to enjoy rest, be undisturbed and find shelter while the storm rages elsewhere.

9–21 The sharpest blow, the surest solution – prayer. 9–11 Constant pressure: day and night. **12–14** The deepest grief, fellowship violated. **15–19** Constant prayer: evening, morning, noon. **20, 21** The deepest grief, covenant violated.

The answer is not fleeing from the situation, but calling God into the situation; not the natural solution of escapism but the spiritual solution of prayer. **9** David prayed a similar prayer in 2 Samuel 15:31, but the psalm did not originate there: for at that point David was in flight – though not into peace. Here the danger is right inside the *city* and David is our example in countering it by direct and vigorous prayer. **10** *Malice* ... *abuse*, 'mischief ... trouble'. **12–14** Among the company opposing him (9, 10, 15, 19) one inflicts the saddest blow, a friend (13) and one-time spiritual confidant (14). David is walking in the shadow cast by a coming, greater betrayal (Mt. 26:47, 48; Mk. 14:43–45; Lk. 22:47, 48. Note how all the accounts say 'one of the twelve'.)

15 We will be in a position to criticize the boldness of David's prayer here when we have stood in a like danger – to ourselves (4, 5) and to others (9–11), (*cf.* 2 Ki. 2:24). The Lord Jesus, in his perfection, pronounced a *woe* upon Judas (Mt. 26:24). The prayer matches God's law (Dt. 19:19) by requesting for them what they threatened to him (4); it also mirrors the action of God himself when, earlier, his appointed leader was threatened (Nu. 16:28–33). Yet note that the motive (15) for this dire prayer is not the threat they constitute to David, but the fact that they have opened themselves as a lodging-house for (plural of amplification) 'every sort of evil'. The prayer is a product of moral conviction. **16–19** David's prayer is a committed policy, *I call* (16), emphatic, 'But I for my part ...'; a sustained discipline, *evening, morning, ... noon* (17); and rests on what the Lord does – *saves* (16), *hears* (17), *ransoms* (finds the total and sufficient solution for my need, 18) – and on what the Lord is – *enthroned* (19).

22, 23 A counsel, a confidence, a truth and an example. In v 23, for *but* read 'for'. The counsel to others to commit all to God in the confidence that he will *sustain* arises from what is true about the Lord in his opposition to *the wicked*. Thus the verses pinpoint what *you* should do, what the Lord does, for the *righteous* (those right with him, (22)); for the *wicked* (23); and what *I* do (23). **22** *Cast*, 'Throw', vigorous action. *Cares*, 'allocation', what is allotted to you. *Sustain*, the promise is not to remove the burden but to sustain the person. *Fall*, from the same verb as 'cause to slip' (3). However heavy the avalanche of trouble that slips down, *the righteous* will not be suffered to slip.

Psalm 56. Fear and faith

When I am afraid (3) ... *I will not be afraid* (4). This paradox expresses the heart of the psalm. The situation is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:10–15 and is commented on in Psalm 34 (a subsequent meditation: that it was not the cleverness of 1 Sa. 21:12, 13 but prayer that effected escape) as well as here – a contemporaneous meditation while David experienced house-arrest in Gath, presumably being held as a top-person hostage. The psalm consists of six balanced sections: David, the object of man's hostility (1, 2) is the object of God's care (9–11); the trust which counters fear (3, 4) is a trust which issues in prayer (7–8); and David under oppression by man (5, 6) becomes David under vow to God (12, 13).

1, 2 One brief cry to God amid a concentration on surrounding danger. Contrast 12, 13, one reference to danger amid a concentration on God! Such is the effect of *trust* (3, 4) working by prayer (9–11). When the eye is turned on Jesus 'the things of earth will grow strangely dim'. **3, 4** *When*, 'The day', *i.e.* 'at the very time'. *Whose word.* Trust is not a 'feeling' that all will work out for the best. It is a conviction arising from what God has himself said, a confidence in promises. In v 1 *men* is a word pin-pointing the frailty of humankind; here *mortal man*, 'flesh' implies a contrast with God (Is. 31:3; 2 Ch. 32:8), weakness contrasting with strength (*cf.* 11). Thus when faith turns to God as revealed in his word, perspective alters. **5, 6** How true to the double situation in which David found himself! – Saul's court twisting his words and plotting; the Philistines watching his steps (as surely they would when the killer of Goliath had the affrontery to appear in Gath!). **7, 8** balancing vs 1, 2: a plea for divine care. **7** should probably read 'On account of their iniquity, can there be escape for them?' *The nations*, here, rather, 'these people'. **8** Every sorrow we feel (*tears*), every occasion of grief (*record*) is stored in heaven for divine action. **9–11** *When* (9), 'The day': in v 3, it was the day of trust; here the day of prayer, for prayer is the first way in which true trust expresses itself and, in turn, leads to a more fully formed trust: *cf.* 10, 11 with 3, 4. *Man* (11), is man as created by God, therefore totally under his sovereign control. **12, 13** *Plotting to harm* (5) is (lit.) 'upon me, all their

thoughts'; in v 12 *under vows to you* is 'upon me, your vows'. The more the world threatens, the greater our commitment – not by way of striking a bargain with God, but to show determination to advance spiritually as a result of experience endured and deliverance granted. Indeed, v 13 (*that I may*); this is the very purpose God had in mind in granting deliverance.

Psalm 57. 'Through the night of doubt and sorrow' in the care or under the wings?

This psalm asks the question, 'Where are you?' The title says David was *in the cave* (more probably 1 Sa. 21 than 1 Sa. 24) but David places himself *in you, in the shadow of your wings* (1). In flight from Saul, and about to spend a night (4, *I lie*, 'lie down') as a lone fugitive, the cave looms above him, but he sees it as the outspread wings of his God. Because of this, the opening cry of prayer (1) turns into a concluding cry of praise (9, 10); his confidence in prayer (2, 3, *I cry . . . he sends*) turns into steadfastness in praise (7, 8); and his sense of the power of his enemies (4) becomes a conviction that they are doomed (6). Yet what is important to David is not that he should be delivered or his enemies trapped but that God should be *exalted* in *glory* (5, 11).

1 *Mercy*, unmerited grace. **2, 3** Confidence ('as *I cry* so *he sends*') arises from a sense of God: supremely exalted, *God Most High*; irresistible in purpose (*fulfils . . . purpose, cf.* Phil. 1:6); and of 'changeless *love*' and *faithfulness*. **5** How true to life that the buoyant spirit of 2, 3 is at once challenged by the threats of life (4)! What a lesson in spirituality that, with equal immediacy, the threats are challenged by a cry to the exalted God! **6** With the recollection of God (5) comes the assurance that evil will be its own downfall. **7, 8** David has faced (4) and then, by seeking God's glory (5), has outfaced the foe. He now summons himself to praise. *Soul*, (lit.) 'glory', probably a metaphor for offering 'my very best' to God. *Awaken.* Having tried to settle to sleep amid danger (4), David now feels ready to face the new day with praise. **9–11** David takes seriously that wider purposes than his personal triumph will be fulfilled, including a world-wide role, for he was chosen to be king over a nation which had a special calling in relation to all the nations (Gn. 12:3). And he had so faced his difficulties that he now had a valid testimony to God's *love* and *faithfulness*.

Psalm 58. The only help, the great appeal

While doubt surrounds the translation of *rulers* (1), it is plain that those who administer justice (whether human judges or angelic beings charged with maintaining order on earth) are failing to do so (2). Consequently, appeal is made to God (6) to intervene, and the psalm ends with joy for the *righteous* (10) and public awareness of a just God (11). The intermediate sections (3–5, 7–9) deal respectively with the character and doom of the wicked. This psalm speaks profoundly in respect of injustice on earth and the failure and connivance of those in whom its administration is vested. We are being simply unrealistic if we shy away from the rigour of v 6 for instances abound where we rightly cry to God to stop the mouth of injustice in high places.

1,2 Righteousness violated. *Rulers*, (lit.) 'silence', possibly 'Can it be that in silence you speak righteousness?', *i.e.* serve the cause of justice by keeping quiet. A small vowel-change offers 'mighty ones', whether earth's great ones or heavenly principalities and powers.

3–5 The character of the wicked. Deviancy (*astray . . . wayward*) and falsehood (*lies*) are their birth-inheritance (*cf.* 51:5); they carry a poison within, and are incorrigible: (lit.) 'like a deaf cobra that stops its ears', both unable and unwilling to hear any call to be different (4; *cf.* Rom. 1:28–32; Tit. 3:3).

6 The great appeal. Since the accusation pinpointed speech (1), divine judgment is invited to stop the mouths of those who abuse their position and to destroy their power to hurt. This is holy realism – like asking God to bankrupt the firms of arms dealers, or to make terrorist bombs explode in the hands of those who make or set them. If people are irreversibly set in their ways and immune to appeal, nothing is left but to consign them to God the all-holy.

7–9 The doom of the wicked. Four pictures of 'coming to nothing': water running off the surface of the ground and vanishing (7); a discharged arrow which 'as it were withers' – falls to the ground like a dead leaf (7); a slug 'that goes away to melting', leaving only an empty shell (8); a pregnancy that issues in death and not life (8). **9** *Before your pots . . .* is possibly a proverb of suddenness ('Before you can say Jack Robinson'). Dry thorns flare immediately but before the heat can reach the pot . . .! *Green or dry.* The words (lit.) 'living' and 'heat' are not exemplified in this metaphorical meaning. Possibly a reference to the Lord: 'As the Living One, as Wrath itself, he will blow them away'.

10, 11 Righteousness vindicated. *Bathe their feet*, a metaphor for entering into victory (68:23). *Men will say.* Exactness in the execution of justice is a potent influence upon society, (Dt. 19:18–21).

Psalm 59. Top security

The psalm falls into two parts (1–10, 11–17). The first begins with a prayer for deliverance

(1–2), extending into a prayer for worldwide judgment (5); the second, with a prayer for requital (11–13b) sought as providing worldwide revelation (13cd). Each prayer is followed by the 'prowling dogs' theme (6–7, 14–15) and this in turn leads to *But you* (8–10) and *But I* (16–17).

The background story in 1 Samuel 19:10–12 suggests a one night ambush at David's house, but such a story is told only in its essentials and the whole period beginning at 1 Samuel 19:10 leaves plenty of time for the persistent threat of which the Psalm speaks (6, 14). At some point in his flight from Saul, David slipped through the watchers and home to Michal. Saul had to act with circumspection because of David's popular repute but doubtless hoped at first to despatch David by unattributable murder. When David's escape made this impossible, the ambush was set.

The recurring theme of the psalm is top-security in God: *protect* (1), 'set me on high'; *fortress* (9, 16, 17), 'high-refuge' – a height inaccessible to the foe. Note how David moves from the plea, 'Be my top-security' (1), to a climax of confidence, 'You are my top security' (17).

He started with prayer (1–5). He had a real trust in the sufficiency of prayer: aware of the forces against him (3) it was yet enough to say *Deliver ... protect ... save ... arise to help.* The appeal for God to bring in, even now, the final, worldwide judgment (5) is a measure of David's sense of his own innocence (3, 4) of the charges levelled at him: even before that tribunal he would have nothing to fear. But his confidence is not in innocence but in prayer.

He continued with faith (6–10). The prowling dogs *return at evening* (6) but as David peeps through the lattice it is not in fear of them but watching for God (9), confident of his leading (10) and that he will survive the threat to 'see the last of' (not *gloat over*) his slanderers.

He maintained moral rigour and commitment (11–13). In v 11 David speaks of *my people* because in principle, though not yet in fact, he is their king. As such, he is not seeking any mere personal relief but wants God to act so that the nation will learn the lesson and the world take note of the moral providence of God at work on earth (13). Likewise, his concern was not 'getting his own back' but that *sins ... pride ... curses ... lies* (12) should be punished.

In the thick of the trouble, God brought a song to David. The dogs were still prowling (14, 15) *But* (16) 'as for me, I sing ... (17) I make music'. How astonished the watchers must have been to hear David and Michal at morning and evening worship!

Psalm 60. Unfurling the banner

David was in trouble of his own making. According to 2 Samuel 8:3–7, he caught Hadadezer of Zobah with his back turned. Hadadezer was busy securing his frontier in the far north and David opportunistically invaded the south. But before he could savour his victory, news came that Edom had caught David with his back turned and invaded across the valley of the Dead Sea. With the king and the army miles away, it looked as if the infant kingdom of David would perish before it was well begun. The situation is expressed in brief in v 1: the real danger is not Edom but divine anger (expressed through Edom). Therefore only prayer (*now restore us* – to your favour) is the answer. The *shaken land* (2, *cf.* Ex. 19:18; 1 Sa. 14:15), the *wine* of staggering (3, *cf.* Is. 51:17) picture the divine presence and anger, but there is a banner that can be unfurled (4), the banner of prayer (5). For in essence, this is the situation: God has made promises regarding the land, the people and the present enemies (6–8). God alone is our hope (9, 10), therefore prayer is the only way (11). The message is wider than the occasion: in every crisis – even one of our own culpable making – the solution is to repeat the promises of God and to unfurl the banner of prayer. When we are unfaithful, he abides faithful: he cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13).

1 It is characteristic of biblical thinking to trace the *desperate times* (3) directly to the hand of God. It is not impossible that Hadadezer encouraged Edom to open a second front. But the way to deal with situations is to go straight to the source. Whatever justification David might have had for attacking the Philistines (2 Sa. 8:1) he was not justified in conquering Moab and Ammon (2 Sa. 8:2, 12; *cf.* Dt. 2:9, 19). To attack Hadedezer was simply to ape the opportunistic policy of worldly powers. No wonder the Lord was angry! **4, 5** *Cf.* Ex. 17:8–16. Moses saw his uplifted hands as a banner against the enemy and also touching the throne of God in appeal. Doubtless David had this in mind: Edom's attack was like that of Amalek (Dt. 25:17–18). *Against the bow* or 'in the cause of truth'. **6–8** *From his sanctuary*, better 'in his holiness': he has pledged his holy word. *Shechem ... Succoth*, the central areas of Palestine and Transjordan; *Gilead ... Manasseh*, the northern areas straddling Jordan. These typify the land the Lord promised. *Ephraim ... Judah*, the two main components of the people to whom the promises had been made. Dignity (*helmet ... sceptre*) belongs to his people; menial status (*washbasin ... sandal*) and subordination (*over Philistia*) to others. **9–11** *No longer ... with* is transformed to *with God* by the submissiveness of suppliant prayer. The unfurled banner avails towards God as well as (4, 5) against the foe.

Psalm 61. Fainting heart ... rising prayer

Like many psalms, Psalm 61 opens with prayer and ends with praise. This is a biblical sequence, for prayer begets a confidence in God that expresses itself in praise and is answered by acts of God to which praise is the right response. The initial request is for a hearing (1) spelt out in prayer for security based on past experience of God's protective strength (2, 3), for unending fellowship based on an established relationship (4, 5, translate 'O let me dwell ....'), and for the endless reign of God's king (6, 7). Since the continuance of David's kingship was in question, his flight from Absalom is an acceptable setting for the psalm, but it beautifully speaks to us about a security that lifts us above the threat, a strength within which we are safe, a warmth of loving, protective welcome and a king who ever reigns.

Notes. 2 *From the ends*, from earth as remote from heaven. *Higher than I*, such as I could not, unaided, reach. 4 *Tent*, God's home, as the Tabernacle (Ex. 29:44–46). *Wings* (Ru. 2:12; Lk. 13:34). 5 The reason (*For*) behind seeking entrance to God's home: a human vow (of self-commitment, loyalty) and a divine gift of inheritance (Eph. 1:13, 14). 6 David prayed according to the conventional formula, 'May the king live for ever', but the Lord answered by setting on David's throne a truly eternal king (Lk. 1:31–33). Prayer is always answered more fully than we can ask (Eph. 3:20). 8 *Praise ... fulfil.* Praise without serious and sustained moral commitment is unreal.

Psalm 62. Power working by love

We have much to fear and nothing to rely on or trust in humankind. Consequently, under human pressure in all its reality, where is our resource? Only and perfectly in God! This truth is stated (1, 2), repeated as self-encouragement (5, 6), commended to others (7, 8) and grounded in a word of God (11, 12). This is no 'ivory-tower' doctrine but one proved in the hard school of experience: that people can be very menacing (3, 4) and that the world offers no solution either in its people (9) or its practices (10).

1 along with vs 2, 4, 5, 6, 9 begins with a particle (ignored by NIV) meaning 'But yet'. There are many pressures 'but yet' (1) *rest in God*; many alternative strengths proposed 'but yet' (2) *he alone is my rock*; many reasons why the foe cannot succeed 'but yet' (4) *they fully intend*; and, notwithstanding their intentions in all, their real threat 'but yet' (5) *find rest.* And should anyone say you need other strengths as well, reply 'but yet' (6) *he alone*; or if they point out what a help people could be reply 'but yet' (9) *men are but a breath.* Thus the great truth of the total strength of God to keep his people at rest in life's turmoil has been hammered out in experience, in the face of contrary facts and alternative advice. *Finds rest*, 'is stillness'. 2 *Fortress*, top-security (59:1, 9, 16, 17). *Never ... shaken* NIV omits an adverb, 'never seriously shaken'. This is realism: life has its shaking experiences but v 6 is also true, we cannot be shaken out of our top-security. 3, 4 How true of sinful mankind – to break down the weak (3), dishonour worth, resorting to lies and deceit! How unlike God (Is. 42:3), and his true servants (2 Cor. 4:2; 13:9)! 5 In times of stress it may be necessary to command ourselves to do what we know to be true. 6 *Shaken* (*see* v 2). 7 *Honour*, the reputation and position the enemies would destroy. 8 *Pour out.* Personal rest in God has to be wrought out in the place of prayer (Phil. 4:6, 7). 9, 10 The command to 'sole-trust' in the Lord is supported by a dissuasive regarding humankind (9), their ways and their resources (10). *Low ... high*, an idiom for 'all alike'. 11, 12 God has power (unlike man in his insubstantiality, 9) and unchanging love (unlike man's deceitfulness, 9). Not only so, but his loving power is an active force of moral providence (12) whereby he 'fully requites' (*reward*). Therefore we can trust him for our welfare and against the works of our enemies.

Psalm 63. Morning longings ... night thoughts

David experienced *the desert of Judah* (title) in his flight from Absalom (2 Sa. 15:23, 28; 16:2, 14; 17:16, 27–29). In that life-sapping heat his thirst was rather for God. *Earnestly I seek* (1) is rather 'early I seek': his dawn-thoughts cover his present state (1), a thirst for God gripping his whole being (*soul ... body*); his past experiences (2, 3) of God's *power*, *glory* and *love* enabling him to face the new day with praise; and future (4, 5) responsive praise: a *soul ... satisfied* and *singing lips.* But also *on my bed* there are night-time thoughts, of a past (6, 7) in which, (lit.) 'you have proved to be my help', prompting a song; of a present of mutual commitment (8, *I ... to you, your right hand ... me*) and consequent safety (9); and of a future bringing judgment, joy and triumph (10–11). This psalm reveals 'not the groping of a stranger, feeling his way towards God, but the eagerness of a friend, almost of a lover, to be in touch with the one he holds dear' (Kidner). David speaks of God's love for him (3) but it is his love for God that makes us pray, 'Oh for grace to love thee more!'

1 God is personally known (*my God*), given priority in time ('early'), and in desire (*in a dry*

land . . . no water). **2** Lit., 'So' *I have seen, i.e.* as the solution to such a longing as v 1 expresses. God had previously satisfied the longing soul and would surely do so now. **4** Again 'So' *I will praise.* Places change. David is no longer able to approach the sanctuary, but God does not change. He will still reveal his power, glory and love – even in the desert – and receive praise for it. **9–10** The spirituality of 1–8 is neither escapist nor other-worldly but the very essence of practical living. The situation was one of conflict, thrust upon the king, which must be resolved by victory and defeat. As they are intent on destroying David, it will be their own destruction they will bring about: *will be destroyed*, 'are bound for destruction'. This is the active moral providence of the love and power of God, which 62:11, 12 affirms. **11** Absalom threatened David as king (*cf.* 2 Sa. 15:4, 10). In speaking of himself here as *king*, David is asserting that 'God's gifts and his call are irrevocable' (Rom. 11:29).

Psalm 64. The retributive God

Personal experience and public events often call in question the existence of a just God and an active moral providence. If a good God really ruled the world would there be such imbalance of fortune between plainly good and plainly bad people? Would wrong so often succeed unscathed? This psalm answers by asserting divine retribution. David's evil-doing (*wicked*), trouble-making (*evildoers*) enemies (3) sharpen their sword-tongues and aim poisoned arrow-words, planning well hidden, sudden assault (4); confident in their planning, they act *without fear* and ask 'Who will pay heed?' (5) – scouting the existence of a holy God who observes and reacts. But the very weapons they use will be turned back on them – the arrow and the tongue – and with like suddenness (7–8)! For however cunning the mind of man (6), God knows where to aim and the moral providence they scorned will become a matter of public testimony (8, 9). But God's just providence which works one way in retribution works also the other way in protection: the voice that prays in trouble for protection becomes the voice that, within the divine refuge, rejoices in praise (10).

A^2 (vs 1–2) Praying for protection
  B^1 (vs 3–4) The attack
    C^1 (vs 5–6b) Denial of retribution
  B^2 (vs 6c–8b) The counterattack
    C^2 (vs 8c–9) Affirmation of retribution
A^2 (v 10) Rejoicing in protection

1–2 Praying for protection. *Complaint* – not 'complaining' but sharing trouble. **2** *Conspiracy*, 'clique'

3–4 The attack. *Fear*, fear of reprisal.

5–6b Denial of divine retribution. *Who will see? i.e.* 'look at' so as to take note and do something about it.

6c–8b The counterattack. *Cunning*, 'deep'. Translate 'Though the mind . . . deep, yet God. . . .' It is possible to conceal a plan from people but not from God. However deep the heart, his arrow is on target. **8ab** is difficult to translate, but NIV establishes the essential point in vs 7, 8 that the wicked are punished with their own weapons (3, 4).

8c–9 Affirmation of divine retribution. *Cf.* Is. 26:9.

10 Rejoicing in protection. Joy comes before the solution. The acts of God are sudden (7), not necessarily immediate, but while they wait in his protection those who are 'right with him' have a joy independent of worldly fortune.

Psalm 65. The crowned year

Every year was 'crowned' with the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles – the removal of sin (Lv. 16) and harvest-thanksgiving (Lv. 23:39; Dt. 16:13–15). But this psalm reflects a year that was markedly special. There had been a notable answer to prayer (2, 5); sin had been an overpowering reality (3); God had done awesome deeds (5), involving stilling the nations (7) and establishing a worldwide reputation (2, 5, 8); the harvest was particularly abundant (9–13).

There is one recorded year which provides an illustration: when Assyria threatened Zion and was overthrown by an act of God (Is. 36–37). Rebellion against Assyria had brought them into a situation of powerlessness (Is. 37:3) but prayer had been answered (Is. 37:4, 14–20, 21), the Lord had stilled the tumult of the nations (Is. 37:36–37), and the provision of harvest for two years, without human activity, was offered as a proof that it was no accident but the work of God (Is. 37:30). But within the experience of David the situation recorded in 2 Samuel 21:1–14 suggests an equally apt background to the psalm as the three-year famine was ended not by David's ill-judged and sinful expedients (2–9) but by answered prayer (1, 14). In three sections, the psalm unfolds it all.

1–4 Prayer, atonement, reconciliation. The people draw near to God in praise and dedication, addressing him as the one who answers prayer, experiencing the richness of being brought near to God by atonement. **1** *Praise awaits*, (lit.) 'Unto you silence/stillness is praise'. 'Stillness' may mean 'what is still there', *i.e.* 'Praise is ever yours'; or the expression may capture a moment of awed silence before the God who had wrought such a deliverance that no words were possible. *Our vows* (*cf.* 61:8), vowing to God was customary in crises. **2** The

implication is that prayer was answered in such a way as to suggest that this God must one day be recognized by all people everywhere. Deuteronomy 4:6–8 links a praying people and an impressed world. 3 *Overwhelmed*, 'overpowered', gripped in the mastery of sin. *Forgave*, 'covered', 'made atonement for' (NIV mg.), not by hiding out of sight but by paying the price that 'covered' the debt. 4 Atonement brings blessedness, is apportioned by the elective choice of God, brings us near and makes us accepted in the *holy* place itself.

5–8 Deliverance, domination, revelation. The answer to prayer came in *awesome deeds* by which God showed himself to be *our Saviour*, worthy of worldwide trust. The power of the Creator was used to still the turbulent nations with the result that in every place people would be brought to fear him. It is typical of the psalms to generalize in this way, reaching out from some specific act of God to sketch the widest panorama of his sovereignty and power (*cf.* Ps. 67). 7–8 The *awesome deeds* of God overmastered the *nations*, even to the extent that his *wonders*; 'signs' were reported *far away* and provoked *fear* (*cf.* Jos. 2:8–11).

9–13 Care, lavishness, provision. At the end of a year when Assyrian occupation of the land made agriculture impossible, there was still an abundance (*cf.* Is. 37:30). This was God's *care* (9), his lavish fertilization (10) whereby plenty crowned the year (11–13). 9 *Streams of God.* His heavenly rivers, holding water in store for the earth. The picture is fanciful but the reality is that earthly growth is always the product of heavenly forces, not human cleverness but divine productivity. 11 *The year with*, or 'the year of your goodness'. The year's end in bountiful harvest was but the crown on all the goodness that had preceded.

Psalm 66. His providence ... my prayer

The movement of this psalm from *the earth* (1) to *me* (20) *via us* (10) cannot for certain be explained. Did an individual preface his thankoffering (13–15) and testimony (16–20) with a hymn about the Lord's relationship to the world (1–7) and to his people (8–12)? Or did the people come in gratitude for deliverance (12) and an individual (?the king) express what was in their hearts (13–20)? The setting can only be conjectural but the message is plain.

What the Lord did, historically, for his people is the basis of an invitation to all the world (1–7). The world is summoned as it were to watch the Lord at the Red Sea, then to join his people in rejoicing in such a God and not to rebel against him (5–7). The salvation he wrought for some (Israel) is an invitation to all (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5:18–19) (*N.B.* 'us ... the world').

The Lord's present dealings with his people are to be understood in the light of what he did in the past (8–12). Whatever testing (10) they had endured was like the Red Sea all over again: when they passed through the water it was in order to emerge into liberty (12).

We must live through our sufferings in such a way that they become an opportunity for testimony: the *peoples* are summoned to *praise ... God* for the preservation, testing, deep hurt and ultimate liberation of his people (8–12).

There is no such thing as the church apart from those who compose it, the individual responding spiritually in dedication (13–15), testimony (16–19) and praise (20).

God's providential dealings with his people arise from his own will and deeds (10–12, six second person singular verbs), but the blessing arising does not come without prayer (17) and holiness (18). Indeed, the Lord performs his choicest, pre-determined wonders through the prayers of his people (Mal. 3:1; Lk. 1:13).

1–12 World praise. The experience, past (1–7) and present (8–12) of the Lord's people leads to an invitation to all to join in worship, acknowledging first what he has revealed himself to be (2, 4, *name*), then his acts and conquering power (3). 5–7 The Red Sea experience (6) was centuries old. The call, therefore, to *come and see* is deliberately imaginative. But having transported ourselves back to that great event we can then say (lit.) 'There let us rejoice' (6c), as if we were standing on the opposite shore, with the victorious *power* of the Lord and the fearful consequences (7, *cf.* Ex. 14:30, 31) of rebellion visibly before us. But God is still on the throne (8–12) and his people have an up-to-date experience to share: God is determined upon his people's good (9), (lit.) 'He has appointed us to life'; he imposes purposeful sufferings (10) in which they are *tested* for quality and *refined* for purity; he appoints all our experiences, however dreadful (11–12). When life hems us in (*prison*), when pressures mount (*burdens*), when people are atrociously cruel (*ride* roughshod), when one threatening circumstance follows hard on another (*fire ... water*) – it is all his personal act: we are never elsewhere than in our Father's hand (Jn. 10:29; 1 Cor. 10:13), the God of ultimate abundance (12; 2 Cor. 4:16–5:1; Rev. 7:9–17).

13–20 Individual praise. Individual experience in dedication (13–15), prayer (17), holiness (18) and answered prayer (19) provides a testimony to the church (16). The time of trouble (14, *cf.* 10–12) was faced by vowing to the Lord, a vow now symbolically discharged in *burnt offerings* (13) – the offering that withholds

nothing (Gn. 22:2, 12). But such a vow is not a bargain with God and the deliverance, when it came, was not God keeping his side of a bargain, but an answer to prayer. True prayer expresses our need verbally (17, *with my mouth*), is always ready to burst into praise (17, *on my tongue*, 'on the tip of my tongue'), and requires the context of purity of heart (18) – determination not to 'countenance sin in my heart'. In its turn, answered prayer flows out into praise (20) for it is living proof that *his love* has not (lit.) 'turned aside' *from me.*

Psalm 67. The harvest

It is exciting to listen to this psalm as an act of harvest thanksgiving: in vs 1–3, 5–7 possibly the worship-leader spoke (line 1) and the congregation responded (line 2). This correctly isolates the pivotal v 4 (spoken by all together?) with its prayer that all the world may come under the sway of Israel's God. The meaning is improved if we read, in v 4, 'will rule ... will guide', and in v 6, 'has yielded'.

1 *Cf.* Nu. 6:24–26. Israel was the uniquely blessed people. **2** But for God's people, their own blessedness is never an end in itself. They enjoy not only the Aaronic blessing (1) but also the Abrahamic blessing (Gn. 12:2–3) held in trust for the whole world. They are blessed 'in order to' be a blessing worldwide. **3–5** Bracketed by repeated prayer, v 4 affirms that worldwide happiness can only come when God is king and shepherd of all *nations. Rule*, 'judge' (not 'pass judgment on' but) 'put everything to rights' as a true king would. *Guide*, (*cf.* 77:20), act as shepherd. **6–7** Harvest has once more come in. The praiseworthy goodness of God is seen not simply in outstanding deliverances (Pss.65, 66) but equally in the providence of ordinary, annual mercies. This blessing is seen first as an earnest of greater blessings to come (6b) and then (7), since harvest is a metaphor of world-gathering (Is. 27:12–13), an earnest too of a harvest embracing *the ends of the earth* (7; Rev. 7:9–10).

Psalm 68. Cavalcade: a march of memory and expectation

With the repetition (1) of Nu. 10:35, the psalm recollects the onward march of Israel from Sinai towards Canaan (1–3). The marchers are the *prisoners* (6) whom the Lord led from Egypt and to whom he is now *father* and *defender* on their desert journey (4–6). It is they whom he brings into the *abundant showers* of Canaan (7–10) where he *scattered the kings* (14), announcing the news of his victory for joyous companies to publish abroad (11–14). Within Canaan also (to the chagrin of more *majestic mountains)*, he chose Mount Zion and ascended in triumph (15–18), as the God who saves his people and destroys his foes (19–23). Passing thus to his throne through ranks of girls playing tambourines (25) he is escorted by singers and instrumentalists and by representatives of his people in the presence of a *great congregation* offering praise (24–27). In prayer they seek from God the submission of the whole world to him (28–31) and in vision they summon the whole world to join in praise (32–35).

There is more here, however, than a march through memory. It is given visible, dramatic expression in an actual *procession* (24) which we may identify with the occasion when David brought the ark to Mount Zion (2 Sa. 6:12–16; 1 Ch. 15:1–28).

1 *May God* or 'God will' *etc.* the prayer of the past becoming an affirmation for the future. **2** *Smoke ... wax.* Respectively what is insubstantial and vulnerable. Such are the Lord's enemies before him, however invincible to us. *Wicked.* In his victories the Lord is always moved by moral considerations, acting out of his holiness, not out of favouritism to his people (*cf.* 21; Gn. 15:16). **4** *Extol.* Better, NIV mg. 'Build up a highway for him', (Is. 40:3). They are so to conduct their march that they are creating a road for the Lord to march among them. *On the clouds* emends the Heb. text in the light of 18:9–10 and pagan parallels, but, (lit.) 'through the deserts' suits this stanza better: the great Desert-Rider has come in gentle care of his wilderness-people (Dt. 2:8; 8:15). **5** *Cf.* 10:14; 146:9; Ex. 22:22–24; Dt. 10:18. **6** *Prisoners*, those he brought out of the 'house of bondage' (Ex. 20:2). *Rebellious*, Nu. 14:9, 22–23; 26:64–65; Dt. 2:14–16. Not only towards his enemies (2, 21) but also towards his people the Lord is the holy God, demanding obedience, imposing his disciplines. **7–8** *Cf.* Jdg. 5:4–5. Sinai was marked by natural manifestations reflecting the awesomeness of the Lord (Ex. 19:16–18) but the God of Sinai also uses his creation for the gentler providences of *abundant showers* (Dt. 11:10–12). Contrast the *sun-scorched land* (6) with the *refreshed ... inheritance* (9), the respective fates of the disobedient and the obedient (Acts 3:19; 5:32). **11** *The Lord ... the word ... the company.* Like a Commander-in-chief (2 Sa. 18:19ff.) the Lord announces his victory and, as in Ex. 15:20–21; 1 Sa. 18:6, (lit.) 'great was the crowd of women telling the good news'.

12 *Kings* (Jos. 12:7–24). *In the camps men* or 'she who stayed at home', (*cf.* Jdg. 5:28–30). **13** *Sleep among the campfires*, those of the 'home guard' not on duty; alternatively 'between the saddlebags', like a donkey sinking beneath the weight – those overborne by the demands of the occasion; or 'by the hearths', the women

'keeping the home-fires burning'. To such an extent is victory the work of the Lord that neither rest, nor exhaustion, nor non-participation by humankind makes any difference. *My dove.* By adding 'my' NIV creates a reference to the Lord's people whose adorning with *silver* and *gold* the Lord secures with booty from his victory without effort on their part. Without 'my', 13 refers poetically to the rich spoil itself. **14** *Snow ... Zalmon.* Does this mean that the kings were *scattered* like snow before the wind? Or did the Lord use a snow-storm to secure victory? (*cf.* Jos. 10:11; Jdg. 5:21). Or did the rubbish from war lie thick, like snow, on the ground? *Zalmon* (see Jdg. 9:48). The expression may be a proverb whose significance is now uncertain. **15–17** *The mountains of Bashan* may look superior but they cannot match Zion's greatness which consists of the Lord's choice, presence and power (16–17). *Sinai ... sanctuary.* Sinai was the scene of a most awesome manifestation of the Lord (Ex. 19). When he comes to Zion then, (lit.) 'Sinai is in the holy place' – all the values and realities of Sinai are now resident in Zion. (*Cf.* 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; Eph. 2:19–22; 3:16–19).

18 *Ascended ... gifts ... men.* At the end of the long wilderness march and the toil of conquest, the victorious Lord comes triumphantly to Zion. He has (lit.) 'taken captivity captive' (*cf.* Jdg. 5:12), *i.e.* he has taken as his captives those who made his people their captives. *Men, even ... the rebellious* acknowledge the Lord's victory by making tributary *gifts.* We could, however translate: '... gifts, namely, people – rebels to boot! – that the divine Lord might take up residence', *i.e.* erstwhile rebels have been won by the Lord, who did this so that he might dwell among them (Ex. 29:46; 2 Cor. 6:16). **19–20** When Paul used v 18 in reference to the ascension of the Lord Jesus (Eph. 4:8) he incorporated what vs 19–20 say about God's goodness to his people by adapting the quotation to 'gave gifts'. *Bears* (Is. 46:1–3). *From the .... Lord ... death*, possibly 'To the sovereign Lord belong the exits belonging to Death'. Death jealously guards the doors that keep its prisoners in, but even the doors belong to the Lord! **21–23** With typical realism the results of victory are described but note that when the Lord 'crushes' his foes and gives his people the fruits of conquest all is justified on moral grounds (21, 23). We who suffer from moral atrophy, who have little capacity for true moral indignation, and who are ever-ready for moral compromise, have no conception what sin really is, how it appears to and offends a holy God and how just is even the most apparently savage retribution. *Bring ... bring.* The reference is either to the inevitability with which the Lord's foes, seeking escape, will be brought to book, or to the constancy with which he brings his people back even if their enemies would disinherit them. **24–27** *Tambourines*, (Ex. 15:20: Jdg. 11:34; 1 Sa. 18:6–7). *Benjamin etc.* Two tribes from the south and two from the north suggest poetically all the tribes of the Lord's people. **28–31** As the procession marched toward and then ascended Zion's hill it recapitulated for marchers and watchers alike the whole long cavalcade of Israel's history and of the Lord's grace and power. Now the *great congregation* turns to prayer that the Lord will prove himself to be the same by manifesting his power (26–28) and grace (*temple* (29a), to bring the world into submission (29–31). *Beast ... reeds*, Egypt lying along the Nile. *Bulls ... calves*, respectively figurative of power and leadership and of subordination and following: kings and people alike. *Delight in war.* The infant kingdom of David was surrounded by nations at the ready to possess it, especially the Philistines. A reference to them here would bring together enemies great (Egypt) and small (Philistines), past and present. *Cush*, remotely beyond upper Egypt, representing earth's remotest bounds. **32–35** Prayer turns to praise, for the Lord will surely answer. Therefore all the earth can be called to extol his exalted sovereignty, his might, his dominion over Israel and over all (33–34), his awesome holiness and gracious indwelling (*sanctuary*,) his available power and his worthy praise (35).

Psalm 69. The cost, concern and realism of true devotion

David was experiencing life-threatening, prolonged hatred (1–4). It denigrated the godly in the land (6), estranged his family (8), made his religious profession the subject of mockery (10–12), left him dreading that the Lord had turned from him (17), heartbroken and friendless (20). The public story was that he was involved in (financial?) malpractice (4) but its secret cause was his devotion to the Lord (7) and to the Lord's house – indeed, the Lord himself was the real object of attack (9). The psalm was written with the crisis unresolved (29).

A^1 (vs 1–4) Prayer describing the deadly crisis
  B^1 (vs 5–12) Those needing protection
A^2 (vs 13–18) Prayer pleading the character of God
  B^2 (vs 19–29) Those meriting retribution
A^3 (vs 29–36) Prayer turning to praise

No recorded situation of David's life matches this but it is easier to insert it credibly into his history than to compose a scenario for another person at another time. David was

heavily involved with plans (1 Ch. 28:11–21) and financial provision (29:2–5) for the temple. Wealth excites jealousy and there could have been those in the land who felt that the needs of the poor and other national interests were being impoverished by what seemed to them to be a royal obsession. Charges of misappropriation would have been easy to make and not always as easy to rebut, bringing with them the sort of character assassination the psalm suggests. This is the most frequently quoted of the psalms in the NT mostly by the Lord Jesus: 4 (Jn. 15:25), 9 (Jn. 2:17; Rom. 15:3), 21 (Jn. 19:28; *cf.* Mt. 27:34, 48), 22 (Rom. 11:9ff.), 25 (Acts 1:20). Other verses too (12, 20) are more than matched by the Lord's experience of savage hostility. (Mt. 27:27–31, 39–44; Mk. 14:50).

1–4 Prayer describing the deadly crisis. Metaphors of drowning, quicksands (*cf.* 40:3) and overpowering floodwater (2) describe the grim reality of the situation. Prayer has been so long unanswered that voice and eyes are exhausted (3) while unnumbered people and *many . . . enemies*, without justification, are of sufficient influence to compel uncalled-for measures of restitution (4).

5–12 Those needing protection. *Guilt* refers specifically (Lv. 5) to situations where an offence was committed requiring restitution manward. Thus v 5 looks back to v 4. When the Lord examines David he will find *folly* ('silliness') in yielding to pressure and making restitution but he will not find *guilt.* **6–12** Because David had acted as if guilty, a potential for criticism was created against all who lived by trust and practised the presence of God (6). For the people of God are one body and when mud is thrown it sticks to more than its immediate target. As for David himself, he had lost the love of his family (8) – easy to imagine in the scenario sketched above: did they think their now wealthy brother might be more generous to them? But also his genuine religious practice and personal repute were brought into open contempt – in the mind of the important members of society who *sit at the gate* (10–12; Dt. 21:19; Ru. 4:1) as well as in drunken songs. And it was all without justification, for he was motivated only by devotion (7a; *cf.* 2 Sa. 6:14–21 where David's devotion also caused misunderstanding), and by his commitment to the Lord's *house* (9a). But he knew also that he was being used to get back at God (9b).

13–18 Prayer pleading the character of God. Note how the same metaphors (water, quicksands, flood) reappear from vs 1–4, as do people who *hate.* But now the single cry of v 1 becomes a sustained appeal, beginning with divine *favour* (acceptance) *love* (committed, unchangeable) and *sure salvation* (13) and ending with the *goodness of . . . (unchanging) love* and *great mercy* (the surging, passionate love of 1 Ki. 3:26). **18** *Come near*, (*cf.* of the 'next-of-kin', Lv. 21:2–3; 25:25; Ru. 2:20). *Rescue*, 'redeem', the action of the 'next-of-kin', taking upon himself, as his own, all the needs of his distressed relative (Lv. 25:25; Ruth 3:12; Is., 41:14; 43:14, *cf.* Ps. 19:14). *Redeem*, 'ransom', pay whatever price will meet the need (31:5; 55:18).

19–28 Those meriting retribution. See Introduction, Imprecatory Psalms. In vs 19–21 we learn the effect the enemies have had; in vs 23–28 the punishment they deserve. Like most imprecations, these rest on the principle enunciated in Dt. 19:19, that those who make false accusations must be judicially recompensed in kind. In the present prayer (for it is a prayer: all is committed to God without thought or purpose of personal vengeful action) they are brought for divine judgment. They acted in poisonous spite, figured in terms of food (21): their *table* will be a *snare* (22); they brought about bodily exhaustion (3): they too must suffer (23); they inflicted a sense of divine withdrawal (17): they will suffer its reality (24); his family was estranged (8): their homes will be destroyed (25); they made false accusations of guilt (4–5): they will be held irretrievably guilty (27); they set themselves against God (9): God will set himself eternally against them (28).

This is the awesome logic of divine judgment. Before we criticize a prayer like this we must be sure that we have ourselves been in a like place of suffering. We must also ask if our moral sense – particularly our sense of moral outrage – is sufficiently acute to make us sure what would be right and what wrong to pray. We must also ask if such a prayer accords with the mind of Christ, for much in the psalm has brought us face to face with his sufferings and his reaction was to pray that his tormenters might be forgiven. Surely this is now the only possible course. But there is more to be said: the Lord Jesus himself pronounced dire 'woes' (Mt. 23:13–36); he envisaged himself saying 'Depart, you who are cursed' (Mt. 25:41); the day will come when all will flee the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:15–17); he will be there when the books are opened (Rev. 20:12) – and at that day there wil be no prayer for forgiveness, only the logic of divine justice eternally applied. In a word, there is such a thing as pure anger and here, in one who longed for justice, the OT reflects that aspect of Christ's character. **28** *cf.* Ex. 32:32; Dan. 12:1; Lk. 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 21:27.

29–36 Prayer turning to praise. While the *pain* persists, *praise* will also persist, pleasing God, providing an encouraging testimony, based on the assurance that prayer will be answered

and worthy to become the song of all creation, for, when the present distress is over, stability will return to the land (35) for those who *love his name* (36).

Notes. **31** *Horns and hoofs.* Horns would attest its age, hoofs (Lv. 11:3–4) its 'cleanness': *i.e.* more delightful to the Lord than an offering that fulfils all requirements is the thankful heart. **33** *His captives, cf.* 26. In every circumstance, we are the Lord's, even when people think we are totally at their mercy. Our bonds are his bands (Eph. 4:1; 6:20; Phil. 1:13).

Psalm 70. Help!

What Psalm 69 says at length, Psalm 70 expresses as a sharp, urgent cry. In both there is the same sense of personal threat (69:1–4; 70; 1, 2, 5), the same prayer against assailants (69:22ff.; 70:2–3) and for God's people (69:6; 70:4), but now brevity rules; the prayers have a 'telegraphic' quality. The same is true, comparing Psalm 70 with the almost identical 40:13–17. Words there which 'round out' the petitions are lacking here as if urgency forbade more than the bare cry for help. It is usually suggested that Psalm 70 adapts the earlier psalm for public liturgical use but it is much more likely to be a crystallization for private use in a crisis. It is good to have such a written prayer available for times of pressure when our thoughts cannot focus and our extremity confuses our powers of expression.

Notes. **2–3** *Shame . . . confusion . . . disgrace.* Disappointed hopes, reaping (public) shame. **4** Not joy because of the opponent's shame; joy in the Lord throughout the crisis.

Psalm 71. Running with all my might

In 1836 Charles Simeon retired after fifty-four years of ministry at Holy Trinity, Cambridge. A friend, discovering that he was still rising at 4 a.m. to light his own fire and spend time alone with God, remonstrated, 'Mr. Simeon, do you not think that, now you are retired, you might take things more easily?' 'What?' replied the old man, 'Shall I not now run with all my might when the winning-post is in sight!' Here is another old man (9, 18) running with all his might: ripe in experience of God (5, 6, 17), still challenged and pressured (4, 13), deeply reliant on prayer (1–9, 12–13), uplifted in praise (8, 14, 22–24), leaving the future to God (19–21), avid to prolong his testimony (17–18) – a glorious example for the retired, a challenging portrait for all. The psalm quotes from other psalms (1–3, 31:1–3; 4–6, 22:9–10; 12, 22:11; 13, 35:26; *etc.*) but thematically and circumstantially it belongs with Psalms 69, 70 and fits perfectly with the picture of David under false accusation and fearsome assault while, in his last days, he made preparations for the beloved house that was to be built.

1–3 Prayer within a secure position. Refuge has been taken in God (1) but is also constantly renewed (3). From this position, prayer is made for vindication (1, *shame*, exposed as a fraud, brought to public disgrace) and *rescue* (2, 4). **2** *Righteousness.* Salvation/deliverance can never be accomplished through compromise within the divine nature (Is. 45:21; Rom. 3:21–26). **3** *Refuge* copies 31:2. The Hebrew here reads 'habitation/dwelling' – 'a home in the rock'. *Always, see* vs 6, 14, respectively always sheltering, always praising, always expecting.

4–11 Lifelong divine care. Prayer for deliverance is nourished by an experience of God going back beyond the reach of memory, consciously enjoyed throughout *youth* (5–6) and now, in old age desired all the more as strength, but not opposition, diminishes (9–10). **5** *Hope*, the One on whom I waited with confident expectation. *Confidence*, the 'place' on which my trust rested. **6** *Relied*, 'been upheld'. **7** *Portent.* The charges levelled against him (see on Pss. 69, 70) make people look on him as a 'warning example'. But just as in the face of his direct assailants he reacts by recalling God (4–5), so when faced by public loss of reputation he reacts by finding again in God 'my refuge – and what a strong one!'. Thus what could have resulted in deep depression issues rather in praise (8). **10–11** 69:3 reveals a long-standing period of trial in which God has remained silent and even David wondered if his face had been turned away in rejection (69:17). His enemies are quick to capitalize on this, but . . .

12–16. Prayer (12–13, for divine nearness and the end of opponents), resting in *hope* (14a) abounds in *praise* (14b–15) and issues in *confidence.* The times that we most need to seek God (10–11) are not always when inclination and energy make it easy to do so. Insistent, committed seeking God in the face of threat is a central feature of this psalm (4–5; 7–8; 9–12). **12** *Quickly* (70:1, 5). **13** *Shame . . . scorn . . . disgrace.* Synonyms for public loss of repute, disappointment of hopes, 'reaping shame'. This boldness of prayer in the face of personal threat and danger to the cause of God (69:9) is something we need to recover. **15–16** Though under personal assault and calumny, David has nothing to say publicly about himself – by way of exculpation, justification *etc.* All his talk is of the Lord and him alone – his *righteousness,* (perfection of character, reliability of action, changelessness in purpose), *salvation* (power and willingness to deliver), *mighty acts* (conquering strength).

17–21 Lifelong human testimony and the desire for its prolongation. Matching vs 4–11 in the 'youth . . . old age' theme, the lifelong goodness of God seen there is now matched by lifelong sharing, first of what *you have taught* (17), God's revealed truth, next his *deeds*, his saving acts in the past (17), then (18, lit.) 'your arm', his personal power intervening in the lives of his people. **19–21** offer a summary of what he desires to share with the future: God's character, past acts, incomparable being (19; Ex. 15:11; Mi. 7:18–20); strange providences, reliable purposes (20) and certain recompenses (21).

22–24 Responsive praise. The psalm opened with prayer (1–3); in 12–16 prayer merged into praise. Now only praise remains – for God's faithfulness, holiness, redemption, *righteous acts* (lit. 'righteousness', see 2, 15) and answered prayer (22–24, *cf.* 13). To this exercise of praise David brings his fingers to play, his lips to sing, and his tongue to tell. **22** *The Holy One of Israel*, rarely used outside Isaiah (where it occurs about forty times), this title holds together two things: God's holiness and his identification with his people. He comes to us in the full reality of the divine nature, deigns to call us his and to allow us to call him ours.

Psalm 72. 'O the joy to see thee reigning!'

Apart from this psalm, only Psalm 127 has a title referring to Solomon. In each case it could be dedicatory, 'For Solomon' – here a 'prayer of David' (20) for his son. But the wording is that of the standard ascription of authorship and Psalm 72 fits well with the time and mind of Solomon. More than any other in David's subsequent line he could have prayed for himself as *the royal son* (1, lit. 'the king's son'); he had actual experience of the homage of kings (10; 1 Ki. 10:1–13) and of the wealth of the nations coming to Jerusalem (15; 1 Ki. 10:22). He was a king under whom peace and prosperity were the order of the day and he could well have been forgiven if he saw his empire as the first fruits of the world rule of the Messiah. His prayer at Gibeon (1 Ki. 3:6–9) and the psalm match each other in their kingly ideals. But at the same time the psalm runs beyond what even hyperbole could claim for any merely earthly and human king. It could remind Solomon of his high calling but only in the Messiah could that calling become sober reality. The psalm has a closely-knit structure in four stanzas

A^1 (vs 1–5) The caring king
  B^1 (vs 6–8) The world ruler
A^2 (vs 11–14) The caring king
  B^2 (vs 15–17) The world blessing

1–5 The blessing and its consequences: the royal mediator. In consequence of divine enduement the king's rule will be righteous and caring and creation itself will pour out its blessings. His reign will bring deliverance to his people and, responsively (5, lit.) 'They will reverence you . . . through all generations'. **1** *Justice . . . righteousness*, the exact application of righteous principles of rule. **2** *Afflicted*, downtrodden, humbled and humiliated. **3** Contrast Gn. 3:17–19 and *cf.* Am. 9:13. When the curse of sin has been dealt with and removed, creation itself will be renewed and rush to pour out its benefits. *Prosperity*, (lit.) 'peace', total wellbeing – peace with God, in society and within human nature. **4** *Needy*, exploited.

6–10 Spreading influence: the king and the kings. His gently beneficent reign, in which righteousness and reward will match each other and 'peace' will abound (6–7), will magnetize the world (8–10, *cf.* Is. 2:2–4). **6** *Rain . . . mown field*, a simile of fragrance (2 Cor. 2:14–16). **7** *Righteous . . . flourish.* Society will be such that the life of righteousness is made easy (contrast Am. 5:13); and the proper sequence of righteousness and reward will be evident (contrast 73:12–13). **9, 10** cover in turn those fiercely resistant to rule (*desert*), the opposed (*enemies*) and the remote: all alike will submit. *Tarshish . . . shores* involved long sea journeys; *Sheba . . . Seba*, probably the remote south of Arabia, difficult land journeys. The contrast between sea and land is intended to embrace all the earth.

11–14 The magnetic reign. The fact of universal homage (11) is explained by (12, *for*) the nature of his rule. This deliverance, care for the helpless, pity, salvation and redemptive concern explain the simile of *rain* (6). **12** *Needy . . . afflicted*, see 4 and 2. *Cry out*, *cf.* Ex. 2:24. **14** *Rescue*, 'redeem', the next-of-kin who makes their needs his own (*see* 69:18).

15–17 A prayer for the king. Following the foregoing descriptions of the king's rule and its benefits, this prayer for realisation follows naturally. The prayer spreads as it proceeds: from the king to his people, to the prospering creation and to the world. The tension between an actual and an expected king is evident here. The natural result of a king enthroned in the hearts of his people is that they pray for him (15); those who look forward in expectation pray, 'Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!' (Rev. 22:20).

18–20 are an editorial conclusion to the second book of psalms, *cf.* 41:13.

Book 3

Psalm 73. 'Not in vain, in the Lord'

We 'believe in God the Father Almighty' but often experience, our own and others', would call in question his almightiness, (for other forces seem to be in command); his fatherliness, (for life in this world contradicts the thought of a loving God) and, for many, his very existence: 'How can there be a God when . . .?' The book of Psalms is notable for facing, not hiding from, life. Book 1 opened with a credal affirmation (1:3) of the prosperity of the godly; Book 2 opened (42:3, 5, 9–10) by recording that life does not offer a straightforward correlation between virtue and reward, nor is the experience of the godly uniformly comfortable; Book 3 opens with the blunt question: Is godliness worthwhile or just a waste of time (13)? Since others have all the enjoyments (4, 5) and we get all the kicks (14), why not give up and join the happy majority (10)? Asaph has given us a psalm notable for its realism regarding what life is like, practical in its recommendations for facing harsh problems, and uplifting in offering an alternative view. In effect Asaph replied to his own despairing *Surely in vain* (13) with Paul's great affirmation, 'Not in vain, in the Lord' (1 Cor. 15:58). The psalm is a rounded treatment of this theme.

A^1 (v 1) Truth stated: God is good
  B^1 (vs 2–14) Poor me!
    C (vs 15–20) New perspectives
  B^2 (vs 21–26) Rich me!
A^2 (vs 27–28) Truth affirmed: yes it is good!

1–14 Truth in conflict. Verses beginning *surely* (1, 13) bracket the first section of the psalm and summarize its two parts. Truth (1) comes into conflict with experience (2–14). The truth is the goodness of God to his people; the conflict arises from their evident suffering (14) and the prospering of the wicked (3–5). The goodness of God in question is not his general benevolence (145:9) but the blessings of goodness pledged to his people, conditional upon trust and reverence (34:8, 9), prayer (86:5, 6; 107:6–9), and, here (1), purity of heart. Yet moral diligence, striving to maintain inward (13a) and outward (13b) purity has met only with plague and punishment (14). Not unreasonably, this provoked envy when the arrogant (3, people who live without thoughtfulness or concern) and the *wicked* enjoy *prosperity*, 'well-being'. He saw them die 'without distress' (4, NIV mg.) or terminal illness. They enjoy singularly trouble-free lives (5). Pride marks their character and aggressive exploitation (*violence*) of others their conduct (6). They show every evidence of 'self-indulgence' (NIV mg.) and forego nothing they fancy (7). Their tongues (ever, in the Bible, the yardstick of character) reveal their sense of self-worth – their assumed right to sit loose to moral values (8a, *malice*, 'evil'), to be 'top dog' (8b), to order all things in heaven and earth (9). They attract adherents, who willingly climb on to the bandwagon of their *abundance* (10), even if it involves subscribing also to their theology of an irrelevant God (11). Yet, devastating though this critique of *the wicked* is, observation shows that they enjoy a *carefree* life and *increase in wealth* (12).

15–20 New perspectives. In this perplexity over the moral inequity of life three principles of immense significance emerged. (i) In every situation practise loyalty to and safeguard the welfare of the people of God (15). (ii) Be found in the place of worship. Since Asaph could not share his problem without needlessly upsetting God's *children* (15), he had to wrestle alone but found the problem too weighty (16). Then, it seems, he realized that there is no need to be alone and betook himself to worship (17a) – the *sanctuary*, the place where the Lord promised to live and where he is always to be found. (iii) Consider eternity. Their *final destiny* is insecure (17–18); they will find themselves to have been victims of a 'total deception' (*ruin*, 18), not only *destroyed*, but terrified (19); and, disaster of disasters, without any reality in the estimation of God (20).

21–28 Truth triumphant. The two sections which conclude the psalm are unequal in length and have a clear bracket around them: one who knew himself to be *senseless, ignorant*, and *a brute beast before you* (21, 22) finds it *good to be near God* with the *Sovereign Lord* as his *refuge* (27, 28). In all his grief he was still a rich man: he had God: a secure present (23), future (24a) and eternity (24b), a heavenly and earthly wealth (25), a strength and an inheritance beyond the duration of earthly life (26), a goodness and refuge unavailable to those who are perishing under divine wrath (27–28), and, over against the silence of v 15, something to talk about (28). **21, 22** Paraphrase: 'When my thoughts turned sour and emotionally I was cut up, why, for my part, I was reacting as though I was spiritually untaught and in the dark – like a mere animal before you!' (*cf.* 49:12, 20). **23, 24** A fourfold wealth: peace with God (*I . . . with you*); God's grasp ('you have gripped my right hand'); God's plan for the future ('will guide'); and *afterwards . . . glory*. The sequence of thought in vs 23, 24a demands that 24b reaches into the *afterwards* beyond this life. But also this *afterwards* stands as a designed contrast to *final*

destiny, (lit.) 'their afterwards' (17). It leads into vs 25, 26 which emphasise *heaven* and the *portion* that is still his when outwardly (*flesh*) and inwardly (*heart*) this life, (lit.) 'comes to an end'. **26** *Portion.* The fulfilment for Asaph the Levite (1 Ch. 24:30 – 25:1) of Jos. 13:14, 33; 18:7.

Psalm 74. A voice in the darkness

As in a nightmare, this psalm relives the year 587 BC and the events of 2 Kings 24–25. The psalmist sees again the Jerusalem temple in ruins (3), hears again the full-throated roar of the enemy where once he had heard the word of God (4) and watches the swinging implements of destruction (5). There is something specially moving about (lit.) 'and now the carved panels – altogether – with axe and crowbars they have smashed' (6) as though the watcher had followed the destroyers, his heart silently pleading 'Not the panels, please, not the panels!' It seems 'for ever' (1, 10) since all this happened and yet there has been no sign of any lifting of divine anger (1), no word from God (9), no indication that God is going to act for his people, recall his promises or stand up for his name (19–21).

How very well the psalmist captures the 'agelong minute when thou are silent and the wind is shrill'! For indeed 'days of darkness still come o'er us' and the psalm offers us the reassurance that this is no strange thing, but ever part of the experience of the Lord's people – as of the Lord himself (Mk. 15:33–34); it also offers us a stake to which to tie our boat when this particular tide threatens to sweep us away. (i) The entire experience of darkness is enfolded in prayer that God will *remember* us in our protracted need (1, 2) and *remember* also (22, 23) that his own repute is threatened. (ii) The dreadful cause of the darkness is recalled in detail (3–11): the advice of the psalm is not 'Try not to think about it' but rather 'Ask God to come into it with you' (3), face the darkness with him. (iii) Plead the name of God (18–21): it is for his name's sake that he chose us to begin with and while for sure we can plead our need (*Remember the people*, 2) we can go to the heart of the matter with the plea *remember . . . your name* (18). (iv) Focus everything on the central reality of who and what God is (12–17). This is the focal point of the psalm.

A^1 (vs 1–2) Prayer: your neglected people
  B^1 (vs 3–11) Prayer: the enemy destroying
    C (vs 12–17) King, Saviour, Conqueror, Creator
  B^2 (vs 18–21) Prayer: the enemy reviling
A^2 (vs 22–23) Prayer: your neglected cause

The darkness is surrounded and filled with prayer and into the heart of the darkness is brought the light of the truth of God.

1–2 Prayer: your neglected people. These verses review the whole history of the people of God and put a question-mark beside each significant event: *rejected* challenges their fundamental position as the 'elect' in Abraham (Gn. 18:19); *purchased . . . redeemed* recalls the exodus-redemption (2 Sa. 7:23); *sheep* points to their wilderness experience under his care (77:20; *cf.* Is. 63:11); *tribe . . . Zion* marks them as the people of the promised land among whom the Lord God came to dwell. But in the darkness all this seems to count for nothing!

3–11 The enemy destroying the house. 8 At the fall of Jerusalem there were no other places in the land where the Lord was worshipped. The reference here may be to the temple itself, with a plural used to express its magnificence: '. . . the whole great place . . .' But the word translated *place* points more to the fact of meeting with God than to the place where it happened, *i.e.* in burning the temple 'they destroyed by fire every meeting with God (all possibility of festal gatherings) . . .' **9** (lit.) 'We do not see our signs' – things like the round of temple services, the recurring festivals, significant people, *etc.* which spoke to them of God.

12–17 King, Saviour, Conqueror, Creator. Seven times the emphatic pronoun 'You' occurs (13, 14, 15, 16, 17). The first four affirm the Lord's power over every opposing force; the last three affirm that it is he who imposes his order on the world. These are the very truths challenged by the psalmist's experience, for the enemy seeks to be triumphant and it is worldly power that has imposed its dreadful disorder upon the world! Nevertheless the thing to do is to challenge experience with truth, to stand in the darkness and say the creed.

Pagan mythology saw the *sea* as the opponent of the creator god and made it the dwelling of anti-god powers, the *monster* and *Leviathan.* Marduk, the Babylonian creator-god, was supposed to have defeated these dark forces before the field was clear for him to create the world. But what Marduk did only by repute the Lord did historically when he *split* the Red Sea, and cleft open its *streams* to make a dry pathway for his people, leaving the Egyptians dead to the scavenging beasts (14, Ex. 14 – 15).

18–23 Prayer: do not forget. 20 *Haunts, etc.* The *dark places* could be the secret hiding places in which the people sought escape from the Babylonians and to which they were tracked and slaughtered; or else the *dark places* are the areas to which they were exiled from Jerusalem. **22, 23** God is reminded how his name has been reviled and his person mocked (18) and exhorted to defend his neglected cause.

Psalm 75. 'Disposer supreme and judge of the earth'

In v 1 we meet the thankful community. By *wonderful deeds* God has shown that he is what his *name* declares him to be and that he is *near* (34:18), the next-of-kin assuming responsibility for his people's needs. Then, maybe through a prophet (*cf.* 2 Ch. 20:13–17), the word of the Lord came to them, explaining to them the meaning of the experience through which they had passed.

2–5 the voice speaks from God: when everything seems unstable he remains the ground of stability (3), in particular addressing his word of rebuke to the *wicked* as they make their bid for power (4, 5). **6–8** the voice speaks of God: the decision who rules is not made on earth but in heaven by the God who appoints destinies and makes the *wicked* drink their appointed potion.

9–10 Finally another voice speaks. Similarity with the royal vow of Psalm 101 suggests that it is the king, committing himself to praise (9) and to the creation of a morally sound society (10).

What was the situation? Was it David's restoration after Absalom's rebellion (2 Sa. 15 – 19)? Was it Hezekiah and his marvelling people after the divine rout of Sennacherib (2 Ki. 18 – 19)? We cannot tell, but our understanding of a great truth does not depend on the incident which illustrated it: earthshaking events do not shake the almighty hand that holds the earth in place (3). 'God is still on the throne'. No matter how dominant wicked people may appear, the voice of God speaks against them (4, 5) and their downfall is certain (8). They are not of God and they will come to nothing (Acts 5:38). The wonders of God should meet with thanksgiving (1) and with commitment to reproduce on earth (10) the values he enunciates (4, 5).

Notes. 2 *You say*, an interpretative NIV addition. *Judge* (also 7) in the fundamental sense of 'put things to rights'. 4 *Horns*, symbol of dominant strength. 5 *Against heaven*, 'on high'. *Neck*, with face assertively thrust forward. 6 (Lit.) 'Not from east . . . west . . . desert (*i.e.* south) comes uplifting' (Rom. 13:1). 8 *Cup* (*see* 60:3; *cf.* Is. 51:17; Jn. 18:11).

Psalm 76. 'The Lion has triumphed' (Rev. 5:5)

Psalm 76 explores the *wonderful deeds* of 75:1. Both psalms have close affinity with 2 Kings 18, 19. Even though it is not possible to prove that they arose from the Assyrian debacle it must have been some such divine victory. The 'Lion' theme is concealed by NIV *tent* (2) where the word, in every specific use, refers to a lion's den (10:9; Je. 25:38). Such a motif suits the drama of the psalm and mirrors its final fulfilment in the Lion-Lamb of Revelation 5.

1–3 The Lion's den. With a repeated emphasis on place (*in Judah . . . in Israel . . . in Salem . . . in Zion*) we are told that the Lord is *known* (1, lit. 'self-revealed') in victory, notwithstanding the military prowess (3, *arrows . . . shields . . . swords*) of the foe. The Lord who dwells among his people in unspeakable condescension has awesome power over all the power of the enemy.

4–10 The Lion's triumph. The reference to *mountains rich with game* (lit.) 'mountains of prey') continues the lion theme. NIV *more majestic than* is possible, but better: 'You are resplendent, majestic (returning) from the mountains of prey'. The lion went out hunting and returned with majestic step, covered with glory, totally dominant. There are two sides to this victory: (i) 'Victory over' (5–7), (*cf.* 2 Ki. 19:35; Is. 30:31; 31:4). Human valour, trained ability and military resources yield to the mere voice of God (5–6). He needs no power outside himself for none can stand to face him (7). (ii) 'Victory for' (8–10). The land had been in turmoil, occupied by enemy forces, racked by the sound of war, but when God spoke all was quiet (8). This invincible intervention was designed *to save all the afflicted* (the downtrodden) (9). In this way (by his mere word) human *wrath* turns to his *praise* and whatever remains is gripped within his sovereign power (10).

11, 12 The Lion's just due. So what shall we render to the Lord who reduces to nothing (3, 5–6) all the power ranged against us? For the psalm ends by addressing (not *all . . . neighbouring lands*, 11, but) 'all who are round about him' – his people, enjoying his presence, the beneficiaries of his triumph. Our response is to pledge loyalty and live it out, bringing tributary gifts to prove its reality, for he is *the One to be feared* (11, lit. 'The (real) Fear') and (12) 'the hearts of kings are in his rule and governance'. Our only safety in a threatening world is in him.

Psalm 77. The tonic of memory

This psalm records a time of intense but unspecified suffering. Prayer was sustained to the point of exhaustion but brought no comfort (1–3) until finally the trouble outweighed the capacity to pray (4). Sleepless nights (4a) prompted memories of better times past (5–6) but only resulted in uneasy questioning of God (7–9). But then a new approach suggested itself (10): to remember the past works of God, especially his self-revelation in holiness and greatness (11–13), exercising his power over peoples (14), identifying himself with his people (15), both dominating and using the 'forces' of

nature (16–18), leading onward by his own unseen presence and by agents he raised up (19–20). With this the psalm ends abruptly – designedly so. It is as if the psalmist said to himself 'That's it! That's the way forward – not prayer for circumstances to be changed (1–4), nor fretful recollection that things are not what they used to be (5–9), but remembering the works of God and the God who performed the works.'

1–4 Memory's first failure. We are not told precisely what he prayed for but the implication is prayer for the adversity to cease, for circumstances to be changed for the better. In this sense he (3, lit.) 'remembered God': keeping God prayerfully in mind as the One who could intervene and perform the great transformation. In the light of the survey of the psalm above the lesson is clear: the believer's first reaction to adverse circumstances is not to ask God to change them, but to make use of the given revelation of God (10–20) to live within them. Prayer, though vehemently verbalized (1, lit. 'With my voice I shrieked to God, with my voice to God . . .') and untiringly pursued (2), was not the solution, because it expressed, in fact, a fretful refusal to accept God-given circumstances. Indeed God himself withheld the balm of sleep, bringing his child deeper into exhaustion till he could learn the precious lesson of resting upon revealed truth (4).

5–9 Memory's second failure. In the sleepless hours the mind turned to the past and memory dwelt on times of happy song (5–6). But this brought no comfort, only a questioning of God and his ways (7–9). Interestingly the questions seem instinctively to be phrased so as to bring reassurance, especially by introducing the five changeless covenant realities of *favour . . . unfailing love . . . promise . . . merciful (grace) . . . compassion* (passionate love). But the point rather is that questions are comfortless things; they arise from an unsettled mind and settle nothing. Hankering after the past (6) is no remedy for the present and no recipe for the future.

10–20 The tonic of a true memory. Suddenly thought takes a fresh turn: not now remembering God as a solution to problems (3), nor remembering former spiritual experiences (6) but remembering the wonder of God's past acts (11–12), the surpassing greatness of his holy character (13), and what he has done for his people in redemption (14–15), power (16–18) and providential care (19–20). **10** contains possibly insoluble problems of translation. The NIV offers a translation well suited to the context especially in offering a contrast between *the years of long ago* (5) – the memories that only teased – and *the years of the right hand of the most high* (10) – memories of the might of a favourable God. **13–20** *Holy* (13). At base the word points to all that makes God distinct, separate, unique and it is this sense (rather than the moral quality of his holiness) that is prominent here. He acts in mighty independence, free from outside constraint, doing what he will in heaven and earth. Comparison of v 13 with Exodus 15:8–11 shows that memory is concentrated on the great works of God from the exodus onwards. The progress of his people is traced from their redemption from Egypt (14, 15), through the Red Sea (16), to the awesome storms of Sinai (17, 18; Ex. 19) and onwards under the unseen leadership of the Lord (19) and the guiding hands of his shepherds (20). He is powerful against *peoples* (14), powerful for his *people* (15), powerful to deal with every adverse circumstance (16), powerful in using mighty forces for his own purposes (17–18), powerful to protect and provide in the inhospitable wilderness (19–20).

It is on this thought that the psalm abruptly ends. Circumstances they would never have chosen – the waters of the Red Sea, the 'great and terrible wilderness' (Dt. 8:15) – were his appointment. Indeed it was he who, unseen, led them into these very experiences (19) and provided for them in the thick of them (20). Here indeed is comfort. The holy God is totally free to do what he will and in his will is our peace. Wherever he leads he will also provide.

Psalm 78. The power of memory

The introduction (1–8) sets the scene for this long and wonderful psalm. It speaks of (i) a duty: each generation must pass on its sacred tradition to the next (3–4) according to the will of God (5–6); (ii) the content of the tradition is twofold: the deeds (4) and words (5) of the Lord; (iii) the objective being that the coming generations would *trust in God* (7, the word suggests a simplicity of faith), keep his *deeds* and *commands* in mind (7) and avoid the errors of the past – rebelliousness arising from lapsed commitment and inconstancy (8). But (iv) if all this is to happen there must be a true understanding of the past, a 'teaching' (*law*), expressed in common speech (*words*, 1), which explains (2) what has gone before: a *parable* is an instructive story or saying, here the use of incidents from the past (9–72) to illustrate truth; *things hidden*, 'riddles': by itself the record of the past is a tangle of events, an enigma or riddle needing interpretation.

This then is the purpose of the psalm: to clarify the riddle of the past so that it becomes a lesson for present and future. The psalmist sees a single principle in all the complexity of Israel's history and offers it as a potent clue for living.

He provides two reviews of history (12–39, 43–72), each introduced by a preface (9–11, 40–42). The prefaces are the essence of the psalm. The first states that the Lord's people (*Ephraim*) were defeated because *they forgot* (11); the second traces their repeated rebellions against the Lord to the fact that *they did not remember* (42). If only they had not forgotten, the enemy would not have triumphed; if only they had remembered, they would have lived obediently. This is the power of memory – and this is why, as he left us, the Lord Jesus instituted a memorial feast (1 Cor. 11:23–25). The historical reviews specify the truths on which memory is to feed and thus to mediate power for victorious, obedient living.

In any and every situation, whether the external threat of enemies (9–11) or the internal pressure of a wayward nature (40–42), suppose they had said, 'But he has redeemed and he will provide'; suppose they had lived in a proper fear of his anger and a due sense of his love! And it is the same for us. This is the power of an active, constantly refreshed memory, living with an immediate sense of redemption (12–14, 43–53. He has brought us out of bondage into liberty), provision (15–16, 54–55. In every situation he can and will provide), judgment (17–33, 56–64. Those who know him as Father should live in godly fear, 1 Pet. 1:17), and love (34–39, 65–72. He will never turn us away when we return to him for he knows our frailty, 32–39, and he is ever active for our welfare, 65–72).

9–11 Defeat because they forgot. 40–42 Rebellion because they did not remember. See 1 Samuel 31. Saul the Benjamite (1 Sa. 9:1–2) was particularly associated with the 'northern' tribes, variously called *Ephraim* and Israel. His home was in Gibeah (1 Sa. 10:26) which 1 Samuel 9:4 suggests was in the hills of Ephraim. After Saul's death it was in Ephraim that the rump monarchy of Ishbosheth established a kingdom (2 Sa. 2:8) and that the rebellious Absalom found it easy to rally the Israel tribes to his banner (2 Sa. 15:2, 6, 10, 13). The review of history thus begins with the downfall of the house of Saul and asks why it should have happened – for (9) the *men of Ephraim* were (lit) 'the best equipped bowmen'. For the Lord's people victory does not proceed from resources but from loyalty and obedience (10) prompted by remembrance (11). **41** On putting *God to the test*, see 56 below.

12–14, 43–53 God's redemption. These verses share the theme of coming out of Egypt (12, 43, 51), *i.e.* the great divine work of redemption (42). 12–14 stress the Red Sea crossing: the power of the Lord over every opposing circumstance; 43–53 concentrate on the plagues visited on Egypt: the power of the Lord to destroy the power of the enemy. *Zoan* (12, 43), an ancient capital city of Egypt. Each section ends with the thought of guidance and security (14, 52–53). The power of the Lord is against opposing circumstances and opposing forces but always for his people.

15–16, 54–55 God's provision. The first review of history moves from Egypt to the wilderness (15–16) as the scene of divine provision (provision for pilgrimage). The second review by-passes the wilderness to recall the provision of the promised land (provision for home-coming). Note how vs 54–55 begin with *his holy land* and end with *their homes*. This is the Lord's way, to take what is his and make it ours.

17–33, 56–64 God's judgment. The history of the people was marred by *sin*, rebellion and 'testing' God (17–18, 56–58). The emphasis in 17–18 is on testing his faithfulness – in Exodus 16, 17 they disbelieved his power to provide food and water, suspending belief until he proved himself; in 56–58 they tested his patience, disbelieving his holiness and judgment. Both were the occasions of divine wrath (21, 31, 59, 62). The tragedies of life (31, 33, 61–64), just as much as its kindly providences (15, 16, 54, 55) are the acts of God. **29–31** (*cf.* Ex. 16; Nu. 11; Ps. 106:15). What they asked was not food for their need sought in a spirit of faith, but satisfaction of greed clamoured for in a spirit of unbelief. God replied by granting in wrath what they asked, to their destruction. How often we complain when our desires are crossed, not stopping to think that the Lord is withholding what would harm. **32** refers to the wilderness generation (Nu. 14:28–33). No doubt, aware that they were living in divine displeasure, they sensed with terror the approach of death. **60–64** (1 Sa. 4).

34–39, 65–72 God's love. The Lord knows his people's hearts (34–39), deceitful, unreliable, but his passionate love (38, *merciful*) makes atonement, restrains his anger and remembers frailty (39); the Lord knows his peoples needs (65–72) and spontaneously rouses himself against their enemies (65–66), comes to dwell among them (68–69) and raises up over them the king of his choice (70–72). **35** *Rock* in itself is a picture of changeless stability but in the light of Exodus 17:5–6 it is also a picture of saving, life-giving action (*cf.* 95:1). *Redeemer*, the next-of-kin who makes his own the needs of his people. **38** *Forgave*. The verb has a basic meaning 'to cover' but in relation to sin it never means simply to put out of sight but always 'to cover a debt by paying the sufficient price'. **65** Rather 'like a warrior shouting aloud through wine', a remarkable simile designed to underline the Lord's excited commitment to the task of putting things to rights for his people.

67–72 The historical review began (*see* 9–11) with the defeat of Saul's monarchy; it ends with the dominance of Judah and David's accession, by divine choice (68, 70). The fact that the *sanctuary* has been built (69) suggests that the psalm belongs to the later reign of Solomon when the king's defection from the Lord (1 Ki. 11:1–13) first began to be evident. This would account for the abrupt ending. Saul's monarchy could not survive, notwithstanding military prowess (9); will David's last? With great artistry the poem stops with the accession of David, leaving the ruling family to draw its own conclusions – leaving us, too, to draw ours. For now as then the secret of life is trust and obedience fostered by remembrance.

Psalm 79. Praying and hoping in a day of wrath

Not all the adversities of life are evidences of divine wrath, as Job came to understand. But the warning predictions of the prophets left people in no doubt that when Jerusalem fell, the Babylonians (2 Ki. 24 – 25) were agents of divine punishment. By the time this psalm was written the ensuing ruination had lasted some time (5), but the sense of eye-witness experience is strong and suggests that the psalmist is a devout Jerusalemite who remained in Judah (2 Ki. 25:12), lamenting the devastation, longing for better days (13). The psalm alternates between 'they'-sections (1–3, 5–7, 10–11) and 'we'-sections (4, 8–9, 12–13). What happened in the past to others (1–3) implicates those who remain (4); the sins which called forth wrath (5–7, 8) are *our sins* too (9). God will not forget his detractors (10) or his sufferers (11) and *we your people* will once more offer praise (13).

1–5 Enduring judgment. Foremost is the hurt done to the Lord himself. His *holy temple* has been defiled (1). But as the sack of the city proceeded those who devoted themselves to him (*servants*, 2) and to whom he was devoted (*saints*, 'your beloved', 2) fell in such numbers that no one was left to perform the last duties of love (3). The situation, remaining unremedied, keeps the people of God in ongoing contempt (4). It is indeed a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31).

5–9 Under condemnation. Surely something remarkable must have occasioned such a judgment! No, just sin: 8 *sins*, 'iniquities', the consequences of a fallen, wayward nature; 9 *sins*, 'shortcomings', specific items of wrong. And not just 'their sins' as though the generation that perished in the sack or were deported to Babylon bore the sole blame: *our sins* too (9) – and if we have not likewise perished it is due to the extraordinary mercy of a sin-hating God. 5–7 must not be understood to reflect a perplexed or resentful spirit complaining of unfairness. In all the adversities of life, whether occasioned by divine wrath or part of the inexplicable but sovereign workings of his providence, our first reaction must be to bow in acceptance, as 5 implies. But may we not also pray for the overthrow of those who savagely use us for their own profit and leave our treasured possessions in ruin (7)? Part of the positive side of 'leaving vengeance to the Lord' (Pr. 20:22; Rom. 12:19) is the prayer that seeks the overthrow of every power that continues to mistreat the Lord's people. 8 *Hold against us*, 'remember' (Je. 31:34; Mi. 7:18–20). *Fathers.* In the Bible our sinful inheritance from earlier generations is never an excuse but always the occasion of greater guilt (Lk. 11:50). *Mercy*, 'compassion/passionate love'. *Come ... to meet* (Lk. 15:20). 9 *Forgive*, 'find and pay the price which fully covers our debt of sin'. Throughout vs 8–9 the appeal is only marginally to our need; it is fundamentally an appeal to the divine nature – note the emphasis on *your name* (9), *i.e.* what you have revealed yourself to be.

10–13 Entertaining hope. The hope in v 13 rests on two foundations: first, the Lord will always stand by his own reputation (10, 12) and, secondly, he will always stand by his threatened people (10–11) for even when labouring under the infliction of his wrath we are still *your people, the sheep of your pasture* (13). These two foundations are reflected in the contrasting uses of *reproach* in vs 5, 12.

Psalm 80. The smile and the frown

The plea for the light of divine favour runs through this psalm (1, 3, 7, 19). The contrast between the smile of God (3, *make your face shine*) and his frown (16, *your rebuke*, 'the rebuke of your face') says it all. Desperate though the situation is – the triumphant enemy (6), God's wrath (4), and the apparent undoing of the work of grace (8, 12) – the sole needed remedy is that he should smile, so powerful is the favour of God and so disastrous his displeasure. The disaster has fallen on the tribes of the north, *Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh*, the ancient 'camp of Ephraim' (Nu. 2:18), tribes linked with *Joseph*. Parallels with Psalm 79 (the 'shepherd/flock' motif [1; 79:13], prolonged divine anger [4; 79:5], mocking foes [6, 79:4]) suggest that the lament of a Judahite survivor of the Babylonian victory in Psalm 79 finds here a companion-piece from a survivor of the old northern kingdom.

The psalm is marked by a recurring refrain (3, 7, 19) in which urgency mounts as the initial cry *O God* (3) becomes in v 7 (lit.) 'O God, O Omnipotent One/O Omnipotence' and in v 19 'O Yahweh, O God, O Omnipotence'. But

though the urgency mounts, the reality remains the same: a change in the face of God has transforming power. For the problem was not that they had fallen into the hands of man – that was only the dreadful sympton – but that they had fallen out of the favour of God. So it is with all our defeats, and to be received back to a smiling, reconciled God is our remedy. It may be that v 14 should be understood as another refrain, further dividing the psalm into its stanzas. It certainly comes in the right place, but theologically it is of supreme importance. We cannot be restored to God (3, 7, 19) until first he *return*, reconciling himself to us (14). The great adjustment must be on his side. As regards this, we can only plead.

1–2 The shepherd and king. A very ancient theme linked with Joseph (Gn. 48:15; 49:22–24). *Enthroned ... cherubim.* The cherubim overshadowing the Ark were a pedestal for the invisible throne of the invisible God and also the meeting-place between the Lord and his people (Ex. 25:18–22). *Shine forth* or 'blaze forth' (50:2). No great outreaching of power is called for, only that the darkness of his disfavour be dispelled by his light. **3, 7, 19. Restore**, 'bring us back' (to yourself). *Shine.* (*upon us* is added by NIV). The request is only for a change in God; that the frown become a smile.

4–6 The strange provider. 4 (lit.) 'O Yahweh, O God, O Omnipotence', *i.e.* he is the Redeemer (Ex. 3:14–17; 6:6), he is God and he is himself every potentiality and power. *Smoulder*, 'smoke', expressive of divine holiness (Ex. 19:18) anger (74:1), separation from sinners (Is. 6:4–5). **5** *You* (Is. 45:7; Am. 3:6). The Lord uses agents (6; 79:1–3: Is. 10:5–15) but never ceases to be The Agent. **6** *Source of contention*, possibly as they squabbled over the spoils of conquest.

8–13 The vine-dresser. Like sheep among domestic animals, the vine among plants needs the most persistent care. Under this motif of patient providence, the psalm depicts the work of redemption, inheritance (8–9) and prospering (10). The sphere of influence (11) from the Mediterranean *Sea* to the *River* Euphrates was achieved under David and Solomon, but thereafter history became chequered and sovereignty constricted until Samaria fell to Assyria in 722 BC and Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BC. Isaiah 5:1–7 reveals the cause of this descent into an unprotected enclave where there is no fruitfulness for God there is no power against the enemy.

15–18 The right-hand man. Rachel, dying in childbirth (Gn. 35:18) called her little boy Ben-Oni, 'son of my sorrow' but his father renamed him Benjamin, 'son of my right hand'. In this way the psalm comes full-circle: *Benjamin* (2) has sunk down in sorrow and loss but faith says that the Lord has a *man at your right hand, the son of man* (17) who is looked for as the solution, the one, therefore, in whom the face of God will again wear a smile of favour. In the neatest way v 15 allows the theme of the vine to develop, for (Gn. 49:22, another Joseph reference) 'son' (15) can mean a vine-tendril. Beyond what the psalmist may have known, the Lord did indeed watch over his vine-people until in the fullness of the time (Gal. 4:4) the expected son-tendril came to birth, the *man at your right hand* (17) in whom we have been given new life (18; Jn. 10:10) and an unprecedented access to God (Eph. 2:18) to invoke his *name.*

Psalm 81. Bidden to the feast

The mid-month *feast* (3) to which this psalm refers could be either Passover (Ex. 12:18) or Tabernacles (Lv. 23:39) both of which were essentially exodus-remembrances (Ex. 12:26–27; Lv. 23:42–43). It is more likely Tabernacles because of the references to the Law and listening to the Lord (8–10, 11, 13; *cf.* Dt. 31:9–13) and to harvest abundance (10, 16; *cf.* Dt. 16:13–15). The psalm begins with the ordinance of God which the people must keep (1–5), moves on to the acts of God in deed (6–7) and word (8–10), and ends with the requirement of God that his people should obey him (11–16), dwelling on the dire consequences of disobedience (11, 12) and on victory and rich abundance (14–16) consequent upon obedience (13). Thus the psalm deals with the great central issues of the Bible: redemption and response. The people who are brought out of Egypt (6; the redeemed of the Lord, Ex. 6:6, 7; 24:4, 5) become at once people under the word of God (8–10; Ex. 19:3–6; 20:2–19) which they are called to hear and obey (8, 13; Ex. 24:6, 7; Rom. 1:5; Heb. 3:7–19; 1 Pet. 1:1, 2).

1–3 A mounting tide of acclamation – congregation, songsters and instrumentalists, trumpeters (3) – a whole people of praise – greets the *Feast.*

4–5a *Decree*, an unchangeable rule; *ordinance*, an authoritative decision of the Lord; *statute*, a testimony to what he is (*i.e.* the God of exodus redemptive power and holy law).

5b *Against Egypt* dates the feast from the time of divine action against Egypt to deliver Israel but the same words (lit. 'to go out over') are used in Genesis 41:45 of Joseph taking up his position as Lord of Egypt. The exodus was the supreme example of the Sovereign God in action.

5, 10, 16 are three first person utterances (5c, lit. 'A language/voice I did not know I began to hear') each concluding its own section of the psalm. The latter two represent the voice of the

Lord and the first, exceedingly difficult to interpret, is likely also to be the Lord speaking. If so it refers back to Ex. 2:24–25 (where *was concerned about* is, lit. '. . . and God knew'). Thus, everything begins for the Lord's people when he looks on their needs and 'knows', enters into a relationship of care towards them (5). Those whom he redeems and to whom he reveals his word (6–10) are invited to enjoy full sufficiency (10); those who obey are promised rich and miraculous sustenance (16) – *honey*, when the best of the past was water (Ex. 17:6).

6–10 trace events from the exodus-deliverance (6) to the Red Sea (7; Ex. 14:10, 19, 24; Ps. 99:6, 7), then on into the wilderness (7; Ex. 17:1–7) and to Sinai (8–10). The Lord liberates his people (6), answers their prayers and determines their experiences (7) and reveals his word (8–10). **7** *I tested you.* But Exodus 17:2 says they tested the Lord! Life's adversities (Ex. 17:1) are divine testings (Dt. 8:2) but if we come to them doubting his love, care and power to save, we 'test' him by suggesting that he must prove himself before we will trust him. **8–10** The foundation duty (8): obedience; the foundation truth (9): sole-loyalty; and the foundation itself (10): the Lord, the Redeemer.

11, 12 (Is. 5:5–7; Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). Because of disobedience, they were sent into the wilderness when they might have been enjoying Canaan (Dt. 1:32 – 2:1).

13 *Cf.* 8 (the Lord's central requirement), 11 (their central fault), and now (13) the key factor determining loss or gain.

Psalm 82. Judgment in the high court: a vision and a prayer

Poets do not always explain themselves and we, their readers, trail behind, making the best we can of their allusions.

1 The court in session. *Presides* is translated 'takes his place' in an identical context in Isaiah 3:13. The Great Judge himself enters to give *judgment among the 'gods'* – but who are *'the gods'*?

2 The accusation. The 'gods' have used their position to *defend the unjust*, 'pervert justice' and to favour wickedness.

3–4 The law. The prosecuting counsel opens by reminding his Lordship how the law stands: this is what the 'gods' should have done: to uphold the rights of the defenceless, *Weak . . . fatherless*, those without earthly resources, of either wealth or people; *poor*, the downtrodden, those at the bottom of life's heap; *oppressed*, the impoverished; *needy*, people who can be exploited by stronger, vested interests. Such are not to be favoured by the law but protected by the due operation of their legal rights and (4) they must be protected by law from the power (*hand*) of law-breakers.

5 The witnesses. Having stated the law (3–4), counsel now calls witnesses. The first (5a) accuses the 'gods' of lack of wisdom: they are ignorant rather than knowledgeable; they lack understanding/discernment in decision and action. The second (5b) testifies that under such government people are led astray, as though living in darkness, lacking direction and purpose. The third witness (5c) testifies to the breakdown of social structures and stabilities.

6–7 The sentence. 'Gods' or no 'gods', whatever be their status (6) they will suffer the death penalty like ordinary mortals (7).

8 Prayer. The vision of God giving judgment (1) is turned into a prayer that he will do so – worldwide because this is his right (8).

So what does it all mean? (i) The 'gods' may be the shadowy but real 'principalities and powers' working their own evil way in the affairs of earth (Is. 24:21; Dn. 10:12–13, 20; Eph. 6:12). The OT occasionally uses 'gods'/'sons of God' for angelic beings (8:5; Jb. 1:6). (ii) The duties specified in vs 2–4 are, however, those of Israel's judges (Ex. 22:22–24; 23:6–7; Dt. 1:16–17; 10:17–18; 16:18–20); their work is to exercise 'the Lord's judgment' (Dt. 1:17). To bring a case 'before God' and 'before the priests/judges' are interchangeable terms (Ex. 21:6; 22:8, 9; Dt. 17:8–13; 19:17). Furthermore, the Lord Jesus understood 'gods' as humans 'to whom the word of God came' (Jn. 10:35).

The balance is thus tipped in favour of earthly rulers considered in their high dignity, the responsibility they hold to God and for which they will be answerable to him. (iii) When earthly rulers fail (5), being themselves directionless, leaving people comfortless, presiding over social disintegration, there is still a true God to whom they are answerable (1, 6–7) and to whom we can pray (8).

Psalm 83. Foes around but God above

It is helpful to read 2 Chronicles 20 as an illustration of this psalm, but the situation here exceeds any coalition Israel ever faced. Rather than trying to associate it with some historical incident we should see it as a picture of the people of God finding a resource in prayer (1) in the face of a hostile world (2–8), fashioning their prayer in the light of the revealed power of God (9–15) and desiring the blessed outcome when the one Most High is universally acknowledged (16–18). The psalm teaches how we are placed amid a world that hates us because we do not belong to it (Jn. 15:18–25); how we should react: there is no way out, only prayer; where we

should rest: in the already-demonstrated power of God to overcome the world (9–12; Jn. 16:33; Rev. 1:17–18); what we should wish: not just personal relief from opposition, nor just the end of opposition, but the conversion of those who oppose (16, 18).

1–4 Your people. The psalm opens with the threat to the Lord's people expressed in the foe's determination to destroy them 'from being a nation' and to blot their name from memory (4), leaving them without a place on earth or a place in history. This is the deadly enmity of the world, evidenced in its reaction to and treatment of the Lord Jesus (Jn. 1:10; Acts 3:13–15). It offers no compromise and should be offered none (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1; Jas. 4:4). 3 *Cherish*, 'hide', hidden away in a secret, strong place as one would hide valuables. 4 *Destroy*, a strong word: 'efface/eliminate'.

5–8 Yourself. Not only his people but more specifically the Lord himself is the target of the alliance (5). It is true that he will never forsake us (Is. 41:10; Heb. 13 5); it is more deeply true that he will stand by the glory of his name (Jos. 7:9; Is. 42:8; Ezk. 20:9, 14, 22, 44; 36:22). 6 A coalition of peoples to the east *Hagrites*, 'Descendants of Hagar' (1 Ch. 5:10; 11:38; 27:31). Presumably linked with Abraham and Hagar. 7 *Gebal.* Some suggest an otherwise unmentioned place in Transjordan. Gebal (a N. Palestinian [Phoenician] port) is mentioned in Jos. 13:5; 1 Ki. 5:18; Ezk. 27:9. If this is intended the list begins in the far north, moves east to *Ammon*, south to *Amalek*, round to *Philistia* in the west and back to *Tyre* in the north: a total encirclement of the Lord's people. 8 *Assyria* may be the dark power behind the 'front line' coalition states, like 'the god of this world' (2 Cor. 4:3, 4) behind every overt hostility to the church, but possibly 'Asshur' here is an Arabian tribe of N. Sinai (*cf.* Gn. 25:3, 18; Nu. 24:22, 24). *Lot* (Gn. 19:36–38; Dt. 2:9, 19).

9–12 Your land. Canaan is called *the pasture-lands of God* (12) because there he shepherds his flock. All the earth is his but this land is his special treasure (Dt. 11:12), as is his people (Ex. 19:5). 9 A similar alliance (Jdg. 6:1, 2) would have prompted this memory of *Midian* and the mind would easily move to *Sisera* (Jdg. 4 – 5). Midian perished at the hands of a meagre 300 so that the excellency of the power might be God's (Jdg. 7:1–7); Sisera fell by the hand of a lone woman (Jdg. 4:17–22; 5:24–27, 31). 11 (Jdg. 7:25; 8:18–21)

13–16 Your tempest. The Lord has all the forces of creation at his command and they often become, as here, symbols of his own power – to scatter, destroy, disorientate and disappoint (*shame*, disappointment of all they hoped) his foes. But his ways are ever full of purposeful mercy and in our prayers we should share that attitude. Sometimes people must be brought to nothing (13–15) *so that* they may be brought to God (16).

17–18 Your name. The note sounded at the end of the last section becomes a dominant theme. The prayer with which the psalm opens, *be not quiet* (1), becomes a prayer for a voice of divine revelation, *let them know* (18), addressing those who, left to themselves, plotted the elimination of the church (4). *Whose name is* (18) is rather 'by' or 'because of your name': *i.e.* 'by' telling them who and what he is, he will win them to himself; or because he is what he is he must move out towards them in revelation.

Psalm 84. 'To be a pilgrim'

In its depth of longing and hunger for God himself (2), its sense of the efficacy of the sacrifice God has provided (3), its resoluteness of faith (5–7), its blissful contentment with God (10–11), this psalm rebukes our meagre spirituality.

1–4 Longing. The *soul* is the essential ego, *heart* and *flesh* the inward and outward aspects of personality: thus the whole person is caught up in a consuming longing for God's house and for God himself. The thought of the security of the birds that nest on and around the Lord's house leads to the thought of that which secures the safety of all who dwell there (4), the altar where sinners are reconciled to the Holy God and he to them. 3–4 The sequence is: 'The birds are safe in their house; it is the place of God's altar; we are safe in his house.' The *altar* is the key to our security.

5–8 Journeying. Blessedness is not confined to the house. There is also a blessedness on pilgrimage, when pilgrims (i) live by God's strength, (ii) keep their hearts resolute (5, Lk. 9:51–53, AV, RV, RSV), (iii) meet adversities with unshaken faith (6, see below) and so (iv) find ever increasing strength until (v) they are themselves accepted into God presence (7) and into a speaking relationship with him (8). 6 *The valley of Baca*, 'balsam trees', possibly an actual place (2 Sa. 5:22–25), here typifies every arid, uninviting aspect of pilgrimage. To *make it a place of springs* involves meeting its aridity with an assurance that, none the less, there will be water (contrast Ex. 17:1–3) – and, sure enough, God's *rains . . . cover it*, (lit.) 'with blessings'.

9–12 Resting. The continuance of the house depended on the king and the stability of the kingdom under him. He was thus the guarantor of spiritual enjoyments. Consequently the pilgrim prays for the king (9). For us, Jesus, with his unchanged priestly-kingship, is the eternal guarantor of our security, acceptance and blessedness (*cf.* Heb. 4:14–16;

7:23–25; 1 Jn 2:1, 2). **9** *Shield . . . anointed.* As 'anointed' he is appointed and endowed by God; as 'shield' he covers us. **10** begins with 'For', explaining the prayer in v 9. The pilgrim prays for the king 'because' he wants the benefits of the house made secure. **11** explains v 10: life with God is preferable to any other life because he is *sun*, the source of light (27:1) and life (56:13), *shield*, protector from every threat; by his *favour*, 'grace' he draws us to himself and then shares his glory with us (2 Pet. 1:3–4). But not unconditionally: the *good* he freely gives (11) is for those whose *walk* (both life-style and the motives which prompt it) is *blameless* (Mt. 5:48). At the same time it is not their achievements but (12) their trust which makes them blessed.

Psalm 85. Longing for revival

Life's troubles do not always indicate God's disapproval but our reaction should always include self-examination lest there is sin to be confessed and wrong to be righted. Such was the occasion of this psalm. God's favour was only a memory (1–3); the present was full of his anger (4–7). The unknown writer who has left us this meditation adopted the same pose as Habakkuk: just as the prophet, puzzled by the present (1:1–17) stood and looked *to see what he will say* (2:1), so the psalmist, having reviewed the situation (1–7), set himself to *listen to what God . . . will say.* The psalm is a prophetic meditation on the theme of revival/renewal (6).

1–3 Remembering: the foundation of God's favour. When, earlier, God had favoured and restored (1), it was through forgiving their sin (2) and turning from his wrath (3). There was a change in them – the repentance that brings forgiveness; and a change in God – the abandonment of wrath that brings peace. There can be no renewal/revival until sin is forgiven and wrath propitiated. **2** *Forgave*, 'bore away' (Lv. 16:21, 22).

4–7 Pleading: the end of wrath and the gift of salvation. Salvation means deliverance – in this case deliverance from God's *displeasure* ('vexation', 4), anger (as personally felt, 5). Only in this way can there be revival/renewal with its consequent joy in God (6); and it can only come about through his changeless love and free gift (7). In the matter of revival/renewal we are dependent on his sovereign will. **4** *Restore us again*, 'Turn back to us' – the heart of the matter (3, 5) is that he should be reconciled to us.

8–9 Listening: the word of promise and its conditions. *I will listen*, 'I resolve to listen' – a committed posture. Those who desire revival/renewal must wait upon God's word. But this imposes demands: (i) to respond to his love: *saints* (8, 'the objects of his committed love who are committed to love him back'); (ii) to forsake the follies of the past (8). (iii) to live in the fear of God (9, 1 Pet. 1:17–19). The consequence is that *glory* – God in all his glory – will come among his people.

10–13 Expecting: the harmony of heaven and earth. God's attributes are in harmony: he loves us without any adjustment of his 'truth' (10); he extends his *peace* to us without compromising his *righteousness* (10, Is. 45:21–25; Rom. 3:23–26). Heaven and earth are in harmony (11): earth produces the fruit of 'truth' (11, Is. 45:8; Eph. 5:8–9) under the untroubled gaze of *righteousness* itself from heaven (11). As God gives earth responds (12): the ultimate reality of salvation includes the restoration of Eden in the New Heavens and the New Earth (Is. 65:17–25; 2 Pet. 3:13). Into this situation, with his herald *Righteousness* preceding him, comes God himself (13, Rev. 21:3).

13 (Lit.) 'And O let him set his feet on the way' – the Psalm's equivalent of Rev. 22:20.

Psalm 86. The pillow of sovereignty

Seven times (3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15) David speaks of the *Lord*, using the word which expresses the sovereignty of God. In personal need (1), *in the day of my trouble* (7), when *the arrogant* and *ruthless* (14) were hot against him, he found a pillow on which to lay his head: the Sovereign God who would hear his prayers (3–4), deliver him (12–13) and put his foes to shame (17). In this psalm of protracted intercession, the need (14) is not specified until David has first explored his relationship with God (1–6) and renewed his commitment (11–12). At a deeper level we may say that his prayer is more occupied with 'telling God about God', dwelling meditatively on the divine nature, than with 'telling God about me'. In this it mirrors the way people pray in the Bible (Ne. 9:5–31, 32–37; Acts 4:24–28, 29–30) and is a model for us.

1–6 'To you, O Sovereign': he hears prayer. The section is 'enclosed' by an appeal to be heard (1, 6). The word *for* in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (omitted, NIV) and what v 2 implies offer five grounds on which we pray: (i) Because of helplessness (1): *poor and needy*, downtrodden and the ineffectual pawn of others; (ii) Because of two-way love (2): *devoted*, better 'dear and devoted', loved and loving back; (iii) Because of committed trust (2), a personal relationship (*my God*) issuing in obedience (*servant*), founded on *trust*; (iv) Because of persistent (*all day*, 3) expectant intercession (3–4). To 'lift up the soul' (24:4) is to bring all our desires to God alone and to look to him alone for supply; (v) Because he is what he is (5), *good* 'kind', towards us in our need, *forgiving* our sins, *abounding* in the unchanging *love* to which he has committed himself.

7–13 'None like you, O Sovereign': he is the only God. David now comes closer to the situation: the 'brackets' of the section are v 7, confidence that in the *day of trouble* God will *answer*, and v 13, confidence that divine unfailing *love* 'will deliver' (the verb is future) even if his enemies bring him to the grave and in Sheol he faces the life beyond. His awareness of the greatness of God starts on the widest scale: (8–10), that the only God is sovereign over every power there may be in heaven (8), and awaits the submission of all the earth (9); it moves to the personal plane (11–12), that the only God is worthy of his total commitment, outwardly in the way he lives, inwardly in heart (11) and upwardly in praise (12). 11 does not mean 'teach me how to get out of this trouble' but 'teach me, while the trouble still rages, to live your way'. *Undivided heart*, 'unite/unify my heart', deliver me from being double-minded, two-faced with God; give me 'a single, steady aim, unmoved by threatening or reward, to you and your great name'.

14–17 'But you, O Sovereign': he is sufficient. Now we learn the actual situation which has brought David into weakness (1) and trouble (7). The recurring reference to the love, forgiveness and mercy of God (3, 5, 6, 15, 16) suggests that he was fleeing from Absalom, a situation in which he was himself by no means innocent. 2 Samuel 16:5–7 reveals how some in the land felt about David, and 2 Samuel 17:1–4 shows that *arrogant* and *ruthless* (14) is not poetic licence. Yet the *compassionate . . . gracious* (15; Ex. 34:5–6) God was sufficient both for David's weakness (16) and against David's foes (17). 17 *Sign*, as in Jdg. 6:36–40. When people are so stressed as to need a sign, God is compassionate enough to condescend to their weakness.

Psalm 87. Zion's children

Three OT themes converge in this psalm and explain its often enigmatic lines: (i) The 'city' theme: (Is. 2:2–4; 26:1–4; 54 – 55; 60; Heb. 12:22–24). Man's first attempt to organize the world without reference to God resulted in a city (Gn. 11:1–9) and the Bible pictures the consummation of the recreative work of God as *his* coming world-city (Rev. 21:1–2, 15–27). (ii) The 'birth' theme. When Nehemiah wished to populate his new Zion, its would-be citizens had to prove that they had a birthright to live there (Ne. 7:4ff., 64; *cf.* Ezr. 2:59, 62). This corresponds to the 'new birth' (Jn. 1:12–13; 3:3–8). (iii) The 'book' theme: (Ex. 32:32; Ps. 56:8; 69:28; Ezk. 13:9; Dan. 12:1; Lk. 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 3:5). Isaiah 4:3 is important as linking the 'book' theme to Zion. These three themes form the substance of Psalm 87. It is a Zion-psalm (1–3) – a 'birth'-psalm (4–5), and a 'book'-psalm (6). In essence it proclaims the coming world-city of God in which birthright will be extended to formerly hostile and pagan nations (4), on the basis of their inclusion by the Lord in his register (6).

A^1 (v 1) His foundation
  B^1 (v 2) the Lord's love
    C^1 (v 3) The City of God
      D (v 4) The world city
    C^2 (v 5) The City of the Most High
  B^2 (v 6) The Lord's register
A^2 (v 7) My fountains

The contrast between v 1 and v 7 reveals the movement of the psalm from what the Lord thinks of Zion (1–3) to the people who live there and enjoy its benefits (5–7) (*cf.* Ne. 7:4ff). V 4 is thus the pivot of the whole psalm: how the city embraces as its children the whole wide world. The Lord's founding and esteem of the city (1–2) is expressed in the *glorious things* said about it (3). What are these? The reply is in v 4: its citizens are worldwide, they know the Lord and possess a birthright to the city. Zion is thus the consummation of the purposes of God. But this incoming of a worldwide citizenry, far from diminishing the speciality of Zion is in fact (5) the very way the *Most High . . . will establish her.* Yet how can a worldwide company possess the requisite birthright? Because (6) the Lord himself has entered their birth on Zion's register. Consequently there is no distinction and (7) singers and musicians – the whole rejoicing company – alike enjoy what Isaiah (12:3) called 'fountains of salvation' (*cf.* Joel 3:18).

Note. 4 *Rahab*, a nickname for Egypt (Is. 30:7). Egypt and *Babylon*, the two great oppressors; *Philistia* and *Tyre*, the contrasting warlike and commercial powers of the world; Cush, earth's remotest bounds.

Psalm 88. The darkness of the soul: patient faith, faithful patience

The three sections of this psalm have three common features: each opens with a testimony of sustained prayer (1–2, 9, 13); each laments an experience of darkness (6, 12, 18); and each faces death (5, 10, 15). There in a nutshell is this 'psalm without hope'. Someone who knows the Lord as (lit.) 'the God of my salvation' (1), has no hope in the face of death (9–12). Someone who is committed to prayer finds no remedial answers to suffering. The wrath of God (7), the alienation of friends and inescapable (8) debilitating grief (9) fills the whole of life; the upward look sees only wrath, the inward look, terror (16); the outward look, present threats and absent friends (17–18) and the forward look, unrelieved darkness (18).

Most pastors will have had to minister in such a situation, holding the hand of a dear fellow-believer sinking into seemingly comfortless sorrows and facing eternity without assurance. And most believers will have encountered – in lesser or greater degree – the dark valley which excludes sunlight and where Jesus and his love, the gospel and its assurances, heaven and its compensations all refer to someone else. The psalm tells us that unrelieved suffering may still be our lot. It reminds us that we are not in heaven yet but part of a groaning creation (Rom. 8:18–23). It sets before us a shining example of the faith that holds on and of resolute occupancy of the place of prayer. Here is one walking in darkness, without light, and trusting in the name of the Lord and leaning on his God (Is. 50:10).

1–9a Life without light. Are there *dead* who are *cut off from* the Lord's care? Yes indeed: they occupy *the lowest pit . . . the darkest depths* (6), pressed down by divine *wrath* (7). As the psalmist feels that his long drawn-out terminal condition (15) is near its earthly end (3) it is this that afflicts him: is he to die under wrath? It is this too that drives him to prayer (1–2; note *for* in v 3).

9b–12 Death without hope. Beyond death man's destiny is sealed. To die with the issue of divine wrath unsettled, is to go where there can be no expectation of God's *wonders*, his supernatural saving acts, nothing for which to praise him (10), no experience of his love to share, no reliance on his faithful care (11), no one who can speak of his saving marvels (12), nothing of (lit.) 'your righteousness', divine intervention to set everything to rights. Only *Destruction* (11), *darkness* and divine forgetfulness (12, *cf.* 5, *remember no more*, for the meaning of 'remember', Ex. 2:24), *i.e.* God leaving people to their own devices without any loving, caring, provident intervention from him. This is not (as some commentaries mistakenly insist) a general statement of OT belief about life after death awaiting NT correction. The Psalm describes only the death this psalmist dreads, death under divine wrath. When the NT takes up this theme, it is to make it infinitely more dreadful.

13–18 Question without answer. The cry for help (13) becomes a cry for explanation (14) and no answer is vouchsafed – just as to the end God offered Job no explanation and we, similarly, with understandable folly, ask the same question with the same result. Were an answer to be given, undoubtedly it would be as baffling as the situation it was meant to explain. For the circumstances of life are his appointments and his doing. In life's storm we encounter his waves (7) and in our fears his terrors (16–17). That sovereignty which does not explain itself, which is brimful of infinite wisdom, love, power and justice, which is, therefore, far beyond our grasp and sight – that sovereignty is our pillow (Ps. 86) when all (18) is darkness.

Psalm 89. 'Does he promise and not fulfil?'

The structure of this psalm tells its story. It consists of two identically shaped sections (1–14, 38–51) surrounding a 'core' (15–37). V 52 is an editorial conclusion to Book 3 of the Psalms.

1–14 God's promises guaranteed by God's nature. Three eight-line stanzas (as NIV, 1–4, 5–8, 9–12) with a four-line concluding summary (13–14). The psalmist sets himself to sing of divine *love* (1) as eternal (2) and, in particular, recalls the Lord's promise to David (3) of an enduring line and a secure throne (4). Since the Lord is supreme in heaven (5–8) and sovereign on earth (9–12) these promises must stand. In summary, the Lord possesses power and supremacy (13); his royal dignity rests on his holiness expressed in principle (*righteousness*) and practice (*justice*); and everything he does is heralded (14) by *love and faithfulness.*

15–37 Focal points of promise. Six eight-line stanzas: (i) the favoured people (15–18); (ii) the favoured king: David anointed (19–21), promised universal sway (22–25), related to the Lord as son to father, supreme over earth's kings, enjoying an eternal covenant of love and promised an enduring line (26–29); (iii) the favoured dynasty: disciplined but never rejected (30–33), established for ever within the inviolable Davidic covenant (34–37).

38–51 The failure of the promises: resort to prayer. Three eight-line stanzas (38–41, 42–45, 46–49) and a four-line concluding prayer (51–52), match the opening section in shape. But contrast with it in theme: the fourteen affirmations of divine sovereignty (9–14) are balanced by fourteen verbs of personal divine destructive action contradicting the promises (38–45). The covenant has been renounced and national defences have been shattered (38–41); enemies are in the ascendant and the throne lies on the ground (42–45); so where is all this *former . . . love* that was pledged (46–49); Lord, *remember* your servants and your anointed (50, 51).

What is to be done when great promises become great disappointments? The promises to David were plain and pointed. A covenant was inaugurated (3), pledged in perpetuity (28, 34), and then renounced (39). Even more particular there is the love of God, by definition changeless: in vs 1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49 the word used expresses the love of commitment, love in the will and not just in the emotions,

pledged love. The psalm is bracketed by this word used in the plural (1, 49). This is unusual enough in the OT to excite attention for the plural is only used ten times as compared with well over two hundred in the singular. In the psalm the plural, 'commitments of changeless love' (1, 49) calls attention to the two-sided promise, lovingly made to David: a world-dominating throne (22–25) pledged by love (24), and an enduring dynasty (26–29, 30–33) pledged by love (28, 33).

Yet it is precisely these covenantal, love-based promises that have failed. It is easiest to picture a psalmist after the fall of Jerusalem (597, 586 BC), and the exile of the last kings (2 Ki. 24:8–12; 25:6–7), pondering, in Babylon, the meaning of these events, candidly facing the reality of a throne dominated rather than dominant and of a dynasty that has run into the sand, and asking Balaam's question: Does God promise and not fulfil? His answer is surpassingly wonderful. When God's promises seem to have failed, then affirm them in joyful song (1, 2) and bring all the grief of the unfulfilled promises to God in prayer (46–49, 50–51). We must remember that the psalmist set himself to sing the promises (1–2) when he knew he was going to record their failure (38–45) and that he prayed his sorrowful prayer when as yet there was no sign of a remedy. But how right he was to do so for (in God's timetable) soon a root would spring from the dry ground (Is. 53:2) and a divine Son of David (Is. 9:6–7) would reign in victory (Is. 9:4, 5) and righteousness (Is. 11:1–5; 32:1) for ever (Lk. 1:31–33).

In a word, the promises had not failed but human understanding of God's time-scale and of the complexity of his world-rule was not sufficient to keep step with what he was doing. So it is for us: the promises never fail, though seeming delay makes some lapse into doubt (2 Pet. 3:4) – and it is not just the great promise of his coming, 'for no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.' The promises cannot fail, though our expectations may, at any moment, be blighted. At such a time, like the psalmist, we must turn the promises into song and the disappointments into prayer.

2 The NIV omits 'For' at the beginning of this verse. It should be restored for the song in v 1 arises from the affirmation of v 2. When faith declares that God's word cannot fail, the mouth is filled with singing. *Forever* (*see* 2, 4, 16, 28, 29, 36, 37). In these verses, in a variety of expressions, the theme of perpetuity is stressed. This is the issue the psalmist faced and which he makes us face: God made everlasting commitments but they have not been kept. How is such a situation to be faced?

5–8, 9–12 The point of these two stanzas is that since there is no power in heaven or on earth to withstand the Lord, what can possibly prevent the fulfilment of his promises? **9, 10** The sea is often used typically of an unruly universe in which restless adversaries set themselves against the Lord. In pagan mythology this was 'personalized' into the battle waged by the creator god, Marduk, against the chaos monster, Rahab. This battle took place before creation in order to give Marduk a clear field to perform his work. In the Bible Rahab is a nickname for Egypt (Is. 30:7), for what Marduk did when there were no witnesses (and therefore requires an act of credulity to believe it), the Lord did historically, shattering Egypt and severing the Red Sea (Is. 51:9–11), when people were there to see and testify to the conquering might of the Lord (Dt. 1:30). History puts a rock-foundation under theology.

13–14 *Strong . . . righteousness . . . love.* If we could deny any one of these three, every problem of suffering would be logically explicable. We could say, God is strong and righteous in all he does, but he is not always loving; or, he is righteous and loving but not always strong enough to do what he wants; or, he is loving and strong but not always righteous. But since he is always all three together and every act of God is full of his almighty strength, holy righteousness and changeless love, we face life with faith rather than with explanations, with trust in him rather than reliance on our own logic.

18 Restore the initial 'For'. The blessedness of God's people (15–16) is explained (17) by the Lord as their strength; this in turn is explained (18) by their possession of the Lord's king reigning over them. In this way, the loss of the reigning king meant the end of the blessedness – a blessedness that would not come back until the king comes back. **19** *Strength on a warrior*, or 'help against a warrior' – David, divinely helped against Goliath (1 Sa. 17:37). **25** *Sea . . . rivers, i.e.* universally, the two contrasting categories of water used to express totality. **26, 27** *My Father . . . firstborn* (see on Ps. 2:7). **30–33** (*Cf.* 2 Sa. 7:1–16). The psalm reaches back to the foundational promises given to David. **37** *Sky*, 'cloud'. Only rarely does this word appear in the singular. Elsewhere always plural, of 'clouds'. The *faithful witness* may be the rainbow (Gn. 9:12–17) or, on the basis of v 6, the incomparable God himself.

38–45 Even though these verses do not specifically mention the fall of Jerusalem they describe something more than a passing defeat of the Davidic king. No mere set-back could be described as a breach of covenant or a casting down of crown and throne to the ground.

Nothing suits the verses as well as the events of 597 BC and 586 BC with the ensuing captivity and end of the monarchy. Likewise in v 46 the long duration of trouble speaks to the same point.

46–49, 50–51 These two prayers both call on the Lord to *remember*, not as if he had forgotten, but (as in Ex. 2:24–25) that he should allow his commitment and care of his people to flourish in fresh action. The first prayer calls for urgent action. The psalmist naturally wants to live to see the reversal of the overthrow and the re-establishment of Zion. The second prayer pleads on the basis of the distressed state of the Lord's people. The mockery of the nations who destroyed city and monarchy – and, if he is in Babylon, the daily mockery directed to one who professes faith in a sovereign God and is yet a captive exile – burdens the psalmist's heart. Not only so but (51) has he actually seen the Davidic king paraded as a captive through the streets with mockers deriding his every *step*? We can easily identify with these two prayers as the world scornfully dismisses the church of our Lord Jesus Christ and mocks his Name and we, for our part, long for revival and the honouring of the Name above every name.

Book 4

Psalm 90. Preserving an endangered species

The Hebrew text of Psalms is clear that this is a *prayer of Moses* and commentators who resist it are notably short of impressive reasons for doing so. No situation suits the psalm so well as that of Moses during the wearisome years of divine alienation (Nu. 14:34). It is a beautiful, moving and realistic psalm, facing our insecurities and offering us a remedy and a hope.

1, 2 A fixed address in time and eternity. These verses begin with the time-reference in which human life in set, *throughout all generations*, 'generation after generation', and end with the eternal sweep of the life of God *from everlasting to everlasting*. Within this panorama of time and eternity we have a fixed address. He 'has proved himself to be our dwelling place'. United with him, we enjoy permanence. With what feeling Moses could and would have said this!

3–11 The endangered species. For forty years Moses watched sadly as time, like an ever-rolling stream, bore all its sons away (3–6, Nu. 14:23, 29; Dt. 2:14–16) and recognized behind what he saw the dread reality of the anger of God against sin (7–11). But the truth he expressed is true of all humankind: threatened by impermanence (3–6), and blighted by wrath (7–11). It is by the agency of God that we suffer the insecurity of transience. It is by his decree (Gn. 3:19) that we return to dust – an inescapable fate, *for* (4) even those whose life-span was near-millennial (Gn. 5) came to death like all others and for all alike the fresh grass of the morning is the dry vegetation of the evening (5–6). Why should this be? Why should a species destined to eat of the Tree of Life and live for ever (Gn. 2:16; 3:22) crumble to dust and sleep in death? Restoring 'For' to the beginning of v 7 gives the answer – divine *anger* . . . *indignation* against *iniquities* . . . *secret sins* (8), *wrath* (9)! Is it simply the product of an incurably melancholy spirit to say that life ends with a *moan* (9) and that prolonged days only mean prolonged *sorrow* (10)? Of course there are other sides to life but when we stand back the common denominator of people worldwide is a sad tale of lives blighted by sin, inescapably answerable to the sin-hating God.

12–15 Preserving the endangered species. The remainder of the psalm is a series of six prayers. It is by prayer that we counter the disintegrative power of sin, by prayer that we fly to the God whom we have offended, by prayer that we take up our *dwelling place* (1) in him. This was the way of Moses (*e.g.* Ex. 15:25; 17:4; 32:31–32; Nu. 13–19). To preserve the endangered species there are four aspects of prayer: recognize our limited time so as to use it with wisdom (12); cry for compassion from a reconciled God (13); counter the withering of life (the *morning* of 5–6) with a new *morning* filled with his *love* which does not change *all our days* (14); look to him to make life as full of gladness as otherwise it would have been of affliction (15). Here are the four strong walls of our eternal dwelling in God: he is our wisdom (12, 1 Cor. 1:30), our forgiveness (13, Is. 55:7), our stability throughout our days (14, 73:26), our renewal (15, Rom. 6:4–8).

16–17 Partakers of the divine nature. The psalm ends as it began by referring to *the Lord*, 'the Sovereign' (1, 17), and to the passing generations (1, 16). It began by affirming that we can enter into him for permanency (1); it ends by praying that he will come upon our children in his *splendour* (16) and upon us in his 'loveliness' (17, *favour*). He not only opens himself to us (1); he shares himself with us (16–17). We who are caught up in the passing of the generations, the transiency of life, the dark undercurrent of divine wrath, are made partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:2–4) in all its glory and beauty.

Psalm 91. Divine wings and guardian angels

Some threats lie in wait for us (3), some sneak up insidiously (3, 6); some are our own dreads, real or imaginary, some reflect hostility (5); some, again, we meet on life's pathway (12–13). Life is like that. But simple trust brings us into a place of strong defence (2), the personal warmth of divine care, pledged defence (4) and a host of heavenly guardians every step of the way (11). The form in which all this is stated itself serves to affirm our protected status.

A^1 (v 1) Theme stated: sure protection
  B^1 (v 2) Personal testimony
    C^1 (vs 3–8) Affirmation
  B^2 (v 9a) Personal testimony
    C^2 (vs 9b–13) Affirmation
A^2 (vs 14–16) Theme confirmed: divine protection

It is a psalm of personal testimony (2, 9) but the matter does not rest there. Testimony may be the product of imagination or of wishful thinking and, in any case, what is true of one person may not necessarily apply to others. But here human testimony is enfolded (1, 14–16) in divine testimony and affirmed by the word of God (3–8, 9–13). The whole is a highly artistic way of expressing a fundamentally important fact: that we are always totally secure. How such a psalm came to be written is a matter of conjecture. Did a troubled individual seek out a prophet who applied the word of God directly to his need and then was privileged to be the agent of the voice of the Lord, or is the whole just the record of individual pondering of a great truth in the light of experience and truth. Here is a psalm for every believer every day.

1 Sure protection. *Most High* (Gn. 14:18–22). How promptly Abram recognized that Melchizedek's God must be his God – for he had proved his sovereign exaltation in victory! *Almighty* (Gn. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25). Consideration of these references shows that Shaddai (*see* NIV mg.) is the God whose power is sufficient in every human weakness.

3–8 Protection from life's threats. The emphasis here is on things which come unasked upon us. We should isolate the psalm from the rest of of Scripture if we understood it to promise immunity. Here, as elsewhere (*e.g.* Rom. 8:28), the promise is not security *from* but security *in*. 3 *Fowler*, 'trapper'. *Deadly*, 'chance'. 4 *Feathers* (61:4; Lk.13:34). *Shield . . . rampart*, two different sorts of protection summarizing every possible protection. 8 A plain implication that the simple trust which ensures protection also carries moral obligations.

9a Protection found. (Lit.) Indeed you, Lord, are my refuge! You have made the Most High your dwelling.

9b–13 Protection on life's path. These verses stress the dangers that we encounter *in all your ways*, out and about in life. When Satan used these verses against the Lord Jesus, the reply he received was that genuine trust does not demand that the Lord prove himself but simply rests in God's care (Mt. 4:5–7). 12–13 The lion and the snake represent respectively dangers in strength and insidiousness. The doubling of the names implies 'in whatever guise they come'.

14–16 Divine promises of protection. The Lord's eight promises: rescue (intervening action), security (*protect*, set on high out of reach of danger), answered prayer, companionship in need, deliverance (from threat), vindication (*honour*), personal fulfilment (*satisfy*) and the enjoyment of *salvation*. Note how these reach from initial saving action (*rescue*) right through to fully enjoyed salvation and cover all intervening needs. There are three conditions to be fulfilled: *loves me* (the yearning love which clings to the loved one), 'knows my name' (lives with the Lord in the light of what he has revealed about himself) and prayer (*he will call*).

Psalm 92. A day for taking sides

This whole psalm 'pivots' on v 8, a forceful statement of the supreme exaltation of the Lord which might even be translated 'You are exaltedness itself!' Moving out from this centre, in concentric circles, there is, first, his moral rule of the world (6–7, 9). There are those who are unaware of this – the spiritual dullards of v 6; but there are those who see (in 9 *surely* is on each occasion 'behold') the destruction (7) and perishing (9) that awaits the wicked. Secondly, there is the Lord's exalted people (4–5, 10–11). In v 10 *exalted* is a word directly related to *exalted* in v 8: the Lord shares with us what is true of him. We are glad (4–5) and triumphant (10–11) through what he has done. The final circle is the unfailing praise due to such a God (1–3, round-the-clock praise; 12–15 life-long praise). Both sections of this outer circle emphasize what he is (*LORD, Most High, name*, (unfailing) *love, faithfulness . . . LORD, Rock, upright*, without *wickedness*, 'deviation'); likewise both sections affirm commitment to 'proclamation'; but whereas 1–3 are all about what the Lord is, 12–15 describe also the life that we enjoy when we are 'right' with him.

The title says that this is a *song* for *the Sabbath day* and its parallel with main themes from Isaiah 58 affirm this: a day of praise (1–3, 14–15) with a central focus on the exalted Lord (8); a day to recognize his holiness and to

reaffirm our awareness of eternal distinctions between right and wrong (6–7, 9); a day to recall what he has done (4–5) and especially what he has done for us (10–11).

1 *Good*, intrinsically right and personally satisfying. *Name*, all he has revealed himself to be. 4–5 Note here and in the parallel 10–11 what personal true religion is like. This is a psalm of 'my' enjoyment of the Lord (while not forgetting, 12–15, the wider company). *Glad . . . sing*, the emotion and its expression, heart and voice. *Deeds . . . works*, covering creation, providence and salvation; plus *thoughts*, the mind of God lying behind them. 6 *Senseless* could be paraphrased 'unspiritual', the merely natural person (described also in 49:11; 73:22). The related verb means 'to be brutish', without a touch of God bringing spiritual life, lacking revealed truth (Pr. 30:2, 3). *Fools*, people who never penetrate deeper than the surface appearance of life. 7 *Grass . . . flourish*, an appearance of vigour that belies its impermanence and its destiny. *They will be*, more forcibly 'are destined to be'. 9 With a true biblical emphasis *the wicked* (7) become *your enemies*. In the ultimate the adage that the Lord hates the sin but loves the sinner needs correction; those who set themselves against the Lord will find that he is personally set against them. 12 *Righteous*, those who are 'right with God'. *Palm . . . cedar*, contrast *grass* (7). The picture is of dignity, strength, durability. 13 *Planted*, (lit.) 'transplanted', brought into a new position by the design and work of the Gardener. *House . . . courts*, accepted and given security of standing in his very presence. 15 *Proclaiming*, more forcibly 'bent on proclaiming': increasing years should bring increasing spiritual determination. *Wickedness*, deviation from the norm, the negative counterpart of *upright*, 'straight'. *Rock*, a metaphor deriving from Exodus 17:1–7.

Psalms 93–100. 'Jerusalem Praise': The hymns of the Great King

This psalm-group underlines the theme of the Lord's kingship. He *reigns* (93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1); he is *king* (95:3; 98:6). In this respect Psalms 94 and 100 seem at first sight out of step but 94:2 (*cf.* 96:10–13; 98:9) uses the 'king-equivalent' word *Judge* and Psalm 100 holds its place in the series not only by its links with Psalm 99 but by its shared theme with Psalm 95 (*cf.* 95:6, 7; 100:1–3). It is interesting to think that we may have here (*cf.* on Pss. 120–134) a small collection of hymns for use, say, at the Feast of Tabernacles. Since Tabernacles marked the final ingathering each year (Ex. 23:16; Dt. 16:13) and also celebrated the Lord's victory over Egypt and his care of his people in a hostile world (Lv. 23:39–43) it is an easy transition to a celebration of his kingship (Zc. 14:16). It is even possible (see Introduction) that it became an annual celebration specifically of the Great King. At all events these seven psalms belong together and, in pairs, share aspects of the theme of kingship: 93, 94, The King over all the earth; 95, 96, the King over all gods; 97, 98, the King in the hearts of his people; 99, 100, the King in his own character.

Psalms 93, 94. The place of faith and the place of prayer

The picture of the *king* with his effortless sovereignty (93:4) over pounding waves merges into the work of the *Judge* (94:2) administering the world where *evildoers crush* ('pounding' and 'crush' are matching words) his people (94:4–5), where sovereign rule is exercised in the ordinary ways of divine providential ordering of life (94:10, 12) and still awaits its final manifestation (94:15, 23). The spiritual reality of divine royal majesty (93:1) faces the earthly usurpation of the proud (a related word, 94:2) and of alien *thrones* (20). In calm, credal solemnity the Lord's people acclaim his kingship (Ps. 93) and in the hurly-burly of life they experience how he rules the world (Ps. 94).

93:1–5 The King acclaimed. The affirmation of vs 1–2 moves into the picture of vs 3–4 and the solemn consequence for the Lord's people (5); vs 1–2 work downwards from the securely enthroned Lord to the derivative security of the world he rules; vs 3–4 work upwards from the turbulence of earth's 'forces' to the serene might of his exaltation. The earth is a safe place to live in because he reigns; and even when it is at its most turbulent he is still on the throne. 1 emphasizes the Lord's clothing: *robed . . . robed . . . armed*, 'has girded himself'. As a motif, 'clothing' indicates character and intent (*e.g.* Jos. 5:13–15; Is. 59:16–18). The Lord wears the garb of royalty because he is, and intends to act as, king. Why the *world is firmly established* we are not told, but the fact that this truth is sandwiched between the Lord's reign (1) and his *throne* (2) speaks volumes. While he reigns earth remains stable. 3–4 use the restless seas to portray all the forces of destruction and hostility in the created order – whether violent storms themselves, or the turbulence of nations (Ps. 2) or even (as pagans thought) the ceaseless warfare of spiritual forces of chaos against the Creator. No matter what the turbulence, *the LORD on high is mighty*. 5 matches v 2 in the structure of the psalm. There, God who is by nature eternal occupies his eternal throne; here the God who lives in his *house* among his people has spoken his unchanging word and makes *holiness* his unchanging requirement.

94:1–23 The King experienced. 'All

admit', says Calvin, 'that God reigns but how few are those who oppose this shield to the hostile powers of the world.' With these words we pass the bridge between Psalms 93 and 94. Our faith rests on his untroubled sovereignty (Ps. 93), but in life we find ourselves in the place of difficulty (4–7), opposed in word (4), deed (5–6) and by a philosophy of life (7) which does not necessarily deny God's existence, but thinks of him as inactive, non-interventionist and irrelevant. Opposed we may be, but comfortless we are not: there is (i) God the Creator who is aware of everything (9), who has not abdicated his throne of moral government of the world (10) and to whom even the most hidden human realities are known (11). Only the *senseless* and *fools* (8, see 92:6) could be heedless of these truths. (ii) The God of providence (12–15): the hardships of life are morally purposeful (12–13), life rests on an underlying confidence in the divine faithfulness (14) and leads into a coming righteous society in which there will be freedom to live uprightly (15); (iii) The God of tender care (16–19): life may indeed be lonely, precarious and distracted but the Lord is on our side, his love is our support and his comfort is in our hearts. (iv) The God of certain triumph (20–23): for as *Judge of the earth* (2) he will not come to terms with corrupt, afflictive and morally perverted world-rulers. On the contrary, while proving to be a present refuge he will ultimately bring an exact, destructive and personally enforced judgment. Psalm 94 concludes (22) on the same note of resting in divine sovereign protection that was sounded in Psalm 93: the assurance that he is in charge, that we can take refuge in such a God, but the binding truth in Psalm 94 is the prayer that God will *pay back* (2) and the confidence that he will *repay*, 'pay back' (23). Faith rests in a sovereign God (Ps. 93) but it is 'by prayer that we wrestle' in the face of a hostile, buffeting world. Prayer is our first practical response to divine sovereignty: if he is indeed the Lord of Psalm 93, nothing has greater priority than to fly to him in the face of life's turbulence (94:1–3).

Psalms 95, 96. Glad tidings of salvation

In Psalm 95 the church is singing and worshipping and in Psalm 96, singing and sharing. Psalm 95 is wholly within the fellowship where the Lord is known as *rock*, King and Creator, Maker and Shepherd and the one to whom obedience is owed. In Psalm 96 the church is still singing but immediately moves out in testimony to the only God, worthy of all praise and coming as universal judge. Psalms 95, 96 bring the Lord's kingship into relationship with the 'gods' (95:3; 96:4, 5) and this is their distinctive mark. These psalms are, however, no more a decline from monotheism than is Paul's assertion about lords and gods many in 1 Corinthians 8:5. Many spiritual forces are abroad in a fallen world – there is even a 'god of this age' (2 Cor. 4:4) – and since they exercise their delusive magnetism on the Lord's people also, the reminder in these psalms that he is supreme king (95:3) and that the 'gods' are nonentities (96:4–5) remains relevant.

The only God and the gods. These psalms are typical in their appeal to creation as evidence for one, only God. Compared with the Creator, other 'gods' are (not *'elohim* but) *'elilim* (96:5) imitations of the real thing. The similarity of the Hebrew words is like the assonance of 'idol' and 'idle' in English. They are 'no-gods', nonentities. In contrast he is in sovereign management of the earth (95:4–5). In pagan thought, the *depths* were ruled by Molech, the *mountain peaks* by Baal, and the *sea* by Tiamat. But in the Bible all is *in his hand*, and is *his* by right of creation.

Psalm 95. The only God and his people

Psalm 95 consists of:

A^1 (vs 1–2) A call to worship with joy
  B^1 (v 3–5) Explanation of his greatness
A^2 (v 6) A call to worship with reverence
  B^2 (v 7a–c) Explanation of our privileges
A^3 (v 7d) A call to obey
  B^3 (vs 8–11) Explanation of its serious implications

To his people the Lord is (i) Saviour (1), on the model of the 'saving Rock' of Exodus 17:1–7, reliable and active, the living fount of life, saving from death. (ii) Shepherd (6–7). *Maker* here does not point to creation but to the way the Lord made his people for himself. They are secure in his commitment to them: *our God*, not because we have chosen him but because he has committed himself to us; provided for in his planning: *pasture* (*see* Nu. 10:33, 34); cared for by the touch of his hand. (iii) Lawgiver (7–11). It is to the saved that the Lord addresses his call for obedience (7) and he takes his law seriously and enforces its disciplines if his people disobey, for a whole *generation* (10) forfeited blessing by disobedience (Heb. 3:12–19). They would not listen to his word, bend their hearts to his will or learn his truth and consequently they forfeited his goodwill and his rest. The specific incident mentioned (8) occurred in Exodus 17:1–7 and is used as typical of a record of lack of trust. The people had more than enough evidence that the Lord can be trusted to provide in every situation (Ex. 12 – 16) but, faced with an apparently waterless valley, they turned from trust to doubt, much as the Pharisees of the NT closed

their eyes to all that Jesus performed and refused belief pending another sign!

Psalm 96. The only God and his gospel

Psalm 96 consists of:

A^1 (vs 1–2a) A call to the world to worship
  B^1 (vs 2b–3) A command to the church
    C^1 (vs 4–6) An explanation of the only God
A^2 (vs 7–9) A call to the world to worship
  B^2 (v 10) A command to the church
    C^2 (vs 11–13) An explanation of the coming God

Those who rejoice in the God of salvation (95:1) must tell the good news of salvation, inviting the world to *praise his name* (2), *i.e.* respond to what the Lord has revealed about himself, to come into his very presence (*the splendour of his holiness*) through the *offering* he requires (7–9) – responding to his name (8, see on 2), entering his courts (8), safe in his holy presence (9), and worshipping with due awe. But the good news is also of expectation (11–13). To *judge* means 'to set all things to rights' – heaven, earth and sea, the natural and the human creation. No aspect of what he first created is forgotten in final salvation.

Psalms 97, 98. Visible righteousness, joyful salvation

The link between the Lord's kingship and holiness or righteousness has been quietly established in these psalms (93:5; 94:15, 21, 23; 95:7; 96:9:13). This now comes to a climax in a throne of righteousness (97:2), a proclamation of righteousness (97:6), a call to righteousness (97:10–12), a revelation of righteousness past (98:2) and to come (98:9). These psalms make no secret of the awesomeness of the Lord's righteousness (97:2–5), the strictness of his demands (97:10), the fate of idolaters (97:7), yet their predominating note is of gladness (97:1, 8), singing and shouting (98:1, 4, 7). How can joy and judgment, human songs and divine righteousness blend together in this way? The answer is that salvation has been accomplished (98:1–3): the God of the *holy name* (97:12) who summons his people to holiness is the God of the *holy arm* (98:1) who brings them salvation.

Psalm 97. Joy in the face of the demands of holiness

The whole earth and Zion share an identical joy (*glad . . . rejoice . . . rejoices . . . are glad*) – and this notwithstanding the awesome and destructive power of his righteousness (2–7) and the demands it makes (9–12): for the contrasts are stark between *foes* and lovers, destruction and preservation, the glory that all may see and the light which only the righteous enjoy, the fate of idolaters and the joy of the righteous. **2** *Clouds, etc.* The God of Sinai (Ex. 19:16–19). *Righteousness and justice* both express holiness (Is. 5:16): righteousness is holiness embodied in right principles; justice is holiness expressed in right decisions and actions. **3** *Fire.* Divine holiness in its destructive hostility to sin (Ex. 3:3–5; 19:16–18, 20; *cf.* Lv. 9:24). It was the fire of Sinai that ignited the first Aaronic burnt offering and it was this fire that burned perpetually on the altar: holiness satisfied by a substitute offering. **4** *Trembles*, not as creation before the Creator so much as sinful earth before the Holy One (Jdg. 6:22; 13:22; Is. 6:5). **7** *Idols*, the 'no-gods' of 96:5. **10** *Faithful*, related to the word which expresses the Lord's ever-unchanging love, means 'those who are loved by him and love him back'. **11** *Shed upon.* Heb. 'is sown for', *i.e.* planted in readiness for them to reap it as a crop. In every situation there is a righteousness waiting to be enjoyed. **12** *His holy name*, 'the remembrance/reminder of his holiness' (*cf.* Ex. 3:15).

Psalm 98. Joy resting on a finished work of salvation

The dilemma of Psalm 97 is explained. In the salvation accomplished for Israel all the earth sees its salvation (3). The psalm is in three sections marked by *sing* (1), *shout* (4) and *let . . . resound* (7) and covers in turn salvation accomplished and the praise of the Saviour (1–3), worldwide joy in the world's King (4–6), and the praise of the coming Lord who will consummate all his righteous purposes (7–9). His salvation has been *worked*, is known and seen; the whole earth lays voices and instruments under contribution to *shout for joy* to *the LORD, the King.* Sea and land, river and mountain – the whole created order – links with the world's peoples to acclaim the coming God who will *judge the earth* (9), set the whole world to rights. **1** *Marvellous*, things emanating from the supernatural realm – like the name 'Wonderful' (Is. 9:6; *cf.* Gn. 18:14 [*hard* = wonderful]; Je. 32:17) *Hand . . . arm*, direct personal action backed by sufficient personal strength. **2** *Salvation . . . righteousness.* Just as the Lord is righteous when he judges (97:2–5, 6–7) so he is righteous when he saves. His salvation accomplishes all that his holy righteousness requires. **3** The sequence is important: it is in the course of love to Israel that the world is saved. **7–9** Note the same environmental objective as in 96:11–13. The basic motivation of biblical environmentalism is that the Creator loves his creation (Gn. 1:31), not just the human aspect but the whole. And in the consummation, when the Lord Jesus returns, the new heavens and earth will be the eternal proof of this love (Eph. 1:3–10).

Psalms 99, 100. The Lord, holy and good

Psalm 99 issues a call to praise and worship; Psalm 100 responds to it as *all the earth* comes, enters and praises. Together the psalms focus on the Lord's character (see introduction to Psalms 93–100) as *holy* (99:3, 5, 9), good, loving and faithful (100:5). The privilege of the Exodus people (95:7) has now become the privilege of a worldwide people (100:3).

Psalm 99. A call to worship

1–3 The grace of the Holy One. Psalm 99 divides itself into three parts by the 'holiness' refrain (3, 5, 9). This first section is full of the greatness of the Holy King before whom *nations tremble* and *earth shakes*. Yet, *great and awesome*, 'worthy to be feared' though he is, he is *in Zion*, dwelling among his people, enthroned in the place of grace, for *enthroned between the cherubim* his feet rest on the 'mercy seat' – where he speaks to his people (Ex. 29:42–46) and makes atonement for their sins (Ex. 25:17–22; Lv. 16:15ff). His greatness is that of the God of grace.

4–5 The law of the Holy One. The King loves his law, establishes it (among his people), and has set an example by his own acts. In relation to his own nature, 4a says literally: 'The king's strength loves justice' – *i.e.* the almighty power of the divine king is wholly absorbed in what is right. We are unflatteringly called *Jacob*, the one who, though given a new name and new nature (Israel), still so often lived the old Jacob-life. The giving of the law is not tailored to our capacity but holds before our faltering steps the mirror of the perfect will of God. But those who thus face the obligation of the divine law also constantly live under grace, for it is 'Jacob' who is invited not simply to praise but to *worship at his footstool*, the mercy-seat.

6–9 The fellowship of the Holy One. *Moses, Aaron* and *Samuel* are not mentioned as being privileged but as typical of those *among* whom they served. The psalm uses them to typify the personal walk with God: (i) praying and receiving answer (6): the foremost mark of God's people is their praying relationship with him (Dt. 4:7; Ps. 65:2, 138:1–3). The verbs imply, 'their unvarying attitude was one of calling and he kept constantly replying'. (ii) Hearing and obeying (7). The Lord's people live by supernatural truth, the word of God. (iii) Forgiveness and chastening (8). *Forgiving*, '(sin-)bearing' looks back to Leviticus 16:22 and forward to Isaiah 53:12 and John 1:29. But there is also (exact) punishment of misdeeds because forgiveness without chastening would make us complacent, and chastisement without forgiveness would make us despair. Forgiveness without discipline would make us spoilt children; discipline without forgiveness would break our hearts. Together they guarantee that while we can treat forgiveness as certain, we can never treat sin as negligible.

Psalm 100. The people of God in the presence of God

A^1 (vs 1–2) Threefold invitation; *shout, worship, come*
  B^1 (v 3) Threefold affirmation: *God* ... made us ... his
A^2 (v 4) Threefold invitation: *enter* ... *give* thanks ... praise
  B^2 (v 5) Threefold affirmation of God's nature: *Good* ... *love* ... *faithfulness*

Three verbs of increasing nearness (1–2) bring us first to acclaim him (*shout*), then to come worshipfully into his precincts and finally to rest (*come before*) in his very presence. We do so with *joy, gladness*, and *songs* because we *know* that this divine Lord *made us* for himself, and we belong to him as sheep in a good shepherd's care.

Once more three verbs of increasing intimacy (4) bring us to him: the *gates*, the *courts* and the reality of a God known by *name*, with our thankful praise arising from what he is (5): in himself wholly, absolutely *good*, in his unchanging attitude to us, committed *love*, and in the ongoing experience of life totally faithful.

Psalm 101. The king: a mirror of the true

The speaker must be the king himself as he contemplates his high office, for who else could commit himself to the task of eliminating the wicked from the land (8)? The NIV accurately reflects the stanza structure: in the first three stanzas (1–2b, 2c–3b, 3c–4) the king affirms the personal standards to which he commits himself; in the next three (5, 6, 7) he states the standards which he will promote in his court officials; and in the final stanza (8) he turns to the public duties of his office as head of the judiciary.

1–4 Personal commitments. The three stanzas here cover, in turn, the king's life with the Lord, his life in the home and the life of personal holiness. 1 The NIV inserts an interpretative *your* and this seems correct. The Lord is characterized by *love*, unchanging loving fidelity and *justice* the true wisdom that can always make the right decision. The king sings of these divine attributes as one who delights in them. 2 *Blameless life*, a 'way'/life-style exhibiting total integrity. *When will you come?* An appeal for the Lord's companionable support for the king. *In my house* here refers to the domestic scene as the first place where he will

display (*walk*) a heart of integrity (*blameless heart*). 3 *Eyes.* The organ of desire, what is wanted and aimed at. The king vows that at home his emotions and objectives will be above reproach. *Vile*, possibly combining 'worthless' and 'destructive', *i.e.* unworthy aims which, being achieved, destroy. *Deeds of faithless men.* Maybe more lit. 'activity involving declension'. The king aims at the highest standards of holiness. 4 Such standards are to apply also to *heart* (not *men of perverse heart* but 'a crooked heart'), and mind (*have nothing to do*, lit. 'know/give personal acknowledgement to').

5–7 Standards at Court. The scene is set by *dwell with me, minister to me* and *stand in my presence.* The *house* (7, *cf.* 2) is now the royal court where, under the king as chief executive, others perform his service. (i) Negatively (5, 7): the king rules out the selfishly ambitious person ready to destroy others by innuendo, the arrogant, the unreliable and the one who compromises with the truth. (ii) Positively (6) he wants the *faithful*, 'those who can be relied on' and the one who (like himself) 'walks in the way of integrity'.

8 Public jurisdiction. The scene is now *the land* and *the city* where the king, as Lord Chief Justice, is responsible for public standards, not least 'the punishment of evildoers'. He who would be personally the Lord's (1) vows to deal faithfully in public in the Lord's affairs. *Every morning.* It is his first priority, a veritable Moses (Ex. 18:13). *Put to silence*, including the silence of death. In this the ministers of the crown enjoy no immunities or concessionary liberties. One law rules both court and market-place.

We cannot ignore the lessons of this powerful psalm. It speaks to the often heard claim that provided a minister of state does his job properly his private life is his own business. But David thought differently: his royal duty began in his own person, home and standards of life. If he cannot be trusted privately, what guarantee is there for public integrity? But though David may have thought this, how far he actually fell away from the standards he professed! The home was the scene of his most tragic collapse and his eyes the cause of it (2 Sa. 11:2). The public administration of justice was the point where public discontent opened the door to the great rebellion (2 Sa. 15:1–6). Consequently, like all the psalms touching on the king, there is here an ideal which exposes David and his successors as inadequate and cries out for the perfect David-to-come.

Psalm 102. Request refused, prayer answered

There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. Sometimes the answer is 'No', pure and simple, when, in the light of perfect wisdom, our request is no more than a nonsense. Often the answer is 'Not yet', when our timetable and God's are out of step. Had he known it, Elijah's request to die (1 Ki. 19:4) was greeted in heaven with a smile and the words 'Don't be silly. You're never going to die at all!' Within these parameters lies this psalm. To the psalmist's request that he might live on earth to see what he desired, the answer was 'No' (23–24); to his confidence that the time for answered prayer had arrived (13), the answer was 'Not yet'; to what he actually asked for Zion the answer was 'Don't be silly! Just you wait and see!'

Who the author was and when he lived we do not know. Many commentators interpret *stones* and *dust* (14) as the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and place the psalm in the exile. But, as far as we know, the exiles in Babylon were not prisoners, nor under sentence of death (21) – in fact, conditions were very tolerable (Je. 29) and at the end only a minority were willing to leave (Ezr. 1). It is hard, therefore, to see the author as being himself among the exiles and easier to place him in some earlier crisis when the city suffered damage and he watched fellow-citizens carried off into the uncertainties of bondage. At all events, facing what he believed to be an untimely death (23–24), and longing to see Zion in full glory, restored, the centre of the whole earth (12–22), he made this mighty prayer. He is indeed the *man* of the title, *afflicted* (downtrodden, downcast, 6–8), faint as strength ebbs, but he knows a God to whom he can bring his *lament* (his 'worries').

His opening cry for a hearing (1–2) is followed by a self-contained poem whose bracket (*my days*, 3, 11) announces its topic. Note the 'pivotal' structure of this poem: vs 3, 11, fast-ebbing life; vs 4–5, 9–10 (linked by the reference to *food*) describe how he has no heart for life (4–5) and that this is due to divine anger (9–10); the 'pivot' (6–8) emphasizes loneliness, by night and day and isolation among enemies. He does not confess sin but rather implies himself to be caught up in an inexplicable *great wrath* of God, a change from former favour (*taken up*) to present humiliation (*thrown me aside*).

In the central poem of the psalm (12–22) he dwells on the greatness of the Lord and the glory of his purposes. This too is a 'pivotal' poem. It begins with *the* LORD enthroned for ever (12) and ends with *the* LORD worshipped by all peoples (22); vs 13, 21 focus on *Zion*, the city of the Lord's favour and of his coming praise; vs 14, 20 share the theme of pity. His *servants* are operating with a narrow concern for Zion's ruined state but the Lord's pity embraces the

earth's needy; vs 15, 19 share the theme of *the* LORD and *the earth*: the whole *earth* will yet reverence him (15) but this will be the product of his concerned survey of its needs; vs 16, 18 affirm that *the* LORD will build Zion, be personally present in glory and that he will create a people for his praise; and the 'pivot' (17) puts all this glory down to answered prayer.

The Lord brings his choicest and infallible purposes to pass through the prayers of his people. The abrupt change from human need (3–11) to divine glory (12–22) is typical of the Psalms (*e.g.* 74:1–11, 12–17). Then, as now, the way to deal with life's dominating pressures is to 'turn your eyes upon Jesus': to refresh ourselves in the vision of God (12, 22), his intentions (13–16, 18–21) and the power and place of prayer (17).

But the psalmist speaks for us in another way also: he senses curtailment of his envisaged span; his life is being untimely cut off, lit. 'He humbled my strength in the way' (23). I was still vigorously walking life's way when divine action brought me to weakness. In this circumstance he resorted to prayer (24), (lit.) 'Do not take me up' (*cf.* 2 Ki. 2:1, 11). How very different is the life of God! Can God the eternal really sense how sharply life's brevity bites into us when we feel, like Moses, (Dt. 3:23, 24) that we have but paddled in the shallows of the divine plan and long to be there when it is consummated?

Of course, he was confident that God would be faithful to his purposes and that when the consummation came (28) *the children of your servants* would be there enjoying and established in his presence. The eternal God is eternally *the same* (27).

But what about me? At this point the Eternal smiled: 'Don't be silly! If only you knew!' For the words his fainting servant addressed to him – though he did not know it – were the very words the Lord himself had addressed to his Son (Heb. 1:10–12) as together they planned a consummation far more wonderful than the psalmist longed for: that his own experience of weakness, suffering, enmity – and even of the wrath of God – would be recapitulated when the Son took our flesh and bore our sin and brought in the kingdom that cannot be shaken and the true, heavenly Zion (Heb. 2:9–18; 4:15; 5:7–8; 9:11–14; 12:22–24, 26–27). When the psalmist at length saw his experience and his words in the light of the Son of God, was he not glad that the Lord refused his request but heard his prayer?

Psalm 103. 'Your God is King, your Father reigns'

The blend of changeless fatherly care and endless sovereign rule is the distinctive stress of this psalm. The central verses (6–18), bracketed by divine *righteousness* abound in the Lord's attributes of grace, compassion, patience, forbearance, forgiveness and fatherhood, but, above all, *love* – the love that speaks of his commitment to us, his ever-unchanging loving fidelity. The psalm opens (1–5) on a personal note: how these attributes of grace have acted in my life; the matching conclusion (19–22) closes a bracket round the psalm on this personal note but its purpose is to raise us to the heights where we can review all reality, spiritual and physical, and worship the one Lord who is the eternal King.

1–5 The Lord's personal blessings. 1, 2 *Praise* (*cf.* 20–22) is the distinctive word 'Bless'. When the Lord 'blesses' us, he reviews our needs and responds to them; when we 'bless' the Lord, we review his excellencies and respond to them. *Holy name.* We 'bless' the Lord himself before we recount his blessings. All he does stems from who he is (*name*) and what he is (*holy*): he never acts outside what he has revealed and what he is. *Benefits*, better 'sufficiencies' – the corresponding verb in v 10 (*repay*) means 'to act fully'. 3 He *forgives* and *heals*, though, as Scripture carefully indicates, not in parallel ways: in 2 Samuel 12:13–23, forgiveness was instantaneous, healing was withheld; sin and sickness were alike laid on Jesus (Mt. 8:16, 17) but just as, in this present life, though forgiven we still suffer the plague of sin, so sickness is still our lot according to his sovereign appointment until, in heaven, every disability, like every moral infirmity, will be gone. 4 *Redeems*, acts as the next-of-kin who makes all our needs his own. *Pit*, not only metaphorical of deadly dangers in this life but also indicative of a dread possibility in the next (*cf.* 49:7–9, 13–15). *Love and compassion.* The former is love centred in the will, the love of commitment, unchanging; the latter is the love of the heart, surging and emotional. 5 *Desires.* Doubt surrounds this word which possibly should be read as 'your continuance'/'as long as you live'. *Eagle*, a picture of buoyant, tireless strength (Is. 40:30).

6–18 The Lord's loving nature. This poem 'pivots' on v 11 with its affirmation of overshadowing, over-mastering, (*great* is translated *flooded* in Gn. 7:24), 'ever-unchanging' *love*. It moves towards this central truth in matching steps: (i) 6 and 17–18 affirm the Lord's *righteousness, i.e.* his inflexible commitment to his own righteous nature and purposes: he never loves through any adjustment of his holiness or relaxation of his standards. His righteousness is the stamp of all his actions. To the human eye many wrongs go unrighted and oppressions unrelieved: v 6 says that the Lord

sees to it that this is not so (Gn. 18:25); and motivated by his *love*, the Lord sees to it that right prevails for those who live obediently within his covenant (17–18); (ii) 7–8 and 14–16 balance what the Lord *made known* with what the Lord *knows*. We can be sure that v 6 is true because of the revelation of himself God granted to Moses, namely, (*cf.* Ex. 34:6) that he is emotionally moved towards us (*compassionate*), reaches out to us in spite of being undeserving (*gracious*), restrains his just wrath (*slow*) and has an abundant store of the *love* that never changes. He thus reveals himself because he knows us (14–16) in our frailty and transience. (iii) 9–10 and 12–13 are the negative and positive sides of divine dealing with our sin. **10** *Sins*, specific faults; *iniquities*, the perversion of our inner nature. **12** *Transgressions*, wilful rebellion against God's known will. V 9 indicates that God the Judge (*accuse* is a law-court verb) is a passing mode of his relationship to us, whereas v 13 reveals that his fatherhood is permanent. This is the only verse that specifically uses *father* along with the verb 'to have compassion'. (*Cf.* use of mother-love, Is. 49:15, and for its emotional intensity, 1 Ki. 3:26.)

19–22. The Lord's eternal throne. What is the proper response to One who rules *all*? The answer of angelic, heavenly and cosmic reality is 'We do what he wants' – *his bidding* and *his will*. So what about me? If I truly respond to the excellencies of the Lord as vs 1–5 indicate, will not I too obey his word?

Psalm 104. Creation rhapsody

The stateliness of 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation', compared with the exuberance of 'All creatures of our God and King', catches pretty well the relationship of Genesis 1 to Psalm 104.

This psalm turns creation truth into song, environmental theory into wonder and praise. The sequence of the psalm accords with Genesis 1 and we can imagine a poet meditating on that great statement of the Creator and his work and giving free play to his imagination.

There is a broad structural parallel between the two passages. The psalm begins with a prologue, a summons to personal praise and adoration (1) and ends with an epilogue of adoration and personal praise (31–35). In between, the body of the psalm follows Genesis 1. With 2 *cf.* Gn. 1:3–5; with 3–4, Gn. 1:6–8; with 5–13, Gn. 1:9–10; with 14–18, Gn. 1:11–13; with 19–24, Gn. 1:14–19; with 25–26, Gn. 1:20–28; with 27–30, Gn. 1:29–31.

An interesting feature of the way this psalm presents its theme is the unexpected alternation between 'you'-forms and 'he'-forms: 'you', 1, 6–9, 13b (the NIV alters the Hebrew here (13a) from 'your works' to *his work*), 20, 24–30; 'he', 2–4, 10–13a, 14–19 (lit. 'he made the moon for seasons'), 31–35. For the most part these changes occur at points where the psalm moves into another section but not with any observable regularity. It does not seem possible to see here evidence of antiphonal singing. The point rather is that the Creator is both 'he' and 'you', a God observed in his works and also personally known.

Another point of interest in the psalm (though one that cannot be easily expressed in translation) is that the verbs used are sometimes in the Hebrew 'perfect' tense (what is fixed, settled), or in the 'imperfect' (what is regular, repetitive), or the participle (a changeless state of affairs). The perfect tense expresses the permanent greatness and majesty of God; the historic finality of the work of creation and its fixed form and boundaries and the wisdom evident in it. Participles express changeless facts: creation witnesses to its Creator; he unchangingly provides and watches. Imperfects express the repeated works of God in satisfying earth's needs, his recurring transformations, provisions, withdrawal of life, renewal and how from time to time he touches the earth, controlling its forces.

1–9 Creator and creation: transcendent, indwelling, dominant. 1 *Praise* (see 103:1). *Very great etc.* The Creator is transcendent in greatness. If *splendour and majesty* are to be distinguished, the former is his intrinsic 'importance', the latter his observable majesty. **2–4** Clothing is always a metaphor for character and commitment. If his garment is *light*, it is because God is light (1 Jn. 1:5) and the Giver of it (Gn. 1:3; 2 Cor. 4:6). But also, with the picture of the Creator wrapped in light the psalm moves from his transcendence to his immanence. He is not remote from his creation (deism); nor is he to be identified with it (pantheism); but he indwells the world he created. The heavens are his tent-curtains (2); what Genesis 1:7 calls 'the waters above the expanse' are but the foundation above which his *upper chambers* (3) soar, far beyond our sight. But he is also the Rider in the clouds above us and present all round us in the *wind* (3). Furthermore, the invisible forces of the created order fulfil his will, and so do visible forces, whether the kindly warmth of the fire or the destructive awesomeness of the fire-ball. **5–9** apply the foregoing images of the Creator in relation to creation: he engineered its security, determined its condition (Gn. 1:2), and, by his mere word, ordered it into its predetermined and lasting form.

10–23 Creator and creation: creation organized to sustain life. 10–13 (enclosed between two verbs, *makes springs . . . waters*)

teach that by the work of the Creator, creation furnishes water for its creatures. **13–18** growth sustains life, and growing things, as well as the very shape of the world, provide protection for life. Furthermore, alternating night and day enables the life of beasts and mankind to co-exist (19–23). Creation is a subtly adapted system for the maintenance and enjoyment of life – and this by the direct action of the Creator who *makes springs, waters, makes grass grow* and plants.

24–30 Creator and creation: the Creator is Lord of life, death and renewal. The creation veritably seethes with activity from the smallest marine entity to the unspeakably terrifying sea-monster, Leviathan itself (Jb. 41:1ff.) and the constant bustling of mankind. But (whether they know it or not) all depend on the Creator to provide, exist only by what he gives, are subject to his sovereign determination of the hour of their death, and life itself on earth only continues because he wills to renew it.

31–35 Creator and creation: the holy Creator and his joy in creation. The *glory* here is the Creator's glory displayed in his created universe. Were he to withdraw this glory, the universe would disappear. He alone gives it being and stability. Solid as it may appear, it is of the utmost fragility in relation even to his eyes and fingers. Such a Creator is worthy of unceasing praise, but brashness is out of place and we can only pray that our poor song will be found pleasing, for he is the holy One and sinners have no final security in his creation (35). What then can *my soul* do but, having reviewed the excellencies of the Creator, turn to him in blessing and praise?

Psalm 105. 'Not only with our lips but in our lives'

The Bible does not contain 'narrative poetry' in the usual sense of the term, telling a story in poetic form. Psalms like 78, 105, 106, 136 do not, indeed, seem to be interested in narration as such and are more a series of allusive reminders of well-known events designed to lead to a particular point. Psalm 105 sweeps through the history of the Lord's dealings with his people in three stages: first, the patriarchal period (Gn. 12–50), alluding to the inauguration of the covenant (7–11), the period of nomadic wandering in Canaan (12–15), and the story of Joseph in Egypt (16–22); secondly, the time of the exodus (Ex. 1–12): Israel entering Egypt (23–25), Moses and the plagues (26–36), Israel leaving Egypt (37–38); thirdly, the journey in the wilderness (39–43, Ex. 13 – 19) and the entrance into Canaan (44, Joshua). The survey covers many years but paints one picture: a faithful, promise-making, promise-keeping God, mysterious in his ways but ever mindful of his people, ever planning ahead for their good, ever meeting their needs.

7–11 The Lord promising. As is usual, what the Lord does for his people is set against the backdrop of his universal sway. If he is to keep the promise to Abraham (Gn. 15:18–21) he must also be Lord over the Amorites. But he is even more, for *all the earth* is his to command. **8** anticipates the sweep of history the psalm covers. It looks back (lit. 'he has remembered') over the centuries and asserts, as did Joshua in respect of the same period, 'Not one of the Lord's good promises . . . failed; every one was fulfilled' (Jos. 21:45; 23:14). *Covenant*, a freely made commitment of God, not a bargain or *quid pro quo*, a sovereign, stated intention that he is God, to Abraham and his descendants, and that they are his people. Hence the covenant is defined further as *the word he commanded . . . the oath he swore* (8–9). It is his promise and he will see to it. **9** *made*, (lit.) 'cut', the technical word for the official inauguration of a covenant (Gn. 15:18). *With Abraham*, therefore with us, the descendants of Abraham (Rom. 4:11, 12, 16, 23–25; Gal. 3:6–9; 4:28–31), whose story is our history, whose calling is our calling and to whose promises we are heirs. **10** *Decree*, an unchangeable commitment. **11** The covenant was expressed in multiple promises (Gn. 17:1–7) and of these one is chosen, the promise of the land, as a test case of the faithfulness of the Lord. It is on the triumphant note of its fulfilment that the psalm's survey ends (44).

12–15 The Lord protecting. These verses cover the same period as Hebrews 11:8–10, 13. The land was theirs but they lived in it as *strangers*, 'aliens' (12). Their nomadic, stateless existence brought them from one king's dominion to another (13) and the only land they ever owned was a tomb (Gn. 23). How mysterious are the providences of God with his people! To promise land and leave them landless! But never unprotected – not even when their own follies would seem to have forfeited his goodwill (Gn. 12:10–20; 20:1–18; 26:1–11), nor when they faced the massed powers of the world (Gn. 14). **15** *Anointed*, set apart for God in status and function. *Prophets* (*cf.* Gn. 20:7) where Abraham is the first in the Bible to be called a prophet.

16–22 The Lord anticipating. The Lord not only holds sway over all the earth (7) but executively ordains earth's events (16). Again we face a mystery, for we cannot trace the paths and patterns of divine providence. But where we cannot understand why this or that experience has been *called down*, or why necessities of life have been withdrawn from us

(16), we can be sure that he is still on the throne (*He called . . . destroyed*) and that he has made a provision for our future (*sent a man before them*, 17). But even though we see that Joseph was an 'anticipatory providence' the element of mystery remains – indeed the public mystery of v 16 is re-enacted on the individual level: if Joseph was God's man in God's place for God's time (Gn. 45:5–8; 50:20) why did he suffer so (18)? 'It is not for you to know' said the Lord Jesus of another matter (Acts 1:7) but his answer must suffice for this too. All we are allowed to know is that the Lord was working according to eternal wisdom to fulfil his word (19) and to have a ruler in Egypt to welcome and feed his needy people.

23–38 The Lord redeeming. Note how this long section is bracketed by Israel entering (23) and leaving (38) Egypt. It was not for any sin of theirs that they entered Egypt, but by divine command and under divine promise (Gn. 46:3–4); nor was it for any sin of theirs that they came under Egyptian hostility. Indeed (25) it was by the act of God! Once again we face the mystery of divine providence. His thoughts are not ours, nor our ways his (Is. 55:8). But how marvellous are his ways (Rom. 11:33–36)! He brought them into threat and duress (25) and then revealed the splendour of his redeeming power. He prepared a man (26), a sufficient power against all the power of the enemy (27–36) and a glorious deliverance (37–38).

Note the structure of vs 28–36. The account starts with the ninth plague and the outcome of the whole exercise (The NIV is mistaken in making 28b a question; it is a statement that at the end of the plague sequence the cowed Egyptians made no further rebellion). It then 'back-tracks' to recount the steps leading up to that outcome (29–35): the first (29, Ex. 7:14ff.), second (30, Ex. 8:1ff), fourth and third (31, Ex. 8:20ff., 16ff.), seventh (32, 33, Ex. 9:13ff.) and eighth (34, 35, Ex. 10:1ff.) plagues, thus coming again to the climax, this time in the grim tenth plague (36, Ex. 11, 12). 37 (Ex. 11:2, 3) 38 (Ex. 12:30–33).

39–42 The Lord providing. This section brings both the historical review and the psalm itself to a conclusion. The revelation of the Lord is completed as we see him in attendance on the daily needs of his pilgrims. He caters (39) for their guidance (Ex. 13:21, 22) and safety (Ex. 14:19) and answers prayer (even their grumbling) in the provision of food (40, Ex. 16: 12–13, 14ff) and water (41, Ex. 17:1–7). But he did all this because he had given his word to Abraham (42, *cf.* 8, 'he remembered' . . . *word*; 9) – a faithful, promise-keeping God!

How do we respond to such a God and such a display of promise-keeping, protection, anticipation of need, deliverance and provision? In the joyful response of thanksgiving, and song (1–2), glorying verbally in what the Lord has revealed of himself (*name*), committedly cultivating his presence (3–4, *seek . . . seek*, not as searching for the lost but as coming again and again, assiduously, to where we know he is to be found), holding his great deeds in fresh remembrance (5) and sharing the news of actions worldwide (1): a programme for the tongue in praise and testimony, for the heart in 'seeking' the Lord, and for the mind in careful remembrance.

But there is more. Vs 43–44 form a conclusion matching the praiseful beginning to the psalm. Those who experienced at first hand what the Lord had done for them rejoiced and were glad. God had been good to them, crowning his record of promise-keeping with the gift of the land (44), just as he had pledged to Abraham four hundred years and more earlier (Gn. 15:7–16). But joy falls short of the response he designed: all he did was with a view to creating for himself a people who would obey his word (45). Without this, praise is only religious noise (Am. 5:23–24).

Psalm 106. 'A song that is music to thee'

In the main Psalm 106 reviews Israel's history from the Exodus (6–12, Ex. 14) into the wilderness (13–18, Nu. 11:4–34; 16), to Sinai (19–23, Ex. 32:1–6, 9–14), on to the borders of Canaan (24–27, Nu. 14), the episodes of Baal-Peor and Meribah (28–33, Nu. 25:1–15; 20:2–13) and the eventual entry into the Promised Land (34–38, Jdg. 1:21, 27–36; 3:3, 5; *etc.*).

It is a sad story of sin (6), heedlessness and forgetfulness (7, 21), short-lived response (12–13), self-indulgence (14), dissatisfaction with God's provisions (16), idolatry (19), disobedience (24–25), failure to inherit (26), disloyalty (28), provocation (32), compromise (34–35) and religious corruption (37–39). But (with a greater emphasis) it is a story of divine salvation in power (8–11), readiness to be persuaded to mercy (23, 30), repeated countering of just judgment with unmerited mercies (40–43), compassionate listening to cries for help (44), and fidelity to covenant and love (45). This is the lesson of our history: our faithlessness, his faithfulness.

1–5 Praise and prayer. The psalm opens on the note of praise and prayer and closes on the notes of prayer (47) and praise (48). For history tells of a love that never fails (1) and of a God who is changelessly the same (48), exciting the praise of his people – even though they know that no mortal tongue can fully rise to the

occasion. It assures us that prayer is worthwhile, for the individual is not forgotten in the Lord's purposes for his people, and the people are not forgotten even though spread throughout the world. Interestingly the beginning and ending of the psalm also strike the note of blessedness (3, 48 lit. 'Blessed be the Lord'), though using different Hebrew words. The way of obedience is the way of blessing (3), but if that were the whole story where would we stand with our record of ceaseless declension? There is, however, a God worthy to be blessed (see on 103:1): the ever-faithful, compassionate, loving, forgiving, prayer-hearing, delivering, saving God. To this *all the people* – we who have had our catalogue of failure read out to us in vs 6–39 – delightedly say *Amen! Praise the* LORD (48).

6–12 Man's forgetfulness. God's salvation. 'We have sinned along with our fathers' (6). It is not just that we are like them in sin (as NIV) but one with them in a continuum of sinfulness. They and we together have 'pervertedly done wrong' – a fault in our natures (perversion) and in our lives (wrong-doing): blind to the marvels the Lord does, forgetful of his *kindnesses* (7, lit. 'the abundance of his acts of changeless love') and full of faithless rebellion (Ex. 14:10–12) – unperceptive in mind, short in memory, transient in faith. But the Lord goes on (8–11) acting *for his name's sake, i.e.* because it is his nature to do so, dealing with our circumstantial and human adversaries, working a full salvation (Ex. 14:13–14, 30–31) and prompting a sadly short-lived response of praise (*cf.* 13).

13–18 Self-indulgent, self-seeking discontent. They neither remembered the God of the past nor consulted the God of the future (13) and consequently they fell prey to their own unsanctified emotions: first by tiring of God's provision for their sustenance (14, Nu. 11:4–6 *cf.* Jn. 6:35ff.); secondly, by resenting the authority he had set over the community (16, Nu. 16:3). In each case God's favour was forfeited and judgment followed. There comes a point where prayer can become stubborn insistence on our own way and, as an act of just judgment God gives us what we insisted we must have (15). Likewise there comes a point where he insists that, contrary to what we might think, we must have what he wants. Moses and Aaron were his best will for his people and on this point he was immovable (16). 13 is the correct way to live with God in the light of his saving acts (*cf.* 8–12) and to face the future in the light of his word of counsel.

19–23 False religion: Moses as mediator. 19–20 (Rom. 1 21–25). All man-made religion involves thinking in terms of earthly models, trusting a do-it-yourself salvation, replacing the eternal God with what needs support to keep it going, and when we turn aside the basic cause is always forgetfulness of the saving power of the one true God. But even in such circumstances, the Lord accepts the interceding office of a mediator (Heb. 7:25).

24–27 The word and the voice. This is the pivot of the psalm.

A^1 (vs 1–5) Praise and prayer
  B^1 (vs 6–12) Man's forgetfulness: God's salvation
    C^1 (vs 13–18) Discontent with God's provisions
      D^1 (vs 19–23) False religion: Moses
        E (vs 24–27) The word and the voice
      D^2 (vs 28–33) False religion: Phinehas
    C^2 (vs 34–38) Discontent with the Lord
  B^2 (vs 39–46) Man's rebellion: God's rememberance
A^2 (vs 47–84) Prayer and praise

The brevity of the central section makes it all the more dramatic, a truth that needs no elaboration: the central sin of the people of God is to refuse his word. 24 (lit.) 'they did not believe his word'; 25 (lit.) 'they did not listen to the voice of the Lord'. This is the privilege of possessing the word of God and the reason why it is our cardinal sin to ignore it: the word of God is the living voice of God.

28–33 False religion: Phinehas as mediator. Like Moses in v 23, Phinehas interposed and wrath was turned away. Moses, with his self-sacrificing prayer (Ex. 32:31–32) came nearest to the perfect Mediator they were unconsciously foreshadowing. Grace allowed him to turn wrath aside but he did so by becoming a curse on our behalf (Gal. 3:13), becoming sin in our place (2 Cor. 5:21). But if Moses foreshadowed the Lord Jesus by his prayer, Phinehas did so in the divine status of *righteousness* accorded to him as mediator, anticipating the One whom Isaiah calls 'that righteous One, my Servant' (53:11; Heb. 7:26).

The second incident (32–33) included in this stanza completes the first: *they yoked themselves to ... Baal ... they angered the Lord.* Notwithstanding that they had been in this very situation before (Ex. 17), lack of water (Nu. 20:3ff) provoked an outburst against Moses, a bitter regret at having left Egyptian slavery, a wish for death rather than the life God ordained for them. No wonder it was too much for Moses! The old Moses of Exodus 2:11–12 was still lurking within the man renowned for meekness (Nu. 12:3)! Moses paid dearly for his hotheaded disobedience (Nu. 20:12). Disobedience to the word of the Lord is the cardinal sin (*see* 24–27). 27 (*Cf.* Lv. 26:33; Dt. 28:64).

34–38 Discontent with the Lord. Once again, every evil thing stemmed from the basic sin of disobedience (34). Regarding the command to *destroy*, first (as Gn. 15:16 shows), the commanded destruction was a just judgment of God following four hundred years of probation. It was neither arbitrary nor hasty but a solemn judicial decision of the holy God. Secondly, at that stage of the history of God's people, it was the only way to secure a proper separation from the world. Refusing to become a separate people, they became a compromised people (35–39) – it is always so. 35 (Jdg. 3:5, 6). 36 (Jdg. 2:12ff). 37 (2 Ki. 16:3). 38 Since creation is itself a holy thing, it can be *desecrated* – indeed it is a moral force operating against defilers (Gn. 3:18; Lv. 18:25).

39–46 Human rebellion, God's remembrance. These verses reflect the tension within the nature of God which the book of Judges records at length. In righteous anger, he reacts to his people's defection by causing their enemies to dominate them. Yet it is not their return to righteousness that moves him but simply their misery and his own faithfulness to his pledged word.

47–48 Prayer and praise. *Gather us from the nations* may indicate that this psalm was written during the Babylonian captivity but the inclusion of these verses in the celebrations when David brought the Ark to Jerusalem (1 Ch. 15, 16) speaks against this. In the psalm the *nations* are a place of scattering, a snare and a dominating force. There was no time, from the first entry into Canaan, when this was not the case to a greater or less degree. The psalm is best simply heard as the song of the church in the world, subject to its enticements, overcome by its powers, losing its identity by compromise, but longing and praying for a better day and praising the God who, amid the fluctuations of his people, is the same *from everlasting to everlasting.*

Book 5

Psalm 107. Everybody can pray

One of the enduring delights of this psalm is repetition – repeated descriptions of threatening situations (4–5, 10, 17–18, 23–26), repeated recourse to prayer (6, 13, 19, 28), repeated divine response (6–7, 13–14, 19–20, 28–29), repeated calls to thankfulness (8, 15, 21, 31). Who are these people? It is quite common to link the psalm with the return from exile in Babylon but this does not accord with the worldwide view the psalm takes of the gathered people (3). Others find a wider review of Israel's history: from the wilderness to Canaan (4–9), from Egypt and Babylon into the promised land (10–16), from the 'death' (17–22) and 'storm' (23–32) of the exile into life and peace. But, again, the stance of the psalm is deliberately worldwide and we may allowably ask what about a gathering from the *west*? Indeed, the Hebrew of v 3 actually says (not *and south* but) 'and from the sea' (presumably meaning 'and from overseas').

Another point of translation is also important: *some . . . some . . . some . . . others* (4, 10, 17, 23) is interpretative, assuming that four different groups are intended. The Hebrew rather suggests that the same people are being described from four different angles – the typical hazards out of which divine redemption (2) and love (1, 8, 15, 21, 31, 43) have brought us, the Lord's people. This is how the psalm should be understood. The psalmist is meditating upon one of the great 'pilgrim' feasts of the pre-exilic church (Ex. 23:14–19). He sees people come together from scattered locations and remembers that the promises to Abraham (Gn. 12:1–3; 18:18; 22:18; 28:14; Ps. 47:9), now focused in the house of David (Ps. 72:8–11), pledged a gathering from the whole world. Though for him – as for us (Rev. 7:9–17) – the realization is still future, yet every individual and every generation of the people of God can enjoy the reality of belonging to the gathered people, adoring the love which redeemed (1–2) and rescues (8, 15, 21, 31) and must ever be the focus of our thoughts (43).

1–3 Redeeming love. Throughout the psalm the *love* referred to is the committed, unchanging, loving determination of the Lord who will never give up those whom he has chosen for himself. This *love* expressed itself in redemption (2) – the work of the 'next-of-kin' who took as his own all the needs of his threatened kinsfolk, himself bearing their burdens and rescuing them from their dangers.

4–32 The four pictures. The first picture of deliverance from danger by land (4–9) is balanced by the fourth, danger at sea (23–32). The contrast indicates deliverance in and from every problem in earthly life. The second (10–16) and third (17–22) pictures focus on spiritual problems – rebels against God (11, 17) bringing upon themselves bondage (10) and self-destruction (17), *i.e.* the fact that sin makes us enemies of God, deprives us of the liberty it promises and corrupts our natures. The four pictures taken together offer an assurance that redeeming, unchanging love can deal with every circumstance and every condition and that it is in answer to prayer that the loving Lord does so (6, 13, 19, 28). The Lord's earthly people are ever under redemptive care, ever buffeted by

circumstances, outside and within, and constantly need the resource of prayer.

4–9 Lost in a wide world: the love that brings us home. The redeemed often do not 'know which way to turn' (4) and long for the settled security of a true city. Like Abraham, experiencing the insecurity of tent-life, longing for 'the city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God' (Heb. 11:9–10). We also often come to the point where 'we can't take any more' (5). But we can pray (6). Often on earth we find, in retrospect, that what we thought was a winding pathway became the straight road of divine direction (7) and certainly it will be so if, in heaven, we are allowed hindsight. What seemed, as we lived through it, to be a veritable corkscrew-road or a maze will then be seen in truth as a direct, undeviating path from conversion to glory. This is the 'supernatural' (*wonderful*, 8) work of God who (even now – how much more then, Rev. 7:16–17) satisfies.

10–16 Hemmed in a narrow world: the love that makes us free. In the garden (Gn.3) it was the purpose of the serpent to make the word of God seem unnaturally restrictive, an unwarranted denial of human liberty. Too late the man and his wife discovered that it was only by binding themselves to obey God's word that they enjoyed liberty (*cf.* Ps. 119:45). Rebelling against the word brought bondage. This explains our condition (10–11). With v 12, *cf.* Gn. 3:16–19. How often divine mercy protects us from the results of our own false choices we shall never know, but sometimes, with equal love, the barrier is allowed to fall and we experience the bitter bondage we have brought on ourselves. But even then we can pray (13) and find that – in measure now but in full reality then (Phil. 3:20–21) – grace responds to prayer in deliverance (14–16).

17–22 Damaged in a sinful world: the love that makes us whole. Within our own natures, sin is our all-time 'own goal', (lit.) bringing us low (17) and 'right up to the gates of death' (18) – the double disaster of self-destruction now and eternal loss ahead. In v 11, *rebelled* reflects the stubbornness of the rebel; in v 17, wilfulness. But even so we can pray (19). Through prayer comes the great antidote to sin's poison, the healing word (20). Just as the source of our spiritual plight is rejection of the word (11), so the return to spiritual wholeness (20) is through the return of the word into our lives.

23–32 Beaten in a hostile world: the love that brings us peace. Seafaring is a perfect picture of our experience in this life: getting on with our lawful business (23) when, 'out of a clear blue sky', comes the storm that upsets all our calculations, destroys our cherished comforts, leaves us helpless in the grip of totally overmastering forces (25–27). Every storm is a summons to trust, for it is not a chance happening or a satanic ploy: it is his storm (25) and in due course the same hand that roused the storm will still it (29). Every storm is a call to prayer (28a) which will avail even against the mightiest opposing forces. The door of prayer will prove to be the entrance to peace (29–30). In vs 21–22 the response of thankfulness was Godward, in the offering of a sacrifice that both expresses our gratitude and reaffirms our dedication. In vs 31–32, thankfulness leads into participating membership of the worshipping community.

33–43 Providential, caring love. In these verses two contrasting pictures (33–34 and 35–36) are interpreted in reverse order as two contrasting experiences of life (37–38, 39–40). The psalm ends by noting that here is a truth that *the upright see* (42) and a thought on which *the wise* concentrate (43). The pictures are respectively of the fertile becoming infertile (33–34) and the infertile changed to support life and afford security (35–36). This is so often true: there is covetable prosperity when everything succeeds (37–38), but also times of recession when calamity follows trouble (39) and leaders can offer no solution (40); but then again, prosperity is recovered and the needy given security (41). What is it in all this that *the upright* (those who are right with God and committed to rightness of life) *see*? First, that every circumstance is directed by the Lord who is not a watcher from the sidelines but an executive director. It is he who works transformations in both directions. The most practical course in life is to be right with the One who directs all. Secondly, his providences are moral. If fruitful land becomes a waste, it is a judgment on sin (34); therefore the upright should determine on holiness. Thirdly, when prosperity comes it is not a reward for good behaviour but a sheer act of divine concern for the needy (41). For this reason, true wisdom (43) will always fill its gaze with the *great love*, (lit.) 'the loves' of the Lord – that changeless, 'ever-unfailing' love which is so many-faceted that within it (in answer to prayer) there lies the solution to every need.

Psalm 108. A recipe for an hour of need

Although it is composed of parts of two other psalms (1–5, Ps. 57:7–11; 6–13, Ps. 60:5–12), this is no (mere) anthology. Even if we knew nothing of Psalms 57 and 60 (which may be consulted for the details of this psalm), Psalm 108 would still stand by its own merits. The enmity

of Edom was a constant back-drop to the life of Israel (*cf.* Am. 1:11) and we may assume that the Edomite crisis of Psalm 60 was not the last David heard from that restless quarter. In some such critical moment David drew on his earlier psalmody and fashioned it afresh for new needs. The poem falls into three stanzas held together by 'domino'-linking: the first stanza (1–5) ends with prayer and the second (6–9) opens with prayer. The first hinges on the reality of the Lord's unchanging *love* (4) and the second begins with *those you love* (a different word, 'those dear to you'). The second stanza ends with a reference to *Edom* (9) and the third (10–13) begins with the problem of *Edom*.

Each stanza contains prayer: first, that God may be glorified (5), secondly, that his people may be delivered (6) and finally that the crisis may be met (12). This is a true order of biblical praying and arguably the foremost lesson of the psalm. But prayer derives its confidence from truth about God and each stanza brings a particular truth to the fore: (i) God's *love* (4) is 'ever-unchanging' – his *faithfulness* is comparable to the highest reality we observe, *the skies*, but his love is even *higher*, *i.e.* his loving commitment to us is the supreme reality of all. Hence we can face a crisis with a steadfast heart, with vocal and public praise and with prayer that in this situation he will prove himself to be what he really is (1–5). (ii) God's promises cover the crisis (7–9). The Lord had committed himself beforehand to the subservience of Edom. Prayer, resting on promises, possesses certainty (6). (iii) His power alone is sufficient for the crisis (10, 13) and in answer to prayer he will return to favour his people and give the needed help (11–12).

Psalm 109. The hallowing of anger

Psalm 109, the most outspoken of the imprecatory psalms (see Introduction), has attracted a 'bad press'. Commentators queue to pronounce it lacking in Christian ideals, the opposite of the spirit of the gospel, and some try to evade the rigour of the psalm by treating vs 6–19 as a quotation of what the psalmist's enemies allege against him. The Psalms do not necessarily indicate where a new speaker begins but it is doubtful if this is the case here: (i) the change from plural enemies (2–5) to an individual (6–19) is paralleled in Psalm 55; (ii) to allocate 6–19 to the psalmist's enemies brings no relief to the problem for in v 20 the psalmist repeats the sentiments himself and there is nothing in principle in 6–19 that cannot be paralleled elsewhere in the Bible. (iii) Furthermore, Acts 1:16–20 accords to this psalm the honour of full inspiration and sees v 8 as spoken against Judas. As in so many other psalms, David's experience foreshadows that of Jesus, the ultimate, true and holy speaker of the words of cursing.

So does the psalm depart from the spirit and ideals of the NT? (i) The psalmist does not deny the duty of love: vs 4–5 begin and end with an affirmation of his love (*friendship* is too weak a translation) for his enemies and the present tenses indicate that this love continued throughout the experience of enmity. Maybe, instead of finding here a departure from the principle of love (Mt. 5:44), we should ask whether our understanding of love is correct. Will the Lord Jesus cease to love his enemies when he subjects them to 'the wrath of the Lamb' (Rev. 6:16)? (ii) The psalmist is not vengeful in act or spirit. He says in v 4, (lit.) 'But I am prayer', meaning 'my whole being is identified with the exercise of prayer.' Thus he will not retaliate. His response to hurt and malice is to bring it to God in the place of prayer and to leave it there – a perfect expression of Romans 12:19. Even if his prayers proved to be blameworthy in word or spirit, his way is preferable to that of the modern-day bomber, arsonist or cut-throat commercial operator. (iii) But are his prayers blameworthy? What we retreat from is not the fact that he prayed, but the realism in which he couched his prayers. When any measure of hostility disturbs our comfortable lives we rouse ourselves to say 'Lord, help me to love my enemies as Jesus taught, and, please, will you deal with them for me.' The psalmist was more realistic: how will God 'deal with them' except in ways which he has revealed in his word? False accusers must receive what they purposed to achieve (Dt. 19:16–19, *cf.* 2 with 6); those who disobey have no tenure on earth (Dt. 4:1, *cf.* 8); sinners bring disaster on their descendants (Ex. 34:7, *cf.* 9–12). If we retreat into unreality with a general petition where the psalmist ventured to express scriptural realism, we should at least be aware of what we are doing.

But our retreat is understandable and accords with Paul's caution (Eph. 4:26) that allowable anger is near neighbour to sin. J. L. McKenzie (*American Ecclesiastical Review, III*, 1944, pp. 81–96) asks whether 'the imprecatory psalms are not a model, not because of their lower degree of perfection but because they are too lofty for . . . us to imitate without danger.'

1–5 Prayer for divine action. 1 The spirituality of the psalmist throughout this terrible time is remarkable: he maintains praise (1) and prayer (4), the demanding exercise of *fasting* (24) and his commitment to public worship (30). These are the things which our lesser spiritual quality allows to evaporate under pressure. Furthermore in the face of slander, lies, animosity and active assault (3, *attack*, 'war

against'), he maintains love of his foes (4–5), not allowing his reaction to them to be determined by their unequal treatment of him.

6–19 Prayer for divine justice. This section falls into two parts: (i) vs 6–15 are a balanced poem of five stanzas: the first (6–7) requests a verdict of guilt in a human court and the last (14–15), for unforgiven guilt before God; the second (8–9) and the fourth (12–13) unite in loss of tenure of life both for the individual and in his descendants; the middle stanza (10–11) is the most terrible: no one sins alone and our children are bound with us in the bundle of life, for good as for ill (Prov. 20:7). As noted above, these prayers give expression to scriptural inevitabilities: this is what life is like under the rule of an awesome and holy God. 6 *Evil man*, the same word as *wicked* (lit. 'the mouth of a wicked man') in v 2. Thus evil boomerangs on the perpetrator. 7 *Prayers condemn*, (lit.) 'may his prayer become a sin' – even the way of prayer denied him as a solution. 14 In Scripture (*cf.* Mt. 23:29–35) our sinful inheritance never excuses us, but rather puts us under the heaped-up sin of the past. We are not fatalistically bound (Ezk. 18) but, unless we repent and disavow it, we are its inheritors.

(ii) Vs 16–19 turn specifically to the offender himself: why should he expect kindness (12) who never showed kindness; his heart, his will (*pleasure*), his practical life (*garment . . . cloak*), were all alike stained by his malevolence and it will rebound – coming to him, seeping into the fibres of his being and binding him fast like a *belt*.

20–31 Prayer for divine help. For the believer, in every situation, another set of factors operates. However numerous and vicious foes may be, however trying and disastrous our circumstances, there is always *But you, O Sovereign* LORD, the One who never deviates from his revealed nature (*name*,) and his pledged *love* (21). 22 *Poor . . . needy* often express our plight before stronger forces, respectively how we can be humiliated and pressured by them. They are also used as terms of godliness, humility before God and pliancy towards his will. 27 His desire is not simply for a solution but for such a solution as is unmistakably an act of God and a public vindication of spiritual reality (31).

Psalm 110. 'He will be a priest on his throne' (Zc. 6:13)

The very name, Melchizedek, breathes an air of mystery. He enters Scripture unheralded. Abram has just conquered the kings of earth (Gn. 14:14–15) but when 'Melchizedek king of Salem' came, Abram acknowledges his pre-eminence as priest, presenting him with a tithe of the spoil (14:20) and affirming Melchizedek's 'God Most High' to be none other than the Lord himself (14:22). In Joshua 10:1 we meet Adoni-Zedek. His name is identical in form and meaning ('king of righteousness') with Melchizedek, suggesting the continuation through the years of a priestly-kingship in Jerusalem. If so, when David took Jerusalem (2 Sa. 5:6–9) he sat on Melchizedek's throne, himself heir to the priestly-kingship validated by Abraham. This would account for Psalm 110.

As David meditated on his dignity as priest-king, it became a telescope turned on the Messiah and he looked forward to the perfect Priest-King, the full reality of what David was only the shadow cast beforehand. When Hebrews (6:20–7:28) uses Melchizedek in order to show that the Lord Jesus is a true priest though without Aaronic ancestry, it is the fulfilment of a line of truth reaching back through David to Abraham. Jesus is indeed the true Melchizedek of whom Abram met the prototype, David was the foreshadowing and of whom Zechariah spoke.

The psalm consists of two parallel movements: the king (1–3) and the priest (4–7). Each begins with a divine promise, declares the status of its subject as king and priest, pledges his dominion, from Zion, over earth's kings. It contrasts the willing devotion of his people with the overthrow of the nations and shows the King-Priest himself as ever-fresh with youthful vigour and ever-refreshed by timely renewal.

Title and 1 (*cf.* Mk. 12:36–37) The Lord Jesus affirms David as author, accords divine inspiration, and finds his own messiahship revealed. King David speaks to one of higher kingship than himself (Heb. 1:3, 13). *Says*, 'The very word of the Lord to my Sovereign' (*cf.* Jos. 5:14). *Enemies . . . footstool.* For an apt picture *cf.* Jos. 10:24; the reality (Heb. 10:12–13). 2 *From Zion . . . in the midst.* Though even now reigning (Heb. 10:13) in Zion (Heb. 12:22–24), the king is still among his *enemies*. The consummation of their submission is still ahead. Thus the psalm speaks of his and our position today (*cf.* Phil. 2:9–11; Heb. 2:8–9). *Rule*, a very strong word, 'dominate'. 3 (Lit.) 'Your people will be free-will offerings', *i.e.* 'willingness itself' – the proper response to such a king. *Arrayed.* While it is possible that the phrase could point to the 'holy array' of the king's people, it is more likely to point to himself clothed in his own holiness. (See 96:9; *cf.* 1 Ch. 16:29; 2 Ch. 20:21.)

The womb of the dawn. Possibly drawing on ancient mythology (Is. 14:12) to allude to the supernatural origin of the king; possibly a picturesque allusion to where the dew originates.

Dew as life-giving (Is. 26:19; Ho. 14:5); as coming secretly (2 Sa. 17:12) is God's fresh vitality preserving the king 'in the power of an indestructible life' (Heb. 7:16). 5 The position is reversed from v 1: the Lord is at his royal priest's *right hand* to energize all his endeavours (*cf.* Is. 9:7; Jn. 14:10), taking up the position of protection (121:5) and patronage (Is. 45:1). Authority of position is thus matched by power of accomplishment issuing in world-dominion. 6 How does such a picture accord with the 'Prince of peace' (Is. 9:6) and the NT reality of Jesus? First, true to the kingly metaphor, the expanding kingdom is by conquest. At present this is the conquest of gospel truth bringing the nations into submission (Acts 15:13–18; 2 Cor. 4:6); but, secondly, there will be a day when One with the blood-stained garments of the priestly sacrifice will arrive as King of kings and the great victory will at last be consummated (Rev. 19:11–21). 7 The picture looks back to David at the brook Besor (1 Sa. 30:10), a pause in the pursuit of his foes. So the ultimate King will never relax or relent until every foe submits to him. *Lift up ... head. Cf.* the synonymous phrase in 83:2; Jdg. 8:28; Jb. 10:15; Zc. 1:21, means to act with bold confidence, to dominate every opposing force.

Psalms 111, 112. An ABC of family likeness

These psalms form a pair in style and theme. Each is an 'alphabetical acrostic' (see Introduction). The theme of Psalm 111:1b is the Lord, revealed in deed and word; the theme of Psalm 112 is the Lord's people, viewed in a typical 'man', in character and conduct resembling the Lord himself. Time and again the matching lines express related ideas: the thankful heart and the reverent spirit (111 and 112:1b respectively); the *upright* people delighting in obedience (1c); the *great* LORD, the *mighty* people (2a); the majesty of the Lord, the richness of his people (3a); *etc.* In particular there are direct correspondences: both the Lord and his people possess enduring righteousness (3b); the same word describes the Lord's *steadfast* ('maintained') precepts and his people's *secure* heart (8a); the Lord provided redemption for his needy people, they display prodigal generosity (9a). Just as we say 'like father like son' so, biblically, those who look at us should see him. Throughout the two psalms 'forever'/'eternal' chimes like a bell: the Lord's righteousness, covenant, precepts and praise are eternal; so is the righteousness of his people and their security and perpetuity. Because he is eternal in righteousness they are set apart from the world's relativisms, holding and practising the moral values they see revealed in him.

Psalm 111. The Lord in deed and word

V 1 with its notes of praise and moral commitment (*upright*) is matched by v 10, calling for *fear*, obedience and praise. Between these brackets vs 2–9 begin by affirming the greatness of the Lord's works (2–3) and continue by exploring what he has done (4–9). The first (4) and last (9) work is the revelation of himself by name. 4 (lit. 'A remembrance/memorial he has made in respect of his wonders') (*cf.* Ex. 3:15). His name says all he wants his people to know about him. He delights in bestowing unmerited grace and is stirred by emotional affection (*compassionate, cf.* 1 Ki. 3:26) for them. He redeemed them (9) – *redemption* focuses attention on paying the ransom-price: he took upon himself the whole 'cost' of their deliverance – and brought them into *covenant* with himself. Because he *remembers his covenant* he fed them (in the wilderness), brought them into the land and gave them his trustworthy law to live by (5–7). Thus the unmerited grace and passionate love which flowed out first in redemption, brought the Lord's people within the embrace of his covenant where they experience his providential care in daily needs, his power over all the power of their enemies, and his word by which they live.

Psalm 112. The Lord's people in character and conduct

The psalm moves consecutively through clear topics, devoting four lines to the first four and six lines to the last: (i) 1–2 Individual and family: Each individual is moved inwardly by reverential fear, issuing outwardly in delighted obedience (1). To this character and conduct a particular blessedness is attached – children of recognized worth (2a, *cf.* Pr. 20:7) and a blessing that extends to succeeding generations (2b). (ii) 3–4 Fortune and misfortune. *Righteousness* is double-faceted: endlessly right with God, constantly committed to righteousness of life. Such a person is amply provided for (3a, *cf.* 1:3; 73:23–26) but is not immune from life's darkness. When such comes they are faced in the faith that light is bound to dawn. But while the darkness lasts the duties remain of continuing *upright* in conduct, *gracious and compassionate* (*cf.* 111:4) in relationships and *righteous* in character. (iii) 5–6 Generosity and security. As surely as light will dawn in darkness, so *good will come* – but note how the emphasis still rests on maintained character – a *generous* spirit (5a, the same word that provided the word for *gracious* in 4b, 111:4b) practising liberality (*lends freely*) and a life lived with *justice, i.e.* applying principles of righteousness through right decisions. (iv) 7–8 Threat and trust. The life of the

righteous is not a bed of roses. *Bad news* comes (not now the darkness of 4a, but human hostility, 8b) yet there is no loss of peace. The *heart* remains *steadfast* because the Lord is trusted. Furthermore, this is not a passing mood but a maintained attitude until the threat is over. *Look in triumph*, (lit.) 'look upon/at his foes', maybe an idiom for 'see the last of', certainly no sense of gloating is intended. (v) **9–10** character, conduct and destiny. Each verse expresses its own telling sequence: generosity in the context of a life that is right with God and right in conduct leads to honour (9, Rom. 2:10); wickedness with animosity is self-destructive (10) and ends in *nothing*, (lit.) 'will perish'.

Psalms 113–118. The Egyptian Hallel: A Cantata of Salvation

Anything that relates to the Lord Jesus Christ is of supreme value and attractiveness for the Christian. Consequently, the strong likelihood that this group of psalms formed part of his Passover celebrations enhances their interest and importance. At the last Passover, the first Supper, he and his company would have sung Psalms 113–114 before the meal and 115–118 would be the 'hymn' they sang at the end (Mt. 26:30). No doubt each psalm in the group had its own literary history but together they are well called 'the Egyptian Hallel/Act of Praise', a commentary in song on Exodus 6:6–7.

Psalm 113 grounds the whole enterprise in the Lord – how it is intrinsic to his exalted dignity to exalt the poor and needy. 114 majestically records the exodus as the Creator manages his creation for his people's welfare. 115, 116 balance each other as, respectively, the community and the individual rescued from spiritual (115) and physical (116) death. 117 extends exodus truth to its worldwide limits – what was done for Israel was done for all. Finally 118 enables us to join in the great procession through the gates and into the very presence of the Lord himself.

(a) Psalm 113. The Lord, exalted and exalting

The theme is the universal and transcendent, Lord, exalted above heaven and earth, embracing all time, filling all space, over the nations, raising the poor and transforming the frustrated. The movement of thought is from the sovereignty which rules all, to the goodness which touches each.

1–3 The worthy name. The Lord's *name* (what he has revealed of himself, Ex. 3:15) excites the praise of his *servants* and is worthy of endless and universal acclaim. *Name* teaches that praise responds to revelation, and *servants* that praise is rooted in commitment of life.

4–6 The exalted Lord. The threefold reference to the *name* in 1–3 is matched by a threefold statement of exaltedness in 4–6: *exalted . . . heavens, enthroned, stoops . . . heavens.* He is exalted over every people and every place, incomparably exalted, so transcendent that he must stoop even to see the heavens. His *glory* is the highest of all realities, his person is above all dignities, his omniscience embraces all creation.

7–9 The shared exaltation. He is himself *exalted* (4); he *lifts*, 'exalts' *the needy*; he who *sits enthroned* (5) *seats* the *needy* (enthroned) – out of the dust, onto a throne, into personal fulfilment. He takes people in their helplessness (*poor . . . needy*), countermands their unworthiness and reverses their hopelessness. How true all this is of the inner realities of the exodus – from the Lord's control over earthly powers (Ex. 4:22–23; 14:30–31) to his awareness of his people's needs (Ex. 2:24–25; 3:7) and to the despairing cries of forcibly bereaved mothers (Ex. 1:22)! But its revelation of the Lord is permanent: what he was then, he is now.

(b) Psalm 114. The Sovereign Lord: over all, in all, through all

The message of 113 is not wishful thinking for 114 displays the Lord supreme over nations (1) identified with the erstwhile outcast (2), sovereign over creation (3–7), providing for the needy (8). The facts of the exodus undergird the facts of revelation.

1–2 Redemption and indwelling. When the Lord redeems, he comes to stay; separating his people from the world, he separates them for himself. The psalm goes beyond the topographical fact that the Lord's *sanctuary* (his 'holy place', where he dwells) was in *Judah*; rather, *Judah*, his people themselves, became the place where he lived (Eph. 2:19–22). For those whom he redeems he transforms: finding them as *Jacob*, living in them as *Israel* (Gn. 32:27–28).

3–4 Creation and completion. Natural marvels accompanied the exodus, at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21ff), Jordan (Jos. 3:14ff) and Sinai (Ex. 19:16ff). The two 'crossings' mark respectively coming out of Egypt and coming into Canaan. Thus what the Lord begins, he completes – and the assurance that he can do so is his sovereign power as Creator whereby humanly unsurmountable barriers 'flee' before him.

5–8 Compassion and provision. Questions hurry us forward to the climax: the simple reality of the Lord's *presence* was sufficient to achieve his marvels of deliverance. In his mercy he identifies with one as weak, even despicable, as *Jacob*; and he who begins and completes his

good work (see on 3–4, *cf.* Phil. 1:6) caters also for his people's pilgrim needs (Ex. 17:1–7).

(c) Psalm 115. The Lord, blessed and blessing

We can only guess at the setting for this psalm. Does v 2 imply that the people of God are in some disarray before the taunting world and ask the time-honoured question, 'What about your good name?' (1, *cf.* Jos. 7:9). More likely, but still only guesswork, a recent victory has been won, so credit might be given to the king or the army. The enemy, strong in its idols, may have taunted a people whose God is invisible. More likely still, the psalm is imaginative, dwelling on the occupation of Canaan: the battles were hard but the victory was the Lord's, pagans were exposed as the devotees of dead gods and the Lord revealed as faithful (1) and sovereign disposer of all (16). The structure of the psalm tells its story:

A^1 (vs 1–3) Praise due only to the sovereign God of heaven
  B^1 (vs 4–8) Idols and those who trust them
  B^2 (vs 9–15) the Lord and those who trust him
A^2 (vs 16–18) Praise due to the sovereign God of heaven

The psalm is an act of antiphonal worship (*cf.* Ezr. 3:10–11). Can we hear one choir singing 9a, 10a, 11a, and another responding in 9b, 10b, 11b? Is 12a a congregational affirmation, with 12b–13 the response of both choirs? Possibly around this 'core', 1–3, 16–18 were spoken by the whole assembly, and 4–8 and 14–15 are the voice of the worship-leader, declaiming against idols and pronouncing blessing on Israel. At all events the psalm is as 'alive' as an act of worship as it is in its theology.

4–8 are typical of the OT view of idols and idolaters. On the one hand there is no spiritual force or reality behind the idol; it did not represent an invisible 'god'; it had no more reality than its material craftsmanship (4–7, Is. 40:18–20; 41:5–7). Yet idols were potent to destroy their worshippers (8, Is. 44:6–20). In particular there was no spoken revelation (*mouths*), no moral oversight (*cf.* 53:2), no response to prayer (*hear*), no propitiation through sacrifice (*smell*, Gn. 8:21), no care (*hands* to touch, 95:7), no movement (*walk*) or thought (*sound*, the murmuring that indicates pondering). 11 *Fear him.* At a much later date 'God-fearers' became a technical word for loosely attached proselytes. Here it describes comprehensively the two categories of vs 9–10, people and priests alike. Trusting and reverencing, the simple intimacy of the former balanced by the respectful awe of the latter, mark the Lord's people. 17 Behind the psalm lies a crisis from which deliverance has been granted (1). Were it not for divine intervention and victory death would have come to all. Hence, 18, all the more reason to extol the Lord. To read into v 17 what the OT thought of the state of the dead and to refer to passages like 88:10–12 misunderstands both. Psalm 88 envisages death under the wrath of God and consequently entertains no hope. But here, v 18 expressly looks forward to an offering of praise *for evermore*, 'unto eternity'. Rather, therefore, what might have been but for the Lord (17) invigorates a praise that has no end (18).

(d) Psalm 116. Faith and freedom

The situation was one of deadly threat (3, 8, 15), brought about by human deceitfulness (11) and personal lack of discernment (6). But into this situation came prayer (1–4). The Lord listens (1–2), is *gracious* (bestows favour on the undeserving), *righteous* (never deviates in his commitment to his people and promises) *compassionate* (is emotionally moved by their plight) (5), and sensitive about the death of his beloved (15). So there came salvation (4–6), deliverance from death (8) and bondage (16), and full provision 7, 12). Consequently there are vows to be made and kept, of love (1) and prayer (2), of resting (7) and walking (9), of personal enjoyment of salvation (13) and public profession (14, 18). Above all, however, the crisis was met by faith, the key to making all things new (8–11), the pivot of the whole psalm.

A^1 (vs 1–2) Calling on God in the day of trouble
  B^1 (vs 3–4) The situation met by prayer
    C^1 (vs 5–7) Full provision, resting
      D (vs 8–11) Faith; making all things new
    C^2 (vs 12–14) Full provision, responding
  B^2 (vs 15–16) The situation dealt with by the Lord
A^2 (vs 17–19) Calling on God in the day of deliverance

Note how 1–2 and 17–19 are linked by *I will call*; 3–4 and 15–16 by *death entangled . . . death . . . freed* and *O LORD*; 5–7 and 12–14 by *been good*, 'provided in full' and *his goodness*, 'his full provision'. All this focuses a bright spotlight on vs 8–11, the centrality of faith. The key-words *I believed* (10), stand at the mid-point between new life enjoyed (8–9) and old life endured (10–11). Just as, of old, it was a great cry for help (Ex. 2:23–24) that initiated the exodus acts of God so, faith working by prayer remains the greatest force available to God's earthly people.

1 (Lit.) 'I love (him) – for the Lord hears my voice!' 3, 6, 11, 15 *Death* and *the grave* ('Sheol') are represented as aggressive, out to lassoo victims (3). Other factors also menace: the troubles

of life (3), personal deficiencies (6, where *simplehearted* might rather be translated 'foolish/silly/undiscerning'), human unreliability (11). Yet, (15), there is no such thing as untimely death. For the Lord, death is too valuable a thing to be squandered. The death of *his saints*, 'his beloved', is like a *precious* jewel which he bestows – precious to him and to them because at death he receives them home. In this sense, death is the final and greatest earthly blessing of God on his people. **10** *I believed.* Used like this, the verb means 'I had faith'. *Therefore.* To face the grimness of life with dismay and to say so is not a failure of faith but an evidence of it. A more likely translation, however, is 'when' (I maintained faith even when I was most despairing) or 'though' (I held on to faith even though every hope was gone). **13** The Lord's goodness is first repaid by taking ever more and more of it. The *cup* is here his gift of 'salvations', *i.e.* full salvation. **16** *Servant . . . son . . . freed.* A threefold bond: personal bond-service (*servant*), inherited bond-servitude (Ex. 21:4) and the voluntary servitude of the freed slave who loves his master and will not go (Ex. 21:5–6). **17–19** A very strong description of 'going public' in testimony – all the more so in the light of the intensely personal nature of the experience recorded. *Vows* undertaken in time of trouble were not bargains with God, but evidence of serious intent to learn from experience and to emerge from it a better and more dedicated person.

(e) Psalm 117. One God, one world, one joy

This psalm is quoted in Romans 15:11 in support of Paul's contention that Jesus is the world's Messiah, and fulfilled in Revelation 7:9. Psalm 117 reaches into the heart of God's purposes and out to the remotest bounds of the world. From the start exodus-faith reflected the Abrahamic promise of blessing to the world by including regulations for receiving non-Israelites into the covenant community (Ex. 12:48–49). Likewise, Solomon's prayer passes with ease from a variety of home-concerns to envisage foreigners praying to Israel's God and finding him listening (1 Ki. 8:41–43). Similarly, the truth that divine saving acts, targeted upon Israel, were at the same time salvation for the whole world is plain in the Psalms (*e.g.* 96–98).

So here is a brief statement that there is one God for all people (*the* LORD *. . . all . . . nations*); that there is one worldwide people united in one God (the *us* in 2 embraces *all nations* as belonging with and in Israel); that there is only one divine heart towards all (his changeless, committed *love*, and his eternal *faithfulness*); and that true religion is a praiseful, joyous response to what this loving, faithful and only God is. 2 *Great*, 'mighty', 'overmastering'. *Us.* If this is exclusively Israel, then the psalm is a recognition that what is for Israel is automatically for the world. But it is more telling, as above, to see here a 'world-Israel', the whole family of the children of Abraham (Ps. 47:9; Rom. 4:11–12; Gal. 6:16).

(f) Psalm 118. The gates of righteousness

The Lord's exodus-purpose went beyond liberation to redemption and taking the former slaves to be 'my people'. It is this ultimate end that Psalm 118 enacts symbolically. Its overall movement is a procession up to the temple *gates* (19), then through the gates to the altar (27). But as the procession moves along there is an antiphon or 'dialogue' between a group and an Individual. The whole assembly speaks in 1 and 29; the group and its worship-leader speak in response to each other in 2–4. But for the rest of the psalm the group acts as a responsive echo to what the Individual says and the 'real' sequence of the psalm is the story of his experiences through suffering (5–7), international hostility (10–14), and divine chastening (17–18) up to the point where he asserts his right to enter the *gates of righteousness* (19), all the time bringing along with him a company of those who respond approvingly to his position of trust (6–7 with 8–9) and endorse his victory in the name of the Lord (10–14 with 15–16).

After v 19 the tone changes: speaking about the Lord becomes speaking to the Lord; and the voices also change: the (priestly) gate-keepers state the conditions of entry (20) and their colleagues of the sanctuary greet the incoming Individual as *the stone* (22), acclaim his arrival as *the day the Lord has made* (24), bless him as the one who *comes in the name of the Lord* (26) and invite the whole entering company to gather to the altar and keep the feast (27).

The 'feel' of the psalm suggests a real occasion, possibly an annual (Passover?) celebration within the temple. Or maybe a ceremony in which the king played the central role, expressing in an individual way the pilgrimage of the whole people from anguish (5) and worldly opposition (10), even threatened death (17) into light (27) and the divine presence. Yet there are elements in the psalm looking beyond God's remembered mercies, exceeding what the people or any king had endured, and demanding more than they or he could fulfil. When did *all the nations* surround and threaten and be beaten back? Who could come to the *gates of righteousness* and be welcomed as the *stone* and the one who comes in the name of the Lord (22, 26)?

The psalm is expectant as well as commemorative. It looks forward to a coming One

about whom all its details would yet be true. Ultimately the NT supplies the answer, but it does so only because the OT raises the question, for the idea of the Messiah in the NT is not an (unnatural) graft on to the OT but a (natural) growth from it.

1–4 Summons and response. 1 Psalm 136 spells out the implications of this summons: it was a succinct reminder of all the great acts of God (*cf.* Je. 33:11). **2–4** *See* on 115:9–11.

5–7, 8–9 Anguish, prayer, confidence, trust. Without introduction an individual voice is heard (5–7). *Anguish (cf.* 116:3) is 'enhanced' here by a definite article suggesting 'supreme anguish'. In itself the word suggests 'pressure/constriction' and contrasts with the freedom that came in answer to prayer. *Free*, 'in a wide place', unconfined. Such an experience begets confidence for the future – in relation to human opposition as such (6; 56:11; Heb. 13:6) and in relation to the outcome. **7** *Look in triumph* (*see* 112:8). **8–9** The accompanying group comments on the Individual's testimony, affirming the effectiveness of the way of trustful faith.

10–14, 15–16 Surrounding foes, sufficient name, strong right hand. The Individual reveals more of his *anguish* (5): he was hemmed in by the united hostility of *all . . . nations* but though the assault was as determined as that of hostile bees it was stamped out as quickly as fire among thorns (12), through the effectiveness of acting in and by the *name of the Lord* (10–12). Yet the danger was real and victory only came through divine intervention (13), donated strength and delivering salvation (14). **15–16** match 8–9; those who are right with God (*righteous*) experience *joy, victory* ('salvation', as in 14). *Hand* symbolizes personal strength in action and *right hand* pre-eminently so. In the victory of the Individual they see a supreme example of the Lord in action.

17–21 Divine chastening, righteousness, entrance. As the individual gives a third testimony (17–18) he also reaches the temple gate (19) and, although these are *gates of righteousness* (gates which can only be passed on the condition of righteousness), demands entrance. The gate-keepers reply (20), affirming the condition of entrance and as he passes through the gate (21) the Individual gives thanks for his experience of answered prayer and divine deliverance. **17** in its original setting matches 6–7: the speaker affirms that he and not his deadly foes will have the last word. But when we view the psalm through the spectrum of the Lord Jesus, the meaning is that death itself will not have the last word (Jn. 10:18). **18** (Is. 53:5, 6, 10). Behind human enmity, the Individual sees the hand of God (Acts 2:23). **19** Note the personal nature of the claim (*Open for me*) to have fulfilled the requirement of *righteousness* (Is. 53:11; Jn. 16:10; 1 Jn. 2:1).

22–23, 24–25, 26–29 The stone, the day and the Coming One. It adds vividness to our understanding of these verses if, once more, we hear antiphonal voices. The temple-priests hail the incoming Individual as *the stone* and those accompanying him respond (22–23); the priests acclaim *the day* of his arrival and the group pray to experience the blessings of the day (24–25); the priests pronounce blessing on the Individual and on the group (26, *you* plural) and the group responds; the priests invite them to the feast (27); the Individual (28) and the group (29) join in worship. *The stone* is a messianic symbol (*cf.* Is. 28:16; Zc. 3:9). In Mt. 21:42–44 Jesus links v 26 with Is. 8:14 (*see* also 1 Pet. 2:6–8; *cf.* Rom. 9:33). In its original setting in the psalm this may be a proverbial saying describing a notable reversal of human opinion: who would have thought that the slave people were the chosen people, the key to human history and destiny? Or if the psalm is some ritual portrayal of the defeat of the Davidic king before the nations and his subsequent 'resurrection' by the intervention of the Lord – who would have thought that one so humbled would turn out to be the acme of divine purposes? But how very far the reality in Jesus outshines all such preliminary fulfilments! Was any other ever so scornfully rejected by the great ones of church and state? Was any other so humiliated, so crushed under the weight of international opposition (Acts 4:27), any other actually brought down into the dust of death, any other given the 'highest place that heaven affords', 'far above all principalities and powers and every name that is named'? And (23) who could have done this but the Lord himself (Is. 53:10; Acts 2:23; Phil. 2:9–11).

24 The day – the day when one prayed under supreme pressure and faced all odds confident in God (5–7); the day when he met and overcame the massed forces of the world (10–12); the day when he experienced the hostility of a single foe (13, lit. 'You [singular] pushed . . .', Jn. 12:31) and came forth singing and victorious (13–14); the day when he came out alive from deadly threat and the Lord's chastening (17–18) and, in full personal righteousness, came through the gate into the presence of God (19–21); the day when the rejected Stone became the capstone (22) – a day of days in the creative hand of God!

V 27 is a very obscure piece of Hebrew. *Join in the festal procession* might, perhaps, be, 'Prepare the feast' but at all events (and not least with the last Passover and the first Supper in mind) the meaning is 'come and share in the feast that rests on a divine work of salvation'. **28,**

does this reflect what Jesus said when, in the full reality of his victorious, glorified humanity, he went to his Father and ours, his God and ours (Jn. 20:17) – and how more richly could we respond than with v29?

Psalm 119. The golden ABC of the word of God

This, the geatest example of the art of the alphabetic ('acrostic') psalm (see Poetry in the Bible), has a subject worthy of its skill. We do not know when it was composed and therefore cannot tell how much written material was intended when it speaks of the *word* of the Lord, or his *commands, precepts* and *promises*. It is our privilege to sing these words in a day when the entire written Scripture is available; it was the psalmist's privilege to celebrate the fundamental reality that, however it came and in whatever form it existed, the word of God is central to the life of God's people. Our God is a God who speaks and it is the possession of that verbal revelation which marks his people off from all others on earth.

In referring to this 'word of God' (which it does in almost every one of its 176 verses) the Psalm uses nine main words. These can be listed in five groups: (i) The word originated in divine speech. *Word(s)* (Heb. *dābār*, 9, 16, 17, 25, 28, 42, 43, 49, 57, 65, 74, 81, 89, 101, 105, 107, 114, 130, 139, 147, 160, 161, 169) and *word/promise(s)* (Heb. *'imrāh*, 11, 38, 41, 50, 58, 67, 76, 82, 103, 116, 123, 133, 140, 148, 154, 158, 162, 170, 172) are both rooted in verbs of speaking. The 'word' is what God himself has spoken – whether directly, as to Abraham (Gn. 17:1) or to and through Moses or one of the other prophets (*e.g.* Ex. 3:5; 19:9; Am. 1:1, 3).

(ii) Two words are used which affirm that this word expresses the mind of God: *laws* (Heb. *mišpāt* 7, 13, 20, 30, 39, 43, 52, 62, 75, 84, 91, 102, 106, 108, 120, 132, 137, 149, 156, 160, 164, 175) arises from the verb 'to give judgment', to make a decision what is right and what is wrong; *statute(s)* (Heb. *'ēdāh* 2, 14, 22, 24, 31, 36, 46, 59, 79, 88); *'ēdut* (95, 99, 111, 119, 125, 129, 138, 144, 152, 157, 167, 168) comes from the verb 'to bear witness': in his word God 'bears witness' to himself, his nature and his truth.

(iii) The enduring significance of God's word is expressed by *decrees* (Heb. *hōq* 5, 8, 12, 16, 23, 26, 33, 48, 54, 64, 68, 71, 80, 83, 112, 117, 118, 124, 135, 145, 155, 171). Deriving from the verb 'to engrave' it points to something 'graven in the rock' for perpetuity.

(iv) The authority of the word and the love which prompted it are blended in the description *law* (Heb *torāh*, 1, 18, 29, 34, 44, 51, 53, 55, 61, 70, 72, 77, 85, 92, 97, 109, 113, 126, 136, 142, 150, 153, 163, 165, 174). While the word is used of authoritative imposition, at base it means 'teaching' and is specifically (Pr. 3:1) the instruction a careful father gives to a loved child.

(v) Finally, the word of God is designed for practical application to life. It is *commands, commandments* (Heb. *miswāh*, 6, 10, 19, 21, 32, 35, 47, 48, 60, 66, 73, 86, 96, 98, 115, 127, 131, 143, 151, 166, 172, 176). If any distinction is to be drawn practically between this word and the next, it is that *command* is the simple idea of 'doing what you are told' whereas *precepts* (Heb. *piqqud*, 4, 15, 27, 40, 45, 56, 63, 69, 78, 87, 93, 94, 100, 104, 110, 128, 134, 141, 159, 168, 173) suggests applying the word of God to the minutiae of life, and *ways* (Heb. *derek* 3, 15, 37 – where NIV changes 'ways' to *word*) is what is now called 'life-style'.

Across all these words there are certain sustained emphases, for example, the love of the word of God (16, 30, 54, 70, 127, 140, 159, 167), commitment to obey (17, 34, 60, 100, 106, 129), the word resolutely held to in times of difficulty (51, 61, 83, 87, 95, 109, 110, 143, 157, 161). Concern for the word is a ground for pleading for compassion (77) and deliverance (153); the Lord is always as good as his word (41, 59, 65, 76, 116, 154, 170). This psalm is an inexhaustible treasury. It is virtually entirely a psalm of prayer, for throughout it is addressed to the Lord and comes from a heart of true humanity in all its frailty and failure. However great our aspirations to obey, to keep the Lord's word in the forefront of our minds and lives, we remain to the end *like a lost sheep* needing the Shepherd's care (176).

Though occasionally writing a triplet (48, 176) the poet throughout devotes eight couplets to each letter of the alphabet in turn. But, as always in Hebrew poetry, form is subordinate to thought and each alphabetic section is a carefully composed statement.

1–8 Aleph. The great 'if only'. Typically of the whole Psalm the opening section asserts that obedience to the word of God is the key to life. The great cry of v 5 is the pivot of the section. Doubly *blessed* are those who live by his word with constancy and commitment (1–3) – for it is his word and he intended it to be obeyed (4). Oh that I were like that (5) – for then there would be no disappointed hopes (6) but rather praise (7). With God's help I will obey (8). **1–4** are objective: these are the facts. *Blessed* (1–2) under divine approval; *blameless*, a life fully 'integrated' round the Lord's *law*, outwardly (*walk*), inwardly (*heart*); *do nothing*, 'have determined to do nothing'. *You* (4), emphatic, 'You yourself'. **5–8** are subjective: personal

longing, expectation and resolve. *Steadfast.* This is the ideal of 'being set in our ways'. *Shame*, finding life a disappointment. *Your decrees* (8) is emphatic, matching the *you* of v 4.

9–16 Beth. The absorbed heart. Aleph expressed longing (5) but the practical way forward is to focus that longing on God's word and on to the Lord himself (10, 12). The case is posed of a *young man, i.e.* a situation where the life of purity is under constant pressure. The possibility of a pure life depends on the direction of the will (10), the contents of mind and memory (11), the pre-occupations of the mouth (13), and of the emotions (14, 16), the subjects of thought (15, 16). The outward life (*way*), arises from inner factors, all absorbed in the word but centralized on the Lord in praise and instruction (12). **9** *How*, a practical question, 'By what means?' The problem is outward (9), but the answer (10–16) is inward. **10** The deliberate direction (*seek*) of the *heart* (the whole inner being) Godward and the exercise of specific prayer. **11** The *heart* stored up with the *word* is the antidote to *sin*. **13** The verse opens with human *lips* and ends with the divine *mouth*: talking to oneself or to others, our conversation replete with what God has spoken. **15** Up to this point the main verbs have been 'perfects of determination' ('I am determined to seek . . . to hide . . . to recount . . . to rejoice'). Parallel thoughts are now taken up in prayer: 'O please let me meditate . . . consider'. Our commitments must be bathed in prayer. **16** A final quiet resolve centres on a proper use of the emotions and the memory (16).

17–24 Gimel. The Lord's dependant. The verses belong together in pairs: 17–18 (acts of God enabling obedience) are matched by 21–22 (acts of God punishing disobedience and rewarding obedience); 19–20 (the psalmist as an alien on earth) are matched by 23–24 (the psalmist as an object of rebuke). Our passions do not make the life of holiness easy (9); neither, says Gimel, do our circumstances. The earth is an alien place (19); society contains those who desert the word (21), personal – even official – opposition is encountered.

How are we to live the life of God in the courts of earth? First (17–18), by requesting divine action. *Do good*, 'make full provision for'. *Open.* In the 'full provision' sought, one thing is specified: the ability to understand the word in all its wonder. Secondly (19–20), by recognizing the realities of the situation and maintaining a true priority. *Stranger*, resident alien. Yet, notwithstanding the potential difficulties of such a life, it is not earthly comfort, provision, or even home-going that is sought, but a knowledge of God's word as an all-consuming longing. Thirdly (21–22), the negative equivalent of the foregoing: longing for divine provision (17–20) matched by avoidance of divine displeasure through committed obedience. Fourthly (23–24), at whatever cost (even the disapproval of influential people), the Lord's word dominates mind, emotions and the practical advice that directs life.

25–32 Daleth. Time of trouble, time of . . .? The Gimel situation, an alien in a foreign environment, is real. Humiliation (25), weariness (28), temptation (29), potential disappointments (31) are all part of life. Things 'get us down' (25, 'My soul cleaves to the dust'), life becomes too much (28, 'My soul is sleepless with depression'). But, more than anything else, the time of trouble is to be a time of prayer.

These eight verses contain seven prayers. Prayer for renewal (*preserve*, 25), for progress in knowledge (26–27), for strength in need (28), for grace, divine favour to the meritless needy (29), for a favourable outcome (31). The time of trouble is also a time of special commitment, to fix the mind on his wonderful word (27), to choose and set the heart on his truth (30), to meet trouble with obedience (31, 'I cleave to your statutes'), to make the effort, ('I will run'). But the time of trouble is also a time of rest, for God will always be true to his word (25b, 28b, 29b, better 'in accordance with your law').

33–40 He. Inner renewal, the heart kept whole. The spirit of dependence continues with nine requests in eight verses. But the threat to running in the Lord's way (32) is not here a hostile environment (Gimel) nor the difficulties of life (Daleth) but the wayward heart which wants to obey (34) but can so easily be drawn away to selfish ends (36) and follow the enticements of the eyes (37). There is thus a tension in the heart itself: heart-loyalty threatened by heart-disloyalty. The solution is prayer: only the Lord can keep the 'way' obedient (33, *to follow*, (lit.) 'the way of your decrees'), the heart whole (34), direct us to true happiness (35), keep us from unworthy pursuits (36–37), save us from disappointment (39, *disgrace*) and renew the springs of life (40, *preserve*). The section is in three parts: 33–35, total commitment, keeping God's word with the whole heart; 36–37, inner threats, the divided heart; 38–40, divine, faithful care and supply.

41–48 Waw. Steady progress. Each verse in this set begins with 'and' (omitted throughout by NIV and in v 42 translated *then*). This is not just a device to provide for the letter Waw (which, as a prefix, means 'and') but is the whole point of the section: there are things which follow in sequence. The preceding sections have wrestled with the problem of living the pure life (Beth) in an alien world (Gimel) full of

pressures (*Daleth*), and with a divided heart (*He*). One ingredient is important above all others, the Lord's promised *unfailing love* and *salvation* (41) – the *love* which knows, cares, provides and never fails and the *salvation* that steps in to deliver at every moment of need. Hence the significance of the 'and' with v 41, as if to say 'and of course this too'. Then come the 'things that accompany salvation' (42–48). **42–43** share the theme of spoken testimony: those who know the Lord's love and salvation speak of it. His word can be trusted to provide the answer even to the hostile questioner (42), but (43) the word can only be used by divine consent and there must be sensitive dependence on divine goodwill at all times. **44–46** are linked by a form of verb which goes beyond *I will* to 'I promise I will'. Testimony requires the context of an obedient life (44), a life which demonstrates the true freedom which obedience brings (45). On this basis there is no embarrassment or fear of disappointment even in witness to *kings* (46). **47–48** are linked by *love* of the word, for the mouth that speaks the word (42,43) and the life that exemplifies it (44–46) must arise from a heart that loves it.

49–56 Zayin. Trustee of the word. Many things prompt the reaction 'Why should I bother any more?' – trouble (50), scornful opposition (51) or because nobody else seems to bother (53). In such times, the psalmist still centred his life on the Lord's word, finding that divine promises brought renewal (50, *preserves*), that the time of opposition was the very time to hold firm to the Lord's teaching (51), that his *laws* ministered comfort (52), that life's darkness must be met with resolute 'keeping' (the servant's 'keeping', 55) and constant conservation (56, *obey*, lit. 'keep intact'), the Trustee's keeping. **49–50** The word of hope and comfort. *Word . . . promise*, 'speech'. The word originates in the mouth of the Lord; consequently it conveys (sure) *hope* and is a quickening force (50, *preserves*, 'renews'). **51–52** The word held fast against scorners: unrestrained opposition met with undeviating commitment bringing *comfort*. **53–54** The word in sorrow and song. People observe different standards and the world is an alien place (*lodge*, 54, 'live as an alien', see v 19) These pressures do not mould him but revolt him and make the joys of the word the more precious. **55–56** The word to be kept, see above. The Zayin-section balances any impression the Waw-section created that life is an unbroken triumph. The *freedom* the word brings (45), the boldness (46) and the delight (47–48) must be safeguarded by the often grinding task of gripping resolutely to the word.

57–64 Heth. The ordering of life. The section opens and closes by addressing *the* LORD, his sufficiency for me and his faithful love as filling all life. How do we react to one who is all sufficient (57–60) and how do we live in relation to one whose love is to be found everywhere (61–64)? We are like the tribe of Levi (Jos. 13:14, 33; 18:7) who needed no other source of supply than the Lord. Our response to this is fourfold: pledged obedience (57), heartfelt seeking his favour and unmerited grace (58), thoughtful self-reformation (59) and prompt obedience (60). In a word, a life committed to his word, trusting his promises and conforming to his statutes. Outside there are opponents to face (61), a programme to organise (62), friends to cultivate (63) for in every situation and place – whether hostile, secret or corporate – his (unfailing) love is everywhere. Every situation must therefore be used to delight him – holding the word in adversity (61), ordering life to make time to delight in the word (62), making friends of those who follow the word (63).

65–72 Teth. Graduating in the Lord's school. In Heth we are called to a personal reordering of life in the light of what the Lord is; Teth dwells on the Lord's redirection of our lives. We are pupils in his school of affliction (67, 70), he is Principal of the school and the graduation award is the treasure of his word. **65–67** The surprising benefit of affliction. The Lord has kept his word by doing good to his servant (65, (lit.) 'You have done good . . .'); this leads the servant to request more teaching (66), confident in what the Lord commands even though the school in which he received the benefit was that of affliction. **68–70** The benefit of a resolute and rejoicing heart. Come what may, because the Lord is good he can only do good. We can therefore be ready pupils in his school, committing ourselves to counter *lies* with wholehearted trusteeship of his word (*cf.* 56) and to develop true sensitivity of heart by delighting in his law (70). **71–72** Benefits in the school of affliction. It was in this school that he learned the Lord's decrees (*i.e.* his word as designed for our obedience) and learned too what a treasure his *law* is (*i.e.* his word as designed for our instruction). Note the prominence of the idea of 'good' in this section: what the Lord has done (65, see above), what he is (68) and what he bestows on us in his school (71–72).

73–80 Yodh. Making suffering a testimony. In affliction the psalmist himself reaped benefit (according to Teth), but now we find that he is concerned so to live in affliction that the benefit can touch others also. The same human agents of affliction reappear (78, *cf.* 69) but he prays to bear with their hostility in such a

way that those *who fear you* may experience joy through his steadfastness of hope (74) and gather to him in fellowship (79). The section begins, centres and ends with prayer for personal good; it moves to prayer for others and the influence of good example; and it balances the two agents in affliction: the faithful Lord and hostile people. 73 *Formed me* is rather 'established me': hence 'you have made me what I am and put me where I am.' *Made* includes all the forces by which the Lord moulds our characters. Life's 'pressures' are the *hands* of the Potter. *Understanding.* The prayer is not for teaching but for 'discernment', an ability to see to the heart of his truth. This section majors on the inward appreciation of the word: discernment and learning (73), confidence for the future (74), knowledge (75), comfort (76), delight (77), meditation (78), and a *blameless heart* (80), *i.e.* an inward being in which every capacity is perfectly integrated around the word. This was his prayer, aim and commitment in a time of affliction (75) and undeserved hurt (78)!

81–88 Kaph. The end of the tether. Affliction continues. His opponents are the same (85, *cf.* 69, 78), the suffering is unmerited (86, *cf.* 69, 78) and he has reached the end of endurance. **81–84** express urgency and plead that the Lord will change the situation; **85–88** pray for help and renewal (88, *preserve*, 'renew') within the situation. The whole section is a prayer, alternating statements with pleas as he sets before the Lord the facts as well as the needs of life: and this is the primary lesson to learn, that at the end of our tether there is a place called 'Prayer'. Very often prayer is the first casualty of suffering, whereas it is in reality the surest remedy. Suffering is often long-drawn-out – *faints* (81), *fail* (82), *how long* (84) – but at the end of the tether there is also a place called 'Hope' (81–82) and another called 'Obedience' (83, 87). Suffering can bring extreme discomfort. It can arise from hostile people, and be undeserved but their breaking of the law of God (85) must be outdone by our obedience (88). The trustworthy word remains our rule for the present (83, 87, 88) and our hope for the future (81–82).

89–96 Lamedh. Word without end. The Hebrew word 'for ever', occurring as *eternal* (89) and as *never* (93), divides the section into two parts: the Lord's word and commitment to the word are alike 'for ever'. Thought moves from the word in heaven (89) to the word personally enjoyed (92), and then from the word personally enjoyed (93) to the word in its own *boundless* nature (96). *Your word* (89), expressing as it does the nature and the will of the Lord, is the fixed point of heaven. But the Lord is the same on earth (90). His *faithfulness*, unvarying consistency, remains, undergirding successive *generations* of people and giving stability to the *earth* they inhabit. Indeed, such is his enduring changelessness that he is the same today and such is his total sovereign sway that *all things* – good and bad alike – do his will (91). On the personal level it is the same. The enduring word gives durability to the one who delights in it. This naturally leads to commitment, for the word which guarded from perishing equally brought renewal (*preserved*, 93). Such commitment to the word marks those who are the Lord's (94). Still in the same period of hostility (95, *cf.* 69, 78, 85), it will be spent in preoccupation with the Lord's *statutes* (his word declaring what he is and requires). This is the way to life for 'In everything finite I see a limiting factor but your commands mean real freedom' (96, *cf.* 45).

97–104 Mem. The delightful word. The substance of this section is bracketed by the two *How* exclamations: 97, *how I love*, subjective delight in the word; 103, *How sweet*, the objective delightfulness of the word. V 104 is a concluding summary. We are taught (97–100), that the delightful word informs the mind: as *love* of the word issues in protracted meditation on it, a wisdom is imparted that is superior to threat (98), greater than human wisdom (99), excelling tradition (100). Furthermore the delightful word directs the life (101–103): it teaches what to avoid, and what to do. It is the teaching voice of the Lord himself and is intrinsically delightful. In summary (104), this is the way to a sound mind (*understanding*, grasping and discerning the truth), to reliable emotions (*hate*) and to right living (*path*). Note the sequence: consistently sustained meditation (97, 98, 99) becomes obedience (100), the power of the word to change our lives. Obedience (101) arising out of recognition of the divine authority of the word (102) becomes delight (103).

105–112 Nun. The practical word. The harsh realities of life common to previous sections are present here as undefined *suffering* (107) and *wicked* snares (110). This is the context of what is said about the word. It is meant for real living in a real world. As with all the sections, this has a clearly defined structure:

A^1 (vs 105–106) the word as a guide for life and a solemn response: the light and the oath.
  B^1 (vs 107–108) The word in the Lord's hand amid life's troubles, able to renew and to teach.
  B^2 (vs 109–110) The word in human hands amid life's troubles, remembered and obeyed.
A^2 (vs 111–112) A joyful response and the word as the guide for life: possession and direction.

105 *Lamp . . . light.* Probably the lamp to illumine the next step, the light to illumine the path ahead. **106** *Oath* The idea of deliberate commitment is strong in this section. The verbs in 109, 110 express determination: 'I am determined not to forget . . . not to stray'. We must not expect to drift by accident into devotion to the word! **107** *Preserve*, 'renew'. **108** *Willing praise*, 'freewill offerings', deliberate, self-imposed devotions. **109–110** combine risks necessarily undertaken in the course of life with risks encountered by the hostility of others. Thus every possible hazard is included: the whole precarious course of life is to be kept under and within the word. **111–112** The rejoicing heart must be linked with the 'directed heart' (112) lit. 'I have inclined/directed my heart to do your decrees'. Joy without obedience is frivolity; obedience without joy is moralism.

113–120 Samekh. Singlemindedness, not compromise. The psalmist stands in contrast to the undecided, the evildoers, the wanderers and the wicked. The observable ground of distinction is the word, loved (113, 119), conserved (115, *cf.* 56), the place of *refuge* and the ground of *hope* (114), the focus of a steady regard (117, (lit.) 'I will/O may I always keep my gaze fixed on . . .'). But the inner distinguishing reality is the Lord: for hoping in the word is sheltering in the Lord (114); the word is the *commands of my God* (115); fearing the word and fearing the Lord belong together (120).

To the contrary the compromisers and the wicked in rejecting the word are rejected by the Lord (118): wrong with his word, they cannot be right with him. In this way Samekh develops the commitment-emphasis of Nun. Such commitment is not optional nor negotiable, but intrinsic to living with the Lord in fellowship and peace. The structure of the section clarifies its message.

A^1 (vs 113–114) Love and shelter
  B^1 (v 115) Decisive separation
    C^1 (v 116) Prayer for upholding
    C^2 (v 117) Prayer for upholding
  B^2 (v 118) Divine rejection
A^2 (vs 119–120) Love and fear

Thus this section deals with a distinctive person, inwardly (113), upwardly (114) and outwardly (115); a supported life, according to promise (116), bringing deliverance (117); and a discriminating God: the ground of rejection (118); a different reaction: love (119) a true fear (120).

121–128 Ayin. A plan for perilous times. The Lord's servant sees that, notwithstanding his determination to be a light in the world, oppressive and arrogant people are becoming dominant – and how much longer he can hold out (123)? Divine truth is discounted and the 'bottom line' is that only divine action will suffice (126). *Act* (126) is the same verb as *done* (121), as if to say 'all my endeavours are failures; you take over'. In this way 126 is the climax to which 121–125 lead, but it is also a 'pivot' between two verses of prayer (124–125) and two verses of allegiance (127–128). To say 'I can do no more' (121–123) and 'You must act' (126) is far from being an opt-out. The proper prayers of the servant for personal safety modulate into prayers to learn and understand divine truth (125). Furthermore, asserting the necessity for divine action carries with it a consequence (*Because*, 127a, 128a, should be 'Therefore'): to love the Lord's word as our chief treasure (127), to accept its complete correctness (128a, (lit.) 'all your precepts in every matter') and to abhor every alternative (128b). Do we learn here the context in which the Lord, should he so will, grants revival? Prayer, knowledge and love of his truth, hatred of false ways.

129–136 Pe. The double-filament light. In Ayin exhausted eyes could see only a gathering darkness. Now a door opens on to light – the light of the word (130) which, before the section ends, has become the light of the Lord (135). Yet the situation is the same: his own appreciation of the supernatural quality of the Lord's word (129) bracketed with his grief over the flouted word (136). Between these brackets lies:

A^1 (v 130) The light of the Lord's word
  B^1 (vs 131–132) Divine mercy, satisfying hunger for the word
  B^2 (vs 133–134) Divine redemption, bringing freedom
A^2 (v 135) The light of the Lord's favour

129 *Wonderful*, rather like our word 'supernatural'. *Obey*, 'safeguard/conserve/keep intact', (*cf.* 56). What is unique requires guardianship. **130** *Unfolding* (lit.) 'door, opening'. The meaning may be that when the word opens like a door, the light of the Lord floods through. This is part of the supernatural quality of the word. *Simple.* One who, left alone, would lack guiding principle. **131–132** Longing for the word and love for the Lord belong together. It is only by *mercy* (divine favour to the undeserving) that the word is fed to the hungry soul. **133** *Rule*, 'have mastery' so that freedom to obey the word would be restricted or destroyed. **134** Redeem, 'pay the ransom price', take upon yourself whatever cost is required.

137–144 Tsadhe. Righteous Lord, righteous word. How is it that when the word gives light the Lord gives light (130, 135)?

Tsadhe replies: Because the Lord perfectly and eternally expresses and conveys himself in his word: He is *righteous* (137) and his word is *right*(eousness) (144), *His statutes* (138) are 'commanded in righteousness' and (142) his own *righteousness is everlasting.* The 'match' between the two is perfect. **137–138** The word expresses the Lord. *Laws*, the Lord's decisions, revealing his mind; *statutes* what he 'testifies', revealing himself; *laid down*, 'commanded', revealing his will. Thus he who is *righteous* gives *righteous* commands. He and his word are one. **139–140** The word captivates the Lord's servant. Faced with enemies his first concern is for the prestige of the word; faced with the word in all its refined purity (*thoroughly tested*, 'exceedingly refined') his heart goes out in love. **141–142** The word pre-occupies his mind. Status (*lowly*) and repute (*despised*) are unimportant compared with holding the word clearly in mind. The eternally righteous Lord has spoken and his word is 'truth' itself. What personal consideration could outweigh this? **143–144** The word brings life. Quality of life is threatened by *trouble and distress* (143, 'adversity and pressure') but a different quality of delight is imparted by the word. Consequently the target of prayer is *understanding*, 'discernment', because this is the way into the life that is life indeed.

145–152 Qoph. The felt presence. The two halves of the Qoph-section correspond to James 4:8, 'Draw near to God' (145–148) 'and he will draw near to you' (149–152). Vs 145–146 are linked by the common word *I call*; vs 147–148 begin with the same verb, (lit.) 'I forestall . . . my eyes forestall . . .' and together encompass a twenty-four hour session of prayer and Bible meditation. In v 149 prayer rests not on human pledges but on the Lord's love; vs 150–151 contrast two 'nearnesses' and v 152 round off the section with the truth of the eternal word. **145–148** Near the Lord. Prayer is (i) inseparable from obedience. Without serious moral commitment, intercession is merely self-seeking; (ii) inseparable from self-denial: not that our urgency makes prayer effective but in real prayer there is an element of sacrificial commitment; (iii) inseparable from God's word. Without his word we cannot know what we may allowably expect or ask. **149–152** The Lord near. The nearer life's threats the nearer the Lord. *Near* (151) is a 'next-of-kin' word. The Lord has pledged himself to be our nearest relative who, in our helplessness, takes all our needs as his own. His nearness is thus linked with his unchanging *love* – pledged loving fidelity; and our assurance that he is our next-of-kin rests on his unchanging testimony (*statutes*) to what he is and does. But furthermore, because the Lord and his word are identified (see Pe, Tsadhe), the word is his life-renewing (149, *preserve*) agent.

153–160 Resh. Three reliable things. The reliable psalmist who does not forget the word (153), the reliable Lord (154, 156, 159) and the reliable word which never changes (160). But human reliability cannot be taken for granted. Life is marked by *suffering* and the eroding presence of wicked and *faithless* ('treacherous') people. Life needs constant renewal which depends on the Lord's love, promise and decision. This reiterated prayer for renewal constitutes the heart of the section.

153–154 (A^1) See my need. Defend my cause. The psalmist is suffering accusation. *Redeem* (like *near*, 151) belongs to the next-of-kin vocabulary: the 'redeemer' identifies with his troubled kinsman, takes and discharges all his debts, undertakes all his needs. Within this troubled situation fidelity to the word continues. **155** (B^1) The *wicked.* Those who dissociate from the word can expect no divine saving intervention. **156–157** (C) Many compassions. Many foes. *Compassion* is the readily moved love of the Lord. *Great* is the same word as *many.* His love runs to meet us and is equal to every threat. **158** (B^2) The treacherous. Unreliable with people, they have no commitment to the word. **159–160** (A^2) See my love. Warned by the experience of those who ignore the word (158) and can expect no deliverance (155) the psalmist affirms his love for the word and the word's eternal truth.

161–168 Sin and Shin. Treasured word, constant life. If we follow the distribution of the initial letters Sin and Shin, this section falls into three parts: 161–163, 164–166, 167–168. They deal with, respectively, the constant heart (what it fears, what it treasures, what it loves), the constant life (praiseful, unstumbling, obedient), and the constant keeper (obeying 'keeping' that springs from love, obeying 'keeping' that aims to please). *Love* occurs in each section: the constant heart safeguards its love for the Lord's teaching (163) by a corresponding hatred of the false; the constant life enjoys *peace* (wholeness; peace with God, with people, and peace of mind; a rounded life) in consequence of loving the Lord's teaching (165); the constant keeper is motivated by love of what the Lord has testified of himself (167). The life that is determined to be constant – under pressure and in devotion – finds enrichment and peace; but it also encounters moral conflict, for there is no such thing as unchallenged constancy. The choice is between what to love and what to hate; the battle is for patient continuance until the Lord acts. But it is obedience that is the hallmark of love

and it is by obedience we please the Lord (168).

169–176 Taw. Straying but obedient! 169–170, linked by *before you*, are both prayers for a hearing and ask the Lord to act according to his word, working inwardly (*understanding*, 'discernment') and outwardly (*deliver*). 171–172 linked by references to *lips* and *tongue*, are both prayers for responsiveness, for the word taught and recognized for what it is. 173–174 ask and long for divine action, basing the requests on the response (*chosen ... delight*) already made to the word. 175–176 focus on personal needs, the sense of ebbing vitality and the tendency to stray. The clue to vitality and to recovery is the sustaining and unforgotten word.

The first four verses (169–172, which could be entitled 'Lord, hear!') focus on the psalmist's voice, with the themes of prayer and praise centred on the word as that which God has spoken and which is received as teaching and command. The last four verses (173–176, which could be entitled 'Lord, act!') are the voice of testimony (*I have chosen: long ... strayed ... not forgotten*) arising from the will, the emotions, the life itself and the mind/memory concentrated on the word. Each set of four verses ends with the word as *command* (172, 176). A fitting concluding section indeed!

Psalms 120 – 136. Pilgrim praise

Possibly the loveliest single group of psalms in the whole psalter, 120–134 are self-described as 'Songs of Ascents', though without any added explanation as to how we are meant to understand this title. The word (correctly and literally) translated *ascents* is used of 'steps/stairs' (Ex.20:26; 1 Ki. 10:19f; *cf.* 2 Ki. 20:9f; Am. 9:6) also, on one occasion, of the journey 'up' from Babylon and of thoughts 'arising' (Ezk. 11:5). 'Steps' prompted Jewish tradition to make a rather fanciful link with levitical choirs singing on the steps leading from the Court of the Women into the Court of the Sons of Israel in Herod's Temple, but stopped short of saying that the choirs either exclusively or especially sang these songs. The reference to 'stairs' in Nehemiah 3:15; 12:37 has aided the more reasonable thought that these songs were sung on a processional way up to the temple at festivals. The pervasive Zion/Jerusalem/House of the Lord theme backs up such an explanation.

Broadening the picture, some commentators have linked the psalms with the homeward journey of the Babylonian exiles. The single relevant use of the word 'steps' in Ezra is too narrow a base from which to make it a technical term for coming home from Babylon but the theory has the right 'feel' in relation to the broad movement, as well as some details of the psalms.

The psalms, however, were probably first brought together to provide a hymn-book, 'Pilgrim Praise', for travelling companies on their way to Zion for the annual pilgrim feasts (Ex. 23:17; *cf.* 1 Sa. 1:3; Lk. 2:41). They are certainly suitable for such occasions. Each psalm, of course, had its own point of origin and use before it was edited into its present position in the 'Songs of Ascents'. In most cases this cannot be traced and, even were it possible to do so, little or nothing would be gained. 'Pilgrim Praise' has been edited with consummate skill and it is the meaning of the psalm in its present setting that is all-important.

The 'Songs of Ascents' fall into five groups of three, plus Pss. 135 and 136. The first four of these groups (Pss. 120–131) share the following characteristics: the first psalm in each group exposes a situation of distress; the second emphasizes the Lord's power to keep/deliver/build/give hope; and the third has the theme of security: in Zion (122, 125, 128); in the Lord (131). This Zionward 'movement' suits and supports the 'Pilgrim Praise' idea. The whole collection keeps the traveller's eye on the goal. 132–134 are all psalms of arrival – the ark in Zion, fellowship in Zion, blessing in Zion. The pilgrim who begins far off in a harsh world (120), indeed in this world's 'darkness' (*Kedar*, 120:5, means 'black') ends in a very different *night* (134:1), secure in the Lord's house and under his blessing.

Psalms 120 – 122. The first triad. When trouble comes

Uncongenial people (120) and hostile circumstances (121) alike threaten the pilgrim but there is peace within Jerusalem's walls (122).

Psalm 120. Prayer amid hostile people

The order of words in v 1 is 'To the Lord in my distress I call and he answers me'. This is the picture the psalm leaves with us: praying amid trouble, garrisoned within divine care. There is no reason to think that 3, 4 were actually spoken to the opponent. As Proverbs 20:22; Romans 12:19 command, the trouble is taken to the Lord and left there but in the certainty of what will happen: *arrows* (4) directed with a *warrior's* skill must find their mark: the punishment will fall where it is deserved; but behind it lies *burning* fire, the retributive justice of a sin-hating God. But, leaving all such action to the Lord, the psalmist meanwhile lives in a world which cannot give peace (5–7). *Meshech* in the far north (Gn. 10:2) and *Kedar* (Je. 2:10) in the Syro-Arabian Desert are too far apart to be where the psalmist lives. Metaphorically they suggest being far from home, out in the wilds of this world. Even here he would live at peace

(that is his nature: 7, (lit.) 'I am peace'; *cf.* 109:4) and share the peace he knows, but the world is a venomous place.

Psalm 121. Unknown perils, known securities

The question where security can be found (1) could originally have been prompted by any number of situations, but in its present pilgrim context it pictures an anxious gaze at hills which could shelter marauders, or a longing gaze at the far-off hills of Zion: how shall I escape the dangers of the way and arrive within the hills (125:2) of home? But (2) *the* LORD is *the Maker of heaven and earth*: every threat arises and every journey is made in his world where he rules supreme. Consequently (3–8) six times the verb 'to keep' (*watches over, keep*) sounds out. The perils are unknown but the security is certain. **3–4** The Lord who redeemed (Ex. 6:6) his son *Israel* (Ex. 4:22) will not now lose him on his way home! **5–6** The divine companion (*at your right hand*) stands between you and every threat, real (*sun*) or imaginary (*moon*). **7–8** He caters for *all harm*, guarantees personal security (*your life*), accompanies life's busy-ness (*coming and going*) for all time (*now and forevermore*). The Creator is also the Redeemer and the Companion.

Psalm 122. The family in the city

Picture the pilgrim at the end of the first day in the city: (2) lit. 'Our feet have actually been standing within your gates!' The wonder of home contrasts with the 'far country' (120:5); the company of *brothers* (8) with the sniping of foes (120:2, 7). Anticipation has been crowned by arrival (2), and the sight (3) and constitution (4–5) of the city. No wonder it all issues in responsive prayer for the Lord's people, their fellowship and the security of the city itself. Isaiah 26:1–4 teaches that amid life's threats we live already, by faith, within the 'strong city' (Heb. 12:22; *cf.* Eph. 2:6). In this sense the pilgrim of old, still on his hazardous journey, could sing of feet already planted on Jerusalem's pavements. The essence of this city is its unity (3–5): the very shape of the city tells that it is *together*. Those who enter come as separate *tribes* but they are all *of the* LORD, motivated by obedience (*statute*) and with the objective of praise, privileged by his revelation of himself (*name*). They come to a place where, in principle, under God's appointed king, everything is put to rights (5, *judgment*). They needed to pray because their Jerusalem was of this world. Ours is different (Heb. 11:10) but the call to joy, unity and prayer remains.

Psalms 123 – 125. The second triad. When resources fail

Human scorn (123) and hostility (124) find the Lord's people in total dependence on him but (125) those who trust are as secure as Zion itself. In 120 the plea was for the Lord to deal with foes: 123 asks him to cater for weaknesses; 121 envisaged circumstantial dangers: 124 pictures raging human powers; in 122 Zion symbolized peace: in 125 it symbolizes strength.

Psalm 123. The Lord in heaven

The earthly church is surrounded by *contempt* (3), *ridicule* and *proud* ('complacent'), *arrogant* ('superior') people (4). What do we do when we cannot 'take it' any more (3)? The eye symbolizes longing, need, expectancy. 'The upward glancing of an eye' tells it all to the Lord whose heavenly throne (1) speaks of his endless resources as well as his worldwide sovereignty. *Slaves* look to the uncertain resources of earthly masters. We look to *the* LORD, who revealed his name and worked his wonders for us when we were slaves in Egypt. But the threefold *mercy* (grace to the meritless, 2–3) will not fail. It is a matter of keeping our eyes on him, submitting our necessities to his timetable (*till*, 2).

Psalm 124. The Lord alongside

Four pictures of danger tell it all: earthquake (3b, Nu. 16:30) and flood (4a) are overwhelming threats from which deliverance is against all the odds – but the Lord can do it! The beast of prey (6) and the *fowler* (7) are threats in the animal and human realms. We have not only emerged unscathed but the threat itself has been destroyed (7c). Only a God of total, sovereign and worldwide command (8) could have done such things – and this God is *the* LORD committed to and unfailingly on the side of his people (1–2).

Psalm 125. The Lord encircling

This is a picture of a believing community, finding security in trust (1, 2); a threatened community, patiently waiting till the Lord remove the burden of wicked rule (3); a divided community in which the good and bad are mixed (4–5). **1–2** Trust makes us the living counterpart of the immovable Zion; the encircling *mountains* are a physical counterpart of the encircling Lord. 3 That trust includes faith in the Lord's providential world-rule. The duration of oppressive or inadequate rule is adjusted to the patience of the Lord's people in enduring it. It will not reach the point where they would fall into the *evil* ('deviation') of resistance, violating what the Lord has appointed (Rom. 13:1). **4–5** Such a situation, where trust is challenged by

circumstances, calls for prayer. Prayer is not directed against the wicked (5) – they are left to the Lord – but to the enriching of those who follow the Lord from the heart (4), his Israel (5), the true people within the professing people.

Psalms 126 – 128. The third triad. When failure threatens

The Lord's people are still in the world. *Tears* (126:5) are the order of the day. But 127 puts another side of the picture: within the *toil* of life the Lord gives *sleep* (1–2) and the tears with which 126 ends become the 'happy' (*blessed*) of 127:5. 128 rings with happiness (1, *blessed*; 2, *blessings*, 'Happy you are') given and guaranteed by the blessing of God (4–5). Thus the theme is subtly different from the 'getting to Zion' theme of the first two triads. Indeed in one sense this triad begins in Zion (126) as well as ending there. But it begins with blessing longed for, a harvest yet to come, and ends with blessing enjoyed. In a word, it is a pilgrimage of the heart rather than of the feet: a longing for greater blessing than we have yet enjoyed (126), greater security than we have yet experienced (127).

Psalm 126. The tension of experience

The early rapture of Ezra 1–6 and the erosion of enthusiasm by the harsh facts of life illustrate this psalm. It has always been the same: whether we think of the exodus, the return from Babylon or even the redemptive work of Christ – redemption is accomplished but still needed! Joy seems to lie in the past, tears occupy the present. If only the Lord would act now as completely and dramatically as he did then ! So we pray for *streams in the Negev* (4) a sudden flash flood, transforming dried-up watercourses, making the scorched land into a garden! But no, in God's providence, following on his mighty acts (1–3), the metaphor of the harvest takes over (5–6). There will be *songs of joy* but only when the toilsome task of sowing has been done and the crop has matured for harvest. That is where we find ourselves in God's perfect plan of things (*cf.* Phil. 1:9–11; Jas. 5:7, 8; Rev. 14:14–16).

Psalm 127. At rest in toil

Does 126 say it all? Past laughter, future songs, present tears! 127 covers three areas of human activity and potential anxiety – the house, the city (1) and the family (3–5) – and affirms that without the Lord we can do nothing. Vs 1–2 seem to suggest 'Leave it all to God; let go and let God', and enjoy a restful life. But in the Bible, the opposite of rest is not work but restlessness, and 3–5 add a corrective. The Lord has ordained the human activities of begetting, conceiving and bearing. Yet, the Bible insists, it is not human but divine agency that 'opens the womb' or, indeed, 'closes' it (Gn. 29:31; 30:2). Children are not our achievement but his gift (3). So is a completed house and a guarded city (1–2). All life must be lived to the full, all its joys enjoyed and its duties performed in unworried reliance on him who is the doer of all. Joyful activity, toilsome activity – but full of untroubled rest. (2d)

Psalm 128. The transcending of failure

Blessed (1) combines here the ideas of 'under God's blessing' and 'finding personal fulfilment/happiness'. The psalm pledges this experience in two areas of life: (i) the personal and present (2–4): the prospering of work and marital and domestic joy; (ii) public and future (5–6): lifelong, communal, and familial. The secret of all this lies in the individual: v 1 *all* is singular, 'everyone'; v 4 *the man*, the individual person. 1 a heart of reverence (*fear*) for the Lord and a life-style (*walk*) conformed to his 'life-style' (*ways*). 2 *Eat the fruit*, a picture not only of prosperity but also of security (*cf.* Je. 31:5). 3 *Vine*. Maritally a picture of attractiveness and sexual enjoyment (*cf.* Song 7:8). *Vine . . . Olive*. Together symbolic of God's richness in blessing (*cf.* Dt. 8:8). Psalm 126 cried out for blessing; 127 asserted that it comes not by toiling but by trusting; 128 fulfils the desires of 126 and confirms the assertions of 127: *Blessed* (1) . . . *blessings* (2) . . . *blessed* (4) . . . *bless* (5) – two different words each used twice for confirmation.

Psalms 129 – 131. The fourth triad. When sin threatens

The fourth triad is unlike any of its predecessors in that the only reference to Zion comes in the first psalm of the three (129:5). Its similarity to the third triad is seen especially in the middle psalm, for while 121 and 124 dwelt on external opposition, circumstantial and human, 129 and 130 stress internal, personal threats, respectively anxiety and sin. Once more the pilgrimage is that of the heart. In Psalm 129, thanks to the righteous Lord, Israel has been saved (1–4) and ungodly foes may be left to him (5–8); but (130) is not the same righteousness a threat to Israel? For no sinner can stand before him (130:3). But he is a God of forgiveness (4) love and redemption (7). Hence, Psalm 131, there is rest of heart and hope in the Lord.

Psalm 129. Righteousness

The facts of the past (1–4) teach how to face the problems of present and future (5–8). This psalm could date from almost any point in Israel's troubled history. But though the threats were manifold (1, *greatly*, 'more than enough', 123:3), the lesson of history is plain: not even

savage oppression (3) has gained the upper hand because (4) *the LORD is righteous, i.e.* having revealed himself (Ex. 3:15; 6:6) as the redeemer of his people and the conqueror of his foes, he never deviates from that standard. Foes would impose bondage but the Lord gives freedom (4). And this is not a fictional reconstruction of history! Where is the imperial Egypt which enslaved Israel – or the Philistines, Assyrians or Babylonians? In 5–8 the verbs could as well be prophecy as prayer. If prayer, this is how to deal with life; if prophecy, this is how to face the future. Those who *hate Zion* will prove transient (6), unsuccessful (7), unbefriended and excluded from the community of blessing (8, *cf.* Ru. 2:4).

Psalm 130. Forgiveness

Righteousness sets this triad of psalms apart. True, if the righteous God sides with his people, then no foe can prosper (129); but if this God comes among his people so as to side with them, will not his righteous presence expose and condemn their sin? The key-words of Psalm 130 tell their own story: the psalm opens with a *cry*, rising out of the *depths* of distance and alienation, for *mercy*, the unmerited, undeserved grace of God (1–2). It moves to an affirmation that, (lit.) 'with you (*i.e.* as an inseparable companion) is forgiveness that is forgiveness indeed!' (3–4). This is followed by waiting (5–6). To be sure the verb contains the idea of waiting with confident expectation but waiting it is: there is nothing we can do: forgiveness when it comes is a sovereign decision and action of God. In 7–8 the individualism of the psalm gives way to a community-wide appeal: there is *hope* for all, sure, certain, confident hope; because the Lord has two other inseparable companions: pledged *love* and 'abundant' *redemption* – resources and readiness in God to pay whatever price will *redeem*, 'ransom' us *from all . . . sins*(8).

Psalm 131. Rest

In 130 the exhortation to *hope* arose from what is true of the Lord; in 131:3 it arises from what the psalmist has found to be personally true. He has taken a lowly place (1); his inner being (2) is at rest – like a child grown past the instinctive demands and fretfulness of infancy and now content, as a toddler, simply to be with mother. What original journey out of self-competent pride into humility and rest first prompted this beautiful psalm? We do not know, but its call to *hope in the Lord* links it with 130 and makes it the testimony of a sinner forgiven: humbled by the mercy of God, at peace within because at peace above.

Psalms 132 – 134. The fifth triad. When the goal is reached

These psalms are all centred in Zion. The pilgrimage is past; home has been reached. Yet there is movement within the three: from the objective facts of city and monarchy as divinely chosen and established (132) to the heaven-sent fellowship of the Lord's family (133) and to the actuality of standing in the very presence of the Lord himself (134). This is the end of the pilgrimage: the Lord with us (132), the church in perfect fellowship (133), the Lord's servants in the Lord's sanctuary (134).

Psalm 132 The Lord in Zion: divine choice

This beautifully constructed poem is a meditation on 2 Samuel 7. In that chapter David proposed to build the Lord a house only to find that the Lord was rather purposing to build David a house, so here David's oath (2–5) is balanced by the Lord's oath (10–11). Each of these two divisions has the same pattern: Prayer (1, 10), statement (2, 11), speech (of David, 3–5; of the Lord, 11–12), a further statement (6, 13) and a final speech (exhortation, 7–9; and promise, 14–18). Thus human purposes and desires (1–9) are balanced and matched by divine purposes and affirmations (10–18). David's oath (1–5) is followed by human devotion to fulfilling it (6–9); the Lord's oath (10–12) by his commitment to fulfilling it (13–18). We can imagine a pre-exilic congregation gathered at one of the annual feasts singing joyfully of David's zeal to found the sanctuary and the Lord's commitment to make it what it was meant to be.

1 *Hardships.* Bringing the Ark to Zion was not achieved without disappointment and suffering (2 Sa. 6:5–9), preparation, cost and loss (2 Sa. 6:12–23). The word, in its meaning 'humiliations/deep humiliation' could also refer to David being rejected as the temple-builder (2 Sa. 7:5, 13; 1 Ki. 5:3; 1 Ch. 22:8; 28:3). 2 No such oath is recorded in the histories. The psalm may be adding to our information or enlarging poetically on David's pure zeal for God's honour in making Zion his capital and planning for the House. *The Mighty One* (Gn. 49:24; Is. 49:26; 60:16; *cf.* Is. 1:24) emphasizes 'sheer power'. 3–5 The subordination of personal life, and comforts to the great priority. *A dwelling*, 'a fit/great dwelling', also in 7. 6 *Ephrathah*, of uncertain meaning, is specially linked with Bethlehem (Gn. 35:16; Ru. 4:11; Mi. 5:2). *Jaar*, an abbreviation for Kiriath-jearim (1 Sa. 7:1–2), where the Ark was housed during its 'lost years'. 7 *Dwelling . . . footstool.* The significance of the tabernacle/temple was that it actualized the dwelling of God among his

people (Ex. 29:43ff.; 1 Ki. 8:10–11, 13, 27). Within the Tent/House the Ark, more specifically the 'mercy seat/atonement cover' (Ex. 25:17–22; Lv. 16:13–14) was the place where the Holy God touched earth.

8 *Arise* (Nu. 10:35) *Your might.* (Jos. 3:11; 1 Sa. 5). 9 *Clothed.* Clothing, *cf.* 16, symbolizes character, function, commitment, *i.e.* make them righteous. *Saints*, the recipients of the divine changeless love who also love him in return. **10–18** *David* is referred to by name three times (10, 11, 17) and by implication seven times. Everything the Lord ever did for Zion and the line of David arose from the original oath (11) and divine faithfulness to promise. Implicit in the oath is the choice of Zion (13; Heb. 12:22), the indwelling of the Lord in his city (14, Ezk. 48:35; Rev. 21:2–3), his blessing, materially (15) and spiritually (16), and the ultimate purpose, the coming of the Messiah and his triumph (17–18).

Psalm 133. The family in Zion: divine blessing

The psalm begins with a situation, proceeds to a double comparison (2, 3ab, lit. 'It is like . . . it is like . . .') and ends with a certain blessing (3cd). V 1. Unity is emphasized: '. . . dwell *together* – and in *unity*!' This is (objectively) *good*, (subjectively) *pleasant.* But it is much more: it prompts a heavenly response of unstinting abundance by which the Lord (*cf.* Ex. 29:7; 30:25; Lv. 8:12) consecrates his people to be his priests, fulfilling his own expressed desire for them (Ex. 19:6). Moreover it is a heavenly miracle eradicating divisions (1 Ki. 12:19) and bringing *Hermon*, the chief mountain of (northern) Israel and *Zion*, the mountain of (southern) Judah, together in divine life-giving dew (Ex. 16:13, 14; Is. 26:19; Ho. 14:5). Consequently *there* (emphatic), *i.e.* where v 1 is true, 'the Lord has commanded, for evermore, the blessing of life.'

Psalm 134. Worship in Zion: divine fellowship

The pilgrimage began in 'Kedar' (120:5); it ends in the Lord's house wherein the pilgrims 'bless the Lord' (2) and he blesses them (3). When he 'blesses' us he reviews our needs and meets them; when we bless him we review his excellencies and worship him. What joy as the pilgrims at last arrive and their feet are standing not only in Jerusalem but in the Lord's house! What joy when 'from earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the unnumbered host!' – and the Great High Priest himself summons them to 'bless the Lord' (1–2) and pronounces the Lord's blessing on them (3). 1 *Minister*, (lit.) 'stand', accepted and secure. *Night*, possibly priests and levites on night-duty in the House; or pilgrims devoutly keeping vigil by night; or (best of all) keeping the night festival of Passover (Ex. 12:42) – 'the Lamb is all the glory in Immanuel's land'.

Psalms 135, 136. The Lord's chosen people

It is very fitting that these psalms should be numbered with 120–134 in 'Pilgrim Praise'. Could anything be more suitable to the newly-arrived pilgrims than one song which traces the steps of the great, foundational pilgrimage from Egypt to Canaan, rejoicing in the benefits that the divine choice has brought (135:4); and another song (136) which, using much the same material in a great antiphon, traces the same attributes and powers of the Lord, and the same benefits granted to his people to one abiding reality within his nature, the *love* which *endures for ever*?

Psalm 135. The choice of Israel: its meaning for the people

The structure of this psalm is:

A^1 (vs 1–4) Praise to the electing God
  B^1 (vs 5–7) The great Lord, sovereign in creation
    (seven facets of his greatness)
    C (vs 8–14) The acts of the Lord;
      C^1 (vs 8–9) Delivering
      C^2 (vs 10–12) Bestowing
      C^3 (vs 13–14) Vindicating
  B^2 (vs 15–18) Dead and death-dealing idols:
    (seven facets of idol-gods)
A^1 (vs 19–21) Praise to the indwelling God.

1–4 The references to *servants . . . who minister* and the adjectives *good . . . pleasant*, here applied to the Lord, link with 133:1; 134:2. The repeated call to praise and the seven drumbeats of the divine name arise from divine choice of *Jacob . . . Israel. Treasured possession* (Ex. 19:5; Dt. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Mal. 3:17). For the meaning see also the 'secular' example, 1 Ch. 29:3.

5–7 Communal praise only has the value that each individual contributes to it. The pilgrims worship together but personal conviction is essential: (lit.) 'I, for my part, know indeed . . .'. Pagan thought permeated the whole universe with many gods, especially *the seas* and the *depths* (6). The psalms love to dwell on the fact of one sole Creator God whose writ runs everywhere without exception (6) and whose will governs even the detail of climatic change (7). *All gods* are mentioned not because they exist objectively but because they are worshipped and magnetize the devotion of deluded minds (Is. 44:6–20). (See on 95:3.)

8–14 The whole exodus-period is covered, from the moment of leaving Egypt (8) to the final victories under Moses (11, Nu. 21:21ff; Dt. 2:20ff; 3:1ff), then on to inheritance under Joshua (12) and, because the Lord does not change (13), out into the undated future in which he will always side with his people in action and in heart: *Vindicate* means 'plead the cause of' his people; *have compassion*, 'feel sorry'.

15–18 (*See* 115:4–8.) Note the careful way in which this 'quoted' material plays its significant part in its new setting. As the outline above shows, the psalm contrasts the God who is active everywhere (5–7) with the man-made gods whose only 'work' is to spread the corruption of their deadness (18).

19–21 Except at the end of v 21 where the same verb is used as in 1–3, *praise* translates the verb 'to bless' (*see* on 134:2–3). On the categories of the Lord's people, *see* 115:9–11; 118:2–4. The cause from which 'blessing the Lord' particularly arises is, 'Blessed be/is the Lord ... who dwells in Jerusalem' (21). The Lord chose his people because he so wanted them for himself (4) that he came to dwell among them (*cf.* Eph. 2:18–22; 2 Cor. 6:16).

Psalm 136. The choice of Israel: its root in the Lord

The supreme reality is not the Lord's status (1–3), nor his work in creation (4–9) and history (10–22), nor even his goodness to Israel (23–25) but what he is in himself, the one whose *love endures forever.* To this point of emphasis and reiteration everything returns. His status would by itself inspire awe; his creatorial works, marvel; his power evident in history, submission; his goodness, gratitude. But when we see that all these greatnesses spring from an unchanging love which delights to manifest power in mercy and provision, then the Lord is truly acknowledged with wonder, love and praise. What is it to us that he is good, supremely exalted, the Creator, the Lord of history, the benefactor of people in time past, if there is not also the unchanging love which brings us too into the warm embrace and keeping of such a God?

Therefore we, with our pilgrim brothers and sisters of the OT church, can retrace our foundational pilgrimage from Egypt to Canaan and sing with them at every step that *his love endures for ever.* No power can resist him (1–3; Rom. 8:31–39; 1 Cor. 8:5, 6; Eph. 1:19–22); we are safe because the world we live in is his world (4–9); we too experience redemption (10–15; Jn. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:18–21), enjoy provision irrespective of circumstance (16; Phil. 4:12–13, 19), enter into our inheritance through his victory (17–22; Col. 1:12–14), marvel at the condescension of his choice of us (23–24, 1 Cor. 1:26–31) and eat our daily bread, looking with gratitude to the hand that feeds us (25), the *love that endures for ever.*

Psalm 137. The Lord's strange song

Since the tenses in 1–3 are most naturally understood as past and the word 'there' occurs in v 1 (omitted by NIV) and 3, with an equivalent in 2, the psalmist is looking back in time and away in space. He belongs in the returned community and his psalm recalls the captivity.

1–4 The unsung song. To the grieving exiles (1), memories were bitter (*cf.* 7) and joy was consigned to the past (2). Deliberately so – for the captors demanded songs and joy (3). But the Lord's songs are statements of truth and acts of worship, not items in a concert. Furthermore, there is a proper time for weeping. Life is not ceaseless joy. Also, the invitation to sing was a veiled invitation to settle down – you're Babylonians now! But they could not forget or conform. They were in a *foreign land* (4).

5–6 Home is where the heart is. Things now become individual. Each had (and has) to decide where his citizenship lies and live accordingly – in thought (*forget ... remember*), in deed (*hand*) and in heart (*joy*). Babylon was his address, Jerusalem his home (Phil. 3:20).

7–9 The Lord's strange song. But there was a song they sang and, when they left an unscathed Babylon and returned to a shattered Jerusalem, they sang it again. (i) Edom left to the Lord. (7) (lit.) 'Remember for the Edomites' (*cf.* 132:1, 'Remember for David') is a legal formula setting a case before a judge. Gratuitously Edom participated and gloated when Jerusalem was razed (Ob. 10–14). Nothing is asked; no vengeance proposed or planned. All is set before the divine Judge. (ii) 8–9, Babylon left to justice, and seen in the light of Scripture (Je. 51:56 has three verbs in common with vs 8–9) is already *doomed.* The translation *Happy* (the word should be repeated at the beginning of 9) is strictly incorrect here. The word must always be contextualized: mostly it means 'blessed/under God's blessing' (32:1); often it means 'Happy/personally fulfilled' (1:1); sometimes, in line with its basic meaning of 'straight', it means 'Right/doing the right thing' (Pr. 14:21; Ps. 106:3).

The psalmist asks nothing about Babylon but notes (and who can contradict him?) that when Babylon is treated in the same manner as Babylon treated Jerusalem, it will be right. The Judge of all the earth (Gn. 18:25) will have acted (Rom. 2:5–6). 8 recognizes the justice of what Babylon did to Jerusalem (*you have done*, 'you repaid'). The ruins they see evidence the justice with which the world is run by a Holy God; that

justice will be Babylon's portion. **9** records the savagery of Babylonian 'justice' (*cf.* 2 Ki. 8:12; Is. 13:16; *etc*) and as they did so it will be done to them. Does the Psalmist say he wants it to be so? No, only that it will be so. That is the sort of world we live in under God.

Psalm 138. New window, fresh eyes

It was one of those occasions when a single experience opened up a whole new vista – on the nature of the Lord (1–3), the future of the world (4–6) and personal security (7–8). Of the experience itself we only know that prayer was answered in a way that gave David new vitality so that he wanted to sing the Lord's praise into the face of every so-called '*god*'. He felt he knew the Lord as never before (2). He knew that no *trouble* or *foe* (7) could ever beat him or prevent the realisation of the Lord's *purpose* (8).

Maybe it all happened in 2 Samuel 5:17–21 when the Philistines challenged David's infant kingdom, and in answer to enquiring of the Lord, a signal victory was won and the 'gods' of Philistia became the litter of battle. Maybe, but it all arose simply through prayer and answered prayer. The place of prayer is the place where the Lord's revelation of himself takes on new dimensions (2), the place of renewal (3), world-vision (4) and confidence in God (7–8).

2 *Temple*, used in 1 Samuel 1:9 of the Tent at Shiloh. In David's day the Tent was at Gibeon (2 Ch. 1:3) but probably the reference here (*cf.* 18:6) is to the heavenly temple. **3** More dramatic 'In the day I called, you answered me'. **4–6** *May* does not express doubt but asks that the assured future may happen. The verbs could equally be futures: 'All ... will'. The *words* declare the *glory*, defined as the Lord's condescending identification with the *lowly*. This is the truth which, in answer to prayer, opened David's eyes to the dimensions of the Lord's name and transformed him inwardly. He is convinced it will win the world and by it he can face the future with assurance.

Psalm 139. No escape, no regrets, no compromise

Certainly this psalm teaches the Lord's omniscience (1–6), omnipresence (7–12), creatorship (13–18) and holiness (19–24) but such abstractions are far from its heart. For to the psalmist omniscience is God's complete knowledge of me; omnipresence, God with me in every place; creatorship, God's sovereign ownership of every part of me; and holiness, God's will that I be like him. The psalm is not written by one who would escape this God if only he could, or fly from him as a sinner, but one who knows he cannot escape and finds nothing to regret in such a truth.

The psalm is a unity. *For*, v 13, makes 13–18 an explanation of 1–6, 7–12 and identical wording in vs 1, 23 binds the whole together. This means that the tension between the psalmist and the wicked in 19–24 must be the setting from which the psalm sprang. Some situation of moral conflict, evil in its most culpable (19) and outrageous (20–21) forms, made David not only take sides (19–24) but also re-explore his shelter and security in God (1–18). Traces of Aramaic and other hints of later language in the psalm have suggested to some a date later than David. But these hints are insufficient to support a later date. Its theology is undatable and perfectly at home in the mouth and experience of David.

1–6 God the all-knowing: from inner thoughts to outer ways. These verses are full of verbs of 'knowing'. The general statement of v 1 is applied to life's outward activities and inner thoughts (2), everyday acts and lifestyle (3, *ways*), and unexpressed thoughts (4). Personal life falls wholly within divine limits, *behind, before* and over, (5, 'You cup your hand over me' – a picture which reveals that it is all for my protection and comfort Jn. 10:27–30).

7–12 God the all-present: from the everlasting to the temporal. The *Spirit*, the dynamic presence of God (7, lit. 'face'), his personal presence. *Where ... where?* implies that the Lord is present and active in every place and this is explored in 8–12: the everlasting dimension, above and below, (8, NIV mg. Sheol); the spatial dimension (9–10) – 'If I could go so far east as to fly off with morning light as it wings its way over the land, and continue west beyond the bounds of the sea...'; the temporal dimension (11–12): v 11 raises the possibility of finding cover (the verb's meaning is problematic) in a darkness so deep that (11) *light* becomes *night*. But even such a darkness would be no problem to the Lord (lit. 'too dark for you'), rather (12) the darkness would 'lighten up' *like the day*; indeed 'darkness and light are the same' – as far as he is concerned and as regards the possibility of my being bereft of the guiding and holding *hand*.

13–18 God the all-creating: from conception to resurrection. How is it that the Lord knows and surrounds me? Because from conception and gestation through the days of life and on to 'awaking' in eternity he is my creator-possessor. **13** *Created.* The verb means 'to acquire a possession' – *e.g.* purchase (Gn. 25:10; Ex. 15: 16); and, in the case of the Lord and the created order, 'to enjoy creative possession' (Gn. 14:19, 22). *Inmost being*, 'kidneys', the seat of emotion, the sentient being. **15** *Frame*, the bony structure, the physical being. **16** *Unformed body*, 'embryo'. Every embryo is a person, a creative possession of God with days

planned ahead, a life ordained in heaven to be lived on earth. 17 *Precious . . . vast, i.e.* the whole sweep of thought in vs 1–12 and in particular the awesomeness of the human creation (13–16). But that is not all: there is still eternity! *Awake, cf.* 17:15.

19–24 God the all-holy: From coming judgment to present testimony. The verses are in three pairs: **19–20** Identifying with the Lord. Since he will slay the wicked in his own time, I will separate from them now. **21–22** Siding with the Lord. They hate him; I hate them. **23–24** Pleasing the Lord. Come into my *heart* with full divine scrutiny; take control of my *ways* to eradicate and direct. To say that the cry for judgment is astray from the Jesus of Lk. 23:34 is to forget the Jesus of Mt. 7:23; 25:41, 46a; Rev. 6:15ff – the biblical dimension of the wrath of God. Maybe if we matched the spirituality of vs 1–18 we would be in a position to judge the morality of 19–24. Indeed if we shared his commitment to moral emotions (21) and his unreserved commitment (23–24) we would find no other words possible. If these verses shock, the fault is more likely in us. Were we under threat as David was, we would better appraise his words; but, deeper than we are in suffering, he was also higher in holiness. To side with God is to identify with the totality of his revealed character and ways.

Psalms 140 – 145. Praying through to praise

Psalms 140–145 form a linked Davidic group. 142 links itself with David's bad experiences with Saul and the same period suits all the psalms until (as with Ps. 18) we come through into the sunshine of a great alphabet of praise in 145. Psalms 140–143 are all prayers: the first reaction to trouble in all its many forms (see the titles in the commentary) is to 'take it to the Lord'.

Psalm 140. Slander

The psalm consists of two prayers (1–5, 8–11) each followed by an affirmation (6–7, 12–13). The first prayer is for protection, the second for disaster; the first affirmation acknowledges the God of salvation in personal, protective care, the second affirms the God of righteousness in public oversight of society. Each of the prayers makes special mention of *violence* (1, 4, 11), harm to the person, and of speech (3, 11). Likewise the psalm mingles the thought of a single hostile individual with that of a hostile group. All this was true of David in the days of Saul's pathological dread of him. In vs 1–5 note how the mind prompts the *tongue* (3) which in turn moves the *hands* (4). Typically of the Bible, the tongue is seen as not only hurtful (*sharp*) but as deadly (*serpent . . . poison . . . vipers*). 7 *Strong deliverer*, 'the strength of my salvation'. *Shields*, a perfect tense expressing fixed habit. David is turning into worship what past experience has taught him. **8–11** reintroduce what we see as the 'problem' of imprecation. But it is a revealed truth that sin boomerangs (8, 9, 11), that the characteristic judgments of God on the wicked are fire and flood (10). In committing all in prayer to the Lord – leaving all to him, resting in prayer, purposing no retaliation – David realistically verbalizes what the God to whom vengeance belongs has said he will do. 12 *Poor . . . needy*, those crushed down and pushed around by strong and unscrupulous people.

Psalm 141. Provocation

The slanderous accusation in 140 contrasts with concern for guarded speech (3), only the voice of prayer (1–2) and, when once the trouble is past, sweet (not vindictive) words (6, see below). But the psalm is, in effect, a sustained prayer, the true use of the believing tongue.

1–4 Effective prayer. David desires God to find in his prayer all the power and acceptability of the divine ordinances of the daily offerings (Ex. 29:38–42; 30:8). But pure prayer Godward must be matched by controlled speech manward (3, Jas. 3:10–12). 4 The prayer for the mouth must be backed by a prayer for the heart. *With men . . . eat.* A temptation to end the stress by compromise, by joining with the opposition. 'Eating their delicacies' may be taken literally, 'join in table fellowship', or metaphorically 'delight in the things that delight them'.

5–6 Sustained prayer. In 1–4 the psalmist accepted the hostility of the ungodly without reply. His humble and resolute spirit went further, accepting rebukes (5) from people who might have been expected to understand. V 5 expresses a contrast; it would seem that the *righteous* were rebuking him possibly for his silent acquiescence and maybe urging reply or counteraction. But this is not to be: only the voice of prayer will be heard until (6, more lit,) 'when their judges are thrown down the cliffs, they will hear my words, that they are sweet'. The distress of the times included corrupt courts (*cf.* 1 Sa. 8:1–3). The summary execution (*cf.* 2 Ch. 25:12) of such judges means the end of the oppression. On that day his self-imposed silence will end, not in self-congratulation or vindictiveness, but in 'sweet . . . words'.

7–10 Sheltering prayer. Omit *They will say* (7, an NIV insertion). David and his fellow sufferers feel broken and as good as dead and buried (7) *but* (8) – there is the ever-present *but* of (a) expectation (*eyes*), (b) a *Sovereign Lord*, (c)

refuge, prayer for life (*not . . . death*), safety (9), the merited downfall of the wicked and a safe passage through affliction (10).

Psalm 142. Loneliness

On the title, *see* Psalm 57. Surrounded by enemies (140:9) and misunderstood by friends (141:5) David, lamenting that he is man-forsaken (4), finds that he is not God-forsaken (5). The three sections of the psalm (1–3a, 3b–5, 6–7) contain the same themes: (i) Personal distress: fainting; friendless; at the end of my tether; (ii) Prayer: describing; affirming; asking; (iii) The Lord: understanding; protecting, providing; delivering.

1–3a Prayer from an overwhelmed spirit to a God of grace and care. Though the Lord knows our needs (Mt. 6:32) he commands us to ask (Mt. 7:7–8). (1, lit, 'With my voice I cry . . . with my voice I supplicate') *i.e.* verbalizing the details, summoning our fainting spirits before the One who cares (*know, see* 1:6). **3b–5** Prayer out of danger and isolation to a God of safety and sufficiency. *Refuge* (4) a place to run to; *refuge* (5) available shelter. *Portion*, sufficiency for life (Jos. 18:7, *cf.* 19:9) *in the land . . .*, here and now. **6–7** Prayer out of helplessness to a God who deals fully with our needs. *Desperate need*, 'hang down': 'hangs my helpless soul on thee'. *Because of your goodness*, (lit.) 'because you do a complete work for me', defeating every foe, releasing every bondage, restoring to praise and fellowship.

Psalm 143. The end

A crescendo with eleven petitions marks 7–12. The deeper the need the more fervent the prayer. And the need has become deep indeed! Like a hunted beast he has been chased, grounded, caged (3, *cf.* 142 title) and is in despair (4). Power to endure has gone. Could it be that the Lord has rejected him and that this really is the end? The psalm 'pivots' on the urgency of v 7:

A^1 (vs 1–2) Relationship
  B^1 (vs 3–4) Danger
    C^1 (vs 5–6) Trust
      D (v 7) Urgency
    C^2 (v 8) Trust
  B^2 (vs 9–10) Danger
A^2 (vs 11–12) Relationship

1–2 (Relationship) The attributes of the Lord; **3–4** (Danger) The failing of the human spirit; **5–6** (Trust) The Lord's past works; **7** (Urgency) Only the Lord; **8** (Trust) The Lord's present love; **9–10** (Danger) The guiding divine Spirit; **11–12** (Relationship) The attributes of the Lord.

2 Throughout the whole Saul-episode David was guiltless but even so, as the oppression continued the thought was inevitable: Have I offended the Lord? Not all suffering is consequent upon sin, but every suffering should prompt self-examination with a proper dread of the Lord's displeasure. **5–6** The cordial of memory. To recall our past is to promote sadness, very often, or self-pity; to recall the Lord's past prompts confident prayer. *Thirsts for you*, better 'I spread out my hands to you, my soul to you like . . .' Mute appeal: the mere need of his people is powerful before God. **7** The solution is in God. David prays not for the removal, destruction *etc.* of foes, but just the lifting up of the Lord's face in favour. That is all that is needed – just one look! **8–10** The longing is for God himself rather than simply the end of trouble. Divine favour will make the life of obedience possible. *Your good Spirit* (Ne. 9:20). **11–12**, a case in point regarding imprecatory prayers: we are at ease with v 11 and could and do pray such a prayer, but in reality the 'bland' terms of v 11 include the 'harsh' requests of v 12, for this is the way the Lord deals with unjust accusations (Dt. 19:16–19). There are circumstances (like David's) where there is no deliverance without destruction and to pray for the one is to pray for the other.

Psalm 144. And there was morning

While 144, 145 join 146–150 in a paean of praise to conclude the Psalter, they are linked more especially with 140–143, firstly by their Davidic titles and secondly by the links between 144 and 18 (*e.g.* 1, 18:34; 2, 18:2, 47; 5, 18:9; 6, 18:14). Just as 18 jubilantly marked the end of Saul's persecution, so after the deepening darkness of 140–143, 144 heralds the long-awaited morning.

1–4 Past salvation. David, at last on his throne (2, *peoples*, Heb., 'my people'), ascribes all to the Lord and cannot but marvel at such goodness to a mere mortal. *Rock* (1), changelessness (Dt. 32:4; 2 Sa. 22:47–49), *refuge* (Ps. 31: 2, 3), sustenance (Ex. 17:6; Ps. 95:1). *Trains* (1). The Lord governs much more than the outcome of the battle. He looks after details, down to hands and fingers, the agency and skill of the individual soldier. The battle is his – but not without the dedicated soldiering of his people (Dt. 7:1, 2; Eph. 6:10ff). *My loving God*, (lit.) 'my Unchanging Love', the divine attribute made into a title. *Fortress . . . stronghold . . . shield*, the first implies encircling strength, the second inaccessible security, the third, protection at the moment of attack. The positive truth (1–2) that God alone is Saviour is safeguarded by the negative truth (3–4) that man can never deserve or contribute to his salvation.

5–11 Present deliverance. 18:9–17 uses this imagery (5–6) to depict what the Lord had already done in delivering David from Saul. Here the pleas are for the present. There are still enemies, still a need for deliverance. Praise is pledged but prayer must continue as long as the danger continues. Past mercies do not breed a 'leave it to the Lord' complacency but a 'take it to the Lord' urgency. *Part* (5), as a tent curtain is parted to allow the occupant to emerge (Is. 40:22). *Down ... smoke* (Ex. 19:18). *Mighty waters* (7), figurative of overwhelming threats (124:4). *Foreigners* (7) such as threatened David after his accession (2 Sa. 5:17ff; 10:1ff.) *Right hands* (8) as used in oath-taking (106:26).

12–15 Future prosperity. How well the psalm suits the situation of the newly enthroned David, reflecting his praise for newly given victory (1–5), his continuing involvement in threat (6–11) and now his concern for the future! The keynote is one of confidence (15) as he seeks blessing in the family, the economy and the nation. *Well-nurtured plants* (12), soundly rooted, strong-growing. *Pillars carved ...* (12), combining the imagery of strength, security of position and beauty, and also themselves giving stability to the 'building' of which they are part: the position of woman, wife and mother in a well-ordered society. *Draw heavy loads* (14a), *i.e.* the harvest-wagons. **14** describes in turn defensive and offensive war and the mourning for the dead which accompanies each. *Blessed* indeed *are the people of whom this is true*!

Psalm 145. An ABC of the glory of the Lord

This psalm is an alphabetical acrostic. In the Hebrew text the line beginning with the letter nun (n) does not appear. It is usually supposed that it has been lost and most would applaud the NIV in supplying the nun-line from other sources (13b, see NIV mg.). It is neither certain nor obvious that this should be done. It is far easier to see why some versions should supply the line than to see how it could ever have been lost. The distinctive character of Hebrew poetry is to subordinate form to meaning and we should at least consider that the poet deliberately omitted one letter in order to indicate that, not even with the help of revelation, can the human mind fully grasp the glories of God. The psalm is bracketed (1–2, 21) by affirmations of a purpose to extol or proclaim the Lord's glories. It opens with ceaseless personal praise but by v 21 it is clear that nothing less than the praise of *every creature*, 'all flesh', will suffice for such a God. The body of the psalm expresses this praise in sections with matching opening words: *Great is the LORD* (3–7), 'Gracious is the Lord' (8–16), 'Righteous is the Lord' (17–20). If the nun-line is introduced at 13 a further section emerges, 'Faithful is the Lord' (13b–16). But within this sectioning, the attributes of the Lord weave in and out of each other, for God is One and there is no conflict within his nature: his greatness includes his goodness and righteousness (3, 7). His graciousness includes his greatness (8, 11–13), his righteousness includes his gracious love (17–19).

3–7 His greatness is explored as limitless; awe-inspiring; good and reliable. Note the intertwining of general and individual testimony – to what the Lord is and has done. His works are *mighty*, *i.e.* in power, *wonderful*, supernatural in quality, *awesome*, striking fear into the witness.

8–16 The Lord's gracious benevolence is reviewed in itself (8–9), how his nature expresses itself in kindness; and in the testimony of his people (10–16). His specific goodness to his covenant people (8, Ex. 34:6–7) is accompanied by a universal goodness (9). For this *all* but in particular his *saints* owe him thanks (10). To them too belongs testimony to his *might* (11) and to the glory of his kingly rule (12), his fidelity to his word (13), his grace in support (14) and supply (15–16). **9** *Compassion* (*see* 103:13). **10** *saints*, those who are the object of the Lord's pledged love, who then love him back (1 Jn. 4:19) and extend the same love to each other (1 Jn. 4:11).

17–20 In the Lord, justice lives alongside kindness. There is an intrinsic morality in all he does (17), and there are personal moral qualifications leading to his holy enrichments (18–20). Righteous though he is, he is also *near*, next-of-kin, to his praying people. At the same time his righteousness also looks for their sincerity (18), their reverence (19), and their love (20). His righteousness is indeed a righteousness of grace – loving, fulfilling desires, saving, watching over, but it is also the righteousness of holiness.

Psalms 146 – 150. The Endless Hallelujah

The Book of Psalms began (1:1) with 'Blessed is the man'; it ends with the sustained, five fold equivalent of 'Blessed be the Lord'. In these psalms there is no reference to personal need, no petition, little that could be called historical allusion; all is focused on God; all is praise. But there is step-by-step progression in this praise. It begins with the individual (146:1), involves the community (147:1, 12), extends to heaven and earth (148:1, 7). If, however, the whole world is to offer praise for what the Lord has done for Israel (148:13–14) there is need for the praise of a people committed to mission (149) until everything that has breath praises the Lord (150:6).

Psalm 146. Individual praise

The opening call, like the concluding, is plural but at once it becomes singular (2): the Lord is worthy of the praise of the whole person (*soul*) and the whole life. **3–4** guard this truth negatively: all human objects of trust, whether outstanding or ordinary lack ability, continuance and reliability. **5–10** But in contrast to this there is not just 'God' but a God proved as One able to save (*of Jacob*), known through his self-revelation as Saviour (*the* LORD, Ex. 6:6, 7), and grasped in personal faith (*his God*). He is a God of total power and changelessness (6), all-embracing pity, socially (7) and personally, a God of moral exactness (8, 9) who is moved by the plight of the needy – and a God who is always there! Praise him indeed!

Psalm 147. Communal praise

The structure of the psalm is marked by the calls to praise in 1, 7, 12. Each section refers to the Lord as Creator: **1–6** note his detailed knowledge of the universe and brackets this with his concern for needy individuals among his people and the moral discernment which underlies all his action **7–11** observe his bounty in providing for earthly life but insist that in the case of people, he acts on a moral basis, looking for a response of reverence and expectancy. **12–20** teach that his word is the controlling factor in the created order and is also the distinguishing mark of his people.

1 *How pleasant* or 'for he is delightful. Praise is a lovely thing'. **2** explains how delightful he is: in his concern for the stability and circumstances of his people as a whole and for the inner and outer (3) needs of individuals. *Exiles*, 'scattered ones', not necessarily those 'exiled' to Babylon but any 'scattering'; maybe even as broad a meaning as 'harassed'. **4** (*cf.* Is. 40:26). In the OT the Creator not only originates everything but also maintains, controls and guides everything to its appointed destiny. Also, **5** the created order reveals his power and understanding. **6** *Humble*, those at the bottom of life's heap. **8–9** The Creator also operates the processes of climatic change, of growth and provision. These are not automatic or self-determining but are manifestations of the agency and life of God in the created order.

10–11 *Strength* is, typically, prowess, military strength. *Horse* and *legs* may hint at cavalry and infantry, the things nations applaud as giving strength and status. But the biggest of the 'big battalions' to have on our side is the Lord himself and (11) he looks for the spiritual qualities of reverence and *hope* – confident, trustful waiting for his changeless love to act. **12–20** Just as 7–11 built on 1–6 by clarifying the conditions of divine blessing (*cf.* 10–11 with 6), so 12–20 build on 7–11: the reverence and patient trust of 11 need the revealed word (19–20) as their basis. This is a secure basis for life because (15–18) the word of God is the effective agency by which he runs the world, whether in severity (16–17) or mildness (18). 15–18 is bracketed by 13–14 and 19–20 and leaves us to draw our own conclusion: the Lord is all the security and enrichment (13–14) his people need; their possession of the word (19) makes them the unique people (20; Dt. 4:5–8).

Psalm 148. Creation praise

Beyond the praise of the individual (146) and the community (147) there is a praise due to the Creator from the whole creation: heaven (1) and earth (7), introduced by identical commands. Each call to praise is grounded in an explanation (5–6, 13–14), again with identical introductions. Heavenly praise is grounded in the fact of God the Creator who originated, maintains and controls all (5–6). Earthly praise is grounded in this intrinsic glory of the Lord and the unique position of his people (13–14). The order of praise in 1–6 is downward from the heavenly beings (2) to the physical constituents of the heavens (3–4); the order of praise in 7–14 is upward from the depths (7) and the inanimate order (8–9) to the animal (10) and human kingdoms (11–12). Things that in themselves can become objects of reverence (*angels*, 2; *stars*, 3) and things that often seem to contradict a divine ordering hand (8) – all alike and in all their manifestations exist solely for his praise. Indeed, the storm can only *do his bidding* (8).

4 *Waters above*, the sphere of the rain-clouds. **7–10** How does a mute creation 'praise'? By being what it is, his subjects, fulfilling their allotted function, just as (6) the 'praise' of the stars is their subservience to fixed divine ordinances. **13** Earth is summoned not simply to 'praise God', *i.e.* to respond to some sense of a supernatural being, but to *praise the name*, *i.e.* respond to what he has revealed himself to be. How can the whole earth praise that of which they have no knowledge? The problem is solved by implication in 14 (see 149) where the existence of a special people is an additional ground for earth's praise: his people are the way whereby the world may come to know the Lord. *Alone.* The word *all* occurs ten times (2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14), covering every created entity. There is only one *alone*! **14** *Horn*, symbol of strength: the Lord has made his people a 'fixture' on earth; *people* ... *saints* ... *close.* Circles of increasing intimacy: he chose his people out of all peoples; made them the objects of his changeless love; took them as his next-of-kin.

Psalm 149. Kingdom praise

Responding to the implication of 148:13, 149 explains that the Lord's purpose in Israel is to bring the whole world under his sway – therefore into the blessedness Israel enjoys. Within 146–150 only 149:2 describes the Lord as *King* to whom (8) the *kings* submit. Thus the psalm takes the metaphor of kingship seriously, including the extension of the kingdom by force of arms. But (*cf.* Is. 45:14–25; 60:1–22; Eph. 6:10–17; Rev. 1:16) it is metaphor, just as (Is. 9: 4, 5, 7) militarism is metaphorical of the extension of the kingdom of peace and as in Acts 15:14–18, Amos's picture of Gentile subservience to David is metaphorical of the spreading gospel. The prologue (1) leads to joy in a saving King (2–4); joy in world-dominion (the restfulness and conquests of a praising people) their objectives; and finally the epilogue (5–9).

1–2 *Saints*, security in the Lord's love (*cf.* 5, 9); *Israel*, chosen (Is. 41:8) son (Ex. 4:22), redeemed (Ex. 6:6–7); *Zion*, constituted under David. **4** The ground of praise: divine *delight*, the Lord's glad acceptance of his people; *salvation*, the people's experience of the 'opposite of adversity', divine, human or circumstantial. *Humble*, downtrodden without resource to deliver themselves. **5–6** The contrast between *bed* and *sword* is intentional. The Davidic people were not called to military conquest. *Bed* may suggest a couch at the messianic banquet (Is. 25:6–10); and *sword*, a victory already in principle accomplished. But for them as for us the 'conquests' are spiritual (2 Cor. 10:5) and the victory that of Calvary (Rev. 12:11). **7** *Vengeance*, the dark side of the day of salvation (Is. 61:2; 63:4; Phil. 1:28; 2 Thes. 1:7–10; Rev. 14:14–19; 20:15). **8** (*Cf.* Is. 45:14–25). A vivid portrayal, within the metaphor of King/Kingdom, of the fact that to accept the message is to submit to the messenger (2 Cor. 8:5). **9** *Sentence written*, *i.e.* in God's book, judgment in accordance with the record.

Psalm 150. All praise!

The sequence of psalms has brought the world (149:5–9) into submission (Is. 45:23; Phil. 2:11) and the anthem of the redeemed is about to commence (Rev. 5:8–14; 7:9–10).

1–2 Praise appropriate to God. From the height of his heavenly *sanctuary* down to the *heavens* ('the expanse of/which displays his strength'), down to *his acts of power* (dominating strength) seen on earth, the Lord displays *surpassing greatness*, greatness exceeding that of any and every claimant. *Sanctuary* could be translated 'his holiness' but the meaning would be the same. The idea is defined by the earthly house the Lord commanded: the place where the Holy One dwells and where his people approach him through atoning sacrifice. This is the highest point of the greatness of the Lord. His *acts of power* are not defined but, since *his mighty heavens* instance the work and fact of creation, his *acts* will be what he has done, for his people, in redemption, providential care and discipline.

3–6 Praise proportionate to humanity. By every means (3–5), from every person (6), a great shout worthy to act as a climax to the joyousness of OT religion and to be a foretaste of that 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit' which will fill the courts of heaven and last to all eternity.

J. A. Motyer

PROVERBS

Introduction

Proverbs offers theoretical and practical teaching about life, in two main forms. Chs. 1 – 9 are mostly encouragement to a moral life (see *e.g.* 1:8–19). These sermons are in verse, but poetic form matters less than getting the message across, and much of the verse is doggerel. The chapters have two main emphases, on applying oneself to the teaching of the wise and on avoiding adulterous relations with women. The two themes are related: sexual unfaithfulness is the supreme folly.

With ch. 10 the atmosphere changes. The form becomes mostly one-verse sayings, linked in one way or another but each saying complete in itself. The themes broaden out and are quite varied. Among the recurrent topics, as well as wisdom and sexual relationships, are the nature of righteousness, the use of words, relationships in the community, work, wealth and kingship (17:1–5 is a good example).

The last third of the book (22:17 – 31:31) comprises five further collections of material, mixed in content and also mixed in form. These bring together many more one-verse sayings, some longer units, and one final poem of twenty-two verses.

Both sermons and sayings show the usual features of poetry in the Prophets or other books – indeed they tend to be more regular than poetry elsewhere in the OT. Generally, each verse comprises a unit of thought if not an actual sentence, and consists of two half-lines which complement, complete or contrast with each other. Often their meaning is interwoven and interdependent. Thus 10:1 implies that a wise son is a joy to both father and mother, a foolish son a grief to both. Commonly the balancing half-lines each have only three words, and thus three stresses; Hebrew frequently compounds words but the English reader can often perceive which are the important words in each line around which the little words cluster, and thus see where the three stresses are. 1:2–4 is an example of all these features.

The material in Proverbs may reflect three social backgrounds: the life of the family, the court college and the theological school. First, the teachers often speak as father and mother to the hearers as their children. While this way of speaking may be partly metaphorical, behind it is the implication that the home is the natural place for teaching and learning about life, wisdom and the way of righteousness (*cf.* 22:6). The first likely background of the material in Proverbs is the life of the family and the clan.

Secondly, in other Middle Eastern cultures wisdom teaching was collected under royal patronage, as resources for the training of the nobility for their work at court. The content of Proverbs does not point mainly in this direction; it relates to the life of people in general. But the references to Solomon and other kings in the headings to the collections, as well as the references to kingship and national affairs in some sayings, suggest that the court college where people were trained for the king's service may have been one context in which the material was used and collected.

Thirdly, the material at times reflects an interest in theological questions such as creation and revelation (see 3:19–20; 8:22–31; 30:2–6) as well as in more down-to-earth questions about practical life. The background of this material may have been discussions in schools where theologians or interpreters of the Scriptures or scribes were trained, the 'houses of instruction' to which Sirach invites people who wish to understand the ways of God (Ecclus. 51:23).

We know little regarding the authorship or actual date of the material in Proverbs. The oldest material is found among that which could naturally be used in family life as we saw above. This may have originated long before Solomon's day and before Israel existed in Palestine, though it would carry on developing and accumulating as family life continued. Teaching suggesting the life of the court presumably belongs in the centuries from David to the exile. (On Solomon's relationship to it, see the commentary on 1:1 below.) The more theologically reflective material may come from the Second Temple period; it provides the final literary background (chs. 1 – 9 and 30 – 31) for our reading of the bulk of the book with its mainly down-to-earth concerns.

Proverbs takes an experiential, almost scientific approach to life. It looks at life itself in order to discuss directly how to see life (big questions about its meaning and down-to-earth questions about our understanding of topics such as friendship, marriage and the family) and how to live life on the basis of that understanding. It understands wisdom as thinking and

living in accordance with how things actually are. Folly is a way of thinking and living that ignores how things actually are.

Attempting to formulate and collect wisdom teaching assumes that we are not limited to learning from our own experience; we also learn from that of others. From their own and from other people's experience Israel's wise teachers offer us insights which may help us to make sense of experience we have had, and may help us to do the wise thing in the future.

Theologically considered, Proverbs starts from God's general revelation, available to people because they are made in God's image and live in God's world. Precisely because it knows that God is real, that people are made in God's image and that they live in God's world, it also assumes that morality and faith are part of life itself as people experience it.

Christians are continually allowing themselves to be influenced by human wisdom and experience. Proverbs encourages that. It also offers us some guidance on how and how not to go about it. It assumes that the real world includes matters of faith and moral conviction, and sets our experience in the narrow sense against the background of these; it puts learning, religion and morals together. It would insist that principles of education, counselling and business, for instance, are formed in conjunction with religious and moral considerations, not independently of them. It thus says both a 'yes' and a 'no', or a 'yes but', to what we learn from the world.

Further reading

F. D. Kidner, *Proverbs*, TOTC (IVP, 1964).
K. L. Aitken, *Proverbs*, DSB (St Andrew Press/Westminster/John Knox Press, 1986).
D. A. Hubbard, *Proverbs*, CC (Word, 1989).
W. McKane, *Proverbs*, OTL (SCM, 1970).
C. V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (JSOT Press, 1985).

Outline of contents

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Commentary

1:1–7 Introduction

These verses are the book's own introduction to its nature and purpose. The contents of the book as a whole can be described as *proverbs*, which have the two main quite different forms noted in the introduction. This in itself shows that *proverb* is a word of broader and more varied application than the English word 'proverb'. To us a proverb is a means of comparison. The Bible, however, uses the word more broadly. In different passages it can refer to a prophetic oracle (Nu. 23:7), an object lesson (Dt. 28:37), a saying (1 Sa. 10:12), a poetic discourse (Jb. 27:1), and other forms of speech. It thus suggests something more intense, vigorous and provocative than a straightforward saying.

V 6 describes the book's contents as *parables* and as *sayings and riddles of the wise* (GNB 'the hidden meaning of proverbs and the problems that wise men raise'). That draws attention to two further features of the teaching of Proverbs. It is often cast in puzzling form rather than told straight; this makes the listener think. It also reflects the fact that the book often handles deep questions.

The heading *The proverbs of Solomon* introduces the whole book, but it does not indicate that Solomon was the author of all the material in it (see 24:23; 25:1; 30:1; 31:1). Rather, it makes a statement regarding the whole book's authority as a collection of truly Solomonic wisdom. For Solomon is *the* great biblical embodiment of wisdom (see 1 Ki. 3 – 4). What it contains is the kind of wisdom he taught and embodied. We do not know whether particular parts of the book were his work. We actually know nothing of when different parts of the book were written (beyond that it was between 2000 and 200 BC!) but their meaning does not rely on information of this kind. They concern everyday human questions, for all time.

In v 1 Solomon is described as *son of David, king of Israel* (*cf.* Ec. 1:1). Ecclesiastes goes on to make Solomon its model, for as king he would have been in a unique position to make the statements in Ec. 1:12 – 2:11. In a parallel way the sermons in Pr. 1 – 9 may have Solomon as their implicit model; they express the kind of principles a king such as Solomon should have been wise enough to live by. There is an irony there!

The introduction goes on to state the book's purpose, and in doing so it offers us a glossary of wisdom's technical terms.

In v 2, *wisdom* itself means first the practical know-how or cleverness which achieves things (see 30:24–28), though it comes to be a more abstract discipline concerned with deep theological questions (see 8:22–31). *Discipline* or 'instruction' (the same word in v 8) reminds us that wisdom is not acquired cheaply or painlessly; it involves submission (*cf.* 3:11; 6:23; 13:1, 24). Thus 'rebuke' or 'reproof' (1:23, 25, 30) often accompanies *discipline* or 'instruction' (see 3:11; 5:12; 6:23; 10:17). *Understanding words of insight* implies the ability to analyse, the discernment to see behind things or to read between the lines, and the discrimination to make decisions in the light of that (*cf.* v 6).

Wisdom's link with a *prudent life* (3) again shows its practical concern; the word suggests having good sense. *Prudence* in v 4 is a different word, meaning 'shrewdness' (REB), the capacity to get people to do what you want and not to be taken in yourself (see 22:3; also Gn. 3:1 in the bad sense). *Knowledge* can refer to knowing facts and knowing people, but it overlaps with acknowledgment and thus with commitment – it links theory and practice (see 1:22, 29; 3:6). 'Knowledge of God' (2:5) is thus more closely linked to obedience to God than to having a personal experience of God. *Discretion* suggests the resourcefulness of the practical person who knows how to get things done and is not put off by a problem; in the bad sense it denotes scheming (12:2).

In v 5, *learning* comes from the verb 'to take' and hints at the effort involved in grasping something and at the receptiveness required by wisdom. The same word is translated 'persuasive words' in a striking context in 7:21. *Guidance* comes from the word for ropes and suggests skill in steering your way through life with its storms (see 24:6).

The book's introduction also specifies its target audiences. The *simple* (4) are the uninstructed young who are in danger of being naive, gullible, easily led – and happy the way they are (see v 10 – 'entice' is a related verb, and suggests leading astray the gullible; also 1:22, 32; 14:15). But Proverbs' teaching is not something that the *wise* and *discerning* grow out of (5). The word for *discerning* is related to the expressions for *understanding words of insight* in v 2 (see comment on them). The wise and discerning know that most people usually have more need to act on old truths than to discover new ones.

In contrast, people become *fools* (7) when they are unwilling to learn or are complacent in their confidence that everything will turn out all right, or when they turn their back on the old

basic truths (see 1:32; 12:15; 17:12; 27:3, 22).

A further related target appears in v 22: 'mockers'. The word suggests people who always have their mouth rather than their ears open; they know everything already and have no need to listen to anyone. They are arrogant, unteachable and unliked (*cf.* 9:7–8; 13:1; 15:12; 21:24).

Finally, the introduction reveals the company that wisdom keeps, making clear that learning and pragmatic decision-making do not operate on their own. First, they go together with morals (3b). *What is right and just and fair* is the characteristic concern of the prophets. All three come again in 2:9 and in 8:6, 20 (NIV right, righteousness, justice).

Secondly, they go together with faith (7; *cf.* 9:10 at the other end of the collection of sermons and 31:30 at the other end of the book). *The fear of the LORD* suggests reverence and awe which issue in obedience (*cf.* v 29, with the comment on ***knowledge*** above); it does not imply being afraid of God. *The LORD* is Yahweh, the God specially revealed to Israel. Proverbs does not refer to the specifics of Israelite faith but in using the distinctive Israelite name of God it implies that this is the faith it means. Its common-sense wisdom is common sense which takes this faith as its framework. *The beginning of knowledge* means its 'foundation' (REB), because you never cease to need it. Proverbs assumes that you cannot make sense of the world or live a full and successful life unless you see God behind it and involved in it, and seek understanding of it from God with reverence and humility.

1:8 – 9:18: Advice on wisdom

1:8–19 Warning to avoid becoming involved with gangs of thugs

This first piece of advice is typical. It begins with a challenge to attentiveness (8), which assumes that mother and father together lead the family in its relationship with life and with God (*cf.* 6:20; 10:1). The challenge has a promise attached to it (9), adding to the ones in vs 2–7 the promise that wisdom is not only beneficial but attractive. *Instruction* is a wisdom word (see on 1:1–7), but *teaching* is the word 'torah' (lit. 'direction'), which suggests that the style and content of the Wisdom books and those of the Torah are coming together (*cf.* 'commands' next to 'wisdom' in 2:1–2). This is more clear in ch. 28.

It then goes on to its main challenge regarding a particular aspect of behaviour: v 10 summarizes what may happen and how one is to respond, vs 11–14 and 15 amplify the two parts of this. The enticement appeals to the young man's instinct for thrills, violence, money, power and comradeship.

Vs 16–19 attach reasons to the advice. Reasoning is prominent in this section: it teaches in an authoritative but not in an authoritarian way. Thuggery is stupid. The thugs are after blood (11) but it is their own blood they are hastening to shed (18). Their stupidity is such that they cannot see disaster when it is staring them in the face (17). V 16 probably suggests the same idea. The word for *sin* is translated 'harm' in v 33 and elsewhere, which makes better sense here too: they are keen to cause harm – to themselves; swift to shed blood – their own. They have mocked their victims' naivity; now the teacher mocks theirs.

Note. 12 *The grave* (Sheol) and *the pit*: *cf.* 27:20; 30:15–16; Ps. 49; Ec. 9: Is. 5:14. When people die, physically the family tomb swallows them whole; Sheol is a non-physical equivalent to the tomb, the destiny of the non-physical side of the person. But the image of Sheol with its greedy mouth also takes up the way the myths of Israel's neighbours picture the god Death swallowing people up enthusiastically. The NIV renders 'Sheol' as 'the grave', 'death', or 'Death'.

1:20–33 Wisdom calls the simple, the fools and the self-confident to pay attention if they are to avoid disaster

Vs 20–21 personify wisdom as a woman prophet preaching in the places where people gather in the city, in a way to which Israel would be accustomed. Vs 22–33 record what she was saying, taking further the image of a prophet preaching, being ignored (*cf.* Is. 65), then being unavailable when people want to consult her (see vs 23–24, 28). The image of the prophet helps to convey the urgency of wisdom's challenge to people who are in a critical situation. She speaks as if it is too late, as prophets often do in order to jolt people into a response before it really is too late.

The beginning (22) and the end (32–33) summarize her lament, her warning and her promise. *Love* and *hate* (22) are here shown to be commitments of the will as well as emotions, as is regularly the case in Proverbs and elsewhere in Scripture.

Vs 23–25 then amplify the lament: people failed to respond and missed out on wisdom's overflowing provision. They were unwilling to listen to *rebuke* and *advice* – the negative and the positive complement each other. Vs 26–28 in turn amplify the warning with which a prophet characteristically follows up her reproof: people are threatened by sudden terror and overwhelmed by distress. The verses exaggerate to make this point in an attempt to jolt people to their senses.

Vs 29–30 and 31 repeat the pattern of vs 23–25 and 26–28. They lament people's deliberate refusal to commit themselves to what is right and to use their human freedom to bow down in obedience to God (29; *cf.* vs 22, 32 for the stress on responsibility and choice). They warn how such human decisions have their 'natural' outworking comparable to the sense of surfeit that overcomes us when we eat too much (31).

The image of wisdom as a prophet helps to make the point that wisdom speaks for God and from God (see further ch. 8). Her teaching is derived from experience but it is not mere human opinion. God is involved in the human activity whereby people seek to discern the truth which life itself can teach them. Wisdom herself teaches that the chief hindrance to growing in insight is a moral one, an unwillingness to learn uncomfortable truths. She also teaches that once you are morally open to living by wisdom's insights, they will open the way to a successful and protected life. Real security lies here: contrast *complacency* with true *safety* and *ease* (32–33). Alternatively disaster will come, not merely because God sends it but because that is the 'natural' outworking of foolish deeds (31–32). These are the characteristic promises of Proverbs; the fact that they do not always work out is the starting point of Job and Ecclesiastes.

2:1–22 Promises concerning the moral benefits which attentiveness to wisdom brings

Following on from the parent-like exhortation of 1:8–19 and the prophet-like warning of 1:20–33, this section takes yet another form, that of observation and promise. It contains no actual imperatives: as 1:20–33 is a matter of prophetic warning, this is a matter of if-clauses and promises. Thus the many promises are themselves a veiled challenge. The image of the 'path' runs through the chapter.

The challenge to attentiveness in vs 1–4 takes a more subtle 'if' form than the direct challenge of 1:8. But it is still a matter of *commands*, as in the Torah (see on 1:8), and of an utterly serious quest, involving four forms of exertion. It involves training the memory (1). It involves stretching the mind (2; on *heart* see on 4:21). It requires strong motivation (3), a quest as serious as wisdom's own (*cf.* 1:20–21). It requires energetic effort, as if you were digging for gold (4): the talk of treasure sought and kept safe (*cf.* v 1) already hints at the promise attached to the object of the search. Acquiring insight is in one sense a straightforward matter, but it requires much effort.

Like 1:9, vs 5–11 then expound the promise attached to attentiveness. The serious quest for insight reaches its goal when people find God and submit themselves to him as the one with the key to this treasure store. Gaining insight requires much effort (1–4), but when you find it you receive it as a gift! To find God is then to find the key to the protected life, because the key to the protected life is also insight. This is so because of the moral aspect to true insight; insight expresses itself in an upright life, and to find God is to find one whose insight is upright.

Vs 5–8 are further explained in the parallel verses 9–11: the *Then* and *For* of vs 9 and 10 take up the ones in vs 5 and 6, and the promise in v 11 parallels that of vs 7–8. The would-be wise pupils want to know how to live, and they are promised they will find it (9).

In vs 12–22, the promise of vs 5–11 is first applied to the way of uprightness in general – or rather to the straight way, for the image of wrongdoing as crookedness runs through vs 12–15. Wisdom is your protection from the liars of vs 12–15 (close relatives of the thugs of 1:10–19) who call black white and white black so audaciously that it becomes plausible.

Vs 16–19 spotlight unfaithful women as well as these wicked men. The verses may simply concern adultery in the straightforward sense; Proverbs certainly emphasizes marital faithfulness. But the *adulteress* or *wayward wife* is such a major concern of chs. 1 – 9 (see ch. 5; 6:20 – 7:27; also 22:14; 23:26–28; 29:3) that there seems likely to be more to it than that. Perhaps marital unfaithfulness is a parable of unfaithfulness to God, as is often the case in the OT; here, the concern will be faithfulness to God as expressed in faithfulness to wisdom. The words are not, however, the ordinary ones for immoral women; they mean 'alien woman' and 'stranger' (JB). This may suggest that the women are people committed to foreign gods and foreign wisdom. They will beguile those who get involved with them into acknowledging these themselves – lead them astray religiously as well as sexually. The urging to take wisdom seriously (which involves reverence for Yahweh) and to resist the temptations of other women (who will lead you into involvement with other gods) are then two sides of a coin. This interpretation makes good sense of some of the later 'adulteress' passages, though here v 17 most naturally suggests an Israelite woman who has abandoned the husband to whom she made her vows before the God of Israel.

Like 1:10–19 the passage describes wrongdoing in a way which makes its moral wrongness clear (12–17), but its actual warnings stress that the way of wrongdoing leads to personal calamity (18–22). Sexual sin is wrong, but here even

more it is stupid. The pressures of our own world glamorize sexual self-expression in the name of love; it is commonly only afterwards that people discover that the pain and loss are hardly worth the pleasure. Proverbs sees adultery as leading to the same destiny as thuggery: *cf.* 1:16–19 and the description of Sheol in 1:12.

3:1–12 Recommendation regarding attitudes to God

Like 1:8–19 this section comprises a standard introduction urging attentiveness because of the benefits it brings (1–2); then a series of direct recommendations on a particular theme, with their own promises attached (3–12).

In contrast to 1:8 and 2:1 (see comment), v 1 uses only the vocabulary of the Torah (*teaching* and *commands*). This prepares us for the fact that the specific advice of vs 3–12 is more directly religious than those of other sections; specific links with Deuteronomy are noted below. Indeed, vs 3–12 are concerned with warnings about wisdom rather than praise of it: interest in wisdom gets out of hand if it loses touch with God. But first, in v 2 the introduction makes its own promise regarding the value of its teaching. The *prosperity* it speaks of is *shalom*, the wide-ranging biblical concept of peace, happiness, wholeness and fulness in this life (*cf.* v 17).

Five specific attitudes are then urged on us. First, we are to be steadfast in our commitment (3–4; *cf.* Dt. 6:8; 11:18). *Love and faithfulness* are a key OT word pair suggesting the making and keeping of commitments. Such characteristics belong to God, and constitute aims for the human response to God and to other people (*e.g.* 14:22; 16:6; 20:28; Pss. 25:10; 40:10–11).

Secondly, we are to be dependent in our thinking (5–6). *Trust* and *lean* both suggest the physical experience of supporting yourself on something or someone in total and helpless reliance and commitment.

Thirdly, we are to be humble in our obedience (7–8). *Wise in your own eyes* denotes not merely proud of your own wisdom but self-sufficient in it and therefore not feeling the need to refer things to God (no doubt a besetting temptation for people committed to finding wisdom).

Fourthly, we are to be lavishly generous in our giving (9–10; *cf.* Dt. 26).

Fifthly, we are to be submissive in our experience of affliction (11–12; *cf.* Dt. 8:5).

We can be those things because they will bring us favour (4), direction (6), health (8), and prosperity (10), and because the one to whom we submit in these varying ways is our loving Father (12). On questions these promises may raise, see on 10:1 – 11:11.

3:13–20 The blessing of wisdom

Scripture is consistent in reminding us that God is involved with us in the blessings of a full life in the world. It also gets the message across to us in an adventurous variety of ways (*cf.* 1 Cor. 9:22). There are many ways to preach a sermon! Here (14–18) we are introduced to wisdom personified as a woman. She will reappear many times, often embodied in the charm of a girl or the maturity of a married woman. Her opposite number, folly, is similarly embodied in the silliness of an adolescent or the irresponsibility of a disillusioned married woman (see 4:1–9; 7:1–27; 8:1–36; 9:1–18). We will refer to them as Ms Wisdom and Ms Folly.

A tree of life (18; *cf.* 11:30; 13:12; 15:4) is in Proverbs a metaphor parallel to 'fountain of life' (*e.g.* 10:11; 13:14), to describe something life-giving. It does not have the theological overtones of Gn. 2 – 3. Earlier references to life and death seem to have the ordinary down-to-earth meaning (*e.g.* 1:18–19; 2:18–19), but by 'life' the OT often means fullness of life (vitality, health, blessing, prosperity, fulfilment) and by 'death' the absence of those. References in Proverbs have to be considered in their context to see whether these meanings are present (see *e.g.* 3:22; 4:4, 13, 22–23).

Vs 19–20 then add an unexpected saying of great significance. The ultimate reason for taking wisdom seriously is the fact that God did so when creating the world. (The *LORD* is in a very emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence.) Ch. 8 will develop both parts of this idea.

3:21–35 A call to sound judgment and neighbourliness

The elements in this section are less closely linked than those in others and they may be of independent origin, but as it stands the sermon does follow the familiar structure. It opens by urging very careful attentiveness to wisdom (21), to which a series of promises is attached: life (see on v 18), distinction, security, calmness, confidence, all based on divine protection (22–26).

There follows advice regarding specific aspects of behaviour, this time focusing on neighbourliness (27–31). Further promises of being in God's confidence, experiencing God's blessing on one's home, being shown God's grace, and finding honour in the eyes of the community, are attached to those (vs 32–35 are a series of notable opposites). The assumption is that being sensible and being neighbourly actually go together – it is not really shrewd (21) to be calculating at someone else's expense (27), because of the way God makes the world work (32–35).

4:1–9 A call to seek wisdom and promises regarding her gifts

This passage urging us to pay attention to wisdom is like 3:13–20 in seeing wisdom as a person, but it is like other passages in giving directions backed up by promises of wisdom's benefits. The reader is directed to attentiveness, application, responsiveness, commitment, consistency, sacrifice and enthusiasm (note the repeated *get*). The motivation promises life, protection and honour.

The stress on family-style teaching is developed here (1–4). Whereas the attitude of parents can swing between being too authoritarian and failure to give guidance at all, Proverbs urges a third way, which offers firm teaching but is always under God (though in that there is a danger of manipulating people!).

The attractive Ms Wisdom (8–9) provides a positive counterpart to the seductive Ms Folly embodied in the 'wayward woman' of *e.g.* 2:16–19. The shrewd woman who can use her femininity to achieve her aims can act as wise counsellor to her husband and protect him from folly. No price is too high to pay for the right woman, metaphorically as literally (7).

4:10–19 A call to avoid the way of the wicked

Again a call to pay attention leads into associated promises of life and stability (10–13). That introduces a warning to avoid the ways of people who eat, drink and sleep wickedness and violence (14–17), with its associated promise of light and warning of darkness (18–19).

4:20–27 A call to guard the mind and the life

Once more a call to close attentiveness leads into the promise of life and health (20–22). That introduces advice regarding the guarding of the whole person: mind, speech, look and walk (23–27). The inner person has to be right, because that is the source of all else; but outward behaviour is not just left to work itself out from that. We also have to pay attention to speaking straight, looking straight, and walking straight.

5:1–23 A call to marital faithfulness

The chapter's opening challenge to attentiveness with its usual promise is brisker than usual (1–2). The writer is following systematically one theme and presses quickly on to his real concern with the *adulteress* who is to be resisted and the wife who is to be rejoiced in (3–20) (see also on 2:16–19). It is summarized in vs 19–20, which set side-by-side alternative forms of captivation; as vs 15–18 lead towards v 19, vs 3–14 provide the grounds for v 20.

It closes with a reminder of the general moral principle of wisdom teaching, that God judges (21), but that judgment comes through events having their 'natural' outworking (22). The warning has a sting in the tail, obscured by the NIV. *Led astray* (23) is the verb translated *captivated* in vs 19 and 20: to be wrapped up in the love of another woman rather than in that of your wife is to be wrapped in the shroud of folly (REB).

Thus on the one hand, the love of another woman may be a very attractive proposition (3), but an affair is certain to end with terrible pain (4–5: the implication may be that her love does not last, but even if it does, there will be pain). You must allow for her refusing to face this fact (6). It is therefore necessary to keep well away rather than taking risks in getting involved (7–8: see Mt. 5:28). Otherwise the consequences will be financial loss, hurt, regret, loneliness and shame (9–14).

There is an alternative: learn (as a recent book puts it) 'how to make love to the same person for the whole of your life'. Make her the delight of your eyes, your body and your whole being (15–19).

The advice of Proverbs is breathtakingly applicable to a culture in which adultery is common among Christians, who reason themselves (as the teacher here envisages) into believing that in their case it is the best thing. The only problem the advice of Proverbs may seem to raise is that it is expressed solely from a man's viewpoint. On the one hand, the woman who is being described here should not be totally to blame: perhaps she is desperately unhappy in her marriage and is understandably desperate to escape it. That is the more reason to be wary of her longings. On the other hand, men can also be desperately unhappy in their marriages and keen to escape them, and women have to be wary of the male equivalent to the female pressures being described here.

6:1–19 Two calls to action rather than delay, and two comments on the person who stirs up trouble

In vs 1–5 the person seems to have stood surety with a *neighbour* on behalf of *another* person who has then defaulted. The word for *another*, indeed, usually means a 'stranger' (5:10, 17; 20:16; 27:13 in a context like this; *cf.* RSV here), so it may be that the person has gone surety for a stranger who has then disappeared. Either way it is stupid just to hope the situation will somehow solve itself. You have to take urgent action to get out of the mess, even if it is humiliating, taking the initiative in casting yourself on your neighbour's mercy. (See 11:15; 17:18; 22:26–27 on how not to get into this

mess, and 20:16; 27:13 on how to take the initiative if you are the neighbour.) While one ought to be merciful to a member of one's family or even of one's local community in need, this is no excuse for being reckless and risking one's own financial viability – and thus ultimately one's personal freedom.

In vs 6–11 the idle person (see on 24:30–34) is scornfully, and perhaps not hopefully, urged to learn wisdom from the ant (see 30:24–28 for another lesson from the animal world).

The person who *stirs up dissension* is the concern of vs 12–15 and 16–19. The description in vs 12–14 comes to its climax with this phrase. In a numerical saying like vs 16–19 all seven items can be equally important, and all are of course seriously meant, but after vs 12–15 the real point in vs 16–19 must lie with the last one (*cf.* 30:18–19, 29–31). The two observations are that the person will pay for it (15) and that God especially loathes this behaviour (16). With the use of eyes, tongue, mind and feet here, contrast the advice in 4:23–27.

6:20–35 A call to avoid adultery because it costs so much

We return to the familiar form of the sermon, with its opening call to attentiveness (20–21) and associated promises (22–23). These pass imperceptibly into urging to avoid adultery, by being wary of enticing words and of attractive looks (24–25; see on 2:16–19; 5). There follows a long account of the reasons for that, which occupies the bulk of this section (26–35). It focuses on the financial cost and the public shame, not to say the wrath of the offended husband, all of which make an affair simply not worth it.

The point is made by means of three comparisons. First, you can compare having an affair with going to see a prostitute – rather an insult to someone with a romantic view of their affair (26). It may be that the woman is being called a whore (though she is not literally that) or it may be that she is being unfavourably compared with a whore (!), since she costs much more; everything, in fact. Secondly, having an affair is like playing with fire; you will not escape getting burned (27–29). The verses play on the fact that in Hebrew *fire* and *wife* are very similar. Thirdly, having an affair is like theft (30–35): taking something that belongs to someone else because you are *starving*. With ordinary theft you pay the penalty; all the more with stealing someone's wife. The 'property' view of marriage is taken for granted here, because that was how people thought of the matter, though the strength of the husband's reaction perhaps implies the feeling that adultery involves more than interference with his property.

7:1–27 A call to resist any temptation to have an affair

The final section on sexual behaviour begins with the usual call to attentiveness (1–4), though the general reward for this is only mentioned in passing (2a). The sermon presses on to its particular topic, the possibility of protection from the *wayward wife* (5; see also on 2:16–19; 5; 6:20–35). The reason for avoiding her is also less prominent than usual (see vs 22–23, 26–27), though what it does say in warning of the consequences that will follow from ignoring the teacher makes a telling contrast to that brief promise of 'life' in v 2 (see on 3:10).

The author is not ashamed to advise the kind of rote learning which in now unfashionable. But this is not merely rote learning: it reaches the inner being, the mind. The fact that God has to write things on the mind (Je. 31:33) does not take away our responsibility to do this – indeed, it makes it possible for us to fulfil the responsibility (*cf.* also Ezk. 18:31). This inner attitude is expressed in another way in v 4: to call someone your sister is effectively to ask them to marry you (see *e.g.* Song 4:9–12), so we are being invited to give Ms Wisdom a position which is incompatible with the attitude the *simple* young man takes to the woman in the story.

The story focuses on her method of seduction, described in a vivid word-picture (6–21). The teacher's observation from behind lace curtains (6–7) illustrates how wisdom proceeds by learning lessons from observation and experience, other people's as well as one's own. There are several ways to read the story. Perhaps the woman is simply someone who engages in prostitution when she has opportunity through her husband being away, though vs 10–12 may only mean she is dressed in a provocative way and inclined to sexual adventure. Perhaps she is the devotee of an alien religion who needs a man to make love to as part of her religious obligation, as vs 14–18 might imply (for v 14 in particular, *cf.* Lv. 7:15–16). Or perhaps the two of them are already in love; she has been looking out for him in particular, and he has been walking her way in the hope that her husband may be away. The teacher will not mind which of these corresponds to the facts of the story. That is not the point. Whatever type of affair it is, it is stupid. What her charm makes the young man think is the way of love is the way of death. As we have noted before, the seduction scene also needs to be viewed from a woman's angle so that she may resist a married man's fatal charm.

8:1–36 Wisdom's offer of truth and life

Once more Ms Wisdom herself takes her stand in public (1–3). She draws attention to herself like the wayward woman, but makes a quite

different offer. Her words are more like the encouraging invitation of Is. 55 than the standard confrontational rebuke of a pre-exilic prophet (*cf.* 1:20–33); the sermon takes yet another form in an effort to get the point over.

Ms Wisdom herself speaks in vs 4–36, urging attentiveness on three grounds. The first is the truth and justice of what she says (4–11). Here, the link between wisdom and morals stated in 1:1–7 is worked out more systematically: note the heaping up of terms for right and wrong alongside the words for sense and folly. It is that which makes the teaching so valuable (10–11). At the same time everything she says contrasts with the false promises of lying men and unfaithful women.

The second ground for attentiveness is the practical value of what she says (12–21). It is she who makes possible the exercise of power and the production of wealth. Here the other link in 1:1–7, between wisdom and religion, is also noted (13), though the focus remains on the connection between wisdom and right and wrong. It is assumed that power is exercised in a right way (see vs 13, 15) and that wealth is the gift of one who is concerned for *righteousness* and *justice* (18–21). Ms Wisdom is the king's key adviser. Here more than anywhere we see what wisdom was supposed to be, and sometimes was, for a king like Solomon.

The third ground takes the argument onto a different plane: Ms Wisdom was involved with God in the very creation of the world (22–31). What more impressive argument for heeding her could be imagined? Ms Wisdom's door is the one to wait at (32–36). It is not an oversolemn business, however (30–31).

So God had wisdom from the beginning, before creating the world (22–26). God used wisdom – mind, intelligence, common sense – in undertaking the creation (27–31). The more we know of creation, the more impressive we find wisdom to be.

The image of wisdom as a person may have been used literally in religions which featured many gods, whose terms Proverbs then uses in a 'demythologized' sense. Its language would also encourage Israelites not to worship a goddess alongside Yahweh (*cf.* Je. 44:17) : the real (but metaphorical) goddess to revere is wisdom. In Christian times, by taking the personification literally and thinking of wisdom as an actual person separate from God, people gained a way of understanding Christ's relationship to God. It underlies Jn. 1:1–4 and Col. 1:15–17.

The word for *possess* (12) usually means 'acquire' in Proverbs (*e.g.* 1:5; 4:5, 7), and Ms Wisdom's words here pick up that usage. Taking the personification of wisdom literally (see above) led people to prefer the translation *brought forth* in v 22 (see NIV mg.), which is more appropriate to Christ because he was brought forth as a person rather than acquired as an object. A word meaning 'brought forth' certainly comes in v 24. That contrasted with the Greek translation of the OT, which had taken it to mean 'created'. In the controversies over the person of Christ, this played into the hands of the Arians who could use it as evidence for their view that Christ was a created being.

In v 30, the word translated *craftsman* comes only here in the OT. 'Little child' (RSV mg.) or 'darling' (NEB) fits the context of vs 30–31 better, where the emphasis is on the joyful play of creation rather than the hard work involved in it. If it is right, vs 22–36 may take Ms Wisdom from birth via the play of girlhood to the stature of adulthood.

9:1–18 The identical invitations of Ms Wisdom and Ms Folly

The final sermon has a nicely balanced structure: an invitation from Ms Wisdom, an invitation from Ms Folly which apes her words, and between them a collection of observations, all of which restate implications of the sermons as a whole.

Ms Wisdom's final invitation (1–6) again recalls Is. 55. Here she abandons the role of prophet and takes up that of host, so that her servants, not she herself, do the calling. Proverbs' portrait of wisdom has taken many forms: 'she is as awesome as a goddess, as playful as a small child, as comfortable as a mother's arms, as challenging as a prophet, as satisfying as a table laden with food, as mysterious as a lover hidden among the lilies' (Camp).

It is no self-denying offer she makes: the food is rich, the wine is good (*mixed* with spices), and the setting splendid (1; the significance of the *seven pillars* is a matter of guesswork). But there is perhaps an irony in vs 4–6, that people *who lack judgment* are bound to spurn her invitation.

The interlude (7–12) therefore begins on a rather resigned note. Experience suggests that the teacher will get nowhere with many people, and it is advisable (wise!) to be realistic about this (7–8). But a teacher does have happier experiences (9). That comment recalls the introduction to the sermons (see 1:5, also 1:3 for the introduction of moral questions). It also leads into a restatement of the motto text (10, *cf.* 1:7), with Ms Wisdom's usual promise attached to it (11), and the familiar stress on personal responsibility (12).

The interlude gives Ms Folly time to prepare her feeble imitation of Ms Wisdom's supper. As Ms Wisdom is modelled on a prophet, Ms Folly is modelled on the wayward woman. Vs 13–18 are to be compared with 7:10–27, and *stolen*

water also with 5:15–16: illicit sexual activity has often seemed more exciting than more conventional alternatives. But Ms Folly also takes people to the same destiny as the wilful woman (18). This section thus closes dramatically by setting a life and death choice before us.

10:1 – 22:16 Proverbs of Solomon

The second main section of the book comprises *proverbs* in a narrower sense nearer to that of the English word, one-verse sayings on a number of subjects. The sayings have been collected and arranged on at least three bases.

First, they may be divided into four general types:

a. observations about how life is (*e.g.* 10:4, 12, 26)
b. observations about wisdom (*e.g.* 10:1, 5, 8)
c. observations about righteousness (*e.g.* 10:2, 6, 7)
d. observations about God's involvement in people's lives (*e.g.* 10:3, 22, 27).

The groups overlap, as the examples listed illustrate, but the broad division is useful. The order in which we have listed the types has also been taken as a guide to their age – the first proverbs were observations about life (as English proverbs generally are) and their use was later extended to refer to wisdom, then morals, then theology. This may be so, but all four subjects are equally ancient topics for human reflection.

This fourfold division of the sayings is one basis for the way they have been grouped in Pr. 10 – 22. For instance, although chs. 10 – 11 carry examples of all four groups, they have an especially strong concentration of sayings about righteousness and wickedness.

Secondly, the proverbs can be categorized according to the topics they deal with: for instance, in 10:1–22 there are many proverbs on wealth and on the use of human speech. This division runs across the one we have just described. It provides another principle which has influenced the arrangement of the proverbs. Thus the sayings in 10:2–5 all deal with the topic of prosperity, but they illustrate all four types of saying noted above.

A third basis for connecting the sayings is purely verbal – sayings are put next to each other because they use the same key word or phrase even though it may have different senses in the two contexts. Chs. 10 – 11 again provide many examples: *e.g.* 10:6 and 7 both refer to the blessing(s) of the righteous; 10:6b and 11b are identical; 10:11 and 12 both use the verb 'cover'. As the last example shows, these links are not always apparent in the NIV; the comments will draw attention to some of these examples.

The author may have used verbal links of this kind for several reasons. It may be an aid to memory. It may indicate a playful and aesthetic delight in such word-links. It may convey a sense that such links reflect an inner oneness in reality, deriving ultimately from the one God.

While the broad lines and many details of the arrangement of chs. 10 – 22 reflect these three bases, often individual sayings seem to have no links with their context. It may be that the chapters bring together earlier groups of sayings which were miscellaneous in content, and that some groups were located on the basis of the content of one or other of their members which then brought with it others on different topics. Or it may be that we have not yet spotted the 'clue' to the arrangement.

The divisions which follow are based on which types of saying or which topics are dominant at different points. Sometimes divisions are allowed to overlap where it helps to consider verses in more than one connection.

10:1–22 Sayings on wealth and on words

10:1–4 Introduction. The phrase *The proverbs of Solomon* has already appeared in 1:1 (see comment). Here it presumably indicates that this was once the beginning of a separate collection comprising 10:1 – 22:16, which has now has chs. 1 – 11 placed before it.

The rest of 10:1 is then an introduction like the ones which come at the beginning of the sermon section (*e.g.* 1:8). Such introductions urge attention to the wisdom we find in the material which follows – though this one does so in an indirect way. Vs 2 and 3 introduce one of the dominant topics of the sayings, but do so by setting it in the context of righteousness and wickedness and of God's involvement in these matters. V 4 offers a more straightforward comment about it, without overt reference to wisdom, morals, or religion.

Vs 1–4 contain all four of the main types of saying. They begin a sub-collection which runs through vs 1–22, and illustrate both how the sayings are by their very nature concerned with life itself and with a wise approach to life, and also how understanding life and seeking wisdom are never to be separated from morality and religion (*cf.* 1:1–7).

10:2–6, 15–17, 22 Wealth. The sayings expound the conviction that prosperity is a fruit of hard work (4), wisdom (5), righteousness (6, 16), and the involvement of God (22). Laziness will bring poverty and shame (4–5), but so will the resourcefulness which ignores right and wrong (2). Both inner necessity and God's involvement make things work out this way (2–3, 22). At the same time there is a recognition of the facts about poverty and wealth and their inescapable results (15).

The teaching of Proverbs often raises two opposite questions for people. The first is that it seems to teach a this-worldly 'prosperity gospel' or an unbalanced 'Protestant work ethic'. What Proverbs is actually promising is a good harvest which gives the righteous person nothing to worry about – a plentiful supply of life's necessities, not an ostentatious supply of its luxuries (Cadillacs would be a different matter!). Jesus reaffirms the scriptural promise that putting God's rule and God's righteousness first leads to all one's material needs being met (Mt. 6:33). Further, the call to hard work is set in the context of wisdom and piety, with the concern for the development of community life which also runs through Proverbs. This makes it possible for its thrust not to encourage self-centred workaholism.

The second question – whether it works – we will consider in the comments on 10:23 – 11:11.

Notes. 2 *Ill-gotten treasures* are 'treasures gained by wickedness' (RSV). Wickedness and righteousness are thus contrasted in vs 2, 3 and 6. 5 *Wise* is the word translated 'prudent' in 1:3 (see on 1:1–7). **16a** The RSV's 'The wage of the righteous leads to life' makes it clearer that the phrase *to life* links vs 16 and 17.

10:6–14, 18–21, 31–32 Words. One characteristic thrust of Proverbs' sayings on words is 'the fewer the better' (19). Listening is a sign and a means of wisdom; chattering is the opposite (8, 10). The words the wise and righteous do speak, however, will be valuable and nourishing expressions of love, capable of dissolving the power of evil and of finding acceptance with people (11–12, 20–21, 32). The words of the loose-tongued or wicked bring trouble to themselves and to others (6, 11, 13–14, 21, 31), especially where they issue from ill-feeling and thus breed dissension and deceit (12, 18). Even beyond death, the words spoken about these two groups continue to contrast (7).

Notes. 6 Reference to the *mouth* suggests that the proverb warns especially against wickedness of speech (*e.g.* deception). 7 The form of the words *will be a blessing* implies not 'will receive a blessing' (as in V 6; *cf.* 11:26) but 'will be an example of blessedness which comes to be used by people in their prayers for blessing' (*cf.* REB; and Gn. 12:2). 8 *chattering fool* is not the same word, but the same person, as the 'mocker' (see on 1:1–7). 9 in theme belongs with 10:23 – 11:8, but in its poetic form it corresponds distinctively to vs 8 and 10. 11 The alternative translation (see NIV mg.) makes better sense here. With the NIV's translation v 11a presumably means he brings life to himself. 12 Wickedness covers up violence (11), love covers up sins – the same verb is used in very different senses. 13 The discerning speak with wisdom and do well; the foolish do not.

10:23 – 11:31 Righteousness and wickedness, and more on words and wealth

10:23–27 Introduction. Vs 23–27 resemble vs 1–4: they begin with another implicit invitation to seek wisdom rather than folly, and follow it with instances of the other three main types of saying which appear in the collection as a whole. They thus again invite us to treasure wisdom (23) but stress its link with righteousness (24–25), the theme that runs through 10:23 – 11:11. V 26 adds an example of a third type of saying, a straightforward comment about life. V 27 sets all these concerns in the context of God's involvement in human affairs. The opening of the section thus once more connects life, wisdom, morality, and piety.

10:28 – 11:11 Righteousness and wickedness. *Righteous(ness)* comes thirteen times in the section, *wicked(ness)* twelve times, a concentration unparalleled in the whole of Scripture. Each expression appears twenty-one times elsewhere in chs. 10 – 13, which takes further this section's theme, the nature and the rewards of righteousness and wickedness.

The nature of *righteousness* is to be straight, correct, proper, orderly and fair. It is thus closely related to *uprightness* (*e.g.* 11:3, 6, 11), a word which more literally means 'straightness' (*cf.* 11:5). Both these are also closely related to *integrity*; the word literally means 'wholeness'. It also appears in 11:3 and 5, though NIV translates blameless there; see further 10:9 – and note the contrast with crookedness.

Righteousness expresses itself in honesty, justice, sympathy (even for animals) and truth (10:2; 12:5, 10; 13:5). It issues in speech that is wise, valuable, nourishing and life-giving (10:11, 20–21, 31). It brings blessing to the nation (11:11, 14:34). Different sayings promise that the righteous themselves will receive as rewards deliverance, blessing, satisfaction, fulfilment, prosperity, joy, security, direction, fullness of life and favour with God and with other people.

Wickedness, in contrast, by its very nature represents what is out of true and out of joint, askew and awry. It can constitute 'crookedness' (10:9; 11:20 – NIV 'perverse'). It can involve rebelliousness or offensiveness (10:12 – NIV wrongs; 10:19 – NIV sin; 12:13 – NIV sinful). It can suggest failure to meet standards expected of us (13:6 – NIV sinner). It can be pictured as going astray from the right road (10:17). It can be a matter of craftiness in devising evil (10:23; 12:2). It can suggest what brings trouble – to other people and to oneself (10: 29 – NIV *evil*).

It can denote a *perverse* turning of things upside-down (10:31–32; also the different word translated *duplicity* in 11:3). It can involve treachery or unfaithfulness (11:3, 6). It implies godlessness or profanity, the deliberate abandoning of the way of religion (11:9).

Concretely, it expresses itself in dishonesty, deceitfulness, bloodthirstiness, cruelty and rapacity (10:2; 12:5–6, 11–12). It results in shame and destruction for the community, and thus in joy at the wicked person's death (11:11–12; 13:5). As its nature is the opposite of the nature of righteousness, so is its fruit: exposure, ruin, trouble, fall, entrapment, wrath, hunger, destruction, the frustrating of hopes, the spread of violence, the rotting of memory, the fulfilling of fears, the shortening of life, the loss of home and land and the illusoriness of its gain.

Modern readers are often puzzled by the confident assertions of Proverbs concerning the profitability of righteousness. It may not seem to be true that *righteousness delivers from death* (11:4). Several comments may be made on this difficulty. First, as much as any other aspect of Proverbs it was apparently based on experience (*cf.* Ps. 37:25); it was not mere theological dogma. Modern readers who are puzzled by it perhaps need to take more account of the evidence available in their personal experience that righteousness finds its reward.

Secondly, if it is the case that Proverbs' assertions work out less in our world, that may reflect the wickedness of our world (*e.g.* in its unfair distribution of resources). Proverbs may be reflecting a society which paid more attention to seeing that business and community life worked in a moral way. It thus challenges us to combat injustice, not least because of the danger it shows us we are in by our wickedness.

Thirdly, Proverbs sometimes makes generalizations; there are exceptions. The book knows that life is more complicated than some individual sayings imply (*cf.* 13:23; 30:1–4). Other Wisdom books, notably Job and Ecclesiastes, focus more on the fact that these generalizations often do not work out. The general statements and the exceptions both need to be taken account of.

Fourthly, Proverbs' focus on the generalizations has a theological concern. Theologically, it must in the end be the case that the universe works out in a just way. If it does not, the judge of all the earth has hardly arranged its affairs rightly.

Fifthly, other parts of Scripture solve the problem of the apparent injustice of life in this age by seeing justice worked out in the age to come. The difficult assertions of Proverbs need to be set in that context, but not robbed of their force by it. They form an important part of Scripture's testimony to the conviction that God is Lord of *this* age. Biblical faith is not merely a matter of pie in the sky when you die.

Notes. 10:26 On the idler, see on 24:30–34; also *cf.* v 4. V 26a suggests he is an irritation. Although in content the verse does not fit the context, in form it corresponds to v 25 ('When' and 'As' are the same word in Hebrew). **11:1** takes up an expression from 10:32: 'the lips of the righteous know what is fitting . . . accurate weights are his delight.' On what God *abhors* as opposed to his *delight*, see on 15:8. **2** in this context takes further the thought of 10:31–32 that wise or righteous speech also links with modesty; wicked or foolish speech with pride and disgrace. **4** *The day of wrath* is the day of calamity, when some terrible thing happens and when it seems as if someone's wrath has fallen. The phrase does not imply that the event actually stems from God's anger (*cf.* Jb. 21:30). *Death* is similarly sudden and premature. **7** Here too it makes best sense to take the saying to refer to sudden death which frustrates the person's expectations.

11:9–14 Words in the community. The power of words to give life or to destroy is reaffirmed (see on 10:9–14), but here especially words for the community: note allusions to *neighbour*, *city* and *nation*. In this context there is a particular reason for noisiness (10) and a new reason for affirming the capacity to keep one's mouth shut (13).

Notes. 9 *Escape* provides a link back with v 8; it is the same verb as that translated *is rescued* there. **9b** suggests that the verse refers to perjury rather than gossip. **11** The *blessing* seems to be the one they utter rather than the one they receive (to judge from the parallel in v 11b).

11:15–31 Wealth. Proverbs is aware that one saying which looks simple or pragmatic needs to be accompanied by another which complements it and complicates the matter. Prosperity may seem to come from being ruthless rather than soft-hearted, which brings respect but no cash (16). Yet it also issues from generosity with what one has already (24–26), and if the wealth gained is to be the real thing it depends on righteousness (18–19, 21, 23, 27, 29, 30–31); God makes sure of that (20). The use of wealth requires good sense not to squander it on kind but risky causes such as going bail or guaranteeing a loan for a stranger (15). It also involves kindness, which in this context suggests generosity and which also benefits oneself (17), and the sense not to trust in wealth (28). There are situations in which one truth is relevant; other situations require another.

Notes. 16 *But* and *only* are NIV interpretations (*cf.* RSV); there is no contrast between

respect ('honour') and *wealth*, which belong together (3:16; 8:18), and there is no separate word for *men*. The point may thus be 'there are two routes to wealth and honour, one via graciousness (which is characteristic of women), one via aggressiveness'. **20** Regarding what God *detests* and *delights in*, see on 15:8. **22** links with the discussion of wealth by virtue of the fact that it starts off from things of value. **25** *A generous man* is literally 'a person of blessing; *cf.* v 26b. **29** In the context *brings trouble* suggests trying to gain wealth, by being miserly or negligent. **30** as a whole makes better sense if v 30b is understood the other way round, as 'the wise man wins souls'. The idea then is that the righteous have a life-giving influence on others, and the wise win others to wisdom.

12:1–28 More on words and work

12:1–4 Introduction. Vs 1–4 again resemble 10:1–4 and 10:23–27 in bringing together sayings of all four types as an introduction to a chapter. Once more they implicitly challenge the listener to wisdom rather than folly (1), affirm God's own involvement in affairs (2), declare that righteousness and wickedness get their reward (3) and make an observation about how life is (4). Play on words links *husband's* (4) with *cannot* (3) and links *disgraceful* with *plans* in v 5.

12:5–8, 13–23, 25–26 Words, true and false. The dominant theme in the rest of ch. 12 is again the use of words, in particular the contrasting effect of good and bad words. Righteous, upright, wise, prudent, truthful, peacemaking, kind words issue in justice, deliverance, praise, profit, healing, joy, discretion, encouragement and in God's delight. Wicked, twisted, foolish, lying, malevolent, thoughtless, unrestrained or plotting words issue in deceit, in hurt to other people, in discredit and trouble to oneself and in God's abhorrence. It is wise to listen to advice but to ignore insults rather than vice versa (15–16); but also to be cautious in relations with others (26).

Notes. **5** The word *advice* is the one translated 'guidance' in 1:5 (see comment). **6** suggests that it is unknowingly their own blood that the wicked lie in wait for (*cf.* 1:18).

12:9–12, 24, 26–28 Work and its rewards. Having enough to eat and having status in society come from expending some energy and living rightly, not from pretending (9), neglecting one's animals (10), following worthless pursuits (11), emulating other people's wicked schemes (12) or simply failing to do anything at all (24) – even to bother to cook what you have caught (27)! *Cf.* also v 14b.

13:1–25 Desire, wealth and wisdom

13:1 Introduction. V 1 is a similar opening to those of previous sections, implicitly urging the hearers to attend to the wisdom of this chapter (*cf.* 10:1). It does not go on, however, in the style of the earlier introductions. As we move through the chapters, righteousness and wickedness decrease in prominence and in this chapter God's involvement quite disappears, though it becomes increasingly prominent in the chapters that follow. The focus here is thus on wisdom itself (see vs 13–20).

13:2–12, 18–25 Desire and wealth. Behind questions about wealth lie some mysteries of the human personality which mean that appearances cannot always be trusted (7) and that fulfilment or frustration of desire can have deep effects on the person (12, 19). There are also mysteries associated with the quest for wealth itself. It is actually an ambiguous achievement; it both solves problems and brings problems the poor do not encounter (8).

The sayings point to ways in which desires can be satisfied or frustrated. One key lies in whether one uses one's words in a prudent way and is able to keep one's mouth shut (2–3), another in whether one uses one's energy (4). Vs 5–6, 9, 21–22 and 25 remind the hearers in general terms that moral considerations underlie these factors and v 11 makes the point more concrete. V 23 recognizes that the moral laws which in theory govern it do not always work out; they also contain an implicit challenge to see that injustice is not allowed to flout these laws.

Notes. **2** *Violence* is to themselves, ironically, in the context (*cf.* 1:18). **3** The word *life* means self or person (see v 8), but also appetite, and this last meaning seems to be the one which runs through the chapter: see vs 2 (*craving*), 4 (*desires*), 19 (*soul*, REB 'taste'), 25 (*heart*, RSV 'appetite'). **9** A person is likened to a house, where the presence of a light suggests the presence of life (*cf.* Jb. 18:5–6). **10** *Pride* is used in the sense of arrogant, unteachable talk (*cf.* 21:23–24).

13:13–20 Wisdom. In the midst of these sayings which have the quest for wealth as their most common theme, vs 13–20 remind us that wisdom also underlies this quest (see vs 10 and 24 and specifically v 18). Openness to advice and correction, and submission to the wisdom learnt in the company of the wise, is the key to prudent behaviour, gain, fulfilment, favour, honour and life – and vice versa.

Notes. **17** A reminder to choose your *messenger* carefully: a faithful one brings healing to situations; a bad one makes them worse. **19** *Evil* is more likely 'trouble' or 'misfortune' (the same word in vs 20–21). The idea is that they

will not turn from the way which leads to trouble to the way which leads to fulfilment.

14:1 – 15:1 Wisdom, the inner person and life in society

14:1–4 Introduction. Once more the chapter opens with an implicit challenge to seek wisdom and avoid folly (1). In this context, then, the two figures are personifications of wisdom and folly, as in 9:1, 13 (*cf.* also 24:3–4), and the point of v 1b is that if we are not careful we allow folly to tear down the house that wisdom builds (*cf.* v 3). Again, an understanding of wisdom which leaves out God and morality is forbidden by a saying which draws attention to right and wrong and to attitudes to God (2). The four regular types of saying in these chapters are then completed by an observation about life in v 4: *empty* is more literally 'clean' (RV), suggesting that farmers have to put up with a little mess if they want to reap a harvest.

14:1–9, 15–18 Wisdom and folly. To put it negatively, folly is destructive (1), self-destructive (3), self-perpetuating (6, 18, 24), self-expressive (7), self-deceptive (8), stubborn (9), credulous (15), reckless (16), unpopular (17), quick-tempered (29) and ultimately self-imposed (33).

Notes. 9 Fools do not care about putting relationships right when they are in the wrong; the upright are concerned for mutual goodwill. **16** *the* LORD is an NIV addition, not part of the text (*cf.* RSV).

14:10–15 The inner person. *Heart* is the recurrent word here: see vs 10, 13–14 (where it is literally 'the faithless of heart'), 30 and 33. These examples show how 'heart' in biblical speech is not merely the place of the emotions but the inner centre of the whole person, so that it connects with the mind and will (with thinking and decision-making) as much as with the feelings (which in the Bible are often associated with the stomach or kidneys, *e.g.* 23:16a). The heart is connected with understanding and wisdom (2:2, 10; 3:5), obedience (3:1), memory (4:4; 6:21; 7:3) and with plotting (6:14, 18). In 6:32; 7:7; 9:4, 16 it is translated 'judgment', in 7:10 'intent', in 8:5 'understanding'. When translations use the term 'heart', it is usually wise mentally to replace it with 'mind'. Thus in 4:21, 23 we are urged to fill our mind with the teaching of the wise and to look after our minds as the decisive mainspring of our whole personality (*cf.* Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23; Heb. 8:10; 1 Pet. 1:13; also Mt. 15:18–19).

Notes. 10 There is a sense in which everyone stands alone in their deepest feelings and experiences. **11** *Cf.* v 1. **13** It is because a person's laughter often conceals hidden pain (or because there is pain of some kind in everyone's heart – so most translations) that their joy never has the last word. **15** *believes anything* is literally 'trusts in any word' – in any advice or promise about the future (*cf.* v 15b).

14:19 – 15:1 Life in society. The words *king*, *prince*, *nation*, *people*, *neighbour* and *friend* have made few if any appearances in the sayings so far; their appearance together here in vs 19–21, 28 and 34–35 gives a community context to the regular concerns of the sayings on subjects such as prosperity (23–24). The way to use such prosperity is for the sake of one's neighbour in need (21), rather than to take the usual attitude towards the poor (20). Vs 19 and 32 make that a matter of both morals and self-interest. Going beyond that, v 31 similarly adds religious motivation to it, with vs 26–27 going further in that direction and promising that we need not fear any risks involved.

V 34 makes *righteousness* the key to a nation's greatness, a recipe that has perhaps not yet been tried, though its converse (34b) has often been proven. For such a society, love and faithfulness would be an ideal foundation, and v 22 offers a prescription for planners in this connection (*plot* is the same word as *plan* – it has no sinister meaning here). Legal justice will also be of key importance to it (25).

Leaders are only as significant as their people; v 28 points to the pressures on leadership in society. That explains something of the high stakes involved in working for them and the need to know how to handle the relationship wisely (14:35 – 15:1 – *wrath* picks up the concern of the previous verse, though it is a different Hebrew word; *cf.* REB). Kingship will be a major theme in ch. 16, though not before we have thought about God much more in between.

15:2 – 16:19 God in relation to wisdom, king and the inner person

15:2–7 Introduction. Once more a contrast between wisdom and folly with its implicit challenge to aim for the former (*cf.* vs 5, 7) opens the introduction to a new collection of sayings, adding an assertion of God's involvement in human life, along with observations about how life is and about the righteous and the wicked (3–4, 6). 15:2 – 16:19 as a whole contains many sayings which bring God into the equation of human life. The section comes at the centre of 10:1 – 22:16 and thus at the centre of the book as a whole, and thereby sets God at the heart of the book's teaching about wisdom.

15:7–19 The inner person and the eye of God. Four references to this involvement of God in vs 8, 9, 11 and 16 interweave with six allusions of the human *heart* in vs 7, 11, 13, 14 and 15; *cf.* also vs 21 (NIV *judgment*), 28, 30 and

32 (NIV *understanding*); 16:1, 5 and 9 (see on 14:10–15). The two come together in 15:11.

That statement in v 11 links with the section's references to what God detests or takes pleasure in (8, 9; *cf.* v 26; 15:5; also 11:1, 20; 12:22; 17:15; 20:10, 23). These are matters of human honesty or motivation, or of the linkage between what is said and what is meant. They remain concealed to the human eye – but not to God's, says Proverbs. God sees and detests them and this may put some constraint on people's hidden wrongdoing.

The sayings bring out other aspects of the links and differences between the inner person and the outward life There is a link between folly in thinking and in speech (7). There must also be a link between the inward and outward aspects of our spirituality (8) and even between how we feel and how we look (13). But the richness of the inner person may compensate for pressures on the outward (15–16), while an open mouth and an open mind may be incompatible (14).

Notes. 11 *Death and Destruction* (Sheol and Abaddon) – see on 1:12. Even Sheol is not beyond God's power (*cf.* Ps. 139:8). **16–17** These two verses balance each other, as 15:15–16 do. The peace which comes from revering God takes the edge off poverty; so does the reality of human love. **18–19** hint at a continuation of this conversation, v 18 amplifying v 17, v 19 then warning about becoming too laid back!

15:20–33 Wisdom and reverence for God. Vs 20–24 begin like an introduction to a new section or a discourse on wisdom (v 20 in fact repeats the introduction to ch. 10), with *joy* as a recurrent motif: the joy of perceiving wisdom (20), the joy of exercising it (23) and the false joy of avoiding it (21; *delights* is the same word, *cf.* RSV). But it soon gives way to that emphasis on God's involvement in the world which is the special feature of 15:2 – 16:15 as a whole. As v 11 brought together the two recurrent themes of vs 7–19, so v 33 brings together the two themes of vs 20–33 at the close of this section.

Human beings are concerned with wisdom and honour (33): as vs 20–24 express the concern with wisdom, vs 25–29 reflect the concern with honour, the former more positively than the latter. They affirm God's attitude and action in relation to the self-sufficient and the have-nots, which underlie the way the haves often get their come-uppance.

Vs 30–32 gradually prepare the way for v 33 to declare that the key to both wisdom and honour is reverence for God or humility. In this context humility is an attitude before God and not merely a human virtue. The sequence of vs 30–33 suggests that nice news helps to mature us as people, but so does criticism, and nothing matures us more than submitting to God's criticism.

The words for *news* (30), *listens* (31) and *heeds* (32) are related, so that vs 31–32 suggest that setting apparently negative statements alongside obviously good news can be equally life-giving and upbuilding. The point is underlined by the fact that *understanding* (32) is also the same word as *heart* (30). In turn *discipline* (32) reappears in v 33 (*cf.* RSV; literally 'the fear of Yahweh is a discipline in wisdom', so that v 33 explicitly relates God to the teaching of vs 30–33.

16:1–19 Divine and human sovereignty. As nowhere else in Proverbs, God appears nine times in vs 1–11; the king five times in vs 10–15.

The definition of a king's position in a traditional monarchy (which may be applied to the various other forms of political leadership) is twofold. First, he has frighteningly ultimate power, in word and act (10, 14–15). Secondly, he is committed to justice and righteousness (10, 12–13). In Israel and elsewhere, the latter would be reckoned as essential to the idea of monarchy as the former, though it could also be seen as not merely a matter of morals but of self-interest (12). In the context of sayings on kingship, the comments on justice, wisdom, uprightness and humility in vs 8 and 16–19 will also apply to the king in particular.

This is especially so when the comments about the king are set in the context of God's activity in the world. The interweaving of the two at vs 10–11 helps to prevent their being held apart, but so do the actual statements about God, for they also focus on sovereignty and justice. It is God's involvement which determines how far plans are explained effectively (1), how actions are assessed (2), how far plans are successful (3) and how even apparently negative factors fit into a purpose (4). It also determines how far the arrogance of power gets away with things (5), trouble is avoided (6), diplomacy is effective (7), ideas work out in practice (9) and fair standards operate in business (11).

Humanly speaking, business standards were the king's responsibility. V 11 thus makes especially clear how in this section as a whole the king's position is being subordinated to God's. This would bring an important message to Israel in the First Temple period, when they had kings who are here challenged to rule in a way which mirrors God's rule – as are the governments of the modern world. It would also bring an important message to Israel in the Second Temple period, when they were ruled by

foreign kings, who are also said to be ultimately under God's rule – an encouragement in turn to peoples today controlled by alien powers.

Notes. 6 *Evil* here seems to denote disaster (the same word as in v 4); turning from wickedness to right ways and to God makes it possible to avoid the calamity resulting from one's sin. **10** The RSV's 'does not' is preferable to the NIV's *should not*; the statement is parallel to those in vs 12–13. **12–15** What kings *detest* and what they *take pleasure in* or *favour* (the same word) is compared with the list of things God detests and takes pleasure in (see 15:8 where the same two words appear, and the comment there). **17** For *evil* in the sense of 'trouble' see v 6.

16:20 – 22:16 Life, righteousness, wisdom and God

In this second half of the collection 'proverbs of Solomon' which appear in 10:1 – 22:16, particular types of saying and topic again feature prominently in different sections, and many sayings have verbal links with others in the context. As a whole, however, they are not as clearly divided into sections as is the first half, and the reason behind their arrangement is often less clear than in the first half. There are three clusters of wisdom sayings, a collection of sayings on righteousness and wickedness near the end, and small groups of sayings which bring in God. Proverbs which make observations about life itself predominate.

16:20–30 The blessings of wisdom. Vs 20–23 explain some of the blessings of wisdom in such a way as to make the student want to pay attention to the rest of the book's teaching. Vs 24–30 have verbal links back with vs 20–23 and with each other, so that vs 20–30 form a chain. Many of the links appear in the NIV; in addition, *mouth* is the same word as *hunger* (23, 26); *lips* as *speech* (23, 27, 30); while *prospers* (20) is literally 'finds good' (*cf.* v 29). Together, then, they promise that wisdom (linked with reverence for God) brings benefit, repute, influence, satisfaction, healing, guidance and a full life, and they warn about the foolish perversity that will mislead into division, chastisement, disaster and death. V 26 perhaps serves to add to the motivation: for pupils too their appetite should thus be their stimulus. In vs 21b and 23b, the idea is that winsome speech 'increases learning' (REB): see on 1:7.

16:31 – 18:1 The dynamics of relationships. The concrete observations in this section major on aspects of relationships within family and community. Two reflect on the special status and mutual pride of the three generations of the family, the grandparents who will be the senior members of the community, the adult parents and the children (16:31; 17:6). The affirmation of all three groups and the vision of their interrelationships has something to say to modern developed countries. V 17 reflects on the importance that brothers and sisters and friends have for each other in life in general but especially in times of crisis, even if v 18 hints that neighbourly concern, too, needs to be exercised with prudence. But wilful loners impose loss on everybody (18:1).

A number of sayings in ch. 17 relate to harmony and conflict within the family and elsewhere. V 1 affirms that family harmony matters more than anything else. V 2 warns therefore against strife, particularly over money (though v 8 recognizes the influence of money on people), and vs 21–22 and 25 note the pain to father and mother that such folly can bring.

V 4 points out that the things people say are often what cause the trouble (*cf.* 16:28; 17:27–28). V 9 urges us to encourage love and friendship by covering offences rather than talking about them, though this does not mean that we never say the hard things to people (10). Similarly vs 14 and 19 urge us to avoid starting or loving quarrels (*cf.* 16:32; 17:11–13), though vs 15 and 20 warn against this leading to compromise or deceitfulness.

'Dissension' is a recurrent theme of Proverbs. In churches and communities there are always stirrers, people who like causing trouble. The cause may be anger (15:18; 29:22), mockery (22:10), alcohol (23:29–35), gossip (26:20), greed (28:25) or just perversity (16:28). The result may be ongoing conflict (26:21), permanent breakdown of relationships (18:19) or overwhelming trouble (17:14). The best solution is either to withdraw from the quarrel (17:14) or let the matter be decided by the equivalent of the toss of a coin (18:18). In other words, a stubborn continuation of a dispute does more damage than making a minor wrong decision.

Sayings such as 17:16 and 24–28 speak of wisdom, but not only this-worldly wisdom. 16:33 and 17:3–5 explicitly add God to the equation. These verses affirm that God is the final arbiter of how family fate works out, undertakes the final test of family folly, and is the final object of people's insults.

Notes. 7 Another comment on the things people say, following up v 4. **19** As well as the word *loves*, the word *invites* links v 19 with v 9, where it is the same word translated *promotes* (*cf.* RSV). In v 19b the image is unclear, but the action is some expression of pride. **18:1** Again *pursues* is the verb which has already come in 17:9 and 19 (*cf.* RSV), while *an unfriendly man* is related to the word for *separates* in 17:9.

17:24 – 18:8 The nature and the price

of folly. Folly is prominent in this group of sayings. It is promiscuous in its interests (17:24), has difficulty in keeping its mouth shut (17:27–28; *cf.* 18:8), insisting on making decisions on its own (18:1) and prefers talking to listening (18:2). It thus brings trouble to the family (17:25), loss to other people affected by decisions (18:1) and pain to the individual (18:6–7). On the other hand, there are contexts in which a person must speak up and provoke conflict if necessary (17:26; 18:5).

Notes. 18:4 While 18:4a and 20:5a might imply that human beings have their own inner resources of wisdom, that is not stated elsewhere in Proverbs. Hence the NIV's *but* assumes a contrast between human evasiveness and wisdom's sparkling clarity.

18:9–21 Matters of strength and power. This section speaks of the strength of a fortified city, and of two things which have parallel strength. One is wealth (11; v 16 notes another aspect of the power of wealth in relation to the great). But v 10 has already affirmed that God protects the righteous, qualifying the comment on the (presumed) impregnable strength of wealth. It also supports a different understanding of pride, honour, and humility (12). Vs 13 and 15 link with that assessment of pride, and v 9 hints at another form of strength exercised even by the inactive.

The human spirit can sustain itself but not for ever (14). God's protective strength provides an answer. The second thing which is as strong as a fortified city is the sense of personal injury that can sometimes come between brothers (19). V 18 offers one down-to-earth tip for solving such disputes between strong opponents. 16:33 is the only other reference to casting the lot in Proverbs so v 18 may also take for granted that God is sovereign when lots are cast.

18:22 – 19:10 Poverty. Poverty is clearly a bad thing; it means, for instance, that you are always begging for mercy (18:23). It make even your family push you away (19:7). It certainly reduces the number of people who seek your company (19:4, 6–7). In this context, 19:5 perhaps implies that it makes the courts disinclined to treat you with justice, but it promises that perjurers will be punished (*cf.* 19:9).

What else can be said to encourage the poor? They are given several facts to bear in mind. First, that the poor man who begs for mercy (18:23) is already the object of God's grace through God's gift of his wife (18:22). Secondly, that one close friend may be better than many acquaintances and more loyal than the closest member of your family (18:24). Thirdly, that it is better to be poor and honest than a devious or activist fool who blames God for his self-inflicted problems (19:1–3), and to whom poverty is actually appropriate (19:10). Fourthly, that in seeking wisdom you are being your own best friend (19:8). When the poor person receives human grace, God knows and will reward it (19:17). So people are encouraged to show such grace (the word 'grace' lies behind the NIV 'is kind to' in 19:17). A poor person is generally preferred to a liar, because 'faithful love is what people look for in a person' (19:22 NJB).

Notes. 24 *Companions* is the word translated *friends* in 19:4, 6–7. *Friend* in 18:24 is a stronger word formed from the word for 'love' (*cf.* 19:8). *Brother* is the word translated *relatives* in 19:7.

19:11–19; 20:2–3 Conflict. The section takes up themes from 16:31 – 18:1. The combination of power and anger is clearly a fearsome one (19:12; *cf.* 20:2). Strife at home may amuse the outsider but it also feels deathly (19:13) and real glory lies in being able to avoid strife (20:3). Wisdom thus lies in being able to 'lengthen your anger' – the literal meaning of *patience* (19:11); and the gift of God lies in not being involved in that kind of strife at home (19:14).

The *hot-tempered* person may be incorrigible and bound for disaster (19:19). But that is no reason to neglect the saying of hard things within the family, which is to leave someone on the road to *death* (19:18). *Laziness* may itself induce death-like *sleep* and starvation (19:15); ignoring wisdom risks death itself (19:16).

19:20 – 20:5 Wisdom. 19:20 comments on the benefits and risks of wisdom and folly (*cf.* vs 25, 27 with vs 26, 29). These are illustrated by several portraits of wisdom. It is incompatible with a liking for a drink (20:1); so much for the fondness for alcohol that often characterizes academic communities! It is illustrated by the inactivity of the idler, the object of some of Proverbs' choicest pen-portraits (see on 24:30–34). Wisdom enables one to plumb the hidden and possibly deceptive depths of the human heart (20:5; see on 18:4).

We are then reminded that God's involvement in human affairs means that mere human wisdom does not always have the last word, and that reverence for God is as important to a successful life as intellectual application (19:21, 23). Human relationships count too (19:22), as does justice (19:28, where the reference to mockery links with the comments on the fool as mocker in vs 25, 29).

Note. 17, 22 See on 18:22 – 19:10. **20:2–3** See on 19:11–19.

20:5–19 Appearances and truth. Righteousness may be defined as a life of personal integrity (7), but it is really difficult to find an example (6, 9). Openness is not common (5), as business life illustrates (14), and human evasiveness is difficult to penetrate (15).

V 5 points to wisdom as the key to penetrating this evasiveness. In more down-to-earth fashion v 8 points to authority exercised with one's eyes open. V 11 implies that actions ought to be taken as the clue to the real person. V 12 sees the open eyes as the gift of God, while v 10 adds the warning of God's loathing for deceit in trade.

Vs 16–19 link together as vs 16, 17 and 19 use the same verb in three different ways, to mean *puts up security*, *tastes sweet*, and 'mix with' (hence the NIV *avoid*); v 19 also functions as a qualification to v 18. The verses link the theme of this section through v 17 with its comment on deceit.

Note. 13 *Stay awake* is literally 'open your eyes', the verse's link with the context (see vs 8, 12).

20:20 – 21:4 God's sovereignty and human authority. The section includes further references to God. We are to trust God when wronged (20:22). In that situation we can be reassured of God's concern for honesty and justice (20:23; 21:3), of God's direction of the powerful (20:24 NJB: it is not the ordinary word for 'man' here), of God's understanding of how human beings 'work' (20:27), and of the finality of God's assessment (21:2). 20:25 picks up one example of when human beings may not even understand themselves.

The king has responsibility for 'winnowing out the wicked' (20:26) and his kind of punitive action has a role in purging the inner being of other people too (20:30). But the sovereignty of God in relation to the king (see 21:1) suggests a qualification on both these sayings: it is only God who can see into the inner being (20:27). Another comment on the first saying is that the king needs to focus on the positives, on what builds up the throne, not just on punitive action regarding things that have gone wrong (20:28).

Young and old have their own glories, physical strength and the authority of experience (20:29). The former must not despise or swindle the latter (20:20–21: *curses* and *blessed* are the first and last words of the two verses).

21:2–29 Righteousness and wickedness. Towards the end of Pr. 10 – 22 there appears another clutch of sayings on righteousness and wickedness, parallel to that near the beginning of these chapters. After the two comments from God's angle (2–3), wickedness has the focus. Wickedness makes pride its guiding light (4), expresses itself in violence and crookedness (7–8), is graceless and craves the ruin of others (10; *evil* is the word translated *ruin* in v 12), is proud and arrogant (24), religious but hypocritical (27), and bold-faced but unreflective (29).

Craving is a theme which appears elsewhere, especially as the desire to be rich, which can be pursued in ways that are right or wrong, wise or foolish (5–6, 13, 17, 20, 25–26), but about whose power we also have to be realistic (14).

Wickedness finds its natural fruition. The violent are dragged away violently (7). The Righteous One takes action against people whose character is opposite to his (12). The merciless find no mercy (13). Those who go astray get finally lost (16). When that happens, it is as if they take the place of the righteous who were in danger from them (18: a sharper version of the point made in 11:8). People who put their trust in a foolish place are exposed by the wise (22). The witness who threatens someone's life with his falsehood loses his own life (28).

There are several striking positive comments on righteousness. God is uniquely called *the* Righteous One (12), which sheds a new light on the word righteousness in Pr. 10 – 22 as a whole: all it says on this subject stems from the nature of God. There is the joy of justice (15), an example of the way in which the judgment of God – as this expression is commonly rendered – is good news in the OT. It marks the just reign of God (and contrast v 17, where *pleasure* is the word earlier translated *joy*). Righteousness, loyalty, life, and honour are brought together (21).

Note. 9, 19 See on 16:31 – 18:1.

21:30 – 22:16 Wisdom, wealth and God. The last sayings in Pr. 10:1 – 22:16 mix typical wisdom sayings with a striking number of sayings which bring God into the equation. They thus affirm the importance of human wisdom and effort (22:3, 6, 10, 15; typical wisdom sayings in 22:5, 8, 11, 13, 14) but also declare that these mean nothing independent of God's will (21:30–31) and even require God's involvement if their principles are to be fulfilled (22:12). They are realistic about wealth and poverty (22:7) but qualify that not only by human considerations (22:1, 9 – *blessed* is here people's speaking well of him) but also by noting what rich and poor have in common in God (22:2) and by affirming that attitudes to God are of key significance to questions of wealth and poverty (22:4). Truly reverence for God is the foundation of wisdom.

22:17 – 31:31 Five further collections

The last third of Proverbs comprises five further separate collections of wisdom material of varying kinds: two collections of the sayings of the wise (22:17 – 24:22 and 24:23–34), a similar collection 'copied by the men of Hezekiah' (25 – 29), and the sayings of Agur (30) and of King Lemuel (31).

22:17 – 24:22 Thirty wise sayings

The teaching over these two chapters returns to the emphasis of ch. 1–9 in urging the reader to adopt or avoid certain types of behaviour. The sayings about life which are common in 10:1 – 22:16 no longer appear, and most units of thought last several verses rather than just one. The extended form of the teaching gives scope for comment on why the listener should obey. The NIV helpfully leaves a paragraph break after each of the 'thirty sayings' (22:20), so it is possible to see how they divide.

The thirty sayings are closely related to a thirty-chapter Egyptian work, the *Teaching of Amenemope*. This work seems to date from some time before Solomon, and it is usually reckoned that Proverbs depends on *Amenemope* rather than vice versa. The openness to learning from the wisdom of other peoples reflects the theological conviction that the God of Israel is God of all nations and of all of life. It is not therefore surprising when other peoples perceive truths about life which the people of God can also profit from. The thirty sayings encourage us to use our own common sense in our service of God. God's service does not always require 'a word from the Lord' in order for us to see what needs doing!

The *Teaching of Amenemope* was designed to offer advice to people involved in public service. The thirty sayings have much to say to such people too.

First, such people are to heed the insights of wisdom (22:17–21, where *give sound answers to him who sent you* reflects their work as go-betweens; 23:12, 13–16, 22–25; 24:3–7, 13–14). They need to avoid wasting time on fools who will take no notice of them (23:9). They need to note good examples (22:29) and avoid wrong influences – for instance, people who might set them an example of hot-headedness rather than coolness, an important concern of Egyptian wisdom (22:24–25), or people inclined to rebellion (24:21–22).

Secondly, like ordinary people learning from the insights of the wise, they are to remember God's involvement in their lives and work and expect to see results from it (22:19, 23; 23:11, 17; 24:12, 18, 21).

Thirdly, they are to remember the moral demands of their work and how easily power can be abused (22:22–23, 28; 23:10–11; 24:8–9, 15–16). But they also need to be wary of the opposite danger, being recklessly indulgent with people in financial difficulties (22:26–27). They can never say, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (24:11–12), and their responsibility extends to their thoughts and not just their words and actions (24:17).

Fourthly, they are to remember the danger of self-indulgence. It can make them forget the real issues they are concerned with and their position, forget the transience of wealth, and take someone's friendship at its face value when they should be asking why the person is being so generous (23:1–9 – the idea in v 9 is that the nice conversation will stick in their throat when the truth dawns). It can make them envy or fret at the transient success of wrongdoers (23:17–18; 24:1–2, 19–20). It can make them forget how much can be wasted in self-indulgence and how ill this can make them (23:19–21, which point to the relationship of self-indulgence and sloth, one of wisdom's favourite themes; 23:29–35, where *mixed wine* is wine mixed with substances such as honey, the equivalent of our cocktails). It can make them yield to the temptation of sex outside marriage (23:26–28). Facing pressure will reveal what they are actually made of (24:10).

24:23–34 Further wise sayings

These form a mixed collection added to the thirty sayings. They include two short comments on our appreciation of someone who will talk straight (the literal meaning of the word translated *honest* in v 26) and on the need to have enough to eat before indulging in 'building a house' (27). The latter may be meant quite literally, but the same phrase can refer to starting a family; the nature of a proverb like this is to be open to a number of applications.

Two longer sayings cover behaviour in court on the part of judges (not a profession but a task undertaken by senior members of a community) (23–25) and on the part of witnesses (28–29; these two verses seem to belong together and thus each helps us to see the meaning of the other).

The longest of the sayings is one of Proverbs' fine pen-pictures of one of its favourite (or rather least favourite) characters, the idler (30–34). He is unreliable (10:26; 18:9), unfulfilled (13:4; 21:25), beset by problems (15:19), hungry (19:15; 20:4), full of excuses (22:13; 26:13), never finishing anything (12:27; 19:24; 26:15), poverty-stricken (12:24) and incorrigible (26:14, 16). 6:6–11; 19:24 and 26:13–16 are further memorable word-pictures. Contrast the person who works hard (12:24, 27; 13:4; 16:26; 21:5). Hard work is a wisdom virtue, necessary to gaining wisdom and to success in life; thus laziness is the opposite.

25:1 – 29:27 Sayings transcribed at the court of Hezekiah

Chs. 25 – 29 parallels 10:1 – 22:16 in that much of it comprises one-line sayings, and some sections of it arrange the sayings on the basis of verbal links, particularly in ch. 25 – *e.g.* the

phrase *the king's presence* in vs 5 and 6; *neighbour* in vs 8 and 9 and *hears* and *listening* (the same Hebrew verb) in vs 10 and 12. In ch. 25 the sayings come in pairs (see the NIV paragraphing), while in ch. 26 they are gathered into larger groups. Sometimes the link lies in the form of the saying – *e.g.* 25:13 and 14 are both weather comparisons.

There is a great delight in vivid metaphor and simile in the first half of this collection. They are sharper than the translation implies, because the words 'like' and 'is', or 'as' and 'so', are not usually expressed (they appear in 25:13; 26:1, 2, 8, 18; 27:8, but not elsewhere). Thus 25:14 simply says 'Clouds and wind without rain; a man who boasts of gifts he does not give'. The result is to require the hearers of the saying to work out its meaning; it is not handed to them on a plate.

25:1 Introduction. In the light of the Egyptian background of the thirty sayings, it is interesting that this next collection is said to have been edited in the time of King Hezekiah, the period during which Judah had closest contact with Egypt. Is. 30–31 warns Judah against the human wisdom of assuming that Egypt is its best ally, and failing to take God into account. In preserving the material in Pr. 25 – 29 the teachers of Hezekiah's day encouraged people to take a positive view of human wisdom, but they too – like the compilers of earlier chapters – warn people not to leave God out of account.

25:2–7 Kingship. In the light of the courtly origin of this collection, it is to be expected that its first actual sayings – three pairs – concern matters to do with the king. The affairs of God involve mystery; ch. 30 will take this point further. This recognition is important, as often Proverbs seems to imply that theology is all very straightforward. Proverbs does not take this view. In contrast, the this-worldly affairs the king is concerned with are ones over which he shows complete mastery (2). On the other hand, the mind of the king itself is like God's own (3). It needs to be, if it is to be up to the demands placed upon it, and the king is well advised to hide some of his feelings and policies if he is to maintain authority and respect.

Thus flattered, he is confronted by a challenge in the use of his authority (4–5), while his court are given some advice regarding their own conduct in relation to him (6–7 – to which Lk. 14:7–11 appears to owe something).

25:8–28 Conflict. Like parts of ch. 10 – 22, the main theme of the sayings in this section is the nature of conflict and the way to avoid or resolve it. First, do not rush into public conflict, certain that right is on your side, nor if you make it a private matter, reveal all your sources; either way you may end up humiliated (8–10). Don't lose your self-control, or you may find you have lost everything (28). Don't be put off from speaking the truth in love and resisting evil (*cf.* v 26 – but the verse comes here because of the image which contrasts with that in v 25) but be careful how you do it (11–12; v 11 has the same form as other comparisons, so that the NJB renders 'Like apples of gold inlaid with silver is a word that is aptly spoken' – the NIV reverses it).

We now turn to relations with one's superiors. If they are tired and potentially hostile, reliability will refresh them and thus be a favour to oneself (13; comparison with v 25 suggests the reference is to ice-cold water from springs fed by Mt Hermon snows even in summer, not to the actual fall of snow in summer). When one has to disagree with one's superiors, care in the words one uses is of key importance. The right words can break the backbone of their resistance (15).

Even when it is not under pressure, neighbourly harmony needs to be protected. Don't outstay your welcome, therefore (16–17; the image from v 16a reappears in v 27), don't tell lies or betray confidences (18–19, 23), and don't (accidentally?) increase your neighbour's suffering by your insensitivity (20). One might connect with this the reminder not to promise people more than you can deliver (14).

Neighbours might be divided into friends and enemies, and one's *enemy* (21–22) is likely also to be one's neighbour. The command to love one's neighbour (Lv. 19:18) presumably has enemies as much as friends in mind; Jesus' command to love one's enemies thus only makes it clearer. This same principle is connected to the concern to win one's hostile neighbour to repentance (22a refers to signs of repentance, presumably figurative). In offering advice on restoring harmony to the community, however, the teachers here appeal to more selfish instincts. Their point is that loving our enemy/neighbour may be the best way of achieving our own desire to end the other person's hostility, as well as being a policy God approves. Paul affirms their approach (Rom. 12:20).

Conflict at home may be the most painful and the most intractable (24).

Note. 23 In Israel rain comes not from the north but from the Mediterranean, the west (*cf.* Lk. 12:54). Perhaps the proverb had its origin where rain did come from the north; it might be another indication of Egyptian influence on Proverbs.

26:1–12 The fool. There is little definition of folly here, but vivid illustration of it. Fools can in theory appreciate wisdom, can perhaps

learn it by rote, but they do not know how to use it (7). They are like students who have accumulated knowledge but not acquired the ability to apply it: like someone who has a dangerous weapon but does not know how to use it (9 – unless the point of this verse is that they have only acquired their knowledge by accident). Nor can they profit from their mistakes (11).

By definition, fools are not going to learn from these sayings. What are the wise to learn from them? They are to register that to honour fools is ridiculously out of place (1, 8 – a stone is placed in a sling in order to be projected, not to be kept there). They are to use the method of training appropriate to fools (3). They are to avoid using fools if they want to get something achieved (6, 10; v 10 implies that something will be achieved, but there is no way of knowing what it will be). They are to avoid fancying themselves superior to fools, which may prove that they aren't (12, the sting in the tail of this section).

Vs 4–5 offer striking contrary advice regarding how one answers a fool's foolish questions. It depends on whether one takes the fool's question seriously, or dismisses it and thus behaves the way the fool does with issues. Life is complex and the same easy answer is not applicable to every situation. The wise person is one who can see which piece of wisdom applies in each circumstance.

Notes. 2 This verse comes here not because it continues the theme but because its form links it with v 1: both are comparisons from nature and in both the actual words 'like' and 'so' are present in the text, as is not usually the case in the comparisons in these chapters. Because words can be very powerful, particularly prayers or declarations of blessing and curse, one might fear that a curse will inevitably be fulfilled; this saying promises that this is not so.

26:13–16 Laziness. Four cartoons of lazy people with their implausible excuses, their rigidity (a hinge is meant to keep turning but never move, a man is not!), their sluggishness and their monumental self-deceit. (See on 24:30–34.)

26:17 – 27:22 Friendship. The subject of 26:17–22 is quarrels (see vs 17, 20–21). They may spring from a character defect, a quarrelsome disposition (21), but a particular cause is the stupidity which takes a joke too far (18–19). One way to stop them is to stop malicious talk (20), though that is easier said than done (22). It is best not to attempt to resolve someone else's quarrel (17).

The related topic of 26:23–28 is deceitfulness in personal relationships (see vs 24, 26, 28). This is a warning against the gap there may be between friendly words and the mind behind them. The wise always keep in the back of their mind the possibility that there is more than meets the ear to what someone says, and they learn to recognize the deceitful person (23–26a). The sayings promise that the deceiver will pay for it in public dishonour and personal pain (26b–28).

27:1–22 comprises individual sayings broadly relating to good relationships. At the beginning, vs 1–2 warn about two forms of boasting (*praise* is the same word as *boast*); in this context the stress is on the second with its implications for relationships (*cf.* also vs 21 and 18 for a practical comment on gaining a reputation). The sayings go on to warn about the vexation caused by folly (3; *cf.* vs 11–12, 22), about the power of jealousy which even exceeds that of furious anger (4), and later about the destructiveness of greed (20).

The sayings turn to friendship and begin negatively, but they affirm the positive value of an honest rebuke by a friend, over against a love which hides itself and does not say the hard thing (5) or an enmity which hides itself in apparent love (6). In the context of v 9, which speaks of the sweetness of friendship, v 7 speaks of how easily the friendless can let themselves be deceived by pretended friendship such as that described in v 6a. Friendship can be creatively uncomfortable (17, where *another* is literally 'one's neighbour'), and perhaps in v 19, where the idea may be that we discover ourselves through getting to know someone else (*cf.* the NJB). Vs 15–16 also belong in the context of v 9, for the *perfume* of v 9 is the *oil* of v 16. The expansion in v 16 of the familiar sentiment expressed in v 15 thus makes a poignant point: love is like perfume, and when love is lost the perfume cannot be recaptured.

More positively, the sweetness and joy of friendship lie in the positive advice it can bring, rescuing us from our own devices (9), and in the way that we rely on our friends during a crisis rather than having to go miles to get the support of members of our family (10) – though better not to have strayed away in the first place (8). Friendship therefore needs to be safeguarded (14); to make a show of it may be counterproductive!

Neighbourliness is a recurrent theme in Proverbs. It has great potential for the health of the community, especially when individuals are in need (14:21; 27:10) – though it can also do harm (see 16:29; 25:18; 29:5). One therefore needs to be wary of actions which may destroy neighbourliness: putting one's own interests first rather than doing good or paying dues (3:27, 28; *cf.* 14:20; 21:10), failing to take action in the event of a real financial mistake (6:1–5),

betraying a neighbour's trust (3:29), picking a fight for short-term gain (3:30–31), dallying with a neighbour's wife (6:29), destroying one's neighbours with words (11:9), humiliating them in public (11:12), putting up security for them unwisely (17:18), lying about them in court (24:28), being too quick to go to law (25:8), telling them the gossip about them (25:9–10); or – more humorously – taking their welcome for granted (25:17), playing practical jokes on them (26:18–19) or being too cheerful with them too early in the morning (27:14).

Notes. 27:13 For the content, see on 6:1–5. But here the saying links with v 2 (where *another* and *someone else* are the words translated *a stranger* and *wayward* in v 13); it warns against being too gullible in relation to the people whose words (v 2) had encouraged us to trust.

27:23–27 Safeguarding long-term assets. There are assets which seem very attractive but may not last (24). It is thus important to safeguard more long-term assets such as flocks which can provide you with clothing, capital, and nourishment (26–27), by caring for their condition (23) and working out the right programme of cropping for their feed (25) – with the right timing a farmer can get two crops in one year.

28:1–18 Righteousness, wisdom and religion. We have noted that the earlier sections in chs. 25–27 contain vivid pen-pictures. They have made few references to righteousness and wickedness, or to God. In ch. 28–29 the balance is reversed, and questions of morality and theology return. There are many references to God (5), righteousness (8), wickedness (10), wrong/sin (5), justice (3), evil in the moral sense (2), integrity/blamelessness (2), perversity (2), uprightness (3) and other such matters.

These chapters thus repeat convictions about morality and wisdom which have appeared in earlier parts of Proverbs. Righteousness and wickedness receive their reward (28:1, 10, 18), and even when they are not doing so, the former is to be preferred to the latter (6). Wisdom is the key to the stability of the state (2), while conversely an oppressive ruler fails in his most basic task (3: rain is designed to encourage crops but can do the opposite). The tyrant is as great a danger to people as a raging wild animal (5), and in his lack of discernment is also a danger to himself (16–17). People thus recognize that it is good news when the righteous do well and bad news when the wicked prosper (12, *cf.* 28; 29:2).

These chapters also refer to *torah* (law). In general, *torah* means teaching or instruction; the teaching or instruction of the wise (*e.g.* 1:8; 13:14) or that of a prophet (*e.g.* Is. 8:16). But in Pr. 28:4, 7, 9; 29:18, in the context of those moral and theological sayings, Israelites would surely understand *torah* to refer to the teaching of Moses.

Generally in Proverbs, understanding or discernment are the everyday personal qualities and skills of common sense which the wise seek to teach (*e.g.* 10:13; 19:25). This would be the natural way to take the references to understanding and knowledge in 28:2, 11, 16, 22; 29:19). In 28:5, however, understanding or discernment is something which depends on seeking God as opposed to being an evil person, and in v 7 the discerning son is not merely the one who obeys his father but the one who keeps *torah* (*cf.* 29:7, where 'have no such concern' is literally 'do not understand knowledge').

The religious and moral understanding of knowledge and discernment in these verses also provides the hearer with a new context for understanding those words elsewhere. Even where they come in what looks at first sight their everyday sense (see 28:2, 11; 29:19) they have spiritual and moral overtones.

It is particularly noteworthy how *torah*, wickedness, evil, justice, and seeking God come together in 28:4–5 with its picture of the moral world getting turned topsy-turvy when people ignore *torah* and fail to seek God. Integrity/blamelessness, perverseness, *torah*, and discernment then come together in vs 6–7, where the specific theme is possessions: riches and povery in v 6, squandering wealth in v 7 (*cf.* the REB) and the amassing of excessive profits in v 8. *Torah*, prayer, uprightness, and blamelessness come together similarly in vs 9–10, and sin, confession, mercy, awe and hardening the heart in vs 13–14 (though there is no actual reference to God there, *the LORD* in the NIV being an addition – *cf.* the NRSV).

Note. 17 *Tormented* comes from the same verb as *tyrannical* in v 16; it thus suggests that the tormentor is in due course tormented.

28:19–27 Prosperity. Hard work is the key to prosperity (19). But the quest for prosperity – or even survival – which operates selfishly and brooks no compromises is wrong, blind, and futile (20–24). As in vs 1–18, a comment from a religious perspective then throws this wise teaching in a new context (25): the quest for prosperity is also inclined to divide one from other people; and paying that price is doubly stupid because the key to whether one reaches prosperity is one's trust in God. People who trust in themselves instead are likewise doubly stupid (26). Paradoxically, giving is the key to having, in more than one sense (27). Wrong/sin, trust, God, folly, and wisdom thus strikingly come together once more in vs 24–26. *Wisdom* here has overtones again of the spiritual and moral. Wisdom and trust in God are set

alongside each other, both being the opposite of trust in oneself.

28:28 – 29:27 Power and righteousness. Once more the nature and fruit of righteousness and wickedness are expounded, particularly their effect on community life and its leadership. It is in society's best interest for the righteous rather than the wicked to flourish and hold power in the community (28:28; 29:2); actually it is also in the interest of the wicked (1). For rulers to rule with justice is the means of the country's stability (4), and of the stability of their own rule (14). The influence of arrogant know-alls on the community is likely to be an increase in tension rather than in harmony (8–9), and once a ruler is known to place no premium on truth he will find that his subordinates are quite willing to operate his way (12). He needs to be aware that exaltation and lowliness can easily be reversed (23). Leaders in particular are thus to be concerned for the needy (7). Such righteousness is allied with wisdom and brings joy (3, 5, 15), knows the meaning of self-control (11), is prepared to discipline (17, 19, 21) and loathes wrongdoing (27).

Leaders will oppose the wickedness which cares nothing for the needy (7) and both detests and actively attacks the upright (10, 27), which gives full vent to thoughts and feelings (11, 20, 22), and which often masks itself in flattery (5) but pays its own price (6, 16, 24).

Like other aspects of wisdom and morality, the wisdom and morality of leadership and community life are also here set in the context of faith. The reminder that God is creator of both poor and oppressor is reassurance to the one and challenge to the other (13) and theologically underlies the promise to the king that fairness to the poor will contribute to the stability of his throne (14).

The stability of society itself depends on openness to revelation and responsiveness to *torah* (18). *Revelation* is a term for a prophet's teaching on God's will and purpose (*cf.* Is. 1:1). Presumably *Where there is no revelation* means 'where God's revelation is ignored' (the mere existence of revelation, of course, does not prevent the people casting off restraint, as the prophets' ministry shows). This saying, unique in the Wisdom books, brings together the *Torah* and the Prophets as the key to the blessing and order of the community (in v 18b it makes best sense to take the people as the subject of the verb as it is in v 18a – *i.e.* 'it is blessed when it keeps *torah*').

That comment encourages us to read the *understanding* of v 19 as a spiritual discernment (see on 28:1–18). The close of the verse indicates that this spiritual discernment is not actually there. (*He will not respond* is literally 'there is no response', so that the phrase closes off vs 18–19 in a way which balances *there is no revelation*.) The temptation is to make people such as rulers the object of our fear and trust and our resource for action for justice, but God is the true object of these attitudes and the final resource of this blessing (26–27).

Notes. 3 *Brings joy* is a form of the verb 'rejoice' which appeared in v 2 – placed here, the saying suggests how wisdom, like righteousness, can be a cause of rejoicing to people. **24** The accomplice cannot come forward and testify, and therefore bears the guilt which attaches to the offence (*cf.* Lv. 5:1).

30:1–33 Sayings of Agur

30:1–9 Introduction. We know nothing of Agur, Jakeh, Ithiel, or Ucal (1), and they may well be of foreign origin (*cf.* 31:1 and comment). But this mystery sets the right tone for the mystery Agur wishes to confess (2–4). We have noted that often Proverbs can seem to be teaching rather over-confident generalizations about how life works and how God works, whereas both are more mysterious than the generalizations suggest. Here Proverbs knows that well. Vs 2–3 might seem to suggest that the problem lies in Agur's lack of intelligence; v 4 makes clear the irony of his opening statement. He is simply the only one who openly acknowledges ignorance because of the inherent mystery of the things of God.

Yet there is a further irony; v 1 has already described his sayings as *an oracle*, a standard term for a prophetic word from God (*cf. e.g.* Is. 13:1; though the margin notes that the word *oracle* could be understood as the name of the Arabian country Massa mentioned in Gn. 25:14). The irony continues in vs 5–6. Although Agur has suggested that neither he nor anyone else has brought knowledge from heaven to earth, he also implies that there *are* words from God, which as such are refined and reliable, and demand acceptance without meddling.

The introduction concludes with Agur's prayer to be kept from falsehood, but also more strikingly from extremes of wealth and poverty, because he sees the snag of both. He reminds us that when Proverbs speaks of the wealthy and the poor, as it often does, it is not referring to two groups which between them include everyone. Most people belong in between, and this is where Agur wishes to be. His solemn acknowledgment of the mystery of life and of God (note that he uses the Israelite name for God, Yahweh), is like that of Ecclesiastes (see Ec. 7:16–18).

30:10–17 Self-assertiveness. Three units relate to each other here. Cursing is the verbal link between the saying in v 10 and the longer

unit vs 11–14. The former warns against interfering in other people's affairs in a way that may rebound; *he* might be master or servant. Then in vs 11–14 each verse describes a group of people whose arrogant self-assertiveness is disapproved of. Such lists often come to a climax at the end, and v 14 is twice as long as the other verses. At its climax, then, the unit also links back to vs 7–9 with its theme of poverty – though its actual words for *poor* and *needy* are different from those in vs 7–9. V 15a follows on from that, in that the leech with its suckers seems to be a figure for a grasping instinct on the part of human beings, and vs 15b–16 continue that theme. V 17 takes us back to where we started in v 10.

30:18–33 Things that come in fours. The 'three or four' sayings in vs 15b–16 leads into several sayings of comparable form (see on 6:16–19) in vs 18–33. The climax of the first (18–19) again lies in the last item in its list: the way a man may get his way with a woman shares the mystery of the three things described in vs 18–19a. The saying in v 20 is an independent one, added to it quite appropriately in the light of its subject, as it puts the matter the other way round.

In the second and third numerical sayings (21–23; 24–28) there is no working to a climax. Four people are described; all enjoy unexpected success; all can be equally tiresome. There is some humour about this saying, as there is about some others in the chapter. V 23a probably refers to a woman who seemed to be 'on the shelf' but then catches a man; v 23b perhaps refers to a servant who has a baby when her mistress is infertile. Then four animals are described; all achieve great things despite their limitations, thus all show great wisdom. Human beings should learn from them.

The fourth saying does come to a climax. Its animal pictures, too, are there to illustrate a human reality, the stately power of the king, which becomes explicit at the end. There is perhaps some irony in comparing the king not only to a lion but to a cock and a he-goat; the king is being gently put in his place. But at least his status belongs to him; vs 32–33 follows as a warning against exalting ourselves to a stateliness which does not belong to us at all. *Churning*, *twisting*, and *stirring up* are all the same word in Hebrew.

31:1–31 Sayings of King Lemuel

31:1 Introduction. As with Agur, we know nothing of King Lemuel beyond his name, though if he is a king, he is not an Israelite one. Like Agur's, his words demand to be treated as a prophetic oracle.

31:2–9 Three exhortations. Lemuel's mother urges her son to avoid other women (2–3), though in a style quite different from ch. 1–9. Her *vows* were presumably promises made to God in connection with his birth (*cf.* 1 Sa. 1:11, 27–28). Lemuel is also to leave strong drink to people who need to drown their sorrows, because in his case it may make him neglect his royal obligation to the oppressed (4–7). That leads into a clear call to this royal responsibility (8–9).

31:10–31 The complete woman. Vs 10–31 are often treated as separate from the sayings of Lemuel. But every other independent unit in Proverbs has its own heading, and the absence of such a heading in v 10 suggests that this section should be seen as part of the sayings of Lemuel. The fact that Lemuel's sayings came from his mother (1) suggests that this last section of the book is a woman's description of a woman's role. It comprises an acrostic of twenty-two verses beginning with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, a poetic form which suggests a complete exploration of its subject. The sequence of the statements in the portrait is then formal rather than logical.

'The truly capable woman' (NJB) is a better rendering of the opening phrase. It portrays her exercising responsibility for the provision of food and clothing for the household, and also being involved in managing financial and business affairs outside the house itself. She also cares for the needy, and fulfils a wise teaching ministry. This element in the portrait suggests that, as an authoritative teacher at the end of Proverbs (like Lemuel's mother in v 1), she parallels Ms Wisdom in the opening chapters (*cf.* corresponding expressions in 3:13–18; 9:1–6). Woman's teaching role in the book alongside man's (*e.g.* 1:8; 6:20) fulfils part of the vision in Gn. 1 – 2 of man and woman together representing the image of God and called to exercise authority in the world on God's behalf, and invites men and women to seek to realize this vision in the world.

Lemuel's mother (who as the queen-mother might exercise very significant political power) encourages the complete woman to make the most of and to push the boundaries of what a woman's role might mean in a patriarchal society. Men generally need little encouragement to make their mark and achieve; women can be tempted to settle for the demure role in life, which has often been all that such society expects of them, and thus fail to realize their God-given potential for making their own mark. There are, of course, other aspects to Scripture's vision of womanhood (such as those in the Song of Songs), but this encouragement to womanhood to achieve is an important aspect of that vision as a whole.

The capable woman wins the respect and honour of her husband and children and those of the wider community, not least because her own commitment to God underlies this productive life of hers (30).

John Goldingay

ECCLESIASTES

Introduction

Pessimism versus faith

Within the Wisdom Literature of the ancient Near East there was a style of writing which we may call 'pessimism literature'. In the Bible Ecclesiastes is its only example, but the tradition goes back at least to 2000 BC in both Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Yet Ecclesiastes is 'pessimism' with a difference. For other 'pessimist' writings were bleak, sensual and unrelieved by any note of hope. In the *Dialogue of Pessimism* (a Babylonian work of the fourteenth century BC) suicide is the only answer to the problem of life. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the god Shamash states bluntly 'The life you pursue you shall not find'. Although Ecclesiastes echoes ancient pessimism, it has another strand which is in marked contrast. For it also holds forth the possibility of joy, faith and assurance of God's goodness.

Ecclesiastes is an edited work. In 1:2, 7:27 and 12:8 the words 'says the Teacher' occur in the middle of proverbial sayings. In 12:9–14 a description is given; clearly one person is presenting the teaching of another. 'Teacher' represents the Hebrew word *Qoheleth*, which is an artificial name (although quite ordinary in its structure). It has a meaning, roughly 'Mr Teacher'. The verbal root means 'to assemble' and is used elsewhere of assembling a meeting to address it (see the NIV mg., which gives an alternative, 'leader of the assembly'). It has the 'feel' of the paraphrase 'Mr Teacher the king!'. Who then is this 'Mr Teacher'? 1:1 and the descriptions in chs. 1 and 2 clearly refer to Solomon (although 'son of David, king of Israel in Jerusalem' could refer to any king in the line of David). Yet the name 'Solomon' is avoided. There is no claim to Solomonic origin as there is in Song 1:1 and Pr. 1:1. The editor is presenting royal teaching in the tradition started by Solomon, yet he holds back from claiming that he is presenting the very words of Solomon. The tradition then is Solomonic, but the editorial work is later.

What is the date of the editorial work? Three lines of approach have been pursued in answering this question, two of them fruitlessly. The first looks for historical references within the book itself. Identifications of the events in 4:13–16 and 9:13–16 have been attempted but not satisfactorily. The second suggests that Ecclesiastes depends on Greek thought and, therefore, derives from the Greek epoch (*i.e.* third century BC or later). Nothing can be asserted along these lines. No explicit citations of Greek thought are found. Pessimism goes back to centuries before any possible date for Ecclesiastes. Greek scepticism itself may owe something to the Mesopotamian world. The third approach, and the one that holds out most hope for dating Ecclesiastes, is the study of its language. Yet even this is difficult. It is not written in precisely the same Hebrew as any other part of the OT. It uses two Persian words which suggests that our edition of Ecclesiastes dates from the time after the rise of Persian rule in Israel (sixth century BC). Yet it also has a few traits which could be early. Mention of the temple (5:1) excludes the period when there was no temple (586–516 BC). Tentatively we may suggest that Ecclesiastes dates from the fifth century BC, but more statistically thorough studies of the language may provide evidence of an earlier date. Or it could be that further study of the language will provide convincing evidence of both early and late features (and therefore suggest that it is an early work which was subsequently updated). Along these lines progress may be made but no consensus has yet been reached.

Purpose and abiding message

There are three features of Ecclesiastes that are worth mentioning: (i) It makes use of a division of reality into two realms, the heavenly and the earthly, referring to what is 'under the sun' or 'under heaven' and what is 'on earth', *e.g.* 'God is in heaven and you are on earth' (5:2). (ii) It distinguishes between observation and faith. The Teacher says 'I have *seen* under the sun . . .' (1:14) but goes on to say 'but I came to realise . . .' (2:14). When he uses the verb 'see' he points to life's hardships. When he calls to joy it is not in connection with *seeing* but it is what he believes about God despite what he sees. (iii) It brings us to face the grimness of life and yet constantly urges us to faith and joy.

What then is the purpose and abiding message of Ecclesiastes?

It is a reply to the unrelieved pessimism of much ancient thought. Yet at the same time it does not envisage a superficial 'faith' which does not take adequate account of the fallenness of

the world. It is thus both an evangelistic tract, calling secular people to face the implications of their secularism, and a call to realism, summoning faithful Israelites to take seriously the 'futility', the 'enigma' of life in this world. It forbids both secularism (living as though the existence of God has no practical usefulness for life in this world) and unrealistic optimism (expecting faith to cancel out life as it really is). Negatively, it warns us that 'faith' is always a contrast to 'sight' and does not provide us with a short cut fully to understand the ways of God. Positively, it calls us to a life of faith and joy. Summarizing Ecclesiastes, J. S. Wright (*Ecclesiastes*, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 [Zondervan, 1992]) used to say 'God holds the key to all unknown – *but he will not give it to you*. Since you do not have the key you must trust Him to open the doors'.

Place in the canon

From as far back as any one can trace, Ecclesiastes has been 'canonical' (*i.e.* authoritative in the community of believers). Although there was a dispute among the rabbis at Jamnia in AD 100 as to *why* it was authoritative, it was agreed that it was authoritative. The presence of Ecclesiastes manuscripts at Qumran shows it was viewed similarly even earlier.

Structure

A line of argument can be traced in chs. 1 – 3. In chs. 4 – 10 the sections are more loosely linked; groupings of proverbs can be found, but any more rigid logic or reason for the order of the sections cannot be traced. Chs. 11 – 12 are distinctive in that they carry a note of sustained exhortation.

Further reading

D. Tidball, *That's Life! Realism and Hope for Today from Ecclesiastes* (IVP/UK, 1989).
F. D. Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, BST (IVP, 1976).
J. S. Wright, *Ecclesiastes*, EBC (Zondervan, 1991).
M. A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, TOTC (IVP, 1983).

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Commentary

1:1 – 3:22 The quest

After the title (1:1) the problem of life is explored (1:2 – 2:23). This ends in a picture of failure and despair (2:23). Then comes a turning point. In 2:24 – 3:22 the facts of life are no different, but the writer brings the goodness of God into the picture. The result is a more contented (but not more problem-free) outlook.

1:1 Title

The Hebrew of *Teacher* is *Qohelet*, which is a Hebrew participle. It has a meaning (like the English name Baker). See the Introduction.

1:2 – 2:23 The pessimist's problems

1:2–11 Some basic facts. 2 *Meaningless* translates a word which includes ideas of brevity,

unreliability, frailty and futility, lack of discernible purpose. **3** Real progress cannot be found. *Gain* is a term used in ancient commerce. It refers to substantial achievement, observable evidence that something worthwhile has been done. *Labour* and *toil* may refer to physical effort (see 2:4–8; Ps. 127:1) or to mental and emotional heaviness (see 2:23; Ps. 25:18). Mr Teacher refers to what he observes *under the sun*. In view of its frequency and the sharp distinction made in 5:2 the phrase must be significant. It is attested in various ancient cultures and refers to the earthly realm as opposed to 'heaven', where God supremely reveals himself. The phrases 'on earth', 'under heaven' and 'under the sun' are synonymous. See further in the Introduction. Mr Teacher explicitly confines his outlook for the moment to the limited resources of the world he surveys. **4** The succession of generations does not change humankind's basic situation. The problem of 'meaninglessness' is embodied in the entire world. Rom. 8:20 is making precisely this point and perhaps is an allusion to Ecclesiastes (Paul's Greek word is the word in the Greek version of Ec. 1:2). **5–7** Nature shows no progress. It is busy in sky (5) and land (6) and sea (7) but its busy-ness brings about no change in people's fundamental situation. **8** *Wearisome* carries the thought of 'exhausted'. It implies that nature's activity leaves it depleted or that human beings are exhausted by it. **9–10** We come to history. Circumstances (*what has been*) and human activity (*what has been done*) repeat themselves. **11** *Remembrance* may refer here to action arising from memory. Our present life does not arise from what we have learned from the past. People do not learn from previous generations.

1:12–18 The failure of wisdom. In the light of the problems presented in 1:2–11, is wisdom the solution to the lack of 'gain' (1:2) in life? **12** It is Solomon's traditional wisdom he is presenting. **13a** *Study* and *explore* speak of thoroughness and extensiveness. *Under heaven* lets us know a limited area is being considered. **13b–15** Three conclusions follow. (i) The quest for purpose is a God-appointed matter. *Burden* has the sense of 'compulsory activity'. (ii) Frustration results. *Chasing after the wind* refers to striving for the unattainable. Human beings 'under the sun' cannot solve their problem. (iii) There are insoluble twists and gaps in life. *What is twisted* refers to both human life (see 1:3–4a) and environment (see 1:4b). The source of the twistedness is suggested in 7:13, 29 but is unmentioned here. Life and circumstances have 'gaps', leaps of logic or gaps in data which leave life an enigma. In **16–18** the phrase *and also of madness and folly* shows that the Teacher kept the alternative to wisdom in mind. This anticipates 2:1–11. His conclusion is that the attempt to solve the problem of life enlarges one's view of the problem but does not bring any solution. Further insight into a solution was to await the advent of Christ.

2:1–11 The failure of pleasure-seeking. Having shown the failure of wisdom, Mr Teacher shows the failure of its opposite. We see his resolve (1a), his conclusion (1b–2), his detailed account (3–10) and a repeated conclusion (11).

Laughter (2) tends to be used of superficial fun; *pleasure* (in its general usage) is more thoughtful. All kinds of pleasure fail to answer the Teacher's problem. *Foolish* is a word associated with loss of judgment. The unanswered question *What does pleasure accomplish?* lets us know that even lofty joys cannot solve life's enigma.

Vs 3–10 lists the Teacher's endeavours. Every kind of relaxation and pleasure was involved. *Slaves*, *herds* and *flocks* indicate great wealth. A difficult word in v 8 probably means 'concubine' (NIV, *harem*). V 9 tells us of his prestige and his retaining his objectivity (which is the point of the last phrase). Nothing outward (visible to *eyes*; 10) or inward (things in which the *heart* takes pleasure) was withheld. The result was a sense of achievement (10b) but nothing more.

His final conclusion (11) is no different from that of his exploration of wisdom (*cf.* 2:11 with 1:17–18). The pile-up of terms (*meaningless, chasing the wind, nothing . . . good*) indicates his bitter disappointment.

2:12–23 A sure fate for all. After the problem of life (1:2–11) and two unsuccessful remedies (1:12–18; 2:1–11), a question is left: is there any preference between wisdom and pleasure-seeking? In one respect wisdom is better than pleasure-seeking. In another respect they are equal; neither can deal with the problem of death.

The second half of v 12 lit. 'What kind of person is it who will come after the king, in the matter of what has already been done?' (see M. A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, TOTC (IVP, 1983), p. 68 for more details). The NIV gives roughly the same thought. The sense is, 'Will future kings be such men as are able to do better than I have done in my quest?'. Future kings will have to face the same problem Mr Teacher has faced; what advice can he give? Wisdom is the need of the king supremely (see 1 Ki. 3:5–28; Pr. 8:14–16). The *fool* is notorious for his ill-considered babbling and malice; he is one for whom wickedness is 'fun' (see *e.g.* Pr. 9:13–18).

Verses 13–14a answer the question. Wisdom is of value. *Light* is a metaphor for understanding, know-how, skill in living. Another angle is

in vs 14b–16. The *same fate* is death, which confronts everyone, wise or foolish (14b). Its inevitability puts both the wise man and the foolish on the same level. Neither can defeat the 'last enemy' (15). The thought of v 16 is like that of 1:16 except that here the individual is in view. Memories are too short to make endeavour worthwhile (see also 9:15).

In vs 17–23 the Teacher considers life *under the sun*. Death brings wisdom to a halt, which in turn makes life itself seem pointless. **17** *To me* is a valid translation, but the phrase also means 'upon me' and sometimes expresses what is burdensome (see Is. 1:14). **18** Hatred of life is followed by hatred of *toil*, a term which sometimes refers to the total struggle for understanding (1:13) but here focuses more on daily activities. **19** Another aggravation is that a man may ruin the work of his predecessor (Rehoboam following Solomon is an example; 1 Ki. 11:41 – 12:24). **20** An abyss of despair is the end of the Teacher's reflections thus far. The Hebrew may be translated, 'he allowed his heart to despair'. **21** It was an injustice that another should profit from his predecessor's labours. Despite *wisdom* (practical know-how), *knowledge* (information) and *skill* (the success that comes from wisdom and knowledge), there is nothing that can sidestep death or guarantee permanence. Only the gospel gives an answer: 'your labour in the Lord is not in vain' (1 Cor. 15:58). **22** What do *toil* (work, endeavours) and *anxious striving* (emotional-intellectual struggles) achieve? The answer is in v 23. *Pain* and *grief* may refer to the mental or to the physical. Both aspects must be in view for *at night* refers to the sleeplessness that may come with the frustration.

2:24 – 3:22 The alternative to pessimism

God was scarcely involved in 1:2 – 2:23, being mentioned only in 1:13. Earlier argument referred to the earthly realm (1:3, 13–14; 2:3, 11, 17–20, 22) and only passingly mentioned God as the cause of frustration. But now God is controller of his world, creator of beauty, judge of injustices. Nihilism and despair turn to joy, beauty, God's generosity, security and purpose in life.

2:24–26 The generous God. **24a** Humankind is to enjoy God's good provisions. *Eat and drink* signify the provision and contentment that is God's will for all. **24b–25** The enjoyable life when we experience it comes from his hand. **26** Three blessings from God are *wisdom* (skill in living), *knowledge* (knowledge of facts, understanding, experience) and *joy*. The *sinner* is one who does not love to please God; the usage is different at 7:20. The judgment on the *sinner* is also God-given. *Wealth* is not explicit in the Hebrew; the Teacher refers to all-embracing acquisitiveness. But possessions only fall into the hand of the righteous. This is not something observed. That the 'sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous' (Pr. 13:22) can be seen in Canaanites' cities falling into Israelite hands. The Christian's view of eternity makes it easier to understand (for the opposite seems to happen in this life) but for the Teacher it must have been sheer faith. Events like those of Ex. 12:35–36 may have given rise to his conviction.

3:1–8 God's control of time. The function of this section is to call us to a view of God's sovereignty which both reassures and yet sobers the reader. It reassures because of God's control; yet it sobers because God's control remains mysterious. **1** There is purposefulness in life because of God's oversight of its seasons (see Ps. 31:15 'My times are in your hands'). *Time* means an 'occasion' or 'season'; *activity* could be translated 'purpose' and pinpoints what one wishes to do. **2–8** God's control of time imposes itself upon us. V 2a deals with the beginning and end of life (and therefore everything in between). Three pairs (2b–3) deal with establishing or destroying activities (the verbs are widely used figuratively). Then come emotions (4), private (*weep . . . laugh*) and public (*mourn . . . dance*). To *scatter stones* and *gather them* probably refer to aggression by ruining fields, and to bringing land into cultivation (the reverse of 2 Ki. 3:25; in Is. 62:10 it refers to welcoming a conqueror). The phrases in v 5 refer to enmity and friendship, individual and corporate. Next (6–7a) is reflection on possessions or ambitions, getting or abandoning the quest for what one wants, keeping or getting rid of what one has. Vs. 7b–8 refer to talk (*to be silent . . . to speak*) and relationships, personal (*love . . . hate*) and national (*war . . . peace*).

3:9–15 Contentment and satisfaction. Vs 9–11 are sobering. The question of v 9 reminds us that *gain* is what is desired but is hard to find. V 10 recalls the divinely imposed quest for meaningfulness. V 11 reminds us of the limit to our understanding. Vs 12–15 are more reassuring and divide into two sections (11–13, 14–15) beginning with *I know*.

In v 9 the question of 1:3 is again asked (but the phrase 'under the sun' is missing). Again (10, repeating 1:13b) the quest for meaningfulness is said to be *laid on men* (*i.e.* appointed). But now the viewpoint is different. **11** God's disposal of times is *beautiful*, a source of delight. *Eternity in the hearts* refers to the capacity for something larger and greater than the succession of *times* that are so uncontrollable. (*Time* and 'purpose'/*activity* in v 1 form a contrast to *eternity* here). Human beings have a capacity for 'eternal' things, something

that transcends the immediate situation. This does not bring comprehension of God and his ways; one still cannot understand *from beginning to end.*

The God-given life is our privilege (12–13) and also God's purpose, upheld by him or (on another view) judged by him. 12 The Teacher recommends contentment. *Do good* does not have its common meaning; it is to practise a happy life. 'Enjoy good' expresses the thought. 13 Provision and contentment are gifts of God. 14 Security is not to be found in the earthly realm itself, which is subject to vanity (1:2,4). God's action exhibits permanence and effectiveness. This leads to *fear*, awe-inspired regard for God and his ways (see 5:7; 12:13). The vocabulary of v 15 was used in 1:9–11, but now it reflects an optimistic outlook. The past is repeated; the present will be repeated. The picture is one of stability, but (unlike 1:2–11) what we have is not pessimism; *God* is present to ensure the continuity of the movement of the world. The NIV of v. 15b means that God is a judge who oversees the movement of the epochs of time, and will one day *call the past to account.* Another translation is that God 'seeks what is hurrying along', *i.e.* God cares for the world, which hurries round its circuits (see Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 83).

3:16–22 The judgment of God. If God is the controller that 3:1–15 suggests one is led naturally to think about the injustices of the world. We have an observation, two comments, and a conclusion (16, 17, 18–21, 22). V 16 states the problem: injustices. 17 Injustices are considered in the light of a future (*will*), divine (*God will*) event or period of judgment (*will bring to judgment*). All people will be involved (*righteous and the wicked*). The judgment assesses inner purpose (the AV's 'purpose' catches the thought) and deeds. Vs 18–21 make a second observation. The main points are that God uses injustices to show that without him human beings are like animals (18); animals and humans are alike in the fact of their dying (19–20); few appreciate any difference between people and animals in what is after death (21). V 22 is the conclusion; the remedy to life's enigma is to live on God's goodness.

4:1 – 10:20 Facing reality

There is grouping in the proverbs of this section. We see life's hardships and perplexities, the companionship it demands but the isolation it exhibits, poverty and wealth, human adversities, the limits of wisdom and the impact of foolishness. Each is problematic, yet the Teacher insists that God is present and that faith in him is supremely worthwhile. Life for the Christian is often problematic too and the words of the Teacher are of more than antiquarian interest.

4:1 – 5:7 Life's hardships and life's companions

We have five units (4:1–3, 4–6, 7–8, 9–12, 13–16) each of which relates in some way to isolation, lack of companionship or lack of human assistance (no comforter, 1; rivalry destroying human relationships, 4; a man all alone, 8; two better than one, 9–12; kings who become isolated, 13–16). 5:1–7 itself seems somewhat isolated; it restates the reality of God.

4:1–3 Oppression without comfort. *Oppression* is a fact (*I saw*, 1), part of the grimness of this world (*under the sun*, 1), embittering in that oppressors have power. No solution is suggested (although 2:26 and 3:22 have given a hint). The implicit question is, how shall we face reality?

4:4–6 Envy and its alternatives. If oppression damages relationships (1–3), so more subtly does envy (4–6). Much effort is motivated by the desire to outclass others. V 5 is the opposite of v 4. If rivalry disgusts, the opposite danger is withdrawal from life altogether. But this is to destroy one's life. Contentment (6) is better than rivalry (4) or laziness (5). *One handful* expresses a limited amount, *two handfuls* more than can be easily handled. The first case leads to *tranquillity*; the second to failure and frustration (*chasing the wind*).

4:7–8 What does one live for? A man is without family or friends, yet is successful and rich. He raises the question of v 8, but no answer is given and the question is left hanging; it is part of life's frustration.

4:9–12 The need for companionship. V 9 makes the point; vs 10–12a give illustrations; v 12b restates the matter. Pits (10), cold nights (11) and bandits (12a) faced the ancient traveller, suggesting the need of companionship in times of accident (10), inadequacy (11) and adversity (12a). The increase of number from two (9, 12a) to three is significant: the more friends the better.

4:13–16 An isolated leader. Some ambiguous pronouns in v 14 mean that this passage can be read in several ways. The NIV is probably correct. The elderly king of v 13 was wise once (as *no longer* suggests) but lost his wisdom. The word for *poor* refers to humble origins. *Youth* ranges in age from teens to forties. In v 14 *his* refers to the king. A young man arises; he had everything against him but the king became isolated (implied in v 15). The isolation of the older man led to the success of the younger. The younger man was successful for a while (15). In v 16 *before them* means 'were their subjects'. For the younger man also popularity was not lasting.

He repeated the cycle. Two main points that are true universally arise from the story: that isolation is part of the painfulness of human experience, and that the new generation did not solve the problem of the older generation (see 1:9–11).

5:1–7 The approach to God. If one is right in seeing the theme of companionship in 4:1–16, the matter is abruptly dropped with no real solution suggested. We are instead faced with God. 4:1–16 would raise the question in the mind of any reader, is not God the answer? But he must be approached in the right way.

House of God (1) is the temple, the structure of which pointed to God's holiness and inaccessibility except by sacrifice. The fool is unaware of his offensiveness to God in the way he approaches him. 2 Hastiness in prayer fails to see the greatness of the difference between God and human beings. *Heaven* is the location of God's glory; the worshipper must remember he does not approach God as an equal.

3 Responsibilities have side effects. As they produce disturbed sleep they may also lead to a flood of ill-considered words. **4–5** The vow (an accompaniment to petition or a spontaneous expression of gratitude) might consist of a promise of allegiance, a free-will offering, or the dedication of a child. To make a right vow but not keep it offends God. The *messenger* (6) would be a priest or someone sent by a priest. The *dreaming* (7) must mean something like day-dreaming, casualness, unreality in approaching God. This and the flood of careless words in prayer are both marks of the *meaningless* (frustrated, awry) world. Fear of God is the remedy (see 3:14; 12:13).

5:8 – 6:12 Poverty and wealth

We have here *the poor* (5:8), *money* (5:10), the increase of 'good things' (5:11), the *rich man* (5:12), 'riches' (5:13–14), 'riches and wealth' (5:19; 6:2) and the *poor man* (6:8).

5:8–9 The poor under oppressive bureaucracy. The Teacher considers the frustrations of oppressive bureaucracy with its delays and excuses. The poor cannot afford to wait, and justice is lost between the tiers of the hierarchy. No remedy is offered; this is what human nature is like.

8 The NIV's *one official is eyed by a higher one* could be taken as though one official was suspicious of another (see the verb in 1 Sa. 19:11). The GNB's 'Every official is protected by the one over him' fits the context better. The last phrase refers not to God or the king but to many tiers of authority.

V 9 has been interpreted in many ways. If the NIV is followed the thought is: despite bureaucratic hold-ups a stable land is worth having; even the king needs it. Another possible translation is: 'but an advantage to a land for everyone is: a king over cultivated land'. Bureaucratic oppression does not override the value of stability in society.

5:10–12 Money and its drawbacks. Limits to the value of money are: it cannot satisfy the covetous (10), it attracts a circle of dependants (11) and it disturbs one's peace (12). *Money* and *wealth* (*10*) are silver as a means of exchange and wealth in the form of goods; *abundance* (*12*) could refer to wealth or physique (NASV has *full stomach*).

5:13–17 Wealth – loved and lost. We pass to those who had wealth and lost it. We see wealth acquired (13) and lost (14a). The rich man could not pass anything on (14b) or take anything with him (15).

16–17 The ease with which wealth can slip through one's fingers is part of the frustration of life (16a); at the last a person takes quite exactly (the Hebrew is emphatic) what he brought – nothing.

5:18–20 Remedy recalled. When the Teacher's presentation of the grimness of life gets overwhelming, he reminds us of 1:2 – 3:22. He is concerned about having a confident outlook and a contented spirit, with which to face the grimness of life. Here he recalls that there is an approach to life, in which life is enjoyable *in* toil, not by dispensing with it. *To eat and drink* is expressive of companionship, joy and satisfaction, including spiritual joys (see Dt. 14:26). **19** Wealth may lead to misery (see v 14), but if it is part of the contented life, taken from God, it may be positively appreciated after all. V 20 is a striking contrast to the drudgery of 2:23, a proof that the Teacher is weighing two approaches to life. The Hebrew of *keep him occupied* is related to the term 'business' that we have had earlier. There is a 'business' that frustrates; but the 'business' of taking life from the hand of God is also preoccupying for those who view life that way.

6:1–6 Wealth and its insecurity. Wealth does not guarantee its own enjoyment (1–2). A man may live in his prime with a flourishing family but die unsatisfied and unmourned (3). Better never to have lived than to have lived a discontented life (4–6a). Death is inevitable (6).

6:7–9 Insatiable longing. A person's labour is not for sheer pleasure but to earn a living with the hope of finding satisfaction in life. But 'the longing is not satisfied' (better than *appetite*; the reference is to more than the physical). 8 Two questions expect a negative answer. Neither wisdom nor the poor person's ingratiating himself improve his lot. V 9 could be advisory, and be urging contentment. But in the light of 9b, the thought is probably that the

poor, though there may be plenty to see, only experience a roving desire which adds to frustration.

6:10–12 An impasse. 'Name' speaks of character. The world (*whatever exists*), *man* and God (*one who is stronger than he*) all have settled characters. The problem stated in 1:2–3 will not go away. **12** What is needed is something that will be adequate for every day (*the few . . . days he passes*) but which will be lifelong (*a man in life*), something which can cope with the enigma of life (*meaningless days*) and which gives experience and values that are worthwhile (*what is good*). The two questions imply that the generality of people do not discover such a remedy, and others cannot easily help. Few have an answer now; no practical certainty exists for the future. The section has reached an impasse. Only 5:18–20 has given any help.

7:1 – 8:1 Suffering and sin

In this section we first have the possible instructiveness of suffering (1–6), then its dangers (7–10). Wisdom is indispensable (11–12); life is under the hand of God (13–14). The second half moves from the crookedness of life (13) to the crookedness of humankind (29). Basic questions concerning the origin, universality, and perverseness of evil are posed in a mixture of factual statement and of encouragement to action.

7:1–6 Instructive suffering. Two comparisons are put alongside each other (1), and could be translated '*As* a good name is better . . . *so* the day of death is better . . .'. As inner character is more crucial than outer fragrance, so the lessons derived from a funeral are more instructive than the lessons of a birthday party. The funeral may bring us to think about life but the party probably will not. In this sense sorrow *is good for the heart* (3), *i.e.* enables our innermost thoughts to make true evaluations. V 4a means that the wise man learns something from the inevitability of death, but (4b) the fool is blind to spiritual issues and gets more preoccupied with festivity. 6. The *fools'* laughter is a sudden flame, a display of sparks, but is soon spent and easily put out.

7:7–10 Four dangers. Four obstacles to wisdom are: corruption (7), impatience (8), bitterness (9) and nostalgia (10). *End* (8) has the sense of 'outcome' (as in Pr. 14:12). A time of testing has an end-product. *Lap* or 'bosom' (9) refers to what is innermost. If tolerated, resentment makes its home in the personality.

7:11–12 The need of wisdom. In Israel *inheritance* referred mainly to the land. Here the idea is spiritualized. Wisdom also, like the land, belongs to God but is given to his people. Like wealth, wisdom has protective power, but at a deeper level.

7:13–14 Life under God. V 13 echoes 1:15. The basic twistedness in our experience of life is not 'fate' but is God-ordained. **14** Both good times and bad times are purposeful. The one is to lead to joy; the other to a realization that life is 'subject to vanity' (Rom. 8:20). The fluctuating seasons of life keep us dependent on God. We are not in heaven yet.

7:15–18 Perils along the way. *Meaningless life* (15) is life dominated by the problems mentioned in 1:2–11. Naboth (1 Ki. 21:13) and Jezebel (1 Ki. 18 – 19, 21) illustrate the point of v 15. Faced with injustice, one tends to move to either self-righteousness (the point of v 16, which could be translated 'play the righteous person') or capitulation to sin (17). The final line of v 17 could be translated 'shall escape them both' and refer back to vs 15–16.

7:19–22 The need for wisdom. A call for wisdom is now appropriate. Wisdom may be greater than the collective opinions of experienced leaders (19). It is needed in the light of human sinfulness (20), which is seen especially in talk (21). One should not pay much attention to the vindictiveness of others. V 22 reminds us that our own experience ought to make us realize its frequent inaccuracy.

7:23–24 Wisdom's inaccessibility. Wisdom might be needed (19–22), but it is hard to find. V 24 looks back to the question of 1:12–18. *Who can discover?* is a rhetorical question. The answer is, generally speaking, no-one.

7:25–29 The sinfulness of humankind. Realization of the limits of our grasp of wisdom drives us to consider further the character of humankind and of reality (25). The *scheme of things* (25, 27) is a mathematical phrase, 'the sum total'. The Teacher has conclusions about women (26, 28) and about men (29). One kind of woman he dreads (26). Her personality (*heart*) has the instincts of a hunter. She is forceful in her attentions (*hands* as *chains*). Escape is not given to all but is a gift of God (see 2:26). V 28 is not a generalized statement; it focuses only on the matter of wisdom (like 1 Tim 2:14; Tit. 2:2–6), and only on a certain kind of woman. The word *upright* is not in the Hebrew. One should compare 9:9 for another viewpoint. V 29 presents a conclusion about the entire human race, led – almost exclusively in the Teacher's day – by men. *This only* lets us know there is a single point which is the source of the calamities of humankind. The race was created not neutral but *upright*. Despite an original righteousness, sin has come in. It is perverse (*schemes* speaks of a contrivance for overcoming what would be otherwise expected), deliberate and universal (*men* refers to all people).

8:1 Who is wise? This verse continues the

theme of ch. 7. Where is anyone who will find the solution to the enigmas of life? The bright *face* refers to gracious demeanour (*cf.* Dt. 28:50; Dn. 8:23).

8:2 – 9:10 Authority and injustice

After the realities of authority (2–9), the injustices (10–15) and perplexities (16–17) of life, and the final monstrosity (9:1–6), the Teacher puts forward a platform on which to stand amidst perplexity (9:7–10).

8:2–9 Royal authority. The king's subjects take an oath of loyalty; God witnessed and sanctioned it. **3–4** The Teacher warns against deserting one's post. Haste to leave the king's presence would indicate disaffection or disloyalty (see the phrase in Ho. 11:2). *Stand up for* could also mean 'persist in'. The king's power ought to be taken seriously. **5** Living under an autocratic regime involves watching for God-given opportunities (the wording recalls 3:1–8) and following proper *procedure*. Jonathan, Nathan and Esther are examples (1 Sa. 19:4–6; 2 Sa. 12:1–14; Est. 7:2–4). **6–7** *Misery* is the frustration and perplexity that is the theme of Ecclesiastes, intensified by people's ignorance of the future. In v 8 four limitations to all authority are mentioned. First, no-one can imprison anyone's *spirit* (the NIV mg. fits the context). Secondly, death is within God's control. Thirdly, *no-one is discharged in time of war* would seem to speak of the extent of the king's power. But the Hebrew could be translated 'this war' and follow from the second point. In the conflict of death no authority is able to rescue. *War* is a metaphor for the struggles of the approach of death. Fourthly, no measure, however ruthless, will deliver in this respect. The NIV links the third and fourth of these (*As . . . so*), but the phrases could be taken distinctly. In situations where law and order and the constraint of governments appear to be breaking down this call to 'obey the king' is more than ever appropriate.

8:9–11 Life's injustices. Again the Teacher claims observation (*I saw*), evaluation (*I applied my mind*), breadth of view (*All this . . . everything*) but with one limit (*under the sun*). Burial was part of honourable treatment in Israel; honour coming to the wicked is anomalous. Their being at ease (*come and go*) and the praise that came to them seems unjust. Recent examples will spring easily to mind. **11** The delay of judgment is misunderstood. God's inactivity seems to be indifference rather than longsuffering.

8:12–13 The answer of faith. The wicked person's sin might be great (*a hundred crimes*) and his life long, but the viewpoint of faith says *I know*. (The *I saw* of v 9 puts forward what all can see; the *I know* of v 12 is a viewpoint not appreciated by everyone.) From one angle the wicked man *lives a long time* (12), yet the wicked person will not *lengthen his days like a shadow*. The contradiction hints that wickedness will not flourish beyond the grave, whereas the righteous will in some way flourish after death.

8:14 The problem restated; remedy recalled. Sometimes deed and retribution are totally inappropriate. If v 14 intensifies the problem, v 15 recalls 2:23–24 and 5:18–20, the Teacher's remedy, which is to accept the gifts that God gives us and place ourselves in his hands.

8:16 – 9:1 The enigma of life. The enigma of life gives restless days and nights (16; see also 2:23). So (17) we must be content not to know everything. Hard work, diligence, accumulated wisdom, all fail to find the answer. The point of the last part of v 1 is that no-one knows ahead of time what kind of treatment he will receive. (The treatment referred to is at the hands of fellow human beings, not at the hand of God.)

9:2–3 The same treatment for all. The righteous are not necessarily favoured above the wicked, either in life or in the fact of dying. The words *who are afraid to take* could be translated 'who avoid taking' and refer to those who avoid the taking of oaths of allegiance to God. The usage elsewhere of the word *madness* suggests a life-style that is wild and unprincipled.

9:4–6 Where there's life there's hope. This life is crucial, and death introduces a decisive change. That *the dead know nothing* recalls similar statements in Jb. 14:21–22 and 2 Ki. 22:20. It is not asserting that the dead are asleep, but that the dead have no contact with this world. Also men and women of this world soon forget the departed. This life is the place where reward is reaped. V 6 mentions some earthly experiences that will cease.

9:7–10 The remedy of faith. What had before been advice (2:24–26; 3:12–13, 22; 5:18–20) is now a call to action. The basis of contentment is God's favour. Humankind has to receive contentment as God's gift (*cf.* 3:13); it is in such a context that God will approve of the person's activity. Comfortable clothing (*white* in a hot climate), softened skin (relieved from irritation by *oil*), the companionship of a wife (9) are among its practical aspects. The marriage referred to is affectionate, life-long, monogamous. **10** Upon the basis of contentment (7), comfort (8), and companionship (9), we throw ourselves into the responsibilities of life. What one's *hand finds* refers to what is available and within one's ability. Life is to be active, energetic, practical. Death is the end of opportunity.

9:11 – 10:20 Wisdom and folly

In this section each unit connects in some way with the themes of wisdom and folly.

9:11–12 Time and chance. Five accomplishments are listed in v 11, but two factors limit success: *time* (recalling 3:1–8 and its point that the seasons of life are in the hands of God) and the unexpected event (*chance* to human viewpoint). The times of frustration or of death (*evil times* could refer to either) are unexpected but irresistible (as *net* and *snare* suggest).

9:13–16 Wisdom unrecognized. The Teacher recalls an incident in which there was a struggle between prestige (*powerful king*) and insignificance (*small city*), between strength (*huge siegeworks*) and weakness (*small city*). The precise incident is unknown but was similar to the events of Jdg. 9:50–55 and 2 Sa. 20:15–22. The last sentence of v 15 would mean that no-one remembered the poor man after his help was given. However the line could be translated, 'he *could* have saved the city by his wisdom'. This fits v 16: the humble circumstances of the poor person count against him and his wisdom is unheeded. But this is not a call for us to abandon wisdom as useless but rather to persevere in its light and leave the outcome to God.

9:17 – 10:1 Wisdom thwarted. If the poor man is unheard (16), rulers make themselves heard easily (17). The shouts of the powerful may override wisdom. Also, wisdom is easily overthrown (17), for a small mistake makes the smell of folly greater than the fragrance of wisdom (10:1).

10:2–3 Foolishness. The rest of the section considers the invisible side of a person's life, contrasted with face (7:3), hands (7:26) or body (11:10). Since lefthandedness was linked with incompetence (see Jdg. 3:15; 20:16), to have one's heart inclined to the right is to be upright, skilful and resourceful in one's daily life. To have one's heart inclined to the left is to be fumbling and incompetent at the 'wellspring of life' (Pr. 4:23). Such incompetence will become visible (3).

10:4–7 Foolishness in high places. The anger of a ruler must not lead into desertion of one's post (either from panic or bitterness). The advice of v 4a is followed by the reasons that undergird it (4b–7). There may be folly in national leadership (5) and odd reversals of position and prestige that will thwart wisdom (6–7). People with resources (*the rich*) may lack opportunity; people with opportunity (*princes*) may lack resources.

10:8–11 Foolishness in action. Vindictiveness has its built-in penalties. The imagery of v 8 may suggest malice (see Je. 18:18–22). More constructive activities (quarrying stones, chopping logs) may also be done incompetently (9) or skill may be overwhelmed by the mishaps of 'time and chance' (9:11). V 10 tells us that thoughtfulness will bring success better than brute strength, but v 11 warns against its opposite: one who is capable of handling a difficult matter (the snake charmer) may fail for lack of promptitude. Slackness may nullify inherent skill.

10:12–15 The fool's word and work. Talk is the test of wisdom. *Gracious* words will be kindly, appropriate, helpful and attractive. The fool's words consume him, damaging his reputation (see v 3) and the possibility of his doing good. *Beginning* (13) could have the sense of 'source'. The origin of foolish words is the inherent foolishness of the heart (see v 2). Its *end* (including the idea of 'outcome', as in 7:8) is *wicked madness*, an irrationality that is morally perverse. V 14 points to the arrogance of such a person; despite the quantity of his words he has no control of the future. V 15 moves from word to *work*. Towns are conspicuous but the fool misses the way even to what is obvious. Refusal to accept the wholesome wisdom of God always leaves people without purpose or direction in life.

10:16–20 Folly in national life. The Teacher contrasts, at a national level, the way of disaster (*Woe* . . .; 16) and the way of safety (*Blessed* . . .; 17). The first need is for a mature leader. The *was* could be 'is'; *servant* is a word that refers to immaturity. In 1 Ki. 3:7 Solomon considered himself immature, needing God-given wisdom. *Of noble birth* (Heb. 'son of free men') is one whose position in society gives him the boldness to act without fear. Another need is self-control. Eating and drinking in the early hours of the day suggests self-centred indulgence. While the nation is still in mind (note v 20), v 18 focuses more on the individual in the nation. The sluggishness of the fool brings the judgment of steady decay (18). While laughter, wine and money were not despised by the Teacher, the point of v 19 is that the pleasures of life should not be its total outlook. The emphases of the Hebrew word-order here point to the failure of the slothful life: 'bread' . . . *wine* . . . *money* is the limit of its horizon. V 20 closes with a word of advice (picking up the theme of v 4) and challenges the reader to remain calm in days of national sloth, immaturity or indulgence. 'A little bird told me' (20) (*i.e.* I heard it rumoured) is a proverb which appears in a variety of cultures, from the ancient Hittites to the later Greeks and onwards.

Everything said about wisdom and folly points us again to 2:24 – 3:22 and the need to take life day by day from the hand of God.

11:1 – 12:8 The call to decision

More than other parts of Ecclesiastes, this section is characterized by sustained encouragement to action. The commands come to an impressive and sustained climax in 12:1–7, which is one long sentence. The *before* ... *before* ... *before* (12:1, 2, 6) repeatedly point to the fact of death and the need to act speedily.

11:1–6 The venture of faith

Everything in 11:1–6 could be summarized in the word 'faith'. Ships might be long delayed, so any business venture that entailed sending one's goods elsewhere involved considerable trust (1 Ki. 10:22). *Bread* has the sense of 'goods, livelihood' as in Dt. 8:3. **2** The Teacher commends grasping a variety of opportunities. The ascending numerals, *seven* ... *eight*, speak of trying every avenue there is and then adding one more. The background may be that of generosity, giving *portions* to the poor. Or it may continue that imagery of commerce and refer to the many ventures of the businessman. Despite our ignorance of the future, now is the time to act. **3** Neither an ominous outlook (clouds full of rain) nor the unexpected event (a tree falling) must hinder our enthusiasm for life. We cannot control events even when we can anticipate them (the clouds and the rain). Nor can we precisely determine how events will work out; the tree falls where it will. Next is a warning against procrastination (4), and a warning that we are not to be put off by ignorance (5). **6** Then the Teacher calls for vigorous sowing of seed. The proverbs concern not merely agriculture but the whole of life.

11:7–10 The life of joy

The goodness of life is *light*. To *see the sun* is to be alive. **8–9** Enjoyment is to be life-long. It involves joys both internal (the *ways of your heart*) and external (*whatever your eyes see*). But warnings are added: *days of darkness* refer apparently to days of calamity and trial; that *everything* ... *is meaningless* reminds us that the perplexities of life continue, and its joys only come with effort. There is a future assessment of all human works. The definite article is used (*the* judgment) referring to a specific future event. The pursuit of joy must keep this in mind. **10** As far as is possible the problems that beset *heart* and *mind* are to be resisted.

12:1–8 The urgency of decision

Humankind is to look not only to the life of joy but also to its Maker. V 1b leads into a single sentence (in Hebrew) containing a picturesque description of old age and death. The images have been variously interpreted but a likely approach is as follows. The lessening of light (2a) is the fading capacity for joy. The returning clouds (2b) refer to the succession of perplexities that come as old age approaches. The *keepers of the house* refer to the arms, *the strong men* to the legs, the *grinders* to the teeth, *those looking through the windows* to the eyes (3). V 4 refers successively to impaired hearing, lessened involvement with the outside world and erratic sleeping. V 5 (briefly leaving aside imagery) refers to fear of heights. *The almond tree blossoms* refers to the hair turning white. The *grasshopper* pictures ungainly walking. *Desire no longer is stirred* means the sexual appetite is weakened. Then death (the *eternal home*) and mourning follow. V 6 has two pictures of death. In one, a *golden bowl* is attached to a *silver cord*; death is the untying of the chain. In a second, a *pitcher* is lowered down a *well*. Death is when the wheel breaks, the pitcher crashes, and the waters of life are no longer renewed.

V 7 abandons imagery. Death is the returning of the body to the *dust*. The *spirit* (the principle of responsible, intelligent life) has a distinct destiny. The Teacher is pointing to life after death.

12:9–14 Epilogue

The contrast with *the people* suggests a respected Teacher. *Pondered*, *searched out* and *set in order* refer to thought, study and arrangement. Two characteristics of the Teacher's work (10) are his artistry (*right words* is more literally 'words of delight') and his integrity (*words* ... *upright and true*). *Goads* and *nails* refer to the way his teaching stimulates to action and yet is memorable. The *Shepherd* is God; Ecclesiastes contains a claim to inspiration (11). Two reasons for caution are wisdom that is not from God and over-ambitious projects (12). The Teacher summarizes the message, drawing attention to the awesomeness of God, the cruciality of his word (13) and the inevitability of his judgment (14). It is a judgment which will include every person, every deed, public or hidden, good or bad.

Michael A. Eaton

THE SONG OF SONGS

Introduction

Who was the author?

The book claims to be by Solomon and there is not sufficient reason to believe that this is not so. He is mentioned several times (1:1, 5; 3:7, 9, 11; 8:11–12), and the reference to 'a mare' in 1:9 is interesting as it was Solomon who introduced horses from Egypt. Some scholars, however, suggest alternative authorship on linguistic and personal grounds. They question whether Solomon, with the 1000 women in his life, would have written about exclusive love. God can, however, use the most unlikely people for his work. If Solomon did write the book, the date would be about 965 BC.

How many main characters are there?

The view in this commentary (and of the NIV) is that there are two major characters: Solomon and the Shulammite girl. This seems to be more straightforward than the view that there are three: Solomon, the Shulammite girl and her husband, to whom she remains faithful despite the approaches of the king.

What is the form of the book?

Some think that the book is made up of a random collection of love songs, originally independent and then strung together. This is unlikely, for there seems to be a genuine sequence in the book. It begins with the girl's first days in the palace of the king (1:1–14), then there is a delightful countryside scene (1:15 – 2:17). This is followed by the girl meditating on her fiancé (3:1–5), the wedding day (3:6–11) and the wedding night (4:1 – 5:1).

A lapse in the relationship follows (5:2 – 6:3), but the two eventually make up (6:4–13). A beautiful scene in the king's bedroom is then described (7:1–10) and further scenes in the countryside (7:11 – 8:14). To see it as a story with a sequence gives much more meaning than to see it as a set of isolated love songs. It is important to note that there is no sexual intercourse before the marriage; a significant fact in the light of modern behaviour.

What does the book teach?

1. The Song of Songs, as its title suggests (1:1), claims to be the best song on married love ever written. It is superior to all other love poetry, and so we must give full heed to it.

2. It describes love in poetic rather than prosaic terms. This stands in contrast to the emphasis today on the mechanics and techniques of love-making which so easily debases the relationship.

3. God is concerned about the physical. After all, he made us, and he made us to make love. As this is such an important part of peoples' lives he provided a whole book about it. But, to keep it in balance, this is only *one* book out of the sixty-six in the Bible.

4. It is not wrong to talk about the human body (see 4:1–5; 5:10–16; 6:5–7; 7:1–5). Today we will probably not use quite the same language as this book does, for it was written in a particular cultural setting. Also some of the descriptions may seem strange to us, but they refer as much to feel as to actual physical shape.

5. We must know God's timing in love-making. Love must not be aroused until it is ready (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The world says, any time, any place. God says, my time, my place.

6. Family training is all important (8:8–10). The girl's brothers, especially, trained her to be a 'wall' to keep out unwanted intruders rather than a 'door' that would let anyone in and so do damage to her life. The training proved successful.

7. There is a danger in taking each other for granted (5:2–8). These verses constitute a timely warning to those who fail to respond to the loving approaches of their spouse and describe the regret that follows.

8. Married love is exclusive (4:12). In terms of physical love each partner must remain as a locked garden and a sealed fountain. Each life is a private vineyard for the other (8:12). Neither is on the open market.

9. The smallest things can spoil a healthy relationship (2:15). Both partners must watch out for 'the little foxes' that spoil the blossoms of those early days of marriage. True love is both unquenchable and without price (8:6–8). No-one is immune from those things that seek to quench the fires of love, but true love, because its source is in the heart of God, can never be put out. Likewise, no material things can ever buy love.

10. Used illustratively, the song says some beautiful things about the relation of Christ with his beloved church. We are reminded,

among other things, of the strength of Christ's love (8:7); his delight to hear the prayers of the church (8:13); the sense of yearning for his presence (8:14); the invitation of Christ to share his company (2:13); the dangers of the failure to respond to his knocking (5:2–8; *cf.* Rev. 3:20).

We cannot do without this book, especially in an age of 'free love'. Let it remind us that God is deeply concerned about our love relationships, not only to him but to each other.

Further reading

T. Gledhill, *The Message of the Song of Songs*, BST (IVP, 1994).
R. Davidson, *Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon*, DSB (St Andrew Press/Westminster/John Knox Press, 1986).
G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon*, TOTC (IVP, 1984).
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Commentary

1:1 – 2:7 The king meets the Shulammite in his palace

1:1 The title

The title says two things: one, that Solomon composed the book and two, that there is no love song like it in the world. It is important, then, that we love it, treasure it and live by it.

1:2–8 The daughters of Jerusalem and the Shulammite

2–4 The physical side of love is immediately introduced. The girl just longs for the king's kisses. Kissing is a God-given expression of love. That's what lips are for, amongst other things. Wine gives physical pleasure but cannot be compared with those kisses which are the expression of the total commitment of the lover. Likewise, perfume can stir the feelings but there is no perfume quite like the name of your spouse. Perfume may also have associations; it can remind you of a particular person. The other girls in the palace liked the king too, for he had such a magnetic personality. (It is a good testimony when other people recognize the good qualities of your partner.) *Take me away with you* is another expression of true love. Her desire is to be alone with him. How can she enjoy him fully with all the other girls around? And look where she wants him to take her: to a very private place, that is, to his rooms. There they can make love without disturbance and enjoy each other to the full.

The ladies of the palace say *We rejoice and delight in you*, that is, the king. It is almost like a crowd of girls with a modern pop star. They are crazy about him, but not in the same way as the Shulammite. She and her lover have a unique, exclusive relationship; it is just for themselves. No-one can kiss two persons at the same time,

and so it should be with love between a man and his wife. Others may acknowledge it and admire it but they cannot, and must not, share it. So also true believers are drawn to Christ because of the beauty of his character and his sacrificial love.

5–8 How self-conscious the Shulammite is of her sun-darkened skin compared with the ladies of the palace. It is like the black goat's hair *tents* of the nomads of *Kedar* (Kadai) or the dark *curtains* in the king's *tent*. Her dark skin stands out so much that she is the object of curiosity to the other girls, and she requests that they don't *stare* at her. But in fact, her dark skin is a sign of her good character. For she had worked hard under the hot rays of the sun day after day without protection. Bullied by her brothers (or step-brothers), she had slaved in the family *vineyards* to the neglect of the 'vineyard' of her own skin. She requests that they do not judge her by her skin, for beauty is more than skin-deep. She has a loveliness underneath all that sun-tanned skin which is an example to any modern girl.

7 Her thoughts turn from herself to her lover. There is one thing she desires above all else: to be with him. She describes him in simple, beautiful terms: *you whom I love*. Later she describes him in detail, but for now this is sufficient and says it all. It is a description of relationship. So the Christian may say of Christ: 'You are the one I love'. She asks, *Why should I be like a veiled woman?* A veiled woman was a loose girl, perhaps even a prostitute. So she is saying that she doesn't want to look like one of these women, wandering around looking for the next client. That's why she asks for a particular place and time (midday) for them to meet.

8 The palace women, in response to her question, appear to say that she must just go and hunt for him – follow the sheep and you will find the shepherd. The main thrust of the whole paragraph speaks of both character and desire. She is a totally lovely person in that she is not afraid of hard work even if it spoils her body. And her one desire is for her royal lover.

1:9 – 2:7 The king talks with the Shulammite

1:9–11 The king speaks. 9 Solomon knew all about horses – he had enough of them (1 Ki. 4:26; 10:26)! While women of some cultures may not find being likened to a horse greatly flattering, it would have meant a lot to the Shulammite. In all these comparisons, which spring from an eastern culture, we must realize that it is not always the physical appearance that is being compared, but the feeling and the spirit. Here the *mare* represents grace, beauty and nobility. In the team of horses pulling the chariot, the mare would stand out uniquely. The king also addresses the girl as *my darling*, which has the sense 'my lover friend'. It is a word which occurs frequently in the book (1:15; 2:2, 10, 13; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4).

10 The king moves from considering the decorations on the mare to the ornaments on his lover. Having been a poor country girl, she is not only conscious of her sun-tanned skin but also of her lack of jewellery. But the king will rectify this. Out of his great wealth he will adorn her with jewellery fit for such a bride. Likewise Christ, the rich bridegroom of heaven, will adorn his bride the church with the jewels of grace and truth. He is even now preparing her for the great marriage supper of the Lamb.

1:12–14 The Shulammite replies. The bride speaks again, this time of her attractive *perfume*. Scent can play a significant part in love-making, even in the animal world. It can stir physical senses other than those of smell, but the thought here goes beyond that. *Fragrance* is a symbol of the strong attraction the king has for her. As we love to smell a delicious aroma, so she breathes in his love and strength. He is irresistible. Christians are called to be the aroma of Christ (2 Cor. 2:14–16).

1:15 The king speaks. The king cannot help repeating how beautiful she is. In addition, the couple are now looking into each other's eyes, an important part of love-making. Close eye contact can bring entry into each other's lives. *Dove* suggests tenderness, purity and simplicity.

1:16 – 2:2 Rose of Sharon. 16–17 The bride responds to the king with further intimate words. She first uses his word 'beautiful' (*handsome*) and then adds 'pleasant' or 'lovely'. Moreover, they lie together on the grass in anticipation of the consummation of their marriage. They are at home amongst nature. *Our bed is verdant* means they use the grass as their couch.

2:1 The girl has now moved away from her earlier self-consciousness. The king's love for her causes her to have a new self-esteem. She sees herself as a beautiful flower. It is a very beautiful thing how being truly loved can bring about a transformation in the view you have of yourself. As believers we are the object of Christ's unfailing love, and we are beautiful in his eyes. 2 The king replies and adds to her thought. The others seem like thorns compared to her. This may seem a little hard on the maidens of the court, but it is his way of expressing her uniqueness.

2:3–7 The Shulammite thinks about her incomparable lover. 3 If she is a *lily of the valleys*, then he is an *apple tree*, and as such he offers her shade and food, for she is in constant need of both security and strength. In her

younger days she had sweated in the open sun (1:6), but now she enjoys protection and security with him. And in addition to security, he offers sweetness and enjoyment. Like the delicious crunch of a juicy apple in the heat of the day, so is her enjoyment of his protective love.

4 *Banquet hall* is literally 'house of wine', perhaps meaning 'house of love'. The mood becomes more intimate. She is moving into an experience of intense joy and gladness. A banner is a focusing point and conveys here that she does not mind the whole world knowing of their love for one another.

5–6 *Faint with love* is love sickness. She both pines for his love and has become faint with happiness and needs sustaining. She then imagines herself in his physical embrace. It is a kind of request. The picture is of them lying together, he with his hand under her head, supporting her, and doubtless gazing into her eyes. The unashamed physical frankness of the book is again obvious to the reader.

7 This verse provides one of the most basic principles of a true love relationship. It speaks of genuineness and reality and right timing. It is sin which causes physical love to be expressed at the wrong time and in the wrong place with the wrong person. There is a time for everything in God. The way of our sinful world is to arouse and waken love in false and evil ways. Likewise, in another sphere, the evangelist and the preacher can use fake and manipulative methods which only bring about untimely 'conversions' (see 2 Cor. 4:2).

2:8 – 3:5 The beloved's visit and the Shulammite's night search

2:8–17 The beloved's visit

8–9 While it is true that love must never be wrongly stimulated, there is a compulsion about true love. When the time is right the lover comes *leaping* and *bounding*. He can't wait to see her again. She responds suitably, shouting to anyone who wants to hear that he is on his way with the speed of *a gazelle*. Then on his arrival he peers *through the windows*, longing to see her, longing to speak to her

10–13 There cannot be a better time of year to express their love fully to one another. It is spring, spring in every sense of the word. He had certainly had the spring in his step as he bounded over the hills to meet her. She has the spring in her heart as she watches him approach and then peer through the window with his eager love-filled eyes. What a time for love. Flowers are bursting forth; birds sing their own love songs; the fruit trees show their fruit; and the smell of spring blossom makes the heart beat a little faster. It is not surprising that love has often been associated with spring. For spring is the time of new life and vitality. And should not Christians long for an eternal spring in their relationship with Christ? Out of the believer's inward being should flow rivers of living water. New fruit, new blossoms and pleasing scent should continuously be an expression of our life with the Lord.

It is all capped by the invitation to come away with her lover, just the two of them, to consummate their love to one another. The words of invitation are said twice for emphasis (10, 13).

14–15 The king speaks, and there is both a positive and a negative to what he says. Positively, he seeks for a complete openness on the part of the Shulammite. It was characteristic of doves to hide in *the clefts* of the hills so that no-one could see or hear them. His request is that there be an absolute exposure of her whole person and character to him. So we should be completely open to Christ. Negatively, he requests that anything that would spoil their relationship (*the little foxes*) must be caught and dealt with, however small they may appear to be. Their love for each other must be pure and unadulterated. It is already blooming beautifully, how terrible if something came to spoil the blossom.

16–17 The climax is arriving. Understandably and beautifully, it begins with a statement of mutual ownership. They belong totally to one another and, as far as their marriage is concerned, not to anyone else. This is God's pattern for marriage, and there is security in that sense of belonging. *He browses among the lilies* may be a reference to the description she has given to herself as a 'lily of the valley'. He finds his pasture in the one he loves. Her final request in this paragraph is for them to be all night long in one another's embrace – *until the day breaks* and the rising sun causes the *shadows* to *flee*. Their total spiritual belonging has its physical expression.

3:1–5 The night search

1–3 This looks like a dream (or a nightmare?) in view of the opening statement – *all night long on my bed*. It is a kind of fear dream. She is so united to him that she cannot bear the thought of his not being there, and this fear comes out in a dream. However, it ends well. Some of the saints of past ages have made good use of this passage in describing what has been called 'the dark night of the soul', the cry of agony from the heart of one who senses he or she has lost the presence of God and so loses his or her sense of belonging and security (see Ps. 42). Four times in these opening verses she describes her lover as *the one my heart loves*. She feels she has lost part of herself, and in intensity of longing she

searches for him. She does all she can to find him, going to every part of the city, all *its streets and squares*, asking anyone she meets if they have seen him. Only intense love does that, as when a parent has lost a little child.

4 Oh the joy of finding! Such joy is expressed in a hug that seems to go on for eternity. It is a way of saying, 'Please don't leave me again'. But why does she take him to her *mother's house*? Because it was her old home, the place of her security, where her own mother had showered love on her. After the strangeness of the night wandering she needed a place that was deeply familiar. Young brides still go home to their mothers from time to time.

3:6 – 5:1 The king's procession and songs

3:6–11 A different kind of wedding procession

The clue that this is Solomon's wedding procession is seen in v 11 – *on the day of his wedding*. But what a procession! It is first seen in the far distance. The dust kicked up by the horses' hooves seems like *a column of smoke*. Then it is identified; it is none other than Solomon, and the song expresses delightful surprise. Let everyone *look*. Today it is all eyes on the bride as she begins her walk down the aisle, but here it is all eyes on Solomon as he approaches in regal splendour to be wedded to his bride. The splendour and size of the procession fits the occasion. Solomon will not spare anything for such a day as this. One best man is not enough for him – he has *sixty*, and they are all magnificently dressed as noble *warriors* of the land. Perhaps, too, the king wishes to tell his bride that he will provide constant protection for her, for each warrior has *his sword at his side*. Vs 9–10 describe the wedding chariot. Again, it is nothing less than the best. It is custom-made and of the finest material. When the king arrives (11) all the ladies of the palace are summoned and requested to gaze at him wearing his special wedding *crown*. The crown (or wreath) was normally placed on the king's head by his mother (see 1 Ki. 1:9–31; 2:13–25). How aptly it is that the day of his wedding is described as *the day his heart rejoiced*. Not every bridegroom can afford such magnificence and splendour, but every husband should provide the best for his wife and vice versa. True love brings out the best in other people. It improves character.

4:1 – 5:1 The king's love song on the wedding night

4:1–7 The bride's beautiful body. This delightful love song that Solomon sings to the Shulammite is based on the *wasf*, a song style still used in Syrian weddings today. It reminds us that we are not only fearfully and wonderfully made but beautifully made too. The body is the handiwork of a marvellous Creator. For the lover, this mutual admiration is a final prelude to the actual act of love. The couple are now in the privacy of their own bedroom, completely and legitimately exposed to one another. The king cannot help but speak of what he sees, for love is total and loves both spirit and body. To speak of her body is an expression of his love. The Christian is not so other-worldly that he or she cannot admire the human body and even talk about it. It is lust, not physical and verbal love, that is condemned in Scripture.

1 After a general opening statement on the beauty of his bride's body, the king begins to detail its various parts. The comparison of her *eyes* to *doves* is not in terms of shape but of brightness and gentleness. Her black *hair* cascades down from head to shoulders like a flock of black *goats* descending a mountain. 2 Her open mouth reveals *teeth* that are perfect in number and shape, completely even. They glisten too, like newly washed sheep. *Twin* signifies that the upper set perfectly corresponds with the lower with no gaps. 3 Her *lips* are brilliantly red. *Ribbon* ('thread') may either express the idea of thinness, which is unlikely, or indicate that her mouth is very clearly defined as by a fine thread. (Note how carefully some women put on their lipstick in order to avoid smudges and irregular lines.) Her *temples* (better 'cheeks') have the beautiful russet tan of the *pomegranate*, perhaps especially flushed with the excitement of the moment. 4 The *tower of David* suggest strength. This hardly means she has a bull neck; but rather that she has a royal bearing. The decoration of many shields adds to this concept of strength and fortitude. 5 The comparison of *fawns* and *breasts* is again not in terms of shape but of feel. Both are pleasant to caress.

6 The king declares his avowed intention of holding and caressing and making love to such a body until dawn, when *the day breaks and the shadows flee*; thus responding to her request of 2:17. At last the time is right. Love has been deliberately aroused and awakened (*cf.* 2:7). God's timing makes it all so right. 7 Finally, the king declares his bride perfect. This whole paragraph is not necessarily a model for lovers as it stands. Some would feel slightly embarrassed, to say the least, if such words were used in this kind of way. But it is saying that spoken love is not out of place; that God has ordained not only foreplay but forespeaking; that people, especially men, are not animals and should not rush in without deep consideration for their spouses; that wives are not sex objects; and with it all, that God makes all things beautiful in his time.

4:8–15 Invitation and response. The king now moves from admiration of his bride's physical form to a description of their relationship. It is an exquisitely beautiful song that sings of the promises and the delights of love and the intense joy of the consummation of their marriage (5:1). Much of the description is in terms of a beautiful garden. The garden is filled with a great variety of flowers, and the aroma that they shed abroad it is all so very inviting. The word *bride* is used for the first time.

8 The song begins with an invitation for his beloved to leave all thoughts of other places and other situations behind so that her mind will be totally devoted to him. You can't truly make love to another with your thoughts far away. Perhaps she has fears as well, not unknown for a bride on the first night of her honeymoon. But there are no 'lions' or 'leopards' here, only the security of his embrace. No wild barren country this, only a locked-in garden. **9** Moreover, he assures her that he is totally captured by her love. He no longer belongs to himself, nor does he wish to. He is content to have his *heart stolen*. (There is an echo of this in 1 Cor. 7:4.) She just has to look at him and he is felled. It is a delightful helplessness.

10–11 These verses speak of two forms of physical contact: caresses and kisses. The word translated *love* in the NIV can mean the physical expression of love, *i.e.* love-making. It is used in this way in Ezk. 16:8 and the context here suggests it. He responds with deep delight at her initiative in stroking his skin. It is better than any other physical sensation he knows. Their kisses too (11) are ravishing and intimate (*under your tongue*). Perhaps, too, there is a reference to a new land flowing with *milk and honey*, the 'land' of her body. Just as God provided the promised land for the whole nation, now he has provided this woman just for the king.

12–15 Here in these very beautiful verses is the comparison of the bride to a garden. **12** *A garden locked up* speaks of their exclusive relationship. He alone has access to that garden, for it is closed, rightly so, to all others. She herself has done the locking and put up a 'No trespassers' sign to the world outside. As well, she is like a *fountain* from which only the king may drink. To him she is like a spring that constantly provides an inner vitality of love. **13–14** *Your plants* are the varied expressions of her beautiful personality. The garden of her life is attractively laid out with a rich variety of fruit trees and sweet smelling herbs and shrubs. He wanders up and down the garden, pausing here and there to enjoy each facet of her magnetic personality. **15** The idea of the *fountain* expands to *flowing water streaming down from Lebanon*. While it is still exclusive to him, her love is increasingly large and expansive. He can hardly find pictures big enough to describe it.

16 As he invited her (8), so she now invites him to come into the garden of her life in the fullest possible way. It may be locked to others but it is certainly not locked to him. The phrase 'I could eat you' is not such a modern expression. Here she invites him to do that very thing. He can pick and eat whatever fruit he chooses; the lot if he wants it. The whole thing is an invitation to complete possession.

5:1 A whole night has elapsed, the first night of their married life together. He has accepted her loving and passionate invitation. This is a choice verse. After their night of love-making, they now lie contentedly in each others arms. The paragraph concludes with words of encouragement and endorsement from the court ladies.

5:2 – 6:3 Untaken opportunity

5:2–8 Taken for granted

This is more likely to be reality than dream, in contrast to 3:1–5. Either way, these verses are packed with drama and teach a very important lesson in the relationship between a husband and a wife. The man is late home from work and his hair is wet with *dew*. Doubtless he was greatly looking forward to both the comforts of home and the presence of his wife and thinking how nice it would be to cuddle up in bed. But it's a different story in the bedroom. His wife has had the equivalent of a late shower and is now undressed and in bed. She is delightfully drowsy when the knock comes at the door. He speaks with beautifully endearing words (perhaps he has rehearsed them on the way home) and addresses her by four names, each with the personal possessive pronoun: *my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one*. Each is intimate and personal, and they build to a climax. The scene is set for a beautiful homecoming, but it is not to be, at least not yet. Other things have taken over in the mind of the Shulammite. Bodily comforts are more important to her than greeting her husband. She has painstakingly washed her feet, how could she get them dirty again? And she just can't be bothered to get dressed again.

After a short time she changes her mind but it is now too late; he's gone. She can't believe it. She is in despair and calls out in desperation, but there is silence. She goes running through the city streets to find him, only to be beaten by the watchmen. Finally, she pleads with the women of Jerusalem to tell her as soon as they find him and also to tell him the dreadful state of her heart.

Perhaps this all took place some time after their wedding night and is the first indication

that she is taking him for granted. That initial delight in each other had waned slightly, even if only for a moment. Here is one of the 'little foxes' (2:15) that spoil the blossom of a new relationship. It is a warning to her, and in her favour she responds immediately. Underneath she really does still love him for she found her heart pounding for him (4). It is a lesson to all of us, both in our relationships with one another and with Christ, our heavenly bridegroom. How his heart must grieve when he comes to us offering his delights and we just can't be bothered. Bodily comforts or something similar have taken over our love for him.

There is a moving touch in v 4 which reflects the heart of the lover. There is no anger and no sulking on his part, only deep disappointment. But what he does do is to cover the door handle with *myrrh*, a sign of his continued and fragrant love for her. This she discovers to her delight as it drips down on her own hand.

5:9 – 6:3 The Shulammite describes her lover to the women of Jerusalem

9 In this verse the friends of the Shulammite speak. Theirs is a useful question for it makes her express her appreciation of her husband. Her earlier attitude had been an expression of ingratitude; now she is called upon to state how much he really does mean to her. And what a reply! It provides us with our next detailed and deliciously poetic description of the man she loves and admires so deeply.

10–16 In this section it is important to remember that the imagery used does not always relate to physical appearance and shape. It is as much the feel of what is being described and the impression given by it that the writer has in mind. V 10 provides the general opening statement. The Shulammite sums her lover up by saying that he is unique and incomparable. *Radiant* is from the Hebrew 'to glow, to shine'. The brightness of his character shines through his face. **11** *Purest gold* is either a reference to the nobility of his form and carriage or to his sun-tanned face, which is surrounded by long, jet-black wavy hair. **12** His strength is wedded to gentleness. As the dove is one of the gentlest of birds, so his eyes shine with a strong and passionate kindness. The whites of his eyes shine out brilliantly like a dove. **13** *His cheeks* (*i.e.* his beard) are beautifully perfumed. The deliciousness of his kisses is like breathing in the most irresistible of perfumes, *dripping with liquid myrrh*. **14** If we translate 'hands' (AV) here, rather than *arms*, this is a reference to his fingers, which are each like perfect golden cylinders, gorgeously decorated. The description of his abdomen is in terms of strength and beauty. There is no superfluous fat; he is fit and athletic. **15** Strength is again implied in the comparison of his legs to *marble pillars*. They wouldn't easily buckle under stress but would always be there for her support. The *bases of pure gold* are his feet. His whole appearance is like the majestic mountain of *Lebanon*, or like the cedar, king among the trees. **16** *He is altogether lovely* ('All of him is wonderful') are the fitting words she uses as she attempts to sum him up and provide a suitable parallel to the opening words of v 10.

6:1–3 **1** *Where has your lover gone?* is the second question asked of the Shulammite in her distress, and it is just as significant as the first. It makes her think of the kind of response that he would make to her temporary rejection of him. Knowing his character as she does, what is the thing he is most likely to do? **2** She knows immediately. There will be no sulking, no anger; he will have gone to his work, for work is a blessing in such situations. But more than that, he is gathering flowers for her. As he has called her a 'lily of the valley' so he is gathering *lilies* as a love gift. He feels no offence, only deep disappointment. He is living out a Christian response to her rejection of him and meeting hurt with love (Rom. 12:17–21). **3** In addition to all this, she is secure in the knowledge that they still totally belong to one another. A temporary set-back would never lead to an inseparable break. They had made their vows to one another for life.

6:4 – 8:14 Increasing love

6:14 – 8:4 The end of the Shulammite's stay at court

6:4–10 **Further compliments.** These verses provide yet another description of the Shulammite. Instead of the king greeting her with a rebuke for her behaviour, he showers her with compliments. It follows a similar pattern to previous descriptions and begins with a general statement. She is both beautiful and dignified, a majestic combination.

4 *Tirzah*, meaning 'pleasantness', was the capital of the northern kingdom from the time of Jeroboam to the reign of Omri (1 Ki. 16:23) and was a beautiful city. *Majestic as troops with banners* speaks of the imposing personality of the Shulammite. **5a** When she lifts her eyes to his, he finds it too overwhelming. Perhaps she is crying with deep sorrow for all she has done.

5b–7 These verses are more or less a repetition of 4:1–2. Women do not necessarily tire of hearing the same compliments. She doesn't say, 'Oh, you've said all that before', so again he speaks of her long flowing black hair, her regular white teeth and her rosy cheeks. Is it all a reminder of her wedding night when he used the same words? **8–9** New things are, however,

added which are suited to the occasion. Let her be assured that there is still no-one like her: *my perfect one is unique*. What more can he say? There is total forgiveness; total assurance that his love for her has not changed one bit. **10** In a delightful touch, the court maidens echo the king's sentiments. *Dawn*, *moon*, *sun* and *stars* all speak of light and radiance and glory. Perhaps her whole personality has been lit up again because of his response of loving forgiveness and is in stark contrast to the blackness of the night in ch. 5.

6:11–13 The nut garden. These two verses are difficult to interpret, especially as the Hebrew of v 12 is not at all clear. Despite the NIV heading it is probably the girl who is speaking here. She wanders down to the nut garden, where she believes her beloved will be, and makes the delightful discovery that it is springtime again in their relationship. Then all of a sudden she is placed in the king's royal chariot, doubtless the first of his fleet, and she finds herself racing along at his side before all the people. It is a public display of total reconciliation. They are together again, and a new spring has begun. All is in blossom and no more 'little foxes' must spoil that blossom (2:15).

13 The women of the palace call after her as she flies by, wanting to see again the look on her face that speaks volumes about the joy of a restored relationship. In the second half of v 13 the king expresses his delight at the way the women of the palace are caught up in their entertainment. He says it is just like the excitement of watching a lively, exuberant dance.

7:1–9a A most intimate description. These verses provide the final list of beautiful compliments that the king gives to his beloved. It is the climax of the process of reconciliation and compares interestingly with the passage describing their wedding night (ch. 4). Several things may be noted. First, that sexual intimacy can be the Lord's provision for total reconciliation. Secondly, that this description is even more intimate than that of the wedding night. For the first time he speaks of her thighs and her stomach. Thirdly, perhaps he wishes to remind her of the first night they came together in intimate embrace and so is emphasizing that nothing has changed. The description is from the feet upwards. 'From the soles of your feet to the top of your head you are incomparable', he says.

1 Even feet can be beautiful in the eyes of the beholder, not least the feet of those who bear the gospel (Is. 52:7). Jewels made by a master craftsman speak of the perfection of her beauty. Her legs are exactly the right shape, and in their movement are full of grace. **2** Her whole stomach region is as tasty as a meal with delicious wine. He cannot wait to take his fill. It would seem that eastern men of this period didn't like their women on the thin side! **3** The comparison of breasts with fawns lies in the touch and the feel; both are delicate. **4** Her neck is as strong and stately as an *ivory tower*. This gives the impression of the right kind of self-confidence; she holds her head up high, there is no drooping with her. Doubtless the *pools of Heshbon* were both clear and peaceful, and so are her eyes. To gaze into them brings delightful refreshment. *The tower of Lebanon looking towards Damascus* indicates defensive strength. Syria, with its capital Damascus, was a constant enemy of Israel. Fashions in beauty vary from place to place and from time to time, and perhaps prominent noses were considered beautiful then.

5 *Mount Carmel* was known for its beauty and nobility. Her face provided the climax and crown of all her beauty. To be captured and captivated by a woman's hair is not uncommon in poetry, so *the king is held captive by its tresses*. **6** Every exquisite part of her body is called a 'delight', not only for itself but because it produces such delightful sensations to the king. (It is like tasting a box of chocolates one by one, only much more so.)

7–9 Her whole bearing gives the impression of a *palm tree*: tall, slender and graceful. Standing out on such a palm tree are its delicious fruits, her *breasts*. These, he says, he will gently caress and handle: *I will take hold of its fruit*. From her breasts he will move to her lips, adding the wine to the fruit. *Mouth* (lit. 'palate') suggests the most intimate of kisses. The Shulammite interrupts him to invite him to do what he longs for. 'Kiss me as much as you want', she says. After consummation they fall asleep in each other's arms. *Lips and teeth* may be 'lips of sleepers' (see the NIV mg.), indicating that they sleep the deep, contented sleep of true lovers.

7:9b – 8:4 The beloved's wholesome response. The Shulammite picks up the picture of *wine* used by her husband and tells him that she wants to be all that he desires, not least in their passionate kissing. The phrase *over lips and teeth* shows just how passionate it is. **10** This verse summarizes their relationship once again (see 2:16 and 6:3). It is a statement of the utmost security that they find in each other. This time, however, she adds to it the phrase *and his desire is for me*. It is in his passionate desire for her that she finds such security. Similarly, it is in Christ's undying love for us that we find *our* security. God himself promises 'I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God' (Ex. 6:7).

11 Now, for the first time, the Shulammite

takes the initiative in the relationship and suggests that they spend a further day and night in the country, for love-making. In such a secure relationship the wife is in no danger of the husband thinking she is forward. V 12 speaks of spring time, but it was spring before. Is it that their relationship is so wonderful that it is always spring? And is that not the ideal relationship of Christ and his church? Always there should be blossoms; always there should be the promise of new fruit (see Jn. 7:38; 15:1–11). 13 *Mandrakes* are plants that not only have a magnetic smell but possess (so it is claimed) qualities that encourage love-making. She is really saying, 'Let's find just the right situation for love-making.' Not only that, however, for she has also given it much forethought by storing up both new and dried fruit. This brings before us two delightful thoughts about our love-relationships with Christ and with one another. First, that expressions of love both express old, familiar and well proven ways, and explore the, as yet, unknown. Secondly, true love always includes a considerate looking ahead. This reflects the heart of a God who has laid up in store such good things for those who love him (Jn. 14:3; 1 Pet. 1:4).

8:1–4 Here the wife sings to herself about her beloved. It just wasn't done in ancient Israel for women to express their love in public, not even love between husband and wife. That's why she wishes she were his sister so that she could kiss him every time she felt like it, even in the market-place, without being despised by the public. But she also knows the importance of self-control and of the 'done thing'. She learnt this from her mother (*she who has taught me*). She has not forgotten her wise and wholesome upbringing and not surprisingly likes to take her husband back to her old home where she has her roots. Parents still have the obligation to train their children in courtship, even though they may not fully understand at the time. 3 Once again she thinks in joyful anticipation of their next time together, when they will embrace in intimate love, not standing but lying, for his left arm is *under* her head. This use of the imagination is a genuine part of love. It is very different from fantasizing in which the mind is allowed to think about and dwell on wrong physical relationships. V 4 repeats the refrain of 2:7 and 3:5.

8:5–14 The nature of true love

The introduction to this description of true love is in the form of a question. The couple are portrayed enjoying a delightful stroll in the countryside, where they so much belong, and the Shulammite is seen leaning on her husband's strong body as they walk. 'Who is this man?', the writer asks. It is left to the wife to respond to the question. She takes us back, first of all, to the time when they made love to each other in the very place where he was born. As there had been that first birth, which in itself had arisen out of the love of his mother and father, now there is a second birth of his true love for the Shulammite. The word *roused* must be linked with 'arouse' in v 4. She provides the genuine arousal. The time and circumstances are just right; there is no sexual transgression here. Such principles must still guide every sexual union.

6–7 True love is now further defined, and there are several important lessons. *Seal* is a sign of ownership that can be seen by anyone. She wants it to be obvious to all that she is totally owned by him and in no way belongs to any other (*cf.* 2 Tim. 2:19). The seal was to be in two places: on his heart (the seat of his affections) and on his arm (the symbol of his physical strength). He would totally own her, love her and protect her. Moreover, true love is *as strong as death* in that both are irresistible. So too, the love of Christ is all-conquering. Paul found that the love of Christ compelled him irresistibly (2 Cor. 5:14). True love has a *jealousy* about it which is a reflection of the jealousy of God (see Ex. 20:5; 2 Cor 11:2). A wife has every right to jealousy if her husband starts getting involved with another woman. Jealousy hurts and hurts badly and that is why it can be as *unyielding as the grave*. Further, true love is as unquenchable as *a blazing fire* (*cf.* Ex. 3:2). *Like a mighty flame* can read 'like the very flame of the LORD' (see the NIV mg.). True love has its source in God, for God is love. So such love has a supernatural power that no human efforts can extinguish. Humankind tried to quench such love at Calvary, but their efforts were futile. The waters of sin, death, Sheol, Satan and all the rebellion of humankind cannot put out the love of Christ for the world. Finally, true love cannot be bought. Love scorns purchase even though the price offered is extremely high. The invitation of the gospel is to come and buy without money (Is. 55:1).

8–10 This is a very significant paragraph on the theme of keeping the expression of physical love for the right time. It is not a new theme in the book but occurs now in a different kind of way. It tells of a loyal, caring family who protected their young sister from misuse of sex. From her early years, before she was physically developed (*her breasts are not yet grown*), her older brothers, in particular, disciplined her and encouraged her to keep her body only for the one she was to marry. *The day she is spoken for* is the time of marriageable age. Until that time she has two options: to be either *a wall*, resisting all the approaches of false love, or *a door*

allowing any man to pass through her defences and so losing her virginity before God's time. This all ties in with the refrain 'do not arouse . . . love until it so desires'. If she disciplines herself, her brothers will reward her with adornment. If she lets herself and her family down, they will be even stronger in their protection and *enclose her with panels of cedar.* V 10 indicates how positively she has responded to their training. She has now reached physical and mental maturity (*my breasts are like towers*) and she has remained *a wall. Bringing contentment* means she has found true wholeness in the exclusive relationship with her husband. The word *contentment* can be translated 'peace' or 'wholeness'. God knows that only as we obey his laws in this and all areas will we find our true health.

11–12 The writer continues the train of thought that love cannot be bought. These verses are a kind of parable. Solomon had owned a vineyard at *Baal Hamon* which he let out to tenants for *a thousand shekels* each, and they in turn made a profit of *two hundred* shekels. By contrast, the vineyard of the life and character of the Shulammite is not on the market. No-one will invade her property, not for any price: *My own vineyard is mine to give.*

13–14 The unique song ends on a beautiful note. First, there is a request from the lover to hear his beloved's *voice*. Perhaps she is in conversation with her friends and there is a general hubbub. The king wants her voice singled out from all the rest (*cf.* 2:14). We may compare the words of the Father amidst all the hubbub of this world: 'This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him' (Mk. 9:7). Secondly, there is a request from the Shulammite to her beloved for him to once more make love to her (*cf.* 2:17). In such requests we hear the desire of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, to hear the prayers of his bride; and the desire of the church to maintain close and intimate communion with her Lord: 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev. 22:20).

John A. Balchin

The prophets

The rest of the OT consists of prophecy. The books of the prophets are not generally arranged in historical order in the OT. The chart opposite offers probable dates for the prophets which should be borne in mind when reading these books.

Prophet	Approximate date of ministry (BC)	King(s)	Kingdom
The early, 'non-writing' prophets			
Samuel	1050-1000	Saul, David	United
Elijah	870-852	Ahab, Ahaziah	Israel
Elisha	852-795	Jehoram-Jehoash	Israel
Micaiah	853	Ahab	Israel
The 'writing' prophets of the period of the monarchy			
Joel	810-750	Joash-Uzziah	Judah
Amos	760	Jeroboam II	Israel
Jonah	760	Jeroboam II	Israel
Hosea	760-722	Jeroboam II-Hoshea	Israel
	(722 The fall of Samaria)		
Isaiah	740-700	Uzziah-Hezekiah	Judah
Micah	740-687	Jotham-Hezekiah	Judah
Zephaniah	640-610	Josiah	Judah
Nahum	630-612	Josiah-the exile	Judah
Habakkuk	600	Jehoiakim	Judah
	(587 The fall of Jerusalem)		
The 'writing' prophets from the period of exile			
Daniel	604-535		
Ezekiel	592-570		
Obadiah	? 587		
Haggai	? 520		
Zechariah	? 520		
Malachi	? 450		

The prophets in historical order.

ISAIAH

Introduction

The historical context

Isaiah lived through a pivotal period of his nation's history, the second half of the eighth century BC, which saw the rise of written prophecy in the work of Amos, Hosea, Micah and himself, but also the downfall and disappearance of the greater part of Israel, the ten tribes of the northern kingdom. (See opposite page.)

In 740 BC the death of King Uzziah (6:1) marked the end of an 'Indian Summer' in which both Judah and Israel had enjoyed some fifty years' respite from large-scale aggression. This would soon be only a memory. The rest of the century was to be dominated by predatory Assyrian kings: Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727), Shalmaneser V (726–722), Sargon II (721–705) and Sennacherib (705–681). Their ambitions were for empire, not for plunder alone; and in pursuit of it they uprooted and transplanted whole populations, punishing any sign of rebellion with prompt and hideous reprisals.

In 735 Jerusalem felt the shock-wave of their approach, when the armies of Israel and Syria arrived to force King Ahaz into an anti-Assyrian coalition. Isaiah's confrontation of the king (ch. 7) brought to light the real issue of this period, the choice between quiet faith and desperate alliances. The king's decision to stake all, not on God but on Assyria itself, called forth an implied rejection of him and his kind, and the prophecy of a perfect king, Immanuel, to arise out of the felled stock of the Davidic dynasty.

Israel paid for her rebellion with the loss of her northern regions ('Galilee'; 9:1) in *c.* 734 and of her national existence in 722. For Judah, bordered now by a cosmopolitan Assyrian province (2 Ki. 17:24) in the territory where Israel had stood, there was every discouragement to patriotic gestures.

But it was a patriot who followed King Ahaz. Hezekiah (for whose chronology see on 2 Ki. 18:1) was a firebrand in whom faith and impatience took turns to kindle the flame. Much of Isaiah's energy was devoted to keeping him out of intrigues against Assyria (see on 14:28–32; 18:1–7; 20:1–6). In the end this struggle came to a head in a bitter conflict between the prophet and a pro-Egypt faction at court, implicit in chs. 28–31. The sequel was Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria (chs. 36, 37), which brought the might of Sennacherib down upon him in 701 BC and left the little kingdom of Judah almost prostrate in spite of the miraculous rescue of Jerusalem.

Isaiah's dealings with Hezekiah were never confined to questions of political prudence, nor to the immediate future; and his last encounter with the king pinpoints the difference between these two men of faith. In 39:5–7 Isaiah looks far ahead to the Babylonian captivity, the fruit of the king's disobedience, but the king's only reaction is relief: 'There will be peace and security in my lifetime.' It was an understandable horizon for a monarch; unthinkable for a prophet. So the prophecy goes on to completion in the final section.

The events implied in chs. 40–55 are identified beyond doubt by the name of Cyrus (44:28; 45:1), which carries us at once into the world of the sixth century. Cyrus, king of Anshan in southern Persia, had seized control of the Median Empire by 550 BC and most of Asia Minor by 547. This put him in a commanding position against the Babylonian Empire (where the Jews had been captive since before the fall of Jerusalem in 587). This empire was itself weak and divided by now, the king, Nabonidus, being absent from the capital (where his son Belshazzar deputized for him) and at odds with the priests. In 539 Cyrus defeated the Babylonian army in the field and his forces entered Babylon without a fight. True to God's prophecy in Is. 44:28, he repatriated the Jews (among other subject peoples) with instructions to rebuild their temple (Ezr. 1:2–4; 6:2–5). His own inscription on the 'Cyrus Cylinder' (now in the British Museum) reveals that this was his general policy, in order to enlist the good offices of the gods whom he restored to their sanctuaries (see on 41:25).

A considerable number of Jews returned, but soon fell foul of the 'people of the land' by rejecting their help in rebuilding the temple (Ezr. 4:3). The whole work came to a halt for nearly twenty years, until Haggai and Zechariah inspired a new attempt in 520, which was completed in 516. Many commentators see this situation, with its human tensions and its preoccupation with Jerusalem and the temple, as the background presupposed in chs. 56–66. In this commentary, however, the thread that binds the last chapters together is taken to be thematic rather than historical, a preoccupation no longer

with Babylon but with the homeland and the mother-city, both as they were in their imperfection and as they pointed beyond themselves to the new heavens and earth, and to the 'Jerusalem above'.

Authorship

The traditional and New Testament view

Until modern times the book of Isaiah was universally regarded as a unity, the product of the eighth-century prophet of the same name. A single scroll was used for the whole of it, as we learn not only from Qumran but from Lk. 4:17 (where the chosen reading was from one of the latest chapters). The same assumption of unity is already evident in Ecclus. 48:22–25, written some 200 years before the NT period. The NT fully concurs: see *e.g.* Jn. 12:37–41; Rom. 9:27–29; 10:20–21.

Modern criticism

Apart from a tentative query by the medieval Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra (whose remarks elsewhere, however, endorse the traditional view), the idea of a multiple authorship of Isaiah has arisen only in the last two centuries. Its simplest, most persuasive form is the ascription of chs. 1–39 to Isaiah and 40–66 to an anonymous prophet living among the sixth-century exiles in Babylonia. It is suggested that as an appropriate sequel to Isaiah, this work came to be appended to Isaiah's, and being anonymous, eventually lost its separate identity.

The chief grounds of this view and of its main variants are, first, what has been called the 'analogy of prophecy', *i.e.* the fact that prophets usually address their contemporaries (and the people addressed in chs. 40–66 are predominantly the exiles); and second, the distinctive style, vocabulary and theological emphasis of chs. 40–66. These will be considered later.

But in fact no scholar holds the theory in this simple form, for by its own principles it demands to be carried much further. A typical analysis shows chs. 1–39 (Isaiah's portion of the book) subdivided into a basic collection of eighth-century oracles by the prophet, supplemented by material from later disciples of various periods (*e.g.* chs. 13, 14 from the Babylonian exile in the sixth century; chs. 24–27 from perhaps the end of the Persian regime, in the fourth century). This added material, including many shorter contributions, may amount to some 250 verses of chs. 1–39 (*i.e.* about one-third); and some of the longer insertions are themselves analysed as composite, with their own history of growth.

Chs. 40–66 are usually divided into two main parts: Deutero- (*i.e.* Second-) Isaiah (40–55; exilic; say *c.* 545 BC) and Trito- (Third-) Isaiah (56–66; post-exilic; say *c.* 520 BC). The former of these is generally considered a unity, the work of a 'great unknown' disciple of Isaiah; but the latter part (chs. 56–66) is most often thought to come from the second prophet's own followers, of several schools of thought, who interpreted his message to the next generation. Commentators differ over the number of historical situations and of parties (*e.g.* moralist, institutionalist, patriotic, universalist) discoverable here, and consequently in their analysis of Trito-Isaiah; but at least four sources are commonly isolated in its eleven chapters.

It is important to realize that this suggested galaxy of authors and supplementers is not wholly arbitrary. Once the initial criteria for dividing the book are accepted, they cannot simply be discarded after the first cut; they must be used consistently (with the results we have seen) or not at all. So despite the attractive simplicity of a supposed two-volume work (by Isaiah and a successor), the only viable alternative to a single author is not two authors but something like a dozen.

It is only fair to add that the emphasis of critical scholars has recently been on the unity in this diversity. The supplementers are seen as a school of disciples, steeped in Isaiah's thought and prophesying in his spirit to new generations. So his teaching, on this view, continued to put out offshoots of new growth for centuries after his death, and his name was appropriately attached to the family of writings fathered by his oracles.

An assessment of the arguments for multiple authorship

In face of the strong tradition of unity of authorship, the onus of proof is on those who divide the book. Their chief criteria are not invulnerable.

1. '*The analogy of prophecy*'. There is no denying that if chs. 40–66 are Isaiah's own, the depth and length of his immersion in a distant age make his experience highly exceptional. But, in the first place, to disallow whatever transcends known analogies is to exalt analogy above reason, and incidentally to accord ill with the innovative God of these chapters (43:18). Secondly, it exaggerates in this instance what is a difference in degree rather than in kind between these chapters and the rest. Chs. 1–39 contain many excursions into a recognizable future which have been critically attributed, in most cases, to later editors rather than to Isaiah on this same 'analogy of prophecy' (which thus turns out to be based on texts trimmed to support it). Moreover, some of these prophecies

speak (as do chs. 40–66.) as if from *within* the future they describe, *e.g.* in the perfect tenses of the well-known birth-oracle of 9:2–6, or in the vision of captivity and judgment in 5:13–16 (despite the NIV's futures). At greater length Jeremiah celebrates Babylon's doom as if from the standpoint of the *final* generation of captives, now urging them to escape (Je. 50:8; 51:45; *cf.* Is. 48:20) – whereas he had forbidden such thoughts to his literal contemporaries in their different time and role (Je. 29:4–14).

Still more to our point, 13:1 – 14:23 (a named oracle by 'Isaiah son of Amoz') sees Babylon, as chs. 40–66 see her, not as the unruly Assyrian province of Isaiah's day, but as a world power whose impending fall will mean the end of Israel's exile. To this oracle we must add the dreamlike vision of 21:1–10, where the reported fall of Babylon throws Isaiah into a state of shock.

In the light of all this, the intense involvement of chs. 40–66 with the Babylonian exile, its lessons and its aftermath, may transcend the reader's expectation, but hardly Isaiah's. For him it could well be the final flowering of his preoccupation with the interplay between those opposites, Babylon and Israel, in the long purposes of God, and represent the fulfilment of his ministry.

It may be worth adding that even the supreme anomaly, the naming of Cyrus a century-and-a-half before his time (44:28; 45:1), is not unparalleled (see the predicting of Josiah, at twice this interval, in 1 Ki. 13:2). Secondly, the power to predict is precisely the proof paraded here that Yahweh alone is God (*cf.* 41:21–23, 26–29; 44:7–8, 25–28; 46:10–11; 48:3–8. Note that 48:8 blames Israel's deafness, not God's silence, for her ignorance of the new things that were to happen at the end of the exile).

2. *The distinctive style of chs. 40–66.* This would only be a valid argument against Isaiah's authorship if these chapters were addressed to a comparable situation and audience to those of 1–39. But if they are indeed Isaiah's, they are the product of his old age, a message written, not preached, concerned to comfort rather than warn, and directed to a future generation with scarcely a glance at his own. These are immense differences. Such prophesying may seem an intrinsic improbability (see above), but one cannot have the objection both ways. For it would be still more extraordinary (granted that Isaiah was the author) if so radical a shift of situation, method and object were to produce no great change of thought and expression.

Certainly one might expect in chs. 1–39, if the whole book is Isaiah's, an occasional foretaste of 40–66, when the latter's themes were momentarily anticipated; and this is so. God's sovereignty in history (a major theme of 40–66) is expressed to Sennacherib in 37:26 (701 BC) in the very tone and terms of the later chapters: 'Have you not heard?' (*cf.* 40:28); 'Long ago I ordained it' (*cf.* 41:4; Heb.); 'In days of old' (*cf.* 45:21; 46:10); 'I planned it' (*cf.* 46:11); 'now I have brought it to pass' (*cf.* 48:3). There is similar language on this theme in 22:11. On the 'greater exodus', ch. 35 not only matches the finest eloquence of chs. 40–66 (with which it has to be grouped to save the theory of multiple authorship) but also, in almost every verse, uses the special idioms of 1–39. Again, in the visions of ultimate concord, the passages 11:6–9 and 65:25 can scarcely be told apart. These may be comparative rarities, but they are recognizable firstfruits of the total crop.

3. *Vocabulary.* Isaiah's early task of denunciation called for such terms as 'briers and thorns', the 'scourge', the 'storm', the 'remnant'; but the later work of reassurance and vocation emphasized God's initiative to 'create', 'choose' and 'redeem'. His 'purpose' is seen to embrace the distant 'islands', the 'ends of the earth' and 'all flesh'; this naturally calls forth the invitation to 'praise', 'rejoice' and 'break forth into singing'. Even the subsidiary parts of speech reflect the change of subject, for the later chapters abound in those that give warmth and emphasis to an utterance.

Alongside the variations, however, must be put the significant number of terms which are common to both parts of Isaiah but seldom or never encountered elsewhere in the OT. 'The Holy One of Israel' (twelve times in 1–39, thirteen in 40–66) is the best-known example, but several other expressions for God add their smaller testimony: *e.g.* the term for 'one who forms or designs' used with a possessive pronoun (22:11; 29:16; 44:2); 'the Mighty One of Jacob/Israel' (1:24; 49:26; 60:16). There are also rare or unique designations of Israel that occur in both parts such as 'blind' (29:18; 35:5; 42:16–18), 'deaf' (29:18; 35:5; 42:18; 43:8), 'forsakers of the LORD' (1:28; 65:11), 'ransomed of the LORD' (35:10; 51:11), 'the work of my hands' (29:23; 60:21). (These examples are taken from the fuller list of R. Margalioth, *The Indivisible Isaiah*, 1964.) It is this large stock of Isaianic expressions that has called forth the theory (for which there is very little supporting evidence) that a circle of disciples perpetuated Isaiah's thought-forms through the centuries. It is simpler to suppose a single mind.

4. *Theology.* It should now be clear that these two main parts of the book face different situations and give complementary teaching. But there is more than this. As J. A. Motyer has

shown ('The "Servant Songs" in the Unity of Isaiah', *TSF Bulletin*, Spring 1957, pp. 3–7), the prophecies of 1–39 lead up to the prediction of a devastating historical punishment, which poses serious theological problems in view of the doctrines and promises set out elsewhere in those chapters. Chs. 40–66 are therefore more than a completion; they are a solution without which chs. 1–39 would end in unresolved discord. And 'if a prophet can be inspired to declare God's truth in the context of history . . . it is no great demand that he should also be inspired to find the solutions to the theological problems raised by those revelations . . .'

To sum up: the theory of multiple authorship (since dual authorship breaks down into this) creates at least as many difficulties as it appears to settle. (It also raises questions elsewhere in the OT, where pre-exilic prophets appear to use material from this book; but this cannot be pursued here.) It makes Isaiah the author of a torso; it admits a criterion of analysis which leaves few of the prophets the sole authors of their writings; it envisages centuries of creative activity by not only an 'Isaiah-school' but similar groups revering other prophets, whose freedom to expand or adjust their masters' work compares strangely with the care, at a not much later date, to transmit it unaltered, and whose very existence is no more than an inference. It also has to account for the unbroken early tradition of Isaiah's unity, and to come to terms with the NT's evident endorsement of that view.

Certainly it may be argued that the NT is not pronouncing on this question, but quoting without digressing; this is the opinion of many who wholeheartedly accept its authority. None the less it is a more direct exegesis, unless the objections are overwhelming, to take it that 'Isaiah' there does mean 'Isaiah'; and at every point this approach seems to offer a similar simplicity. The alternatives (of which there are more than we have mentioned) tend to grow more elaborate the more they are followed through; and this is not a reassuring symptom. When this happens, it is usually time to look for a different centre and a tighter, more integrated scheme.

Further reading

G. W. Grogan, *Isaiah*, EBC (Zondervan, 1990).
J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, NICOT, vol.1 (chs. 1–39) (Eerdmans, 1986; vol.2 forthcoming).
J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP, 1993).

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Commentary

1:1–31 A situation of crisis

1:1 The prophet and his period

Isaiah means 'Yahweh (is) salvation', a name well suited to the 'evangelical prophet'. The list of kings indicates that he prophesied for at least forty years, from about 740 BC, the last year of Uzziah (*cf.* 6:1), until some point after the Jerusalem siege of 701 in the time of *Hezekiah*, whose reign continued to 687/6.

1:2–4 The great accusation

The appeal to *heavens* and *earth* recalls the parting injunction of Moses (Dt. 30:19), to which the emphatic *children* adds a note of personal intensity. In the Lord's direct utterance of vs 2b, 3 (*I . . . me . . . my*) with the confirming comment of v 4, we are already at the heart of the crisis: God's family has broken with him. (V 3 is still more poignant in the terse original, without the *but*. In v 4a the sense may well be '[God's] brood, evildoers!' – the same paradox as in v 2b.) The title *the Holy One of Israel* is almost peculiar to Isaiah, with twelve occurrences in chs. 1–39 and thirteen in 40–66. Elsewhere it is found only twice. It echoes the seraphim's cry (6:3), yet mitigates the remoteness of 'holy' by the fact of God's self-giving to Israel. Ho. 11:9 anticipates the thought.

1:5–9 The devastation of Judah

Whether this is one of Isaiah's later oracles, placed here to open the book on a note of urgency, or whether it is a flash of pre-vision (the *as* and *like* of vs 7d, 8d, rather suggest this, for the prophet seems to be describing what only he can see), it highlights certain themes given him at his call. *Cf.* the closed minds of v 5a with 6:9–10; the devastation of v 7 with 6:11–12; the sparing of the few in v 9 with 6:13. Here is the first hint of the 'remnant' motif, to be prominent as the prophecy develops (see especially 10:20–22).

The picture in vs 5–6 is not of a sick man, but of someone flogged within an inch of his life, yet asking for more. V 5a makes this point, and the symptoms of 6b are those of inflicted injuries; *cf.* the *welts* with the 'wounds' ('stripes' AV) of 53:5. The literal reality comes out in vs 7–8: it is the land of Judah trampled under foreign hordes, with only Jerusalem (*Zion*) left standing. It is evidently the aftermath of Sennacherib's invasion, which has its outline in 2 Ki. 18:13, its effects glimpsed in Is. 37:30–32, and its statistics recorded on the Taylor Prism where Sennacherib claims forty-six walled towns as captured, together with 'innumerable villages' and a fifth of a million people. The *shelter* is the field-worker's or watchman's shanty, a forlorn relic of the harvest. So much for glorious Zion – within an ace of being wiped out like Sodom (9).

1:10–20 Pious corruption and its cleansing

To be addressed as *Sodom* was virtually charge and sentence in one. As a disaster site, Sodom meant all that Pompeii or Hiroshima have come to signify to us; hence v 9. For ill repute it stood alone – until Isaiah spoke v 10. He was supported by Ezekiel (Ezk. 16:48) and by our Lord (Mt. 11:23), who measured (and still measures) guilt by opportunity. Of all prophetic outbursts at religious unreality (*cf.* 1 Sa. 15:22; Je. 7:21–23; Ho. 6:6; Am. 5:21–24; Mi. 6:6–8), this is the most powerful and sustained. Its vehemence is unsurpassed, even in Amos, and the form and content build up together. First, the offerings are rejected, then the offerers (11–12); but while God's tone sharpens from distate to revulsion, his specific accusation is held back to the lurid end of v 15: *Your hands are full of blood.*

Now reproach gives way to command, in eight thunderous calls to have done with evil (16) and get busy with good (17). This is repentance at full stretch, unsparingly personal, ungrudgingly practical (*cf.* Dn. 4:27; Mt. 3:8; Lk. 19:8). But these searching demands prepare for the offer of unmerited salvation which immediately follows.

It is striking that the great offer is introduced (18), like the great accusation of vs 2–4, with an echo of the law courts: *let us reason together, i.e.* let us argue our case (*cf.* Jb. 23:7). God must have frank confrontation; but, given this, he can change the unchangeable and delete the indelible (the *scarlet* and *crimson* were not only glaring; they were fast colours); only so can the call, *Wash . . . yourselves* (16) be anything but a mockery. Vs 19–20 remind us once more of the life-and-death alternatives in Dt. 30:15–20 (*cf.* on v 2, above), which could almost be called the text of the discourse.

1:21–31 God's lament and resolve

1:21–23 Lost purity. As in a funeral dirge ('How the mighty have fallen!', 2 Sa. 1:25; *cf.* the 'How – !' of 14:12; La. 1:1, *etc.*) the theme is vanished glory; even the metaphors for it tail off from the tragic to the trivial (wife . . . silver . . . wine). Only the moral loss is lamented; not

David's empire or Solomon's wealth, simply their justice. V 23 presents in miniature the same progression from spiritual revolt to social injustice which was traced between vs 2 and 17.

1:24–26 Refining fire. God takes up his own metaphor from v 22, to reveal the fiery aspect of love and the merciful aspect of judgment. It is love, the opposite of indifference, which counts *your dross* as *my enemies* (*cf.* 62:1; Rev. 3:19).

1:27–31 Destroying fire. God's line between friend and foe, the *redeemed* and the *broken*, runs right through Zion; not between Jew and Gentile but between *penitent ones* (*i.e.* lit. those who 'turn') and *rebels*. For the latter, the fire is the end, not the beginning. The key to the metaphor of *oaks* and *gardens* (29–30) is in v 31; they stand here for human strength and organization, which one is tempted to trust, *i.e.* *the mighty man* and *his work*, impressive but precarious (*cf.* Am. 2:9). (It is unnecessary to see a reference to idols or fertility rites, *e.g.* the miniature 'gardens of Adonis' whose withering re-enacted the annual death of the god, although these may have suggested the unusual metaphor.) There is a modern ring to the warning that man's very skill can be his undoing, the *spark* (31) that sets off the conflagration.

2:1 – 4:6 God's Jerusalem and man's

The new heading suggests that these prophecies may have circulated as a unit before their inclusion in the full collection. They alternate sharply between the final glory of Jerusalem and its sordid present.

2:2–5 The city of God

Here, as in the nearly identical Mi. 4:1–5, is seen the true eminence of Zion, that the Lord is in her (*cf.* Ps. 68:15–16, where higher peaks look on with envy); and this is the only glory of the church. Her role is to draw people (2c, 3a), not to dragoon them; but their need is of God's uncompromising truth and rule (3b, 4a; *cf.* 42:4), the firm centre to any perfect circle. The idyllic close to the prophecy (4bc) cannot be torn away from the opening, or we are left with the bitter caricature of this scene in Joel 3:9–10. So, both here and in Micah, vision issues in appeal (5), not to dream of a world movement one day, but to respond in the present and on the spot.

Perhaps our Lord had this passage in mind when the first token of the Gentile inflow elicited his prophecy of being lifted up (the same verb, in a richer sense, as in the LXX of Is. 2:2b) to draw all men to himself (Jn. 12:32).

2:6–9 The city of mammon

The flood of superstition (6) alliances (6c), wealth (7a), armaments (7b) and idols (8), making cosmopolitan Judah anything but the light to the nations pictured just above, suggests the days of Jotham or Ahaz, early in Isaiah's career, between the prosperity of Uzziah and the reforms of Hezekiah. Thronged though it is, the land is destitute; it has everything but God (6a).

On the reputation of the *Philistines* for soothsaying (6) *cf.* 1 Sa. 6:2–6; 2 Ki. 1:2–4. On the materialism shown in v 7 see Dt. 17:16–17. The word for *idols* is a favourite term in Isaiah, perhaps because it is identical with the adjective 'worthless' (*cf.* Jb. 13:4). *Men* and *people* (*'ādām . . . 'îš*, the generic and individual terms for 'men') are translated 'low and high' in Ps. 49:2 (very much as in AV, RV here; but this is to read rather too much into them). They recur, as a way of saying 'everyone' in vs 11 and 17.

2:10–22 The terror of the Lord

The ominous refrains (10b, 19b, 21b; 11 and 17) and the immensity of the scene make this a poem of extraordinary power. It consummates Isaiah's opening vision of the Lord 'high and exalted' (6:1) and provides the final argument against reliance on earthly might, which is a constant theme of his prophecy. The fact that *the LORD Almighty has a day* (12) gives Isaiah's preaching the same forward thrust as Paul's (*cf.* Acts 17:31) – an element the church tends to lose – and in this passage the reference is clearly to the last day not some intermediate crisis. The apocalyptic chs. 24–27 will attend to this in closer detail.

The array of high things covers much of what we perennially find impressive in natural resources (13–14), constructed defences (15), technical and cultural achievements (16; see below), and above all, in man himself and man-made religion (17–18). But the end is more striking still, its scene of frantic haste (like that of Rev. 6:15–17.) throwing into relief the present patience of God, who could reduce us in a moment to ignominious flight and to flinging away what he has so long commanded us to put away (20).

Tarshish (16; see the NIV mg.) perhaps means a refinery, and ships so named would be those built to carry a cargo of ingots. Or it may stand for Tartessus in Spain, and for far-ranging vessels (*cf.* 23:6). The rare word for *vessel* (AV 'pictures', RV 'imagery') has, it seems, the sense of 'ships', stressing in this instance their beauty (*stately*), rather than their size. V 22 is absent from the LXX, but it has the same important function as v 5, to translate vision into action. The allusion to *breath . . . nostrils* is to people's slender hold on life; it makes an effective prelude to the next chapter.

3:1–15 Judgment by decay

Here all is as beggarly as in the previous scene it was cosmic and overpowering. It is a study in disintegration, through the pressure of scarcity on a people without ideals. The scarcity, which is desperate, is twofold; of material things (*food* and *water*, v 1; *clothing*, v 7) and of leadership (2–4). In parts of Judah the prophecy no doubt was beginning to come true by the time the Assyrians had done their pillaging and deporting (see on 1:5–9), but its real fulfilment waited a century to Nebuchadnezzar's removal of the ablest citizens to Babylon (*cf.* 2 Ki. 24:14), leaving behind an utterly weak and irresponsible regime.

The list of leading men (2–3) provides a firsthand glimpse of the society of Isaiah's day, whose respected figures included a liberal sprinkling of charlatans (*soothsayer ... clever enchanter*). But for all the misrule of this company, worse was to come; first in sheer incompetence and resultant anarchy (4–5) and finally in a ruin so complete that it would seem irretrievable (6–8). The *boys* and *mere children* of v 4 are a telling metaphor, like the *youths* and *women* of v 12; but the *heap of ruins* (6) may well be meant literally. In spite of the assurance that Jerusalem would not fall to Sennacherib (*e.g.* 37:33–35.), Isaiah saw as plainly as Micah that its final glory (*cf.* 2:2–4) would have to be preceded by destruction (e.g. 22:4–5; 32:14; 39:6; *cf.* Mi. 3:12; 4:1–8.). It was no part of his teaching (though this is often asserted) that God would unconditionally preserve his city.

Paradoxically, the utter defeatism which is predicted in vs 6 and 7 is traced back in the following verses to the present spirit of bravado. The fine show of free thinking and moral daring described in vs 8b and 9 not only affronts God himself, who is the only source of glory (as the striking close of v 8 makes plain), but leaves one ultimately nothing to believe in. After the sceptic has had his fling, he is left stranded in the wasteland he has helped to produce. So vs 13–15 pass sentence on Isaiah's brutal and pitiless contemporaries, who have set the fatal process in motion. Ch. 5 will be more explicit; it will not be more damning.

3:16 – 4:1 Silk to sackcloth

Triviality has never been more mercilessly exposed, or more abruptly overtaken by tragedy. Even the opening parade is jarring as well as absurd, against the ugly background of v 15 which is its human cost. There is no need for caricature; the twenty-one items of finery (18–23) make a little kingdom of their own, enough to occupy the whole mind, but utterly vulnerable. The terrible transformation scene (3:24 – 4:1) has often been enacted; and in vs 25–26 the fate of the individuals becomes symbolic of that of the mother-city itself – an image to be used again both of Babylon and Jerusalem (*cf.* 47:1–3; 52:2).

Although these particular trivialities may seem remote, all generations – and both sexes – have their own solemn absurdities which can be all-absorbing. In the context of these chapters they present us with one more aspect of earthly glory, its emptiness, which must be put to shame before the glory of God. This splendour now breaks through in the following section.

4:2–6 The glory to come

The general tenor of the passage, in its context, is that salvation lies on the far side of judgment. Israel's glory must be that of new growth after destruction, of holiness after a fiery cleansing, and of God's 'Shekinah' – his manifested presence, as in the exodus days.

Branch (2) is a misleading term for the 'shoot of new growth' which is paralleled by the *fruit of the land*. The point is that Israel must be reborn; from her roots a new crop must spring up when judgment has removed all her present glory and all but a few survivors. It is the renewed community that is in mind at this point; later it will emerge that one man will be this new growth *par excellence* (*cf.* Je. 23:5; Zc. 3:8; 6:12; and similar expressions in Is. 11:1).

The NIV obscures the individualism of v 3 (lit. 'he who is left ..., who remains ..., every one written for life ...'). The new Israel will consist of the personally holy, whose names are in the book of life (*cf.* Ex. 32:32–33; Mal. 3:16; Rev. 20:12–15). But v 5 depicts the community of these, assembled in a very different spirit from that of 1:13, and overarched by God's glory. This *glory* will rest on the whole mount, not merely on the sanctuary as in the wilderness, since all are holy now. The hymn, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken', basing one of its verses on vs 5 and 6, rightly sees here God's presence 'for a glory and a covering' over and around his church. *Cf.* v 6 with 25:4–5.

5:1–30 The bitter vintage

A self-contained sequence, this chapter has much in common with its predecessors (for the vineyard metaphor, *cf.* 3:14; for the humbling of the lofty, *cf.* 2:9 with 5:15), and it castigates some of the social sins we have already met. It brings the book's long overture to a strong climax.

5:1–7 The parable

This is a little masterpiece. Its opening, as a love song, catches the ear and the imagination; the

vineyard, like the walled garden and orchard in the Song of Solomon (*e.g.* Song 4:12–15), will surely speak of a bride and her beauty, guarded for the bridegroom. But the listeners are brought up short by the anticlimax and the appeal for their opinion (3–4) – only to find that like David before Nathan (2 Sa. 12:1–7) they have been assenting to their own impeachment (*cf.* also Mt. 21:40–43). Finally, in the original language, the charge is pressed home by an unforgettable last line, terse as an epigram (7). Its double word-play defies reproduction, but might be freely rendered: 'Did he find right? Nothing but riot! Did he find decency? Only despair.'

The parable brings home, as nothing else could, the sheer unreason and indefensibility of sin – we find ourselves searching for some cause of the vine's failure, and there is none. Only humans could be as capricious as that.

5:8–23 The six woes

Here 'the wild grapes of Judah' (G.A. Smith's phrase) show themselves in the plainest of terms. The woes follow one another with increasing rapidity, to give a sense of mounting vehemence, as in the impassioned appeals at the climax of 1:12–17. They are a sample, not an inventory, related to Isaiah's prevailing theme of human arrogance and its downfall; so they are predominantly the sins of the high and mighty.

The attack has all the bite of personal portraiture. Here are the great, for all to see; they emerge as extortioners (8–10), playboys (11–12; *cf.* 22–23) and scoffers, whose only predictable values are cash ones (18–23).

5:8–10 Extortioners. The property law which Naboth defended with his life (*cf.* Lv. 25:23; 1 Ki. 21:3) has become a dead letter, but the craving for empty acres will be ironically fulfilled. The *bath* was a liquid measure equal to the dry *ephah*, of about 8 gallons (36 litres); the *homer* (not to be confused with the *omer* of Ex. 16:36) was ten times as large (*cf.* Ezk. 45:11). So the harvest was to yield disastrously less than the sowing.

5:11–17 Playboys. Refusal to think, *i.e.* to face God's facts (12b, 13a), is anathema to the prophets (Je. 8:7; Ho. 4:6; Am. 6:1–7), whether it takes the form of mindless religion (1:3, 10–17), sophistry (5:20–21), occultism (8:19–20) or the sodden escapism depicted here. The judgment of these sensualists, like that of the fashion-crazed women of 3:16–4:1, will be to lose the one thing they have lived for (13b) and to find themselves the object of a more insatiable appetite than their own (14). *The grave* is lit. Sheol (see on 14:9, 15; 38:10, 18).

5:18–23 Scoffers. Since Hebrew often uses the same word for a thing and its outcome, v 18 may mean 'who draw punishment (on themselves) . . ., who draw retribution (on themselves) . . .'. (*cf.* Heb. of Gn. 4:13; Zc. 14:19). The next verse tends to confirm this. Alternatively, the metaphor may be intentionally strange, since the scoffer in his perversity is not dragged into sin but tugs eagerly at it, makes sure of it. There are such 'fearless thinkers' in most generations, whether blasphemous (19), perverted (20) or calmly omniscient (21). They cut as fine a figure as the fearless drinkers of v 22, and the realists of v 23 who know the value of money, if of little else.

5:24–30 God's scavengers

The repeated *Therefore* gives a doubly inevitable note to the judgment, in terms of logical outcome (24) and judicial wrath (25), both of which are always present when God punishes. The hand *upraised* to strike will be glimpsed again in 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4; so this isolated reference could be a scribal displacement, but is better seen as a shadow of the approaching storm, uniting this chapter of judgment to its successors. The army of terrifying precision and ferocity presented in the final verses, machine and wild beast in one, is Assyria's to the life. But this power, the greatest of its day, is at the Lord's beck and call (26) – small comfort to the rebel, for whom this group of chapters ends without a ray of hope.

6:1–13 The prophet's call

Only now do we pause for the inaugural vision, so urgent was the opening call to repentance, and so necessary the detailed scene of these chapters to show what wrung Isaiah's confession from him (5) and what was the context of the decree of hardening (9–10). In this vision, the major concerns of the book are discernible: God's inescapable holiness and sole majesty; the glory he has decreed and the clearance it demands; the cleansing of the penitent and the resurgent life that will yet break forth from the stock of Israel.

King Uzziah died after, not before, Isaiah's call, as 1:1 makes clear. If his death has significance apart from its date, it is that he died a leper, for flouting God's holiness when 'his heart was lifted up' (2 Ch. 26:16, RV; *cf.* Is. 2:17). The themes of *throne* and *temple* (1) and *King* (5) suggest to some writers a festival of divine enthronement, but there is no hard evidence for it; their importance, in any case, lies in showing to whom all human authority must bow.

Seraphs means 'fiery ones', an epithet suited to the serpents of Nu. 21:6, 8 and Is. 14:29; 30:6. Here these winged creatures are man-like

(*his feet*; and *his hand* in v 6), but the point of the description is to re-emphasize the holiness of God, in whose presence even the dazzling and the sinless are overwhelmed, fit neither to see him nor be seen, yet swift to serve (2) and tireless to praise him (3). The antiphon (3), for all its brevity, thunders out (*cf.* v 4) the nature, name and power of God in its first line (*Almighty* is lit. 'of hosts', *i.e.* of the armies, or resources, which he commands in heaven and earth), and in its second line the scope and character of his dominion. *Glory* is the shining-out of what he is, and therefore of his holiness; *the whole earth*, not merely Israel, was made by him and for this. The vast implications of it for judgment and salvation are seen in 11:9; 40:5; Nu. 14:21–23; Hab. 2:14. Notice the variants on the theme of fullness in vs 1,3,4.

The shaking of foundations, the darkness and the dismay awaken echoes of Sinai (Ex. 19:16–18) and premonitions of judgment. (See the NT's comment on all these in Heb. 12:18–29, and note the relevance of Mt. 5:8). It is integral to Isaiah's message that his words will be those of a forgiven man, himself as guilty as those to whom he will offer life or death. It is also characteristic that judgment is prominent in the cleansing. The fiery messenger and burning coal must have presaged at first anything but salvation (*cf.* 1:25–26; 4:4), yet they came from the place of sacrifice and spoke the language of atonement (*forgiven* is from the Heb. verb 'to atone'). The *live coal* symbolizes the total significance of the altar from which it came; that the penalty of sin was paid by a substitute offered in the sinner's place. The symbol, applied to Isaiah's lips (the point at which his need was most pressing), assures him of personal forgiveness.

Isaiah's '*Here am I! Send me!*' is doubly remarkable. First, for its contrast to his previous despair (5) and to the diffidence of, say, Moses or Jeremiah. Secondly, for the fact that this human voice is accepted in the heavenly court. (See 1 Ki. 22:19–23 and Rev. 5:1–14 for comparison and contrast.) The decree of hardening, quoted in full or in part at least six times in the NT (*e.g.* Mt. 13:14–15; Acts 28:26–27.), should be read through to its conclusion in vs 11–13, where the judgment is seen to clear the ground for new growth. Isaiah fulfilled this commission to blind and deafen by proclaiming (not withholding) the truth. God here shares with the prophet the critical significance of his ministry. Sinful Israel has come to the point where one more rejection of the truth will finally confirm them for inevitable judgment. The dilemma of the prophet is that there is no way of saving the sinner but by the very truth whose rejection will condemn him utterly. The one sign of life (*cf.* 11:1; Jb. 14:7–9) is absent from the LXX, which omits v 13c; but the Isaiah Scroll from Qumran supports our text, and it is inconceivable that Isaiah's doctrine of the godly remnant (*e.g.* 10:20–23) should have contradicted his opening commission. So the vision ends with hope. Instead of the 'seed of evildoers' (1:4, AV, RV) there will survive *the holy seed* – an expression of infinite promise in the light both of v 3, concerning holiness, and of the recurrent pledges of the victorious 'seed' in Gn. 3:15; 22:18; Gal. 3:16.

7:1 – 12:6 Storm and sun: Assyria and Immanuel

These chapters have been called 'The book of Immanuel', after the promised child of 7:14; 8:8, whose nature and reign emerge in 9:1–7 and 11:1–10 against a background of local menace (7:1–9.) and world-wide dispersion (11:11–16.). The prophecies arise straight out of a contemporary crisis, but they extend to the last days (9:1) and the whole earth (11:9–10; 12:4–5).

7:1–17 Isaiah confronts King Ahaz

7:1–9 The call to faith. The date is *c.* 735 BC, and the situation a desperate bid by Israel and Syria to unite their neighbours against the all-conquering Assyria. On Judah's refusal to co-operate, they have arrived in force to replace her king with their own man, *the son of Tabeel* (6).

Isaiah's intervention, amid the general alarm, is impressive and significant. His son *Shear-Jashub* ('A remnant will [re]turn') was living portent of judgment and salvation (see on 1:27; *cf.* 8:18). The very meeting-place would prove, one day, how fatal was the course the king was set on (36:2). The injunction, *keep calm and don't be afraid*, was the first of a lifelong series of appeals for trust instead of intrigue (*cf.* v 9b; 8:12–13; 28:16 and especially 30:15). The appeal was rational enough: Syria and Israel, the *two smouldering stubs*, or 'fag-ends' (Cheyne), would soon be snuffed out. Syria was crushed in 732, while Israel lost her northern territories as early as 734, her national existence in 722, and her racial identity through a series of repeoplings which continued to at least the reign of Esarhaddon (*cf.* Ezr. 4:2). By the end of this (669 BC) she was indeed *too shattered to be a people* (8).

The force of vs 7b–9a seems to be that whereas by implication Judah is under the only God, her enemies are inevitably under men – and what men; to name them is enough! The call to faith (9b) is the pith of Isaiah's preaching, with a slogan-like play on words, as elusive to the translator as that of 5:7. It might

be paraphrased: 'Hold God in doubt, you'll not hold out!', or 'Unsure – insecure!'

7:10–17 The sign of Immanuel. To offer any proof that Ahaz cared to name made it clear that the call to faith was (and is) primarily a call to the will (*cf.* Jn. 7:17). To wave the offer aside was to reject God flatly, but Ahaz had already made up his mind. Faith played no part in his religion (2 Ki. 16:3–4, 10–20) or his politics. Behind the smooth scriptural talk (12; *cf.* Dt. 6:16) lay a plan to outwit his enemies by making friends with the biggest of them (*cf.* 2 Ki. 16:7–10). What kind of friend Assyria would prove, Isaiah made clear in v 17, reinforced by vs 18–25.

Meanwhile God had his own sign, for a wider audience than Ahaz (the *you* in vs 13–14 is plural, for David's whole dynasty) and of richer meaning than a show of power. The attendant details partly reassure (15, 16), partly warn (17); the *curds and honey* are enigmatic, they are symbols of natural plenty (*cf.* 22; Ex. 3:8) yet also of a land depopulated (22b) and untilled (*cf.* 23–25). But the heart of the sign is Immanuel. Who he is remains unsaid; it will emerge in 9:6–7; 11:1–5. Enough, so far, that while the king calls in an army, God looks to the birth of a child (*cf.* Gn. 17:19).

How the sign fits the crisis is much debated. As a straight prophecy of Christ (*cf.* Mt. 1:22–23.) it may seem too remote to speak to Ahaz; yet the sign was for the threatened *house of David* (6, 13; see the paragraph above), and the very vision of a coming prince was itself a reassurance. *Cf.* 37:30; Ex. 3:12; Rom. 4:11 for signs to confirm faith rather than compel it. See also on 8:1–4, below. But God may have unveiled the distant scene by way of the near. Some suggest that the sign had immediate value in (*a*) the time it indicated (the few years from the conception of a child – any child – now, to his reaching the age of conscious choice; 16); or (*b*) the name ('God [is] with us') which a contemporary mother would be moved to give her son – the opposite of Ichabod (1 Sa. 4:21); or (*c*) the rank, if it announced a royal birth, which tends to be a harbinger of hope. (But on any reckoning, this child could not be Hezekiah, born some years before.) These possibilities are not necessarily in conflict with each other, nor with the long-term prediction of Christ.

The term *virgin* (14) is supported by the LXX as quoted in Mt. 1:23. The nearest English equivalent is 'girl'. The Hebrew word describes a potential bride in Gn. 24:43, and the young Miriam in Ex. 2:8; it presumes rather than states virginity and is a term outgrown at marriage. Before its NT fulfilment its miraculous implications would pass unnoticed, overshadowed by those mentioned above. (For a full discussion, see E. J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* [IVP, 1954], pp. 143–198.) The tenses of *will be with child and will give birth* are indeterminate; the Hebrew participles do not distinguish between present and future.

When (15) should probably be 'until' or 'in order that'.

7:18 – 8:22 The choice expounded

7:18–25 Invasion and its aftermath. The two metaphors in vs 18–20 make the swarms of looting soldiers not only an uncomfortably vivid prospect but clearly a divine scourge (a theme developed in 10:5–11). On the *hired* razor (20) *cf.* Ezk. 29:18–20. The irony was that Ahaz imagined *he* had hired it. The point of vs 21–25 is the sad spectacle of the promised land reverting to jungle for lack of Israelites, its abundance (22) a rebuke to their sparseness, and its wild state a proof of their decline. It is the kind of reproach that a failing church might receive from inherited glories and commitments which it can no longer sustain.

8:1–4 The sign of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. The sign of Immanuel (7:14–17), although it concerned ultimate events, did imply a pledge for the immediate future, in that however soon Immanuel were born, the present threat would have passed before he could be even aware of it. But the time of his birth was undisclosed; hence the new sign is given, to deal only with the contemporary scene and with its darker aspect. *This* child would be of ordinary birth, and by his name, 'Quick-pickings-Easy-prey' (J.B. Phillips), he would be a standing witness (*cf.* 8:18) to God's predictions both about the enemy at the gate (4; *cf.* 7:16) and about Assyria's next victim, Judah itself (*cf.* 7:17). The careful attestation (2) would attract notice and also confirm that the name had preceded the event. (For a later placard see 30:7–8.)

8:5–8 God's gentle flow, and Assyria's torrent. Since *Shiloah* (*cf.* Jn. 9:7) is another word for 'conduit' (in this case an open aqueduct, not Hezekiah's tunnel, which was still in the future), it was probably the encounter with the king (7:3) that suggested this figure for God's quiet help. By calling in evil to fight evil, Judah would find herself in the path of the very flood she had unleashed; and the land she was jeopardizing was *Immanuel's*. But there is hope as well as menace in the phrase *up to the neck* (8); for Immanuel's sake there is a limit set (*cf.* 10:24–27.).

8:9–15 God our refuge or our ruin. These splendidly defiant verses are the prophet's response to the meaning of Immanuel, *God is with us* (10c), and to the Lord's insistence (*his strong hand upon me*; 11) that the people

should reshape all their thinking, including their terms for things and their emotional attitudes (12), round God himself. (*Cf.* the call to a transformed outlook in Rom. 12:2.) *Conspiracy* may refer to the intimidating coalition of 7:2; alternatively, it may mean no more than 'league' or 'alliance' and be the term Ahaz was using for his siding with Assyria. If the latter, Isaiah is saying 'This is no alliance worth the name', *i.e* 'Don't trust Assyria or fear Syria; trust and fear God.'

Vs 12b–13a are quoted in 1 Pet. 3:14–15, which strikingly identifies Christ with *the* LORD *Almighty*, as indeed Jesus himself had already implied in his allusion to Is. 8:14–15 in Lk. 20:18a (*cf.* Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:7–8). See also on 28:16, below. It is as the most solid of all realities that God is presented here; either all-sufficient or insuperable.

8:16–22 The light withdrawn. The general tenor of the paragraph is that Israel is refusing the light (19–22) and thereby losing God's teaching and blessing (16–17). All they will have is *signs* (18); all they can expect is *darkness*.

But vs 16–18 are a kernel of immense promise. With the expression *my disciples*, God introduces a new definition of his people and their relation to him (*cf.* Jn. 6:45). (These are the willing exceptions to 6:9–10.) Isaiah's responsive faith (17) speaks for such, and the little group of v 18 is seen in Heb. 2:13 as typical of the church gathered round Christ – a model church indeed, teachable, faithful, expectant, conspicuous. On the function of Isaiah's sons as *signs and symbols* see 7:3; 8:1–4. (The speakers in vs. 16 and 17–22 are evidently the Lord (16) and the prophet (17–22); the imperatives of v 16 are singular, and there is no individual whom the prophet could be naturally addressing. An attractive alternative to Isaiah as implied recipient of God's message might be Immanuel (*cf.* v 8c; Heb. 2:13), but Isaiah's sign-bearing sons seem to be in mind in v 18.

The contrast to this godly group is very marked in vs 19–22. With *mediums* instead of prophets, gibberish instead of teaching, and the dead as guides to the living, it is small wonder that *they have no light of dawn*. For the prohibition of such practices, see *e.g.* Dt. 18:9–12.

9:1–7 The Messianic dawn

The Hebrew Bible takes v 1 with the previous chapter, but Mt. 4:15–16 makes it the opening of our passage. *Zebulun* and *Naphtali* are highly topical here, for they fell to Assyria within months of Isaiah's meeting with Ahaz (see on 7:1–9). So the first part of Israel to succumb would be the first to see the glory (1b) – a striking prophecy which went unheeded (*cf.* Jn. 1:46; 7:52). The mounting relief and joy in vs 1–5 as the trappings of war are abolished prepare us to meet the deliverer; but instead of some latter-day Gideon (*cf.* v 4), it is the *child* (6) already foretold as Immanuel in 7:14; 8:8.

Whereas 7:14 concentrates on his birth and 11:1–16 on his kingdom, vs 6–7 chiefly emphasize his person. Other scriptures confirm that the first three titles imply divinity; *e.g. Wonderful* regularly means 'supernatural' (*cf.* especially Jdg. 13:18), and it is Yahweh who is 'wonderful in counsel' in Is. 28:29. There have been attempts to reduce *Mighty God* to 'god-like hero' (*cf.* Ezk. 32:21, where, however, the term is plural), but 10:21 uses the identical term alongside 'the LORD, the Holy One of Israel' (10:20). *Everlasting Father* has no exact parallel but there is a paradox in so naming a child yet to be born. *Father* signifies the paternal benevolence of the perfect Ruler over a people whom he loves as his children. *Peace* in Hebrew implies prosperity as well as tranquillity, and v 7 takes up the Hebrew of *Prince* (in the word *government*) as well as *peace*, adding now the first explicit assurance that the prince will be Davidic (*cf.* 11:1). On the final phrase of v 7 see Ezk. 36:22; Zc. 8:2.

9:8 – 10:4 The shadow over Samaria

God's hand, poised to strike, was seen in 5:25; the same threat overhangs this passage, punctuating it at 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4. While the northern kingdom is principally in mind (9, 21), the final passage (10:1–4) might well include Judah, as did 5:24–25.

9:8–12 Judgment on bravado. To laugh off the facts (10) may put heart into an audience, but it is a refusal to face what the symptoms imply. Nothing can then avert judgment. *Rezin's foes* (11) would be principally the Assyrians (see on 7:1–9); the pressures of v 12 may have developed between the Assyrian conquest of Damascus in 732 and Samaria's fall in 722.

9:13–17 Judgment on laxity. Judgment begins with leaders (*cf.* Jas. 3:1) but does not excuse those who follow (17). Among the former, it is the prophets who earn God's contempt as well as his censure (15), compared, as Delitzsch puts it, to 'the tail of a fawning dog'.

9:18–21 Judgment on disunity. Sin, doubly destructive, first reduces society to a jungle, then spreads its fires through it – as our modern strifes still bear witness. But self-inflicted judgment is still *God's* judgment (vs 19a, 21b).

10:1–4 Judgment on injustice. Not the raw passions of the earlier paragraphs but the legalized wrongs of government (1) make the climax to the series. The haunting question of v 3 could undermine the exploits of a lifetime, all of them within the laws of the land.

10:5–34 God's axe over Judah

This is an important treatment of God's control of history, in the world at large and among his chosen people. Vs 9–11 seem to date the oracle after the fall of Samaria (722 BC); but Isaiah's complete prior certainty of this event (*cf.* 8:4) must not be overlooked.

10:5–19 Assyria, God's tool. The knowledge that the aggressor is wielded by God puts the question of wicked men's success in its proper context, by showing that it serves the ends of justice when it seems to defy them (6–7), and it is neither impressive in itself (15) nor ultimately unpunished (12). Its hollowness is self-confessed, incidentally, in the samples of Assyrian thinking: the complacency of vs 10–11, the pride of v 13a, and the thief's mentality of vs 13b, 14. The strong cities of v 9 (*cf.* 36:19) mark the enemy's inexorable approach, preserved in the Hebrew word order, from Carchemish on the Euphrates down to nearby Samaria. *Cf.* the more localized, whirlwind advance in vs 28–31.

Of the two metaphors, *wasting disease* and a forest *fire*, intertwined in vs 16–19 (Hebrew has no convention against mixed metaphors), the former has the extra bite, perhaps, of corresponding to the actual means God would use against the Assyrian army (see on 2 Ki. 19:35), while the latter reiterates Isaiah's dominant theme of bringing low what is lofty (*cf.* vs 33–34: 2:12–13).

10:20–23 A remnant converted. Both implications of both terms in the expression *A remnant will return* (Shear-Jashub, *cf.* 7:3) are brought out in this pregnant passage. On the one hand, no more than a sprinkling will survive the approaching judgment or come back from deportation (22–23; *cf.* 11:11); on the other hand, *return to the Mighty God* (21) implies conversion. God looks for people who repent; whose trust, unlike that of Ahaz in 2 Ki. 16:7, is in him rather than in man (20–21). Such is the true Israel; it is not the whole mass of Abraham's descendants (see the allusion in v 22a to Gn. 22:17; *cf.* Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7–9). Paul not only quotes this passage (Rom. 9:27–28) but argues extensively that the 'remnant, chosen by grace' (Rom. 11:5) is a key to God's dealings with Israel and the world.

On *the Mighty God* (21) see on 9:6. On the double mention of a *decreed* devastation (22–23) note the deliberation with which God acts throughout this chapter – see the poised hand of v 4 (with 9:12 *etc.*), the impartiality of vs 12, 25, the concern for simple justice in vs 2, 22b, and the positive outcome envisaged in vs 20–21.

10:24–34 The aggressor halted. This is a double appeal for faith. First, by recalling 'His love in time past' (24–27), secondly by depicting an Assyrian threat suddenly brought to nothing (28–34). This is pictured as a thrust from the north, covering the last 10 or 20 miles (16–32 km) to Jerusalem. Since the actual route of Sennacherib's force was to be from Lachish (*cf.* 36:2), south-west of Jerusalem, the aim of the oracle is not, presumably, to inform but to inspire, first conjuring up the most vivid impression of a northern foe swooping on Jerusalem, then abruptly changing the scene to the toppling of forest giants (33–34) – the distinctive judgment metaphor of this prophecy (*cf.* 2:12–13; 6:13; 10:18–19). It gives dramatic reinforcement to Isaiah's *do not be afraid* (24), his watchword throughout the crisis (*cf.* 7:4; 8:12–13).

11:1 – 12:6 The Messianic kingdom

We return to the theme of Immanuel, and while the fallen fortunes of the royal house (1) reveal the dark side of the sign given to Ahaz (7:13–25), the rest is bright.

11:1–5 The perfect king. The tree, felled but not finished, makes a telling contrast to the razed forest of Assyria (10:33–34). In 6:13 the tree-stump was Israel, living on in the remnant (see also on 4:2); here it is the house of David, and its growing-point is one man.

1–3a *The Spirit* (2), not royal birth alone, fits him for office, like the judges and early kings (*cf.* Jdg. 3:10; 6:34 *etc.*; 1 Sa. 10:10; 16:13), so that he is a Solomon, Gideon and David in one, yet not partially or fitfully endued, but abidingly (2a) and richly. The gifts are threefold rather than sevenfold: *wisdom* and *understanding* for government (*cf.* 1 Ki. 3:9–12), *counsel* and *power* for war (*cf.* 9:6; 28:6; 36:5), and *knowledge* and *the fear of the* LORD for spiritual leadership (*cf.* 2 Sa. 23:2). The *delight* of v 3a carries the implication that *the fear of the* LORD is fragrant to him.

Vs 3b–5 show these powers exercised in turn, making him the guide, guardian and example of his people. It is already emerging in v 4b that he is supernaturally endowed, and this is clear beyond doubt in the ensuing verses.

11:6–9 Paradise regained. In this idyllic scene the title 'Prince of Peace' (9:6) is perfectly unfolded. Significantly, peace is hard-won; it follows judgment (*cf.* v 4b) and springs from righteousness (*cf.* v 5), true to the sequence expounded in 32:17. Its heart, however, is the relationship expressed as *the knowledge of the* LORD (9; *cf.* Je. 31:34). As a picture this is unforgettable and expresses reconciliation, concord and trust with supreme effectiveness. The reign of Christ already produces this kind of transformation in the sphere of human character, and will ultimately change the whole creation (*cf.* Rom. 8:19–25.). Whether this will

be realized literally as depicted here is another matter; it seems better to view this as an earthly expression of the 'new heavens and . . . new earth' (65:17, 25) in which variety will not be enmity, and the weak will be the complement, no longer the prey, of the strong. With v 9b, *cf.* Hab. 2:14.

11:10–16 The great homecoming. V 10, echoed in v 12a, bursts the bounds of nationality, while emphasizing that salvation is in only one name under heaven (*cf.* Acts 4:12). This king is both *root* and offspring (*cf.* v 1) of the royal house (*cf.* Rev. 22:13, 16). Note the voluntary response of the nations in vs 10, 12a (*cf.* 2:3; 42:4; 51:5). At the same time, not all will flock to him, and it is as clear in this passage as elsewhere that those who choose enmity will find, logically enough, destruction (14: *cf.* v 4). The quenching of *jealousy* (*cf.* 9:20–21) is the human counterpart of vs 6–9., liberating the combativeness of God's people for its proper use (14; *cf.* Jas. 4:1, 7).

The theme of a greater exodus (15–16) will be greatly developed in the later chapters (*e.g.* 35:1–10; 48:20–21.), and that of a *highway . . . from Assyria* will acquire a richer meaning in 19:23–25.

12:1–6 The song of salvation. After the exodus allusion (11:16), there are appropriate echoes of the song of Moses (*cf.* v 2b with Ex. 15:2a and, less exactly, v 5a with Miriam's response, Ex. 15:21a).

The *anger* that overhung Israel in the refrain of 9:12, 17, *etc.* is at last turned away, and the song celebrates the end of estrangement (1), fear (2) and want (3). It is characteristic of Isaiah that quiet *trust* (2) finds an early place here, and that God's comfort is the sequel to captivity (1; *cf. e.g.* 40:1; 66:13). But God himself is the true centre of the psalm: God in relation to the singer (1–2); God known by his deeds (4–5) and his name, *i.e.* his self-proclamation (note the unusual combination *The* LORD, *the* LORD in v 2 emphasizing the personal name expounded in Ex. 3:14–15; also Isaiah's special term *the Holy One of Israel* in v 6); above all, God present in power, *great . . . among you* (6).

13:1 – 23:18 Messages for the nations

For all their obscurity of detail, these chapters teach a primary and central truth: that God's kingdom is the world. This is easy to announce in general terms; to spell it out, as this section does, is to show that this sovereignty is nothing titular but actual and searching.

The oracles were given at various times (*cf.* 14:28; 20:1). Brought together, they form a prelude to the world visions of chs. 24–27, and an interlude between the prediction of the Assyrian crisis in chs. 1–12 and its onset in chs. 28–39.

13:1 – 14:23 Babylon

That *Isaiah son of Amoz* (13:1; *cf.* 1:1) should prophesy of *Babylon* as the great oppressor, anticipating her role of a century or two later, has important implications for the authorship of chs. 40–66 (see the Introduction).

Against this, S. Erlandsson (*The Burden of Babylon* [Lund, 1970]) argues that 'Babylon' here is merely the city as it was in Isaiah's day, before its rise to imperial power, and that its destruction is that of 689 BC by its overlord, the king of Assyria. This view, however, involves relating only six of the forty-five verses directly to Babylon; seeing Israel's return from exile in 14:1–2 as unrelated to the Babylonian captivity; and directing the taunt-song of 14:4–23 at Sennacherib of Assyria, under one of his secondary titles as king of Babylon. While details of this thesis are impressive, it is hard to see why the provincial Babylon of Isaiah's day should attract this world-shaking oracle if it had no reference to the role which Babylon would play in the captivity and second exodus of Israel. Above all, the dissection of ch. 13, by which Babylon becomes almost an afterthought (19–22), and the redirection of ch. 14 to Assyria, makes this interpretation appear forced rather than compelling.

13:1–16 The day of the Lord. The poem plunges straight into a battle scene, with the signals and shouts of an attack which turns out to be a wholesale divine judgment (4–5). *My holy ones* (3) are lit. 'my consecrated ones', whether they are serving God wittingly or unwittingly. The term is non-moral here, as v 16 makes plain.

While *Babylon* is the focal point of the chapter (1, 19), it stands for something much bigger than itself, since the ambiguous Hebrew word for *country* (5), *land* (9) or *earth* (13), gives place to another meaning *world* (11). This is a setting of cosmic upheaval such as the NT uses to depict the last days (*cf.* vs 10, 13 with Mt. 24:29).

13:17–22 The overthrow of Babylon. *The Medes* (17), as the major partner in Cyrus's Medo-Persian kingdom, were destined to conquer Babylon under Cyrus in 539 BC. Their military prowess (17–18), which overthrew the Babylonian Empire, was not needed against the city itself, taken without a struggle. This was, however the beginning of the end for Babylon. Vs 19–22 telescope a decline which became irreversible when Seleucus Nicator abandoned the city in the late fourth century BC to build his new capital Seleucia, 40 miles (64 km) away. Even so, its desertion was not total until the

second century AD. The creatures of vs 21–22 (*cf.* 14:23; 34:11–15; but 35:7) are not all identifiable, but are evidently sinister and ceremonially unclean. Hence, 'satyrs' (a kind of demon; *cf.* Lv. 17:7) is a more likely translation in v 21 than *wild goats*, since goats were ritually clean. The contrast between *the jewel of kingdoms* (19) and this 'haunt for every evil spirit, . . . every unclean and detestable bird' (Rev. 18:2) reappears in the final overthrow of the ungodly world in Rev. 18, pictured as Babylon – the world whose glory Satan offered to Jesus in Mt. 4:8–9.

14:1–2 The tables turned. Here is the germ of chs. 40–66 and particularly of chs. 56–66, in which the dominance of Israel is a major interest. The starting-point, as in ch. 40, is divine grace, described here in terms of emotion (contrast God's *compassion* [1] with the heartlessness of 13:18) and of volition (*choose*). In this short space two aspects of the Gentiles' future relation to Israel are sketched, showing them as converts or as servants. With the resident *aliens* of v 1, integrated into the community, *cf.* 56:3–8.

The degrees of service glimpsed in v 2, ranging from friendly help (2a) to bondage (2b), reappear in *e.g.* 66:18–21 and 60:10–16 (see comments).

14:3–23 A taunt for the king of Babylon. God gives the last word on the great conquerors to be spoken by their victims, not their admirers (3–4a). As to the identity of *the king of Babylon*, it is clearly not the ineffective Nabonidus, the final king (for whom Belshazzar deputized), but the whole dynasty and the kingdom personified in it. See also on vs 12–21, below.

The two movements of the taunt-song (4b–11; 12–21), framed by their prologue and epilogue (3–4a; 22–23) announce their themes at once, in vs 4b and 12, with the characteristic cry of comparison, '*How . . .!*' (see on 1:21). *Cf.* ch. 47.

The broken *oppressor* is the first theme; his real epitaph is the unspeakable relief the world feels at his passing (7). God's name for such thrusters is not 'men of destiny' but 'he-goats' (the literal meaning of the Hebrew word translated *leaders* 9), a description almost as deflating as the pathetic state to which they are all seen to come. The royal coverlet of v 11 is the last brutal truth for the hedonist. *The grave* (lit. 'Sheol') is the general term for the realm of the dead; it is not the penal hell, for which the NT uses the term Gehenna. The word for *spirits of the departed* (9) is of uncertain derivation. The poetic description here and in 26:14 and Ps. 88:10 suggests a virtual suspension of existence; but the OT can look beyond this, on occasion to the resurrection of the body (see on 26:19; Dn. 12:2).

The fallen *morning star* is the second theme, *i.e.* the tyrant's fatal ambition rather than his oppression. This song is often thought to tell of the revolt of Satan (taken with Ezk. 28); but this is a precarious conjecture. The tale of pride and downfall is at most only similar to what is said of Satan in *e.g.* Lk. 10:18; 1 Tim. 3:6, and in any case, when Scripture speaks directly of his fall, it refers to the break-up of his régime, not his prior fall from grace (*cf.* Rev. 12:9–12).

Some suggest that an existing tale of the morning star, lording it over the rest and falling to earth, may lie beyond this poem (there are Canaanite verbal parallels to the personified *morning star* and *dawn*, to the title *Most High* and to the picture of a northern *mount of assembly* of the heavenly court); but such a tale, if it existed, has not come to light. The idea of storming heaven, however, was certainly connected with Babylon (*i.e.* Babel; Gn. 11). One of its ironies is the idea that to be *like the Most High* (14) is to be self-exalted, whereas it is to be self-giving (*cf.* Phil. 2:5–11.). The ugliness as well as the brevity of the false glory is powerfully shown in vs 16–21.

The expression the *depths* ('recesses') *of the pit* (15), matching the hoped-for *utmost heights* ('recesses') of the divine mount (13), gives an early glimpse of the distinctions within Sheol which become clearer in the NT (*cf.* Lk. 16:26).

14:24–27 Assyria

This briefly reaffirms 10:5–34, on the immediate threat hanging over Judah. God's assertion, *As I have planned . . .* (24) picks up the very word used of Assyria's own plans in 10:7a ('intends'). That the enemy should be broken in his apparent moment of victory, *in my land*, is characteristic of divine strategy (*cf.* Acts 4:27–28.). On the *hand stretched out* (26–27) *cf.* 9:12; 10:24–27.

14:28–32 Philistia

Vs 28 and 32 bring this oracle to life. Ahaz the pro-Assyrian is dead; Assyria is in difficulties (29a); now a Philistine mission (32a) arrives in Zion to propose a rebellion – an idea always after Hezekiah's heart. If this took place in 727, when the Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser III died, v 29a would have added force; but 716/15 is the more likely date. It was as sharp a test of obedience for Hezekiah as was that of ch. 7 for Ahaz; and the Philistines were formidable people to offend (*cf.* 2 Ch. 28:18–19) at this time.

God's reply is threefold. First, there is worse yet to come from Assyria (29); secondly, Philistia is a doomed people (30b–31); thirdly, true welfare is only in the Lord (30a, 32). It is the constant message of Isaiah: trust, not intrigue.

15:1 – 16:14 Moab

Intimate knowledge and intense sympathy, ready to alleviate judgment but powerless to avert it, are the special marks of this oracle, which is quoted and expanded in Je. 48. Moab had family ties with Israel (*cf.* Gn. 19: 36–37) and particularly with David (*cf.* Ru. 4:17; 1 Sa. 22:3–4.), yet it had nothing in common with Israel's faith and appears in the OT as an evil influence (*cf. e.g.* Nu. 25) and inveterate enemy (*cf.* 2 Ki. 3:4–27).

15:1–9 Defeat and flight. The site of *Ar* (1) is unknown; the consonants could be read as 'city', making it another term for *Kir, i.e.* Kir Hareseth (*cf.* 16:7, 11), Moab's chief stronghold (modern Kerak), situated in the south. With Kir fallen, all was lost, but the southward flight to Zoar (5) in Edom suggests that the invasion had swept down from the north, whose cities named here (mostly on the King's Highway; *cf.* Nu. 21:21–30) had looked to Kir for a stand. The anguish of v 5 comes through again in 16:7, 9, 11. Sensitivity to the miseries of war (*cf.* Je. 4:19–21.) and generosity towards an enemy (*cf. e.g.* Ex. 23:4–5; Pr. 25:21–22.) are not uncommon in the OT, but they are seldom combined as poignantly as here. The refugees clutching their treasures (7; *cf.* Lk. 12:21) are apparently crossing a frontier; the *Ravine of the Poplars* may be the Wadi el-Hesy between Moab and Edom. But despite God's compassion, the judgment is from him, and must increase (*cf.* Mt. 23:37–38).

16:1–5 Moab can look to Zion. Moab was advised to 'dwell in the rock' (Heb. *Sela; cf.* 2 Ki. 14:7; *i.e.* the Edomite fortress now known as Petra), like a nesting dove (*cf.* Je. 48:28). But here God has stirred the *nest* (2) to make her seek a better refuge as a vassal of Zion. Lambs were the customary tribute from this sheep-raising country (*cf.* 2 Ki. 3:4). The verb in v 1 may be either *send*, or 'they have sent' (RSV); the former seems preferable.

But the pathos of v 2 speaks more eloquently than any tribute money – whether vs 3–4a express the plea of the refugees or the Lord's charge to Zion to welcome them. (Read v 3a with the RSV as 'Give counsel, grant justice.'). The plea, or charge, can still dramatize to us the call to use our mind (*counsel*), conscience ('justice') and resources (*shelter*) for the losers in life (whom God seems to name here '*my outcasts*' in the unamended text of 4a; *cf.* the RV). Then the prospect of Zion as a refuge and rallying point (*cf.* 14:32; 2:3–4) leads in vs 4b–5 to another of Isaiah's visions of a perfect king to come. Among the four virtues of his regime (5) notice his speed in promoting the right, in contrast to the perversity of 59:7 and the paralysis of Hab. 1:4.

16:6–14 Moab's pride and fall. Moab's fatal ease is captured in the vintage metaphors of Je. 48:11: 'at rest . . ., like wine left on its dregs, not poured from one jar to another'. The vine, a mainstay of Moab's prosperity, dominates this oracle as well, with its secondary products (7), exports (8b) and festivities (10), all of them highly vulnerable.

V 12 has a bitter word-play in the Hebrew of *appears . . . wears herself out*, and its memorable final phrase shows the bankruptcy of all pagan religion, very much as our Lord does in Mt. 6:7. *As a servant . . . would count them* (14) means 'shorter rather than longer', like the grudging timekeeping of an uninterested worker.

17:1–14 Damascus and northern Israel

This is evidently from Isaiah's early days, when Syria and northern Israel were hand in glove (see ch. 7) and their kingdoms still intact. Damascus is briefly told its fate, but Israel has the brunt of the rebuke, as well as the indignity of being classed with the heathen, her oracle placed among theirs.

Vs 3b–4, perhaps worded so as to recall the departure of *the glory* in Eli's day (*cf.* 1 Sa. 4:21), give an alarming picture of vanished beauty and, with v 5, methodical depredation. But God's plan to glean a handful of converts, worshipping their *Maker* (7) instead of their manufactures, duly came to pass (see 2 Ch. 30:10–11). *Their strong cities* (9) are those left by the Canaanites and still standing in Isaiah's day. If this was a tragically wasteful process, vs 10–11 show that it was of Israel's choosing, in the double metaphor of the neglected stronghold (10a) and the spoilt vintage. The *imported vines*, so quickly promising, stood for Israel's pact with pagan Damascus against Judah and Assyria, to her own ruin (see 7:5–8). Vs 12–14 generalize the assurances given in *e.g.* 7:8; 8:4; their most striking parallel is Ps. 46.

18:1–7 Ethiopia

The word for *Ethiopia* in v 1 is Cush, or in our terms the Sudan; but Isaiah includes the region *beyond the rivers* (*i.e.* presumably the Atbara and Blue Nile) which suggests the present Ethiopia. The term for *whirring* is not unlike the word 'tsetse', imitating the buzzing of insects. Everything emphasizes that the envoys of this chapter are from the ends of the earth; and the exotic appeal of this fact would be enhanced by their striking appearance (*tall and smooth*) and formidable reputation (2b) – for Cush had now gained control of Egypt. Yet this deputation, like the rest (see on 14:28–32), is dismissed with God's *Go*. (The AV is misleading here. Its insertion of 'saying' in v 2a changes the speaker and the sense.) God has no need of intrigues; he will

bide his time, working as silently as the seasons (4). The enemy will reach the very *mountains* of Judah (3; *cf.* 14:25), only to be cut down on the verge of victory, like a crop destroyed on the eve of harvest (5–6).

The final verse seems to look beyond the immediate crisis of Assyrian aggression which had brought the envoys to Jerusalem. Isaiah now sees the travellers in a new light, as the first of many who will come to Zion one day in homage (the Hebrew, lacking the word *from* in 7a, suggests that they will be themselves the homage gift). It is the prospect already seen in 2:3; 11:10 and will be further developed in chs. 60–62. It is expressed exultantly in Pss. 68:31–35; 87:4.

19:1–25 Egypt

This oracle is a strong expression of the truth that God smites in order to heal (see v 22). The initial breakdown is followed by a renewal which goes beyond anything promised to a Gentile nation in the OT. Perhaps Egypt is shown here in its two aspects: first, as the worldly power to which Israel was always looking (*cf.* 20:5) and secondly, as part of God's world, for which he cares, with a place in his kingdom in which present ranks and races will be quite superseded.

19:1–15 Egypt brought to its knees. The metaphor of God's *swift cloud* (1) indicates that poetic imagery will carry the truths of this passage, in which every asset of Egypt is seen to fail. Her spiritual resources are, significantly, the first to crumble: her beliefs, morale (1), unity (2) and worldly wisdom (3). Next will go her freedom (4). The *fierce king* could be one of her Ethiopian overlords, *e.g.* Tirhakah in Isaiah's lifetime, or one of her later conquerors, Persian or Greek; it could even be a native tyrant. It is the sequence, from decay to tyranny, that is important rather than an individual's identity. Then God touches her physical lifeline, the Nile, and one by one her industries wither. The final state is one of helpless anarchy (11–15), all the more mortifying to a nation which had prided itself for 2,000 years on the schooling of its officials. *Cf.* v 12 with 1 Ki. 4:30. *Zoan* and *Memphis* (13) were the current and the ancient capitals of Egypt. Zoan (probably Tanis, in the Delta) was remembered as the scene of the great oppression (*cf.* Ps. 78:43). *Cf.* v 15 with 9:14–15.

19:16–25 Egypt converted. The fivefold refrain, *In that day* ..., is a pointer (as elsewhere *e.g.* 2:11–12) to the day of the Lord. Isaiah foresees the conversion of the Gentiles, under the image of that of Israel's most ancient oppressor and seducer (*cf.* 30:2–5.). The process is traced from its beginnings in fear (16–17), leading to submission (18) and God-given access (19–22; *altar* and *sacrifices*), and right on to fellowship (23) and full acceptance (24–25).

If the five *cities* (18) are meant literally, we cannot now identify them. More probably the expression either means 'a few', or else alludes to the precedent in Jos. 10 where the conquest of five Canaanite cities led on to general victory. The City of the Sun (18b; mg.) would be On, later known as Heliopolis; but the Hebrew spells it here (perhaps punningly) '*City of Destruction*'. The point, either way, is the spiritual capture of an outstanding stronghold of heathenism. In about 170 BC a temple was built at Leontopolis in Egypt by an ousted high priest, Onias IV, who appealed to v 19 in justification. But the intention of the verse is, it seems, rather to speak typically: there will be holy ground where all was once profane. With the *monument cf.* Jacob's at Bethel, staking its claim to be God's own territory (Gn. 28;13, 18).

Vs 23–25, reaching out with the other hand to embrace *Assyria* as well (so often coupled with Egypt in the worst of contexts; *cf.* Ho. 7:11; 9:3) give an unsurpassed vision of the Gentiles' full inclusion in the kingdom. Israel will have only an equal part (a *third*, 24; but not third place), and her distinctive titles will be shared out with her cruellest enemies. (On *my people cf.* Ho. 2:23; 1 Pet. 2:10; on *my handiwork cf.* Is. 29:23; on *my inheritance cf.* Dt. 32:9.

20:1–6 The Ashdod crisis

An inscription by Sargon fills out this picture. The Philistine city of Ashdod had revolted against Assyria, which promptly deposed its king. A new ringleader, Yamani, carried on the struggle with pledged support from Egypt and Ethiopia and had also approached Judah. Isaiah's powerful dissuasion turned out to be fully justified: Egypt failed to fight, Ashdod was subjugated, and Yamani, who had fled to Ethiopia, was handed over to the Assyrians' tender mercies.

The title *supreme commander* is *turtanu* in Assyrian (hence the AV and RV 'Tartan'). The year was 711; the revolt had broken out in 713, and Isaiah's slave garb (*stripped* would mean clad only in a loincloth) had been adopted then, unexplained, as v 3 shows. (V 2 is a parenthesis; see the RSV.) God now expounds it as the fate in store for Assyria's rebels.

Since Judah was left unpunished by Assyria, it seems that the warning was taken. G.A. Smith points out that this sign language (*cf.* 8:18) brought the message home to the nation, not merely to the court. Isaiah's discomfort and humiliation were the price of his people's safety.

21:1–10 Babylon, 'The Desert by the Sea'

This oracle, like the next, has a strongly visionary quality (in the 'lookout' metaphor) and a symbolic title. The subject emerges in v 9 as the fall of Babylon. The phrase *Desert by the Sea* (1) seems to combine two pictures of nature untamed and encroaching, which are more explicit in Je. 51:42–43. But the same consonants could yield simply 'deserts', or possibly 'destroyers'.

A disjointed, vivid picture (2–7) builds up of an attack by the Persians (*Elam* as a Persian satrapy) and Medes (2) which will catch the defenders of Babylon unprepared and feasting (5), just as Dn. 5 records of them. But Isaiah's involvement in the vision is its most striking feature. His great agitation in vs 3–4 is akin to Jeremiah's in Je. 4:19–26, even though the fall of this persecuting city, this place of *groaning* (2), is the thing he has *longed for* (4). But these opposite reactions throw incidental light on the writing of the later chapters, in that they are the very feelings of one to whom (as to the exiles) Babylon seemed both prison and home. If Isaiah was indeed to 'speak tenderly' ('to the heart'; 40:1) of a later generation, as if he were himself one of them, this deep involvement is clearly a prerequisite; it is the inner side of his prophesying. Note, too, his dual consciousness. He stands in some sense apart from his *lookout* self (6) and must report only what he sees and hears (*cf.* Hab. 2:1–3). This objectivity is greatly stressed (6, 7, 10).

In v 8a (charmingly inconsequent after v 7, in the standard text; see the AV) the NIV justifiably follows the Qumran MS. The prophet, just when his vigil appears endless, sees the promised cavalcade and knows that it spells the end of Babylon. Rev. 18:2 takes up the cry of 'Fallen, fallen' and treats Babylon as typical of the godless world. The final outburst, 'O my threshed and winnowed one' (RSV), captures not only the agony, but the purpose, of Israel's long ordeal.

21:11–12 Dumah

The place-names belong to Edom, but the title *Dumah* (*cf.* Gn. 25:14) may have been chosen for its ominous meaning, 'silence'. The point of the question is 'how long till morning?' – reflecting a time of suffering. The reply is not a platitude but a warning that any respite will be only temporary (*cf.* Pr. 4:18–19). The three Heb. imperatives, lit. 'ask, return, come' (12b), can be taken at their surface meaning or, more deeply, as the basic divine call: 'Seek, repent, come'. But Edom's answer can be gathered from *e.g.* 34:5–17 and from Obadiah.

21:13–17 Arabia

The early versions of v 13 read the second *Arabia* as 'evening', which has the same consonants. Possibly there is a *double entendre* (*cf.* v 11 and the symbolic titles in 21:1; 22:1). The special significance of this oracle lies in its warning to the freest and most inaccessible of tribes that Assyria's long arm will reach even them, at God's command. Those of the far south, Tema and Dedan, will have to succour their more exposed brother-tribe of Kedar. This could mean that the trading caravans will have blundered into war-ravaged parts and returned empty-handed and starving. Sargon's recorded invasion of Arabia in 715 BC makes it more likely, however, that the fugitives will have been under direct attack. *Cf.* vs 16–17 with 16:14 and comment.

22:1–25 Jerusalem

22:1–14 'The Valley of Vision'. The symbolic title (*cf.* on 21:1, 11, 13) emphasizes that the prophet's own base, from which he has surveyed the nations, is not exempt from judgment. *Valley*, borrowed from v 5, may refer to Jerusalem as surrounded by mountains (*cf.* Ps. 125:2), or to some more localized spot (*cf.* Joel 3:12, 14).

There is a clear contrast between the city's gaiety (2a, 13) and its grim future. It is not so clear whether the revels are in progress as Isaiah speaks (perhaps after the retreat of Sennacherib; 37:37) or whether we should supply a past verb in v 2a: 'you who were full . . .', as in the lament of 1:21. Either way, Isaiah alone sees where this escapism, which is summed up for all time in v 13b (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:32), will end.

With characteristic long sight (*cf.* 21:1–10), he foretells the fall of Jerusalem a century away (586 BC), with its famine casualties (2b; *cf.* La. 4:9), its fugitive leaders (3:*cf.* 2 Ki. 25:4–5) and its houses torn down to strengthen the wall (10; *cf.* Je. 33:4). The part played in this by warriors from *Elam* and *Kir* (6) is not mentioned elsewhere; but Kir was in the Assyrian Empire (*cf.* 2 Ki. 16:9), and contingents or mercenaries from these outposts could well have been part of the Assyrian legacy to Nebuchadnezzar.

For the *Palace of the Forest* as an armoury (8) see 1 Ki. 10:17; for the water supply (9,11) *cf.* the preparations by Ahaz and Hezekiah (7:3; 2 Ki. 20:20) in Isaiah's own day. The *two walls* (11) were probably 'the convergence of the walls round the south-eastern hill, with an extension to include both pools' (J. Gray).

Note, in all this, that Jerusalem oscillated between activism (9–11) and escapism (12–14); the former was a denial of faith (11b), the latter a denial of repentance. The words of v 11b (and of 37:26) are a striking anticipation of chs. 40–66, where God is repeatedly named as (lit.) 'making and forming' (*who made . . . who planned*) and as doing so from of old (*cf.* 43:7; 44:2, 24;). It is another hint of single authorship (see the Introduction).

22:15–25 'This steward, ... Shebna'. This high official appears again, with Eliakim (*cf.* v 20), in 36:3; 37:2. Possibly he was the leader of the pro-Egypt party (see chs. 30–31) which scoffed at Isaiah's preaching; but his condemnation here is simply for arrogance and display. Every nuance in God's message to him is scornful, from *this steward* (15) to *you disgrace* (18). It exposes the human craving for recognition and power and the worldly love of status symbols (*grave* and *chariots*) and the trappings of office, all of them mere husks. A large tomb-lintel of just such an official, describing him as 'over the house' (*cf.* v 15), has been found at Siloam and could be Shebna's; but a mortice hole has destroyed the name.

Eliakim stands in strong contrast to Shebna, over whom he seems to have been promoted when they reappear in 36:3. Godward he is called *my servant* (20; *cf.* 'this steward', v 15); manward he will be *a father* to his community (21). Yet his downfall (24–25) will come from this very paternalism wrongly exercised, *i.e.* from his inability to say 'no' to any 'hanger-on' from his family who claims his patronage. However well intentioned, this is an abuse of his office, and God's firmest pledges are never guarantees to cover this. With the sequence of vs 23 and 25 *cf.* '1 Sa. 2:30; Je. 22:24; Rev. 2:1, 5.

The key ... of David (22) comes in this context of accountability. A key was a substantial object, tucked in the girdle or slung over the shoulder; but the opening words of v 22 (with their echo of 9:6) emphasize the God-given responsibility that went with it, to be used in the king's interests. The 'shutting' and 'opening' means the power to make decisions which no-one under the king could override. This is the background of the commission to Peter (*cf.* Mt. 16:19) and to the church (*cf.* Mt. 18:18) – with the warning against abuse implied above. Ultimate authority, however, is claimed, in these terms, for Christ himself (*cf.* Rev. 3:7–8).

23:1–18 Tyre

Tyre had a longer reach than even Babylon; her traders were known from the Indian Ocean (*cf.* 1 Ki. 10:22) to the English Channel. Rev. 17 and 18 combine the OT oracles on Tyre and Babylon (*cf.* Is. 14; Ezk. 27) for the composite picture of the world as seducer (*cf.* v 17) and oppressor, over against the city of God.

23:1–14 The repercussions and causes of Tyre's fall. The news is pictured as reaching her ships at Cyprus, her nearest colony (1; see on 2:16 for *Tarshish*), leaving them homeless; as making the sea itself seem childless for lack of her merchantmen (4); as striking dismay into Egypt (5); and as scattering the people of Tyre itself (*the island*, 6) to distant Tarshish (6) or nearby Cyprus (12).

Tyre's colonizing, a development of her trading, is the reference of v 8; and the obscure v 10 may picture a distant colony breaking out into anarchy at the parent city's collapse. 'Canaan' (NIV mg.) is used in v 11 as the name of Tyre and Sidon's home territory, a term which spread to embrace all Palestine; the word *traders* in v 8, closely related to it, shows how synonymous was the name of her realm with that of business.

The human cause of the overthrow seems in v 13 to be Babylon rather than Assyria, both of which powers subjugated Tyre in part. (Later, the Greeks, and later still the Saracens and the Crusaders, captured and recaptured it.) But the root cause is sought in v 8 and answered in v 9: *Who planned this ...? The LORD Almighty* .... It is a particular instance of his judgment on *pride* (9) wherever it appears, which is one of the great themes of this book (see on 2:10–22).

23:15–18 Tyre's old appeal renewed. As a fact of history, after each disaster (until the Middle Ages) Tyre recovered after an interval and resumed her trading. The *seventy years* seem to be a round figure to denote a lifetime, like the 'seventy years' of Jewish captivity. But the metaphor of the forgotten prostitute (15–17) makes the renewal at once pathetic and corrupting. We are shown the perennial seductiveness of things material, although the final verse claims them for their proper use. It is the twofold emphasis of Rev. 18:3 and 21:24.

24:1 – 27:13 God's final victory

After the separate nations (chs. 13–23), now the world as a whole comes into view. These four chapters, often loosely known as the 'Isaiah Apocalypse', show the downfall of supernatural as well as earthly enemies (24:21–22; 27:1), and of death itself (25:8). They contain (26:19) one of the two clear promises in the OT of bodily resurrection. But this wider scene is still viewed from Isaiah's own vantage-point of Jerusalem, with Judah, Moab (25:10–12) and the great powers of Egypt and Assyria (27:12–13) in the near and middle distance. Overwhelming as the judgments are, the dominant note is of joy, welling up in the songs which frequently break into the prophecy.

24:1–23 Earth and heaven judged

24:1–13 Humanity in chaos. The powerful word-painting is reinforced by repetitions, rhymes and word-plays. For *ruin its face* read 'distort its surface' (*cf.* the Jerusalem Bible's vivid term 'buckle'). The reason for the judgment emerges (notice the double *Therefore* of v

6) in people's flouting of all laws and obligations. Whether the *everlasting covenant* is the divine promise to all living things in Gn. 9:9–11 is not certain beyond all doubt, since the expression in v 5 could mean simply 'the most permanent of undertakings' (but notice the reference to the flood in v 18b). **7ff.** The emphasis on joylessness is a striking comment on what Heb. 11:25 calls 'the fleeting pleasures of sin' (RSV); and RSV's term 'the city of chaos' (10; *cf.* Gn. 1:2) is a witness to sin's regressive action, turning God's order back to formlessness. The one ray of hope is the mention of *gleanings* (13), the leaving of a *few* (6), as in 17:6 and in the explicit 'remnant' passages, *e.g.* 10:20–23.

24:14–16 Ultimate praise but present privation. The singing seems to come from the scattered remnant (see on v 13), which in the light of the gospel can be seen to be God's Gentile as well as Jewish people (*cf.* Jn. 11:52). The expression *in the east* (15) is lit. 'in the lights'; the NIV's translation is supported by the matching phrase *from the west* (14). But this is a foretaste; we are back in the straitened present in v 16 (*cf.* the same metaphors in 17:4–6).

24:17–23 Cosmic judgment. The first three nouns of v 17 strikingly alike in the original, hammer home the relentlessness of the judgment. With the unavailing flight of v18a *cf.* Am. 5:19. (For the background of v 18b see on v 5.) *The powers in the heavens* (lit. 'army on high') (21) would mean in some contexts merely 'the stars' (*cf.* 40:26); but here, as counterparts of *the kings on earth*, sentenced to be imprisoned and *punished* (*cf.* 2 Pet. 2:4), they are clearly 'the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12). The fullest OT reference to such beings is in Dn. 10:2–21; *cf.* perhaps Ps. 82. In the NT see further, *e.g.* Rom. 8:38–39; Col. 2:15; Rev. 12:7–12. But the end is sheer glory (23). If *sun* and *moon* are to lose their lustre, it is only as outshone by light itself, by the Lord reigning in full state. It is essentially the same vision as Rev. 21:22–27.

25:1–12 The great liberation

25:1–5 The end of tyranny. This song breaks out unannounced (unlike those of v 9; 26:1–21; 27:2–11.), and by its reiteration of the word *ruthless* (3, 4, 5) it voices the special suffering and corresponding gratitude of the weak and hard-pressed. It is an OT Magnificat. Two of the characteristics of God's working ('wonderful things', 'counsels'; AV, RV) have already appeared in the names of the promised king (9:6), and will recur in 28:29. On the long maturing of his plans (*long ago*), a favourite emphasis in Isaiah, see on 22:11. The song accordingly celebrates not only the victory to come (when the enemy's defences will be down [2], his homage received [3], and his clamour silenced [5]) but the refuge already to be found in God while evil does its worst (4) – its assault pictured in terms of nature's extremes of driving rain (*storm*) and overpowering *heat*.

25:6–8 The end of darkness and death. The *feast* (6) introduces a positive note into what is otherwise chiefly an account of ills removed. It has the note of achievement (for a feast is a celebration), of plenty (6b) and of shared delight (note the fivefold *all* in vs 6–8). Our Lord relished this festive prospect even as he handed a very different cup to his disciples (*cf.* Mt. 26:29).

The *shroud* or *sheet* (better, 'covering ... veil') could be either the mourning (8b) or the blindness (*cf.* 2 Cor. 3:15) of fallen humanity; both are apposite. The translation *for ever* (8a) is the most straightforward (*cf. e.g.* 28:28), but the root does also contain the idea of 'victory' (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:54) or pre-eminence, and is so used in 1 Sa. 15:29 and 1 Ch. 29:11, where it appears as 'Glory' and 'majesty' respectively. In either sense, the promise is one of the summits of the OT and the NT. In a single verse (*cf.* also Rev. 21:4) the last enemy is gone and the last tear shed.

25:9–12 The end of pride. V9 belongs to the preceding paragraph as well as to this one; but perhaps the conjunction 'for' (10), which the NIV omits, unites these verses a little more closely. There is a hint of eager expectation in the verb used for *trusted in* (*cf.* 26:8; 33:2; 40:31; where NIV expresses it as 'wait for', 'long for', 'hope in').

Moab, startlingly local in so universal a scene (*cf.* Edom in 34:5), is introduced as the embodiment of pride (11b; *cf.* 16:6), perhaps especially the pride of little men. The *manure*, or dung pit, likewise expresses the indignity as well as the finality of judgment for the proud (*cf.* the sequence in 14:14–15, 19).

26:1 – 27:1 Triumph after travail

26:1–6 The enduring city. At last our own city comes into view, over against its rival. The latter has a new epithet, *lofty* (5), to add to those of 25:2 ('fortified') and 25:3 ('cities of ruthless nations'). Our city is *strong*, not with brute force but with the saving activity (1b) of the living God, the *Rock eternal*. So our enjoyment of this personal, unseen protection must itself be personal, in truth (2) and trust (3–4). These verses are as logical as they are beautiful, rooted in God. *Perfect peace* (lit. 'peace, peace') is his gift of well-being and wholeness to a mind not merely *steadfast* but steadied (the word is passive, as in the old version, 'stayed on thee'). The call to lifeling *trust* (4) is equally logical, basing our faith on God's rock-like faithfulness

and basing the *'for ever'* of our commitment on the eternity of his being. Jesus would point out, further, the eternity of *God's* commitment to his own (Mt. 22:31–32).

26:7–18 The long night of waiting. The 'waiting' in this passage is partly for the overthrow of evil by the correction (9–11) or destruction (11c, 13–15) of the wicked but is fundamentally a longing for God himself (*for you ... for you*, 8–9). The NIV's *level* and *make ... smooth* (7) are misleading, for the context is anything but easygoing. The verse should run: '... is straight; you ponder the path ...' (*cf.* Pr. 5:6). The proclamation of God's *name* (8) could be a moving experience in public worship (*cf.* Ps. 34:3; 68:4). The last phrase of v 13 alludes to this and scorns the tyrants who have traspassed on the crown rights of Yahweh. That these are earthly overlords, not false gods, is indicated by v 14a (see on 14:9 for the term *departed spirits*). It is a prediction so certain of fulfilment as to use the past tense (the 'prophetic perfect'). Vs 16–18, with their confession of failure and frustration (all too applicable to the Christian church), give another ingredient of this general yearning for better things. There is a similar outburst in the second 'Servant Song', 49:4. Here, as there, God's answer lifts the situation on to a new plane altogether, which is the subject of the next paragraph.

26:19 – 27:1 Resurrection and final judgment. After the prayer of vs 7–18, the Lord now gives his answer. V 19, though obscure in details, clearly promises bodily resurrection. Its companion statement, Dn. 12:2, adds two further prospects: the resurrecton of the unjust and an eternity of life or shame. We should read (with the RV) 'my dead bodies' – for God's servants are still *his* in death, even to their bodies. For the final line there are various translations, but the NIV among others rightly preserves the contrast between the triumphant metaphor of *birth* in v 19b and the tragic birth-language of v 18b, the two linked by a distinctive Hebrew verb in common.

V 20 reproduces the same pattern of salvation within judgment as was seen when the Lord shut Noah in the ark and when Israel in Egypt was directed to take refuge from the destroying angel (Ex. 12:22). The judgment (21; 27:1) is as all-embracing as in 24:21, where 'the powers in the heavens' corresponds to *Leviathan* here (*cf.* 'the dragon and his angels' in Rev. 12:7–9). The unusual epithets, *gliding, coiling* (or 'slippery', 'wriggling'), are exactly the terms used of Leviathan (Lotan) in the ancient Canaanite epic of Baal, who vanquished *the monster of the sea*. This Canaanite material is reshaped to the divine truth it now conveys – truth which demolishes its pagan structure. Both here and at 51:9–10 the context is judgment, not (as in paganism) a supposed struggle in which, before he could proceed to his desired task of creating an ordered world, the creator-god first disposed of the opposition of the gods of disorder.

27:2–13 A people for God

27:2–6 The fruitful vineyard. The loving care (2–4) and teeming fruitfulness (6) must both be seen against the setting of ch. 5, the vineyard that failed and was abandoned. Here is the end to which God has been working. Vs 4–5 are cryptic but may be understood to mean that God's wrath is no longer against his vineyard, only against the *briers and thorns* (that is, his people's enemies) which overran it in 5:6; and even these antagonists he would rather reconcile than destroy. The *fruit* (6) which will benefit the world is interpreted in 5:7 as justice and righteousness. Note the reminder, as in 37:31, that morally as well as physically, *root* is the precondition of *fruit*.

27:7–11 Fruitful hardship, fruitless power. This section brings out the contrast between the measured hardship which would be the making of Israel (7–9) and the utter disaster which would break the tyrant (10–11).

The opening Hebrew word of v 8 is obscure to us. *Warfare* (following the LXX) seems conjectural. Other suggestions are 'measure by measure', i.e. meted out 'seah by seah', gallon by gallon, or 'driving away' (if 'sa-sa' = our 'shoo, shoo') into the exile implied by the rest of the verse. The renouncing of idolatry (9) is shown as both the condition (*by this*) and the continuing consequence (*the full fruitage*) of enjoying God's atonement (*cf.* Pr. 16:6). If exile is a step towards this, it will not be in vain. The *fortified city* (10–11) is clearly the oppressor's (*cf.* 25:2). Here the description in vs 10b–11a is perhaps coloured by the contrasted picture of the well-tended vineyard of vs 2–3. With v 11b *cf.* 44:18–19; 45:6–7.

27:12–13 Harvest home. The harvest depicted could be that of the orchard or the field, since this verb for *thresh* (lit. 'beat') is used both for hand-threshing certain crops (28:27) and for dislodging olives from top branches (Dt. 24:20), so as to be *gathered up one by one*. The point is God's perfect harvesting of his true people, so that 'not one is missing' (*cf.* 40:26–27). For Israel within the homeland (12) the emphasis is on the sifting of the minority from the mass (*cf.* 10:20–23). For those dispersed abroad it is on the trumpet call that will summon them home (13). The NT will show the gospel's call having already this double effect to sift and to save (1 Cor. 1:23–24), among Jew and Gentile alike. So the two verses show the Lord's final triumph, in terms not of conquest or new

creation (as it can be pictured) but simply of persons gathered in and brought home. This is, after all, the heart of the matter (*cf.* Rev. 7:9ff.).

28:1 – 31:9 The Assyrian crisis: God's help or man's?

28:1–29 A challenge to scoffers

Ch. 28, a series of lightning flashes rather than a scene steadily illuminated, challenges the triflers who govern Jerusalem to face the realities of history, of morals and of divine action. Snatches of a fierce altercation seem to be preserved in vs 7–13 or beyond. The setting is the restless period of intrigue with Egypt which led to Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria and the reprisals of 701 BC described in chs. 36–37; but the prophecies frequently break out of these narrow confines.

28:1–6 The drunkards of Ephraim. This is clearly an early prophecy, before the fall of Samaria in 721. For its function in this context, see on vs 7–13. Vs 1–4 catch the outward beauty of that affluent city set on a hill, but see it as a garland on a drunkard's brow (1b) – a rich metaphor for glory that is incongruous and (4a) quickly fading. The second of these aspects is re-emphasized by the *hailstorm* threat of v 2 (a reference to Assyria), to be taken up in v 17, and by the 'ripe plum' metaphor (as we should put it) of v 4b. In a single paragraph Isaiah epitomizes the warnings of Amos to this pleasure-loving, drink-sodden city (*cf.* Am. 2:12; 4:1; 6:6). Characteristically, the clouds part for a moment to show the true *crown* (5) adorning the true Israel, the *remnant* (see on 10:20–23). Notice that *the spirit of justice . . . and strength* (6; see on 11:2) is *the* LORD himself, present and active within his servants.

28:7–13 The drunkards in office. In the words *these also*, the relevance of the foregoing oracle to its present context becomes clear. The besotted Ephraim had come to grief; now Judah is just such another, from her spiritual leaders downwards. The reeling, vomiting *priests and . . . prophets* are so vividly drawn that this section is thought to preserve an actual encounter between Isaiah and a group of them in conclave.

In that case vs 9–10 may be their taunt (*he . . . he* being Isaiah), and v 13 his ominous rejoinder, flinging the same words back. The Hebrew of v 10 is a jingle, almost the equivalent of our derisive 'blah blah', but not quite as meaningless. (For *rule*, lit. 'line', *cf.* v 17a.) *Cf.* J.B. Phillips: 'Are we just weaned . . . Do we have to learn that The-law-is-the-law-is-the-law, The rule-is-the-rule-is-the-rule . . .? . . . Yes, with stuttering lips and a foreign tongue will the Lord speak to this people.' In other words, make nonsense of God's sense and you will get your fill of it from Assyria (11) and your doom from the words that were to save you (12–13). The rejected message of v 12 finds classic expression in 30:15; *cf.* on 7:9b. Paul's quotation of v 11 in 1 Cor. 14:21 is thus a reminder, true to this context, that unknown tongues are not God's greeting to a believing congregation but his rebuke to an unbelieving one (*cf.* C. Hodge on 1 Corinthians).

28:14–22 The sure foundation and the refuge of lies. As in 8:11–15, but now in a setting of reckless confidence, *covenant and cornerstone* are in contrast. The *covenant with death* and *with the grave* (lit. Sheol) could perhaps allude to an invocation of gods of the underworld, *e.g.* in necromancy (*cf.* 8:19) or in a treaty with Egypt. It is, however, more probably to be understood like the boast in v 15b of *a lie* and *falsehood, i.e.* as God's estimate of their hope, put into their mouths. Their version would have been, no doubt, 'Nothing can touch us; our alliances are watertight.' God knew their real enemy and their professed friends. The *cornerstone* promise, with that of 8:14, is quoted in Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:6; *cf.* Ps. 118:22. In 8:14 it explicitly signifies the Lord, but here the Lord lays the stone; the two statements meet in Christ, as the NT makes clear. Rom. 9:32–33 expounds the implications of the faith clause (*cf.* 7:9), *the one who trusts will never be dismayed.* The Heb. is lit. 'will not be in haste' – since haste implies anxiety and confusion.

Among the profusion of metaphors, those of storm and flood have appeared in v 2, to signify the Assyrians; the *measuring line* and *plumb-line* (17) recall the finality of 30:13–14 and of Am. 7:7–8; the scanty *bed* and *blanket* (20) say the last word on resources that miserably fail. On *Perazim* and *Gibeon* (21) see 1 Ch. 14:11, 16. God who swept away David's enemies will now sweep away David's kingdom. On such *strange* reversals the next paragraph will have light to shed. Luther, incidentally, found much comfort in reflecting that while judgment is Christ's *strange work*, salvation is his 'proper work'.

28:23–29 The farmer's craft: a parable. The farmer's constant changes and his varieties of treatment, so capricious at first sight yet so expertly appropriate, give the clue to the complex ways of God, who is his teacher (26, 29). God's strangest work (*cf.* v 21) is exactly suited, it is implied, to the varied times (24), types (25) and textures (27–28) that he handles. On *beaten out with a rod* (27) see on 27:12; and learn from this parable not to handle all situations with one favourite technique! Notice the linking of *wonderful* and *counsel* (29) as in the name of the divine prince of 9:6 and as in 25:1,

where the NIV's 'marvellous' and 'planned' miss this verbal echo.

29:1–8 A last-minute reprieve for 'Ariel'

The end of v 8 identifies *Ariel* as Zion, and in Ezk. 43:15 its meaning is 'altar hearth'; hence Moffatt renders it here (emphasizing Jerusalem's high calling) 'God's own hearth and altar'. The cultic allusion in v 1b confirms this, but v 2b gives a grim turn to the metaphor by its hint of a holocaust, just as v 3a pricks the city's pride in its past (*cf.* v 1a, 'where David encamped' [RSV]. The NIV's *settled* loses this thrust in v 3a).

The promise of miraculous deliverance (5–8) had a partial fulfilment in the year 701 (see 37:33–37). But the gathering of *nations* (7–8), the *siege works* (3; *cf.* 37:33) and the spectacular signs of v 6 suggest a still greater struggle (*cf.* Zc. 14:1–21). The nations' disappointment is vividly suggested in vs 7–8; there have been already innumerable minor occasions when the world has prematurely licked its lips over the demise of the church.

29:9–24 Israel's inner darkness, deepened and dispelled

29:9–12 A people without vision. The pregnant phrase *your eyes* (*the prophets*) (10) shows that Israel is the subject of this oracle, which enlarges on the lessons of Pr. 29:18 and 1 Sa. 3:1–14. A glimpse of such a state, where God's will has become a closed book, is given in Ps. 74:9. The reflexive verbs in v 9 suggest that the blindness is judicial: self-will has invited its own punishment. *Cf.* 6:9–10; 30:10–11.

29:13–14 Religion without reality. Jesus saw this v 13 as the very image of Pharisaism (Mk. 7:6–7.). V 14 is its proper outcome; for without depth, cleverness turns in on itself to obscure all that it touches. *Cf.* Rom. 1:22; 1 Cor. 1:19.

29:15–16 Contempt of the Creator. The mixture of furtiveness and bravado (*cf.* 30:1) would probably be expressed in unconscious ways, such as the suppression of unwelcome truths (*cf.* 30:9–11.). Jeremiah (Je. 2:26) and Ezekiel (Ezk. 8:12) found the same mishandling of conscience in their day. The unanswerable *potter* illustration (16) is used again in 45:9 and, penitently, in 64:8; Paul takes it up in Rom. 9:20–21.

29:17–21 The great reversal. The absurdity of planning against God (15) will appear when his work is complete, when the best that we know will be transcended (17) and the disabilities and injustices of the present made good (18–21). The point is indicated in the verbs of v 17, *i.e.* the present *Lebanon* (uncultivated, like the wilderness of 32:15) will be *turned into* good land, while the present good land will *seem like* a mere wood in comparison with its new fertility.

29:22–24 A people for God's praise. The individual Jacob is surely meant in 22b–23a, despite the NIV (the Hebrew uses the singular: 'his face ... when he sees ... his children'), *cf.* 63:16. He will no longer (as we should say) turn in his grave at the behaviour of his descendants. The thought of God's people expressing God's holiness, which is a first concern of the Lord's Prayer ('hallowed ...'), is developed in Ezk. 36:23 and context, and in Eph. 1:4, 6, *etc.*, bringing future perfection to bear on us now.

30:1 – 31:9 Egypt and Assyria in perspective

30:1–5 The shadow of Egypt. The illusory refuge denounced in 28:14–22 is named at last. Ten years earlier, Isaiah had dissuaded Judah from playing Egypt's game against Assyria (ch. 20); now the mood has hardened, and Judah's envoys are on their way. The *officials* (4) seem to be Pharaoh's, in which case *Hanes* seems implied to be near *Zoan* (which is Tanis, the nearest important town to the Israel border), rather than 50 miles (80 km) further up the Nile, as commonly identified. See the *NBD* article, 'Hanes', for a fuller discussion.

30:6–8 The stay-at-home ally. Isaiah sees the discomforts and dangers of the journey (6a) as typical of the whole enterprise, and the treasures of v 6b, so incongruous in the wild Negev, as a picture of misspent effort and resource. *Rahab* (7), differently spelt in Hebrew from the familiar name of Jos. 2, is a term for Egypt again in Ps. 87:4 (*cf.* Ps. 89:10). It appears to mean 'arrogant' or 'turbulent' and is associated with 'the monster' (crocodile?) in Is. 51:9, which is another of Egypt's names in Ezk. 29:3. Moffatt brilliantly renders v 7c 'Dragon Do-nothing' – a devastating nickname to placard (8) around Jerusalem; as pointed as an earlier slogan had been cryptic (*cf.* 8:1).

30:9–14 The ill-built structure. Truth and right (10) are shown to be as vital to a community as soundness and accuracy are to a building (13). This is one of the clearest statements of the logic of God's judgments; *cf.* Ezk. 13:10–16 on (in our terms) papering over the cracks; Am. 7:7–8 on the plumb-line; and Hab. 2:9–11 on the creaking edifice of the tyrant.

30:15–17 The price of unbelief. V 15 could be singled out as the distinctive challenge of Isaiah (see on 7:1–9). *Repentance* is lit. 'turning' back to God (*cf.* 10:21); *rest* and *quietness* are the antithesis of the frantic activism of v 16 (*cf.* 28:16); *trust* colours each of these responses

with love. The threat of v 17 sadly reverses the promise of Lv. 26:8; *cf.* Dt. 32:30.

30:18–26 The good things in store. Egypt and Assyria fade from sight as the glory dawns, depicted first in personal terms (18–22), then in material (23–26). Notice the relation between God's waiting and man's (*longs* [18a] is the intensive form of *wait* [13d]), and the boon of his exaltation as Judge (18b, c; *cf.* 5:15–16). The intimacy described in vs 20–21 is that of the new covenant (*cf.* Je. 31:33–34.) rather than the final glory, for it does not preclude *adversity* or the possibility of straying, limited though this will be (21). *Teachers* is a plural noun with a singular verb, *i.e.* a plural of God's fullness or majesty (as in the RSV), and the word relates to moral instruction or *tôrâ* ('law'). His voice, recalling us, comes from behind (21) only when we *turn* aside, not when we follow. Vs 23–26, in contrast with v 20a, express in terms of the familiar world the new creation which will utterly transcend it (*cf.* 60:19–22; 65:17–25).

30:27–33 The cleansing fire. While these verses survey the immediate situation, naming 'Assyria' (31), they further apply to the end time. One day the godless powers will find themselves caught (like Judah in 8:8) in a rising tide, and drawn by God's bridle (like Assyria in 37:29) towards their destruction. Yet for us this is liberation (29): every blow of judgment will deserve the sound of *tambourines* (32) like Miriam's (*cf.* Ex. 15:20); but the grave of the oppressors will no longer be the Red Sea, but *Topheth, i.e.* the *fire pit* of final destruction which the NT calls Gehenna, or hell. Je. 7:31–32 tells how this meaning was acquired. The allusion here to *the king* is probably to Molech (RSV mg.; *cf.* 2 Ki. 23:10), which is basically the same word as king.

31:1–5 Some trust in horses ... The relative power of *flesh* and *spirit* (3), as seen by Isaiah, quite contradicted his contemporaries' assessment (*cf.* 30:15–16) – and, for the most part, our own. It is the key to his thinking, and was to be dramatically vindicated (*cf.* the taunt of 36:8–9 with the outcome in 37:36–38.). In v 2, *disaster* rightly interprets the broad term 'evil' (*cf.* 45:7; Am. 3:6). The growling *lion* and the *birds* in flight both depict what is free of human interference; possibly also the formidable and the tender aspects of the Lord as protector (*cf.* Dt. 32:11).

31:6–9 The rout of Assyria. The supernatural smiting of the Assyrians is recorded in 37:36. But Isaiah is concerned with conversion (*return*) even more than deliverance; notice his penetrating estimate of the situation (*greatly* is lit. 'deeply'; *cf.* 29:15; Ho. 9:9). *Cf.* v 7 with 2:20; 30:22. With the Lord's *fire ... in Zion* (9) *cf.* its searching implications in 33:14.

32:1 – 35:10 Salvation and its dark prelude

32:1–8 A kingdom of true men

This fourth oracle on the coming king (*cf.* 7:14; 9:6–7; 11:1–5) shows his greatest triumph, in the flowering of his own qualities (given by the Spirit of the Lord, 11:2; *cf.* 32:15) in the character of his subjects, from his office-bearers downwards. (The passage *can* be translated 'If a king reigns in righteousness ... then ...', *etc.* But the familiar rendering is both a simpler construction and more relevant to Isaiah's teaching from 7:14 onwards.)

After the plural *rulers*, the right translation of (lit.) 'a man' (2a) is *each*, as in the NIV. Here are men in power, using power as God uses it (*cf.* v 2 with 25:4–5; 26:4). Here too are people using the faculties they have (v 3; contrast 30:10–11; 42:20) and finding new abilities (4). Above all, truth has ousted the fictions under which vice takes shelter. With v 5 *cf.* Lk. 22:25–27, for God recognizes no courtesy titles. Vs 6–8 are not a prediction, but a comment on the terms used in v 5, rightly expressed in the NIV's present tenses.

32:9–20 No smooth path to peace

The pampered ladies of vs 9–13 (*cf.* 3:16–26) are only an extreme example of the predominantly escapist society of the time (*cf.* 22:13; 28:15). **10** If the NIV is right in 10a, this oracle dates from about the time of Hezekiah's revolt from Assyria, for which the invasion of 701 was the reprisal. But 10a could equally mean 'for a long period'. In any case, the disaster of v 14 and the glory of vs 15–20 transcend anything that happened in Isaiah's time. The present age since Pentecost (*cf.* v 15) may be partly in mind in the picture of a people of God emancipated from the earthly Jerusalem (14,19).

The basic principle expounded in this poem is that *peace* is not a thing God superimposes on a corrupt society: the ground must be cleared and re-sown with *righteousness*, of which peace is the fruit (16–17). For this, the promise of the Spirit (15) is indispensable: it is the secret of the shared gifts of the Messiah described in v 1–2 above. On v 15b, see on 29:17. Such pictures of a secure and well-watered land (*e.g.* v 20) express God's 'new things' to come in terms of things already known.

33:1–24 The longing to be free

This chapter, Psalm-like in its many changes of moods and speakers, seems designed for public use in a national emergency (*cf.* the answering voice of God in vs 10–12 with that in Ps. 60:6–8 and the dialogue in vs 13–19 with Ps. 24:3–6.

33:1–9 The longing for redress. Denunciation (1), prayer (2–4), praise (5–6) and lamentation (7–9) break out in rapid succession. **1** The *destroyer* is left unnamed, perhaps to typify all whose successful villainy blinds them to the reprisals they are storing up. **2–4** But the recourse to God himself brings a richer vision than of man's rough justice. With God there is not only the prospect of the final answer (3–4) but meanwhile his strong arm (2) sufficing for each day's demands (*cf.* 50:4). **5–6** Further, in contrast to v 4, here are 'solid joys and lasting treasure', summed up in the *fear of the* LORD – that relationship between heavenly master and earthly servant which *is* the treasure, not merely *the key* to it (as in the NIV's insertion). **7** *Cf.* 36:2–3, 22. **8** The deserted *highways* recall (but in different language) the hard times before Deborah (*cf.* Jdg. 5:6), whose victory transformed another desperate situation.

33:10–16 The answering challenge. God's intervention will not be confined to the enemy (10–12) but will burn out the evil of Zion as well (13–16). **14** The *consuming fire* is not only his personal intolerance of sin; from another angle it is the sinner's self-immolation (11–12), brought about by the conjunction of vain pursuits (11a) and aggressive attitudes (11b). On this theme of self-destruction see also 1:31 and, with another metaphor, 30:13.

The heart-searching dialogue in vs 14–16 recalls those of Pss. 15; 24:3–6. It has been suggested that these are based on ritual admission tests employed at sanctuaries (*e.g.* Ex. 19:14–15), given an ethical content. **15** Notice the 'puritanism': the vigorous renunciations recognize the potency of habits, words, thoughts and sense-impressions as the seeds of action. If this verse is negative, it is in order to clarify the meaning of 'pure in heart', in readiness for v 17.

33:17–24 The bliss of fulfilment. The unforgettable promise of v 17a, for which the last phrase of v 15 is indispensable (*cf.* Mt. 5:8; contrast the dismay of Is. 6:5), is the focal point of this passage. Other prospects radiate from it (the spacious countryside, v 17b, gladdening the eyes after the constriction of siege; and tranquil *Zion* the place of pilgrimage again, v 20), while memories of tyrants and indignities now past give added zest to the present (18–19); but the eye returns to the Lord himself as strength and sovereign (21–22). The authoritative titles, *judge, lawgiver, king*, which Judah, like us, was always reluctant to abide by, are the firm basis of this serenity.

The picture of a city flanked by better defences (21) than Nile or Tigris (*cf.* Na. 3:7–8) – for they will be waters which no hostile fleet can use – gives rise to a new metaphor in v 23 for the disarray of the lawless (whether they are Gentiles or 'the sinners in Zion'; *cf.* v 14). But this is a parenthesis; the passage ends by reaffirming God's enriching, healing and pardoning grace (23b–24).

34:1–17 The universal judgment

Just as chs. 24–27 crowned the local oracles with the prospect of final judgment and salvation, so chs. 34 and 35 leave the Assyrian crisis far behind. A further similarity is that amidst these cosmic events, whose majestic description in v 4 is echoed in Rev. 6:13–14, Edom, like Moab in 25:10–12, is singled out over against Zion, whose year of release this is to be (*cf.* v 8 with 35:4), for a judgment which brings the whole scene suddenly to close quarters. **5–7** The thunderstorm, after encircling the entire horizon, arrives practically overhead in v 5, and there it remains, for *Edom* symbolizes in Scripture the ungodly (*cf.* Heb. 12:16) and the persecutor (*cf.* Ob. 10–14), the opposite and adversary of the church. The metaphor in vs 5–7 is a grim variant of the banquet scene (*cf.* 25:6), dwelling on the butchery behind the sacrificial feast and using current idiom to show that the whole people, from 'young bloods' and leading citizens (7a) to the least and lowest (6), is doomed (*cf.* 63:1–6).

8–17 The wasteland of these verses brings both Sodom and Babylon to mind with the *burning sulphur* of vs 9–10 and the haunted ruins of 11–15 (*cf.* 13:19–22). **11b** *Chaos* and *desolation* are the 'without form' and 'void' of Gn. 1:2; they imply here and in Je. 4:23 an undoing of the very work of creation. The mention of *measuring line* and *plumb-line* gives this demolition a disquieting air of precision, matched only by the care (16–17) with which the ruins are furnished with appropriate monsters. **14** On the *wild goats* see on 13:21. *Night creatures* could be either some desert creatures or demons (see further under 'Lilith' in the *NBD*). It is worth noting that judgment is pictured, here and elsewhere, as something worse than extinction; the last state is a kind of parody, obscene and (17b) persistent, of the first.

35:1–10 The flowering wilderness

The glory of this chapter is enhanced, if this is possible, by its setting as an oasis between the visionary wasteland of ch. 34 and the history of war, sickness and folly in chs. 36–39.

The theme is the coming exodus, a greater than the first. **1–2** Why the desert should be carpeted with spring flowers (*crocus*, or perhaps 'narcissus', rightly replaces the traditional 'rose') and shaded with great trees (*the glory of Lebanon*) is a question answered with the news that *the* LORD is to pass this way (3–6), and his

reason for coming emerges in v 4 (*cf.* v 10): it is to fetch his people home. Heb. 12:12 treats v3 as still relevant to the Christian's hope; and while the healings in the gospels announce that the new age of vs 5 and 6 has dawned, the full promise of v 4b is yet to come (*cf.* 61:2; Lk. 4:19–21; 2 Thes. 1:7–10).

If God's coming was indirectly portrayed in the opening verses, reflected in the springing wilderness, the upsurge of hope and the miracles of healing (1–6a), his people's journey home is similarly presented in vs 6b–10. The desert produces brooks and meadows, the safe highway appears, and finally the pilgrims themselves come into view in the last verse, singing their way into Zion.

So the prophecy reaches a climax which already soars above Isaiah's own times and anticipates the style and thought of chs. 40–66 (*cf.* the quotation of v 10 in 51:11) in its lyrical portrayal of the new exodus, the coming of God himself, the re-peopling of Zion and the endless joy of the redeemed.

36:1 – 39:8 The supreme tests for Hezekiah

In these four chapters the political situation that has been developing throughout Isaiah's ministry comes to an immense climax, reinforced by two searching tests of the king's faith and integrity, which are to have far-reaching consequences.

Apart from Hezekiah's psalm, found only in 38:9–20, these chapters coincide almost word for word with 2 Ki. 18–20.

36:1 – 37:38 The Assyrian onslaught

For details, see on 2 Ki 18:13 – 19:37. Isaiah omits 2 Ki. 18:14–16 and part of v 17a.

36:1–22 In ch. 36, in general, the technique of subversion is displayed for all time in the speeches of vs 4–10, 13–20. There we see the tempter's skilful use of truth, barbing his shafts with a few unanswerable facts (*e.g.* the perfidy of Egypt [6] and the failure of the gods [19]), his use of ridicule (8), threats (12b) and cajolery (16–17), and his perversion of theology – misrepresenting Hezekiah's reforms (7), selecting from Isaiah's preaching (10; *cf.* 10:6, 12) and drawing damaging conclusions from false religions (18–20). The king's instruction, *Do not answer him* (21), took due account of the fact that the speaker was seeking victory, not truth.

37:1–38 Ch. 37 (see more fully on 2 Ki. 19) is a model of response to intimidation. Hezekiah's steadfastness owed nothing to blind optimism; his *sackcloth* (1) was proof of that. His call for Isaiah's prayer (4) showed where his confidence lay, and his metaphor of *birth* (3) proved him a man of vision, whose longings were not for the old order but for the new (note too the evidence of 36:7 for his courageous reforms). His allusion to the *remnant* (4) further suggests attention to Isaiah's preaching (*cf.* 10:20–23). Upon Sennacherib's renewal of the war of nerves (9–13), Hezekiah was again too wise either to dismiss the threat or to succumb to it. His spreading out the letter before the Lord (14) epitomizes the act of prayer, and the candour of his words finely echoes the gesture. As in the Psalms, the situation clarified as he prayed (19), and his motive was raised to the highest level (20).

In Isaiah's successive replies (37:5–7, 21–35) note the absence of personal rancour against those whose policies were now in ruins (*cf.* 28:14–15; 30:1–5; on *Eliakim* and *Shebna* (2) see 22:15–25). In the vivid triumph song of vs 22–29, it was now time to answer Sennacherib's challenge 'On whom are you depending?' (36:5) with the question '*Who is it you have insulted?*' (23), and to taunt him with not knowing the meaning of his own career (26; note the Isaianic stress on what God *ordained long ago;* see on 22:11).

The completed story shows that the very successes which feed human arrogance (in any age) proclaim, when all is known, the sure sovereignty of God.

38:1–22 Hezekiah's illness

For comment on 38:1–8, 21–22 see on 2 Ki. 20:1–11.

38:9–20 Hezekiah's lament. This is similar to the outcries of Job (*cf. e.g.* Jb. 7), and to various Psalms (*cf. e.g.* Ps. 88), particularly those that turn to praise. The final words, where the singular gives way to the plural, suggest a public use of the psalm (*cf. e.g.* Ps. 25:22; 51:18–19.).

10 *Death* (lit. Sheol; see also on v 18 and on 14:9) is pictured here poetically as a city or prison; as a community in v 18; and as a devouring monster in 5:14. **12** The finality of the weaver's action is the point here; in Jb. 7:6 it is the swiftness of his shuttle.

13–15a There is a Job-like bewilderment in these verses, where Hezekiah's instinctive resort to God is checked by the thought that his predicament itself is from him (15a). But if this sharpens the problem, it also begins to resolve it, since a single, perfect will is paramount. See below on vs 17–20.

15b–16 These verses are of uncertain meaning, as the different versions indicate. In v 15b perhaps the Hebrew verb, with its hint of a procession (*cf.* Ps. 42:4), contains the idea 'I will walk with awe'. The reference of *such things* in v 16 is not clear, and the awkwardness of the Hebrew here suggests a damaged text; but v 15 points to acceptance of God's will as this

lifegiving discipline (*cf. e.g.* Ps. 119:50, 67, 71).

17–20 Here the fact of God's love dawns and clarifies, from the first assurance that *it was for my benefit*, on through the striking phrase (lit.) 'thou hast loved my soul from the pit', to the certainty of forgiveness in v 17c. The use of 'Sheol' (*grave*) as synonymous with *death* is the key to vs 18 and 19 and to OT usage in general, which concentrates within this set of terms all that is negative in death: people's severance from the praising congregation; their forfeiting of power and position; their fading into the past; their return to dust. At the same time, it is clear from v 17 that Hezekiah had envisaged himself as dying without assurance of the forgiveness of sins, and it is in this context that he views life after death as thankless and joyless – as indeed it would be. Meanwhile there are positive aspects expressed elsewhere in the OT in a distinct phraseology: *e.g.* being 'taken' by God (*e.g.* Gn. 5:24; 2 Ki. 2:9; Ps. 49:15), and being 'with' him (*e.g.* Ps. 73:23; *cf.* Pss. 139:18 and 17:15. *Cf.* in Is. 26:19, 'live ... rise ... awake'; and Dn. 12:2). But there is no synthesis as yet. Hezekiah can rejoice (19–20) in promises that are plenty to go on with (2 Ki. 20:4–6). The rest he will discover soon enough (1 Cor. 2:9).

39:1–8 The envoys from Babylon

For detailed comment see on 2 Ki. 20:12–19.

The faith of Hezekiah, proof against the heaviest blows, melts at the touch of flattery (notice his delighted account in vs 3–4), and the world claims another victim by its friendship. Enough is known of Merodach-Baladan to suggest that this enterprising rebel against Assyria had plots to hatch under cover of this visit. But the Bible is silent on this, and Hezekiah is condemned for glorying in wealth and human patronage.

The price of disloyalty is very heavy (5–7). To Hezekiah there was comfort in postponement (8); but not to Isaiah. Evidently he took this burden home with him, and so lived under its weight that when God spoke to him again it was to one who in spirit had already lived long years in Babylon (6–7) and could 'speak to the heart' (*cf.* 40:2) of a generation of exiles yet to be born.

40:1 – 48:22 Night far spent in Babylon

Whatever our view of the relation of chs. 40–48 to their great prelude in 1–39 (see the Introduction), we emerge in 40:1 in a different world from Hezekiah's, immersed in the situation foretold in 39:5–8, which he was so thankful to escape. Nothing is said of the intervening century and a half; we wake, so to speak, on the far side of the disaster, impatient for the end of captivity. In chs. 40–48 liberation is in the air; there is the persistent promise of a new exodus, with God at its head; there is the approach of a conqueror, eventually disclosed as Cyrus, to break Babylon open; there is also a new theme unfolding, to reveal the glory of the call to be a servant and a light to the nations. All this is expressed with a soaring, exultant eloquence, in a style heard only fitfully hitherto (*cf. e.g.* 35:1–10; 37:26–27), but now sustained so as to give its distinctive tone to the remaining chapters of the book.

40:1–11 The long-awaited Lord

40:1–2 The gentle voice. *Comfort* has its familiar meaning here, not its old English sense of 'strengthen'. It is matched by the womanly gentleness of 66:13 and amplified by v 2, where *speak tenderly* is (lit.) 'speak to the heart', a phrase mostly found in contexts of reassurance or of winning a person back (*cf. e.g.* Gn. 50:21; Jdg. 19:3; 2 Sa. 19:7; Ho. 2:14). *My people* and *Jerusalem* are in evidence in these chapters, separated until the mother-city receives back her children (*cf.* ch. 54).

The expression *double for all her sins* can be taken either in the bountiful sense of *e.g.* 61:7; Zc. 9:12 (these use another word for 'double') or, with most commentators, in the punitive sense of *e.g.* Lv. 26:18, 43; Rev. 18:6. The former would well express the underlying grace of these chapters, but the latter need not be pressed to imply any earning of salvation, only a strong assurance that Jerusalem's sentence is already more than served. It is not impossible, incidentally, that *double* might mean 'counterpart' or 'equivalent'.

40:3–5 The herald's call. The great processional way (to be lined by all humanity, 5) suitably dwarfs the ceremonial routes of heathen festivals. The *wilderness* is doubly significant, both as an example of the barriers that must all yield to the royal progress (4; see ch. 35) and as a reminder of the first exodus. Ho. 2:14 makes it, in its austerity, a place of repentance and renewal; John the Baptist, with prophetic symbolism, used the literal wilderness for this very work (*cf.* Mt. 3:1–3). But God's coming (*cf.* Mt. 3:13–17) and the 'exodus' that he was to accomplish (*cf.* Lk. 9:31) were to take a wholly unexpected form.

40:6–8 The preacher's word. 6 This introduces the prophet and his responsibility (the RSV reading, 'and I said', retains the Hebrew consonants and is well supported). *All men* (lit. 'flesh') echoes the impressive *all mankind* ('flesh') of v 5 but puts it in perspective in God's overwhelming presence. 8 Without the great ending of v 8, the passage would have only the wistfulness of *e.g.* Jb. 14:1–12; but with it, it

reaffirms Isaiah's tireless preaching of faith (*cf. e.g.* 7:9; 31:3). Its full implications will emerge in 1 Pet. 1:23–25, where *the word*, in its final form as gospel, is no longer the mere contrast to our transience but the cure of it. *Cf.* 1 Jn. 2:17.

40:9–11 The crier's news. 9 *You who bring good tidings* is a single Hebrew word, of which 'evangelist' is the Greek equivalent (not as a specialized term). It is feminine here, agreeing with *Zion*, and hence Zion is probably the messenger. In 41:27; 52:7 she is the hearer.

40:12–31 God the incomparable

This superb poem rebukes our small ideas and flagging faith, somewhat in the manner of the Lord's challenge to Job (Jb. 38 – 41), by its presentation of God as Creator (12–20) and Disposer (21–26) of a universe dwarfed by his presence. The goal of the passage is v 31, where human imaginings (18) and doubts (27) give way to the humble expectancy that is urged on us throughout the book (*cf.* 26:8; see on 7:1–9).

40:12–20 The Creator. Matter (12), mind (13–14) and living creatures (15–17) are all put in their place before their great Originator, seen as he might see them. This is not to empty them of meaning but to derive their meaning from him alone (*cf.* Pr. 8:22–31; Rom. 11:34). Such a Creator hardly needs our impatient advice or shares our impotence! The view of us through God's eyes makes the man's-eye view of God (18–20) doubly absurd. The idolater's pathetic efforts are studied at length in 44:9–20; 46:1–7; and the wilfulness that causes the blindness is exposed in Rom. 1:18–23.

40:21–26 The Disposer. The gigantic similes continue and should be taken as poetry, not science (with v 22b, where *canopy* [or rather, 'veil'] suggests the thinness of gauze, *cf.* the similes of Pss. 102:26; 104:2). **23–24.** These verses on the transience of potentates bring the general truth of vs 6–8 a step nearer to the particular situation of the captives; and v 26 draws the true lesson from the majestic progress of the stars: the precision, not the absence, of God's control. The thought is taken further in the final section.

40:27–31 The 'very present help'. 27 The wrong inference from God's transcendence is that he is too great to care; the right one is that he is too great to fail (28); there is no point at which things 'get on top of' him. But vs 29–31 make the big transition from power exercised to power imparted, to be experienced through the faith expressed in the word *hope* (or 'wait'; *cf.* on 25:9). So the final reminder of human frailty (30) is forward looking; it clears the way for trust and the transcending of natural resources. The phrase *renew their strength* (31) is (lit.) 'change strength', as one might change into fresh clothes or exchange an old thing for a new. It may be significant that the three final metaphors speak of overcoming one natural impossibility and two natural weaknesses, ending on the note of steady progress.

41:1–29 God and history

41:1–7 God's challenge to the nations. 1 The call for silence opens the imaginary proceedings of a court, where God will face the heathen world with a test question. (The call to *renew their strength* looks like an accidental repetition of 40:31, but it may be a warning that the encounter will be formidable.)

2 The point at issue is the alarming progress of the *one from the east*, whom 44:28 will identify as Cyrus. He is summoned in *righteousness, i.e.* for God's right purpose of judgment and deliverance. (In these chapters 'righteousness' tends to have this dynamic sense, often coupled with 'salvation', *e.g.* 45:8; 56:1). *To his service* is (lit.) 'to his foot', to follow at his heels (*cf.* Jdg. 4:10, RSV), for the true commander is the unacknowledged Yahweh (*cf.* 45:2, 4).

4–7 The lordly announcement of v 4 is the only clear voice in the prevailing panic at Cyrus's approach. While statesmen try to build morale (5–6a) and craftsmen 'a . . . strong set of gods', v 4 sets the whole scene within the age-long plan and act of Yahweh the Creator. It will be spelt out in 44:24 – 45:8.

41:8–20 God's servant reassured. There is sudden warmth in the *But you* . . . and the repeated personal names. The long chain of promises in the future verbs of vs 10b–20 is characteristically anchored in the facts of present and past: a pledged relationship (8, 10a) and an irrevocable choice and call (9). The word *servant* will stamp its own character on the coming chapters, with an increasing emphasis on its implication of self-giving, up to the climax of ch. 53. Here, however, it simply points to the Master's protection, which is seen as a many-sided assurance of imparted strength (10), scattered enemies (11–13), triumph over obstacles (14–16; *cf.* Mt. 21:21) and inexhaustible provision (17–20). The divine titles, *the Holy One of Israel* (14, 16, 20; see on 1:2–4), *your Redeemer* (14, *i.e.* your protecting kinsman; *cf.* Lv. 25:25) and *Jacob's King* (21) set their seal on it.

All this stands against a realistic background of an Israel cowed (*e.g.* vs 10–11) and puny (*e.g.* v 14), a fit starting-point for God's grace. **15–16** A *threshing-sledge*, by contrast, was the most solid of objects, being made of heavy boards, flint-studded; it was dragged over the reaped corn to break open the ears, which were then winnowed by tossing them to allow the husks to be blown away (16). The huge scale of the metaphor must have seemed belied by the 'day

of small things' that followed the return from Babylon, yet it does not exaggerate the impact of God's people on the world, past and to come.

41:21–29 God's challenge renewed. The tone of vs 1–7 returns, but now the gods themselves are addressed (*cf.* v 23). **22–24** The charge of v 22 is that they cannot even interpret events (*the former things*), let alone predict them (see on 26–27). When their incompetence is added to this (23b), the only conclusion is their unreality (24, 29) – and the word *detestable* (24) suddenly reveals the taunt as deadly serious. This word is usually reserved for heathen rites or idols (*cf. e.g.* 44:19); transferred to the worshipper it shows how corrupting is the choice of a lie for one's ultimate allegiance. The point is followed through in Rom. 1:18–32.

Vs 25–29 cover the ground of vs 2–4 with some added details. **25** the *north* and east are now mentioned together (*cf.* v 2), defining more precisely Cyrus's conquests, which overarched the Babylonian Empire from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian and Black Seas. The comment *who calls on my name* must be taken with 45:4; *i.e.* Cyrus would invoke the name of Yahweh (*cf.* Ezr. 1:2–3), yet not as a true convert. This is indirectly supported by his inscriptions, which diplomatically attribute his victories to the gods of the peoples he conquered (*e.g.* to Marduk at Babylon, but to Sin, the moon-god, at Ur).

26–29 With their emphasis on prediction, these verses would touch the heathen world on a sensitive spot, since divination was a major preoccupation (*cf.* 47:13); and Croesus of Lydia was to pay dearly for the Delphic oracle's ambiguity over his prospects against Cyrus. (Told that he would destroy a great empire, he joined battle and destroyed his own.) On this challenge to predict events as Yahweh has done, and its bearing on the authorship of these chapters, see the Introduction.

42:1–17 Light for the nations

42:1–9 The first 'Servant Song'. The sudden quietness after the overpowering themes of chs. 40 and 41 has been compared to the still, small voice of 1 Ki. 19:12. Four or five times such a solo passage quietly emerges in these chapters, to portray the Servant as 'the man for others', with an increasing emphasis on suffering in 49:1–13; 50:4–9; and 52:13 –53:12, followed by the joyful 61:1–4 to enumerate the blessings he distributes.

At the far end of the series he is the one in the place of the many but in v 1 he is introduced as *my servant* and *my chosen one* and is closely associated with the 'Israel' of 41:8–10. The enduement with the *Spirit* and the bringing of *justice* (1, 3, 4), or true religion, however, are features of the Davidic king of 11:1–5 and 32:1–8 (*cf.* the blending of this passage with the kingly Ps. 2:7 at the baptism of Jesus, Mt. 3:17), so that already an individual begins to stand out from the mass of Israel. The close of the chapter (18–25) strongly reinforces this impression.

2–7 The Servant's gentleness, both as unassertiveness (2) and as tenderness to the weak and inadequate (3), is unmarred by any weakness of his own: the words *falter* and *discouraged* (4) pointedly take up the Hebrew terms already used for *smouldering* and *bruised* (3). The portrait is identified in Mt. 12:17–21, and the glimpse of a waiting world (4c) confirms the character of his mission. *A light for the Gentiles* (6) was one of the earliest designations of Jesus (*cf.* Lk. 2:32) and one of the formative titles of his church (*cf.* Acts 13:47). But while the church was to share in this liberation of the *blind* and the *captives* (7; *cf.* 'the lord's servant' portrayed in 2 Tim. 2:24–26), only its head could be described as God's *covenant*, uniting *the* LORD and *the people* (6; *cf.* 49:8) in his own person (*cf.* Mt. 26:28).

8–9 These verses tie in this Servant motif with the themes of chs. 40 and 41 respectively, for Yahweh's jealousy for his true *glory* will chiefly express itself in spreading his light world-wide. This is the coming phase of his design, the *new things* declared now, which have been disclosed also in outline 'from the beginning' (41:26–27; *cf.* Gn. 12:1–3).

42:10–12 The world acclaims its Master. Outbursts of singing are a feature of these chapters (*cf.* 44:23; 49:13; 52:9 *etc.*), as they are of chs. 24–27, and are closely akin to Pss. 93; 95–100 in theme and language. **10** *cf.* v 10a with Pss. 96:1; 98:1; and v 10b with Ps. 107:23–24. Here not only nature but the nations break out into singing, for joy at the liberation just recounted. **11** Israel's bitter rivals, *Kedar* (*cf.* Ps. 120:5–7) and the Edomite *Sela* (last heard of in contexts of judgment; 21:16–17; 16:1), demonstrate the breadth of this grace. But see the next paragraph.

42:13–17 The Lord declares his zeal. The violent similes, *like a warrior* (13) and *like a woman in childbirth* (14), dispose of any idea of grace as a mere softening of God's mood. Rather, his fury (13) against evil and his pent-up zeal to redress it (14; *cf.* Lk. 12:50) supply as much of the motivation as do his tenderness (16a) and constancy (16b) towards its victims. Salvation will come only through judgment and will not be for the impenitent (17). *Cf.* 63:1–6, the fiery complement of ch. 53.

42:18 – 48:22 Inconstant servant and unchanging Lord

There is a restless interplay in these chapters between the grace of God and the wilfulness of

his people, whose determination to destroy themselves is only outmatched by his tenacity, expressed in classic form in 43:21.

42:18–25 Blind leaders of the blind. This bitter anticlimax to the portrait of the true servant (1–9), of the waiting world (10–12) and of the eager Redeemer (13–17), is vividly apposite to the church's perennial failure to live up to its calling. In Isaiah's first vision, to see and hear without perception (*cf.* vs 18–20) was a danger signal (*cf.* 6:10–13); here it is a crippling disability. The futility of the incompetent messenger (*cf.* 2 Sa. 18:29) is Israel's futility, and it is wilful: he is an heir of the covenant (19b; see the note below); he has the capacity (20) and the data (21) for the knowledge of God's will; he is still invited to *listen* attentively (23). Even the plight he is now in is designed to teach, not destroy him (25b); but the lesson, so far, is lost on him.

Note. 19 *Committed* is probably better translated 'he that is at peace with me' (RV; *cf.* Ps. 7:4). The passive form here suggests 'he that has been brought into peace [friendly relations]'.

43:1–21 Grace abounding. The *But now* (1) is a feature of these chapters, as the love of God, continually rebuffed, continually returns with the initiative. The same Hebrew expression is found at 44:1; 49:5; 52:5; 64:8 (7, Heb.).

1–7 These verses give Israel in eloquent detail the assurance Christ gives to his church, that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Fire and water, peoples and distances, can take no toll; *everyone* (7) will safely arrive (*cf.* 40:26) whom God calls *mine* (1). Some of the many strands that bind them to him are enumerated, such as creation, redemption, call (1), love (4), adoption (6) and the honour of his name (7). The uniqe relationship is emphasized by the bold figure of a human ransom (3–4; *cf.* v 14), *i.e.* great nations have fallen and will fall to make way for Israel. Pr. 21:18 speaks in similar terms; the other side of the matter is that the nations will gain from Israel far more than they lose (*cf.* 42:1–9), and that her ultimate ransom must be a very different victim (*cf.* 53:5–6).

8–13 Here Israel is faced again with her sin against the light (8; *cf.* 42:18–20); yet she is held to her high calling as *servant* and *chosen* (10), as much for her own instruction (*that you may know . . . believe . . . and understand*) as that of the world. Her very history testified for Yahweh (10–12); one day the title *my witnesses* was to have its full force (*cf.* Acts 1:8), but for the present Israel appears as a passive and reluctant exhibit. The forensic setting is that of 41:1–4, 21–23; the point at issue is the non-existence of any God but Yahweh, in ages past, present or to come (10b, 11, 13).

14–21 The name *Babylon* appears for the first time since 39:7, and while the Hebrew of v 14 has its obscurities, the main thrust of the passage is a clear promise of a greater exodus, in which God's wonders in the desert (19–20) will outmatch even those of the Red Sea (16–18). The promise is once again rooted in the covenant (note the terms of relationship in vs 14–15 and of election in vs 20c–21).

For its real fulfilment we must look beyond the modest homecomings from Babylon of the sixth and fifth centuries BC, although these are certainly in view, to the exodus which the Son of God accomplished at Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31; *cf.* 1 Cor. 10:4, 11), which alone justifies the language of this and kindred passages. See also on ch. 35 and 40:3–5.

43:22–28 Grace despised. 22–26 Israel's devastating response to divine ardour is a yawn of apathy. No rebuff could be worse; yet it gives occasion for a penetrating comparison between religion as a burden (23b–24a) and as grateful homage (23a) to the burden-Bearer (24b–25; *cf.* 46:3–4), who once again offers to prove his case in open court (26; *cf.* 41:1).

27 *Your first father* is probably Jacob in this context, as the Israelites are being reminded that they have little to boast of, either in their ancestry or in their spiritual leaders (*spokesmen*). **28** The final thrust is deadly, for *destruction* is the Hebrew term *hērem*, reserved for such objects of judgment as Jericho or the Amalekites, with whom no compromise was to be endured. It is the strongest term in the language.

44:1–28 The living God and his great design. 1–5 An apparently closed question is reopened with a characteristic *But now* (see on 43:1), amazingly reaffirming the ungrateful Israel's calling as *servant* and *chosen* (1, repeated in v 2), together with the affectionate *Jeshurun* ('upright'; *cf.* Dt. 33:5, but see Dt. 32:15; *cf.* on Is. 42:19), and going on to promise greater things to come. The outpouring of the Spirit (3) is a glimpse of the new covenant, as in Je. 31:31–34; Ezk. 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–29; and the confessions of allegiance in v 5 are a rare foretaste of the Gentile conversions, like those of Ps. 87:4–6 (where however it is God who enrols them). These new *offspring* (3) of Israel will mark the flow of God's living water, just as a line of trees marks the course of a river (3–4). The book of Acts traces part of this current of life through the *thirsty land*.

6–8 These verses give the very essence of these chapters, with their emphasis on God as Israel's champion (*Redeemer*, 6; *cf.* 41:14), their explicit monotheism (6b, 8b), their stress on prediction (7b) and their reassuring tone towards a diffident Israel (8).

9–20 Here the same message is preached

from the other side, turning the visual appeal of idolatry into an embarrassment, sparing no aspect of it. It is a favourite theme of these chapters (*cf.* 40:18–20; 45:20; 46:1–7). All worship of *things*, given by God (9; *cf.* v 14) and shaped by man contains the same absurdity and blasphemy (*cf.* Rom. 1:25). Man's eventual inability to see this (which is as modern as it is ancient) comes of a prior refusal to face it (18–20; *cf.* Rom. 1:21).

21–28 We now return to the positive and joyous revelation of the true God. **21** The opening call to *Remember* refers probably to the matters to which Israel can already testify (*cf.* v 8), as well as to the heathen follies just described (there is a similar call in 46:8). But the Lord's repeated claim to control and predict the course of history is now dramatically renewed by the specific promises of vs 26–28. The veiled predictions of good news for Jerusalem and of a liberator in 41:2 and 25–29 are suddenly unveiled to reveal *Cyrus* and his edict of rebuilding; a prophecy which duly came to pass (*cf.* Ezr. 1:1–4). Such minuteness of detail is paralleled only in 1 Ki. 13:2, where Josiah is named 300 years before his time. **27** The reference to the *deep* is another allusion to the exodus, a reminder of God's ability to perform these new wonders. **28** The term *my shepherd* implies no more than God's employment of this ruler for his own ends (see 45:4 and on 41:25).

45:1–25 The God of all the earth. 1–8 These verses put the Lord's control of Cyrus in the setting of his total sovereignty (7), his world-wide self-revelation (6) and his will to vindicate the right (8).

1–3 The term *anointed* is the basis of the title Messiah; but its OT use is general, chiefly for God's anointed kings (*e.g.* Saul in 1 Sa. 24:6). Here it stresses that Cyrus is appointed and equipped for a supreme task to which all his victories will be the prelude. Every phrase of vs 1b–3a highlights these successes; *e.g.* the *treasures of darkness* are those that are the most carefully hidden, as being the most precious. (As conqueror of Croesus and of Babylon, Cyrus was to acquire incalculable wealth.) **4** But the act that was the point and climax of his career, the release of Israel (*cf.* v 13), was doubtless a minor episode to Cyrus, so faulty are human valuations (*cf.* 55:8). His acknowledgement of Yahweh (*cf.* Ezr. 1:2–4), as of other deities, seems to have been superficial (see on 41:25); a recognition of his existence and influence (3) without a corresponding personal knowledge (4).

7 *Light and . . . darkness . . . prosperity and . . . disaster* are typically Hebraic expressions as pairs of opposites for 'all that is' (*cf.* Ps. 49:1–2). *Disaster* is (lit.) 'evil', but this Hebrew word is too general a term to suggest that Isaiah is making God the author of wickedness (see rather Jb. 2:10; Am. 3:6; Rom. 11:36). Some have seen here an attack on Zoroastrian dualism, with its rival gods of good and evil; but this verse is equally opposed to polytheism, the target of most of these chapters' invective. There is no clear evidence that Cyrus was a Zoroastrian as were some of his successors.

9–13 The focus turns from Cyrus to a rather querulous Israel (the plural subjects of the verbs of v 11 and the allusion to Cyrus in the third person in v 13 indicate this change), with a classic rebuke to the suspicion that God is fumbling his work (*cf.* 29:16). The NIV rightly takes v 11's imperatives as highly ironical, the equivalent of indignant questions. **12** The object-lesson from the starry skies has been similarly, if more gently, used in 40:26–31. **13** *Cf.* 44:28.

14–25 Foreseeing the great influx of the Gentiles, these verses leap far beyond the liberation. Chs. 60–62 will take up the theme more fully. Here it is expressed first in an address to Israel (14–19) and then in an appeal to mankind to acknowledge its Lord, as one day it must, and thereby find salvation in company with the nation it once despised (20–25).

14 Such names as *Egypt etc.* and the details of *chains* and homage depict God's triumph in terms of the contemporary scene, using the vivid colouring of human victories. In the fulfilment, these will be transcended, as vs 20–25 make plain. The Gentiles of this verse are those that were never yet within Israel's empire; their surrender will be as total as that of prisoners of war, yet in reality it will spring from conviction (14c–16) and issue in salvation (22, 24).

15 The expression *a God who hides himself* may perhaps be a continuation of the converts' confession, acknowledging the invisible God instead of their idols; more probably it is Israel's exclamation at God's inscrutable ways, 'past finding out'. Vs 18–19 reply that, for all this, he has worked to a great design and has unequivocally revealed himself. The word for both *empty* (18) and *in vain* (19) is as in Gn. 1:2 ('formless'); v 18b looks on to the end in view at the creation (*cf.* the phrase *to be inhabited*), the transforming of an initial formlessness into a habitable world. So too, a glorious end will be achieved with Israel.

22–25 The concluding verses are remarkable first for their picture of world-wide and heartfelt conversions, and secondly for the bold use the NT was to make of vs 23–24, applying them directly to Christ in Phil. 2:10–11 (and indirectly in Rom. 14:9, 11). *Cf.* the use made of 8:12b, 13a in 1 Pet. 3:14–15.

46:1–13 The helpless gods of Babylon. It is in keeping with the sharpening focus of the whole scene (*cf.* the explicit references to Cyrus [44:28; 45:1] and to Babylon and its overthrow [47:1–15]) that particular gods are now specified. 1 *Bel* ('lord'; *cf.* Baal) was a title transferred from the old god Enlil to Babylon's patron deity, Marduk, whose son *Nebo* (Nabu) was the god of learning. Their names appear in *e.g.* Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar. Both gods were commonly transported in processions, but in this scene they are monstrous refugees, weighing down their struggling pack-animals. The contrast between these burdens, with their demands on money and muscles (6–7), and the lifelong burden-bearer, Yahweh (3–4), brings the series of attacks on idolatry in these chapters to a telling climax. The theme of prediction, a constant ingredient of these passages (*cf. e.g.* 41:23), receives its classic statement in v 10a; and the twin realities of the conqueror's career – as both predatory and predestined – are set side by side in v 11a (*cf.* 41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1–7).

12–13 *Righteousness* is a word with several layers of meaning. Basically it means what is right, *i.e.* as it should be, in its proper state. So it can include the ideas of rectitude, of justice and of righting what is wrong. In these chapters the last of these senses is predominant, even shading into that of victory (see on 41:2); but the ethical dimension is not lost (*cf. e.g.* 48:1; 53:11; 58:2), and here it takes precedence in v 12, leaving the secondary sense, deliverance, to emerge in v 13, parallel with *salvation*.

47:1–15 Babylon doomed. This is a dirge, or taunt-song, in the characteristic fall-away rhythm of such poems (it can be felt, in translation, in the succession of a longer and a shorter phrase within v 2a). *Cf.* 1:21–31; 14:4–23.

It is Babylon's proper fate: there can be no mercy, for she has shown none (6; *cf.* Jas. 2:13). Yet the description is not without pity. We are watching the triumph of justice, but equally the tragedy of the sinner. Dust and toil, nakedness and shame, silence and darkness (1–5) – these symbols of damnation have an added bitterness by the glimpse of the arrogant gaiety (8) which they quench for ever (7–11). We can enter into her sinking of heart as the trusted expedients fail (the *magic spells, sorceries* and horoscopes of vs 12–14), and the old associates drift prudently away, 'each in his own direction' (15, RSV), like the fair-weather friends that they are.

The records amply confirm, incidentally, Babylon's profusion of magical rites, alluded to in vs 9, 12–13; and Ezk. 21:21 vividly depicts a selection of them in use by Nebuchadnezzar.

48:1–22 'Love to the loveless shown'. **1–8** The shift of attention from Babylon back to Israel is far from flattering. Their glib talk of *the* LORD and *the holy city* (1–2) accords ill with their persistent idolatry (5); they emerge in fact as hardened hypocrites (1, 4, 8). It is a darker picture than that of the faithlessness of 40:27 and even the coldness of 43:22, although it was anticipated in the sin against the light implied in 42:18–20. The argument from prophecy, hitherto directed against the heathen (*cf. e.g.* 41:21–24), now has to be turned against God's own people, these determined sceptics (3–8). See the Introduction.

9–22 All this, however, serves only to reveal God's patience for what it is: unmerited (9), constructive (10; see the note below) and resolute (11). After all his outspokenness he can still affirm both his call (12) and his love (see on v 14), and give the liberating command, *Leave Babylon* (20). It will re-echo through the coming chapters (*cf.* 49:9; 52:11; 55:12; 62:10). Yet this is no rhapsody; the high price of self-will is stated and re-stated as nothing less than a farewell to *peace* (18,22), *i.e.* to all health of soul and society. The sad realism of v 22 will reappear at 57:21, and the book will end on the still harsher note of 66:24.

Notes. V 10 presents problems of translation. The NIV assumes a small miscopying in v 10a (the Heb. has 'with'), which could also mean 'at a cost of' or 'in the character of'; this is a single letter, easily confused with *as*). In v 10b, the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah supports the NIV's *tested*, but 'chosen' is the normal meaning of the word found in the standard text. **14b** For *chosen ally* . . . read 'The LORD loves him; he will . . .'. **16** This verse ends with a startling change of speaker: no longer the Lord, as in vs 15–16a, but one *sent* by him, as the *Spirit* is also sent. It could be the prophet, but it is more meaningful if it anticipates the 'me' of 49:1; 50:4; 61:1; in other words, the Servant in whom Jesus was to see himself. It is a remarkable glimpse, from afar, of the Trinity.

49:1 – 55:13 The dawn of redemption

49: 1–13 The second 'Servant Song'

The limits of this passage have been variously fixed, usually at vs 1–6. But each of vs 5–8 introduces part of God's answering commission to his servant; and v 8, which echoes 42:6, cannot be shorn of its sequel.

After ch. 42, with its mutually incompatible portraits of 'my servant' (42:1–4, 18–21), the question of Israel's unfitness has become more and more acute. The coming chapters will resolve the tension, not by this servant's dismissal or improvement, but by the clear emergence of a true Servant whose mission will be first of all to Israel itself.

In this passage this is apparent at once from the Servant's clear conscience. Here he shows no contrition for the sins deplored in 48:1–6, or the blindness of 42:18–20; only a sense of being trained for God's moment (1–3; *cf.* 48:16). The unresponsiveness of Israel is something he has done battle with, not shared (4), and although he is addressed as 'Israel' (3), his mission field is itself 'Israel' (5) before it is the world (6).

This paradox of an Israel sent to Israel is part of the powerful thrust of the OT towards the NT, since not even the 'remnant' of true Israelites (Rom. 9:6, 27) can fulfil the boundless expectations of vs 1–13. We are driven to seek a more perfect embodiment of God's *light, salvation* (6) and *covenant* (8) in Christ at the head of his church, 'the Israel of God' (Acts 13:47; Gal. 6:16). Also the theme of conquest through service, broached in 42:1–4, has begun to sound the note of suffering and rejection (4, 7), which will increase in sharpness and significance in the third and fourth 'Songs'.

8 The first part of this verse is quoted by Paul in 2 Cor. 6:2 as a saying now fulfilled (*cf.* our Lord's use of Is. 61:1–2 in Lk. 4:18–21). On the expression *a covenant for the people* see on 42:6. **9–13** The *captives* flocking home in vs 8–13 are visualized as the dispersed of Israel throughout the world, not merely at Babylon (*cf.* v 12 with v 22); but the allusion to v 10 in Rev. 7:17 shows that we may rightly see also the Gentiles leaving for their new homeland (*cf.* 44:5). **12** 'Sinim' (see the NIV mg.) was clearly a puzzle to ancient scribes and translators, who suggested *e.g.* Persia, the South, or *Aswan*. Some reputable scholars have argued for China (*cf.* our term 'sinologist' from the Greek for Chinese), but the most we can safely say is that v 12 foresees converts drawn from far distant lands, of which Sinim was evidently a notable example.

49:14–23 Comfort for Jerusalem

14 The deserted ruins of Zion are a feature of these chapters, personified as a woman bereft of husband and children. **15–16** God's reply here is typical. First, she is not bereft, for he cannot forget her. Secondly, she has her best days before her, when her new family will overflow all her bounds (19–20). The NT applies such promises not to 'the present Jerusalem' but to 'Jerusalem above' (Gal. 4:25–27; *cf.* Is. 54:1), *i.e.* the universal church in heaven and earth. The ruins of the city were indeed rebuilt in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, but these prophecies transcend the modest scale of those events. **22–23** On the abject surrender pictured here see on 45:14. On *those who hope in me* see on 25:9.

49:24 – 50:3 Comfort for the captives

There is a double misgiving reflected here, over the power and the will of God to save. The former is answered by affirming God's control of history (49: 25–26) and of creation (50:2–3), and the latter by a comparison between his character and Israel's (50:1) – for there is no fickleness in him as there is in her, and no pressure on him from outside (*my creditors*). Her sins alone account for the breach (*cf.* 59:1–2); the Lord's attitude is, by implication, that of Ho. 3:1–3, where the erring wife is loved and brought home.

50:4–9 The third 'Servant Song'

After the display of patient gentleness in the first 'Song' (42:1–9) and the acceptance of frustrating toil in the second (49:4, 7), here the Servant faces the active spite and fury of evil. It is only a step, the reader feels, to the cross. There is no hint now of even the momentary discouragement of 49:4; the Servant has set himself to learn (4) and to give (6), as one dedicated in mind and body. **4** The plural (lit.) 'those being taught' emphasizes that he is accepting the common course of training (*cf.* Heb. 5:8), and the element of reiteration in the phrase *morning by morning* suggests a lifelong attentiveness to God's unfolding will, 'the matter of a day in its day' (*cf.* 1 Ki. 8:59). The consequent authority and aptness of his words are those of the prophet *par excellence*.

So his suffering, while still unexplained (until ch. 53), is already fruitful, as all suffering can be. **5** Godward, he makes it his offering of obedience; **6** Manward, a voluntary, costly gift, not a resented exaction (*I offered . . .; I did not hide . . .*); **7–9** Inwardly, he uses his discredit and isolation to clarify his sole trust in God. In Rom. 8:31–39 Paul sings the Christian's variant of this song, for whom Another's righteousness silences the accuser, and for whom God's help (7a, 9a) is now explicitly declared as love (Rom. 8:35, 37, 39).

50:10–11 An epilogue to the song

The two verses seize on the words of faith just uttered, to make them the pivot of life or death for the hearer. **10** Commitment to God is clearly allegiance at the same time to his Servant, whose words are binding and his faith normative (*cf.* vs 7–9). It is a pointer to his identity, as a single individual and a master of disciples. **11** This verse describes either the persecutors (*cf.* v 6 and Ps. 118:12) or, more probably, those who are self-sufficient, in contrast to v 10. Its last line may be a generalization on the sorrow which is always the end of sin, but it may anticipate the NT teaching on punishment after death.

51:1–8 More sustenance for faith

Faith, which 'comes from hearing the message' (Rom. 10:17), is nourished by the three messages introduced by *Listen* (1), *Listen* (4) and *Hear* (7). They confirm the call of 50:10 to an unflinching trust, by an appeal first to look back to Israel's humble beginnings, to see what God can do with *but one* (1–2); then to look ahead to the promised consummation both in this world (4–5) and in the next (6); finally to look at present humiliations against such a background (7–8). The thought of man's mortality, in the light of God's eternity, is echoed from the Servant's words in 50:9. **6** The translation *like flies*, as against the weaker expression 'in like manner' (AV, RV), plausibly postulates here a collective singular of the noun used in Ex. 8:16–17 (12–13, Heb.).

51:9 – 52:12 Mounting expectancy

Quick repetitions lend urgency to the whole section, which takes its tone from the opening, *Awake, awake!* Man's appeal draws out an answering assurance and challenge, marked by God's own reiterations: *I, even I, am he* (12), 'Rouse yourself, rouse yourself' (17; lit.), *Awake, awake* (52:1) and finally *Depart, depart* (from Babylon), 52:11.

51:9–11 The exodus surpassed. 9–10 *Rahab* and *that monster* and *the sea*, which would suggest to a non-Israelite the chaos powers confronting the gods at creation (*cf.* on 27:1), are symbols here of the exodus, as v 10 makes clear. *Rahab* has already been Egypt's nickname in 30:7 (see note). On rather similar symbolism for the final judgment, see on 27:1. **11** But Isaiah's plea for another exodus stirs his memory of a promise already made, and this verse quotes, almost to the letter, 35:10.

51:12–16 The oppressed comforted. 12–14 God himself (*I, even I . . .*) is the ground of comfort, both as *Maker*, in contrast to the transience of mere creatures, and as God of the covenant (15–16) (*your God . . . my people*), who counts his call of Israel the crowning glory, not the anticlimax, of the startling series, *heavens . . . earth . . . Zion*. Note that *Zion* is a term for the people themselves in the last phrase of v 16. V 16a recalls the charge to the Servant in 49:2; and in fact, it is as bearer of God's *words* to the world that Israel has chiefly fulfilled her calling.

51:17–25 The tables turned. The *you* is not plural but feminine singular throughout this passage, which consistently personifies the mother-city (see on v 16). Of the various metaphors, that of the *cup* or 'goblet of staggering' destined to change hands (17, 22) conveys the main message, while the pathos and brutalities of defeat are made vivid by the grouping and prostration in vs 18, 23 and by the simile of the trapped deer (20). The sight of *every street* (20) littered with the dying was to leave its mark deeply on Lamentations (*cf. e.g.* La. 2:11–12, 19, 21).

52:1–10 The good news of peace. 1–2 God's call, *Awake, awake*, throws back at Israel her own prayer of 51:9 in a retort which is the best answer. *Cf.* a comparable rejoinder by our Lord in Mk. 9:22–23. **3–5** The main object of these verses is to rid the redemption metaphor of any notion of a commercial transaction. As 50:1 pointed out, Israel's overlords have no claims on her, nor on God; they are his agents (and far from guiltless at that), not his creditors. While 1 Pet. 1:18–19 will give a fresh nuance to v 3b, the sovereign salvation of God, for the sake of *my name . . . my name* (5–6; *cf.* Ezk. 36:21; Rom. 2:24), is here the sole concern.

7–10 These verses, movingly portraying the arrival of the news (*cf.* 2 Sa. 18:19–33), bring out the three component factors of every such experience. First, the messenger, whose lustre is that of his message (and this must be a despatch, as Paul points out in Rom. 10:15, nothing less); secondly the *watchmen*, those who are 'looking for . . . redemption' (Lk. 2:38), otherwise the news will fall on deaf ears; thirdly, the event, which is here none other than the Lord in action (8b–10), seen not from afar, but close to (lit. 'eye to eye', *i.e.* face to face, as in Nu. 14:14 of seeing the Lord). Notice the Psalm-like outburst in vs 9–10 (*cf.* Ps. 98:3–4; see on 42:10–12).

52:11–12 The clean break with Babylon. The picture is of a priestly procession, not the unceremonious departure of Ex. 12:33. The homecomings in Ezr. 1:5–11 and 7:7–10 were to have something of this character, and Ezra himself took the promise of divine escort fully to heart (Ezr. 8:22) and was not disappointed. But behind the literal departure from Babylon, Rev. 18:4 sees a greater movement, the withdrawal of the church from the embrace and judgment of the world, 'so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues'.

52:13 – 53:12 The fourth 'Servant Song'

From the great homecoming we turn to the solitary figure whose agony was the price of it. We are at the heart of the book, the centre of its whole pattern of sin and righteousness, grace and judgment.

The poem, unusually symmetrical, is in five paragraphs of three verses each. It begins and ends with the Servant's exaltation (first and fifth stanzas); set within this is the story of his rejection in sections two and four, which in turn frame the centrepiece (4–6), where the atoning

significance of the suffering is expounded. God and man reconciled, share the telling (see the 'my' and 'I' of the outer sections, and the 'we' and 'our' of 53:1–6).

52:13–15 The joy set before him. Here is heaven's endorsement of the brave words of 50:7–9, applying to the Servant terms of exaltation that can characterize God himself (*cf.* 'high and exalted', 6:1; 'high and lofty', 57:15; *cf.* also 5:16; 55:9). The *many* ranged against him will give place to the many convicted and enlightened (14–15; note the return of this word, at a deeper level, in 53:11–12). **15** For *sprinkle*, the RSV's 'startle' (supported by the LXX) makes a good opening to the sequence, startled – silenced – convinced. But *sprinkle* (AV, RV), which is grammatically suspect but not indefensible, suits the context well with its implications of sacrifical cleansing (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:2) and perhaps of covenant making (*cf.* Ex. 24:6, 8; a different word).

53:1–3 The disdain of men. The gulf between God's *message* and man's opinion is very plain, in the contrast between what is *revealed* (*cf.* v 1 with Rom. 10:16–17, 21) and what is naturally attractive (2) or impressive (3). *Cf.* the reaction to the humiliated Jesus in *e.g.* Mt. 27:39–44 and to the preaching of the cross (1 Cor. 1:23). *Sorrows* and *suffering* (3), echoed back in v 4, are (lit.) 'pains' and 'sickness', which might suggest to the reader either a sick man or one sick at heart (as in Je. 15:18). But there is another category, that of the physician's voluntary involvement; for he is also a man of pain and sickness in the sense that he gives himself to these things and their relief. This is the sense defined in Mt. 8:17, quoting Is. 53:4.

53:4–6 'O sweet exchange . . .'. This is the central stanza, in every sense. Here the meaning of the Servant's disgrace breaks through, with the inverted word-order of v 4a to stress the exchange of roles, and the emphatic pronouns *he* and *we* (4a–4b) to expose our misunderstanding: 'Our ills *he* bore, and our pains he carried; yet *we* thought . . .'

4–5 The meaning grows in clarity through these verses: the pain he is bearing is ours (4); it is the punishment of sin (5a); it is the price of salvation (5b). But it remains a paradox, one of God's ways which are higher than ours (55:9), as we are reminded by the startling conjunction of *his wounds* (*i.e.* 'weals'; *cf.* 1:6) and our healing, as cause and effect. **6** This verse is perhaps the most penetrating of all descriptions of sin and atonement, uncovering the fecklessness which is second nature to us and the self-will which isolates us from God and man alike; but also the divine initiative which transferred our punishment to the one substitute. The metaphor whereby *iniquity* is *laid on him* is clarified by *e.g.* Gn. 4:13; Lv. 5:1, 17 (where one [lit.] bears one's iniquity, *i.e.* its penalty) and by *e.g.* Lv. 10:17; 16:22 (where the liability falls on another). Note the expressions, *we all . . . us all*, which give the verse an identical beginning and end in the Hebrew; grace wholly answering sin.

53:7–9 Wicked hands, willing victim. The victim's silence (contrast the outcry of another 'gentle lamb', Je. 11:19; 12:3) springs from love and faith, as Jesus was to show (1 Pet. 2:23–24), not from weakness or prudence. Taking note of the NIV mg. on v 8, 'From arrest and judgment [sentence] he was taken [led] away', the whole stanza irresistibly evokes the trial of Jesus and its sequel (see on v 9).

8 The translation *descendants* agrees better with the LXX, quoted in Acts 8:33, than with the Hebrew text, whose word *dôr* points rather to one's contemporaries. It is best rendered 'as for his [own] generation, who gave it any thought?' *Cf.* 'Who has believed . . .?' (1).

9 The NIV should restore the Hebrew's singular, 'a rich man'. It was an enigma until the event of Mt. 27:57, 60, and it still embarasses those to whom detailed prediction is unacceptable. But the ancient versions and the Scrolls confirm the authenticity of *rich*, the latter source indeed correcting a plural found in the LXX, retaining the singular, as found in the standard text.

53:10–12 Crowned with glory and honour. In this stanza vindication is complete. The persecutors fade from view, to reveal *the LORD* (emphatic in v 10; *cf.* Acts 4:28) and the Servant (12; *he poured out his life*) as the ultimate doers of what has been done. Further, in each verse the Servant's resurrection and triumph are clearly implied, while even more facets of his atonement appear than in vs 4–6.

10 A *guilt offering* was the sacrifice which spoke of compensation or satisfaction. The Hebrew of this verse can make either 'his soul' (*i.e.* himself) or the Lord the offerer of the sacrifice; but v 12 leaves no doubt of the Servant's self-giving. **11–12** Other aspects of his saving work are shown in terms of justification, sin-bearing, identification (*numbered with the transgressors*; *cf.* Lk. 22:37) and *intercession*, *i.e.* intervention. He is presented as priest and sacrifice, patriarch (10b) and king. Finally, the *many . . . many* in vs 11–12 (the same word is translated *great* in v 12) for whom the one suffered, reappear in fulfilment of the opening promise (*cf.* 52:14–15, 'many . . . many').

54:1–17 The teeming mother-city

This chapter's exuberance, peace and security spring from the dereliction and death just described, which at 52:13 cut across the description of the great homecoming. In

Christian terms, the Calvary of ch. 53 is followed by the growing church of ch. 54 and the gospel call of ch. 55.

54:1–10 Wife and mother. Paul linked this passage with the story of Sarah and Hagar (*cf.* Gal. 4:27) and saw here the true church, its members born from above (see also on 49:14–23). The promise of world-wide expansion (3; *cf.* 49:19) and the hint of coming strains upon the old structure (2) were to be vividly borne out in the age of the apostles. For the metaphor of the erring wife see 50:1; here however, with rare sympathy, not the guilt but the pain (6) of the estrangement is put to the fore, with a corresponding tenderness of reunion (7–8) – its permanence seen to be as unconditional and as undeserved (*cf. compassion* in v 10) as the promise of Gn. 9:11, and (we can now add) of Mt. 16:18.

54:11–17 Gem-built city. The narrow tent of v 2 and the shattered Jerusalem are equally outshone by this union of beauty and strength, a glowing picture of the church, to be elaborated in Rev. 21:10–27. But its meaning is translated into non-pictorial terms in vs 13–15, where the *righteousness* of v 14 and the impregnability of vs 15–17 are deep rooted in personal discipleship (13; *cf.* Je. 31:34), which is one of the marks of the new covenant. This is the true strength of God's city, which is promised not immunity from attack but the unanswerable weapon of truth (17; *cf.* Lk. 21:15).

55:1–13 Grace abounding

This call to the needy is unsurpassed for warmth of welcome even in the NT. The chapter builds up twice to a climax, first in vs 1–5, then, over a still greater range, in vs 6–13.

55:1–5 Poverty, abundance, mission. 1–3 The fourfold *come* is as wide as human need (note the stress on unsatisfied longing in vs 1–2, as in *e.g.* Ec. 1:3; Jn. 4:13) and as narrow as a single individual (note the intertwined singulars and plurals in v 1, more evident in AV, RV). The Bible closes with an echo of it (Rev. 22:17), and Jesus made the same identification of *come . . . and eat* with 'come to me' in Jn. 6:35. The paradox of *buy . . . without money* throws into relief the twin facts of sure possession and total dependence which are implied in grace (*cf.* the union of the undoubting and the undeserving in Heb. 4:16).

3–5 These verses raise the invitation to the fully personal plane, engaging mind and will and drawing the hearers into *covenant*, to share in the world mission of the Messiah. *David* is named only here in chs. 40–66, but this is enough to identify the kingly Messiah of 7:14 *etc.* with the Servant of 42:1 *etc.* for whom the nations wait. (The suggestion that the promise given to David in 2 Sa. 7:12–16 is here transferred from king to people, goes ill with the emphasis in v 3b on its permanence. Rather, David's vision in Ps. 18:43–45, 49, of nations subdued for a witness to the Lord, is enlarged by the prospect of nations converted: *cf.* v 5 with Zc. 8:20–23; 9:9–10).

55:6–13 Sin, pardon, glory. 6–9 If man is hungry and needs satisfying (1–5), he is also *wicked* and needs salvation. God's calling and seeking (1–5) must be matched by those of the sinner. V 7 is a classic statement of repentance, challenging the mind (*cf.* the NT word for 'repentance') and the will, the habits (*way*) and the plans (implied in the Hebrew for *thoughts*). It is both negative (*forsake*) and positive (*turn*), personal (*to the* LORD) and specific (for *mercy*); and its appeal is reinforced by the shortness of the time (6) and the sheer generosity of the promise (7).

10–11 The declaration of vs 8–9 not only looks back to v 7 but on to vs 10–13, to shame us out of our small expectations. God's thoughts are more far-reaching and more fertile, as well as higher, than ours. The comparison of his word with *rain and . . . snow* suggests a slow and silent work, transforming the face of the earth in due time. The reference is to his decree (*cf. e.g.* 44:26; 45:23) rather than his invitation or instruction, which can be refused (48:18–19; *cf.* the similar imagery to that of v 10 in Heb. 6:4–8).

12–13 His decree is given in these verses, combining the joys of liberation (12a), of the Lord's own coming (*cf.* 12a with 52:12; 12b with Ps. 96:12–13) and of the healing of the old devastations (*cf.* 13a with 7:23–25 and perhaps Gn. 3:18). Notice his special *renown* as liberator (13b).

56:1 – 66:24 The glory and shame of Zion

Whereas chs. 40–55 surveyed the Babylonian exile, tracing the pattern of redemption largely in terms of the Israelite homecoming, the remaining part of the book fixes our attention on the homeland, which is seen partly in its too-familiar aspect as a place of corruption (56:9 – 59:15a) and devastation (63:7 – 64:12), but shown also as it will appear when God has come to the rescue, to make it 'a crown of beauty', the centre and magnet of the whole earth (chs. 60–62). The final chapters (65–66), like the prelude (56:1–8), show God's welcome of the outsider and the heathen to his holy mountain and eternal kingdom, but press home the peril of an everlasting exclusion from these glories.

56:1–8 A welcome for the outcast

1–2 After the exhilarating climax to chs. 40–55, these verses present the sober obligations of integrity (1) and unworldliness (2) that are the plain fare of salvation. In v 1, *righteousness* displays two of its facets by being coupled with both *justice* (*i.e.* fair dealing) and *salvation*; for God's righteousness is oriented towards putting things right, not merely towards condemning them as wrong (*cf.* Rom. 3:21–26; see also on 46:12–13).

3–8 These verses produce a similarly practical translation of the missionary vision of chs. 40–55 into modest terms, in the concern shown for the *eunuch* and the *foreigner*, outsiders in the midst of Israel. The former are shown that the law against them (Dt. 23:1) was given in love (to make this cruel mutilation abhorrent in Israel, if nowhere else); and this love now sensitively matched their handicap with something *better* (5), answering their physical exclusion with the word *within*, and their lack of a posterity with the word *everlasting*. The *foreigners* are likewise treated according to their attitude, not their birth – a principle already established by God's acceptance, despite Dt. 23:3, of Ruth the convert. But the great words of v 7b were too big for the temple's trustees (*cf.* Mk. 11:17; Acts 21:28). With the little-known v 8, *cf.* Jn. 10:16; it is one of several indications that our Lord knew these chapters intimately.

The importance of the *Sabbath*, reiterated in this passage (2, 4, 6), emerges most clearly in the two supporting phrases in v 4, making this day not an end in itself but a mark of love for God (*cf.* 58:13) and loyalty to the covenant (*cf.* Ex. 31:13).

56:9 – 59:15a The shame of Zion

56:9–12 Watchmen asleep. See, by contrast, 52:8; 62:6. Our own phrases, dumb dogs, sleeping dogs, greedy dogs, are all, substantially, in vs 10–11a, and they characterize the spiritual leaders (*watchmen; cf.* Ezk. 3:17), while *shepherds* is usually an OT term for rulers. The sequence is instructive: spiritually, to have no vision (10a; *cf.* 1 Sa. 3:1) is to have no message (10b) and to drift into escapism (10c) and self-pleasing (11a). Indeed the *shepherds* are behaving like their sheep, as they *all turn to their own way* (11b; *cf.* 53:6). Worse, they are predators and drunkards (11c–12), pushing greed and escapism to the limit.

57:1–13 Flagrant apostasy. The watchmen have relaxed (56:9–12), and evil has duly flooded in. The times could well be those of Manasseh, Hezekiah's apostate son, whose persecution of the innocent (2 Ki. 21:16) would accord with v 1, and whose burning of his own son (2 Ki. 21:6) matches the revival of Molech worship here (5b, 9).

2 The thought of the verse is akin to Rev. 14:13. **5** The theme of *lust* refers to the sexual fertility rites of Canaanite religion, rampant also in Jeremiah's early days (*cf.* Je. 2:20–25). (On 5b, see the first paragraph, above.) From speaking of literal whoredom it is a natural transition to the figure of Israel as the wife turned prostitute. In vs 6–13 (where *you* is consistently feminine singular) the metaphors such as *bed, symbols* (*i.e.* the prostitute's trade signs), *perfumes etc.* are intertwined with the actualities, such as *sacrifice* and *idols* in the religious realm, and *ambassadors* in the political realm. Whether v 9a refers to religion or politics is uncertain; the Hebrew text has 'the king', which could be either *Molech* (see the first paragraph, above) or an earthly ally (*cf. e.g.* 30:2–5).

There is loving perception in the picture of weary doggedness in v 10 and of infatuation and coming disillusion in vs 11–13. The whole passage is a fit companion to Ho. 1–3 and Lk. 13:34–35.

57:14–21 Abundant grace. Repetitions, such as *Build up, build up* and, later, *Peace, peace* (19), are highly characteristic of chs. 40–66 (*cf. e.g.* 40:1; 52:1; 65:1); so too is the theme of God as Saviour, vividly presented here. In v 14 he is the masterful liberator. In v 15 the conjunction of the *lofty* and the *lowly* prepares us for Mt. 11:28–30; Jn. 1:14. V 16 echoes Gn. 6:3 on God's forbearance, and vs 17–18 expound his frank resolve to reclaim the undeserving and unpromising, summed up in the memorable first line of v 18. **19** So the offer of grace is crystallized, to reappear in Eph. 2:17 as the germ of Paul's gospel to the Gentiles. 20–21 The plight of *the wicked* is consequently seen, more clearly than in 48:22, in terms of the salvation they have refused. Only their choice separates the *Peace, peace* of v 19 from the *no peace* of v 21.

58:1–14 Cant and reality. God's trumpet-call (1) to the formalists is related to the previous indictment (57:1–13) much as Rom. 2 is to Rom. 1, and its emphasis is largely that of the gospels and of James. Negatively (1–5), note the conjunction of meticulous religious observance (2, 5) and social ruthlessness (3b–4), which the pious of every generation seem to take in their (or our) stride (*cf.* Mt. 23; Jas. 4:1–3), but which God finds nauseating (*cf.* 1:15). Postively (6–14), the redefinition of fasting as social reform (6), loving care (7), and a forgoing of the luxury of 'pointing the finger' (9), is a foretaste of our Lord's constructive approach to the law.

9 The promise *Then you will call* . . . looks back to the unanswered prayers of v 3 (*cf.* Jas.

4:3, 8–10), and its rich development in vs 9b–12 is an expression of the principle of Mt. 7:2: 'with the measure you use, it will be measured to you'. **11** The beautiful simile of the *well-watered garden* reappears in Je. 31:12. The whole series of metaphors in vs 10–12 repays study. **13–14** But lest it should seem that philanthropy is all, these verses describe the strictness and the gladness of the Sabbath-keeping God desires. If fasting is to be an opportunity to show love to our neighbour, the Sabbath should express, first of all, our love of God (though both the foregoing passage and the Sabbath practice of Jesus insist that it must overflow to man). It will mean self-forgetfulness (13a) and the self-discipline of rising above the trivial (13b). But to people of this spirit God can safely give great things (14).

59:1–15a Mutual alienation. This passage is largely the dark counterpart of ch. 58. There is the same problem of unanswered prayer and a similar reply (1–2). But whereas ch. 58 describes true righteousness and its blessings, ch. 59 depicts sin (3–8) and its obliteration of all values (9–15) (*cf.* v 10 of each chapter). The end is chaos, with human life (in Hobbes's phrase) 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

2 This verse classically explains God's seeming inactivity as the effect of separation; not expounded here in terms of his revulsion (as at 1:15), but as the proper product of sin itself. **3–8** The spreading anarchy of these verses clinches the point; if this is sin, not even society survives it, let alone man's fellowship with God. **5–6** The *eggs of vipers* and *spider's web* speak tellingly of, first, the poisonous influence of evil people, propagated by the very attempts to stamp it out (5b; *cf. e.g.* the effects of banning obscene art), and secondly, the futility of relying on their policies or promises (6), flimsy as gossamer.

7–8 Paul drew on these verses in Rom. 3:15–17 in building up to his climax concerning our universal guilt. **9** With its *So*, this verse ushers in the progressive consequences of choosing evil. **10** The groping in broad daylight is the judgment that Jesus' contemporaries courted (*cf.* Jn. 3:19) and suffered (*cf.* Jn. 12:35–40). **14** The four personified figures, with *truth* (*i.e.* trustworthiness) lying prostrate (it is always 'the first casualty' in disordered times) may have contributed something to the imagery of Rev. 11:7–8. **15a** Perhaps the most revealing touch is the victimizing of the decent man, the only one out of step. It is a worse breakdown than that of Am. 5:13, *i.e.* not only public justice has warped, but public opinion with it.

59:15b–21 The solitary Rescuer (cf. 63:1–6)

Divine action is the only possible bridge between the shame of Zion just described and the glories to follow (see the comment introducing the section 56:1 – 66:24).

16–17 The Lord's concern is even sharper than our versions suggest. *Displeased* should be 'appalled', as at 63:5. With this unshared indignation *cf.* Jesus' solitary grief and anger in Lk. 19:41, 45. The armour and clothing in v 17 reaffirm the point of v 16b; the Lord has no external aids in fighting evil, only his pure and intense rejection of it. *Righteousness* seems to have both its dynamic, crusading sense and its more static meaning of integrity (*cf.* on 46:12–13). So God's armour here illuminates Eph. 6:13–17; it is what he himself uses, not only what he gives.

This zeal is governed by strict justice. V 18 bristles with words of requital, *repay ... retribution ... repay ... due* (*cf.* Rom. 12:19), but it clears the way for a kingdom of converts. **19–21** No place of origin will disqualify (19) or qualify (20) a man for membership; the test is spiritual (19a, 20b; *cf.* Mt. 8:10–12), and the *covenant* is recognizably the new covenant, whose participants will not only 'all know' the Lord (Je. 31:34) but all speak for him as a nation of prophets (*cf.* Nu. 11:29; Joel 2:28).

60:1 – 62:12 The glory of Zion

These glowing, exultant chapters depict blessings that transcend the old order and even, in places, the Christian era itself; but the language is that of the OT ordinances and of the literal Jerusalem – it will need translating into terms of 'the Jerusalem above' (*cf.* Gal. 4:26). Also Rev. 21 draws freely on ch. 60 for its picture of the radiant city from heaven; and the interpretation of that vision (of which more than one view is possible) must affect that of the present prophecy. The view taken here is that the return of dispersed Israelites to Jerusalem is made the model of a far greater movement, the world-wide inflow of converts into the church, and that the vision repeatedly looks beyond this to the end, the state of ultimate glory.

60:1–9 Lodestar of the nations. The *you* and *your* of this chapter are feminine singulars, addressing the mother-city, Zion (see on 49:14–23; 51:17–23; 54:1–10), whose *sons ... and ... daughters* (4) are of every nationality, not only of the Israelite dispersion (*c.f.* Ps. 87:3–6; Gal. 4:26). So *the nations* (3) and the *islands* (9) are more than mere carriers of this homeward traffic; they themselves furnish a large part of it as seekers who *come to* [Zion's] *light* (3) and *look* expectantly to the Lord (9), homing *like doves* to their loft (8; lit. 'their windows' or 'lattices'). But see also on vs 10–16. The *gold and incense* (6) remind the Christian reader of the harbingers of this migration in Mt. 2, whose homage then, however, was perilous and whose gifts included the enigmatic myrrh

(*cf.* Mk. 15:23; Jn. 19:39) – pointers to the struggle that still lay ahead.

On the setting and symbolism of, especially, vs 6–9 (of which 7 is crucial to the understanding of the chapter), see the introductory remarks to the section 60:1 – 62:12. The priestly terms of v 7 preclude a purely literal interpretation of the prophecy, since the NT insists that there can be no return to a worship based on sacrificial *rams . . . altar* and *temple*, which were 'but a shadow of the good things to come' (Heb. 10:1, RSV; *cf.* Heb. 13:10–16; Jn. 4:21–26). On *Tarshish* see on 2:16.

60:10–16 The sweets of conquest. The Gentiles of this passage are not converts but subjects, conquered rather than won. Scripture always envisages many such (*cf. e.g.* Lk. 19:27; Rev. 20:7–9). In metaphors of victory and its fruits – foreign labour (10), immunity from attack (11a; *cf.* Rev. 21:25–26), exotic tribute (11b), and the like – God promises the triumph of his kingdom and the endless (15) felicity of his people. The apparent imperialism of the passage only expresses the sober truth that to reject God's sway is suicide (12), and that the meek will inherit the earth.

60:17–22 The full blaze of glory. *Gold* instead of *bronze* is a characteristic divine exchange (*cf.* 61:3, 7), in telling contrast to human decline and devaluations (*cf.* the makeshifts in 1 Ki. 14:26–28 and the pathos of La. 4:1–2). The passage is so packed with these new glories that it can only be portraying the final perfection, where, in a people *all . . . righteous*, no overseers or taskmasters will be needed but the constraint of right and concord (17b), and no defence but the *salvation* which is inseparable from God (*cf.* 59:17), and the *praise* which is trust made perfect. The living centre of this glory, the immediate presence of God, is revealed in the two middle verses, 19–20. Rev. 21:23 and 22:5 confirm that this vision outruns not only the OT but the Christian era, expressing in earthly terms (*cf. e.g.* v 22) the new creation of which 65:17–25 will speak again.

61:1–4 The song of the Lord's Anointed. Although the term 'the Servant of the Lord' is absent from this song (as indeed from 50:4–9), it seems artificial to make the 'me' of v 1 a new speaker. Our Lord saw his mission revealed as clearly in this song as in the others (*cf.* Lk. 4:17–21; 7:22); and we may notice, in this *Spirit*-endued (*cf.* 11:2; 42:1) and *anointed* one, a blending of terms that relate to the Servant and the Messianic King.

The joyful task here is a fit sequel to the travail of the earlier songs (see on 42:1), the fruit of which was glimpsed in 53:10–12. Our Lord could quote this passage at the outset of his career because he had already accepted, in his baptism and temptation, the role of Suffering Servant and with it the cross. These are the 'benefits of his passion'; his miracles spoke the same language.

The setting continues to be the captivity, viewed in turn from Babylon (1b) and the ruined Jerusalem (3). To its first hearers the promise would be as literal as the earlier threat of exile (*cf.* 39:6); but as fulfilled by Jesus (*cf.* Lk. 4:21) it inaugurated the blessings proclaimed in the beatitudes and elsewhere to the downtrodden and particularly to those who *mourn* (*cf.* perhaps Am. 6:6). *Freedom for the captives* was to be spiritual, too, as John the Baptist had to learn (was his question of Lk. 7:19 provoked by the hopes he had pinned on the 'manifesto' of Lk. 4:18?). Notice the element of slow maturing and patient reconstruction implied in the metaphors of *oaks* and *ruined cities*.

But Jesus' marked omission of the words *the day of vengeance . . .* (*cf.* Lk. 4:19–20) points on tacitly to a final stage yet to be fulfilled (*cf.* Mt. 25:31–46; Acts 17:31; 2 Thes. 1:6–8). In its various contexts, then, the prophecy is seen in the bud, the flower and, by implication, the full fruit. See further on 63:4.

61:5–9 The ample compensation. This passage is sometimes thought to fall below the generous missionary spirit of *e.g.* 19:24–25; 45:22; 66:18–21, as though it relegated the Gentiles to perpetual servility. This is to mistake metaphor for fact. Under the figure of a priestly Israel served by foreigners (5–6) and enriched by its former plunderers (7–8), the reality is the people of God (whose status is not national; *cf.* 1 Pet. 2:10; Rev. 7:9), vindicated and enjoying their full inheritance as kings and priests (*cf.* 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6), while the pride of man is humbled and his power harnessed. On the Gentiles seen as the vanquished, see on 60:10–16; on Gentile converts see on 19:16–24; 60:1–9. 7 With the promised *double portion, cf.* possibly 40:2.

61:10–11 The song of the justified. With this outburst of joy, *cf.* 12:1–6 and the songs in chs. 24–27. Note the two metaphors for righteousness: first as the *robe*, on which the perfect comment is 'the best robe' of Lk. 15:22, festive and wholly undeserved; secondly as shoots of plant life, products of what is sown, whose inherent vitality issues in growth and form. The former depicts righteousness as conferred from outside (*cf.* Rom. 3:22); the latter as springing from within (*cf.* Rom. 8:10); both make it the gift of God. On its shades of meaning *cf.* on 46:12–13.

62:1–5 The bridal beauty of Zion. This is another poem in the series (beginning at 49:14, ending with 66:7–16) that depicts Zion as a woman yearning for her husband and

family. But here the stress is on God's side of the reunion: the energy of his will (1a); the height (1b) and width (2) of his ambition for her; the pride he takes in perfecting her (3); his joy in bringing home the outcast (4a); and the central mystery – that this is not philanthropy but ardent love (4b, 5b).

4 Of the four names here, the last two have passed into (and out of) the Christian vocabulary as *Hephzibah* and *Beulah* (see the NIV mg.), and their occurrence together illustrates the contrast between the biblical faith and the Canaanite cults; for the metaphor of God as husband is one of fidelity (*cf.* on 50:1) and *delight*, whereas Baal as husband was little more than a source of fertility (*cf.* Ho. 2:12–13). 5 Zion's *sons* may disrupt the metaphor to our ears, but are meant to enrich it by the reminder that the godly are as much wedded to as produced by their mother-city, whose restoration is their delight as well as God's.

62:6–12 Hastening the great day. The great homecoming is viewed from both the centre and the circumference; from the waiting Jerusalem (6–9, 11b–12) and the far-flung exiles (10–11a). Each of these settings provides its picture of the human preparations appropriate to God's decisive moment. **6–8** God first gives certain people a concern for Zion like his own (*cf.* vs 6–7 with v 1), summoning these *watchmen* (*cf.* 56:9–12.) and remembrancers (the word here for *you who call*; see on 63:7) to importunate prayer (*cf.* Lk. 11:8; 18:7), which he encourages with explicit promises (7–8). **10** Secondly, he calls on those who are in bondage to claim their liberty, and to give a lead to the distant *nations* from whom and with whom he would bring Zion's citizens home. On their identity, see on 60:1–9. 12 Notice finally the fourfold name of this ransomed community (*cf.* the new name promised in v 2); a triumphant climax to this group of chapters and still a promise to God's hard-pressed church.

63:1–6 The solitary Avenger

This is the companion piece to 59:15b–21 (*cf.* v 5 with 59:16). While both treat of judgment and consequent salvation, this poem with its dramatic dialogue (*cf.* Ps. 24:7–10) highlights the *day of vengeance* (4), a theme which was blended in 61:2 with that of restoration. The two activities are related causally, as victory (with its bloodshed) is to liberation (with its joy and peace); the NT endorses the sequence, developing this poem in Rev. 19:11–16, where Jesus is the warrior. But in both testaments God has first offered a refuge from his judgment (*cf.* 27:5).

1–2 *Edom* and its city *Bozrah* have already typified the impenitent world in 34:6. Now there is a play on the name Edom (*red*) and indirectly on Bozrah, a word similar to 'grape-gatherer'. *Speaking in righteousness* (1) refers to God's unfailing completion of what he announces (*cf.* 45:23; 55:11). Notice *mighty to save*; this is the dominant interest, even in this judgment passage. 3 The phrase *I have trodden the winepress alone* may remind the Christian of Calvary, but its meaning (*cf.* Rev. 19:15) is that God alone cares enough and has power enough to carry through the work of judgment.

63:7 – 64:12 The crying needs of Zion

The glories of chs. 60–62 and the vision of decisive action in 63:1–6 stir the prophet to one of the most eloquent intercessions of the Bible, as he surveys the past goodness of God and the present straits of his people.

63:7–14 God's former mercies. 7 Isaiah is doing the work of a manward 'remembrancer' (*cf.* 62:6); his resolve *I will tell* is (lit.) 'I will bring to remembrance'. 8 In the metaphor of a father's hopes for his children, he picks up the opening theme of the book (1:2, 4), and in v 9 he draws freely on the book of Exodus (*cf.* in turn Ex. 3:7; 33:14; 19:4). **10–14** The terms are close to those of Ps. 78; *e.g. rebelled and grieved* (*cf.* Ps. 78:40) and the simile of leading animals to pasture in vs 13–14 (*cf.* Ps. 78:52–53). But he uses the terms with a new intensity (*cf.* v 9a) and with a new emphasis on the *Holy Spirit* as the Lord in the midst of his people (10–11, 14). In vs 10–14 the reference is to the post-wilderness rebellions of Israel, for which they were chastised (10) but not cast off. For the sake of his former mercies the Lord still led them on (*cf.* vs 13b–14 with Ps. 78:72, where David continues the work of Moses).

63:15 – 64:12 God's forlorn family. The plea, three times over, *you are our Father* (63:16; 64:8), gives this prayer its special intensity, as the sense of estrangement struggles with that of acceptance.

The symptoms of estrangement are partly outward, with the enemy treading down all that was holy (63:18; 64:10–11); but far more serious are the inward symptoms: the spiritual hardness of 63:17, the ravages of sin described in 64:5b–6 (a brilliant portrayal of its power to habituate, defile and disintegrate) and a general listlessness (64:7), which makes the condition humanly incurable.

In all this there is seen the judgment of God, who has *withheld* his intervention (63:15), hardened their hearts (63:17; *cf.* 6:10) and made them *waste away* (Heb. 'melt') *because of* (or 'by means of') their *sins* (64:7). The last of these phrases makes it clear that God is not to blame for their spiritual plight; it stems from their own dalliance with evil.

On the other side there is a Father's constancy to appeal to (see the opening comment, above); it is more tenacious than human faithfulness (*cf.* 63:16 with 49:15; Ps. 27:10) and of longer standing (*of old*; 63:16). Further, it is proved by his mighty interventions for *those who wait* for him (64:4; *cf.* 8:17; 30:18) – and why should these not be renewed (64:1–5a)? (The NT points out how unimaginably they would be transcended; *cf.* 1 Cor. 2:9–10.) Above all, the Father is appealed to as the *potter* (64:8) who knows all and controls all. This submissive trust is a very different spirit from that of 45:9–10; it makes the prayer, which resolutely began with praise (63:7), a model for all who must cry out of the depths.

But it ends with a question. God's answer will reveal how much or little the prophet's contrition has been echoed by his people.

65:1 – 66:24 The great divide

Far from ending in a general radiance, these chapters unsparingly sharpen the contrast of light and darkness and strip away all cover of privilege. It is an end as searching as that of Revelation and the parables of judgment, pursuing to the last the implications of Isaiah's inaugural vision (ch. 6).

65:1–16 The owned and the disowned. **1–2** The Hebrew as it stands supports Rom. 10:20–21 in referring v 1 to the Gentiles and v 2 to Israel. In the NIV the Hebrew phrase 'a nation . . . not called by my name', (*i.e.* the Gentiles) has been adjusted to read *a nation that did not call on my name* (which could still be Israel). While this reading can claim ancient support, the unaltered Hebrew (as in the AV and RV) points quite clearly to the Gentiles, answering Israel's disdainful 63:19b, rather than merely echoing 64:7.

The Gentiles, then, are to be brought in, and apostate Judaism rejected (1–7); but vs 8–10 reaffirm the promise of a 'remnant' of godly Israelites (see on 10:20–23). God's dividing line clearly runs not between Jew and Gentile as such, but between 'seekers' and 'forsakers' (10c–11a), who are respectively blessed and cursed in vs 13–16.

3–7 With the forbidden rites *cf.* 57:3–10. The earlier deviations were predominantly licentious; the present ones are provocative, brushing aside God's altars (3b, 7b; *cf.* Dt. 12:2–7), dabbling in necromancy (4a; *cf.* Dt. 18:11), defiantly eating forbidden flesh (4b; *cf.* 66:17; Dt. 14:3, 8) and claiming a magical 'holiness' from these perversions, potent like a spell (5a is [lit.] 'for I am holy to you'). For the crowning insult see v 11.

8 The simile of the good grapes in a poor cluster relates the 'remnant' theme to that of the spoilt vineyard of ch. 5, using perhaps the opening of a vintage song to make the point, since *Don't destroy it* seems to be the name of a tune in the titles of Pss. 57–59. **10** On *the Valley of Achor*, with its troubled past and hopeful prospect, see Jos. 7:26; Ho. 2:15. **11–12** *Fortune* and *Destiny*, Gad and Meni, were worshipped in Syria and elsewhere. Note the word-play in v 12a: *I will destine you* . . . . With the *table* and *bowls* *cf.* 1 Cor. 10:21–22, where Paul's questions, 'Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy?' (*cf.* our v 3) could indicate that he had this chapter in mind.

13–16 Here the opening rhythm is that of a dirge or taunt-song (*cf.* 14:3–23), and the sharp contrasts anticipate those of the gospels (*cf. e.g.* Mt. 25:31–46; Lk. 6:20–26; Jn. 3:36). The name, *the God of truth* (16) is (lit.) the God of 'Amen', *i.e.* what is sure and faithful; *cf.* our Lord's expression, 'Truly, truly,' ('Amen, amen'), and his title in Rev. 3:14 (see also 2 Cor. 1:18–20).

65:17–25 New heavens and earth. The new is portrayed wholly in terms of the old, only without the old sorrows; there is no attempt to describe any other kind of newness. Hence the familiar setting, Jerusalem, and the modest satisfactions, largely the chance to 'enjoy the work of [one's] hands'. This allows the most important things to be prominent in the passage: the healing of old ills (17b); joy (18–19); life (20; see below); security (21–23a); fellowship with God (23b–24) and concord among his creatures (25).

The point of *a hundred* years old (20) is that in this new setting a mere century is shamefully brief, so vast is the scale.

This leaves the question open whether the passage promises these blessings literally, or depicts the final state by means of earthly analogies. If the conditions are literal, they will be those of the millennium, as in a straight reading of Rev. 20, where the resurrected saints appear to coexist with people of the present order, before the final judgment. Against this, however, is the sequence whereby the new creation (17–18) precedes these blessings here, but follows them in Rev. 21:1. For this reason it seems that we should take this passage as an analogy, and its allusions to the sinner (20; see the NIV mg.) and the serpent (25) as promises of judgment and victory. The wicked will no longer flourish, nor the strong prey on the weak, nor the tempter escape his sentence (*cf.* v 25 with Gn. 3:14–15), in the perfect world to come. But all this is expressed freely, locally and pictorially, to kindle hope rather than feed curiosity. Notice finally the implication, by the allusion to 11:6–9, that this is brought to pass not by a bare creative fiat, but through the Messianic king.

66:1–5 Worshippers, welcome and unwelcome. This is no protest against rebuilding the temple, as some have suggested, for God commanded it (Hg. 1:2–11). Rather, it is a rebuke to ecclestiasticism – the spirit that would build human walls round God (1–2a; *cf.* 2 Sa. 7:6–7; Acts 7:48–50, 54). **2b** Note the distinctly chastened attitude that God expects of us, as in Lk. 18:13, since man is not only small but sinful. See, however, 57:15.

Ecclestiasticism also breeds unreality (3) and intolerance (5). 3 The Hebrew runs (lit.) 'slaughtering the ox, smiting a man' *etc.* and could either mean (with most versions) that a merely correct ritual is like senseless slaughter and idolatry (*cf.* 1:13; Je. 7:21), or else that at present it is coexisting with brutality and sacrilege. The intolerance in v 5 was acted out, almost to the letter, in Jn. 9:24, 34. It is one of the earliest allusions to purely religious persecution and theological hatred, one of the darkest stains of the church.

66:6–17 The last intervention. Although the terms of this section and the next are still those of the OT, with its *temple* (6), *chariots* (20), New Moons and Sabbaths (23), they clearly concern the end time. Vs 7–9 stress the utter newness of the event, which mocks the slow processes of history: the *nation . . . brought forth in a moment* is the equivalent of 1 Cor. 15:51–52: 'we will all be changed . . . in the twinkling of an eye'. V 9 gives the triumphant final answer to Hezekiah's message to Isaiah in 37:3.

10–14 The exuberant family scene of these verses, concluding the poems on Zion as wife and mother (see on 49:14–23), is now centred on Zion's children (*cf.* Gal. 4:26). Note that the mother-city is really the secondary, not the primary, source of their wealth and comfort; all is from the Lord, even love like a mother's (13), although he uses the redeemed community to dispense his gifts. The last two lines of this verse give the 'whence' and 'where' of this help: I . . . 'In Jerusalem' (*cf.* RSV) Direct fellowship with God, and full involvement in his church, are held together here. In Jn. 16:22 Jesus gave v 14a a strongly personal reference.

15–16 The *fire* and *sword* are the harsh aspect of every divine intervention (*cf.* Mt. 10:34), but this is the final one (*cf.* v 24; 2 Thes. 1:7–10). While it has reference to *all men*, the special objects of wrath are the apostates of v 17 (*cf.* 65:3–7; Lv. 11:7, 29), who have known the light and despised it. 17 The *one in the midst* was perhaps the leader in a magico-religious rite (*cf.* Jaazaniah 'standing among them' in Ezk. 8:11).

66:18–24 The nations gathered in. On a millennialist view, the Lord's coming will be followed by the further evangelizing of the world, the full return of Israel, and the establishment of Jerusalem as the world's capital and centre of pilgrimage. Alternatively, one may take this final section to be an epilogue that spans the first and second comings of Christ. V 18 will then state his purpose for the world, and vs 19–21 his means of carrying it out: the *sign* (Christ crucified and risen; Mt. 12:38–40?); the survivors, or saved remnant, sent to the nations (19); and the gathering of his people into his *Jerusalem* (20), Gentiles being admitted to full membership with Jews (21). Jerusalem on this view is not the literal city (*cf.* again Gal. 4:25–26). Vs. 22–24 would describe (still in OT terms) the states of final glory and perdition.

In v 19 the names represent the distant outposts of Israel's world. **20–21** From earth's remotest parts, then, the dispersed of Israel will be brought to Jerusalem like a homage offering by the Gentiles. There is a double meaning in this term, which stood for the *grain offering* in Lv. 2 *etc.* but also for a vassal's tribute to his overlord. But these Gentiles, too, will be acceptable; not only like *clean vessels*, fit to convey the Israelites, but as *priests and Levites* themselves. (Grammatically, *some of them* could refer to the returned Israelites, but the anti-climax is improbable.) Paul uses a striking variant of this symbolism in Rom. 15:15–16.

22 With *the new heavens etc. cf.* 65:17. 23 *New Moon* and *Sabbath* have ceased to be binding on the Christian (*cf.* Col. 2:16), and it is implausible to suggest that these 'shadows' will be reinstated. They stand here for their substance, the joyful dedicating of all life to the Creator.

23 *Cf.* Dn. 12:2; Mk. 9:48. In the synagogue, v 23 is read again after v 24 to soften the ending of the prophecy. But it is a true ending. 'It is plain' (to quote G. A. Smith) 'that nothing else can result, if the men on whose ears the great prophecy had fallen, with all its music and all its gospel, . . . did yet continue to prefer their idols, their swine's flesh . . . their sitting in graves, to so evident a God and to so great a grace.'
Seek the LORD while he may be found (55:6).

Derek Kidner

JEREMIAH

Introduction

Author and background

Jeremiah prophesied to the kingdom of Judah during the reigns of kings Josiah (640–609 BC), Jehoahaz (609), Jehoiakim (609–597), Jehoiachin (597) and Zedekiah (597–587). The opening words of the book (1:2) tell us that his ministry began in 627 BC. His work, therefore, spanned forty years, a whole career, and coincided with the last years of the kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah may thus be regarded as one of the prophets of the exile, along with Ezekiel (see also page 628).

With Ezekiel, then, Jeremiah was a successor to the great prophets of a century or so earlier (Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah), who had preached in the days when there were still two kingdoms, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern). The former, however, had been dismantled in 722 BC by the mighty Assyrians ('the rod of my [God's] anger'; Is. 10:5), after the warnings of Amos and others had gone unheeded. Jeremiah's Judah, therefore, though it had survived the Assyrian onslaught (see 2 Ki. 18 – 20), was a tiny and exposed remnant of God's people. Could it survive for long? The answer would depend on whether the people would hear the word of God through Jeremiah.

When Jeremiah first heard God's word, Assyria was no longer the force it once had been. It was in its decline (the fate of all empires) that King Josiah was able to reassert the ancient Israelite claim to the territory of the northern kingdom, lost a hundred years earlier (2 Ki. 23:15–20). In 612 BC, Nineveh the capital of Assyria, fell to the new power in the region, Babylon, which now represented the new threat to God's people. Jeremiah pictures it as an army that would come 'from the land of the north' (6:22). As a century earlier, so now, God's plans for his people were bound up with historical and political events over which he had control. He himself would bring this foe against his unfaithful people (5:15).

The message

Prophets often addressed their words to kings, because these had a special responsibility for maintaining the religious life of the people. In this respect Jeremiah is interesting because his ministry began at the time when King Josiah was reforming the religion of Judah. 2 Ki. 22 – 23 describes at length the measures he took and relates them to the discovery in the temple of the 'Book of the Law' (probably Deuteronomy), possibly lost during the long and corrupt reign of King Manasseh (see on 2 Ki. 22:8). This was in 621 BC, five years after Jeremiah's call. The reform may have been going on since 628, however, as is implied by 2 Ch. 34:3–7. Surprisingly, therefore, Jeremiah's preaching – highly critical of Judah – began during the reign of a just and faithful king. This may suggest that he thought the reform could not of itself produce the deep change in people which God desired. His call would be for a complete change of heart (4:4).

Jeremiah, nevertheless, criticized all the leaders within Judah for their failure to give true teaching and leadership according to the standards of the covenant for which they were responsible. Kings (ch. 22), prophets (23:9–40) and priests (2:7) are uncompromisingly attacked. (An exception is made for Josiah; 22:15–16.) The condemnation is the more striking because Jeremiah himself was both prophet and priest (1:1). The covenant people, in fact, were false through and through (9:3–6). That is the basis of Jeremiah's whole message.

The message itself, however, which was delivered over a long period and against a dramatically changing background, seems to have passed through several distinct stages. First, Jeremiah called for the people to repent of their sins so that they might not suffer at the hands of Babylon (3:12). At a certain point, however, he announced that God would indeed punish Judah at that nation's hands. The time for repentance was past; God's chastisement was now inevitable (21:1–10). However, this second stage was closely linked with the third, which was an announcement that the chastisement was for the purposes of restoration. In God's mercy the Babylonian exile would be a way to life for those who would accept the punishment (21:9; 24:4–7). It is within this last stage that the promises which include the hope of the new covenant (31:31–34) are to be understood. In the end, therefore, the covenant, once despised by Israel, is re-established by God's mercy.

Jeremiah himself was deeply involved in, and affected by, his message. He suffered because of

it in certain obvious, outward ways, having to forgo normal social and family life (15:17; 16:2), being the object of plots against his life (11:18–23; 18:18) and the victim of imprisonments and beatings (20:1–6; 37:15–16; 38:6). Inwardly he was affected too, for he felt keenly the agony which he knew the people must endure (4:19–21; 10:19–22). Yet he also felt the passion of God against the sin around him (8:21 – 9:3). He therefore experienced the judgment from both sides, which placed an almost unbearable burden on him.

The pain that thus arose out of his prophetic calling is most poignantly expressed in the poetic passages often known as 'the confessions' (11:18–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–21; 17:12–18; 18:19–23; 20:7–18). In these he complains to God, almost bitterly. Yet out of them too come reassurances that God will finally save (15:19–21).

The message and the Christian reader

It is not a straightforward matter for the Christian reader to translate Jeremiah's message into something that is relevant for his or her life. What can God's judgment on his ancient people have to do with the life of the individual Christian? Indeed, how does Jeremiah's preaching of salvation to a nation, understood as restoration to a land, in the context of politics and war, relate to the Christian gospel?

A first answer is to point to the work of Christ. At the heart of Jeremiah's message is the truth that God punishes his people with a view to their salvation. This principle of salvation through judgment foreshadows above all the cross of Christ, in which he himself bore the judgment for human sin in order to save sinful humanity.

Jeremiah points to Christ also in the new covenant prophecies (chs. 30–33). These look first to a restoration of the ancient people of Judah to their land in faithfulness, but ultimately to Christ, who himself lives out the life of faithful 'Israel' and gives the Holy Spirit to those who are in him so that they too might participate in that faithful life.

However, if the book of Jeremiah chiefly points forward to the great things that Christ has done for his people, is there any way in which the book can be a guide for the living of the Christian life? The answer here also is that it can. In this connection it is important to understand that the Christian gospel does not concern individuals only, but the church as a body, and to suppose that there is a basic consistency in the way in which God deals with his people. This means, first, that the messages to Judah of both judgment and salvation may apply in a sense to the church as a body. Like God's people of old, it too needs to guard against complacency and should not think that it is above chastisement (*cf.* Rev. 2 – 3). It (or parts of it) may even undergo times of chastening, only to know God's renewal at last.

Secondly, Jeremiah highlights the need for responsible leadership and warns of how corruption in God's people can spread. He cautions against false trust among those who are religious, perhaps a false trust in religion itself. He shows how, when the church's life has become debased, its corrupt character can be transmitted from generation to generation (44:9). This perception may even apply to societies other than the church, national or traditional, and thus explain the transmission of hatreds and prejudices within societies over centuries. The prophecy also exposes the psychology of sin and the strength of the inclination that human beings have towards it (3:6–10). The portrait of King Zedekiah is a great evocation of the eternal hesitation of human beings between good and evil.

Finally, the book has some marvellous expressions of joy in salvation, mainly in chs. 30–33. The poetry of these is itself an inspiration, and in their context in a prophecy which has so much to say about sin and judgment, they focus in their own unique way on the love and compassion of the God whose deepest desire is to give life and blessing to his creatures.

Form, structure and composition of the book

The book of Jeremiah is long and contains a variety of material. Some of it consists of the words of Jeremiah, spoken in the form of poetic oracles, or sayings (*e.g.* chs. 2–6); some of it has a more sermonic style (*e.g.* 7:1–15), printed as prose in most translations (including the NIV); there are also passages written *about* Jeremiah, presumably by someone else (*e.g.* ch. 26). Most of the poetic oracles are in chs. 1–20. Generally, we are not given the dates or settings of individual sayings of this sort. We have more information about the time and place of individual sayings and events in the sermons and the narratives. However, the book is not a biography; it tells about Jeremiah only in order to help proclaim his message.

We know little about how the book was formed. It does not follow a consistent chronological pattern, and it can be difficult to read in a connected way. It was probably formed in stages. This is suggested by ch. 36, where we read that the first scroll of Jeremiah's words was destroyed by King Jehoiakim and that Jeremiah then had another made, which contained more words than the first (36:32). It is also suggested by the fact that the Greek OT (the LXX) contains

a shorter version of the book than that which appears in our Bibles. The prophet appears to have worked on the book's production with Baruch, his assistant and scribe. Baruch may have had a hand, therefore, in the composition of the book as we now know it.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1–19 Jeremiah

Jeremiah was the son of a priest, his birthplace Anathoth being a city specially set aside for priestly families (1; *cf.* Jos. 21:18). It was close to Jerusalem, and the priests would have made the short journey to the city as required in order to perform their duties. In the normal course of events, Jeremiah would have exercised the priestly office in due time.

This expectation was interrupted, however, by his call to be a prophet. The phrase *The word of the* LORD came to him (2) is a typical way of speaking about a prophet's call in the OT (*cf.* Ho. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Ezk. 1:3; Mi. 1:1). It shows well how the prophetic mission was not sought by the person to whom it came. Rather, God chose the person for his purpose. His will, once revealed, required that Jeremiah yield himself wholly to it. His whole life would be affected by it deeply.

Jeremiah's first response to the call was most reluctant (6; *cf.* that of Moses, Ex. 4:10–13). He was only a young man (the word translated *child* might better be 'youth'; Jeremiah could have been around twenty). In a society which valued the wisdom of older people, he might well have felt unable to *speak*, *i.e.* a lack of any natural qualification to lead or to interpret events for the whole nation. The Lord, however, had anticipated his objection; he knew and appointed him before he was born (5). This is a remarkable statement of God's foreknowledge, and particularly of his calling of an individual. It puts all natural and acquired qualifications in the shade. It also puts other aspirations in the shade. When God called Jeremiah, he laid his hand on him in such a way that there could be no true choice but to hear and obey. He had been brought to this hour for this purpose. Yet, of course, he must choose, and must obey, and continue to do so throughout his ministry.

The word to Jeremiah not only reassured the prophet but also validated his ministry among the people. In this sense it comes to all (not just ministers or other church officials) who feel their inability to perform what they know God has called them to. It warns church people generally against being superficial in assessing the gifts and ministries of others.

God reassured Jeremiah that he would protect him from those who would oppose and hate him. As a bearer of God's word he shared, in a sense, in God's authority even over *kingdoms* (10). Jeremiah's message would indeed prove to be important for a number of nations, not just Judah and Babylon (see on chs. 46 – 51). God's words of both judgment and salvation would surely find their mark.

Jeremiah was given visions to confirm God's assurance to him that the call was authentic. The first vision, of an *almond tree*, depends for its meaning on the resemblance in Hebrew between the word for *almond tree* and the word for watching. The second, of *a boiling pot*, shows that the message would be one of judgment at the hands of a people from the north (14). Babylon was not yet specified. The plural (*all the peoples . . . their kings*; 15–16) is vague. Jeremiah may not initially have known that Babylon would be the foe in question. The setting up of the *thrones* of foreign kings in the *gates of Jerusalem* (15) implies that they, and their gods, now ruled there. It looks as if the Lord himself had failed his people. But the prophet will show why their humiliation must be so.

The sin for which the people would be judged was the fundamental one of breaking the covenant with the Lord, by the rejection of him in favour of other gods (16). This was to attack the covenant at its roots, as the people had done at the time when it was first made, at Mount Sinai (Ex. 32). It will be a constant theme in the book.

Finally, Jeremiah was told again to stand firm (17). As the nation would have enemies, so would he, among the people themselves, including the powerful among them (18). The Lord, however, is more powerful than they, and he will protect him (19). The promise will have to be repeated – and kept (see 11:18–23).

2:1 – 4:4 The Lord's accusation of his people

2:1–8 An abandoned love

Ch. 2 contains the essence of the prophet's accusation of Judah. In this opening passage the Lord recalls the earliest days of Israel's life, when he brought her out of slavery in Egypt and made her his people by a covenant at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19 – 24). The time in the *desert* (2) is remembered as one of faithfulness. In that unfruitful place it was essential to trust God for everything. And he had protected her from enemies (3b; see Ex. 17:8–13). (Israel had not always been faithful in the desert; note Ex. 32. Jeremiah, however, focuses on the desert as the place of true communion with God, as Hosea had also done; Ho. 2:14–15.)

The point of this picture of the faith of a past generation is to contrast it with the corruption of the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day. The Lord now calls them to account (4). The covenant involved a commitment on both sides.

The Lord had promised land and blessing at the same time as requiring Israel's faithfulness. He now asks, rhetorically, whether some failure on his part had led to Israel's straying from him (5). The sin affected not the present generation only but their *fathers*.

The sin that had stolen the people's hearts was nothing less than idolatry. This was to reject the first and fundamental commandment (Ex. 20:3). In the land of Canaan, which God had given the people, they had worshipped Baal, the god commonly worshipped by the Canaanite peoples. (The term *worthless idols* in v 5, is a play on the name Baal in Hebrew; the point is that Baal was in fact powerless and empty). The people had thoroughly transferred their trust to Baal, the various leaders forsaking their specific responsibilities to the Lord and the people, and devoting themselves to this other god (8). This was bitter reward for the God who had led them through the dangers of the desert into a land of plenty (6–7; *cf.* Dt. 8:7–10). When he calls it his *inheritance* (7b), the point is not about how he got it, but that it belongs to him perpetually (*cf.* Lv. 25:23). His people, however, by their sin, have made it loathsome to him; they have corrupted themselves with those very practices he had once decisively removed from this land (Lv. 18:19–30).

2:9–28 The charge

In reality, it is Judah who has been the unfaithful covenant partner. Therefore the Lord now elaborates his accusation. The charge is of exchanging the true God for idols. *Their Glory* is a name for God (11), recalling his appearances to Israel in their desert wanderings (Ex. 40: 34–35). The unnaturalness of turning from God is stressed in vs 10–12.

This turning from God to powerless idols, furthermore, is a delusion. Israel's and Judah's history itself shows this. *Lions* (15) seems to refer to Assyria, which had destroyed the northern kingdom in 722 BC (*cf.* v 18, and see the Introduction). That past defeat is matched by the more contemporary threat to Judah from Egypt. V 16 may be a reference to the death of King Josiah at the hands of Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo in 609 BC (2 Ki. 23:29). What hope, then, in attempted alliances with such empires (18)? This policy had been tried in the past, with Assyria (see 2 Ki. 16:7) and discredited (see on Is. 7). And some in Judah would seek refuge in Egypt from Babylon (24:8). All this would be in vain, and bring its own punishment (19).

The theme of falsity is also pursued in the images Jeremiah uses. Judah is a slave (14) where she should have been a servant of the Lord; she is a *prostitute* where she should have been his bride (20; *cf.* 3:1); she is a *wild vine* where she should have been a *choice vine* (21; *cf.* Is. 5:1–4). The false thing is so often an imitation and a mockery of the truth, promising all that the truth can bring. Nevertheless, there must be a reckoning when life is based on false ideas and false worship; and Judah's folly will be exposed, to her shame, as when a thief is caught in the act (26). In the moment of crisis, Judah may turn desperately to God again (27b); but this too is false, an attempt to use God, the genuine spirit of idolatry.

2:29–37 The sentence

The main theme is returned to. It is Judah, not the Lord, who has been untrue to the covenant (31–32). To the charge of religious sin (33) is added that of social injustice (34), a common prophetic theme (*cf.* Am. 5:10–15). The Lord, however, cannot be deceived; no bulwark will suffice against him (36b); he will indeed punish his wayward people (35b, 37).

3:1 – 4:4 Can Judah return to God?

This whole section concerns the need for Judah to turn back to the Lord in truth. There is a question, however, namely, whether the Lord can turn again in love to a people that has persistently broken the covenant. This is the point of 3:1–5.

In 3:1–5 a comparison is made between the separation of God and Israel and a divorce. The divorce law in Dt. 24:1–4 prohibited a woman who had been divorced and who had married another man from ever returning to her first husband. The Lord now pictures Judah as effectively divorced from him by her dalliance with other *lovers*, *i.e.* the gods of Canaan (1b). By analogy with the divorce law, therefore, she could never hope that the Lord would take her back. The strong accusation of prostitution is used here (1–5) for Judah's willingness to worship other gods. This had happened at many places (2a), and the land had been *defiled* as a result (see on 2:7b). If she seems to turn back to the Lord, there is hypocrisy in it (4–5).

The idea of a divorce is continued in vs 6–10. Here, the former northern kingdom of Israel is held out as an example of a severing of a part of the ancient people of God (2 Ki. 17). By Jeremiah's time, this was already an established fact of history. Israel's fate, therefore, is a warning for Judah (*cf.* 2 Ki. 17:18–19) – but she has so far failed to take it to heart.

The argument goes farther in vs 11–14. Judah is actually worse than Israel had been (11). Jeremiah now proclaims repentance to the northern kingdom (*towards the north*). This is a rhetorical device, since the northern kingdom no longer existed; he is making the point that the Lord always responds in mercy to true

repentance. In v 14 that message, which went fatefully unheeded, is applied afresh to Judah. Yet this Judah is a *faithless people*; the word is related to that for *return* and means that the people 'turns' habitually away from instead of towards God. The call to return, or repent, comes to a people whose heart is fixed in resistance.

The scene changes abruptly in vs 15–18, where Jeremiah looks forward to a day of salvation in which God will redeem a people that *will* be faithful. It is a time in the future at which the Lord will bring his people back to *Zion* (meaning Jerusalem and Judah). This picture presupposes the new covenant, which will be presented more fully in Je. 30 – 33. The present passage shows that in the event Jeremiah's preaching of repentance to Judah came to nothing, and that their hope for the future depended on something else, namely a new act of God in salvation.

Shepherds after my own heart (15) are righteous leaders, instead of Judah's present corrupt leaders (*cf.* 23:1–4). The unlamented loss of the ark of the covenant is understandable within the new covenant, which will depend more on inward truth than on outward signs (*cf.* 31:33). It will eventually take the coming of Christ to transform and enable the people of God. He too will be the one who will fulfil for ever the covenant of God with Israel.

Back on the immediate horizon, the Lord bemoans the treachery of Judah, calling on different metaphors of relationship (for Israel as God's 'son' see Ex. 4:22–23; *cf.* Is. 1:2; Hosea also used both these metaphors, Ho. 2:2; 11:1–2). The Lord's lament is matched by Israel's, who seem to know the bankruptcy of their false way (21).

The last section of the chapter opens with another call to repent, anticipating the final cure in the new covenant (*I will cure* . . .). The immediate response, however, is a mere form of repentance (22b–25), the *pretence* of v 10, as there is a renewed appeal in 4:1–4, which gives way to threats of judgment. Yet it echoes v 21, with its hint of an acknowledgment of the futility of idolatry.

The opening verses of ch. 4 belong with the present section because they round off this treatment of repentance, or return. First (1–2), Judah (addressed as *Israel*) is reminded of her mission to lead the nations to the Lord; this was the point of God's call, or election, of Abraham long ago (Gn. 12:1–3). So much is at stake in their faithfulness. Secondly, the people are warned not to trust in outward observance, such as circumcision. Rather, they must be marked out as belonging to God by something that goes deeper, namely a devotion of the whole being, both individual and society, from the heart. The ploughing of unploughed ground has a similar reference to the enlivening of what lies dead.

The call to repentance and to inwardness is one that the church needs to go on hearing, and which it can also falsify in the subtlest of ways, except by the grace of God himself.

4:5 – 6:30 Images of judgment against Judah

4:5–31 The enemy approaches

The remainder of ch. 4 portrays the coming devastation of Judah with imagination and passion. The speaker throughout is Jeremiah; nevertheless, he is uttering the word of the Lord, and the speech is sometimes directly that of the Lord himself (*e.g.* v 6b). The NIV gives one attempt to divide the speech between the prophet and God, but it is hard to do this consistently. In any case, both are expressing the truth, so who speaks does not affect the meaning.

In vs 5–9 Jeremiah depicts the panic that the approach of the enemy will cause. The *trumpet* is a call to arms; the peasantry will flee to the cities for protection, where they will become a defending garrison; the *signal* raised towards Zion is probably a warning (5–6). The enemy, merciless like a *lion* (*cf.* 2:15), has already left on his destructive expedition. He is not yet identified as Babylon. The phrase *from the north* gives little away, since virtually any attacker (apart from Egypt and Judah's immediate neighbours) would find the land most accessible from that direction. The appeal here is to the whole people (8); the inevitable exposure of the false leaders (9) does not diminish the responsibility of all.

Jeremiah is not indifferent to the message which he is called to preach. In v 10 a note is struck to which he will return in relation to himself (15:18). In his distress he accuses the Lord of having deceived the people, presumably by having allowed false prophets to convince them with a message of peace (*cf.* 6:13–14). The only reply is the Lord's own confirmation that judgment is sure.

The vivid pictures of danger are resumed in vs 13–18, as if a watchman were actually observing the enemy armies approach (13). In vs 15–16 the message is relayed first from Dan, in Israel's far north, then, as the enemy comes closer, from Ephraim, the central hill country, until the news hits Jerusalem. These words may have been uttered in order to bring Judah to repent (14) and thus avoid the disaster. Yet Jeremiah feels its inevitability and the pain of it (18).

Jeremiah now freely expresses his own grief

(19–22). This is not a literal 'heart attack' (19) but an agony of spirit which he feels physically. In this passage, he identifies wholly with the people in their coming distress. The sound of the battle-cry fills him too with terror (19c). The homes of Judah are *his* homes (20b).

V 22 might be spoken by either Jeremiah or the Lord. It shows that Jeremiah identifies not only with the people but also with God; though the punishment be unbearable, yet it will be due. Vs 19–22 are thus very important for understanding Jeremiah. His suffering with both God and people makes him a kind of 'mediator' between them. It anticipates the suffering of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world.

Judah's covenant failure does indeed affect the whole world (*cf.* 4:23). Jeremiah now pictures nothing less than an undoing of the created order in the world, in words strikingly like those of Gn. 1 (23–26). If the covenant with God's chosen people were to fail, there could be no final hope for the world. That is why Christ's life must be seen as a fulfilling of that covenant, in order to be light to the Gentiles (*cf.* Is. 42:6).

The last section of the chapter pictures the enemy army wreaking havoc among the people, as they seek desperate refuge. The two final images make a shocking contrast. In the first (30) Jerusalem is a prostitute, hoping for gain from her *lovers*. The intended 'lover' here is Babylon, but the hope that Babylon can be seduced will be frustrated. There is no escape from death in this false love. The feminine image shifts to that of a mother giving birth amidst the murderer's carnage (31). The delusion is shattered, and replaced by a ghastly reality; the act of giving life is encompassed by death. The chapter closes with a last gasp.

There is a hint, however, that this end is not a final end (27). This hope will be developed in later parts of the book. In Jeremiah's experience there is hope in the face of death itself. This is possible only through God who makes himself known to us in Christ.

5:1–31 Punishment due for Judah's falseness

The theme of this whole chapter is due punishment for a thoroughgoing falseness. Its opening, a search for even one person who *seeks the truth* (1), for whose sake the Lord might spare the people, recalls Abraham's prayer for Sodom (Gn. 18:22–33). The point is, however, that there is none; the corruption of Judah is total. On the other hand, is not Jeremiah himself *one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth*? His mediatorial role has already been noted (4:19–22), and we shall see that he will indeed have a special role in saving the people in the end.

The idea of the people's total corruption is now developed (3–6). Their refusal of the *truth* (3) applies equally to the people in general (4) and to the leaders in particular (5). The point of v 4 is not to excuse the ordinary people. Rather the two verses together show that no part of the people is exempt from guilt – though the guilt of the leaders is undoubtedly greater because of their special responsibilities. All together they must face the due punishment (6).

The Lord now justifies his plan to punish (7–13). There is a basic assumption of his right to do so. This belongs within the thinking of the covenant. It was understood as a kind of treaty, in which the stronger nation reserved the right to inflict punishments on a weaker, if the latter did not keep the treaty. In the covenant between God and Israel, God had the right – which required no basic justification – to inflict the ultimate punishment; the giver of life could take it away. Here, however, he explains why the sentence is just in this case (9). The metaphor of prostitution is used again (8), and the charge is one of falseness, implicating the prophets in particular (11–13). The falseness is profound, a lie about God himself, which supposed him indifferent to wickedness (12). The gravity of false teaching about God should not be underestimated.

The next passage says more about the powerful enemy, though Babylon is still not named (14–19). The point is to show that God himself is sending this calamity as a fulfilment of his word (14), and that it will be a destruction of everything that is good. V 17 contains all that amounts to the blessings of God to Israel (*cf.* Dt. 7:13). Babylon's coming is God's suppression of this blessing, the putting into effect of the so-called curses of the covenant (see Dt. 28: 15–68). The coming disaster is now shown to include a period of exile (19). This is the outcome of the punishment; it is also, however, another of those doors of hope which Jeremiah's preaching of judgment sometimes leaves ajar (18; *cf.* 4:27; 5:10).

The Lord now pursues the idea that it is he alone who is the source of everything that is good for Israel. The *fear* owed him by his people (22) is simply right worship, though that worship is necessarily fear-full because it is worship of one who is all-powerful. Worship is due to God, first because he is the Creator (22), and secondly, because it is he who has given life and well-being to his own people; this is the point of vs 24–25, which relate closely to v 17.

Jeremiah turns his attention (as once before) to the oppression of the weak by the powerful in Judah (26–28; *cf.* 2:34). The rich have not only exploited the poor but they have even abused the law courts in order to do so (28; *cf.* Ex.

23:6–8). This contempt for justice is also 'falsehood'. This is so because 'truth' within a covenant with God is not just words but means rightly based relationships, not only with God himself but between the people in covenant with him. Truth is not confined to the realm of notions but is known in actions. The NT also expresses this point forcefully, in its teaching that 'faith without deeds is dead' (Jas. 2:26; *cf.* Rom. 12). The supreme expression of the truth is Jesus himself (Jn. 14:6); truth is indeed word, but word made flesh, in human relationship. There cannot be truth with selfishness.

The chapter ends by repeating the Lord's justification for punishing the people (29); a last reflection on falsehood condemns the prophets and priests for teaching it and the whole people for willingly having it so (30).

These dreadful words are read today by a church that has been finally accepted in Christ, and a people whom nothing can separate from the love of God (Rom. 8:38–39). Nevertheless, there is great loss in a hardening against God's word and a need for watchfulness.

6:1–30 'The refining goes on in vain'

The chapter returns to the scenes of panic seen in ch. 4. The locations named are not far from Jerusalem (Benjamin the land to the north, Tekoa lying to the south; Beth Hakkerem cannot be certainly identified). Jerusalem is depicted as a woman (*Daughter of Zion*), concerned for her beauty but about to be ravished by the attacker (this is implied by the terms in v 3a, the *shepherds* probably referring to Babylonian rulers). The image is thus similar to 4:30. The words in vs 4–5 are spoken by the attacking Babylonians.

The rest of the chapter is divided into oracles from the Lord. The first (6–8) picks up the theme of Judah's violent oppression of the weak (*cf.* 5:26–28) and calls her condition a sickness. A covenant-keeping people is sound in every respect; one that breaks the covenant is infected in every aspect of its life. This metaphor will recur frequently.

In the second oracle (7–15), the gleaning of a remnant does not seem to hit a hopeful note, as elsewhere (4:27; 5:10; *cf.* Is. 17:4–6 for gleaning as an act of judgment). The tone of the whole passage is in this direction (10–15). As the corruption of the people has been total, affecting every part of society (see 5:3–5), so will the punishment be; hence the horror of vs 11–12. In v 13 too, the whole people is blamed again, before attention is turned more particularly to the prophets and priests. V 14 is the centre of the accusation of the false leaders. They have completely inverted the truth, causing others to believe the lie that God is not against wickedness. It is this lie that has allowed the *wound* of the whole society – both its sin and the griefs that follow from it – to go untended. And they are unrepentant, indeed beyond repentance (15b).

The third oracle (16–20) begins with the Lord's appeal to seek the *ancient paths*, namely the life-style commanded by God, known ever since he had revealed himself and his ways in the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 19 – 24). In them was life (Dt. 30:16). Here, however, the appeal merely serves to introduce the people's intransigence. They would neither walk in the *ancient paths*, nor listen to the *watchmen*, *i.e.* the true prophets, who urged them to do so (16–17). God calls witnesses (in keeping with the idea of covenant as a treaty; *cf.* Dt. 30:19; 32:1) to observe that the fate that will befall the people is of their own making (19). Finally, he disowns the kind of worship which is all form and no heart. Here is another side of the falseness in Judah; not only is the worship of other gods a great evil but so is hypocritical worship of the Lord. The theme is common in the prophets (Is. 1; Am. 5:21–25; Mi. 6:6–8).

A short oracle (21) evokes again the thoroughness of the forthcoming disaster, affecting each person's close friends and relations – even making a mockery of relationships.

The Lord then turns again to depict the ferocity and power of the approaching army. In v 24 words of anguished fear are put in the mouths of the people, recalling those of Jeremiah himself (4:19). The fear grips them as they realize that there is no escape from the trials ahead.

The final words of the chapter are addressed to Jeremiah. The image is based on the refining of silver, which involved the smelting of the ore, then the refining of the silver from the lead with which it was very often combined. The refining process could fail for a variety of reasons and no pure silver be produced. The result would be *rejected silver*. Israel too, despite all God's care to help her be a true covenant people, must finally be rejected.

7:1 – 8:3 False worship and false trust

7:1–15 A sermon in the temple

The theme of the so-called 'temple sermon' is misguided reliance on external religion. It is central to Jeremiah's message, and indeed a form of what is presumably the same sermon occurs at 26:1–6, where a date early in the reign of King Jehoiakim is put on it. Jeremiah was evidently still preaching repentance at this time.

The temple was the heart of the life of Judah. Jeremiah takes his stand at one of the gateways

to the temple courtyard, through which large numbers of people were streaming (2), probably coming for one of the great feasts of the year (Ex. 23:14–17). The sermon is thus a highly visible challenge to the official religion and to the practices of the mass of the people. It was an act of great courage (as the account of it in ch. 26 shows).

The substance of the sermon is contained in vs 3–11. Jeremiah calls the people to repent, showing that they are in grave danger but that they can still avert it (3). He mocks the empty words of contemporary ritual (4) and shows that true religion consists in act as well as religious performance (5–6; *cf.* on 5:20–28). The basis for right action is the well-known laws of God, given in the covenant; a number of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2–17) are alluded to in v 9, bringing together religious (following other gods) and social sins. Because of the lives which the people of Judah are living, their confidence as they stand before God has very poor foundations.

A large part of the problem is the false trust which the mere possession of the temple and its rituals inspires. Borrowing from Canaanite ideas, the people had persuaded themselves that this amounted to a kind of guarantee of God's presence and protection. Jeremiah shows the folly of this by pointing to an uncomfortable precedent (12–15). The shrine at Shiloh, which had been the central sanctuary for all Israel long before Jerusalem, was now no more, the victim, we suppose, of the Philistine wars. If Shiloh could fall, why not Jerusalem? In our day too there is no bastion of church establishment which may consider itself sacrosanct; all are called to a living faithfulness.

7:16–29 Beyond redemption?

The temple sermon ends with a word to Jeremiah himself: he is not to pray for the people (16). This is ominous indeed, for it was one of the functions of the prophet to intercede (*cf.* Gn. 20:7; Ex. 32:9–14). The prohibition will come again to Jeremiah (11:14; 14:11; *cf.* 15:1). It is one of the ways in which the Lord indicates that the time of his patience with this people is at an end. (The point is made repeatedly that calls to repent went unheeded, and that this finally led to judgment.)

There follows a passage which gives some insight into the habitual practices of idolatry, here the bread and drink offerings for the Canaanite goddess Astarte. The *cakes* may have been in the shape of the goddess. The preparations involve the whole family, a sign of the thorough corruption of the people. The sin bears the seeds of its own punishment (19).

The Lord declares that his wrath will be turned against the people and recalls generations of stubborn resistance to him. This passage has in common with the temple sermon that it criticizes empty ritual (22). The Hebrew here implies that God was not pressed to speak by the offerings of his people, nor in speaking was he intent on receiving offerings. The passage ends with a sign of lamentation signifying the end of the people (29; *cf.* 16:6; Mi. 1:16).

7:30 – 8:3 Abominations to the Lord

The temple itself, it seems had been defiled by the setting up in it of the cult of a false god or gods. While an Assyrian cult of King Manasseh's (2 Ki. 21:7) had presumably been destroyed by King Josiah in his reform (see the Introduction), something similar had evidently reappeared, probably under Jehoiakim (31). Furthermore, the sacrifice of children was taking place in *Topheth* (lit. a 'place of fire'), in the valley of Hinnom, south and west of the city. This was forbidden in Israel, where the ancient offering of the firstborn was replaced by that of animals (Ex. 13:2). It was the gruesome result, however, of adopting the worship of other gods (*cf.* Dt. 12:31b).

Ironically, this slaughter of the innocents will give way to a slaughter that will be the judgment of God (32). Death without burial was a particular curse in the ancient world (33; *cf.* Dt. 28:26). And indeed, to that which occurs inevitably in war will be added the disgrace of the exposure of the bodies of those already buried, from kings to common people, to the stars they had worshipped (see 2 Ki. 21:3–5).

8:4 – 10:25 Weeping for apostate Zion

8:4–22 No true healing

The section opens with a short reflection (4–7) on the idea of 'turning', 'returning' or 'repenting' (these words in the English all translate the same Hebrew verb; *cf.* also ch. 3). Judah is blamed for consistently turning *away* (5b), the opposite of repenting towards God. The unnaturalness of this is illustrated by observations of order in nature and custom (4, 7; *cf.* Is. 1:3). Such observations are characteristic of the Wisdom Literature (see *e.g.* Ec. 3:1–8). According to nature itself, therefore, it is unthinkable that God's people should not know his requirements.

Jeremiah continues the theme of wisdom by criticizing those who falsely think themselves wise (8), possibly because of their very possession of a written law and perhaps a responsibility for interpreting it. These may be the priests themselves (*cf.* v 10) rather than a special class of people like the later 'scribes' of the NT.

Jeremiah's point in vs 8–11, however, is that those who are responsible for right teaching in Judah have corrupted the teaching itself, while still claiming to interpret it. The teaching is the Torah, both the laws given in the Mosaic covenant and instruction in it. Heads of families had a general responsibility for this (see Ex. 13:14–16), and the priests a particular one (Dt. 31:9–13). The misinterpretation of the law was a case of wilful neglect, which happened to serve the interests of the teachers (10b). Those who teach God's word bear a heavy responsibility and are never exempt from these moral dangers, or indeed the special judgment of God (*cf.* Lk. 17:2; 1 Tim. 1:7). (Vs 10–12 closely resemble 6:12–15; see the comments there). V 13 is a reminder that falsification of the truth cannot continue without disastrous results.

In the midst of the words of accusation stands another passage (14–17) picturing the approach of the enemy and the panic it will bring (*cf.* 4:5–6, 13–15). V 15 contains the words of those who have been deceived by the false prophets and teachers.

The last section of the chapter (18–22) is in the mouth of Jeremiah, but his words contain a kind of dialogue involving God and the people too. Jeremiah begins by expressing his grief to God (*cf.* 4:19), partly because of the pain of the people (18–19a). The words of v 19b are the people's, dismayed at the prospect of defeat. God's promise made to King David (2 Sa. 7:11b–16) had seemed to assure him of God's presence and of the king's permanent victory over enemies (Ps. 2). The people believed that they had an unconditional guarantee from God (see on 7:1–15). This belief explains their words here. The Lord responds with a familiar accusation in v 19b. V 20 records a further lament of the people, the background of which may be the beginning of a drought – the subject of ch. 14. The last two verses are words of Jeremiah, expressing again his grief for the people. Gilead (east of the Jordan) was well known for its aromatic plants, used for medicinal cures. But a more profound healing was needed for this affliction.

9:1–11 A people thoroughly false

The last words of v 3 show that these opening verses are in the mouth of the Lord. Yet the first impression is that they are Jeremiah's (who would more appropriately seek a desert inn for refuge; v 2). We have seen more than once the pain that the prophet feels on behalf of his people. The present passage also shows that his suffering reveals a similar suffering on the part of God. It is another function of Jeremiah's mediatorial role.

The reason for the pain which God and his prophet share is the falseness of the people. Their determination in untruth is introduced in vs 2 and 3 (falseness implying unfaithfulness, as in adultery). In vs 4–8 the portrayal of falseness is sustained. A wide range of vocabulary is used to convey falsehood (deceit, slander, lies). To lie has become a habit (5b), so that they are incapable of anything else; and there is no relationship, in spite even of natural ties, which can be characterized by honesty (4–5). The picture is the very opposite of a society that is built on the covenant. God's purposes had been for a people that had integrity and who would be blessed in the integrity itself. The reality of this is understood by all who live even now in exceedingly corrupt societies. In Judah his purposes had been totally frustrated. Where the covenant does not exist in reality, there is no choice but to call a formal end to it (9). The 'refining' is likely to have little success (*cf.* 6:29).

The weeping in v 10 might again be either Jeremiah's or the Lord's, or both. Desolation will be in the mountains and the pasture lands, affecting bird and beast, and finally in Jerusalem and the cities. The disaster will be total.

9:12–26 Wailing for the people that must suffer

In an earlier saying (8:8–9), false wisdom, which relied on the mere possession of the law, was exposed. Jeremiah now puts a rhetorical question (12): Who is wise enough to understand why the land has been ruined? (The perspective of this saying may be a time after Nebuchadnezzar's first attack on Jerusalem [2 Ki. 24:1, 10–11].) The question draws the Lord's reply, that the people had all the wisdom they needed in his law, which they wilfully neglected. The result will be exile (16).

The end of Judah being determined, she has no choice but to lament her fate. The *wailing women* were professional mourners. There is no suggestion of artificiality in this mourning, however; it will be real enough, such that the wailing women will have plenty of cause to keep their art alive (20). The ghastly picture in v 21 personifies death, probably according to Canaanite mythology – ironic in view of the prophet's criticism of the people's allegiance to Canaanite gods. Between vs 21 and 22, death is pictured everywhere, indoors, outdoors, wherever one might look.

An apparently separate saying (23–24) insists that good – whether wisdom, strength or riches – does not lie within human beings' natural compass but comes from God alone. The qualities named in v 24b are those which he himself exhibits in covenant. *Kindness* is fundamental, that loyal love which binds God to his people and commits him to their care. *Justice*

and *righteousness* are his zeal, respectively, for the rights of those in covenant with him and for right standards between them. When the Lord says that he delights in these things (24), he means that the same qualities are to be shown by the covenant-partners.

The final passage makes the point that a number of nations will suffer in due course at the hands of Babylon (*cf.* 27:3; 46:2). The passage also shows that circumcision was a widespread practice in the ancient east. Judah's failure to be 'circumcised in heart', *i.e.* to understand what circumcision meant for them as a covenant-sign (*cf.* Gn. 17:10), made them no different from other nations. The outward sign was nothing in itself (*cf.* also 4:4).

10:1–25 None like the Lord

The scathing attack on idol-worship in vs 1–16 may have been addressed to people already in exile, who were impressed by the great Babylonian temples and idols and were tempted to think that the Babylonian gods had proved themselves more powerful than the Lord. In truth, only the Lord has real power. The people should not be terrified of what has none (2, 5). The nonsense of bowing down to what merchants have imported and craftsmen have made is mercilessly teased (4–5, 8–9, 14). How foolish to worship artefacts, or even God's own handiwork, (*the signs in the sky*, *i.e.* the stars; 2), instead of the living God himself. The wisdom of the nations too is bankrupt (7b). (The *wise men* here may be like the astrologers and magicians encountered in the book of Daniel.) However impressive foreign gods and the culture that goes with them may seem, they will be shown to be false and ineffective (11, 15). V 11 is an isolated verse in Aramaic, the official language of the Babylonian empire, as if to address the words directly to Babylonian leaders and gods – a piece of defiant rhetoric.

In contrast, when God speaks, who has created all things, the whole earth is affected (12–13). He is truly to be feared (7), though the fear of God, being true worship, is wholly different from the terror inspired by the gods of the nations. When God is portrayed as the *Portion of Jacob*, and the people conversely as his *inheritance*, the language conveys mutual belonging in a relationship of love and care. (The identical idea occurs in Dt. 4:20 and elsewhere in Deuteronomy, where it is an important part of the expression of the covenant relationship.) This is always the aim of God for his people. It is the folly of human beings to set store by other kinds of hope, which can deliver nothing but frustration and destruction.

Another grim saying points to exile at the hands of a victorious power (17–18). It is followed by a saying of Jeremiah (19–25), in which he expresses again his own pain at the coming calamity. He uses again the language of wound and sickness (*cf.* 4:19–21), already used of Judah (6:7; *cf.* 8:15, 22). And here too, Jeremiah's pain is at the same time Judah's. His *sons* (20) cannot be literally his, as he was destined to remain childless (16:2). His expression of pain, however, includes his anger at the failure of the leaders (the *shepherds*). In this sense his experience is a representation of what the people's might properly have been.

The prayer too (23–25) is a prayer of the people expressed by Jeremiah (notice its resemblance to Ps. 79:6–7, where the people pray for deliverance from the enemy, probably Babylon in that case also). It contains an acceptance of 'correction', or chastening – a hint that the punishment will eventually be seen to be just that, and that a life beyond the exile is promised (*cf.* 24:5–7). Jeremiah may also pray for himself when he seeks 'correction', aware no doubt, like all pious people, of his own shortcomings. In two cases, indeed, the Lord does rebuke him (12:5; 15:19).

11:1 – 13:27 The covenant broken

11:1–17 Jeremiah unveils the people's rebellion

The language of covenant is more explicit here than anywhere in Jeremiah. *This covenant* (2–3) is the covenant made between God and the people at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19 – 24) and regularly renewed by the reading of its laws (Dt. 31:9–13). These words may have been spoken on the occasion of a covenant renewal, whether Josiah's (2 Ki. 23:1–3), or a later one. The covenant involves first, God's salvation of his people in saving them from Egypt and giving them the land of Canaan (4a; *cf.* Dt. 4:20); secondly, a command (4a, *cf.* Dt. 11:1); and finally, an oath (5a; *cf.* Dt. 1:8). It promises both relationship with God (4c – a typical formula; *cf.* Lv. 26:12), and well-being (5b; *cf.* Ex. 3:8). And it is motivated by the certainty of either blessing or curse, hence vs 3b, 8b (*cf.* Dt. 27:15–26; 28:15–68; *cf.* 28:1–14 for the blessing). It will be clear from the above how much these words of Jeremiah are a preaching of a tradition that was well established. The aim of vs 1–5 is repentance; vs 6–8 contain the verdict that the covenant has been broken and therefore the *curse* must fall.

Vs 9–13 elaborate the reason why the axe has been laid at the root of Judah. The idea of a *conspiracy* means that there has been, as it were, an agreement in Judah and Jerusalem to abandon the Lord; this had been true for generations. Now that the end is near, far from turning to

God they will only seek their idols all the more, but in vain. V 13 alludes to the polytheism of Canaan (*cf.* 2:28) – a kind of religious promiscuity. What folly to exchange 'Glory' (2:11) for shame (13b).

The irrevocable sentence is repeated (14–17; *cf.* 7:16), now in poetic terms. My beloved is Judah (*cf.* 12:7), but there is irony – the beloved has no right in God's house; her sacrifices belie her false heart. The olive tree is a symbol of the well-being which should have been hers, but which will be consumed.

These words of Jeremiah both tell us much about the form of any relationship between God and people and serve as a warning against taking such a relationship for granted.

11:18 – 12:6 'Confessions'

Jeremiah utters a number of prayers, often called his 'confessions', which reveal his inner turmoil (see the Introduction). This passage contains the first of them, or better, the first two (11:18–23; 12:1–6). Their essence is Jeremiah's complaint to God about his own suffering, occasioned by his call to be a prophet. Here, there has evidently been a plot against Jeremiah's life, which had taken him by surprise (19; *cf.* Ps. 44:11) and which was especially horrible because it was hatched by the people of his own town (21). Priests might well have taken unkindly to criticism of the temple establishment (7:1–15) by one of their own (1:1). The prophet was indeed unwelcome in his own country (Lk. 4:24). Jeremiah's prayer, for vindication more than vengeance (20b), is above all an impatience for truth and justice to prevail (*cf.* Ps. 7:9). The Lord reassures him (21–23) in terms recalling his promise in 1:17–19.

The second confession (12:1–4) brings together Jeremiah's suffering and that of the innocent in general. Its opening is like that of Ps. 73, whose theme is the suffering of the innocent, while the wicked prosper. It has an element of accusation of God, who has not prevented, indeed has even brought about, this state of affairs (2a). Jeremiah here expresses the isolation he often feels in his prophetic work (*cf.* 15:17) and his frustration because the judgment of God, which he must ever proclaim, does not come. (Over forty years elapsed between his call in 627 BC and the final sack of Jerusalem in 586.) V 3 is similar to 11:20; as a prayer that the Lord should not allow himself to be considered unjust, it follows from v 1. The drought to which Jeremiah alludes at a number of points, is already a sign that the wickedness of the people is having its consequences (4a), though these still go unheeded, and the judgment of God is denied (4b) – an essential part of the 'falseness' that characterizes the people.

The Lord's reply (5) apparently means that Jeremiah has faltered already but that he will have to bear greater things yet. This was always going to be a part of his calling, and he must go on believing God. The Lord goes on to warn him not to give up, least of all on account of the good opinion of those close to him (6). They will be treacherous yet. The one who would be faithful to God can often count on the faithfulness only of God himself.

12:7–13 God and his 'house'

As Jeremiah's family betrayed him, the Lord himself knows of a betrayal by those closest to him (7–13). His own *house*, Judah, has turned violently against him (8). He in turn has turned against her (7–8c). A number of metaphors speak of the close bond between him and the people: *my house, my inheritance* (*cf.* on 2:7), *the one I love, my vineyard, my field.* Surely one who uses this language of his people would go to any lengths to care for and protect them. But the reverse will be true. What was fruitful will become a barren waste; *shepherds* (*i.e.* foreign rulers; 10) will come to destroy. This, moreover, will be the Lord's own work (12b), and his curse will mean that the land will not even be capable of bearing fruit (13).

Trust in 'market forces' and the blind pursuit of economic prosperity are two of today's parallels to Judah's idolatry.

12:14–17 A plan for the nations

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet not just to Judah but to the nations (1:10), proclaiming both punishment and rebuilding. The present passage declares first that those nations which the Lord is bringing against Judah will in turn be judged themselves by being removed from their lands (*uproot*; *cf.* 1:10). Remarkably, however, as there have been glimpses of hope for Judah on the other side of the judgment of exile (3:14–18), so now hope is held out even to these. If other nations will accept the worship of the true God, they too will have all the benefits of being the people of God. This is an unusual note in Jeremiah, but a part of the OT's revelation that salvation is in the end for all nations (*cf.* Is. 19:23–25; 40:5).

13:1–27 Signs of judgment

Prophets were not only given words to speak, but sometimes signs to perform as well, designed to demonstrate the reality of the words. They are more than a 'visual aid', for like the words, they bear the authority of the Lord. (*Cf.* the two later signs at the potter's house; chs. 18, 19; also Is. 20:1–6). When the word of the Lord is expressed both verbally and visually the intention is to give it redoubled authority and

effectiveness. The five signs in this chapter are of a belt, wineskins, a flock, a woman in labour and stubble – all signs of rejection.

The *belt*, or waistcloth, worn by Jeremiah is made to represent the intimate relationship between God and his people (11). When the belt is removed and ruined by being abandoned at a place called Perath, the meaning is the humiliation of the strength in which the people took pride but which was a delusion (7, 9). Perath was probably a place not far from Anathoth, the prophet's home (Parah; Jos. 18:23). The name Perath, however, also means the Euphrates, and the sign makes a connection, therefore, with the empires of Mesopotamia. The reference might be to Judah's acceptance of Assyrian religion, as much as to the threat of exile in Babylon. (Exile, in fact, would have a restoring, rather than ruinous, effect; 24:5–7). The *many days* of v 6 would then refer to the long period of Israel's and Judah's persistence in sin (*cf.* v 10). This sin was itself, inevitably, the cause of their ruin.

Jeremiah's odd saying (12) may be a ploy to attract attention by saying something so ordinary that it puzzles, or perhaps it is ominous because he knows that the plenty which the people have known is going to end. To the mocking response (12a) he interprets the saying of the *drunkenness* which will be brought on the people. The confusion of peoples under judgment is described as drunkenness elsewhere too (25:15–16). The leaders of the people will be affected above all, not just one king but several being subdued by foreign invasion (*cf.* 22:18–19, 24–27; 2 Ki. 24:1–4, 8–17; 25).

The remainder of the chapter is composed of three separate sayings. Vs 15–17 are addressed to Judah in general. This oracle uses the language of light and darkness, familiar metaphors for salvation and judgment (*cf.* Is. 9:1–2; Am. 5:18). Darkness was a powerful metaphor in the ancient world, since artificial light was limited, and spoke naturally of fear and death. These words may have been spoken when Jeremiah still hoped the people would repent. As with other such oracles, its setting now along with sayings which know the disaster is unavoidable simply serves to emphasize that it had not always been so. Jeremiah's weeping for the people in their devastation has been met before (*cf.* 9:1).

The second oracle is addressed to the king and his mother, who are to be identified as Jehoiachin and Nehushta (2 Ki. 24:8). The queen mother could have a highly influential role in ancient Israel (*cf.* 1 Ki. 2:19). The oracle sees them removed from their thrones and from their royal status, the land suffering devastation as far as the Negev, the area of Judah's southern borders and farthest from the reach of the Babylonian armies.

The final oracle (20–27) is addressed to Judah in the singular, and as if to a woman (places are often grammatically feminine in gender, a fact which lends itself to their personification as women in poetic speech). The saying seems at the same time to have the leaders in view (20b, 21a). There is irony in being overrun by those whom Judah had sought as allies (21a; *cf.* 4:30).

The feminine imagery is now developed in a number of ways. First, the distress of the invasion is likened to the pain of childbirth (21b). Secondly, the brutality of it will be like the ravishing of a woman (22b, 26–27), which would no doubt be a literal feature of it too. Thirdly, the metaphor of prostitution is used once more to portray the unfaithfulness of the people (27; *cf.* 2:20). This image too had its literal counterpart, as it would have been part of the rituals of Canaanite worship. It would be misguided to look for consistency or system in these feminine images; they are used with the freedom of the poet. The final image is of the ritual uncleanness (*How long will you be unclean?*) caused by Judah's religious sins. The question is rhetorical; the force of v 23 is that Judah is incapable of change.

14:1 – 15:21 Famine, sword and plague

14:1–10 Drought

The supply of water could never be taken for granted in ancient Israel. Huge *cisterns* (3), carved out of rock and lined (the 'broken cisterns' of 2:13 are those whose lining is damaged), would retain water from flash flooding in the rainy seasons and would provide relief for some time during a drought. The drought in this case, however, is obviously severe and well advanced. The distress which such a thing brings (4–6) is sadly well known in our times too.

Since water is so fundamental to life, its supply is a basic covenant blessing, and its withholding a great curse (Dt. 28:12, 24). Whereas droughts in general may be seen simply as natural disasters, within Judah's covenant relationship with God such a thing must be seen as his judgment on them. The exact date of this drought is not known; it may have been relatively close in time to the coming of the Babylonians, to judge by the pairing of *famine* with *sword* in v 12.

The picture of the drought is followed by a confession of sin and an appeal to the Lord for help. It is like some of the so-called 'laments' of the Psalms (*e.g.* Ps. 10:1). The Lord should act in order to show his power to do so (7); ever since the exodus from Egypt, he has been the true Saviour of Israel; he is, finally, known as

the God of Israel (9b). The prayer may be in the mouth of Jeremiah on behalf of the people. The Lord's frosty response to this (10) is in line with his forbidding Jeremiah to pray. (See also the people's insincere confession in 3:22–25.) The phrase *this people*, as a retort to v 9b, strikingly avoids the covenantal 'my people' (9:7).

14:11–22 Too late for prayer

The prohibition of prayer (11; *cf.* 7:16; 11:14) in this context means that neither this present famine nor other signs of judgment will be removed. Rather, the picture in vs 11–16 is broadened to *sword, famine and plague*, a trio which is intended to cover the full range of human misery. The curses of Dt. 28:15–68 are basically variations on these themes.

There were evidently those prophets who hastened to assure the people that their suffering did *not* mean the curses of the covenant. Merely being an official prophet, however (*cf.* 1 Ki. 22:5–8), did not guarantee that one had the word of God (1 Ki. 22:24)! To claim to have the authority to prophesy when God had not given a message was particularly heinous. False prophets would bring the people down with them (15b–16).

Vs 17–18 represent again the pain of the Lord through the mouth, and the experience, of Jeremiah. The Lord is not indifferent to the grief of the people, even though he himself brings it upon them as judgment. His mourning corresponds to Judah's (1; *cf.* 9:1).

The prayer that follows (19–22) has elements known from certain Psalms (*e.g.* Pss. 74, 79) – the protest to God about his harsh treatment of the people, confession, appeal to him to act on the grounds of the covenant and for the honour of his name. It is not yet a prayer that can properly be attributed to the people. As a prayer of Jeremiah for the people it has already been rejected (14:11). As an utterance of Jeremiah, a faithful Israelite, it might yet have a promise of grace. (See below on 15:19–21.)

15:1–9 Too late for compassion

The prayer of Jeremiah in 14:19–22 is followed by yet another declaration that prayer is of no avail, now that God has resolved on punishment (1). Moses and Samuel, both prophets, are known for their prayers for the people (Ex. 32:11–13; 1 Sa. 12:23). The catalogue of disasters in v 2 is a slight variation on the trio met in 14:12; the afflictions here are not, of course, mutually exclusive. The culmination of all is captivity. The rhetorical portrayal of the horror of the invasion and conquest continues in v 3, where the whole creation seems to be called into God's purpose to cast the faithless people out of the land which had once been given to them.

The reference to King Manasseh recalls 2 Ki. 23:26. The guilt of Judah had been building up for generations. Nevertheless, Manasseh is singled out as the king who had committed the most atrocious idolatries against the Lord (see 2 Ki. 21).

In keeping with the prohibition of prayer for the people, the perspective of vs 5–9 is that of a decision that is now taken. The meaning of v 5 is in effect like that of v 6b – it is too late for compassion; Judah has definitively shown its character as unworthy of the covenant (6a, 7c). As a 'backsliding' people, it strains away from the Lord instead of towards him (*cf.* 3:11–14). The proliferation of death is a direct contradiction of the covenantal promise to Abraham of a numerous offspring (8a; *cf.* Gn. 22:17). The *mother of seven* (9) is regarded as particularly happy; her happiness is turned to an equally intense grief.

15:10–21 A confession – and God's loving response

Jeremiah again expresses his own grief that derives from the burden of his call. Vs 10–21 are structured as two appeals to the Lord on the prophet's own behalf (v 10 answered by v 11, and vs 15–18 answered by vs 19–21). His regret that he was ever born (10; *cf.* 20:14–18) effectively doubts God's personal assurance to him (1:17–19). The Lord therefore reiterates the substance of that promise, even going beyond it, when he says that Jeremiah's enemies will come to need him in their distress. This is fulfilled in Zedekiah's dependence on him in the last days of Judah (*e.g.* 37:3).

The next verses (12–14) continue the reassurance to Jeremiah that judgment on the people is determined (even if this is mixed news for him). The unbreakable iron from the north probably refers to the invincibility of Babylon, compared with Judah; it also recalls, however, the promise that Jeremiah himself will be made like an iron pillar against his enemies (1:18). The oracle addressed to Judah in vs 13–14 also serves, in this position, as an affirmation to Jeremiah that the Lord does mean to fulfil his words against the people.

Jeremiah now thinks again of his own enemies, however (15–18). His words have elements in common with words that are elsewhere applied to the people's desire for deliverance from Babylon. The idea of a *wound* that needs healing (18) applied to the people occurs at 8:22. Where the people were said to *bear your name* in 14:9, so now does Jeremiah (16). The accusation that God had deceived the people (by sending false prophets; 4:10) is now made by Jeremiah about himself (18). The prophet's whole experience of abandonment, therefore, parallels that of the people.

It follows that when the Lord reassures Jeremiah (19–21) it may amount to a reassurance for the people too. Indeed, v 19a closely resembles the prayer of 'Ephraim' (a name for the people) in 31:18b, which is answered in the ensuing verses. In the midst of sayings of doom, therefore, Jeremiah's own experience becomes a promise of ultimate salvation for the whole people.

This is the significance of his mediatorial, or representative role. In a sense, therefore, Jeremiah suffers on behalf of the people. In his self-giving to his prophetic vocation, indeed, he even resembles Christ. His prayerfulness and agony are essential (and perhaps neglected) marks of true spiritual leadership.

16:1 – 17:27 Images of exile and salvation

16:1–21 Exile foreshadowed

Jeremiah has already used a sign to reinforce his message (13:1–11); now his whole life becomes a sign (1–4). Being unmarried was unusual in ancient Israel, and so his singleness and childlessness stand out as noteworthy. In fact, they are intended by the Lord as a sign that all normal life in Judah will cease. The giving of life is mocked by the imminence of death (4; *cf.* 4:31). The family was a blessing because it gave a certain place in society, and carried on a man's name for future generations (Dt. 25:5–6; Pss. 127:3–5; 128:3–6). Now it is to become a curse.

Jeremiah is also forbidden to participate in normal funeral ceremonies, as a sign that death will be so widespread in Judah that such mourning ceremonies will become impossible (5–7). The language of v 5b is a clear cancellation of the covenant. *Blessing*, here, is *shalom* (lit.) 'peace', understood as complete well-being; *love* is *hesed*, the loyal-love that is typical of the covenant-relationship; *pity*, or compassion, is that quality in God which makes love deeper than covenantal commitment (*e.g.* Ps. 51:1; Is. 54:7). All are revoked; once again, *this people* is significantly not 'my people'.

The point of vs 8–9 is very like that of vs 1–4. Jeremiah might be said to harp on certain themes. The people's question (10), therefore, reveals their slowness to hear God's message. In his answer, Jeremiah again shows that the people have been consistent in sin for generations (*cf.* 11:7–10). However, the present generation's sins are even greater than those of their forefathers; it is for their own sins that the judgment will come upon them (12). No plea of disadvantage can be allowed.

The present chapter places oracles of judgment and of hope side by side. It should be said that the oracles were not necessarily first uttered in the order in which we have them. Jeremiah, late in life, may well have wanted to let these contrasting oracles stand together, to show a pattern of judgment followed by mercy. The oracle in vs 14–15 is an unexpected sequel to vs 1–13. The meaning is that, at the right time, God will be merciful again. The fact that he is now revoking his covenantal commitments does not mean that he has changed. Indeed a future salvation (from Babylon?) will be so wonderful that it will even replace the exodus from Egypt as the centre of Judah's confession of God as Saviour (*cf.* Is. 43:14–19).

A further judgment saying (16–18) warns, by its metaphors of *hunters* and *fisherman*, of the ruthlessness with which the dismemberment of Judah will be pursued. The *double* payment for their sins is reminiscent of Is. 40:2, where the double payment is said to have been made.

The final note, however, is of salvation, now applied to the nations in general. The picture of nations coming to Judah at some future point to seek the true God, is found also in Is. 2:2–4; Mi. 4:1–2; *cf.* Hab. 2:14. It is fulfilled in Christ's breaking down the division between Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:28) and in the church's Gentile mission.

17:1–13 Trust in human resources – trust in the Lord

The first oracle (1–4) mocks Judah's false use of both the written law and religion. The inscribing of sin on their hearts, like laws on clay tablets, is a stinging satire of ingrained habit that denies the law (*i.e.* the Ten Commandments and other laws) which they claim as theirs. Their sacrifices too merely emphasize their sin. Their children, who should have been versed in the ways of the Lord (Dt. 6:7), have been trained in the ways of other gods (2; *cf.* the prohibitions in Dt. 12:2–3). The generation that has received from its own forefathers now passes its idolatries to its children. The need for schooling children in the ways of God could not be more acutely portrayed.

My mountain is Zion, the temple where God dwells (see on 8:19). Vs 3–4 substantially repeat 15:13–14. There follows a contrast (very like that of Ps. 1) between the person who depends for well-being on human strength and the person who trusts in God (5–8). The 'cursing' of the one and the 'blessing' of the other are covenantal (*cf.* Dt. 28). The covenant has a paradox which is abidingly true: the attempt to put one's life on a secure footing by a selfish reliance on one's own abilities brings undoing; trust in God, which implies obedience and may involve acting against one's own interests, is the way to life (*cf.* Mt. 10:39). This paradox is crucial to an understanding of the covenant.

Despite Jeremiah's emphasis on 'this life' and prosperity, covenantal religion can never be calculating or self-seeking.

The contrast between the two kinds of trust leads to the idea of the Lord's testing the heart (10; *cf.* on 9:7). The *heart* is the very basis of character, including mind and will, in the OT. V 10b is not teaching salvation by works but stressing the point that the Lord truly knows a person's character. V 11 picturesquely illustrates the untruth of injustice, a form of self-deception (on truth as action see on 5:26–28). The exclamation in vs 12–13 is also suggested by the theme of self-deception. Not only individuals but also the whole people may deceive themselves in failing to see that the Lord is the true source of their well-being (12–13). The praise (12) is in the mouth of Jeremiah.

17:14–18 A confession

The fourth of Jeremiah's confessions draws from the themes of the chapter. True healing is the Lord's doing (14). Jeremiah here stands as one who *trusts in the* LORD (7). He has been faithful to the calling, in spite of mockery (15–16). His enemies, to all intents and purposes all in Judah, stand under God's curse (18, *cf.* v 5). An important theme in the book is thus taken up: is there one person in Judah 'who deals honestly and seeks the truth?' (see on 5:1). As that person, Jeremiah himself can rightly expect the salvation of the Lord. He may even be the bearer of it to his people (see on 15:19–21), whose punishment he has not desired (16). To stand alone in faithfulness to God can be very hard; yet the faithfulness of one person may have incalculable effects for good.

17:19–27 Keeping the Sabbath

The Sabbath commandment (Ex. 20:8–11; *cf.* Am. 8:5) prohibited gainful work on one day in seven for the worship of God and as a sign of trust in him for well-being. Laying down the means of earning for a day was an act of faith. In today's terms it means systematically allowing time in one's life for worship and rest, even at the cost of personal advancement. The passage portrays busy commercial activity on the Sabbath, no doubt especially noticeable at the city gates, and possibly involving the king as well as ordinary people (19). Sabbath-keeping could be a barometer of Judah's spiritual state; hence the solemn warning about the need to observe this commandment. The promise of a renewed Davidic dynasty will be taken up elsewhere (23:5–6).

18:1 – 19:13 Two broken pots and a confession

18:1–18 A broken pot remade

The two signs involving a broken pot (here and in 19:1–14) are significantly different from each other. In this incident, Jeremiah goes to the potter's house and observes him at work. The potter, displeased with the pot he is making makes another out of the same clay. The Lord then declares that, like the potter, he is free to revise his intentions for Judah (6). The principle is developed in vs 7–10 and applied to any nation. The crucial point, however (11), is that, even though the Lord has formed a plan to judge his people, there is still time for them to repent and avert the disaster. Late repentance will still be honoured by God; the principle also appears in Jesus' life and ministry (Lk. 15:11–32; 23:40–43). The Lord's appeal to them to change is real, even though he knows that they will not respond (12). When they are judged it will be as a result of their own choosing. This point is very clear throughout Jeremiah's preaching. Why does the Lord need to remake them? Because of the hardness of their hearts (13–18). The illustrations are of constancy in nature: the snow on the peaks of Lebanon, always issuing in cool streams. This constancy contrasts with Judah's unfaithfulness, and at the same time shows it to be unnatural (15; for the kind of argument, *cf.* 8:4–7). It is also the height of folly. The *ancient paths* (15; *cf.* 6:16) were safe; *bypaths* could be dangerous. The resultant ruin will make the people an object of scorn – the regular fate of a defeated nation (*cf.* 25:9; 51:37, the latter said of Babylon). These verses, following the call to repent in vs 5–12, suggest that the call has been in vain.

18:19–23 A confession

The occasion of Jeremiah's fifth confession, like that of the first (11:18–23), is a plot against him, apparently by leading figures in the land (18). The three classes named give a clue as to the roles of the chief figures in the establishment. (The *wise*, in this context, are those who counselled kings; like Ahithophel in 2 Sa. 16:23). The reason for the plot, obviously, is Jeremiah's criticism of such figures (2:8; 8:8–11). There is no explicit plan to kill him here; however, the accusation made might well have been that of treason (*cf.* 37:13), and this in itself could have endangered his life.

The confession itself is almost entirely a prayer for judgment on his enemies. The *good* which he has done them (20) is to have told the truth and prayed for them. The central part of the prayer (21–22) might be read as Jeremiah's

resignation: this is what they have chosen; now it must come, awful though it be. If the motive in v 23 is blameworthy the sentiment is still in line with God's declared purpose and with the prohibition of the prophet's prayer *for* the people.

19:1–13 A pot broken and not remade

Jeremiah is now told to return to the potter's house (1). It may have been near the *Potsherd Gate*, which seems to have opened on to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, on the south and west side of the city. It was probably so called because there the potters carried out their damaged and unsaleable goods. The pieces on the rubbish heaps could not be remade, a powerful picture of what Jeremiah had to say. The area of the gate was probably crowded with people about their business.

Unlike the first incident involving a pot, Jeremiah is no mere observer this time; rather he is to buy a clay jar in order to perform a sign with it. This sign is to be carefully prepared for, and witnessed by senior members of the community, both clergy and lay (1). Jeremiah must have had the respect of certain members of the establishment, in order to be able to arrange this (*cf.* 26:17–19, 24).

Before performing the sign Jeremiah declares that Judah will certainly be destroyed (3–9). The address to the kings of Judah, as well as the elders, shows the symbolic and solemn nature of this speech (3, *cf.* 17:20). The sin condemned is that of idolatry, involving particularly the worship of Baal and star deities (*cf.* 8:2; 2 Ki. 21:5). Such worship is detestable both in itself, because of its inhumanity (5: *cf.* 7:31; 2 Ki. 21:6) and also as a betrayal of the God who had given this people life and made a covenant with them (4–5b). The punishment will be not only severe but public (3; *cf.* 2 Ki. 21:12). The humiliation was due to a people whose mission, ironically, was to show God to the nations. (Vs 5–6 are substantially repeated from 7:31–32.) Vs 7–9 grimly evoke the siege and the aftermath of battle. Cannibalism apparently did occur during the siege of Jerusalem in 586 BC (see La. 2:20).

Jeremiah then performs the sign, smashing the jar, which, finished and hardened, can no longer be remade (10–11; *cf.* 18:4). The two signs together illustrate well the passage from the time of repentance to the time when it is too late; the Lord will not now turn back from his determination to chastise Judah. The sign, as in 13:1–11, reinforces the message. Topheth, the place where children had been sacrificed (7:31), had been *defiled* (that is, made unsuitable for sacrifice), by King Josiah in his reform (2 Ki. 23:10); this would now be the fate of the whole city.

19:14 – 20:18 Jeremiah curses his birth

19:14 – 20:6 Jeremiah in the temple

The performing of the sign in the Valley of Ben Hinnom no doubt had the purpose of using Topheth as a symbol of destruction. Jeremiah now ascends to the temple and issues the warning again there (14–15; *cf.* 7:1–15).

The immediate consequences (20:1–6) show how much stir the prophet was creating in the higher echelons of society. If certain of the leaders were prepared to be seen with him (see on 19:1), others were not. *Pashhur*, who seems to have been a kind of priestly policeman, responsible for good order in the temple area, may be typical, to judge by Jeremiah's own preaching. Here we have a first record of the prophet suffering physically, as he had been warned he would (1:19). The Lord had promised that he would not be overcome by his enemies – but not that he would not suffer. Similarly, the Christian is assured of final victory because of the resurrection of Christ – but not of immunity from suffering or opposition.

Released from the stocks, Jeremiah addresses to Pashhur the kind of oracle which he had previously uttered about the priesthood and leaders in general (4–6). Pashhur is renamed Magor-Missabib ('terror on every side') because his refusal to hear God's word is the very attitude which will ensure the terrible fate of Judah. Ironically, the one who thought he was guarding the institutions and traditions was doing just the reverse; the temple with its rituals and its wealth, which he was protecting from the disorderly, would soon be no more, and the priesthood an irrelevance in a foreign land. No institution, however good, can be an end in itself; it can be good only if it points forward to the kingdom of God.

20:7–18 A last confession

Suitably, the account of Jeremiah's mistreatment is followed by an expression of his anguish because of his prophetic ministry in general. The passage is actually in two parts, vs 7–13 and vs 14–18. The first (7–13) is like a Psalm of lament, in which a Psalmist makes a protest to the Lord, and receives an assurance or an answer (*e.g.* Ps. 13).

The protest is in strong terms. In spite of God's assurances of protection, Jeremiah still feels that he has been unfairly exposed to danger, perhaps even that he has been misled (7a), and that his great sacrifices in the cause of his prophetic ministry have been in vain. He also feels that he has been led along, powerless to do otherwise than proclaim doom, so that he

has been necessarily isolated from others (7b–9). V 10 gives a pathetic picture of his rejection by others. *Terror on every side* is perhaps here a mocking name applied to him, using the words he had used of Pashhur (3). The term *friends* is ironic; they are waiting for him to make some slip which might be his downfall.

Such a sense of isolation can be a common experience in the Christian life. It is, however, in its own way a deception, because the more fundamental truth is that God intends good to his faithful servants (Rom. 8:28–30). Jeremiah comes back to a knowledge of this (11–12), seeing again the truth that God will be just and therefore will act with integrity towards him, but he has no hesitation in sharing his feelings with God. The cry in v 12 is like that in another confession (11:20). For the shout of praise *cf.* Pss. 146:1–2; 147:1.

It is odd that the recovery just observed is now followed by Jeremiah's deepest utterance of despair (14–18). The cursing of one's own birth (*cf.* Jb. 3:3–19) is a strong denial of God's good purposes, whether for oneself or for the world. The thought, introduced at 15:10, is pursued relentlessly here. Even the man who brought the normally glad news is cursed. The final note (18) questions whether any good can be brought out of the trouble which he himself is having to endure, and that which will fall upon the people.

Jeremiah's problem is one of faith itself. Even the greatest saints can be tormented by doubt. The issue, significantly, is not fought out silently in the mind but in the practical matter of continuing to live in costly obedience. Faith and doubt can jostle each other in a disorderly way, as illustrated by the putting together of vs 7–12 and vs 13–18.

In a sense v 18 brings the first part of the book to an end. Can there be any good outcome to Jeremiah's persistent preaching of judgment? He is tempted to think not. However, the Lord will show him otherwise in due course.

21:1 – 24:10 Salvation only through exile

21:1–14 No deliverance from Babylon

The prophecy has reached a crucial stage. Hitherto, we have had few indications of the date of particular incidents. Now we are transported to the reign of the last king of Judah, after the first attack of King Nebuchadnezzar on Judah (2 Ki. 24:15–20; Je. 37:1–2). The prophecy does not proceed according to strict chronology. It goes to the end of the period in question at this point, in order to show that the issue is no longer whether Judah will repent but how she will respond to God's judgment. There is no longer any question about who the enemy will be. In the time of Zedekiah it was painfully obvious that it was Babylon.

King Zedekiah regularly consulted Jeremiah in the last days of his reign, as the Babylonian threat grew greater. (The Pashhur here sent as messenger, incidentally, is different from the one who had beaten Jeremiah; 20:2.) He hopes that the prophet will bring a word of salvation (2), rather as Isaiah had done in the days of Assyrian domination, when Jerusalem had been miraculously delivered (2 Ki. 19:32–36).

Jeremiah will be consistent, however, in his declaration that it is not a time for deliverance but for punishment. The answer to the king's enquiry is terrible (4–6); not only the Babylonians but God himself will fight against Judah. This is to put into reverse God's ancient warring *on behalf of* his people, when he drove out the previous occupants of the land of Canaan; even the same language is used (*cf.* Dt. 1:29–30; 4:34; 5:15; 7:19). The promise of judgment now becomes dreadfully specific: Zedekiah himself will be the victim (see 52:8–11). Nebuchadnezzar is the instrument of God's judgment. The language used shows how much he is the agent of God's own wrath (7; *cf.* 13:14).

The decree is final – but there is still a choice (8–10). The people of Judah may accept God's judgment or try to resist and evade it. The *way of life and the way of death* originally meant the choice between keeping or rejecting the covenant (Dt. 30:15, 19). Now it is reapplied to the acceptance or refusal of punishment. Where God had once driven other nations out of the promised land to let Israel live there, he was now bringing them in and ousting Judah. They must accept this punishment as the only way of hope. There is always kindness on the other side of God's chastisement.

The final oracle (11–14) remembers what the responsibility of the royal house (the *house of David*) had been (12a), namely to administer justice (Zedekiah's name, ironically, meant 'The LORD is righteous'). The words are cited to show that the house – and specifically Zedekiah – had failed. They had taken the assurance of God's presence (2 Sa. 7:11b–16) as an occasion for pride in their own strength (13b). This perversion of God's love must result in an undoing of the covenant. The fate of Judah is a warning against all presumption upon the grace of God.

22:1–30 Unworthy kings

The preceding oracle now leads into a series of oracles against the kings in whose reigns Jeremiah had prophesied. The first passage expands 21:12a (2–3) and is applied to the kings in general (since no king is named, though the

words were presumably said to one in particular). The underprivileged (3) are those who are especially to be protected by careful justice (see 2 Sa. 8:15 for King David acting justly; *cf.* Dt. 14:29). The promise of v 4 is a reaffirmation of 2 Sa. 7:11b–16 (*cf.* also Je. 17:25 for the terms used) – but the responsibility of the kings is highlighted.

Another oracle (6–7) comments on the richness of Judah and the king's house in particular. Gilead was a fertile place, a symbol of God's blessing (*cf.* 8:22). Lebanon was well watered too, famous for its great cedars, many of which had been used in the building of the temple (1 Ki. 5:6–10) and the king's house (1 Ki. 7:2). The wealth of Judah is now seen to be fragile, subject to the will of the God who had given it, and whose goodness they had ceased to recognize.

The public announcement of the reason for Judah's fall (8–9) is a theme of the prophecy (*cf.* 18:16). It was a way of proclaiming God's faithfulness, even if Judah had not been faithful.

Sayings concerning particular kings occupy vs 10–30 (for their dates see the Introduction). They were probably spoken at different times, in or just after the reigns of the kings in question. They are gathered together to pursue the theme of the failure of the kings. (These all predate Zedekiah, who was the subject of ch. 21.)

Vs 10–12 relate to Josiah (*the dead*) and to his son Jehoahaz (here Shallum), who reigned briefly and was exiled to Egypt (2 Ki. 23: 30–34). His exile is perhaps a foreshadowing of Judah's – hence the weeping.

Jehoiakim is in view in vs 13–19. He is blamed for injustice and self-aggrandizement and contrasted unfavourably with his father Josiah (15b–16). Josiah here fits with the Davidic ideal. Jeremiah comes closest at this point to giving him credit for his reform (2 Ki. 22 – 23). However, the reform itself is not mentioned; it had not been enough to redeem the dynasty from its waywardness or its final fall. The succession of Jehoiakim to Josiah proves this. Jehoiakim is personally accused of all the evils which Jeremiah generally condemns (*cf.* 6:13; 7:6; 26:20–23). His own punishment will be that he will not receive the honour of a normal burial or mourning rites. (The words *My brother . . . my sister . . .* are probably addressed by mourners to each other.) Worse, he will have no proper burial. There is no record either of Jehoiakim's death or of his burial, though he was forcibly removed from the throne by the Babylonians (2 Ki. 24:2–6; *cf.* also Je. 16:5–6).

An oracle is now addressed to Jerusalem itself (in the second person singular; 20–23). The vain appeals to allies (Assyria and Egypt; *cf.* 2:36) are made from mountainous places in the north and south (20). Jerusalem's consistent faithlessness (21; *cf.* 7:25–26) now results in the removal of all its supports (22, where *shepherds* means her own leaders). The oracle is focused on the kings by v 23, where *Lebanon* means, symbolically, the kings' palace (1 Ki. 7:2).

The rogues' gallery is completed by Jehoiachin (Coniah in Hebrew and some English translations), who succeeded his father Jehoiakim after the latter had been deposed (2 Ki. 24:6). His mark of belonging to the Lord (the Davidic covenant, symbolized by the *signet ring*) will not prevent him being sent permanently into exile (24–27).

The final words tell the fate of the whole Davidic dynasty in an oracle against Jehoiachin. His expulsion stands for the expulsion of the whole people from the land that was once theirs. V 29 records the Lord's grief over the abuse of *his* land (*cf.* 2:7; 12:4). The last verse writes an end to a dynasty. Though Jehoiachin had children, none would reign over Judah (1 Ch. 3:17–18).

23:1–8 A new Davidic king

The first two verses repeat the verdict on the false shepherds (*cf.* v 22b). Jeremiah now looks beyond the exile, however (3–8). There will be a better future for God's people. He himself will be their shepherd (3), his shepherding delegated to faithful leaders (4). Moreover, although the historical Davidic dynasty is at an end, a new Davidic king would arise, one who would be just like David. His name, *The LORD Our Righteousness*, is, in Hebrew, close to that of Zedekiah. This king, however, would bear the name in truth. Jeremiah here looks towards that Messianic son of David whose birth would be for the salvation of Israel (Mt. 1:1; Lk. 2:29–35). The immediate hope, however, is for the restoration of the people of Judah to their own land, as a new landmark in God's dealings with his people (7–8; *cf.* 16:14–15). This will be a foreshadowing of the greater salvation to come.

23:9–40 On false prophets

As ch. 22 brought together the prophet's preaching against the kings, so this passage is a sustained treatment of the prophets who had not heard God's word and who had misled Judah (*cf.* 5:31; 6:13–14). Part of Jeremiah's own grief is the abuse of God's word by others (9). His accusation of the prophets applies to them in particular what he has said of the people in general. Their unfaithfulness is like adultery (*cf.* 5:7–8; 9:2) and may have issued in literal adultery (14), their lives belying any claim to be God's messengers (see on 5:26–28). Prophet and priest are two of a kind. Wickedness is at the

heart of the national life (11; *cf.* Ezk. 8:5–18), making Jerusalem indistinguishable from the proverbially evil Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn. 19:1–29). From these responsible leaders wickedness has spread like a cancer (15). Evil, however, bears its own reward (12; *cf.* Ps. 73:18).

The essence of the following accusation of the prophets as a class (16–24) is that they have not *stood in the council of the* LORD (18). Rather, their only authority is their own imagination (16b). Naturally, therefore, their message is misguided, proclaiming peace when there is none (17b). There had been a time, as with Isaiah, when it had been *right* for prophets to announce peace (2 Ki. 19:32–36). These false prophets, therefore, might have been mimicking Isaiah's message. Jeremiah's point is that this was no genuine message, because they had no special mandate from God. They had in fact misread his will. The falsity of the false prophets, furthermore, could not be hidden from God (23–24).

Jeremiah develops the idea of prophets who are deluded (25–32), contrasting the power of the genuine with the worthlessness of the counterfeit. He finishes with an attack on the cheapening of the Lord's word, where it is everywhere sought but only to be tamed, and where everyone's claim to have it makes it impossible to hear a true word when it comes. The word of the moment is judgment (33b). Whoever says otherwise will be singled out for punishment (v 34). In terms of declaring God's word in the church of Christ and to an unbelieving world, the responsibility – as awesome as for the prophets of old – is to declare his 'whole counsel', never tailoring it for our own ends, or deliberately making it more palatable than it is.

24:1–10 Two baskets of figs

This section of the prophecy (chs. 21–24) began with a message to Zedekiah. It then looked back to the four kings who preceded him (ch. 22). Now it is comes full circle to Zedekiah again, who became Nebuchadnezzar's puppet king of Judah after the exile of Jehoiachin (597 BC; 2 Ki. 24:8–17). The perspective of these two visions may well be towards the end of Zedekiah's reign, when the Babylonian army was again at the door.

The vision is one means by which the Lord communicates to his prophets (*cf.* 1:11, 13; Am. 7:1). The good and bad figs have overtones of good and bad harvests, and therefore covenantal blessing or the lack of it. This vision is of crucial importance for Jeremiah's message.

As in ch. 21, the exile is now a certainty; the issue is only how people will respond to God's decision to punish. The *good figs* are those who accept the need to go through the Babylonian devastation of the land and the exile itself (5). To these, the Lord now promises life again, in the language of building and planting familiar in Jeremiah (1:10; 18:7–10). This life lies on the other side of judgment, the 'tearing down' and 'uprooting'. Judah's life thus parallels that of Jesus, who died to rise again – and that of the church, which dies in him, in order to rise again (Rom. 6:1–4). The pattern of judgment followed by salvation is thus deep in the biblical revelation of God's ways with the world.

The new life, furthermore, is of a new quality. The terms of v 7 include the well known covenantal formula (*They will be my people, and I will be their God*; Lv. 26:12). The new thing, however, is the Lord's giving them a heart to know him, so that at last they might obey the call which once they would not hear (4:4). This does not mean that the human will is overruled or extinguished. Somehow, it is to be brought into line with that of the Lord. In biblical understanding, this finally happens through the indwelling of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 8:1–17 might be studied in this connection.) In Jeremiah, the language begins to unfold the teaching of the new covenant (*cf.* 31:31–34).

The *poor figs* are all who refuse the punishment of the Lord. This punishment cannot, of course, be literally avoided, but refused in spirit. Zedekiah typified those in Judah who looked to an alliance with Egypt to fend off the Babylonian menace. The flirtation with Egypt symbolized rebellion against God (*cf.* Dt. 17:16). It would persist right to the end of Jeremiah's story, a sign that some would not hear God, come what might.

25:1–38 God judges all the nations

25:1–14 Babylon's time

The fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, and the twenty-third of Jeremiah's ministry (reckoned inclusively, see 1:2) was 605 BC. In that year Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, gained control of Syria and Palestine by defeating Egyptian forces at the battle of Carchemish on the Euphrates. Indeed, according to Dn. 1:1, some prisoners from Judah were taken in that year. Babylon was from this point clearly the force to fear.

Jeremiah uses the time for a retrospect. He has preached continuously and consistently a message in line with that of other prophets who warned of judgment (4). The message (summarized in vs 4–6) had called to repentance and offered the chance of continued life in covenant and in the land (*cf.* Jeremiah's sermon in the temple; 7:3–7). It is given here only to show that it had not been heard (3, 7; *cf.* 7:25–26).

The words of judgment too (8–11) have the character of a summary, echoing earlier words (9c, *cf.* 24:9; 10, *cf.* 16:9). The rise of Babylon, however, gives a new focus and ominousness to them. Not only Judah but other nations too will suffer at Babylon's hands (9, 11). A further new and dreadful note is sounded: Judah (and the nations) will be enslaved to Babylon for seventy years (12). The generation that goes into exile will never see their homeland again.

This bad news, however, has a silver lining, because there will be an end to Babylon's strength, and therefore to the exile. Nebuchadnezzar has been God's *servant* (9) only as an agent of his punishment, but he himself has acted selfishly and cruelly in doing so. Babylon will therefore suffer God's punishment in turn (12, 14). Jeremiah is here seen as the prophet of Babylon's downfall, and thus becomes indeed a 'prophet to the nations' (1:5).

Babylon was to fall to the Medo-Persian Empire under the emperor Cyrus in 539 BC (see 2 Ch. 36:20–23). The *seventy years* may be counted either from 605, the date of the present prophecy and the year in which Nebuchadnezzar first took exiles, to 539, or soon after, when exiles began to return; or from 586, the date of the destruction of the temple, to 516, when it was rebuilt.

25:15–38 The cup of God's wrath

Roughly at the mid-point of the book of Jeremiah, therefore, judgment is pronounced against the nations in general. Such oracles are found in other prophetic books too, telling of the Lord's sovereignty over all nations and warning of their responsibility to him (*e.g.* Is. 13 – 20; Am. 1:1 – 2:3). (Jeremiah's main section of oracles against the nations, chs. 46 – 51, is actually placed at this point in the ancient Greek version of the OT, possibly preserving the original order.)

The sign of the drinking of the cup of wrath was presumably performed in some symbolic way. For the idea of drunken staggering as God's judgment *cf.* 13:12–14. Judgments against these nations are given more fully in chs. 46 – 51. It is important to notice that Babylon (called by the coded name of *Sheshach*), having wrought its havoc, drinks last (26). Also important is the statement that Judah will not be punished alone (29). The nation's suffering, far from suggesting the Lord's weakness since she is the one who bears his *Name* (*cf.* 7:12), will prove his lordship over all the world. The last two oracles of judgment (30–31, 32–38), using terms familiar from Jeremiah's preaching, are also directed against the nations in general. The *lion* once identified as the enemy nation (2:15) is now the Lord (38; *cf.* Am. 3:8).

26:1 – 29:32 Jeremiah becomes a prophet of salvation

26:1–24 Jeremiah narrowly escapes death

The scene returns to the temple, early in Jehoiakim's reign. The sermon recorded in vs 2–6 is a shortened form of the temple sermon in 7:1–15, making the same point, namely that Judah must hear God's word and not trust thoughtlessly in the mere possession of an institution. It is repeated here in order to introduce a narrative about response to God's word through the prophet on the part of various sections of the people.

Jeremiah is arrested by a group led by priests and prophets (8), angry because of his criticism of the worship and institutions of the land and supported by *all the people.* The accusation is that he is a false prophet, a crime which carried the death penalty (Dt. 18:20). The difficulty, however, was in knowing a true prophet from a false one. One test, whether his words came true (Dt. 18:21–22), might not give a certain result for a very long time. (This was the case with Jeremiah). Could he then be convicted because of the message itself? The case might have been based on old prophecies that Jerusalem would be protected from destruction (Is. 31:4–5; 37:33–35).

A trial ensues in which the priests and prophets accuse Jeremiah to the *officials* of Judah (10–11). *All the people* now stand with the officials as those who must be persuaded of his guilt. This shifting picture well evokes the uncertainty of many in Judah about the prophet and the readiness of a crowd to be swayed. Jeremiah, in his defence, affirms that he really is a prophet of God and repeats his call to repent, with its implied threat to city and temple (12–15).

The officials and *all the people* decide for Jeremiah (16). Their decision is supported by certain elders of Judah, who recall that the prophet Micah had preached in a similar way against the sins of Jerusalem (Mi. 3:8–12). If Micah had been right to preach thus, then so might Jeremiah be; and if the people did not repent, as King Hezekiah had done, then the disaster might indeed come.

The tragic case of the prophet Uriah (20–23) shows that Jeremiah was not alone in his preaching. He was not fortunate, as Jeremiah was, to gain the favour of influential people (*cf.* v 24) and became the victim of King Jehoiakim and those loyal to him. Our narrative is not merely telling the story of Jeremiah, as a modern biography might do. Rather it is telling the story of the response in Judah to the word of God. Jehoiakim stands condemned as one

who rejects it outright, and brutally (see also Je. 36).

The question how to know what God is saying is always complex. One indicator is the commitment of the teacher (Jeremiah and Uriah were willing to die), though this is hardly an infallible rule. Another is the consistency of the message with whatever is known about God. There is no substitute for study, accumulated experience and prayer for discernment. The temptation to go with the crowd (even in the church), rather than search rigorously for the truth, can be the main obstacle to finding it.

27:1–22 Serve Nebuchadnezzar!

The scene shifts back to the reign of Zedekiah, in the year 594/3 BC (*cf.* 28:1). Zedekiah is apparently discussing rebellion against Babylon with ambassadors of the nations mentioned (3), possibly in league with Egypt. This is precisely what Jeremiah has warned Zedekiah against (21:1–10; 24). The sign of the yoke (2) is well-chosen to denote servitude, both that which is required of these nations and the worse one which will follow if they do not obey the Lord.

Jeremiah again wields his authority as a prophet to the nations. In calling the nations to account, he uses the language of the Lord's strength (5; *cf.* Dt. 4:34) to show that he is Creator of all the earth and therefore has the right to subordinate rulers to him (4–7). The point will be finally proven in relation to Babylon itself (7; *cf.* 25:12; Dn. 4:25).

The need to submit to Babylon, imposed first upon Judah, is here laid upon all the nations, especially those in the conspiracy. The trio of *sword, famine and plague* (8; *cf.* 14:12) typifies the dreadful judgment which would come in the case of refusal of this word. Those nations too would have their false prophets, who would support the 'establishment' and say that all was well when it was not (9–10). It was not Judah only that was obliged to seek the truth, or that was subject to the word of the Lord. Nor today is it only those who call themselves Christians.

The message to Zedekiah (12–15) is now familiar (*cf.* 21:1–10). The immediate context, however, is one in which he is being supported strongly by certain prophets in his policy of resisting Babylon. Jeremiah's campaign against these therefore takes on a new urgency.

The final passage reveals the nature of the false prophets' message. The setting is one in which the exile has in a sense begun. King Jehoiachin has already been taken captive to Babylon, and some of the treasures of the temple, the rich provision of King Solomon, have been borne off, symbols of the claimed superiority of the Babylonians' gods. The false prophets have now to argue that these will soon be brought back. Their position increasingly goes against the evidence. Yet they go on holding it. Even what remains of the temple treasures will soon be taken also (19; *cf.* 52:17; *cf.* 1 Ki. 7:15–37).

The importance of the loss of these treasures cannot be overestimated for the people of Judah. Their whole understanding of themselves was bound up with these things. The temple and its trappings had indeed been given to them by God. But if they had become themselves the object of their hope (*cf.* 7:4), then they would have to be taken from them. The exile, in an important sense, consists in the loss of the temple; it is also, however, the opportunity to seek God again in a real way. This is why it was God's chosen way to the renewal of the people. It is sometimes necessary for God's people to be shown that they have come to trust in outward things rather than in God himself.

28:1–17 Jeremiah's message vindicated

Jeremiah's general denunciations of false prophets now come to a head in a confrontation with one in particular. While Jeremiah is still wearing the yoke with which he had warned of coming servitude to Babylon (27:2), Hananiah deliberately opposes him (1b) and challenges his sign (2). Hananiah then utters just the kind of oracle which Jeremiah has been opposing (2–4; *cf.* 27:16), promising that Babylonian pressure will very soon be lifted. This was tantamount to denying that God was judging his people and, consequently, that there had been grounds for his anger.

The issue, introduced in ch. 26, is how to know the true prophet from the false. Hananiah is *called* a prophet (1) and uses prophetic language, claiming to speak in the name of the Lord (2a; had he spoken in the name of any other god he could have been immediately denounced; Dt. 13:1–5; 18:20). Jeremiah is initially powerless to demonstrate that he is right and Hananiah wrong. He can only say that he wishes Hananiah were right (6). However, he stands by the word which he knows God has given him and delivers his own challenge (9). That challenge is an appeal to one of the criteria by which a prophet may be known to be true, namely whether his words come to pass (Dt. 18:21–22). Hananiah, undeterred, breaks the yoke from Jeremiah's neck, thus claiming by the most potent kind of symbolism (see on 13:1) that he is the one who knows the will of God. With this he seems to have won the day, and Jeremiah retreats (11).

The Lord now gives Jeremiah his most dramatic vindication. He will show that Jeremiah speaks truly by passing a terrible sentence on Hananiah. Jeremiah, returning to

the encounter, declares again his message that Judah must bow beneath the yoke of Babylon, now an iron one (12–14; *cf.* 27:6). And the message is reinforced by a prophecy that Hananiah will die that same year. If the final demonstration of the truth of Jeremiah's message of judgment would take a little longer, this would be an immediate and powerful proof of the matter.

Hananiah dies because he is a false prophet (Dt. 18:20) who has helped prevent the people from seeing their true danger. His death serves also to vindicate Jeremiah. There is now no excuse, if ever there had been one, for failing to heed his words.

The solemn story is a perpetual warning against lightly claiming that one has a special word from the Lord, and it calls all who would be teachers to be humble learners first, and always.

29:1–14 'Build houses in Babylon'

If people in Judah wanted to believe that the effects of the first Babylonian invasion would soon be undone, so too did those who had already been taken into exile there. Jeremiah now sends them a letter (showing, incidentally, that communication between the two locations remained possible; there was always traffic around the trade route that lay between them. The family of Shaphan again appears in Jeremiah's service in v 3; *cf.* 26:24). In Babylon too the various classes of society are represented (chiefly the upper and better off classes; 2 Ki. 24:14). And there too there is a battle for their mind; prophets are persuading them that they will soon be home (8–9).

The letter contains what seems like bad news, but also a great encouragement. The bad news is that the exile will not be short. Jeremiah repeats his message that it will last seventy years (10; *cf.* 25:11). However, in the 'death' of exile are the seeds of new life. The letter begins to reverse the hitherto bleak preaching of the prophet. Where once he had himself refrained from marrying as a sign that marrying and having children would cease in Judah (16:2), now the exiles may return to normal relationships (6). The people may again increase in number, whereas his previous message had seemed to promise only extinction (4:7).

Just when all planning seems futile, the Lord has plans again for his people (11). The act that had seemed to put an end to the covenant in fact gives life where there had been but the appearance of it. The story illustrates neatly the difference between the Lord's thinking and human plans (Pr. 16:9 Is. 55:8). What seems to be the end of hope is but the end of tawdry dreams; with God there is always a real future. In it, there is willing and joyful communion with him, no longer hidden by human self-seeking. Nor is this future in some unreal 'spiritual' realm. It exists within normal life; hence the marrying and the houses, and – in time – the returning to the ancient land (14). The phrase translated *bring you back from captivity* is richer than this suggests, implying the full restoration of life in all its dimensions. It will recur several times in the following chapters.

29:15–32 Prophets in Babylon

To the objection that the exiles had their own prophets (15), Jeremiah replies with a summary of his former message of judgment, recalling the vision of the bad figs which had condemned those who would refuse the exile (17; *cf.* 24:8–10). There was to be no false hope for the exiles in the fact that Zedekiah still sat on a throne in Jerusalem, or that the temple still stood.

The letter continues with words of judgment against particular prophets who, like Hananiah (ch. 28), are declaring Jeremiah's words invalid. Ahab and Zedekiah (not the king) have shown their falseness by their adulterous lives (20–23). In the light of the fulfilment of Jeremiah's words about Hananiah (28:17), his prophecy about them is ominous indeed (22). Shemaiah the Nehelamite opposes Jeremiah as directly as he can at such a distance, by refuting his letter in a reply to one of the priests. He too has dared too much, and will know the anger of God (24–32).

30:1 – 33:26 A new covenant is promised

30:1–24 Health restored

The next three chapters are taken up with promises of salvation for Judah, and indeed, Israel, after the punishment of the exile. The central subject will be the new covenant (31:31–34). The primary focus will be the exiles who return from Babylon. But this saving act of God is more profoundly a pointer to his creation of a new kind of people in the church of Christ. (See the additional note at the end of Commentary on ch. 31)

It is refreshing to move from judgment to salvation. It is also remarkable to hear Jeremiah now speak as a 'salvation-prophet' having given so much energy to opposing those who promised salvation too soon. The difference between Jeremiah and Hananiah (ch. 28), however, is that Jeremiah has insisted that the punishment must first run its course and itself be part of the restoration.

The command to write down prophecies already given (2) witnesses to an ongoing activity (see ch. 36). Here it signals a turning-point

in the message. The theme of chs. 30–33 is set by 30:1–3, namely the full restoration of the people of God to their covenant relationship with him (3; *cf.* 29:14).

The method of ch. 30 is to quote prophecies of judgment and answer them with words of salvation. Thus vs 5–7 remind of earlier (and other) judgment-sayings (5; *cf.* 20:3, 10; 6, *cf.* 4:19, 31). The *day* of the Lord (7) had been used by Amos to speak of coming disaster (Am. 5:18).

In contrast to all the pain, there will be a *day* of deliverance (8). The time for yoke-breaking will come at last (contrast 28:10–14), and God's people will serve him truly under a true Davidic king (9; *cf.* 23:5–6). It is no less than *Israel* (or Jacob) that will be restored, though in a new guise. The promise of God's presence with his people is fundamental to the covenant (11; *cf.* Ex. 3:12) and grounds for not fearing (Is. 43:2). V 11b refers to the disciplining of the exile.

A new section begins again by recalling prophecies of judgment (12–15). Metaphors of wounding and illness dominate (*cf.* 8:11, 22). The *allies* are (lit.) 'lovers', recalling the metaphor of prostitution (2:33; *cf.* 22:20–22). The legal case against Judah (13a) had been brought by the Lord himself (2:9, 29).

There follow two 'answering' oracles of salvation (16–17, 18–24). The first begins with the word 'Therefore' (NIV *But*). This is surprising, following v 15b. It shows that the Lord's plan to save Israel/Judah is based entirely on his gracious decision to do so. The people's oppressors will be overthrown (*cf.* 25:12). And there will at last be true healing (17), not the counterfeit offered by the false prophets to no avail (*cf.* 8:11, 15).

The second oracle portrays a happy and prosperous people (19–20), in direct contrast to the dearth and misery of the time of punishment (4:29c; 16:9). This repopulation is now envisaged for the homeland, not just for the exilic community in Babylon, as in 29:6, hence the rebuilding of homes (18), cities and fortresses (the probable meaning of v 18c). They will once again be ruled by one of their own (21), a sign of freedom from oppression. All this amounts to a renewal of the covenant, indicated by the formula of v 22 (*cf.* Lv. 26:12).

The last two verses are repeated from 23:19–20. Their repetition here is deliberate and means that the time referred to in the former place has now come. The day when the people will *understand* God's plan is now close.

31:1–26 A remnant returns

This chapter contains a number of pictures of the restored people, headed by a variation of the covenant-formula (1; *cf.* 30:22) and a poetic statement about renewal that lies beyond judgment (2).

The *Virgin* image has only been used ironically before (18:13–15); here (4), it contrasts with the former 'prostitute' (2:20). In the new covenant, the former stains have been washed away. The new life, moreover, is one that can be portrayed in images that are homely and joyful. The idea of Israel as *Virgin* leads into the colourful picture of the young women of the land going out to dance, perhaps at a festival (*cf.* Jdg. 21:20–21). Farmers will harvest crops and celebrate in due course the bounty of God in worship in Jerusalem (6b). All this will be because the love of God does not come to an end in judgment; his love does not die. It is expressed in that special love (*loving-kindness*) which he has set upon his people (3).

A people returns from exile (7–9), a remnant (see 6:9), yet in great number, bringing their infirmities, yet weeping for joy, as the Lord, their father, picks out for them a level path. Israel is the *foremost of the nations* (7), no longer merely one of those whom God punished by Nebuchadnezzar (27:8); she is so simply because she has been chosen to know God's love (*cf.* Dt. 7:7–8).

A further oracle is addressed to the nations (10–14). A joyful people is tended by its *shepherd* (*cf.* 23:3), its blessings pictured in concrete terms: corn, wine and oil, the basic symbols of bounty (*cf.* Dt. 7:13); a garden and dancing (again, *cf.* v 4). The whole community is portrayed in the contrasts of male and female, young and old, priest and lay (13–14). All this is meant as a witness to the nations that God is faithful to his people and able to bless them as he promises. No nation can hold them when he decides to redeem them (11; *cf.* Rom. 8:31).

The strong feminine imagery continues (15–22) with Rachel weeping for her children. Rachel, the younger wife of Jacob, was the mother of Joseph (Gn. 35:24), the ancestor of the northern tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Her weeping stands for the grief of Israel, especially all its mothers, over its losses, the northern tribes into Assyrian exile, the southern to Babylon. That weeping is answered by this restoration (16–17). Ephraim (standing for all Israel) is portrayed as repenting in truth (contrast past false repentances; 3:22b–25). Their turning towards God is met by his turning towards them (18); in the past they had only turned away (3:22a). God himself has done all this; his compassion is finally more decisive than his judgment (20; *cf.* Ho. 11:8).

There follows an appeal (21–22), showing that even in this new order the Lord still calls his people to faithfulness. The last line (22b) is obscure, but may be an image of a mother

protecting her male child, a happy echo of Rachel weeping for her children. This secure people is also a worshipping one (23–25).

The oracles to this point in the chapter seem to have been given to Jeremiah in a dream (26).

31:27–40 The new covenant

The preamble to the new covenant (27–30) answers a proverb of the time of the exile which complained that that generation was suffering for the sins of preceding ones (*cf.* Ezk. 18:2). Rather, the Lord would deal with each generation, and even each individual, separately and justly.

The idea of a new covenant has been contained in all the prophecies of chs. 30–31 so far. Now it is spelt out (31–34). It is made with both Israel and Judah. The renewal goes right back to Abraham and Moses, not just to the fall of Judah, and re-creates the covenant; 'new' can mean 'renewed'.

This covenant, however, will be different from the one which previous generations had broken (32). It will be written on people's hearts, not just on stones, like the Ten Commandments (33; *cf.* Ex. 24:12). In other words, the covenant will be a warm delight to the people, not a cold prescription. This had always been the ideal (*cf.* Dt. 10:16; 30:6), but now it would be realized, because in some way the Lord would create the desire and ability in his people (*I will write* . . .).

Two characteristics of the new covenant are now mentioned (34). First, people will not need to be encouraged to know God, because all will know him. Such knowledge means not only a knowledge of God's character and ways, but is personal, and implies a commitment of the will. It is a response to his knowledge of us, which is also a total commitment of himself. Secondly, God will forgive the sins of the people in a new and decisive way (*cf.* Heb. 10:1–17).

The following two passages affirm, first, that the new covenant will be everlasting (35–37), and secondly, that as a result of it the city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt (38–40).

Additional note on the interpretation of the new covenant. The plain sense of the prophecy in 31:31–34 relates it to the historical nations of Israel and Judah. It refers, in the first place, to the return of exiles from Babylon. This is clear from the reference to the rebuilding of the city in vs 38–40. The whole tendency of chs. 30–31 has been in this direction also. The new covenant prophecy, therefore, has a first fulfilment when God brings back the exiles in 539 BC and the following years.

However, the prophecy suggests more than this. The inclusion of 'Israel', which had ceased to exist as a nation by Jeremiah's time, suggests that a deeper fulfilment is looked for than a mere physical return to the land. The ancient covenant is to be fulfilled at last in a new way, by a people that is capable of entering into it, by God's help.

The NT teaches that the decisive fulfilment of the new covenant prophecy takes place in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:7–13; 9:15). This means that God's covenant is finally achieved in the people who are 'in Christ'. The new kind of forgiveness is possible because he has made a once-for-all sacrifice for sin that makes all other sacrifices obsolete (Heb. 10:15–18). It is a covenant that cannot end because it has been perfected by Christ. Even so, his new people are called to faithfulness and given the Holy Spirit in order to enable them.

There is, therefore, a parallel between how God acted towards ancient Judah in bringing them back from Babylon and how he acts to the whole world in Christ. Ancient Israel and Judah have their counterpart in the church, which is Christ's body and calls all people to him.

32:1–15 Jeremiah buys a field

The scene returns to the reign of Zedekiah. Judah is besieged and Jeremiah is in prison. The prophecies of hope will continue against this background. Part of that background is Zedekiah's refusal to hear God's word to him. Here that word is repeated, actually in Zedekiah's mouth – so familiar was he with it (3–5; *cf.* 21:3–7).

The message of judgment now becomes merely a prelude to a new word of hope, or rather a sign: namely, the buying of a field. The occasion of Hanamel's desire to sell the field to Jeremiah is not known. Perhaps he was old and had no sons and was asking Jeremiah to keep the piece of land in the family (8). Whether Jeremiah paid over the odds cannot be said. The procedures described are presumably the normal ones of the day. Their public character takes on a new importance here because the sale is also going to be a sign (14–15).

The point of the transaction is that normal life will in due course be resumed in Judah (15). It is a potent sign, ownership of a field suggesting possession of the whole land. It is all the stronger against the background of the siege and likely loss of everything, not least the very field which Jeremiah has just bought. By it the prophecies which had insisted that all normal activities in Judah would come to a sudden end are effectively reversed (ch. 16).

32:16–44 Too hard for the Lord?

The oddness of buying a field in the midst of a siege prompts a prayer of Jeremiah. He begins with the affirmation, *Nothing is too hard for you*

(17). He develops the idea by praising God's power both in creation (17), in judgment (18–19), in saving Israel from Egypt and giving them the land (20–22; *cf.* Dt. 26:8) and finally in punishing them for their sins (23). The prayer, however, is really a question: Can this sign make sense?

The Lord, answering Jeremiah (26–44), takes up the question whether anything is too hard for him (27). He begins by repeating familiar words of judgment. The Babylonians will destroy the city (28–29) because of the persistent sin of Israel and Judah, centred on their idolatry (30–35; *cf.* 7:18, 30–32; 19:13). These words, however, merely introduce the word of salvation that follows. The point is that the really hard thing is to bring salvation out of destruction. That, however, is just what he plans to do.

The promise begins in v 36. The long-threatened *sword, famine and plague* (14:12) are at the door. Now, however, the word of judgment is turned into one of salvation. Though the people are being driven out, they will return, not only to their land but to a covenant (38), nothing less than the new covenant (31:31–34), in which they will be faithful and which will never end (39–41). The words *I will inspire them to fear me* take up the new covenant promise *I will put my law in their minds*, in the sense that the Lord himself promises to take a new initiative in bringing this about. This is the miracle that is 'not too hard' for the Lord.

The final verses (42–44) come back to Jeremiah's field. Yes, fields will again be bought in Judah. Jeremiah's apparently foolish purchase is not meaningless, but full of hope and promise.

33:1–13 The sounds of joy and gladness

The final chapter of the so-called Book of Consolation, like chs. 30 and 32, has words of judgment answered by words of salvation. The Lord's word to Jeremiah of his power in creation (2; *cf.* 10:12) contrasts with the prophet's position, still in prison (*cf.* 32:2) in a beleaguered city. The revealing of *unsearchable things* (3) takes up the idea of nothing being too hard for the Lord (32:17) and amounts to a promise of salvation (*cf.* Is. 48:6 for a similar idea). Words of judgment are then recalled (4–5) in order to lead, unexpectedly, into words of promise (6–9). The transition from the judgment to the promise is abrupt (there is no word *Nevertheless* in the Hebrew; v 6). The sequence itself shows how God acts; he brings salvation and blessing out of the blackest despair.

Similar patterns may be seen in vs 10–11, 12–13. There is an echo in v 10 of 4:23–26, but it is answered by a picture of life (v 11; contrast also 7:34; 16:9). Desolation will give way to peace and security throughout the land of Israel (the places mentioned in v 13 cover the length and breadth of Judah, and Benjamin, indeed, lies even beyond Judah's borders to the north).

33:14–26 An unending covenant

The last part of the chapter develops the promise of a new Davidic kingdom made in 23:5–6, which is cited here (15–16). The language of this passage, and of the words that follow, recalls the first promise to David (2 Sa. 7:12–16; *cf.* 1 Ki. 2:4). That promise seemed to have failed, since David's historical dynasty did come to an end, as Jeremiah had said it would (*cf.* 22:30). Now it is reaffirmed (17). So too is God's promise to the priesthood (18). The priests had an indispensable role in the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 28 – 29), and indeed they had a covenant of their own with the Lord (Nu. 25:12–13; 1 Sa. 2:30, 35).

The remainder of the chapter affirms the permanence of the renewed covenant in the strongest possible terms (19–22; 23–26). In restoring his people God will be keeping his ancient promises, even the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be a nation (26; *cf.* Gn. 12:2). And he will do so to prove those wrong who say that he has rejected his people (24).

The promise of a permanent kingdom contrasts oddly with the sermon in 7:1–15, in which Jeremiah had made it plain that the people could not take institutions and nationhood for granted. The difference is made possible by the new covenant. The kingdom foreseen in ch. 33 is none other than the new covenant, interpreted by the NT in the way which we have noted above. The terms, it is true, are taken from the ancient covenant, with its king and priests. This, however, must be seen merely as a vehicle for the essential assurance that God would, in the end, be utterly faithful to his promises. These had aimed originally at the salvation of the whole world (Gn. 12:3) and would finally be fulfilled in those terms.

34:1 – 36:32 Jeremiah's message is resisted

34:1–22 A pardon for slaves

The perspective returns to the time of the siege with another word of Jeremiah's to Zedekiah (1–5). The message is unchanged, in essentials, from 21:3–7; 32:3–5. An addition here (4–5) allows some hope of a mitigated sentence for the king, where the other saying had not been precise about his personal fate. The meaning is that he would not die in battle, and that he would be properly mourned (contrast 22:18 for the fate of Jehoiakim; but see also 52:11). The

imminence of the fall of the city is indicated by vs 6–7, according to which only two other cities besides Jerusalem continued to hold out against the invaders. Most of Judah has already fallen.

The following incident, concerning released slaves, becomes an occasion for a further oracle against Zedekiah. The incident itself gives an interesting insight into the life of Judah in its death-throe. Slavery was an allowed institution in Israel, under clearly defined conditions. These conditions, alluded to in v 14, are contained in Ex. 21:2–11, Lv. 25:39–55 and Dt. 15:12–18. As envisaged, it was a humane institution, allowing those who had fallen on hard times, perhaps through crop failure and debt, to be restored to independence. This required unselfish interpretation on the part of the better off, and in reality, the institution had been generally abused.

In the heat of the siege, Zedekiah had proclaimed a slave-release, which had been accepted by those who had slaves (9–10). For the king, who showed signs of hesitation and weakness during the siege, it may have been an attempt to set some of his wrongs to right, before it was too late. Presumably, however, the decree caused anger, and the result was that the masters took their slaves back (11). The act was irrational in the light of a situation in which all was about to be lost. Yet it is a testimony, perhaps, to human blindness, and an extreme example of that refusal to accept the will, and then the punishment, of God, which Jeremiah had criticized (*cf.* 21:9).

The hard-hearted act becomes the occasion of a further promise of judgment. The idea of freedom (given to the slaves, then taken back) is used ironically of the *freedom* which God will give the people to be punished (17). This is in fact the nature of all unilaterally declared freedom from God, a delusion which leads only to ruin.

The ritual referred to in vs 18–20 involved the sacrifice of an animal as the solemn sign of a covenant. The walking between its parts may have meant a kind of self-curse, *i.e.* 'may such a thing (namely death) happen to me if I do not keep my covenant' (*cf.* Gn. 15:17; 1 Ki. 19:2). Such a ritual may have accompanied the covenant commanded by Zedekiah regarding the slaves. The Lord now simply says, so be it.

The chapter ends with a familiar scenario of death for the city and the land (21–22).

35:1–19 Faithful Recabites

The next two chapters go back in time to the reign of Jehoiakim. The development of the narrative here, therefore, is thematic, not chronological. The themes are the resistance to the covenant with the Lord and the imminent danger from the Babylonians. The danger referred to in v 11 is the Babylonian attack in 605 BC.

Jeremiah uses the Recabites as an example of faithfulness, by way of a contrast with the failure of Judah in general to be faithful. Most of what is known of the Recabites is contained in the present chapter. Their ancestor Jonadab had assisted King Jehu in his zeal, over two centuries earlier, to put an end to Baal worship in the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Ki. 10:15, 23). If the same Recab is meant in 1 Ch. 2:55, however, the family was a clan of Judah (*cf.* 1 Ch. 2:3), with links to the ancient nomadic Kenites, who had been friendly to Israel during their wilderness wanderings (1 Sa. 15:6). Jonadab apparently initiated a rule of life for his clan, which had elements of nomadism and entailed abstinence from all kinds of strong drink (6–7). Whether the *Recabite family* was composed strictly of descendants of Jonadab, or whether it was a more open community, perhaps even a guild, is unclear.

The origins and constitution of the Recabites are not the issue, however, but rather their faithfulness to their rule. The passage takes no position on whether or not the rule was good or bad in itself; the point is the Recabites' faithfulness to it. Jeremiah is told to make a prophetic sign of this, setting wine before them and inviting them to drink, knowing that they were committed to abstinence (2). The sign takes place in a side room of the temple and could presumably have been witnessed by important temple officials. Once again Jeremiah went to the heart of the nation's power.

The Recabites duly refuse (6), and Jeremiah declares the meaning of the sign (12–16). The reproach to Judah takes a familiar form (15; *cf.* 25:4–6) but gains fresh strength from the contrast between their record and that of the Recabites. The reproach is followed by a word of judgment (17; *cf.* 11:11). A final twist promises long survival to the Recabites (18–19), in terms which belong properly to the promise to the Davidic king (19b; *cf.* 1 Ki. 2:4). This directs the contrast pointedly at the king himself, with some irony, since that continuance of the dynasty is precisely what is now threatened by the failure of the kings.

36:1–32 Jehoiakim rejects Jeremiah's words

Jehoiakim's reign had seen a major conflict between Jeremiah and the authorities over his preaching in the temple (ch. 26). The present chapter is a kind of sequel to that incident and returns to the theme of the official rejection of the prophet's words. Jeremiah, indeed, is apparently barred from the temple area (5), no doubt a compromise between those forces who

had wanted to execute him and those who had supported him. The ban was serious, as it kept Jeremiah from moving not only among officials but among the large crowds who would go to the temple on great occasions.

The Lord therefore commands Jeremiah to write all the words he has hitherto spoken on a scroll (2), so that they can be read out in Jeremiah's absence. (It seems that Jeremiah simply remembered all these words, to judge by the surprise of the officials [17–18] that they should come to be written, and Baruch's answer there.) Baruch's humble role as scribe to the prophet now involves him in standing in for the prophet himself, on a crowded fast day, in what must have seemed a repetition of the great challenge of Jeremiah in the temple sermon (6–10; 26:2–6; *cf.* 7:1–15). Baruch's secondary part, therefore, required the same commitment and courage as that of his master when the need arose. Once again the family of Shaphan is involved in gaining a hearing for Jeremiah's words (10; *cf.* 26:24).

The immediate consequences of the reading are remarkable indeed, for an impact is made on some of the leading officials, again through the initiative of a member of Shaphan's family. The writing itself may have added something to the effect, or perhaps merely the putting together of so many different words (15–18).

The officials, in consternation, give the scroll its third reading, now before the king himself. His reaction and that of his closest associates contrast markedly with that of the officials who brought it to him. His callous disregard for the prophet's words is emphasized, almost as a matter of wonder (24; *cf.* v 16). The burning of the scroll horrifies Elnathan, Gemariah and Delaiah, who see it for the blasphemy it is. For the king, it may indicate more than indifference and be a superstitious attempt to destroy the power of the words.

The king's action makes a further contrast, namely with that of his father, King Josiah, when the Book of the Law was discovered in the temple and read out to him (2 Ki. 22:8–13). The role of Shaphan himself, incidentally, is noted on that occasion too.

The attempt to destroy the words of God is futile. Jeremiah is simply commanded to make another scroll (28), and the special word of judgment which Jehoiakim has invited by his impiety follows. It is an express denial of the dynastic promise as passed to Solomon by David (30b; *cf.* 1 Ki. 2:4) and a repetition of the prophecy that he will have no proper burial (30c; *cf.* 22:19).

The new scroll contains other words, not in the first (32). This presumably reflects Jeremiah's ongoing ministry and is evidence of the beginning of the written collection of his sayings.

37:1 – 39:18 The last days of Judah

37:1–10 Relief from Egypt?

The action now proceeds quickly towards the final fall of Judah and Jerusalem to the Babylonians. The scene from now on is the latter part of Zedekiah's reign, the king who had himself been put in by the Babylonians (2 Ki. 24:17–18). The issue is whether the king will listen to Jeremiah's announcement that the city must fall and lessen the force of the disaster by surrendering; the message referred to in v 2 was first introduced in 21:1–10. Zedekiah must not imagine that there will be effective help from Egypt.

The king, though he consistently refuses to hear the full impact of Jeremiah's message, nevertheless actively seeks out the prophet, desperately hoping for reassurance. He urges Jeremiah to exercise his prophetic role of intercessor (3), which, of course, has been prohibited to the prophet (7:16), just because of the hardness of Judah's heart. Zedekiah's desire for the word of God is spurious, because it will only accept the outcome which it has itself prescribed.

At the time in question, the Babylonian siege of the city has been temporarily relieved by an advance of Egyptian forces, Egypt being intent on recovering some ground in the area from its old foe (4–5). It is a natural occasion for the false hopes in Egypt against which Jeremiah has warned. Zedekiah's hope, then, appears to have some basis. The fundamental situation has not changed, however (6–10). The only decisive factor in it is the Lord's intention to punish Judah. False hopes are easily encouraged by superficial appearances.

37:11–21 Jeremiah imprisoned

The imprisoning of Jeremiah is a last desperate attempt of his enemies to silence him, resisting his word to the last, even in the death-throe of the city. The prophet takes advantage of the respite afforded by the Babylonian withdrawal to go to his home town, Anathoth (12), possibly to join a family discussion about its property. Jeremiah's purchase of Hanamel's field (32: 1–15) may have been an eventual outcome of the attempted journey described here.

He is arrested at the very gate of the city on the charge of deserting to the Babylonians (13). The pretext for the charge is his preaching of surrender as the only way of survival (21:9); but the charge of treachery is trumped up. His denial, *That's not true!* (14), uses the word (lit.) 'lie' with which he has described the whole

condition of the people (*cf.* 5:2). His arrest, it is implied, is the result of the people's rejection of his message, not of any evidence of treachery on his part. But he is imprisoned nevertheless.

Even so, Zedekiah continues to seek a word of reassurance from him. In refusing it, the prophet pleads that the falseness of the opposing prophets must by now surely be evident (19). The king still will not hear. He does, however, ease Jeremiah's hard prison conditions (20–21).

38:1–13 Jeremiah thrown into a cistern

As Judah is in desperate danger from Babylon, so Jeremiah remains in danger from his personal enemies. Certain of the palace officials strongly oppose him, and he is vulnerable to the shifting allegiances and power-plays of influential people (see 21:1 for Pashhur son of Malkijah in a more neutral role). The officials cite the well-known substance of Jeremiah's preaching in the last days of Judah (2–3; *cf.* 21:7–10), and call for the death penalty (*cf.* 26:11). The charge is treason, as in the incident in ch. 37. Zedekiah seems powerless against his officials (5). His attempt to hold on to power, therefore, by refusing Jeremiah's message, has a pathetic irony about it, since he has no real power to wield.

Jeremiah was evidently meant to die in the muddy cistern. It took a foreigner in the king's service, the Ethiopian (Cushite) Ebed-Melech (lit. 'servant of the king') to rouse the king to action, by appealing to him while he sat in the city gate, no doubt hearing cases brought to him for judgment (7–10). The royal household is evidently divided; the king himself lacks resolution, but may be swayed. Jeremiah is returned to the relative safety of the courtyard of the guard (11–13). The reaction of his enemies is left to the imagination.

38:14–28 A last interview with Zedekiah

The last encounter of Zedekiah and Jeremiah breathes secrecy (the *third entrance to the temple*, v 14, is not otherwise mentioned and is presumably a quiet place, perhaps private to the king). It not only reflects the king's own insecurity in his palace, but also Jeremiah's understandable exasperation with one who constantly asked but would not accept the only true answer (15). The prophet is no doubt also suffering from his perpetual ill-treatment and uncertainty about his own life, as the king sees (16).

The word which Jeremiah gives on this occasion contains some comfort for Zedekiah, not by changing the accustomed message, but by assuring him of personal survival if he complies with the Babylonians, even protection from his Jewish enemies (17–20; v 19 reveals some of the complex tensions within the Jewish community of the period). The word of assurance has a personal element, affecting the king's family; so, however, does the alternative, for if he refuses then he and his family will suffer (21–23). The loss of a king's harem was a particular humiliation in war.

Zedekiah makes no response to the word itself, though his actions in these last days suggest great personal agony of mind. The sequel in ch. 39 shows how fatal his vacillation in the face of what he knew to be right proved to be.

Jeremiah fears a return to the house of Jonathan (*cf.* 37:15; a return to the cistern was hardly in question, since the king himself had prevented his murder there), but is allowed to go back to the courtyard of the guard, where he stays till the city falls (28).

39:1–18 The fall of Jerusalem

The disaster of which Jeremiah had so consistently spoken is now briefly told, though the campaign itself had lasted some time and had received at least one setback (1–2; *cf.* 37:5). The dates in question are January 588 BC and July 587 BC (see also 52:4; 2 Ki. 25:1). The sham power of Zedekiah and his court is brutally exposed when the Babylonians enter the city, occupying with deliberate symbolism a position representing royal authority in the city (3). The puppet-king flees in humiliation, but finds, inescapably, none of the mitigation of his punishment which Jeremiah had held out to him (5–7; *cf.* 38:17–23).

There is pathos in the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecies to Zedekiah. He would indeed 'see the king of Babylon with his own eyes' (32:4; 34:3), only to be cruelly deprived of his sight (7). His own death would not occur in this heat of war, but presumably afterwards in a time of peace, and with due obsequies (34:5). But there would scarcely be peace for his soul.

The shackling of the former king, together with the execution of his sons (potential heirs) and his officials, is part of the grim political necessity of affirming Babylonian rule. It is at the same time the end of the story of the petty hostilities which had passed for the exercise of power in Judah. There had indeed been a falseness at the heart of the covenant people which could never truly claim God's mandate to rule, nor in the end the enjoyment of his protection.

Jeremiah's preaching had all along been directed not just at the leadership but at the whole people. The ordinary people had not been exempted from blame for their own unfaithfulness to God, even if the leaders had borne a heavier responsibility. So in the punishment, the whole people is affected (8–9). We

are left again to guess at the tensions which may have existed within the exiled community betwen those who had deserted at an early stage (respecting Jeremiah's words!) and those who had held out to the last (9). Though some of the poorest are left behind (10), Judah as a political entity no longer exists.

Nebuchadnezzar's special command regarding Jeremiah may occasion surprise (11–12). It is not necessary to think, however, that the prophet had had any communication with the Babylonian authorities prior to his capture. His message had never required collaboration; God's declared intention could scarcely require such a thing. Rather, the conquering power was prepared to be well disposed to any in Judah whom it regarded as having supported its cause. Jeremiah's advocacy of surrender may have been known to Nebuchadnezzar through Jews already in exile. His perception of what Jeremiah was doing (or indeed of what he was doing himself!) would not have been that of the prophet, of course. However, in God's providence, the kindness of the king to Jeremiah enabled him to remain among those who were left behind in Judah, and to continue his ministry among them (11–14).

A special word from the Lord is now included regarding Ebed-Melech, the official who had saved Jeremiah from death when he had been thrown into the cistern (15–18; *cf.* 38:7–13). He is to be spared in that dreadful day and moreover saved from his personal enemies, the same, no doubt, who had been Jeremiah's (or those of them who had survived).

The story of the last days of Jerusalem, and of its fall, testifies not only to God's anger with his sinful people, but also to the kindness of his providence. In the mass of confusing events, he preserves the life of his prophet and of other faithful servants. And even the severe punishment is meant for good in the end.

40:1 – 45:5 A remnant flees to Egypt

40:1–12 Gedaliah as governor

The present passage expands on the brief report in 39:13–14, in giving more details about the handing over of Jeremiah to Gedaliah. The Babylonian commander, Nebuzaradan, releases the prophet from the captivity which he shares with his compatriots (1), showing knowledge of his message and perhaps respecting his status as a prophet who had known the mind of his God (2–3). Jeremiah is given the choice of going to Babylon or staying in Judah. It may seem that consistency demands that he should go, since he had always preached submission to Babylon. However, since the Babylonian writ now runs in Judah, even those who stay are, in a sense 'in Babylon'. When Jeremiah goes to Gedaliah, the Jew appointed as governor by Nebuchadnezzar, he does so at the command of Nebuzaradan, and thus shows his submission to the Babylonian authority. Gedaliah himself is of the family of Shaphan, which had supported Jeremiah (26: 24). Babylonian intelligence will have established that he too was likely to be sympathetic to the conqueror's cause.

The governorship of Gedaliah (significantly centred on Mizpah, a provincial city, and not rebellious Jerusalem) brings a brief revival in the fortunes of Judah. The issue for those who remain is clear: gathering to Gedaliah implies submission to Babylon, in accordance with the word of the Lord through Jeremiah (9–10). Obedience to God in this way will begin a return to normal fruitful life in the land (10). The news that the issue has been brought to a head in Judah travels fast, and it is realized by Jews in scattered places that the disaster has been the beginning of something new and wholesome. They too begin to return to the homeland, in strange anticipation of the final restoration of the people, foretold by Jeremiah (29:14). And the land bears its fruit, a sign of covenant blessing again (10–12). The *remnant* recalls 4:27 and 5:12. The Lord might yet work with this small community.

40:13 – 41:18 The murder of Gedaliah

The happy ending is not yet to be, however. Certain of Gedaliah's fighting men pick up the rumour that the Ammonite king seeks Gedaliah's life. Baalis's opposition to Gedaliah may have arisen from his hostility to Babylon (*cf.* 27:3), so that Gedaliah may yet become a victim of the tendency to resist Babylon, even after Nebuchadnezzar has visited Jerusalem. Baalis's Jewish agent, Ishmael, himself of royal blood (41:1), may have wished to foment further rebellion against Babylon. While certain of Gedaliah's fighting men are convinced of the plot against him, the governor himself rather naively chooses not to believe it (14). Johanan the son of Kareah, who has apparently established himself as a leading figure among the fighting men, wants to take more decisive action to preserve the community. This will in the end bring him into conflict with Jeremiah.

The treacherous murder of Gedaliah duly follows, another blow against the wise counsel of those who would wait for God to act in these trying times. The thoroughness of the crime, extending to the murder of Babylonian soldiers, suggests a determined attempt to frustrate the Babylonian policy in the area (2–3).

The immediate sequel to the murder (4–9) is interesting because it witnesses to the continuing use of the site of the temple for worship,

indeed pilgrimage, even after the destruction of the temple itself. The *seventh month* (*cf.* v 1) was that in which the Feast of Tabenacles took place, and this would be the occasion of the pilgrimage. Evidently there were those in the territory of the former northern kingdom who remained loyal to the requirement of the law to appear before God at the great feasts (Ex. 23:14–17), perhaps since the reform of King Josiah (2 Ki. 22 – 23).

Ishmael adds to his crimes the murder of these pilgrims, by the most cynical trickery, presumably in order to try to keep his crime quiet. In sparing some for the quick benefit of provisions (8), he may have intended merely to postpone their deaths. His brutal deeds done, he flees with captives for Ammon (10).

The outcome of Ishmael's adventure is miserable and humiliating. He escapes with his life from Johanan, and little else, having to give up his human booty (11–15). Yet his interference in the life of the community which had begun to flourish under Gedaliah has a decisive and disastrous effect: Mizpah is abandoned, and with it the policy of submission to Babylon. This change of mind among the people has admittedly been occasioned by their exposure to terrible danger under what passed for Babylonian protection. In addition, reprisals from Babylon itself were feared (18). Nevertheless, in principle the same issue now confronts the people as had done before the fall of Jerusalem, namely the false promise of Egypt as refuge from Babylon. The people's thoughts, and steps, turn once again in that direction (16–18).

42:1–21 'Do not go to Egypt'

When Johanan and the people turn to Jeremiah for a word from the Lord in this new, uncharted situation (1–3), it is significant that they already stand on the road to Egypt. Jeremiah, however, takes their request at face value and promises to wait for the Lord on the matter. For him too the circumstances are new. He has been used to warning kings that the Babylonians would come. Their coming is now in the past; he needs a new word from the Lord about this residue of the people. His willingness to pray (4) suggests that the old prohibition (7:16) is now lifted. The people's declaration of their readiness to hear him is eloquent – but will it prove well based?

The word from the Lord does not come immediately; Jeremiah cannot command it (7). When it comes it is couched in familiar terms (10; *cf.* 1:10; 18:7–10) and represents an adaptation of the message Jeremiah has preached in the past. It still involves submission to Babylon and carries the assurance the people needed about reprisals (11; *cf.* 41:18). The word also testifies to the Lord's grief over the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (10). This is not a new note in the prophecy (see on 9:1–3). However, it now looks back on the judgment, rather than forward to it. The Lord's intention for his people is now to bless, in accordance with his promises of chs. 30–33.

This prophecy is also like previous ones, however, in that it needs a response. The people must be willing to stay in the land and have faith that God can and will be as good as his word. If they do not, then there is, as ever, a dark side of the future, an alternative to the blessing which God would give. Trust in Egypt is just as much an offence to God now as it has ever been (24:8), for it represents unbelief. If the people choose to go there they will find, once again, that the way that seemed safe according to their own perception would in fact be the way of death (Pr. 16:25; Lk. 9:23–24). The irony of this is clear in v 16a; they are safe from the Babylonian sword when they stay, but will fall by the same sword should they flee from it. Egypt would prove an ineffective ally (*cf.* 22:20, 22). The judgment that fell on Judah would be extended right into its heart, a continuation of that same punishment (17–18; *cf.* 7:20; 14:12; 24:9; 25:18).

Jeremiah concludes his word from the Lord by addressing the *remnant* of Judah (19). The tone of his address warns that there will not, after all, be salvation through this remnant. Perceiving that their hearts were set on Egypt in spite of their protestations (41:5–6; NIV mg. 'you erred in your hearts' is preferable for v 20a), he proclaims that judgment will indeed come on them. It is important, however, that though Jeremiah foresees the choice they will make, the choice itself is real and the true cause of the judgment.

43:1–13 To Egypt

The truth of Jeremiah's words to date could hardly have been more vividly demonstrated than by the recent destruction of the temple. Yet again, however, he meets the accusation that he has spoken falsely. The knowledge of the truth has never been easy for Judah, and the people had been misled before by those who claimed to know it but who spoke falsely on their own authority (23:16–18). Johanan and the others do not overtly refuse God's will; instead they claim to know better what it is. There is, of course, self-deception in this, and no authority. The temptation to think that one's own interpretation of God's will is true, especially if it corresponds to what one desperately wants to believe, is real and modern. The faithful Baruch becomes the scapegoat of the new leadership (3).

The flight to Egypt ensues (4–7). This is presented as an undoing of that which God had graciously begun to do in restoring people and prosperity to the land (40:12). It is a willing and decisive abandonment of the land, involving the vestiges of the royal house (6; *cf.* 41:10) and even Jeremiah, a most reluctant migrant, who had spoken so often against seeking refuge in Egypt.

Even in Egypt, however, God has words for the people through Jeremiah. This in itself is a tribute to his grace and patience (and he will yet appeal to them for repentance; 44:7). The present word, however, is one of judgment. Even in Egypt, God's punishment of his wayward people by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar will continue. In trying to save themselves from Babylon, they have put themselves instead right in the way of her battalions. Jeremiah's prophetic sign here is meant to show the inevitability of a Babylonian victory over Egypt (which did in fact come in 568–567 BC; *cf.* Ezk. 29:17–20). The words of judgment on Egypt are like those uttered formerly against Judah (11; *cf.* 15:2). The victory of Nebuchadnezzar will be a demonstration of the feebleness of Egyptian religion (13).

44:1–14 A final appeal

The impression given in v 1 is of a settled and scattered Jewish community; the recent migrants may have joined already existing Jewish groups living there. They are addressed once more through Jeremiah, who first recalls the recent destruction of Judah as a result of long disobedience to God. The sin in question, as ever, is idolatry, the basic rejection of God, and the terms are familiar (3–6; *cf.* 1:16; 11:17). The memory is meant as an object lesson. The Lord is as good as his word.

The aim, however, is to turn the remnant in Egypt back to him (7–10). They continue, evidently, to worship other gods (8). The word to them, therefore, is based on their own present rebellion against God, not on the past behaviour of either themselves or their forefathers – though that was rebellious too (9). Idolatry continues, possibly now with Egyptian gods (8). The sin is the same, however, whether it persists in old practices or experiments with new ones. Punishment is sure to follow, with that element of shame which is entailed when the nations of the world look on at the fate of the people of the Lord (8b; *cf.* 24:9; 25:18). This, however, is the last thing God desires; he implores the people to avert the judgment (8a).

The word of judgment follows immediately, however (11–14). This reflects the determination of the people not to hear this new appeal of God. The point is not just that God knows the response beforehand, but rather that the judgment of God, when it comes, is always the consequence of wilful rejection of him, not something predetermined and irresistible. The people in Egypt continue to show that they are worthy of God's anger. The recurrence of the term *remnant* in these verses (7, 12, 14) is meant to insist that God's purpose to continue with his people in the future will not be fulfilled through the group in Egypt. This is consistent with Jeremiah's preaching in the days of Zedekiah (24:8–10). Yet it is remarkable that even these were given a chance to make amends and respond to God in truth at last.

44:15–30 'We will not listen'

The worship of *the Queen of Heaven* (Canaanite Astarte or Babylonian Ishtar) continues a practice that Jeremiah had condemned in the days of Jehoiakim (7:18). There as here whole families had been involved (15, 19). In their persistent failure to see the truth of their situation the people now use the false argument that the old days, when they had worshipped the Queen of Heaven, had been prosperous (17b–18). Jeremiah points out that it was just such worship that had brought those days to an end (20–23). There is a crooked wilfulness in the people's thinking that does not want to see this.

The last oracle of Jeremiah to the people in Egypt ironically consigns them to the fate that they have chosen for themselves. Their rejection of God will be met by what in reality they have desired – his abandonment of them (26). He will pursue his intention to punish them with the same resolve with which he will bless those who have endured the Babylonian captivity and who return to him with all their heart (27, contrast 24:6; *cf.* also 1:12). God's word must be fulfilled; no other has any authority (28).

The allusions to a tiny remainder of Jews who will return from Egypt (14, 28) are intended to show that it was not by these that God furthered his plans for the people. The whole Egyptian escapade was under his wrath because it was an attempt at self-salvation. It would be shown, terribly, for what it was (29–30).

45:1–5 A word for Baruch

The oracle given to Baruch comes in the year in which he helped Jeremiah prepare a scroll to be read before King Jehoiakim (36:1). It seems to come between the writing and the reading of the scroll (1) and relates to a protest of Baruch's about the burden of his task (3). We have heard nothing of this up to this point, and it falls, of course, out of chronological sequence. Baruch, however, must have shared in some of the grief and frustration of Jeremiah. God's word to him

here has elements in common with his words to Jeremiah following certain of his 'confessions' (12:5–6; 15:19–21) and contains both rebuke and encouragement. The context of the word is the coming judgment of God upon the whole land of Judah (4; *cf.* 1:10). In such a great levelling, all human pretensions will be seen in their shabby worthlessness Baruch is warned, therefore, to give up small ambitions, but consoled that, in the general devastation, he will live (5). A similar word of encouragement had been given to another faithful supporter of Jeremiah, Ebed-Melech (39:16–18).

46:1 – 51:64 Oracles against the nations

Jeremiah, as the prophet to the nations (1:5), addresses specific words to some of those which are Judah's neighbours. Oracles against other nations are a common feature in the prophetic books (*cf.* Is. 13 – 23; Am. 1 – 2; Ezk. 25 – 32). Jeremiah's oracles, in general, make the point that the coming of Babylon is God's judgment on all the nations – but that in the end Babylon too will be judged, and Judah saved from its oppression. The point was first made in 25:15–19, but now at greater length, and by way of a final word in the prophecy.

46:1–28 Against Egypt

It is natural that Egypt should have pride of place, since it has symbolized false hope and trust throughout the prophecy. The first oracle (3–12) evidently relates to the defeat of Egypt by Babylon at Carchemish on the Euphrates in 605 BC (2). It pictures the Egyptian army preparing for battle (3–4), marching proudly out of Egypt, thinking that its strength is overwhelming, like the Nile in flood (7–8). The tone is mocking, however, for the well prepared army is soon pictured in terror (5; *cf.* 6:25; the language once used against Judah is now turned against Egypt). The force from the Nile, swollen by mercenaries from Africa and Greece (9), is defeated on the Euphrates (6). In the clash of the Titans, the outcome is the Lord's doing, his day of vengeance, and Egypt's defeat is a kind of sacrifice (10). In her intention to conquer and grow great there will not even be healing for wounds in the natural resources of the foreign soil (11; *cf.* 8:22).

The second oracle (14–26) warns of the Babylonian attack on Egyptian territory itself (*cf.* 44:29–30; see 2:16 and 44:1 for the locations named here). In the confusion of defeat, the mercenaries decide to flee for home (16). The saying in v 17 is a play on the name of Pharaoh Hophra, and alludes to miscalculations in the Babylonian campaign. The fate of Egypt, including even exile, reminds us of the fate of Judah (19; *cf.* 2:15; 4:7; 9:12). Tabor and Carmel are symbols of outstanding height and fruitfulness respectively, applied here to the superiority of the Babylonian host (18). Her mercenaries gone, Egypt turns in ignominious flight, helpless before the onslaught, like a forest before locusts (21–24). The judgment is upon Egyptian gods and kings alike, and on those who rely on them – like the Jewish fugitives there (25).

The promise of restoration for Egypt is very remarkable (26b), but not unparalleled (*cf.* Is. 19:23–25). God is not the God of judgment only, but also of salvation, ultimately for the whole world.

The oracle against Egypt is followed by a word of comfort for the scattered people of Judah (27–28). In God's judgment of the nations there will be restoring for them. These words are repeated from 30:10–11, in the long section of prophecies of restoration for Judah.

47:1–7 Against the Philistines

The time of the Philistines' great strength was before the rise of the Davidic monarchy, several centuries before Jeremiah. The occasion in question here, however, is an attack on them by Egypt, possibly during the campaign in which Egypt fought the Babylonians at Carchemish (1). Gaza, on the coastal plain, would be on the army's north–south route. The great upheaval of nations in Jeremiah's time had dreadful consequences for many in the area. Egypt, though unable to overcome Babylon, could wreak havoc on little Philistia (2; *cf.* 46:7–8). The picture of suffering is extreme (3–8).

The disaster for Gaza, which has this very specific historical setting and cause, is put in the context of the Philistines' long history and seen as a punishment for all her wickedness. Its fate is God's judgment; her time has come (4a, 7). God thus asserts his sovereignty over the events of history, even when they seem to be explicable on the purely human and political level.

48:1–47 Against Moab

Moab, one of Israel's historic enemies (Jdg. 3:12–14; 2 Ki. 3:4–27), was one of the allies, with Zedekiah, against Nebuchadnezzar (27:3), but had actually supplied troops to Babylon against Jehoiakim (2 Ki. 24:2). The occasion of the present oracle is probably its own defeat by Nebuchadnezzar in 582 BC, following a rebellion.

The place-names, frequent in the chapter, are locations in Moab encompassing its whole length, east of the Dead Sea. Some of these places had been allocated by the Lord to the tribe of Reuben in the original conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua (Nu. 32:3, 37–38;

Jos. 13:15–19). This is not explicitly given as a reason for the judgment on Moab, yet a kind of completion of the holy war for Canaan may be implicit here.

The opening of the oracle (1–6) pictures the anguish of a people suffering invasion, just as Judah once suffered from Babylon (*cf.* 4:19–31). There follows an ironic portrayal of the fruits of false trust, namely the humiliation of exile and the triumphant removal of the image of the defeated nation's god, in Moab's case Chemosh, whom Solomon had once worshipped in his apostasy from the Lord (1 Ki. 11:7, 33). Such a demonstration of the defeated god's powerlessness was a commonplace of ancient warfare. The *destroyer* (8) is presumably Babylon. The *curse* of v 10 borrows the language of the holy war, which required root and branch destruction (*cf.* 1 Sa. 15:3, 11). Moab's destruction by Babylon is the Lord's own judgment on her.

Moab is depicted first as caught in its complacency (in the image of a maturing wine suddenly poured out, vs 11–12), then as brought low in her pride (14–17). Significantly, the Lord refers to himself here as the *King* (as also in 46:18), to stress that he alone disposes over human affairs and not the king of Moab, nor even Nebuchadnezzar, who is merely his servant (25:9). Further pictures of devastation follow (18; *cf.* 14:1–2, of Judah), again evoking geographically the whole land (19–25). Moab's pride is singled out as its special sin, manifested especially against Israel (26–30). The fall of the proud is great indeed (28). In her agony, the prophet himself wails for her, as he once did for his own people (31–32; *cf.* 9:10; cf. also v 33 with 16:9). Moab, like Judah in its turn, has become an object of scorn to all who see her (39; *cf.* 24:9).

The final oracle (40–47) repeats some of the main themes. The *eagle* is Nebuchadnezzar (40). The picture of inescapable judgment (44) reminds us of the way of arguing in Am. 5:19. The final ignominy is exile (46). The terms of vs 45–46 suggest that an ancient oracle, first recorded in the narrative of the conquest of King Sihon of Heshbon (Nu. 21:28–29), is about to be fulfilled.

After all the talk of judgment, the final note is one of salvation (47; *cf.* 46:26b). The language is that which is used repeatedly of the restoration of Judah in the Book of Consolation (29:14; 30:3 *etc.*). The God of judgment is also the Lord of grace. And his grace will not in the end apply to one people only, but even to those who have been his enemies.

49:1–39 Shorter oracles

49:1–6 Against Ammon. Ammon, like Moab an ancient enemy of Israel (Jdg. 11:4–33), had also supplied troops for Nebuchadnezzar (2 Ki. 24:2), but subsequently joined in the alliance against him (27:3). The sin of Ammon is bound up with its ancient enmity to Israel, which involves its possession, in the name of its god Molech (or Milcom), of Israelite territory (1–2). Such dispossession of Israel from its land was an offence to the God who had given it to his people and whose own name was attached to it.

Here again, the misery of a people attacked and exiled is portrayed, again with the humiliation of its god (3). (Heshbon, as a border town, may have belonged to Moab and Ammon at different times; v 3, *cf.* 48:2.) Typical themes of Jeremiah's are used, namely the false trust of Ammon in its own strength and wealth, and the terror which judgment brings (4–5). Ammon too, however, will enjoy restoration, like Egypt and Moab (46:26b; 48:47).

49:7–22 Against Edom. The bitterness caused by Edom's hostility to Israel, both formerly and in Jeremiah's time, was made worse by her ties of kinship, Edom being descended from Jacob's brother Esau (8; *cf.* Gn. 25:29–30). Edom's assistance of Babylon against Judah was the occasion of the oracle against her in Obadiah.

Edom, lying south of the Dead Sea, was evidently famous for its wisdom. (Job's 'comforter' Eliphaz was from Teman, a town in Edom; Jb. 4:1.) Its wisdom, however, cannot avert the coming disaster, which will be unsparing; nor can its mountainous caves provide safety (10). The weak among them they must leave to the mercy of the Lord (11). The *cup* (12) is the cup of wrath which all must drink (25:15), v 12 emphasizing rhetorically that Edom deserves to do so. Bozrah (13) was the capital of Edom in Jeremiah's day (a different place from Moabite Bozrah; 48:24).

There is no hiding place from judgment, in a land of hiding places (14–16; *cf.* Ob. 1–4). Some of the pictures of destruction have been used already of Judah (18–19; *cf.* 10:6; 23:14). The *eagle* is doubtless once more Nebuchadnezzar (*cf.* 48:40).

49:23–27 Against Damascus. Damascus stands for Syria, yet another ancient enemy of Israel; the smaller states of Hamath and Arpad, also to Israel's north, are included. Their downfall and terror are expressed in terms now familiar in Jeremiah's preaching. These kingdoms flourished well before Jeremiah's day, and he may be taking up an old oracle. The criticism of Ben-Hadad, a former king of Damascus, has become a fixed expression (*cf.* Am. 1:4).

49:28–33 Against Kedar and Hazor. This oracle concerns Arab nomadic tribes living to the east of Israel, akin to the ancient

Midianites and Amalekites (Jdg. 6:3; *cf.* Gn. 25:13). Themes of terror and depopulation are struck in the oracle (*cf.* 6:25; 9:11). The nomads' vulnerability in their unwalled towns is picked up as a kind of illustration of false confidence.

49:35–39 Against Elam. Elam was an important power to the east of Babylon, but subject to it in Nebuchadrezzar's time. The reference to the *four winds* (36) is a way of speaking of the Lord's power in all the earth (Ezk. 37:9; Dn. 8:8; Zc. 6:1–8). Even Babylon's ascendancy over Elam, enabling it to do God's work of judgment on Judah and other nations, is under God's control. Elam, however, will be restored in days to come (39; *cf.* 48:47).

50:1 – 51:64 Against Babylon

The oracles against the nations finish with a lengthy series of oracles against Babylon, the 'destroyer' that has brooded over the entire book. Its giant significance in the book as the instrument of God's wrath against his faithless people is now matched by the sheer quantity of judgment sayings directed against it. It is essential to the logic of the prophecy that the destroyer should in the end be destroyed. Its mighty subjugation of other nations is not the Lord's final word in history. We know already that he will again bring salvation and blessing to his own people (chs. 30–33). In his justice, therefore, Babylon's own time must come (*cf.* also 25:11–12, 17–26).

50:2–17 A foe from the north. Marduk was the leading god of Babylon, the hero of her creation epic. Bel, also known from Is. 46:1, was originally separate but apparently became identified with him. The condemnation of Babylon begins appropriately with her gods. Though Judah has been exiled to the land of their pretended rule, they have not after all proved their superiority to the Lord; on the contrary, their weakness will now appear (*cf.* 48:7).

Babylon was once the enemy *from the north* as far as Judah was concerned (1:14; 6:1). Now the tables are turned (3, 9; see also 51:27–28). No power has absolute rights to rule in the earth; only the Lord has that.

As Babylon falls, so Judah is free to come again in penitence to her God, in a return which is in principle a restoration of historic Israel entire. They will seek Zion, not as the place of false trust which it had once been (7:1–15), but as the place where God had made himself known in truth (*cf.* Is. 2:2–4), and they will renew the ancient covenant there (5; *cf.* 31:31–34). The sin and punishment of Judah are now spoken of in the past tense (6–7; *cf.* Is. 40:1–2). The opportunity to leave the captivity has also the force of a command (8).

Chief among Babylon's sins is its scorn for God's people and his land (11). While the Lord grieved at the judgment he brought, Babylon rejoiced at the plunder. For this reason, the Lord's action against Babylon has the special character of vengeance (15). The turning of pride to shame, the bringing of desolation where there was wealth and busy life, the common topics of judgment now fall on the one who so unworthily brought them (12–15). Not only Judah, but other nations which suffered, may now return freely to their lands (16).

The first part of the oracle ends (17) with a reflection on the twin exiles of the peoples of Israel, first at the hands of Assyria, affecting the northern kingdom in 722 BC, then at those of Babylon. All has been under God, and the story has ended with the revival of his people.

50:18–32 Israel and Judah. The restoration is again pictured as that of the historic Israel in its entirety (20). The picture moves from the literal into the realm of the figurative, because northern Israel scarcely existed any more as a coherent people. This restoration of the exiles, though in itself a real salvation, is also a shadow of that which God will effect for all humankind on the soil of Judah through the Jew who would die for all on the cross.

The battle against Babylon is depicted vividly (21–24), and the war is the Lord's holy war, in which he himself prepares to fight, the destruction having something of the nature of a sacrifice about it (25–28). Once again the note of vengeance is struck, this time related directly to the temple (28). The razing of the temple was the supreme act of sacrilege and blasphemy, even though it was also God's own decree of judgment against his people. It was a challenge to the rule of God in the earth, an act of an arrogant nation (29–32). His judgment on Babylon arises, therefore, out of the need to show among the nations that he is after all the Lord of all. The victory will be symbolized in due course by the rebuilding of the temple.

50:33–46 'Their Redeemer is strong'. History has come full circle. Formerly, the Lord brought his case against his own people, Judah, convicting them of their sin; now he brings in the judgment in favour of his people (*cause* here is the same term as 'charges' in 2:9). In doing so he is cast as their *Redeemer* (34). This term is drawn from ancient Israel's customary law, according to which a widow or orphan might be adopted by another family member (see Ru. 4). In using the term of himself, the Lord emphasizes the natural bond which he has with his people. Redemption of this sort is personal and costly and draws the one redeemed into the closest possible relationship with the one who redeems. The idea is part

of the OT's background to the redemption of the world from sin by Jesus Christ.

In judging finally for his people, the Lord is faithful to the promises of restoration made to them in chs. 30–33.

This implies the downfall of Babylon, whose description continues here. Many of the motifs which had formerly been applied to the judgment of Judah are now turned against Babylon, with some ironic force, *e.g.* the *sword* (35–37; *cf.* 14:12), *drought* (38; *cf.* 14:1), depopulation (39–40; *cf.* 4:29), an enemy *from the north* (41–43; *cf.* 6:22–24 – a virtual repetition). The final verses (44–46) repeat 49:19–21 (against Edom), now putting Babylon in the role of the hunted. Its fall is part of God's plan for the whole world (46).

51:1–10 Zion vindicated. The Lord's turning against his former agent, Babylon, shows that he has not after all cast off his covenant people for ever; that he has not *forsaken* them (lit. 'left them like a widow'; 5) is the other side of his redemption (50:34). Babylon had made the earth suffer God's wrath (7; *cf.* 25:15); now she is beyond healing (9; contrast 30:17, of Israel/Judah). The Lord has judged for Zion (standing for both land and people, v 10; the words here are spoken by those who have now returned there). That is, he has saved his people and put them in the right; the language foreshadows what the apostle Paul would call 'justification by faith' – the salvation by God's grace of those who did not deserve it.

51:11–24 Vengeance on Babylon. Vengeance now becomes a dominant theme, brought again because of Babylon's insult to God in destroying the temple (11; *cf.* 50:28). The one who had a time of plenty and power now comes to its time for judgment (13; *cf.* 25:12). The *Medes* (11) were to be the new power in the ancient world, rising as the grandeur of Nebuchadnezzar's empire fell. Cyrus, whose coming is heralded by Isaiah (Is. 45:1), was the Median king who came to power in Persia, and prepared the way for the Persian Empire. The succession of apparently invincible empires in the biblical story is itself a testimony to the weakness of human strength, and the strength of God's 'weakness' (*cf.* Dn. 2:31–45; 1 Cor. 1:25).

Jeremiah's words against idolatrous religion, contrasting the true creative power of the Lord with the weakness of false gods (15–19), were formerly spoken against Judah (10:12–16); now they are turned on Babylon itself.

Finally in this section, the time of Babylon's might as the instrument in God's hand is recalled in commissioning words of God (20–23), only to be shown to be at an end by the addition of v 24.

51:25–32 The nations against Babylon. The onslaught of many nations upon Babylon is an ironic twist, for Babylon had in its time subdued many besides Judah, also at God's command (27:4–8). The Medes are now portrayed as leading a host of nations (28), just as Babylon had once commanded its own satellites (*cf.* 2 Ki. 24:2; *cf.* also the reversal in v 27 from 46:23). Babylon is pictured in its last desperate agony, exhausted and dispirited, its huge defences of both wall and water now useless against the enemy's strength and ruthless strategies (29–32).

51:33–44 Judah's triumph. The words of the people of Judah who have suffered under Babylon (34–35) recall Ps. 137, with its dreadful prayer against the oppressor. They are followed, however, by a word from the Lord, again promising the kingdom's fall, because he has taken up their *cause* (36; *cf.* on 50:34). Here as in the previous section reference is made to the city's abundant resources of water (36), because of its location on the Euphrates, in Mesopotamia, the 'land between the rivers'. Trust in natural resources and advantages could not protect against God's judgment.

Sheshach (41) is a coded name for Babylon (*cf.* 25:26). *Bel* (44) is one of the nation's gods (*cf.* Is. 46:1), which had not, despite former appearances, won a triumph over the Lord.

51:45–58 'Come out of her!' The last part of the oracle against Babylon is a command to the exiles to flee, now that their opportunity has come (45–46). The deliverance was in the end no irresistible act of God, but demanded an act of faith, obedience and courage from the people, who could be discouraged by frequent rumours of the fall of the city, raising hopes which were then soon dashed. (A similar plea is found in Is. 55:6.) The reassurance comes in answer to such fears (47–48).

Babylon's punishment is directly for its crimes against God's people (49). The pain of the latter is recalled, with a focus on the destruction of the temple (51), only to be answered by a promise that even the gods of Babylon will be brought low. All the misery which Babylon had meted out will be fully requited (56–57).

51:59–64 A prophetic sign. The oracles against Babylon close with a message and sign dated to the fourth year of King Zedekiah's reign, when the king visited Babylon, possibly to explain his part in the uprising (27:3). *Seraiah*, the brother of Baruch (*cf.* 32:12), went with the king on that occasion and bore a commission from Jeremiah to announce the demise of Babylon with a sign. The words on the scroll may have contained some or all of the oracles against Babylon in chs. 50 – 51, which are not dated.

Note. 'Babylon' in the NT. The significance of the Lord's judgment on Babylon is more far-reaching than the deliverance of ancient Judah. Rather, it stands here as a symbol of enmity to God's rule in the world. The language used of 'Babylon' in Rev. 17 – 18 owes much to the OT's oracles against her. 'Babylon' there is meant in the first place to evoke Rome's persecutions of the early church, but extends to apply to all hatred of God and his people. It is against 'Babylon', understood as every manifestation of wickedness and oppression, that Christian believers are exhorted to stand firm, with the assurance that God will, in his own time, overthrow all such defiance.

52:1–34 The fall of Jerusalem

The last chapter of the book is very similar to 2 Ki. 24:18 – 25:30, where the account more naturally belongs. Jeremiah, in fact, has already told of the fall of the city (in 39:18), and indeed of events thereafter in Judah (chs. 40–44). Those events are told briefly in Kings (2 Ki. 25:2–26) in a passage which is omitted in the present chapter since the information has already been given. The present account has probably been placed at the end of our book as a fitting conclusion to the oracles just recorded.

There are some minor differences from the Kings account. The note about the execution of the king's officials and his own life imprisonment (11–12) is found only here, not surprisingly in view of the interest in Zedekiah in the book. There is a difference regarding the date of Nebuzaradan's coming to Jerusalem (the tenth day according to v 12; *cf.* the seventh day in 2 Ki. 25:8), presumably due to a scribal error in one text or the other. Similar disagreements are found in vs 22 and 25 (*cf.* 2 Ki. 25:17, 19). The number of exiles in vs 28–30 is smaller than in 2 Ki. 24:14 and 16, possibly because the figure only includes adult males.

The final incident, the release of King Jehoiachin from prison, on the death of King Nebuchadnezzar, has sometimes been taken as a sign that the exile would soon come to an end. This is possible, but not in itself a firm indicator of hope.

The hope offered by the book of Jeremiah is more profound. It is a hope in the Lord of history, who brings sin under judgment, yet who promises salvation; who promises a new covenant (31:31–34), and who fulfils it in his own son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:11–18).

Gordon McConville

LAMENTATIONS

Introduction

Authorship and date

Since the time of the Greek Old Testament, or Septuagint (LXX; written in the century or so before Christ), the book of Lamentations has been attributed to Jeremiah. Our English versions follow the LXX and place the book together with that of the prophet. Jeremiah certainly composed laments, as we know from his prophetic book (*e.g.* Je. 11:18–20; 20:7–13). There are also some similarities of expression between the two books (*cf.* Je. 14:17 and La. 3:48–51). Furthermore we are told in 2 Ch. 35:25 that Jeremiah composed a lament for King Josiah.

Although this evidence is not conclusive, the two books do belong together in important ways. Jeremiah deals with events in Judah up to and after the fall of Jerusalem and the temple to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC; and the setting of Lamentations too seems to be in the period just following those dreadful events, because of its references to exile, loss of the kings and destruction of the temple (*e.g.* 1:3, 10; 2:2, 7).

Form and structure

The five chapters of the book are five separate poems. Their form is commonly known as a lament (some of the psalms are laments). These contain expressions of protest or complaint about misfortune, as well as confession and prayers for deliverance. Because the authors of the laments knew that God was faithful, they often expressed their belief that he would save them in the end. An example of a lament is Ps. 74, which (like Lamentations) was apparently occasioned by the exile. Lamentations has, in one place or another, all the characteristics just mentioned.

The book has certain stylistic features also. Its metre (that is, its poetic line-form), is the *qinah*, which is typical of the lament. Each poem (except ch. 5) is in the form of an acrostic. That is, each verse begins with a different letter in alphabetical order. Many OT acrostics have twenty-two verses or lines (*e.g.* La. 1, 2, 4; Ps. 34) as the Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters. Ch. 3 varies slightly from this, since each letter of the alphabet is represented by three consecutive verses, resulting in sixty-six verses in all.

The careful artistry of the acrostic form seems to contrast with the intense feeling that is expressed by the poems. However, all poetry is in some way artistic and need not stifle true emotion. Rather, the poet's care may be seen as an act of devotion to the Lord. It is a tribute to the restraint and discipline needed, no doubt, to approach such a theme at all. It has the further effect of suggesting a thorough, complete treatment of a theme (*i.e.* in its use of the whole alphabet).

Purpose

It is difficult to sum up the purpose of Lamentations. Theologically, there is acceptance that disaster is a justified judgment because of the people's sinfulness. This is based on the ancient covenant, which provided that the people's disobedience or unfaithfulness to God would result in 'curses' (Dt. 28:15–68). These were in contrast to the 'blessings' which would follow faithful obedience (Dt. 28:1–14). The prophets' preaching of judgment had had this basis also. In one sense, therefore, the book actually justifies God's action and shows that it was not because of his weakness compared to other gods that the exile had taken place. On the contrary, the triumph of Judah's enemies had actually been brought about by the Lord himself.

Nevertheless, the book also expresses the tremendous difficulty which the people had in coming to terms with the terrible suffering that followed the destruction of Jerusalem, the killing of many people and the exile of most of the rest. That suffering was scarcely easier to accept for the knowledge that it was just. Was the punishment not, after all, savage and excessive (2:20–22)? Could it be right for God to behave like an enemy to his own people (2:4–5)? The poems freely express agony and bewilderment, and it is this which gives them a force still, in any situation where people feel distressed and abandoned.

The most dramatic thing about the poems, however, is that in the midst of this most appalling suffering there can be an expression of hope in God (3:22–26), who is above all else a God of love and compassion. The position of these verses at the heart of the book seems to say that this is the most important thing which can be said about God. It is thus a very remarkable statement of faith, in the midst of great distress. Other passages too reflect the belief that an end to suffering will come (4:22).

Lamentations goes even further than this, for it speaks of a suffering that is borne by one on behalf of the many (see on 3:49–66). Most profoundly, then, the suffering of the Jews in the exile foreshadowed that of Jesus Christ in atonement for all people – the greatest demonstration both of God's judgment and of his saving love. This interpretation should make us wary of finding specific examples of God's judgment in the suffering of nations or individuals around us.

How to benefit from Lamentations today

Lamentations may seem a particularly difficult book for the modern Christian reader to use, whether because of the special events which occasioned it (events which occurred under the 'old covenant') or simply because it speaks so much of judgment. How may such a book speak to those who know the salvation of Jesus Christ?

There are several possible answers. First, the book can speak to any, including Christians, who feel alone or even abandoned by God. In this respect it is like those Psalms which we have called 'laments'. It is good to give honest expression to such feelings and to know the reassurance of God's grace in the midst of them.

Secondly, Lamentations can enable the reader to identify with those who are currently experiencing great adversity. In a world in which disasters, wars and famines are constantly brought before our eyes by the media, it is natural that we should ask where God is in these events. Perhaps we wonder all the more when our Christian brothers and sisters are caught up in terrible events. And we do not merely question why; we identify with their pain. The book of Lamentations enables us to express our grief, not only on our own behalf, but also on behalf of others.

The discipline which we have observed in the writing of the book can also help us. It implies that the use of the book should also be a disciplined act, a decision which we make in all seriousness, in order to face problems which are otherwise hard to face. The word of God can work in this way, not merely teaching our minds, but giving us the means of expressing that which is too deep for us, and tutoring mind and heart in the process.

The element of confession of sin is not easy to fit into this pattern. The people of Judah knew that their exile was due to their disobedience to the covenant made by their ancestors with God. We cannot treat all suffering in the same way. Nevertheless, here too we can identify with our ancestors in faith, by simply recognizing that human sin – in which each of us has a part – is the root cause of the world's grief. The questioning and protest, therefore, can be at the same time confession. It can even be praise, because we address a God who is just. His justice does not finally issue only in judgment, but also, and decisively, in mercy. Our use of this book, therefore, must be in the light of our knowledge of Jesus Christ, who has revealed by his death and resurrection that God is redeeming his world and will one day wipe away every tear.

Further reading

(See the booklist on Jeremiah)

D. R. Hillers, *Lamentations* (Doubleday, 1972).
I. W. Provan, *Lamentations*, NCB (Eerdmans/Marshall Pickering, 1991).

Outline of contents

1:1–22 **Jerusalem's suffering**
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Commentary

1:1–22 Jerusalem's suffering

1:1–7 Jerusalem's loss of greatness

The central thought in these verses is that Jerusalem, once favoured by the Lord, has lost all the marks of that favour. The city was a symbol of the special relationship between God and his people. In the context of the Mosaic covenant, God had made a special promise to King David that he and his descendants would reign in Jerusalem (2 Sa. 7:11–16; Ps. 2). David had made the city and nation great (the Hebrew word for 'great' actually appears twice in v 1, once translated *full*); and Solomon had graced it further with the splendid temple which he built (1 Ki. 5 – 8). Now the city lay in ruins. Where there had been victory over enemies, there was only defeat; where there had been prosperity, there was desolation. The fate of Jerusalem in 586 BC became a symbol for all time of the folly of human pride and complacency.

The city is frequently personified as a woman in Lamentations. The phrase *Daughter of Zion* (6) exemplifies this clearly. (*Zion* is another name for Jerusalem in Lamentations.) The feminine portrayal is exploited in the poetic contrast between *widow* and *queen* (1). The idea of her *lovers* (2) recalls the readiness of Judah to be unfaithful to the Lord by worshipping the gods of other nations and making political alliances with them (*cf.* Je. 3:1). The feminine personification shades over into pictures of feminine grief, which evoke acutely that of the people in general; hence maidenhood (4), motherhood (5b).

The theme of exile is first struck in these verses (3,5). The *roads to Zion* (4) are those of pilgrimage for the great annual feasts (*cf.* Ps. 84:5; RSV). There had been plenty of 'religion' in Judah, but having no true heart, it had become odious to God (*cf.* Is. 1:11–17). One effect of God's judgment on the people had been to put an end to this false religion.

1:8–17 The Lord's wrath against Jerusalem

That the suffering of Jerusalem was a result of her sin was first shown in v 5 and is now developed in these verses. 'Uncleanness' and *filthiness* (8–9) evoke the idea of ritual impurity, here extended to the sinfulness that had the effect of cutting the people off from God. The images here suggest the violence and the humiliation of the enemy invasion (8) and the desecration of the temple (10). The misery of siege and invasion was made worse by food shortage (11).

The voice in the poem has until now been that of the poet speaking about Jerusalem, though the personified city has twice spoken (9, 11). The city is now represented as speaking for herself (12–16). Her appeal to the Lord for mercy (9,11) gives way to an appeal to those who witness her misery, because it was the Lord who had brought her grief upon her. The *day of his fierce anger* is elsewhere called 'the day of the LORD' (Am. 5:18). The idea in the background is that of the holy war fought by the Lord on Israel's behalf against her enemies (see *e.g.* Dt. 2:24–25). The present passage expresses shock at the idea that he should have turned his anger against his own people. Yet even his people could not take him for granted by ignoring his covenant commands; although the temptation to do so is always present.

In all the misery there is none *to comfort* (16–17; *cf.* v 9). This is a profound picture of wretchedness, which reveals a longing for a 'messiah' – one who would finally deliver God's people from their sins and afflictions. The idea of 'comfort' after the exile is also present in Is. 40:1. It would find fulfilment in Jesus Christ, and then would be for all the world.

1:18–22 Appeal to the Lord

The last verses admit that the Lord was right in his judgment (18), yet turn quickly to an appeal to him because the city's wretchedness was so severe (20). There was disillusionment too with the falseness of other nations as friends and a source of help (19). There is terrible recognition of the truth of sin and punishment here and of the reality of the power of God alone. Again, there was *no-one to comfort*. Only God, and no mere ally, could do this – and it was not yet time for him to do so. The poem ends with a plea that Judah should not endure God's wrath alone, but that her enemies too should be brought to account in the *day* of his wrath (21; *cf.* v 12).

2:1–22 The Lord's anger

2:1–10 'Like an enemy'

Like the first poem, this one begins with a picture of Jerusalem's fall from grace. *Daughter of Zion*, *splendour of Israel* and *his footstool* are all ways of referring to the city (though the *footstool* was strictly speaking, the ark of the covenant; Ps. 132:7, but *cf.* Ps. 99:5). That *he has not remembered his footstool* is a way of saying that God had not kept his covenant promise (see on 1:1–7).

The Lord's anger against his people is portrayed in vs. 2–5. Not only had he 'forgotten' his covenant; he had turned actively against his own people, *like an enemy* (see above on 1:8–17). Not only had he *withdrawn his right hand* (3; *cf.* Ex. 6:6; Dt. 4:34), but he had actually *strung his bow*. These metaphorical pictures of the Lord's enmity are, of course, drawn from the terrible realities of warfare. The names of Jacob, Israel and Judah are used in this section to apply to the destruction wrought by Nebuchadnezzar in the whole land of Judah, the remnant of the former people of Israel.

From the perspective of the whole nation, the poet narrows his focus to the temple (*his dwelling*, *his place of meeting*; *cf.* Ex. 25:22) and the associated institutions of priesthood, sacrifices and annual feasts (6–7). The idea of making *Zion forget her appointed feasts* captures both Judah's own past neglect of true worship and the Lord's removal of the trappings of the false worship they performed. Neglect of true worship is neglect of God himself, nothing less than a breach of the first commandment (Ex. 20:3).

Finally, the poet turns to the city as a centre of power; *king* and *princes* had gone into exile; there was no longer a state (9). *Prophets* and priests had neglected their duties of teaching God's law and speaking his word. Their greater responsibility brought greater condemnation (*cf.* Lk. 12:48).

2:11–19 Tears like a river

The poet's own feelings now come to the forefront. His grief for his people because of their suffering reminds us of Jeremiah (*cf.* Je; 4:19), as do the vivid pictures of wretchedness (*cf.* Je. 4:31). In his own grief he addresses the people and desperately wants to *comfort* them (*cf.* 1:2). His grief turns to anger as he recalls the failure of the responsible leaders to bring the people into the ways of obedience (14; *cf* Je. 5:12–13; 23:9–40). The consequence had been the national disaster, with its humiliation. The nations around Judah were not slow to see the degradation of the once proud city (their mockery actually refers to Pss. 48:2; 50:2, with their extravagant descriptions of Jerusalem's splendour).

Yet in truth these events were the judgment of God, the covenant 'curses' (see the Introduction). The poet returns to the theme of weeping (18) and urges the people to turn their cries towards God.

2:20–22 Appeal to God

The final appeal (following from v 19) could be in the mouth either of the people (the *I* of v 22 being the city) or of the poet. (In the latter event the poet identifies strongly with the people in any case.) The appeal is a protest about the excessive severity of the punishment. Yet it is a pointer towards hope because, although there is as yet no word of reassurance, the prayer is a turning to God, as the only source of deliverance.

3:1–66 The compassions of God

The third poem is largely in the mouth of the poet himself. He speaks of his own afflictions at the hands of the Lord, in ways that remind us of Job (*e.g.* Jb. 19:21), the Psalms (Ps. 88:7, 15) and, perhaps most of all, Jeremiah (*e.g.* Je. 15:17–18). However, the individual clearly expresses the pain of the whole community, and the community's plural voice sometimes comes to the fore (22, 40–47). The well-known passage concerning the compassions of God stands at the centre of the poem, which is intended as a place of prominence.

3:1–21 'He has walled me in'

The poem opens with various pictures of human distress. Darkness is a typical biblical picture for lostness (*cf.* Is. 9:2). Sickness is barely distinguishable from death (6), itself a shadowy non-life (*cf.* Jb. 3:11–19; Is. 14:18–20).

Physical pain leads to deep frustration, bordering on despair (7–9; *cf.* Ps. 88). The writers of the Psalms often experience God's refusal to answer prayer too (*e.g.* Pss. 10:1; 13:1; 22:2). The pictures then become more violent, suggesting both the dangers that await the traveller on ancient roads and the perils of battle (10–12).

The Lord's affliction of the poet now takes the form of his persecution by his own people (13–15). Jeremiah too drew extreme hostility from his fellow-countrymen (Je. 20:7; *cf.* 11:18–23). As with the prophet, so the poet's suffering at the hands of his own people is meant to call to mind their suffering at the hands of their enemies. The poet's hopelessness reaches its climax (16–18) when he says that he has lost his *peace*, or the sense of well-being that should have been the mark of a healthy relationship between God and his people.

When, however, the poet dwells on his condition, his thoughts turn to hope (just as those of

the Psalmists; Pss. 42–43). As he gives rein to his memory, then his mind turns to God's past goodness. Such use of memory is always vital in the spiritual life.

3:22–30 'His compassion never fails'

This central passage of the poem is one of the OT's expressions of faith. The poet's mind has already begun to turn from the present horrors (21), and now he thinks of the things that are always true about God. *Love* (22) is the term often translated 'steadfast love', the most typical quality of God. It is here in the plural (though not in the NIV), to emphasize that it is an enduring love that does not fail. Judgment cannot be God's last word, for his compassion triumphs over it, albeit agonizingly. This agony is well expressed in Hos. 11:8, and has its most profound expression in Jesus' suffering on the cross – God's greatest judgment on sin and his final self-giving love for humanity.

Because love and compassion are the chief attributes of God, they are always fresh, ready to be proved and known again (23). For this reason, those who have been afflicted may always put their trust in him again, for their acceptance and restoration. God is 'faithful', or unchanging, in his love. Therefore the poet can be content that God should be his lot (*portion*; *cf.* Ps. 73:26), whatever the circumstances.

Since God is like this, it is good to seek him. To do so, however, may bring a cost, as implied by vs 27–30 (recalling again the life of Jeremiah). It may be that the goodness of God will be known only after suffering patiently endured.

3:31–39 'He does not willingly bring affliction'

The thought in the previous verses leads now to a fuller expression of the idea that affliction is not the Lord's last word. God's love and compassion will be known after grief, for he does not willingly afflict (33; *cf.* Ho. 6:1). For this reason, God is not one to tolerate unjust affliction – such as is sometimes brought upon human beings by their fellows (34–36; *cf.* Jb. 8:3). Yet when calamities come because of sin, this is no injustice (37–39). It is in this context that God can afflict – though he hates affliction.

Modern readers must take care in understanding thoughts like these. The point is that a relationship is established between judgment and salvation; the one lies beyond the other. This order is exemplified in the death then resurrection of Christ. The judgment prophecies of the OT should never lead to the conclusion that some particular affliction is a particular judgment on the sufferer.

3:40–48 'Let us return'

There is a sudden change in vs. 40–47 to a plural speaker and a confession which gives way to complaint. It is possible that the decision to return to the Lord (*i.e.* to repent; 40) was insincere (*cf.* Je. 3:22–25; 14:7–9). The Lord's forgiveness seems to have been expected as a right (42). The people went on to complain that the Lord would not hear their prayer and that, therefore, they were suffering (43–47). The implication is that he is unjust – a suggestion which the preceding verses have declared to be untrue. The final verse in this group returns to the voice of the poet, who mourns not only the suffering of the people, but perhaps their lack of understanding.

3:49–66 'You redeemed my life'

The remainder of the poem is the poet's response to the complaint of the people in the preceding verses. Here again, his own persecution stands in a sense for the people's suffering at the hands of enemies. There is in the lament, furthermore, a certain expectation that his cries would be heard (56–60, 64–66). If, then, the poet could expect deliverance from the Lord, it may be that the people could too.

The ideas of being cast into a pit (53; *cf.* Ps. 88:6), being overwhelmed by waters and calling on the Lord for help (54–55; *cf* Ps. 18:3–6) are common enough in laments. However, the expressions here recall Jeremiah's experience in particular. He too was thrown into a pit (Je. 38:6); he knew plots against his life (60; *cf.* Je. 11:19; 18:18); and called on the Lord to act against his personal enemies (64–66; *cf.* Je. 11:20; 18:19–23).

It is no accident that the deliverance of the people, promised in vs. 22–30, involved the suffering of one who stood in their place. There is great poignancy in the fact that the suffering poet (or prophet) bore, as it were, the griefs of the people, even as he suffered at their hands. There are obvious similarities with the song about the Suffering Servant (Is. 52:13 – 53:12). And there is a foreshadowing of the insults and cruelty heaped on Jesus Christ by the people he came to save, even as he showed in himself the deep 'compassions' of God for them.

4:1–22 The horrors of siege

4:1–10 A dehumanized people

Just as gold and gems, once so prized by the people of Judah, have now been shown to be worthless (1), so the people, once God's 'treasured possession' (Ex. 19:5), were now treated as if common and worthless (2). Worse, they had been brutalized by their suffering.

Even motherhood, which often portrays humanity at its most compassionate, had become more heartless than the beasts (3–4; ostriches were apparently proverbial for their neglect of their young, *cf.* Jb. 39:13–18).

The luxury of refined living was at an end (5; *cf.* Am 4:1–3; 6:1), because the perversions of Judah's life had borne their own fruits. (The word *punishment* in v 6 suggests both the wickedness and the natural or inevitable result of it.) To compare Jerusalem with Sodom (6) is particularly shocking, because of Sodom's proverbial wickedness and just punishment (see Gn. 19:1–29).

The fate of the leaders is singled out for attention (6–7), because their wealth and fine appearance had belied the truth that they were unrighteous. The final picture of misery under siege dwells on the horror of lingering death by starvation and returns to the topic, more horrifically than before, of brutalized motherhood (9–10; *cf.* Dt. 28:53–57).

4:11–22 'Your punishment will end'

The focus now falls on the Lord's wrath (11). Not only people in Judah but also other nations, we are told (12), had thought Jerusalem invincible – and one powerful enemy, Sennacherib, had dramatically failed to take it despite superior numbers (2 Ki. 18:13 – 19:37). All these, however, reckoned without the Lord's determination to show his own justice, which was itself part of the covenant (13).

The theme that is now developed is that of false trust. The religious leaders had had a special responsibility for spreading this, and therefore must shoulder much of the blame. The poet's criticism of them (which is in some ways like that of Jeremiah; *cf.* Je. 23:9–40) continues in the next verses. When the people were scattered among other nations in exile, even there the leaders would be specially ostracized (15) and deprived of the honour which they had taken as their right (16).

False trust was also placed in alliances with other nations (17), which implied a recognition of the gods of those nations and a failure to trust in the Lord alone. Trust in those nations quickly turned to savage attack at their hands (18–19). The danger of trusting in foreign powers had been well illustrated by the policy of King Ahaz of Judah, who had turned to Assyria for help in a former generation, only for his successor Hezekiah to find that Assyria was a false friend (2 Ki. 16:7–19; 18:13–16).

A final object of false trust was the king himself, *the* LORD*'s anointed* (20), because of the people's supposition that the ancient promise to David meant an unconditional guarantee of protection from enemies.

An important part of God's intention in bringing the state of Judah to an end was to show that he himself was the only proper object of the people's trust. Lamentations stands as a witness against false trust in any institution, including a church, for salvation.

The last word in the chapter, however, is one of hope. Though Judah's enemies may briefly rejoice because of the fall of the people, the day of punishment would come for them too, for Edom as for other nations (*cf.* Je. 25:15, 20; 49:7–22; Obadiah). And Judah's punishment would end in a new day of grace (22; *cf.* Is. 40:2).

5:1–22 'Remember, O LORD'

The final poem differs from the others both in form (see the Introduction) and in perspective, apparently reflecting a period when the siege was well past. The consequences of defeat remained, however, in wretched conditions of life. The pictures of grinding hardship here are a pathetic inversion of what life in the covenant might have been.

The land, an *inheritance* from the Lord (2; *cf.* Dt. 4:21), was now controlled by foreigners – though once the Lord had driven other nations out of it in order to give it to Israel (the subject of the book of Joshua). Widows and orphans, the disadvantaged, were once commended to the people of Israel for special care (Dt. 14:28–29), now the whole people was disadvantaged like them, with neither the right to enjoy the blessings of the land, nor peace from enemies and persecutors (4–5; *cf.* Dt. 8:7–10; 12:9). The people could and should have been free and fulfilled, if only they had trusted and obeyed the Lord. The OT demand for trust in God is unrelenting and comes to its modern readers as to its ancient ones.

The people's reflection on their suffering because of the sins of former generations (7) recalls Ex. 20:5. It is best seen as an allusion to the people's consistency in sinning against the Lord, rather than suggesting that they were not themselves responsible for their present fate (see v 16; *cf.* Je. 31:29–30; Ezk. 18).

Pictures of desperate wretchedness follow (11–16): women defenceless against abuse (and perhaps made outcasts as a result); young men put to humiliating tasks; older men deprived of normal association, as well as their role in managing their community's affairs (14a); no joy, no romance (14b–15); lingering memories of atrocities against leaders (12; *cf.* Dt. 21:22–23 for the degradation of this fate). With Mt Zion desolate, this is a powerful portrayal of the wretchedness and potential chaos of life without God.

The poem ends (19–22) by affirming that

God is indeed king. These verses themselves have the form of a lament, however, with its elements of praise together with protest and petition. The prayer in v 21 strikes a positive note, embracing both a plea to be restored not only to full relationship but also to possession of the land, and also a fresh commitment on the part of the people to return to the Lord (*cf.* Je. 31:18). The last verse ensures that the poem does not end on a complacent note. Nevertheless, the true nature of this poem, as of the whole collection, is one of petition. Hope can only be in a return to the Lord. The book of Lamentations shows this consistently in its exposure of the false trust of the people which had brought such dire judgment upon them. And it shows it, above all, in its moving celebration in 3:22–30 of God's love and compassion. These are the things that endure, and which remain the hope of Christians, who have seen them revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even in Christ, however, the church needs to know in its heart that its peace lies in trust and obedience.

Gordon McConville

EZEKIEL

Introduction

Historical background

The book of Ezekiel relates to one of the most critical periods in the history of Israel. The oracles in the book span a period of twenty-two years from 593 to 571 BC (see chart on page 628). During this time the city of Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed. The temple was burnt and the monarchy brought to an end. The population of Judah suffered the deprivations of war. Many would go into exile.

From a human standpoint much of the strife of the period stemmed from the general political instability of the Middle East at that time. Palestine was a small region which was constantly affected by the changes in the balance of power in the whole region. Egypt was an ageing superpower. Assyria had begun to crumble, but Babylon was growing ever stronger. The northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians in 722/721 BC. The kingdom of Judah's allegiances had swung between Egypt and Babylon. When king Jehoiakim attempted to rebel against Babylon, around 601–600 BC, Nebuchadnezzar responded by laying siege to Jerusalem and subduing it in 597 BC. About 10,000 of its inhabitants (2 Ki. 24:14) were carried off to exile. One of those exiles was a priest by the name of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel the prophet

All that we know about Ezekiel comes from his book of prophecies. Even there the information is scant. Ezekiel was a priest (1:3) as well as a prophet. His priestly background shows itself in his concern for ceremonial cleanness (4:14) and the emphasis on the temple (40–48). He was married but his wife died during the course of his ministry (24:15–18). Unlike his contemporary Jeremiah, Ezekiel spent his prophetic career in Babylon. Many of his earlier oracles deal with events in Jerusalem and Judah. This fact, and the details of the oracles themselves, have led some commentators to suggest that Ezekiel spent at least part of his prophetic career in Palestine. However, there is no direct statement in the book to support this view. As an exile, who prophesied to other exiles, Ezekiel undoubtedly would have been concerned about the catastrophies awaiting his homeland. His audience too would have been anxious to hear of the fate of their country. We must at least expect that events in Israel/Judah would occupy a substantial part of his prophetic work. To be able to perceive what was happening in lands distant from where he dwelt was a necessary ability for a prophet exiled in Babylon.

As a prophet Ezekiel was required to relate his insights to the people. Ezekiel sometimes used more than mere words. In several cases he acted out part of the prophecy. Visual aids are nothing new. These enacted prophecies included lying bound in ropes (4:1–8), shaving his head and striking some of the hair with a sword (5:1–2), covering his face and digging through a wall (12:3–7), trembling (12:18) and avoiding the full mourning rituals for his dead wife (24:16–24). It is no wonder that his sanity has been questioned. Yet the very strangeness of his actions, and sometimes his oracles too, served to draw attention to his message. It seems that he also suffered from a partial loss of speech for part of his prophetic career. His power of full speech returned when Jerusalem fell (33:21–22).

Despite his unusual actions Ezekiel was highly regarded as a prophet. Within eighteen months of his inaugural vision the elders of his people had begun to visit him for consultations (8:1; also 14:1; 20:1; 33:30–31). However, it seems that, while appreciated, he was not always heeded (33:30–33). It is easy to admire a moral or spiritual leader but not always so easy to put into practice the demands made. The supreme example is that of Jesus Christ (see Mt. 7:24–29).

Ezekiel was no slave to social conventions. He did not live a comfortable life in a comfortable society. He belonged to a minority group, forcibly resettled as a result of war in their home country. His religion was very much a minority one, struggling to survive in a pluralist, multicultural society. The powerful country where he was exiled had many gods and he had only one. Yet he firmly proclaimed the message that there was one God, who would ultimately save his people, regardless of what other nations might do.

The book of Ezekiel

Despite a reputation for obscurity and for textual difficulties, the book of Ezekiel has a very clearly defined structure. It is a collection of 52 oracles, divinely given messages or visions,

described by the prophet Ezekiel. There is only the barest minimum of narrative supplied to give a context to each of the oracles. However, the beginning of each oracle is clearly indicated by one of two phrases – 'the word of the LORD came to me' or 'the hand of the LORD was upon me'.

These two expressions are not interchangeable. They give an indication of the type of prophecy that is to follow. The first expression is by far the most frequent. It indicates the onset of a verbal message from God which usually is to be relayed to the people of Israel. The second expression is used to indicate a more intense experience, where the prophet is affected physically. It is used in all the great visual oracles, where Ezekiel feels himself transported inside the vision itself.

The oracles are grouped according to subject-matter and are not always in strict chronological order. Each oracle is independent of its neighbours. Sometimes neighbouring oracles are separated from each other by a period of years. In general the construction of the book bears the mark of a clearly organized mind. This impression is reinforced by the repeated use of set phrases and the almost rhythmic nature of many parts of the text.

The nature of the subject-matter means that the first thirty-two chapters consist of warnings of disaster, and the last sixteen consist of promises of hope. The turning point in the book is the fall of Jerusalem, as given in 33:21–22. It laid the foundation for what has come to be called 'Apocalyptic' literature. Indeed its strongest influence is to be seen in the book of Revelation, where much of the symbolism is similar to that in Ezekiel (see article: Apocrypha and Apocalyptic).

The message of the book

As a whole the book of Ezekiel consists of initial warnings of calamity followed by promises of restoration. Just as the calamities that were forecast came to pass, so would the promises of restoration be fulfilled. The people of God, having endured so much in the past, would ultimately be saved from their misery. Israel would return to their God and to their promised land. They would be his people and he would be their God.

Several other themes appear throughout the oracles. The issue of human responsibility occurs in several forms. The destruction that would befall Israel came as a result of her own waywardness. It was because of her idolatry that she was punished. However, it was not the case that guilt was purely a communal issue. Individuals were not punished simply because of the sins of their ancestors (ch. 18). They were held guilty because of what each of them as an individual had done, but this issue is refined still further. Being accounted righteous was not a matter of storing up plus points to offset the minus ones (a view commonly held even today). There had to be a fundamental, enduring change of heart in the individual (18:30–32).

Another important theme is the relationship of God to his people. One phrase which occurs very frequently throughout the book is that the events forecast would occur 'so that they would know' that he was their Lord. The calamities were not merely punishment. They were also a means of bringing people to a knowledge of their God. This special relationship is emphasized throughout the book. He would gather and protect them just a shepherd cares for his sheep. A Shepherd would come to tend them and to rule over them (34:1–31; 36:24–28).

Yet the close relationship between the Lord and the people of Israel did not mean that other nations and lands were outside the sphere of this authority and control. Ezekiel's oracles to the foreign nations make it clear that God was not simply a parochial deity governing Jerusalem and its surrounding hills. In some ways a heathen nation could be God's instrument, even to the point of punishing Israel.

The images in the book of Ezekiel can be disturbing. Ezekiel's oracles relate to one of the darkest periods in Israel's history. During his prophetic career his people would be dispersed and the city of Jerusalem and the temple destroyed. Yet the book ends in messages of hope. In the end-time the Shepherd would come to gather his sheep.

Ezekiel for today

The book of Ezekiel does have passages that are difficult to interpret and even more difficult to apply. It may be of comfort for the modern reader to know that even the ancient rabbis had to ponder long and hard over the book's contents. There is also an unfortunate tendency to be attracted to the more obscure passages at the expense of the more straightforward ones. However, several points are of use when approaching the book. First, it is important to remember that the book is a collection of independent oracles. These are always identified by the expressions 'the word of the LORD came to me' or 'the hand of the LORD was upon me [Ezekiel]'. The oracles are grouped thematically although not always in strict chronological order and may range in size from a few verses to several chapters. We know from those which are dated that sometimes a gap of several years can separate them, so it is best to select a single oracle, read it right through, and consider it on its own.

Secondly, Ezekiel tends to be written to a formula, almost poetic prose. There are themes and expressions which recur throughout the book. A phrase which can seem mysterious in one section may be clearer in another. It is helpful, therefore, to start with some of the less 'exciting' passages in order to get a sense of the language and thought of the book. For this reason it is better not to begin with the initial chapters. The larger oracles of 1:1 – 3:15; 8:1 – 11:25; 38:1 – 39:29 and 40:1 – 48:35 should be tackled last. A possible entry point might be the start of ch. 12.

Thirdly, it is also helpful to bear in mind the general themes linking the oracles. Chs. 4–24 contain warnings about the impending destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Chs. 25 – 32 contain warnings to Israel's neighbours about their attitude to Israel in her time of need, and chs. 33 – 48 contain messages of hope for the people of Israel after the fall of Jerusalem.

The political situation of the people of Israel at that time was obviously quite different from that of today. Yet behind the political specifics we see a complicated society burdened with familiar, messy issues: uncertainty about the future; international upheavals; religious pluralism; institutional corruption; faith in turmoil. Modern society has its own idols, false prophets, corrupted sanctuaries, decadent institutions and national bigotries. They have different names, but the words of Ezekiel can still apply to them.

There is a danger in applying to today too precisely what happened two and a half millennia ago, especially when similar place names occur (particularly Israel). Nevertheless the general outline of society's problems is so similar today that the principles can be easily applied. Society and God do not change.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 – 3:21 Ezekiel's commission

1:1 – 3:15 Ezekiel's call

The book of Ezekiel starts as it means to continue. After the briefest of narrative introductions we are presented with the first in the series of oracles that constitute the book. This initial oracle belongs to the group of highly visual prophecies that are prefaced by the expression 'the hand of the LORD was upon me'.

Although not explicitly stated, this oracle represents Ezekiel's commissioning as a prophet. The vision was intense: we are told that the prophet sat stunned for several days after it (3:15). In the vision he sees a radiant being seated on a sapphire throne below which dash four futuristic creatures. He hears a voice which tells him that he is to be sent to declare what the Lord says to the people of Israel in exile. He is warned about the stubbornness of the people, yet he must speak, whether they listen or not.

There is much in this vision which is not explained, especially in relation to the cherubim and their accompanying wheel-like guides. The general sense of the symbolism is to convey the all-encompassing majesty of God. The fearsome cherubim each displayed faces representing the highest forms of life – man, the lion (king of the beasts), the ox (foremost of the domestic animals) and the eagle (chief of the birds of the air). They travelled 'like flashes of lightning' accompanied by their all-seeing wheel-guides. Yet these magnificent creatures were but throne attendants. They stood beneath the throne of God. If the attendants were awesome how much more so was the King himself.

Ezekiel was told that he was to be sent to the people of Israel and his message would contain warnings and woes, but he would find them sweet (3:1–4). The whole experience changed Ezekiel's life. He would be empowered to deliver his message, despite his people's resistance to it. He needed such strengthening, for his task would not be easy.

It was not through reason, or cold logic, or

contemplation of long-term benefits that Ezekiel sensed his prophetic calling. It was because he had glimpsed the awesomeness and majesty of God. The commands of God are easier to follow when we contemplate who has issued them.

1:1–3 Ezekiel, son of Buzi, experiences visions sent from God. 1:4–14 He sees a great, radiant cloud, the centre of which glows like molten metal. Four creatures can be seen in its fiery centre. They have a human form, but each has four faces and two sets of wings. The faces are like those of a man, lion, ox and eagle. The creatures dash back and forth like flashes of lightning. 1:15–21 Each of them is accompanied by something glittering and round like a wheel. The wheels go wherever the creatures go. The sound of the creatures' wings is like a great roar. 1:22–28 Above the cherubim lies what looks like a spread of glittering crystal. On top of this there seems to be a sapphire throne, which bears a glowing, radiant figure. The radiance is like a rainbow. It is the glory of the Lord. 2:1–8 Ezekiel is told by a voice that he will be sent to the Israelites, a stubborn people in constant rebellion against God. He is to prophesy to them, regardless of whether they listen or not. He is not to be afraid or to rebel. 2:9 – 3:3 Ezekiel is given a scroll containing words of lament and mourning. He is commanded to eat the scroll. Upon doing so he discovers that it tastes as sweet as honey. 3:4–11 He is warned that the Israelites will not want to listen to him. Accordingly he will be given the strength of will for the task. He is told to go immediately to his compatriots in exile and to relay God's message to them. 3:12–15 Tranported back to be with the exiles, he sits stunned for seven days.

Notes. 1.1 'In the thirtieth year' – we are not told what this date refers to. One possibility is that it was the prophet's age. The 'Kebar River' was a canal of the Euphrates which lay to the south-east of Babylon. 2 'Fifth year' of the exile – 593 BC. 5 The 'four living creatures' are the throne attendants. They are called 'cherubim' in ch. 10. 15–21 'Wheels' – the ancient interpreters took the text to be describing a kind of chariot. The nature of its wheels enabled it to travel effortlessly in any direction. 16 'Chrysolite' – a type of rock. 22 'expanse' – the same word is used in Gn. 1:6–8. The idea here is of a firm platform which separates the cherubim from the throne. 28 'Appearance of the likeness' – Ezekiel is careful not to say that he saw God. 2:1 'Son of man' – this expression occurs over 90 times in Ezekiel. In this book it is a reference to the fact that Ezekiel is a mere human – 'mortal'. 10 Scrolls were normally written on one side only. The fact that this scroll was written 'on both sides' may indicate the fullness or completeness of the message. 3:1 'Eat this scroll' – Ezekiel was to absorb the message he was to receive. He was not just a transmitter of divine signals. God's words were for him as well. 11 'In exile' – Ezekiel's immediate audience would be his fellow exiles in Babylon. 14 'Bitterness and . . . anger' – these intense emotions were probably stirred by the sense of the obstinacy of Israel (*cf.* 3:5–8). 15 'Tel Abib' – a 'tel' is a hill or a mound. The name is identical to the modern Tel Aviv, though the two places are very far apart.

3:16–21 The accountability of the watchman

After spending several days recovering from the trauma of his initial vision, Ezekiel receives a second, brief message. This time his responsibilities are outlined, together with the penalties for shirking his duties (*cf.* 33:1–9). The privilege of being called to be a servant of God brings with it responsibilities. The faithful execution of these responsibilities is more important than whether they seem to succeed or not.

17 Ezekiel is made a *watchman* for Israel, to relay God's messages to them. 18, 20 If he does not convey God's warnings to someone, he will be held responsible for that person's fate. 19–21 By conveying the message he will have done his duty, even if the recipient of the message ignores it.

Note. 14 'Watchman' – the watchman's task was to keep a look-out for any danger which was threatening the city.

3:22 – 24:27 Warnings about the coming destruction of Jerusalem

3:22 – 5:17 Enacted messages: the siege of Jerusalem foretold

Ezekiel's first set of prophetic acts were as much visual as verbal. He had an uncomfortable message to bring to the people of Jerusalem: they were to come under siege. Furthermore, the siege would be so long that food would become scarce. A third of the people would die of starvation or disease. Another third would die in fighting around the city. Most of the remainder would be dispersed and only a few would remain.

In order to convey this grim message Ezekiel was to use a striking method. He was to symbolize the siege. It seems that he lost the power of normal speech at this stage, and would only be able to speak when he had an oracle to declare (3:26–27). This partial loss of speech continued until news of the fall of Jerusalem reached him (33:22; *cf.* 24:27). There would be

other enacted messages too (12:1–16; 17–20; 24:15–27), but this first one must have established his reputation as one of the odder prophets of Israel.

We might find Ezekiel's method of conveying his message unorthodox, even amusing or embarrassing. However, it is more important to communicate the message than to preserve the popular image of the speaker.

3:22–23 Ezekiel is told to go out to the plain. When he does so, he sees the glory of the Lord, and collapses. **3:24–27** He is then instructed to go and restrict himself to his own house. He is also informed that he will become incapable of speech – except when he is delivering a message from God. **4:1–8** He is told to make a small model which would represent Jerusalem under siege. He is to lie, bound up, on his left side for 390 days. During this time he is to bear the sins of Israel. He then has to lie on his right side for 40 days, bearing the sins of Judah. Each day represents a year. **4:9–17** During the 390 days he is to subsist on meagre rations, thus indicating the food scarcity which would hit Jerusalem. He avoids having to defile the food, yet similar defilement would occur when the people of Israel were exiled to foreign nations. **5:1–4** He is told to shave his head and face. When he has finished depicting the siege, he is to burn a third of his hair inside the city. Another third is to be struck by the sword all around the city. The remaining third is to be scattered to the wind. A few strands are to be tucked away in his cloak; a few others are to be burnt. **5:5–17** Jerusalem has rebelled against God's laws. Therefore his proclamation is: 'I am against you, *Jerusalem*, and will punish you. Because of your idolatry and detestable practices, a third of your people will die of plague or famine inside you. Another third will die by the sword outside your walls. The last third will be dispersed and harried. Then my anger shall cease and *they will know* that I am the Lord. You will be a warning to other nations when your punishment arrives.'

Notes. 3:23 'The glory of the LORD' – as Ezekiel had seen in 1:28. **25** 'You will be bound' – *cf.* 4:8. Ezekiel was tied with ropes during the time he enacted this prophecy. **4:1** 'Clay tablets' or later 'a brick', soft clay tablets were used as writing 'paper'. **3** 'Iron pan' – it could represent the strong grip of the siege. **5** '390 days' – attempts have been made to explain them in terms of the length of the exiles: Judah's for a generation (about 40 years) 586–536 BC, Israel's for about 150 years 734–580 BC (the LXX reads 190 years, which is taken as the total for both exiles). This is not a satisfying explanation. Perhaps it is better to see the years as representing depth rather than length: Israel's unfaithfulness is about ten times worse than Judah's. **10–11** Ezekiel's rations came to about 200 grams (8 oz) of cereals and 0.6 litres (1 pint) of water. These were meagre amounts, symbolizing the scarcity of food (v 17). **5:1** Shaving the head was a sign of mourning. **17** The four scourges mentioned here – plague, famine, wild beasts and bloodshed (war) – recur several times throughout the book.

6:1–14 Prophecy against idolatry in Israel

Although this prophecy is directed against the mountains of Israel the real targets for condemnation are the sanctuaries or 'high places' which were to be found in the mountains. A high place was an open-worship site of Canaanite origin. Some of the people used these sites to worship the Lord, but many of the pagan idolatrous practices were retained. The warning is that the impending doom that awaited the city would also hit the surrounding regions. The practitioners of high place worship would not be saved by their idols. Yet the coming events were not just a form of punishment. The expression 'they will know that I am the LORD' is repeated throughout the oracle (vs 7, 10, 13, 14). The worshippers at the high places would come to know which gods were false and which one was real.

Idol worship at the high places was a perennial problem for Israel (*cf.* 1 Ki. 12:28–33; 2 Ki. 17:9–11). Although Ezekiel would later attack the 'newer' sins acquired by Israel from their neighbours, some of the oracles deal with these older problems. Wrongful practices, even if institutionalized by centuries of tradition in a society, still remain wrong.

1–7 Proclaim to the mountains of Israel: 'I am about to bring a sword against you. Your high places and other places of worship will be wrecked. Your inhabitants will be slain before their idols. You will then know that I am the LORD.' **8–10** 'But some will be spared. In the nations to which they are dispersed, they will remember me and despise themselves for what they have done. They will know that I am the *LORD*.' **11–14** 'Bemoan and lament the wicked practices of Israel, for sword, famine and plague shall overtake them. When the people lie fallen around their idols and shrines, and their land lies waste, then they will know that I am the LORD.'

Notes. 11 'Alas!' – many commentators suggest that there are overtones of scorn or taunting here. **14** 'From the desert to Diblah' – *i.e.* throughout the whole of the land.

7:1–27 Warning of imminent disaster for Israel

The sense of urgency in this prophecy is acute.

The calamity that was forecast for the land of Israel is about to take place. There is no longer any time to change one's mind. War is imminent; Jerusalem will be besieged and its land laid waste.

1–9 Proclaim to the land of Israel: 'The end is now upon you! There will be no pity. When you have been repaid for your practices you will then know I am the Lord.' **10–14** 'The time has come.' **15–22** 'Sword, plague and famine await you. Those who survive will be filled with shame and despair. Their wealth will be of no use to them – it will be plundered.' **23–27** 'The most evil of nations will seize their property. There will be no respite. Even the king will mourn. They will be judged according to their own standards. Then they will know that I am the Lord.'

Notes. 10 'The rod has budded, arrogance has blossomed' – violence and pride will now bring their own reward. **12** 'Let not the buyer rejoice' – the oncoming crisis will render it foolish to conduct normal business activity. **15** 'Outside is the sword, inside are plague and famine' – those who are left outside the city will be cut down by the enemy troops. Those inside the city will suffer a siege. Starvation and disease will ensue. **19** 'Silver and gold' – as the siege intensifies money will be of no help in getting food. **23** 'Prepare chains' – chains of captivity.

8:1 – 11:25 Jerusalem's idolatry and its punishment

In this great vision Ezekiel finds himself transported in a trance to the temple in Jerusalem. There he is shown the dire state of Israelite religion. The very temple grounds themselves are used for pagan practices. Retribution follows, and Ezekiel then becomes aware of the majestic throne and awesome creatures which he had seen in his initial vision – the glory of God. There will be retribution for those plotting social injustice in the city. Yet the prophecy concludes with a promise that the exiles will return to their land.

Syncretism – the mixing of elements from several religions – is one of the easiest paths to follow. Would-be believers can hedge their bets and keep all the gods happy. Yet the God of Israel is a jealous God. There can be no other contenders for a person's worship and devotion. In our multi-faith, pluralistic societies this emphasis needs to be made and is often misunderstood. Yet our compromising is no less abhorrent to God than the pagan practices here described.

8:1–4 Ezekiel has a vision in which he is transported to the temple in Jerusalem. There he sees the glory of the Lord – just as he had done on the plain. Then he is shown various examples of the idolatry being practised. He sees: an idol erected at an entrance to the altar (8:5–6); seventy elders of Israel worshipping animal motifs inscribed on the walls (8:7–13); women in mourning for the god Tammuz (8:14–15); twenty-five men worshipping the sun (8:16–18).

9:1–6a A man is commanded to place a mark on the foreheads of all those in Jerusalem who deeply regret such practices. The man begins to execute the command. Six other men are then told to kill anyone in Jerusalem who does not have the mark. **9:6b–7** They start with the elders in the temple. **9:8–10** Ezekiel's pleas for leniency are rejected on account of the great violence and injustice in Israel and Judah. **9:11** The man who had to mark the people's foreheads completes his task. **10:1–6** He is then instructed to take burning coals from beside the cherubim and to scatter them over Jerusalem. **10:7–8** One of the cherubim hands the fiery coals to him. **10:9–22** The four cherubim are each accompanied by something like wheels. These cherubim and wheels are the same as Ezekiel has seen before.

11:1–7 Ezekiel is taken to the east gate of the temple. The Lord shows him a group of twenty-five men, who are plotting evil and giving wicked advice. Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy to them. **11:7–12** God knows their thoughts. They have killed many in the city, but will be driven from it and punished by attacking foreigners. They did not keep God's laws. **11:13–15** In the course of the prophecy, one of the group, Pelatiah son of Benaiah, dies. Ezekiel asks the Lord in alarm whether the remnant of Israel is to be wiped out entirely. He is told that those now dwelling in Jerusalem think that the exiles are no longer fit to inherit the land of Israel. He is commanded to tell them: 'Although you are exiled, I have still been with you. I will gather you back to the land of Israel. Those who return will remove its idols. They will have a new heart and follow my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. Those devoted to the idols will reap their reward' (11:18–21).

11:22–25 The glory of God moves to a mountain east of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is then transported back in his vision to the exiles in Babylon. He tells them all that he has seen.

Notes. 8:1 'Sixth year' – 592 BC. 'Elders' – only 14 months after his counselling vision Ezekiel has reached the stage where even the elders of Israel visit him for a consultation (*cf.* 14:1; 20:1). **2** 'Like that of a man' – in this and subsequent verses Ezekiel is noticeably vague in his descriptions of the human-like being he saw. He is careful to emphasize that what he saw was how it appeared to him, and not what actually

were the physical attributes of the divine messenger. **3** 'North gate' – in his vision Ezekiel is transported to the temple in Jerusalem. 'Idol that provokes to jealousy' – possibly an image of Asherah, a fertility goddess. Unlike the idols mentioned later in this chapter, this image was in public view. It was a provocation; it was there to cause passers-by to follow its ways; it would incite resentment among the faithful Israelites; but ultimately it invoked the jealous displeasure of God. **4** 'Glory of God' – it was still there despite what was going on in the temple. **7–12** Ezekiel is now shown idolatry of a more secretive nature. **10** 'Portrayed' – *i.e.* inscribed, carved. **11** 'Seventy elders' – *i.e.* a substantial proportion of the elders of Israel. **14** 'Tammuz' – (also called Dumuzi) was a Babylonian god whose worship included laments for his descent into the underworld. **16** The added insult here is that the sun-worship took place right in front of the temple altar. **17** 'Putting the branch to their nose' – possibly another ceremonial gesture connected with the sun-worship. **9:1–11** This passage is strongly reminiscent of other apocalyptic passages of final judgment. **9:3** The glory of the Lord begins to leave the temple. The message is clear. God's patience with his people is long-lasting but it is not everlasting. If we persist in our idolatrous ways he must depart and finally leave us to it. **9:4** 'Put a mark' – the mark was the letter *taw*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which would have looked like an x. The mark served to differentiate those who had been faithful from those who had not. **10:1** 'Throne of sapphire' – this corresponds with Ezekiel's initial vision (*cf.* 1:26). **10:2** 'Cherubim' – the majestic creatures of ch. 1 are now identified as cherubim. These mythological beings are described as standing under, or perhaps even supporting, the throne of God. Their role here as attendants to the Lord would fit with their depiction on the lid of the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:18–22) and with other OT references which portray the Lord as 'enthroned upon the cherubim' (1 Sa. 4:4; 2 Sa. 6:2; 2 Ki. 19:15; 1 Ch. 13:6; Ps. 80:1; *cf.* Ps. 18:10). They could vary somewhat in appearance; in Ezk. 41:18–20 a two-headed variety is described. **10:14** 'Cherub' – one of the four faces is described as that of a cherub and not as ox as in 1:10. The difference may be due to a scribal slip (*cf.* 10:22). **11:3** 'Will it not soon be time to build houses?' – the exact translation of the first half of this verse is uncertain, but the general thrust of the verse is that the conspirators were trying to read the signs of the times and had come to the conclusion that they would be the elite among Jerusalem's society. They would be prime cuts, not the offal (*cf.* vs 7, 11). **11:13** 'As I was prophesying' – *i.e.* in the course of the vision. **11:19** 'Heart of stone' – 'flesh' – a theme which would be repeated later (*cf.* 36:26). **11:23** The glory of the Lord finally leaves the city.

12:1–16 An acted message: exile foretold

In this oracle and its successor Ezekiel is to act out part of the message he has to convey. Although his prophecy is about the coming fall of Jerusalem, it is intended primarily for his fellow-exiles in Babylon. The message has two elements. The people of Jerusalem would suffer exile. The prince (Zedekiah) would attempt to flee the city but would be caught (*cf.* 2 Ki. 25:4; Je. 39:4). The passage also hints at Zedekiah's fate: Ezekiel is to cover his own eyes (12:6, 12, 13). Zedekiah would be caught and blinded (2 Ki. 25:7).

Ezekiel had to resort to acting the grim message of both this oracle and the next one. It was a means of conveying information to some who would otherwise not listen. Many people will hear only what they like to hear. Sometimes they have to be surprised into new knowledge. For Christians this must be seen as a challenge to examine our means of communicating the Good News. Fresh approaches may be more enlightening than traditional ones.

1–6 To Ezekiel God says: 'Your people are rebellious. They only see and hear what they want to (2). Therefore perform these actions before them – they may understand: During the day pack what is needed for a journey into exile. Then set out on that journey from where you are and go to another place (3–4). In the evening make a hole in a wall, and go through it, carrying your pack on your shoulder. Wear a blindfold. Through this I have made you to be a sign to Israel' (5–6).

7–14 Ezekiel does as he is commanded. The next day he receives the second part of the message, which he is to relay to Israel when they ask him what he is doing (7–10). He is to explain that he is a sign to them (11). To the people he is to proclaim that these actions concern the prince of Jerusalem and the whole of Israel. They will go into exile and captivity. The prince will shoulder his pack at dark and leave through a hole in the wall. He will be caught and brought to Babylon, where he will die (11–13). His followers will be dispersed to foreign lands. Some will survive to recount their evil acts. Then *they will know that I am the* LORD (14–16).

Notes. **5** 'Dig through the wall' – the word for 'wall' here indicates a wall of a house, not the city wall. The mud-brick walls of the house could be dug through. This action would indicate the desperate nature of the flight into exile. **16** 'sword, famine and plague' – a common

trio in the book of Ezekiel. The destruction of war engendered starvation and disease.

12:17–20 An acted message: Israel to tremble

The trauma of the coming attack on Jerusalem and its surrounding territory is to be acted out by Ezekiel's trembling. He is told to tremble as he takes his food and drink. He is to proclaim that those living in Jerusalem and in Israel would eat in anxiety and fear on account of the widespread violence. Town and country would be laid waste. Then they will know that God was their Lord.

Note. 19 'Eat . . . in anxiety' – *cf.* 4:16 where the emphasis of the acted message (*cf.* 4:9–17) is more on the scarcity of food.

12:21–25 Prophecy will be fulfilled . . .

Ezekiel was not the only one claiming to offer messages from God (*cf.* 13:1–23). The people could, with some justification, come to the conclusion that all these prophecies would never come to pass. Many had proved false before. Ezekiel warns that this time it would be different.

There are many 'stock comforts' that people use when confronted with uncomfortable truths. Here we meet one of them: 'It will never happen'. A second one is to be found in the following oracle: 'It may happen, but not for a long time'. Ezekiel is to proclaim to Israel: 'The days when there are prophecies which do not come true are coming to an end. Soon every vision will be fulfilled. What I declare will not be delayed – it will be done in your lifetime'.

Note. 22 'Proverb' – the seeming failure of prophetic forecasts had become proverbial.

12:26–28 . . . and fulfilled soon

It was perhaps as a result of the preceding oracle that some people revised their opinion of Ezekiel's prophecies. They accepted that Ezekiel's warnings could be right, but would only be fulfilled in the distant future. As with today, it was easier to pass a problem on to the next generation than to face it squarely. 'After our time will come the deluge.'

26–28 To Ezekiel the word of the Lord is: 'Israel thinks your prophecies are about the distant future' (27). But he is to proclaim: 'None of my words will be delayed any longer. What I declare will be fulfilled' (28).

Note. 27 'Vision' – *cf.* 7:26; 12:22.

13:1–23 Condemnation of false prophets and prophetesses

This oracle condemns two types of false prophets. The first grouping was would-be prophets who thought they really could divine the future. They expected their pronouncements to be fulfilled. Their messages were the sort people would like to hear (10). Yet despite their sincerity and their comforting messages they were wrong. The falsehood of their utterances would be exposed. It is not enough to be sincere. You can be sincerely wrong.

The second grouping of false prophets had darker elements. For a start the prophetesses of this type operated for gain (19). Practising religion purely for economic reward is condemned in the Bible. Furthermore, they spiced up their act with some magic, possibly using a voodoo-like control over people (18, 20, 21). Their actions had led to injustice, even death (19). Surprisingly, the condemnation of these witches is less severe than that of the first type of prophet. They would lose their power over the people and no longer practise their false prophecies. Perhaps their profession had resulted from economic necessity rather than malicious desire.

1–15 Ezekiel is to proclaim to the false prophets: 'Woe to you! You have not helped Israel in her time of need. Your visions are false yet you foolishly expect them to come true (1–7). I the Lord am against you because of your false visions (8). You will not belong to the council of the people, or be listed in the book of the house of Israel, nor will you enter the land of Israel (9). You have given my people false comfort and a false sense of security (10–12). That security will be destroyed. With its demise will come yours too. Then you will know that I am the Lord' (13–15).

16–21 To the false prophetesses Ezekiel must proclaim: 'You practised magic for gain. Your lies have led to acts of injustice being done (18, 19). I am against your magical devices and will rip them from you. I will break your hold on the people. Then you will know that I am the Lord' (20, 21).

22–23 'You discouraged the upright and encouraged the unjust. Your practices will be stopped, then you will know that I am the Lord' (22, 23).

Notes. 4 'Jackals among ruins' – instead of trying to pick up the pieces and help people rebuild their lives, these prophets, like scavengers, were feeding off the remnants of the community. **9** Their punishment is threefold, resulting in ostracism from the Israelite society. They would be banned from the council *i.e.* lose any status as a leading citizen; they would be struck off the main community records, thus losing their rights as Israelite males; and they would be prevented from returning to Israel. **10** 'Whitewash' – the image might look good, but the reality underneath was weak and insubstantial. **18** 'Magic charms . . . veils' – the exact

ways these women practised their magic is unclear. The purpose of their magic was to ensnare and control their victims. **19** 'Barley ... bread' – this was their meagre fee.

14:1–11 Condemnation of idolatry

As a prophet Ezekiel would have been consulted by the exiles for a message from God. It seems that his status was such that even the elders of Israel came to him to 'enquire' of the Lord *i.e.* to hear an oracle (*cf.* 20:1–3).

On this occasion it was revealed to Ezekiel that the elders had divided loyalties. They worshipped other gods in addition to the Lord. The message Ezekiel delivered was direct: they were to repent and turn from their idolatry. Anyone attempting both to worship idols and to consult a prophet of God would be punished. If such a prophet yielded to their requests he would be punished too. (See 20:1–44 for a similar topic.)

There is no indication that the elders did not have a belief in the God of Israel. Their problem was that they also had other gods. No-one can serve two (or more) masters (Mt. 6:24). There can be only one. Against the background of today's pluralism it may seem attractive to keep our options open and acknowledge many gods. The truth faces us when we become more deeply involved in one religion and find that it is incompatible with the rest. For instance, if Christ is the true way to God (John 14:6–7) other 'ways' cannot be contemplated.

1–11 God speaks to Ezekiel concerning the elders: 'These men worship idols – should I let them consult me?' (2–3) He is to proclaim to them: 'Repent and turn from your idolatry. If an Israelite – or a foreigner living in Israel – practises idolatry, and then seeks to consult me through a prophet, he will get a direct reponse: he will be made an example of and will be cut off from the people. Then you will know that I am the Lord (4–8). If that prophet utters a prophecy, I enticed him to do so. He will be cut off from Israel. He is as guilty as the other one who consults him. Then Israel will no longer stray. They will be my people, and I will be their God' (9–11).

Notes. 7 'Alien' – the prohibition is applied to non-Israelite too. **9** 'Enticed' – if the prophet were worthy of his calling, it would be revealed to him (as in Ezekiel's case) that he should not give a prophecy at a consultation. If the prophet were not worthy, God would let him be seduced into uttering a prophecy, and that prophet would suffer the consequences.

14:12–23 Judgment on Israel will not be averted by the righteous few

Several of Ezekiel's oracles deal with the issues of guilt and responsibility (3:16–21; 18:1–32; 33:1–20). This oracle makes the point that a community cannot expect to escape punishment for its guilt by relying on the righteousness of a few of its members. A corrupt society cannot expect to be exonerated on the grounds that it has a few saints in its midst. Nor can having a godly ancestor atone for the faults of a corrupt family (16, 18, 20). Ezekiel warns Jerusalem not to make such a mistake. Its retribution was coming, though some would be saved.

The oracle depicts the 'four dreadful judgments' which will afflict the land; famine (13–14), wild beasts (15–16), the sword (17–18) and plague (19–20). Such disasters were not unrelated. A debilitating war would bring with it famine, sickness and predators. There has been much debate whether modern disasters, have any direct connection with God's judgment. Ezekiel's grim message is that some natural disasters are divine punishments. Yet note that Ezekiel's task is not to exult, but to warn, so that people may turn from their ways.

12–23 To Ezekiel the Lord says: 'If I punish a country for its unfaithfulness by sending famine upon it, even those with exemplary characters would only be able to save themselves (13, 14). If wild beasts were sent to stalk the land, or if war were declared against the country, or if a plague were to spread across the country, those with blameless characters would only be able to save themselves. Not even their sons and daughers would be saved (15–20). Thus will it be for Jerusalem, though some will be saved' (21–22).

Notes. 14 'Noah, Daniel and Job' – these three are singled out because of their outstanding righteousness. The name 'Daniel' is spelled differently from usual (*cf.* also 28:3) and may refer to a hero from Ugaritic literature. Most commentators believe that the Daniel of the OT would not yet have established his reputation. **21** 'Four ... judgments' – the same four are used in Rev. 6:8.

15:1–8 Jerusalem the useless vine

Usually the vine is seen as a productive and valuable plant in OT imagery and as a picture of Israel, God's chosen people (*cf.* Is. 5). In this oracle it is pointed out that the wood of the vine is of practically no value. It is of even less value after the fire has scorched it. The people in Jerusalem had been like that vine. Little good had come from them before the siege (in 597), and there was no improvement afterwards.

Punishment does not necessarily bring penitence. Changing the heart is the only true way to changing the actions.

1–8 God asks Ezekiel what use is the wood of a vine? And when it gets burnt, what use are the charred remains (2–5)? The word of the Lord is

that the people in Jerusalem will be treated like that vine. They have already gone through the fire, but they will go through it again (6–7). They will know that I am the LORD who will desolate the land because of their unfaithfulness (8).

Note. 7 'The fire will yet consume them' – another siege was to occur.

16:1–63 Jerusalem the unfaithful and promiscuous wife

Israel is depicted as a wildly adulterous wife, engaging in prostitution with the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians. Her retribution would come at the hands of the very lovers she had pursued.

The imagery may seem strong for modern tastes, but the choice of metaphor was quite appropriate. In her international dealings Israel had readily absorbed other religions, beliefs and practices. Her social intercourse had exposed her to many pagan ideas. Some of these included child sacrifice and idol worship (20, 21), but another important strand included cultic sex practices. Sexual activity was not included in worship rituals purely for the gratification of the participants but was linked to fertility, and fertility, when applied to the land, meant food and survival. Nevertheless, lust and promiscuity must still have had a presence in the cult activities.

The practices condemned in this chapter include sex acts with idols (17) and cultic prostitution (16, 24, 25, 31). It seems that the cultic prostitution which had been part of the ritual 'in the high places', *i.e.* the mountain shrines (16) came to be practised openly in the streets of Jerusalem itself (24, 25).

An interesting twist to the sexual theme of the chapter is that Sodom and Samaria are cited as sisters in sin to Jerusalem (46–47). Yet the sin of Sodom that is emphasized is her arrogance and lack of social concern for the poor and helpless (49–50). Jerusalem is cited as being more committed to iniquity than her sisters. Furthermore, both Sodom and Samaria would be restored, compounding Jerusalem's shame (53–55). Yet there is hope. After Jerusalem's downfall and punishment the same suitor who rescued her at birth (4–7), took her in marriage (8), and clothed her in finery, would still remember his promise to her (59–62).

The love of God towards his people is often likened to the love of a husband for his wife, but where a mortal husband might reject, despise, even hate a promiscuous unfaithful wife, God is patient and just and will remember his promises to his people even when they stray.

The demand for fertility appears today in the 'developed' world's headlong quest for economic prosperity as the chief aim of life. The worship of material possessions and market forces have taken the place of Baal but are no less idolatrous.

1–34 Ezekiel is instructed to confront Jerusalem and proclaim to her: 'When you were born you were despised (2–5). I took pity on you and kept you alive. When you reached maturity I took you as my wife and showered you with jewellery and clothes (6–14). You were famed for your beauty. Yet you used that beauty to engage in prostitution. You indulged in pagan sexual rites and other idolatrous practices. You forgot what I had done for you (15–22). Woe to you! Your promiscuity increased. You consorted publicly with foreigners from all around you, even bribing them to come to you (23–34).

35–42 Because of your promiscuity and heathen rites I will humiliate and punish you in front of your lovers. They in turn will strip and stone you. You will stop your prostitution and my anger will then subside.

44–58 Your behaviour runs in the family. Your sisters, Samaria and Sodom, were like you, but you are more depraved than they. I will restore the fortunes of Samaria and Sodom thus increasing your own shame. Even now you are scorned by your neighbours.

59–63 Although you broke my covenant with you, I will remember that covenant and establish an everlasting convenant with you. You will then remember what you have done with shame.

Notes. 3 'Amorite ... Hittite' – Jerusalem had existed long before it became an Israelite city. 4 'Rubbed with salt' – a practice which probably had an antiseptic effect. The point of the verse is that the new-born baby was ignored at birth. 5–6 The baby was left abandoned in the open, still kicking in the blood of childbirth. This practice was not uncommon in ancient societies. 8 'Spread the corner of my garment over you' – this act represented the claiming of the maiden in marriage (*cf.* Ru. 3:9). 9 'Washed the blood' – these verses convey the total change in Jerusalem's condition. When born she was unwanted, unwashed, unclothed and lying in blood. Now she has become claimed in marriage, the water and blood are washed from her; and she is clothed with the finest dresses. 15–19 The very clothes and ornaments the bride received as presents are put to use in her prostitution. 27 'Reduced your territory' – one instance where the allegory states bald fact: in 701 BC Sennacherib gave some of Jerusalem's territory to the Philistines. 35–42 Jerusalem's punishment would be like that of a prostitute – humiliation and destruction. 60–63 There is still the promise of the everlasting covenant, though Jerusalem will still be ashamed of her past.

17:1–24 Eagles, cedars and a vine – a political parable

The chapter falls into three sections: **3–10** contain the allegory of the eagles and the vine; **11–21** contain the explanation of the allegory; and **22–24** contain a further allegorical promise.

The allegory relates to the political events of the time. The first eagle is Nebuchadnezzar and the second is Pharaoh. The cedar in Lebanon represents the royal family in Jerusalem, the topmost shoot being the nobility. The 'seed of the land' was a member of the royal family, namely Zedekiah, who was placed in Jerusalem to rule. He was no longer a cedar, but a 'low, spreading vine', *i.e.* his powers were limited. However, Zedekiah sought to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar by the help of Egypt. This exercise ended in failure.

The parable illustrates the point that the political arena is not outside the law of God. Zedekiah had sworn a treaty with Nebuchadnezzar in the name of God. Nebuchadnezzar may have been a cruel pagan king, but Zedekiah still had a moral obligation to honour his oath.

1–8 Ezekiel must tell this parable to Israel: 'A splendid eagle took the topmost shoot from a cedar in Lebanon and planted it in a city noted for its commercial activity (2–4). He also took some seed and planted it in a fertile spot. The seed sprouted and grew into a leafy vine. At first, the vine's branches grew in the direction of the eagle (5–6). When a second eagle appeared, the vine directed its branches towards it instead (7–8).

9–21 'The Lord God asks: "Will the vine survive? Will it not be uprooted and then wither?"' (9–10). Do you not know what this means? The king of Babylon carried off Jerusalem's king and nobles to Babylon (11–12). He made one of Jerusalem's royal family swear a treaty with him and deported the chief men in the land, thus rendering it weak enough to be kept under his control (13, 14). However, the king rebelled by requesting military aid from Egypt. Will he succeed? No, he will die in Babylon. Egypt will be of no help. He will be punished for breaking his oath (15–21).

22–24 'I the Lord will plant a cedar shoot on the mountains of Israel. It will become a splendid cedar. The others will know that I can do this' (22–24).

Notes. 11–14 The Babylonians had executed a classic strategy for turning Israel into a puppet state. They deported the royal family, but left one of the weaker members in charge. This individual *i.e.* Zedekiah, was forced to sign a treaty with the Babylonians, ensuring Israel's 'allegiance'. Anyone who was deemed to be significant in running the country was deported. This action ensured that it would be difficult to organize (and administer) resistance. **16** 'Die in Babylon' – 2 Ki. 25:1–7 relates the siege of Jerusalem and eventual capture of Zedekiah by Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah was blinded and led off in shackles to Babylon. **22–24** Another message of hope: a new king will arrive some day and a kingdom will begin.

18:1–32 The accountability of the individual

This oracle is aimed directly at destroying the belief that people are bound by the guilt or merit of their parents. This belief took expression in the form of a proverb which is cited in v 2. Such a view could work in two ways. The oracle goes on to expound an example of each: (a) an evil son will not escape punishment because of the righteousness of his father (5–13), and (b) a righeous son will not be punished for the evil done by his father (14–18). The principle is declared in v 4: 'The soul who sins is the one who will die.' Ezekiel also counters the idea that salvation is solely a matter of storing up merit throughout the lifetime of an individual, and using that store to balance out iniquities. This notion is firmly rejected. If an evil man turns from his ways, he will live. If a righteous man turns to evil, he will be punished (21–28). This set of pronouncements was apparently thought to be unfair (29).

2–4 The word of the Lord runs contrary to popular saying, for the person that commits sin will also be the one to be punished for it. **5–9** If a righteous man does what is just and right he will live. **10–13** If he has a son who is violent, unclean and oppressive, that son shall die because of his own sin. **14–18** If that man in turn has a son who avoids his father's iniquity and acts righteously, that son will not be punished for his father's sins. He will live. **19–20** The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor the father that of his son. **21–22** However if an evil man turns away from his sin, and starts to do what is just and right, he shall live. **24** If a righteous man turns away from his upright ways, and starts to do iniquity, he shall die.

25–29 In spite of what Israel says, this teaching is not unjust. **30–31** Each will be judged according to what he/she has done. So repent – get a new heart and spirit. The Lord takes no pleasure in the death of anyone (23, 32).

Notes. 2 (*cf.* Je. 31:29) – Jeremiah too had prophesied that this proverb would come to an end. The thrust of the saying is that people may suffer for the sins of their ancestors. **6–9** A selective list of sins is given here. This list is paralleled by those in vs 11–13 and 15–17.

19 This issue seems to have been one where the prophet's pronouncement was questioned. The great significance of inheritance and community in middle-eastern cultures would have made such views harder to accept than in today's individualist societies. Today we blame 'society', rather than our ancestors, for our woes. In either case we are attempting to shift the blame from ourselves.

19:1–14 Lament for the princes of Israel

This chapter is a lament depicting in allegorical fashion the downfall of David's dynasty. A lioness (Israel) gives birth to several cubs (kings) who grow up to be strong lions. However, one of the kings is captured and led off to Egypt. Another is caught and caged and taken to Babylon (in 597 BC *cf.* 2 Ki. 25:1–7).

In v 10 the imagery changes and Israel is likened to a vine which, although once strong, is uprooted and transplanted to the desert (*i.e.* Babylon). Fire spreads from one of its branches, consuming its fruit. No strong branch is left. The reference is to Nebuchadnezzar's deportation of the princes of Israel to Babylon. The rebellion by Zedekiah (the fire from one of the vine's branches) caused the Babylonians to effect so severe a retribution that David's line was brought to an end.

The lament underlines the fact that past glories are no guarantee for the future. Western civilization has been living on its Christian heritage but the true faith has departed. The heritage is fast running out.

1–9 Ezekiel is to take up this lament for the princes of Israel: 'Your royal line once produced a lion who became strong and was a man-eater. The nations heard about him, captured him, and dragged him off with hooks to Egypt (2–4). A second lion became strong. He was a man-eater. He threatened towns and terrified the inhabitants of the land. The nations came and trapped him and took him to the king of Babylon and imprisoned him (5–9).

10–14 'Your royal line was once like a luxuriant vine with many branches. It was then uprooted. The east wind shrivelled it up and its branches withered and burnt. It has now been transplanted into the desert. Fire has devoured its branches and fruit. It no longer has a branch fit for a royal sceptre'.

Note. 12 'The east wind' – *i.e.* the Babylonians.

20:1–44 Israel's persistent rebelliousness

As in 14:1–11 some elders of Israel visit Ezekiel for a consultation. Ezekiel again is warned of the divided loyalties of his visitors. He delivers a lengthy oracle recounting various instances from Israel's history where they lapsed into idolatry.

The fact that they had come to consult Ezekiel shows that the elders had not entirely abandoned their worship of God in favour of other gods. Yet the pressure was there. The exiles were a small minority in a larger, multicultural society. Babylonian religion had a multitude of gods. No doubt the Babylonians' material wealth and power – even their impressive buildings – seemed to be proof to some of the exiles that Babylonian gods were worth following. Assimilation to the Babylonian way would have been easy. (For a commentary on this see Daniel ch. 1.)

Appropriately Ezekiel's oracle starts with references to the time when the Israelites were forced to dwell in the land of another superpower – Egypt. The cycle of warning, rebellion and restoration is repeated several times. Even when it hurts them, the Israelites wish to follow the religions of the other nations (24, 32). Ultimately, both promise and warning are combined. Israel will be gathered from the countries where they are scattered, but will loathe themselves for what they have done.

This oracle illustrates the enduring patience of God in dealing with his people over the centuries. He remains faithful despite their stubborn rebelliousness.

1–17 Some of the elders of Israel visit Ezekiel for a consultation. He is told to proclaim to them: 'I am not going to let you consult me (2, 3). When I chose Israel and revealed myself to them in Egypt, I swore that I would bring them out of Egypt to a bountiful land (5, 6). They were told to abandon Egyptian idolatry, but they did not. Instead of punishing them, I acted for the honour of my name, and brought them out of Egypt (7–10). I also revealed my law to them in the desert (11, 12). Even in the desert they rebelled, but were not destroyed – despite warnings (13–17).

18–26 'Their children were similarly entreated and warned (18–20) but were not destroyed in spite of their disobedience (21–22). I swore to them in the desert that they would be dispersed throughout the lands because of their disobedience (23, 24). I handed them over to unjust statutes and intolerable laws (25). I let them defile themselves with such practices as the sacrifice of every firstborn child. This I did so that in their horror they would come to know that I am the LORD (26).

27–38 'Your forefathers also insulted me by using every high spot or leafy tree as a shrine (27–28). Are you going to defile yourselves like them (30)? I will not be consulted by you (31). You may wish to be like other nations and serve wood and stone, but that will never happen (32). I will rule over you and judge you. You will be

purged of those who rebel against me. Then you will know that I am the Lord (33–38).

39–44 'Serve your idols, Israel, but you will turn to me later. The whole house of Israel will worship me on my holy mountain (39–41). You will know that I am the Lord when I bring you into the land of Israel (42). You will loathe yourselves when you remember your past conduct. You will know that I am the Lord when I deal with you for the honour of my name' (43–44).

Notes. **1** 'Seventh year' – *i.e.* 591 BC. 'Enquire' *cf.* 8:1; 14:1. **9** 'For the sake of my name' – the name of the Lord identifies the whole personality of God, not just his reputation. **25** 'Gave them over' – God permitted them to go their own way, even when it led to unjust practices (such as child sacrifice). **29** 'Bamah' – a light form of word-play is being used here. The word *bāmâ*, meaning high place begins like the word *bā'îm*, meaning corners. **37** 'Pass under my rod' – (*cf.* Lv. 27:32; Je. 33:13). The image is of sheep passing under the discerning eye of the shepherd.

20:45–49 Judgment by fire

This oracle is the first in a group of four prophecies warning of the impending calamity which would befall the land of Israel. Each prophecy gets more specific than its predecessor.

As with some of the other oracles (*e.g.* 12:26–28), Ezekiel's message is countered by wilful disbelief. His utterances are seen as parables – harsh symbols for what they hoped was a less harsh reality. We are always keen to know what the future brings, but only if it meets our wants. If it does not, we are adept at explaining away even the most obvious of signs.

46–49 Ezekiel must proclaim to the south and to the southern forest (46): 'The Lord says that he is about to set fire to you. The blaze will be unquenchable. Everyone's face will be scorched. They shall see that the Lord has started it' (47–48). Ezekiel's listeners declare that he is speaking in riddles (49).

Notes. **46** The 'south' here refers to Jerusalem and Judah. **47** 'From south to north' – in effect, the prophecy warns of a calamity which will consume the whole of the land of Israel. **49** It seems that Ezekiel sometimes met with a credibility gap. His prophecies of doom were considered 'symbolic'.

21:1–7 Judgment by the sword

In this second prophecy the imagery gets more precise. The reference to the sword – symbol of war – gives a clear indication of the military nature of the disaster. Ezekiel is known for his emphasis on individual responsibility and reward (*cf.* 3:16–21; 33:1–20), so it is noteworthy that he states that the oncoming disasters will afflict both the righteous and the wicked. Being righteous does not guarantee immunity against affliction. Those who claim the Lord's exclusive protection may be exercising great faith but are also ignoring many of Scripture's warnings.

To Jerusalem Ezekiel must proclaim: 'The Lord is against you. He will draw a sword to strike down both good and bad' (2–4).

To Ezekiel God says: 'Groan and grieve! When people ask you why we are doing this, tell them that it is because of the terrifying news to come (6–7). And come it will.'

Notes. **3** 'Sword' – the sword imagery is also used in the next two oracles. **6** 'Groan' – Ezekiel's proclamation was to be accompanied by another symbolic act (the seventh).

21:8–17 The sword is sharpened

In the third oracle of this group the language becomes poetic – almost as if it were a pre-war chant. The theme of the ready sword and its task permeate the passage.

The theme of war as punishment sent by God was probably even less popular when Ezekiel told his people than it is today. The ray of hope was that God's wrath would eventually subside.

9–11 A sharp sword is ready. **12** It is meant for the people and princes of Israel. **14–16** It will strike again and again. **17** Then God's anger will abate. The Lord has spoken.

Notes. **10, 12, 13** 'Sceptre ... princes' – one element not mentioned in the previous two oracles is the targeting of the leaders of Jerusalem for punishment. The next oracle will elaborate on this topic.

21:18–32 The sword of the king of Babylon

In the last of the four oracles the text becomes more explicit about what is to take place. The king of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar) will start out on a military campaign against the lands to the west of Babylon. At some point on the journey he will stop and seek omens as to which town to attack: Jerusalem or Rabbah. The omens will point to Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar will then lay siege against Jerusalem. The ruler of Israel will be deposed and taken captive.

The Ammonites will not escape either, for their day of judgment will come too. People will forget they even existed.

The passage falls into three sections: 18–23 Nebuchadnezzar's actions; 24–27 the message to Israel; 28–32 the message to Ammon.

This prophecy should make us wary of making quick judgments as to who should be punished by whom and why. It might seem that the evil Nebuchadnezzar would be better suited

to receive divine punishment, whereas Israel could be reprieved. Yet Ezekiel, under inspiration, depicts Nebuchadnezzar as God's instrument for punishing the iniquity in Israel.

19–20 Ezekiel is instructed to draw a map showing the road along which the king of Babylon will come. At a fork in the road he is to make a signpost which points to Rabbah in one direction and to Jerusalem in the other. **21–23** The king of Babylon will stop at the fork and consult his oracles. They will indicate Jerusalem, which he will then besiege.

24–27 The word of the Lord to the ruler of Israel is: 'Your people will be taken captive because of your open iniquity (24). And you, you evil prince of Israel, will be toppled from power' (25–27).

28–32 About the people of Ammon, Ezekiel must proclaim: 'Your time has come. Despite false prophecies of peace, you will be handed over for destruction in your land of origin (28–31). It will be your oblivion. I the Lord have spoken' (32).

Notes. 20 Rabbah (modern Amman) – capital of Ammon. Ammon was the subject of a later prophecy too (*cf.* 25 1–7). **21** 'Examine the liver' – the Babylonians practised 'hepatoscopy', a method of predicting the future by examining the livers of slain animals and noting any significant marks. **23** 'Sworn allegiance' – the leaders in Jerusalem had already been forced into an 'allegiance' with Babylon, but had rebelled (*cf.* 17:11–13). **26** 'Remove the crown' – the fall of the monarchy. **28, 29** The Ammonites thought they had avoided calamity. Apparently they even had received false prophecies to reinforce the illusion of safety.

22:1–16 The sins of Jerusalem

This oracle focuses on the sins of Jerusalem, making the point that her iniquity has hastened her end. The list of misdoings ranges from the social to the sacral: bloodshed (3, 9), idolatry (3, 4), misuse of power (6), ill-treatment of various social groups (7), desecration of Sabbaths (8), paganism (9), sexual misconduct and incest (10–11), bribery and extortion (12), and simply ignoring God (12). The punishment due would involve the dispersal of the people throughout the lands.

1–16 Ezekiel must confront Jerusalem with all her detestable crimes (2), and proclaim to her: 'You are a city which has made itself guilty through bloodshed and unclean through idolatry. You have hastened your end by doing so. You will be an object of derision among the nations (3–5). Many strands of corruption are within you, but I will put an end to it (6–13). You will be dispersed among the nations. Then you will come to know that I am the Lord' (14–16).

Notes. 2 'Detestable practices' – the expression occurs frequently in Ezekiel, often to denote actions which rendered one ritually unclean (see v 10). **9** 'Eat at the mountain shrines' – *i.e.* eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols in the 'high places' (*cf.* 18:6; 6:3). **10** 'Unclean' – as a priest Ezekiel was clearly concerned about ceremonial cleanliness and defilement. Many of the sins listed in these verses were specifically mentioned in the law (*cf.* Lv. 18, 20). **16** 'Defiled' – Israel's punishment is itself called defilement.

22:17–22 The smelting of Israel

Israel's punishment is likened to the fire of a blast furnace: the dross would be removed.

Modern ideas of war or punishment usually includes concepts like retribution and/or rehabilitation. Here we find the concept of purification. The corruption was too deep-rooted for minor societal modifications. Everything had to go so that a new start could be made.

17–22 Ezekiel is told that Israel has come to be like the impurities found in unrefined silver (18), and is to proclaim: 'I will therefore gather you into Jerusalem just as men gather silver with its impurities into a furnace. The fierce heat of my anger will melt you just as in the smelting process. You will know that I have poured my anger on you' (19–22).

Note. 19 'Gather you into Jerusalem' – here and in v 20 there is the indication of the coming siege of the city.

22:23–31 Injustice in the land: corruption at every level

The corruption in Israelite society transcended class and social status. It also had many and varied expressions.

Corruption of a society can go beyond the level of the individual. It can become part of the institutions of that society, whether civil or religious. It can be easy to accept practices simply because they are the 'done thing' or supported by the hierarchies, but that does not justify such practices. Sometimes bribery is part of the way everyday business is carried out. Unfair treatment of the weakest in society is also widespread. The individual feels helpless in the face of such corruption.

23–31 Ezekiel must say to the land: 'You are arid (24): your rulers oppress the people (25); your priests profane my law (26); your officials kill to make money (27); your prophets give false oracles (28); your people extort, rob and oppress (29). I looked for someone to stand firm on behalf of the land but could find no-one. So I will pour out my anger on its inhabitants' (30–31).

Note. 30 'Build up the wall' – there was

no-one who was worthy enough to intercede with God on behalf of the people.

23:1–49 Oholah and Oholibah – adulterous sisters

This chapter has a theme very similar to that of ch. 16: Jerusalem and her sister Samaria had prostituted themselves with the practices of the surrounding heathen nations, in particular, Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia. They must bear the consequences of their actions. The differences between the chapters are primarily ones of emphasis. The military and political nature of Israel's association with Assyria and Babylonia is highlighted by the description of her Assyrian and Babylonian lovers as warriors in full uniform (5, 14, 15). They would enact retribution on her. This retribution is also described in terms of military attack and plunder (24–26; 46–47).

Israel's political alliances are not in themselves condemned here. They formed the basis for a social and religious penetration of Israel's culture by pagan beliefs, which the people of Israel readily welcomed.

The sins of the people of Israel were not viewed by God in a neutral, dispassionate manner. Rather, just as a husband considers his wife's infidelity with both sorrow and anger, so God views his people's sin (*cf.* ch. 16).

1–10 The Lord says to Ezekiel: 'There once were two sisters, Oholah i.e. Samaria, and Oholibah *i.e.* Jerusalem. In their youth, while they were in Egypt, they indulged in prostitution (3, 4). They were my wives, but Oholah lusted after the Assyrians, and prostituted herself with them (5–8). In the end I handed her over to these Assyrians, who stripped and killed her (9–10).

11–21 Oholibah was worse than her sister. She too had lusted for the Assyrians, then developed a craving for the Babylonians. After the latter had defiled her, she turned away from them in disgust. Similarly, I turned away from her (as I had turned away from her sister), when her prostitution became more flagrant. She then longed for the times she had had in Egypt with her well-endowed Egyptian studs' (11–21).

22–35 Ezekiel must proclaim to Oholibah: 'I will stir up your past lovers against you. The Babylonians and Assyrians will besiege you and punish you. I will vent my anger against you and put a stop to your debauchery (22–27). I will hand you over to your ex-lovers, whom you now detest (28). They will humiliate you (29–30). Just like your sister Samaria, you will drink the cup of desolation (31–34). Since you have turned your back on me, you must bear the weight of your iniquity' (35).

36–49 Ezekiel must confront Oholah and Oholibah about their misdeeds: adultery, bloodshed, pagan sex rites, child sacrifice, and desecration of God's sanctuary and Sabbath (36–39). Their seduction of foreigners (40–42) descended into adulterous prostitution and bloodshed (43–45). He must proclaim: 'Let them be put to death and so end the debauchery in the land (46–49). Then you will know that I am the Lord.'

Notes. 4 The names Oholah and Oholibah both seem connected to the Hebrew for 'tent'. Although many commentators suggest that this implies a cultic connection (*e.g.* as in a tent-shrine), it might simply indicate the nomadic origins of the people. 'Mine' – although the text does not explicitly state that the daughters were brides to the Lord, this verse and v 5 imply the relationship (*cf.* 16:8, 9). Israel's prostitution is thus adultery as well. **5–10** Samaria's infatuation with Assyria led to her downfall. Samaria fell to the Assyrians in 722–721 BC. **14** 'Chaldeans' – although the term later came to be synonymous with 'Babylonians', the Chaldeans were a separate race from S. Babylonia (*cf.* 23). **23** 'Pekod' – a region in eastern Babylonia. The identification of Shoa and Koa is uncertain. **24** 'Throng' – in Ezekiel this term (*cf.* 46–47 – 'mob') is frequently used to describe a large group of people with destructive intent. **36–39** Some of the heathen practices which Israel had adopted are listed here. **42** 'Sabeans' – the term might also be rendered 'drunkards'. The general sense is of a carefree crowd from no particular place casually taking advantage of the sisters.

24:1–14 The parable of the pot: Jerusalem besieged

This oracle represents a turning-point in the book. Up to now Ezekiel's prophecies had mainly been warnings about the disaster to come. But now the fulfilment of the prophecies had begun. There could be no turning back. The siege of Jerusalem had started. The date of the oracle is precise: 15th January 588 BC. It was the day that Nebuchadnezzar began his siege of the city. After 18 months the Babylonians would capture Jerusalem and set fire to her. The city would be destroyed. This siege was the second for Jerusalem in twelve years. Ezekiel himself had been deported after the previous one.

The message of the oracle is in the form of a parable. Jerusalem is likened to a pot and its people are the contents of the pot. After fire is applied to it a stain remains on the pot *i.e.* even after the first siege Israel's impurity remained. A second, hotter fire (the second siege) will be needed to burn off the impurity, *i.e.* punish the iniquity of the people. Again punishment is portrayed as purification (*cf.* 22:17–22).

1–14 Ezekiel is told: 'Record this date

because today Nebuchadnezzar has laid siege to Jerusalem' (2). He is to proclaim: 'Fill a pot with water and joints of meat. Boil them on the fire. The deposit on the pot will not go away. The stain is like the impurity of Jerusalem (3–7, 13). Heat the pot even more, burning the bones. Let the pot glow red so that its stain may be burnt off (9–12). Your judgment will not be averted now, Jerusalem' (13–14).

Notes. 6 'Encrusted' – as the liquid reduced a stain would be left on the inside of the pot. 'Without casting lots' – if this sentence is rendered correctly, the underlying thought might be that the contents of the pot, *i.e.* the people, would be scattered randomly. **12** The verse as it is in the NIV could imply that the deposit on the pot will not go away even after the second heating. It would be more consistent to see the verse as summarizing the past attempt: 'it had frustrated all (earlier) efforts (until now)'.

24:15–27 The death of Ezekiel's wife and the significance of his grief

The revelation that his wife would be taken from him must have been heart-breaking for Ezekiel. Yet even this was to be used as a means of conveying the grim message about the fate of Jerusalem and the temple. Even in moments of personal grief, Ezekiel was still a prophet of God.

How a believer acts during personal crises can sometimes speak louder than many words, though refusal to make proper provision for mourning can be very damaging to the bereaved person. This command was specifically addressed to Ezekiel and not meant to be applied generally.

15–24 Ezekiel is told that his wife is going to die, and he is not to effect the usual mourning rituals (16–17). When people ask him what his actions mean for them, he tells them the word of the Lord to Israel: 'I am about to desecrate my city. Those relations you left behind will fall by the sword. Yet you will not follow the usual mourning customs, just as Ezekiel has done. You will then know that I am the Lord' (20–24).

25–27 Furthermore God says to Ezekiel: 'When the city falls, a fugitive will come and take you. On that day you will regain your full power of speech. You will be a sign to the people, and they shall know that I am the Lord'.

Notes. 17 There was quite a range of mourning rituals (*cf.* 27:30–32). **27** 'You will speak' – Ezekiel's partial loss of speech would be lifted when he heard the news of the fall of the city. This recovery is related in 33:21–22. Even that event would be a sign to the people.

25:1–17 Prophecies against neighbouring nations

This section begins a series of oracles against the foreign nations surrounding Israel (chs. 25–32). Egypt and Tyre receive most attention, but this oracle concentrates on Judah's immediate neighbours: Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia. These nations had apparently regarded the downfall of the people of Israel with delight (Ammon) and derision (Moab). They had even taken the opportunity to execute revenge on Judah (Edom and Philistia). Ezekiel's oracle warns that retribution will come.

The oracle begins with Ammon, which lay to the east of Israel, and then moves in a clockwise direction to Moab, Edom and Philistia.

It is easy to condemn these neighbours of Israel for their attitudes to her. Yet these attitudes can be ours too when trouble befalls one of our neighbours. Meanwhile God is the God of the whole earth and is ultimately in control of the fate of nations, as of individuals.

Ammon. Because the Ammonites gloated over the destruction of Israel and Judah, they will be taken over and plundered by the peoples from the East (1–5). Because they rejoiced maliciously over Israel, they will be ruined (6–7).

Moab. Because Moab viewed Judah with contempt, they will be taken over by the people from the East (8–11).

Edom. Because Edom took revenge on Judah, they will suffer devastation at the hands of Israel.

Philistia. Because the Philistines took revenge on Judah, the Kerethites and the rest of the coastal peoples will be destroyed.

Notes. 4 'People of the East' – nomadic desert tribes. **5** 'Rabbah' – Capital of Ammon (*cf.* 21:20). **8** 'Seir' – Another name for Edom. **16** 'Kerethites' – A people closely linked with the Philistines.

26:1–28:19 Prophecies against Tyre

In geographical terms, Tyre was minute. In economic terms, however, she was highly significant, and was thus an important force in the politics of the ancient Middle East.

The ancient city of Tyre was an important seaport for the area which is now southern Lebanon. (Its site lies approximately midway between Beirut to the north and Haifa to the south.) The city had two harbours, one of which was on an island which lay just off the coast. In Ezekiel there are several references to Tyre's close links with the sea. Both her prowess and her predicted downfall are described using marine allusions. A substantial part of Tyre's strength lay in her seafaring ability.

Tyre's wealth stemmed from her trading. Her merchants travelled extensively throughout the ancient world and dealt in a very extensive range of goods. Her people were famous for their business skills. These skills in turn had led to prosperity.

Tyre has a long and significant history. The city is mentioned in Egyptian Execration Texts of around 1850 BC. According to Herodotus, alphabetic writing was introduced to Greece by the Phoenicians who came with Cadmus, king of Tyre. The city-state also founded the colony of Carthage around 825–815 BC.

Tyre's relations with Israel often had some economic factor. Hiram I supplied David with materials for building the palace of Jerusalem (2 Sa. 5:11; 1 Ch. 14:1). He also supplied Solomon with materials for the temple and concluded a treaty with him. Just over a century later, king Ahab arranged to marry Jezebel, a daughter of the king of Tyre (1 Ki. 16:31). Through Jezebel the worship of the Tyrian god – Baal Melqart – was introduced into Israel.

Prior to the time of Ezekiel, Tyre had enjoyed a period of prosperity. However, Ezekiel, Jeremiah (25:22; 27:1–11) and Zechariah (9:2–7) all prophesied Tyre's suppression by the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Tyre (from *c.* 587– *c.* 574 BC) was apparently a hard campaign (Ezk. 29:18). The city eventually acknowledged Babylonian domination.

The oracles against Tyre and Egypt are instructive guides as to the nature of national pride. Most people maintain some element of pride in and support for the advance of their nation. In the case of Tyre we see the arrogant confidence of self-made economic success. The wealth that she had acquired was to her the sign that she was superior. She was prepared to support corrupt business practices in order to maintain that superiority. Israel's demise was simply seen as a business opportunity.

Tyre was condemned for these attitudes, which are still prevalent in society today. We must not let the material success of our nation become its sole criterion of achievement.

26:1–21 Self-satisfaction denounced

In this oracle Tyre is rebuked for seeing the fall of Jerusalem as merely an event which will enhance her own prosperity. The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar would lay siege against her and bring about her downfall. Delight at the downfall of others is an emotion that Christians, and others, need to deal with as it is very pervasive, but not readily acknowledged.

1–21 The word of God to Ezekiel is: 'Tyre has said that the ruin of Jerusalem will ensure her own prosperity' (1–2). Therefore he is to proclaim: 'Many nations will pillage you and your settlements, Tyre. Then they will know that I am the Lord (3–6). Nebuchadnezzar will ravage your mainland and lay siege against you. You will never be rebuilt (7–14). The coastal tribes will be appalled at your downfall and will lament your collapse (15–18). You will be dragged down to the pit. You will not return' (19–21).

Notes. 1 'The eleventh year' – *i.e.* 587/6 BC. **2** Tyre saw the fall of Jerusalem as merely a business opportunity. On account of its geographical location the land of Palestine was the hub of numerous trade-routes that linked Africa with Eurasia. **3–5** Many of the images relating to Tyre refer to her maritime situation. **6** 'Her settlements on the mainland' – Tyre had extended her control to areas far beyond the island and the mainland harbour. **7–14** Nebuchadnezzar is now mentioned by name for the first time in Ezekiel. His siege of Tyre is reported to have lasted thirteen years. This campaign apparently proved to be a difficult one even for the Babylonians (see 29:18). The city-state acquiesced and recognized Babylonian control. **15** 'The coastlands' – other Mediterranean city-states who probably were trading-partners of Tyre. **19** The picture here is of the island sinking beneath the waves. **20** 'I will bring you down . . . to the pit'. The 'pit' and the earth below refer to the grave or to Sheol *i.e.* the domain of death.

27:1–36 A lament

This oracle is given as a lament. Here Tyre is likened to a marvellously-wrought merchant ship. The suppliers of her timbers and her merchandise are her trading-partners. The extensive list of countries and products gives us a clear picture of why Tyre was famous for trading. Her links spread throughout most of the Mediterranean, North Africa, Asia Minor, and the Middle East. She was able to employ foreigners in both industry and defence. Yet this ship of state was to be sunk *i.e.* Tyre was to be overthrown.

When an old-established, major manufacturer goes bankrupt and closes its doors not only its own employees are made redundant but often thousands more in satellite industries, local suppliers and services. Recession and economic collapse are some of the modern punishments a state may endure.

1–36 Ezekiel is instructed to proclaim to Tyre: 'You gloried in your beauty (3–4). You were constructed from the finest materials (5–7). You employed many nations to build, operate, and defend you (8–11). You had many important trading partners, near and far, and your merchandise was of the highest quality and widest range (12–25). But you will lose it all on

the day of your shipwreck (26–27). Your neighbours and trading partners will be appalled (28–36). You will be no more' (36).

Notes. 3 'I am perfect in beauty' – Tyre's great wealth had brought her much adornment, in which she had great pride (*cf.* 28:12). **5–6** The timbers used were among the finest. 'Senir' – the Amorite term for Hermon (*cf.* Dt. 3:9). **7** 'Elishah' – probably refers to Cyprus. **8** 'Sidon and Arvad' – these two cities lay to the north of Tyre. **9** 'Gebal' – the seaport of Byblos, an important Phoenician port. The movement of labour to Tyre was another sign of her economic strength. **10** 'Put' – Libya. The three nations mentioned here are widely separated. They are listed to show how Tyre could draw mercenaries from all over the ancient world – whether Libya (Put) in the west, Lydia in the north or Persia in the east. **11** Arvad also supplied draftsmen (8). 'Helech ... Gammad' – both are of uncertain geographical origin. Helech may be in the region of Cilicia, and Gammad may lie in Cappadocia. (Both areas are in eastern Asia Minor.) **12** The list of Tyre's trading-partners in approximate geographical order, running from Tarshish in the western Mediterranean to the Arabian desert and Mesopotamia. **16** 'Aram' – it may be better to read 'Edom' here. **23** 'Eden' – not the garden of Eden; the two forms of 'Eden' are spelled differently in Hebrew. The Eden mentioned here lies in Mesopotamia. **26** The 'east wind' may refer not just to a sea storm (*cf.* Ps. 48:7) but also to where the threat to Tyre lay: Babylon was east of Tyre. **30–31** Seven traditional signs of mourning are listed here: loud lamentation, putting earth on the head, rolling in ashes or dust, shaving the head, putting on sackcloth, intense weeping and chanting a lament.

28:1–10 Against arrogance

The achievement of economic wealth had brought with it a sense of pride. The process is summed up in v 5 – great skill in trading had led to great wealth, and great wealth had led to pride. The king of Tyre is depicted as believing he is as wise as a god. The prophecy warns that the penalty for such arrogance would be both humiliating and final. Other examples of such pride and subsequent fall are easy to find throughout history and today.

1–10 Ezekiel must proclaim to the king of Tyre: 'You think you are a god, but you are not (1–2). Your shrewdness and business acumen have brought you great economic reward (3–5a), which in turn has made you conceited (5b). Because of your conceit, you will die a humiliating death at the hands of foreigners. When they confront you, you will just be a mortal, not a god' (7–10).

Notes. 2 'In the heart of the seas' – part of Tyre consisted of an island (see above). **3** 'Daniel' – see note on 14:14, 20. **7** 'Foreigners ... the most ruthless of nations' – a reference to the Babylonians. **10** The Tyrians practised circumcision and hence to die 'the death of the uncircumcised' would have been considered a humiliation.

28:11–19 Expulsion from 'paradise'

This lament depicts the rise and fall of the king of Tyre, and hence the rise and fall of the city-state itself. The imagery is strongly reminiscent of the Garden of Eden narrative. However there is no attempt to parallel the Genesis account closely. As is often the case in Ezekiel, metaphors are freely mixed, altered and adapted to suit the language of the prophecy. The poetic language serves to highlight the extent of the fall that Tyre experienced; it was like an expulsion from paradise.

11–19 The lament to the king of Tyre is: 'You were once the exemplar of wisdom and beauty (12), dwelling in a paradise, adorned with splendid jewels (13–14) and exhibiting blameless behaviour (15). Yet your widespread commercial activities led to oppression. Your splendour made you conceited and corrupted your thinking. Your many dishonest trading practices led to desecration of the sanctuaries. Thus you have been expelled from your paradise and laid low (16–18). Onlookers are appalled by you' (19).

Notes. 13 The precious stones listed here have been taken to allude to the high priest's robe (Ex. 28:17–20), but pagan deities were sometimes clothed in jewel-covered garments too. The emphasis here is simply on the richness of the king (and of Tyre). **14–16** The exact significance of the cherub is unclear and dependent on which textual reading is followed. Either (as NIV) the king of Tyre was elevated to the status of a cherub, or he had a cherub appointed as his guardian. Both renderings point to his elevated status. 'the fiery stones' – lit. 'stones of fire'; possibly a reference to the precious stones mentioned in v 13. Alternatively, it may be a description of some radiant or glowing feature found on the mountain of God. **15** 'Blameless' – again an allusion to the Eden account. **18–19** Here the subject changes from the king to the city of Tyre.

28:20–26 Prophecy against Sidon: 'Know the Lord'

Sidon was a neighbour of Tyre. It would suffer due punishment as well. One notable feature of this short oracle is the frequency of the phrase *then they will know that I am the* LORD. Furthermore the prophecy holds the promise of

restoration for the people of God (25–26), a theme which would receive greater emphasis later.

20–26 Ezekiel is to proclaim to Sidon: 'I am against you Sidon – but I will be glorified through you. When I execute judgment on you they will know that I am the Lord (22). When I afflict you they will know that I am the Lord (23). When Israel no longer has malicious neighbours they will know that I am the Lord (24). When I gather Israel from the peoples I shall show myself holy to the nations. Israel shall dwell in safety on the land, and they will know that I am the Lord their God' (25–26).

Note. 25 'My servant Jacob' – *cf.* 37:25.

29:1 – 32:32 The Egyptian oracles

The book of Ezekiel contains a total of seven oracles against Egypt – more than any other country. The question arises as to why a Judaean prophet resident in Babylonia should be bothered with a country several hundred kilometres away. The answer becomes clear when we look at the history of the period and the chronology of the oracles.

Egypt in Ezekiel's time was a superpower in slow decline. At the height of power her sphere of influence had extended the whole way up the eastern Mediterranean, embracing Palestine and what is now Lebanon and western Syria. When the Babylonians replaced the Assyrians as the dominant force in Middle-Eastern military politics, Egypt allied herself with the Assyrians in order to stop the advance of the Babylonians. The result was a complex power-struggle, and the smaller states in the region – such as Jerusalem/Judah – had to choose their friends carefully.

The chronology of Egypt and Babylonia's interactions up to and during Ezekiel's oracles is as follows:

605 – The Babylonians defeat the Egyptian forces at Carchemish (*cf.* Je. 46:2) and then press south (Carchemish was in NW Syria). Skirmishing ensues.

601 – Babylonian and Egyptian forces clash again. There are heavy losses on both sides.

597 – Nebuchadnezzar subdues Jerusalem. Egypt stays neutral. Zedekiah is placed on the throne as vassal king by Nebuchadnezzar.

589 – Judah under Zedekiah is in open rebellion against the Babylonians.

588 (Jan.) – The Babylonians advance to besiege Jerusalem.

588 – The siege is lifted temporarily as the Babylonians redirect their efforts against the Egyptian relief forces (Zedekiah had asked the Egyptians for help). However the Egyptians are soon repulsed, and the Babylonians return to besiege the city.

587 (Jul.) – Jerusalem's walls are breached. The city and temple are burnt. The state of Judah comes to an end. The country is in ruins.

The Egyptian oracles in Ezekiel are unusual in that all but one of them are dated. Nearly half of the 13 dates given in the book are to be found in the Egyptian section. When arranged in chronological order, the oracles date as follows:

587 (Jan.) – 29:1–16; 587 (Apr.) – 30:20–26; 587 (Jun.) – 31:1–18; 586/585 – 32:17–32; 585 (Mar.) – 32:1–16; 571 (Apr.) – 29:17–21. The oracle in 30:1–19 is undated but its content is similar to the others.

Like Tyre, Egypt had much national pride. If Tyre was 'new money', then Egypt was 'old money'. Her pride lay in that which she had inherited and seemingly would keep for ever. She was a vast country with considerable resources (especially the Nile). She had a marvellous imperial history, a sizeable army, and widespread political influence throughout the Middle East. Yet her confidence in her glorious past was misplaced. Her fate was to be humbled. Likewise, in this age, we should not let memories of past national glories (actual or otherwise) distort our perception of a nation's true needs. It is easy to *feel* confident that problems and disasters which occur to others can never happen to us. This kind of complacency is never realistic.

29:1–16 Egypt: decline and fall

When we compare the dates of the oracles with the events of the time, we find that the oracles were delivered against a general backdrop of Judah's oscillation between Egyptian and Babylonian domination. The state of Judah had allied itself, willingly or otherwise, with one or other of those great military powers during the last twenty years before the cataclysmic events of 588–87 BC.

Ezekiel's series of oracles against Egypt begins during Jerusalem's darkest hour. Egypt's manoeuvres had failed to break the Babylonian siege. Ezekiel had already predicted the downfall of the city. He now had grim news for her would-be saviour. The overall thrust of his oracles was that Egypt would ultimately fall to the Babylonians and that it would cease to be the great nation it once was.

Jerusalem had already been under siege for a year. There had been a brief respite when the Babylonians were temporarily diverted by an unsuccessful Egyptian assault. Ezekiel's oracle reflects some of the bitterness that must have been felt in Jerusalem when it became clear that Egypt's rescue had failed: Egypt was a staff of reed (6); and would no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel (16). Trust placed in military or economic power is always, in the long run, trust misplaced.

The oracle means that Egypt would suffer defeat and destruction. The nation would recover but never get back to its former strength (14–15).

1–16 The word of the Lord to Pharaoh is: 'Because of your arrogance, Pharaoh, you will be laid low. Then all Egypt will know that I am the Lord (3–6). Because you proved an unreliable help to Israel, Egypt will be ravaged by war. Then they will know that I am the Lord (6–8). Because of your arrogance, Egypt will be desolated, and Egyptians dispersed (9–12). Yet after a while the Egyptians will return to Upper Egypt, but their kingdom will remain a minor one. Egypt will be a reminder to Israel. Then they will know that I am the Lord' (13–16).

Notes. 1 The date was January 587 BC. **3** 'Great monster' – a crocodile or perhaps a creature like the 'Leviathan' (*cf.* Is. 27:1). **6–7** 'Staff of reed' – *cf.* Is. 36:6. Just as a reed staff would break and hurt anyone who tried to lean on it for support, so Egypt's would-be support for Jerusalem had failed, adding to the despair of the city. **10** 'From Migdol to Aswan' – an expression implying the whole of the land: (from north to south). 'Cush' – the country lying to the south of Egypt (Ethiopia).

29:17–21 Nebuchadnezzar's reward

The date of this oracle (April 571) makes it the latest of the Egyptian oracles. It links these oracles with those against Tyre.

17–20 The Lord tells Ezekiel: 'Nebuchadnezzar had a hard campaign against Tyre – with no reward' (18). Therefore he is to proclaim: 'Egypt will provide the rewards for Nebuchadnezzar. He will plunder it to pay his army. I have given him Egypt as a reward for what he has done.

'I will restore strength to Israel, and will open your (Ezekiel's) mouth. Then they will know that I am the Lord' (21).

Notes. 18 'Every head was rubbed bare' – the soldiers' uniforms had chafed on their wearers (a common problem even today). **21** 'A horn' – the symbol of strength. The people of Israel would regain strength. 'open your mouth' – Ezekiel's muteness would be removed (*cf.* 3:26; 33:22).

30:1–19 A dark day for Egypt

This oracle is undated, but its theme is similar to the other oracles from 587 BC: Egypt and her allies will fall at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

2–9 War will come to Egypt. She and her neighbours and allies will be laid desolate. **10–12** Egypt's military might will be destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. The land will be devastated. **13–19** The nation will be leaderless. Its idols will be destroyed, and its cities will be taken by storm.

Notes. 5 The countries and people mentioned here were all allies of Egypt. 'Cush' – a region south of Egypt. 'Put' – Libya; 'people of the covenant land' – probably Jewish mercenaries who had settled in Egypt. **6** 'Migdol to Aswan' – *cf.* 29:10. **15–18** The list of Egyptian cities and regions mentioned here emphasizes the widespread nature of the destruction.

30:20–26 Pharaoh's broken arms

By the time of this oracle – (April 587) – the inhabitants of Jerusalem would have been besieged by the Babylonians for over a year. Any hopes that Egypt might rescue the city by a second strike against Nebuchadnezzar are finally countered in this oracle. The Egyptians had already been repulsed in 588 (*I have broken the arm of Pharaoh* v 21), and would suffer further defeats (*I will break both his* [Pharaoh's] *arms* v 22).

20–26 Ezekiel is told: 'Pharaoh's power has already been reduced (21). It will be reduced further. Egyptians will suffer exile/dispersion. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians will grow more powerful even as Egypt crumbles. Then they will know that *I am the* LORD (22–25). When the Egyptians are scattered, they will then ***know that I am the LORD***' (26).

Note. 26 'I will disperse the Egyptians among the nations' – this verse could be seen as depicting the scattering of the Egyptian expeditionary forces upon defeat, rather than a break-up of the nation.

31:1–18 The lesson of the felled cedar for Egypt

The glory of Egypt and the extent of her downfall is illustrated by the allegory of a majestic cedar which was chopped down.

1–18 Ezekiel is told to proclaim to Egypt: 'Your greatness may be compared to that of a magnificent cedar (2–3). This cedar had an abundant source of water (3–4). It towered above its peers, and spread over a wide area (5). They relied on it for protection and shelter (6). It had great splendour (7). It had no equals (8). It was the envy of the rest (9). Because it stood out above the others and was proud of doing so, it was handed over to a ruler to be dealt with (10–11). It was cut down. Those who relied on it left it (12). No others will acquire its greatness (14). The day of its destruction was a black day for many (15–16). Those who sought its protection met a similar end (17). You and your military might will be felled likewise' (18).

Notes. 3 'Consider Assyria' – a slight textual emendation would alter the reference to Assyria to that of a cypress, as in 'Consider a cypress, a cedar in Lebanon'. The alteration

makes the allegory more direct, though the general sense remains the same. **10** It was pride which led to the downfall for the cedar – and by implication Egypt. **12** 'The most ruthless of nations' – a phrase used before (30:11) for the Babylonians. **18** 'You will lie among the uncircumcised, with those killed by the sword'. As the Egyptians practised circumcision and laid great emphasis on proper burial rites, this prediction would have been doubly abhorrent to them.

32:1–16 Lament for Pharaoh

Egypt is again warned of her overthrow by the Babylonians.

1–16 The lament to Pharaoh is: 'You are like a great sea beast who will be netted and left to rot on the land (2–4). Many will feed off your remains (4–6). There will be darkness over the land when this happens (7–8). Many nations will be appalled at the event (9–10). The Lord says: "The Babylonian war machine will overthrow you (11–12). Egypt will be desolated" ' (13–15).

Note. 2 'A monster' – *cf.* 29:3–5 where similar imagery is used.

32:17–32 Egypt's descent to the domain of death

This lament expands on two themes which had already been mentioned in the oracles: (1) Egypt will lie in its death alongside other nations 'killed' in battle, and (2) she will share her fate with the uncircumcised. (*cf.* 31:18).

Ezekiel uses poetic imagery in his description of Egypt in her state of death. She is depicted as lying in a land surrounded by the war-graves of other deceased nations. The imagery is not to be seen as a description of the after-life in theological terms. It was a useful way of conveying the degradation of Egypt's condition.

17–32 Ezekiel is told to lament for Egypt as she descends to the domain of death. She will join the uncircumcised. Others are there already: Assyria (22–23); Elam (24–25); Meshech and Tubal (26–27); Edom (29); Princes of the North (30); Sidonians (30). Pharaoh and his hordes will join them (28, 32).

All this has a surprisingly 'modern' ring to it; many régimes, great and small, have foundered in the last century for instance. Yet a study of history shows that this is the normal flux in which nations rise and fall. The 'flat field' and secure existence that we hopefully regard as normal is an unfulfilled hope. There is eternal security in the Lord, but apart from that security is an illusion.

Notes. 24 'Elam' – a country to the east of Babylon. **26** 'Meshech and Tubal' – countries from Asia Minor (*cf.* 27:13). **27** 'Swords placed under their heads' – their burial lacked military honours. They had just a basic war-grave.

33:1–20 The scope of accountability

This oracle initially holds a similar theme to that in 3:16–21. Ezekiel is to act as a watchman for Israel. Along with the job come both responsibilities and penalties. (It may be noted that no reward is explicitly mentioned.) Ezekiel is to relay the nature of his task to Israel.

The oracle goes on to attack two notions about the nature of Israel's sin. The first (10–11) was a kind of fatalism, where people maintained they were trapped in their own wrongdoing, that God even was glad to see them in such a state (and thus, if God wanted it that way, there was no point in even trying to change). This idea is rebuffed: God takes no pleasure in the death of even the wicked. It was up to them to change their ways.

The second notion was that people built up a store of merit (*cf.* 18:21–32). Thus a lot of good deeds could be used to offset a lot of bad ones. Such a view meant that there was no hope for the person whose life had been principally evil – that person would be unable to offset the evil done with enough good. Furthermore it meant that those who thought they had built up enough merit could indulge in whatever sins they liked provided they did not exceed their quota. This notion is also rejected. A sincere repentance can overcome any history of wrongdoing. Wilful evil cannot be offset by past charitable actions.

1–6 Ezekiel must proclaim to his countrymen: 'Suppose a country is threatened by war, and that a certain individual is called to the job of giving advance warning of any attack (2). If that person sounds the alarm when attack is near, then any responsibility for casualties will rest with the citizens themselves (3–5). But if the alarm is not sounded when attack is near, that person will be held responsible for the death of any of the citizens' (6).

7–9 Ezekiel has been given that job for the Israelites. He is to convey to them the warnings God sends (7). If he does not convey those warnings to anyone he will be held responsible for that person's fate. But if he does, he will have saved himself (8–9).

10–20 Ezekiel is further to proclaim to Israel: 'You say that you are burdened to death by your sins. I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked (10–11). If a righteous man turns from his former ways and starts to do evil, none of the righteous things he has done will count; he will die for his sins (12–13). If a wicked man turns from his ways and starts to do what is just and right, his previous misdeeds will be forgotten; he will live (14–16). Although you, Israel, say

that my way is unjust, it is your way that is unjust. Each of you will be judged accordingly' (17–20).

Note. 2 'Watchman' – see note on 3:16–21.

33:21–22 Ezekiel regains his speech

This incident is unique in the book of Ezekiel in that his prophetic experience ('the hand of the LORD was upon me') did not result in a vision or oracle. Instead, Ezekiel was given back the power of speech that had been taken from him at the start of his ministry (3:26–27).

The timing of this event was significant. On the next day the news arrived that Jerusalem had fallen. Ezekiel's warnings had come true.

Note. 21 'Twelfth year' – Jerusalem fell in 587 BC. A number of versions and manuscripts read 'eleventh year'. If this reading is correct, and the year refers to the reign of Zedekiah, then the time interval between the fall of the city and the fugitive's visit to Ezekiel was about six months. *Cf.* Ezr. 7:9, where a straight journey from Babylon to Jerusalem took a full four months.

33:23–33 Israel's illegal possessions

The siege was over. Jerusalem had fallen and the land had been laid waste. Many had been killed and others had been deported or forced to flee. Yet there were some survivors.

Calamity does not always bring out the best in people. After the first siege of 597 one group of survivors in the city gloated as they planned to rise to the top (11:2–12). After the second siege the land had been depopulated. Those who were left, far from turning to God, maintained their idolatry. Furthermore, they took it upon themselves to annex their neighbours' possessions and land, even to abusing the wives that were left (24–26). Ezekiel's oracle warns that further desolation of the land would ensue because of what was being done.

At the end of the oracle Ezekiel is warned of a problem which many preachers experience. The people liked to listen to him but did not put into practice what he said. A preacher may have entertainment value, but that does not mean he is heeded.

Deprivation, like calamity, does not always bring out the best in people either. Desperate circumstances sometimes evoke desperate actions, and we must have understanding in such cases. However, there are times, as with this oracle, when chaos and ruination are simply treated as moments of opportunity by greedy and ruthless people.

23–29 The word of the Lord to Ezekiel is: 'The people inhabiting the ruins in the land of Israel think that they now are its owners (24–25). Proclaim to them: "You carry out pagan and violent practices – should the land fall into your possession? (25–26). Because of what you do, the land will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the Lord" ' (27–29).

30–33 Again to Ezekiel: 'You are a topic of conversation among your compatriots. They gather to hear you, but pay only lip-service to what you say. You are like an entertainer to them. However, when your proclamations come true, they will know that a prophet has been among them.'

Notes. 24 'Abraham was only one' – their reasoning was that if Abraham, a single individual, could take possession of the land, then it would be no problem for them, who were much more numerous, to do it. 33 The mark of a true prophet was that what he predicted indeed came true.

34:1 – 48:35 Prophecies of restoration

The prophecies in chs. 34–48 have an entirely different theme from the earlier ones. Whereas the oracles of chs. 1–33 consist primarily of warnings of disaster that would befall the people of Israel or their neighbours, the emphasis in 34–48 is on restoration and hope. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. The people had been driven into exile. But yet there is hope.

Modern readers find these chapters difficult to interpret, partly because of the unfamiliar imagery and partly out of a tendency to look for a specific modern event which relates to what the prophecies describe. It is important to remember that these oracles are essentially similar in character to those in earlier parts of the book. Many of the features of the later chapters have counterparts in earlier ones *e.g.* the promise of a new covenant (16:60), the return to the land (28:25), the symbolic use of numbers (4:5–6; 14:21; 29:13) and identification of a nation by its ruler (29:1–6; 31:2–18). There are references which seem deliberately vague or symbolic, *e.g.* David and Gog, or which point to an end-time *e.g.* 'David will be their prince for ever' (37:25). Such references have led commentators to class Ezekiel as 'proto-Apocalyptic'.

For us the images can be distant and hard to picture. Yet they must have had painful associations for the exiles. The detailed description of the temple (40–48) is difficult for us to follow, but it would have brought memories flooding back to those who had known the temple and worshipped there. The images of the valley of dry bones (37), of scattered sheep (34), of ruined buildings and wastes (35, 36), of a land strewn with fallen weapons (39), and of wild animals feasting on dead soldiers (39) are all images of war. They are pictures of a land so

ravaged that the dead lay unburied, their corpses rotting and their weapons rusting. These images would have been painfully real to those who had witnessed Israel's military destruction.

These prophecies were in the first place for the people of Ezekiel's day. Their content was expressed in terms that the people of then knew and understood. The resolution of the prophecies should not be seen as one-off events but as a process. Their purpose was to bring hope when all hope was gone and to bring guidance when the very reason for living was unclear. Their fulfilment started the day they were delivered. The people of God would never be abandoned no matter what calamity might confront them.

This is not to conclude that such prophecies have no meaning for us today. As we have seen, the fall of nations and the devastations of war are as familiar items of news on our TV screens as they were for Ezekiel's prophecies. Yet overall the same God holds out to us the same hope of future restoration.

34:1–31 Israel's shepherds denounced

The image of the people of God as a flock of sheep occurs several times throughout the Bible. In this oracle, the current shepherds – *i.e.* the rulers of Israel – are rebuked for their self-interest and lack of care for their subjects. Furthermore, some sheep had grown fat at the expense of others *i.e.* some people had acquired wealth and power by oppressing others who were poorer and weaker. Ezekiel warns that justice will be restored.

The warning turns into a promise for the future (21–24). Not only will the Lord save his sheep, he will also appoint his servant David to be shepherd over them, and make a covenant of peace with them. As in other oracles, the name is symbolic. The reference to David does not mean that the ancient king David will be literally resurrected and set up as ruler. Its primary force is that the coming ruler will have the exemplary attributes of David – someone in whom the Lord delighted and who triumphed over the foes of Israel. David is also referred to in 37:24–26, where his rule is described as lasting for ever. The same passage also refers to the everlasting covenant of peace which the Lord will make with his people, a theme almost identical to that in 34:25–30.

Both passages clearly are looking forward not just to Israel's immediate future but also to her long term future. God would make peace with the people, and he would appoint a shepherd to rule them.

The oracle brings a promise of hope. Even if God's people were scattered and oppressed they would one day receive justice. Readers of the NT will see that day as the time of the return of Jesus Christ, a promise sealed by his first coming, death and resurrection.

1–31 Ezekiel is to proclaim to the shepherds of Israel: 'Woe to you shepherds of Israel. You did not look after the flock. They have become scattered over the lands. You only took care of yourselves (2, 5–8). I am against the shepherds. They will be held responsible for the flock, but will be discharged from their jobs. They will no longer feed off my flock (10). I will rescue my scattered flock. I will gather them from the nations and bring them to good pasture in the land of Israel. I myself will tend to them and be a just shepherd (11–15). I will judge between one sheep and another. Some have grown fat at the expense of others. The flock will no longer be plundered (17–22). I will appoint my servant David to be their only shepherd. I will be their God, and David will be their prince (23–24). I will make a covenant of peace with them. They will dwell in safety in a fertile land. They will be rescued from enslavement. Then they shall know that I their God am with them and that they are my people' (25–31).

Notes. 13 'Bring them . . . gather them' – the promise of restoration gets special emphasis in chs. 34–48. However, it occurs in earlier oracles too: 11:17; 16:60; 20:34, 42; 28:25. 25 'Covenant of peace' – the promised new covenant (*cf.* Je. 31:31–34).

35:1 – 36:15 Prophecies and mountains: warnings to Edom and encouragement for Israel

It is important to note that ch. 35 and ch. 36:1–15 form one single oracle. The imagery running throughout is that of mountains. The mountain of Edom, Mount Seir, will be laid waste (35:7, 14), whereas the mountains of Israel will become fruitful (36:8–9) and repopulated (36:10–12).

Edom was Israel's neighbour and ancient rival. The two nations were ethnically close, yet maintained ancient enmities. The land of Edom lay on Israel's eastern border, running south from the Dead Sea. The mountain associated with Edom – Mount Seir – would have overlooked Israel's eastern flank. The Edomites could monitor Israel's misery when it befell her.

Edom is condemned on several counts. First, she had apparently betrayed Israel in Israel's hour of need (35:5). Second the Edomites had gloated, even rejoiced at Israel's destruction (35:12, 15; 36:5). Third, they had taken the opportunity to plunder some of Israel's land during this time of turmoil (35:12; 36:2, 5). Long-standing feuds between neighbours are often difficult to erase. It is easy to take delight in or even take advantage of the misfortunes of a

disliked neighbour. Yet our dealings should be just, even when we find them difficult.

Edom may be taken as a symbol of the ceaseless hostility between God's people and the 'world'. Whereas David was the king who conquered and held Edom (see Commentary on 34:21–24 and 2 Sa. 8:12–14), and David is symbolic of the triumph of Israel, so the downfall of Edom symbolizes the beginning of the new order. The return of 'David' will remind us of the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the new order, the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus Christ came to proclaim.

35:1–15 Ezekiel must proclaim against Edom: 'I am against you Edom. When I make you desolate, you will know that I am the Lord (3–4). Your long-standing hostility led you to betray Israel in their final hour (5). Bloodshed shall therefore pursue you, and you shall become a wasteland. Then you will know that I am the Lord (6–9). You thought you would take possession of the territory of Israel and Judah when they were laid waste. You also boasted against me. Because you rejoiced when Israel became a desert, you will become a desert (10–15). Then you shall know that I am the Lord' (4, 9, 15).

36:1–15 But to the mountains of Israel Ezekiel is to proclaim: 'The enemy thought they would take possession of and plunder you (36:1–4). You have suffered the scorn of nations, but nations around you will suffer scorn too (36:5–7). Yet you will become fertile and prosperous, with many settlements. Then you will know that I am the Lord. My people will come to possess you as inheritance (36:8–12). No longer will the mountains of Israel rob the nation of its people' (36:12–15).

Notes. 35:10 'Two nations' – *i.e.* Israel and Judah. **36:2** 'The ancient heights' – much of Israel and Judah lay in the mountainous region between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean. **36:12–13** 'You ... deprive them of their children'; 'you devour men' – here the mountains are portrayed as contributing to the destruction of the people. The expression may be purely poetic; no doubt many did perish in battle skirmishes in the mountain areas.

36:16–38 The restoration of Israel

This oracle forms the core of the book of Ezekiel. Its message is a summary of the book. Israel had offended God through bloodshed and idolatry (18). Her punishment meant dispersal among the nations – exile (19). Yet the Lord would not leave them there. They would return to their land (24). He would cleanse them and transform them and they would follow him (25–28). The land and its people would flourish again (29–38). The surrounding nations would know that the Lord had acted (36).

The reason why the Lord would bring his people out of their exile is clearly expressed. It had nothing to do with any innate goodness or desirability in the people themselves. Rather, it had to do with God's desire that his name should not be profaned. The very fact that Israel was in exile led others to think that the God of Israel was either incapable or unwilling to look after his own people. This situation was denigrating the character of God, and for this reason, God would restore his people (20–23).

This oracle brings hope to all of us. God acts to save, not on the basis of our worthiness, but out of the richness of his mercy.

16–38 To Ezekiel God says: 'When Israel dwelt in their own land, they defiled it with their iniquity. So I scattered them among other lands. Yet their dispersal profaned my name, which is of concern to me (16–21). Therefore, God's word to Israel is: "For the sake of my name I will show myself holy through you to the nations. Then they will know that I am the Lord (22–23). I will bring you back to your own land and cleanse you. Your heart of stone will be replaced with a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit in you and make you follow my laws. The land will be plentiful [and] you will come to detest and be ashamed of your past conduct. It is not for your sake that I do this (24–32). When I cleanse you from all your sins, the towns will be rebuilt and the land recultivated. The nations left around will then know that I have restored it all (33–36). The people of Israel will become as numerous as sheep. Then they will know that I am the Lord" ' (37–38).

Notes. 25 'Sprinkle clean water' – a ceremonial act of cleansing. **26** 'Heart of flesh' – the use of the term 'flesh' here should not be confused with its use in other parts of the Bible, where it often denotes frailty or corruption. In this passage 'heart of flesh' is contrasted with 'heart of stone', the implication being that the stony cold, hard-hearted nature of the people of Israel would be replaced with a warm, living spirituality.

37:1–14 The valley of dry bones

After the fall of Jerusalem the people would have been scattered and dispirited. The oracle had a simple message: that the dead nation of Israel would one day be revived and return to their own land. The dry bones became living warriors. An equally powerful transformation would one day be applied to Israel.

The force of this vision has brought hope to many down the centuries. The power of God can change even the most hopeless of lives and situations.

1–11 Ezekiel has a vision in which he is

transported to the middle of a valley full of dry bones. The Lord tells him to prophesy to the bones and to tell them they would become covered with flesh and come to life. He does so, and while he is prophesying, the bones come together with a rattle. Flesh, sinews and skin cover them, but they are still dead (1–8). He is then told to command the wind to blow on the bodies. When he does so, breath enters them and they become alive – an immense army (9–10). The Lord explains to him: 'These bones represent Israel, who say that their hope has dried up' (11).

12–14 Ezekiel is to proclaim to all the people of Israel: 'I will bring you out of your graves to the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord (12–13), I will put my Spirit in you and settle you in your land. Then you will know that I am the Lord, I have said it and will do it' (14).

Notes. 1 'The hand of the Lord' – this expression indicates that Ezekiel was about to experience an intense vision rather than the usual more 'verbal' message. **5, 14** 'Breath' – the Hebrew for this word can also mean 'spirit' or 'Spirit'.

37:15–28 The reunion of Israel

The people of Israel had been separated into two kingdoms – Israel and Judah – since the end of Solomon's reign almost three centuries earlier. Not only would they be restored, as promised in the preceding oracle, they would also become one nation again.

They would have one ruler, who is described here as 'my servant David'. (See the comment to 34:1–31 where the term is also used.) By calling the new ruler 'David', the prophecy implies that the new ruler will have all the worthy attributes of king David and all his privileges of ancestry, right to the throne and standing before God in the light of his promises. Israel's future is depicted as an idealised version of her past. Even the deepest wounds of history can be healed through the power of God.

15–23 Ezekiel is instructed to: 'Take two sticks. Write on one: "Belonging to Judah and his associates", and write on the other: "Belonging to Israel and his associates". Join both sticks together in your hand so that they become one (16–17). When anyone asks you, explain the significance of this act, which is: "I the Lord will join Israel's and Judah's sticks together so that they become one" (18–19). Show them the sticks (20), and proclaim: "I will gather Israel from the nations back to their own land. They will have one king and will never again be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves – I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God"' (21–23).

24–28 'My servant David will be king over them for ever. They will observe my statutes. They and their descendants shall dwell in their ancestral land for ever (24–25). I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their number shall increase (26). My sanctuary will be placed among them for ever. I will be their God, and they will be my people. The nations shall then know that I the Lord make Israel holy, because my sanctuary will be ever with them' (27–28).

Notes. 16 'Ephraim's stick' – the name 'Ephraim' was less ambiguous than 'Israel'. Ephraim clearly was of the northern kingdom, whereas the name 'Israel' could have applied to the people of both kingdoms. **26** 'My sanctuary' – this promise concerning the sanctuary is expanded in chs. 40–48.

38:1 – 39:29 Prophecies against those who oppose Israel

We do not know for certain of a historical ruler called Gog. The lands that he ruled – Magog, Meshech and Tubal – are probably to be located in the region of Asia Minor and the Black Sea – see note to v 1. These lands would thus lie at the farthest reaches of the world of the Middle East. It may well be that Gog and his nations are symbolic of the people of the world who are arraigned against the people of God. (The book of Revelation refers to Gog and Magog in this sense in Rev. 20:8). Viewed in this way, the oracle becomes a warning that, even after their return from exile, the people of Israel would at the same time experience immense forces against them. Yet these forces would be routed, and their destruction would be great.

The intensity of the imagery in the oracle – the great armies and the huge numbers of fallen – has led some interpreters to see this oracle as predicting a specific final battle. However, if we compare this oracle with *e.g.* those against Egypt in 32:1–16 and Tyre in 28:11–19, we find a similar extravagance of symbolism.

The implication of the oracle is that in future days the people of God would experience the massed forces of evil ranged against them. The odds would seem insurmountable, but the power of God would protect his people. The enemy would be routed. This victory still lies in the future for us, but the crucial blow has been struck at the cross of Calvary.

38:1–23 The Lord tells Ezekiel to proclaim to Gog: 'I am against you, Gog. You and your allies will suffer a rout (38:2–5). Get ready, for in years to come you and your hordes will invade the land of Israel (38:7–9). At that time you will scheme to plunder and pillage a rich, peaceful land (10–13). You and your numerous allies will advance from the far north. I will

bring you so that nations may know me (14–16). I spoke of you in the past through my servants the prophets (17). When you attack Israel, there shall be a terrifying earthquake with accompanying violent storms. In afflicting you with these I shall make myself known to many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord' (18–23).

39:1–16 'On the mountains of Israel I will knock your weapons from your hands. There you will fall and provide food for the birds and beasts of prey (39:1–5). I will make my holy name known to Israel. The nations will know that I am the Lord, holy in Israel. This shall surely happen (6–8). It will take the inhabitants of Israel seven years to use up the fallen weapons as fuel for their fires (8–10). The burial ground of Gog will be called the Valley of Hamon-Gog. It will take the people of Israel seven months to bury them all and cleanse the land' (11–16).

39:17–29 Ezekiel is also to proclaim and call to all the birds and animals: 'Prepare for the great sacrifice. You will eat flesh and drink the blood of these armies till you are glutted (17–20). Nations shall see what I have done. Israel will know that I am the Lord their God, and the nations will know that they (Israel) had gone into exile because of their sins (21–24). I will restore Israel from captivity and thus show myself holy. Then they will know that I am the Lord their God. I will pour out my Spirit upon them' (25–29).

Notes. 38:1 Meshech and Tubal were probably situated in Asia Minor (*cf.* v 6). The name 'Magog' appears as one of the sons of Japheth in Gn. 10:2; 1 Ch. 1:5 and is thus the name of a people. The word 'Magog' may simply mean 'land of Gog'. **38.5** 'Cush' – Upper Egypt. 'Put' – Libya. **38:6** 'Gomer' – a land in Asia Minor. 'Beth Togarmah' – Armenia. It can be noted that the sons of Japheth in Gn. 10:2 included Gomer, Magog, Tubal and Meshech. **38:12** 'the centre of the land' – Jerusalem (*c.f* 5:5). **38:17** 'Are you not the one I spoke of . . .?' – This question could be taken as another indication that Gog is symbolic. The implication here is that Israel had already been warned of such an event. **39:9** 'Seven years' – the number seven (also in 39:12 – 'seven months') symbolizes the completeness of the event. **39:12** 'Burying them in order to cleanse the land' – anyone who touched a corpse was rendered ceremonially unclean (Nu. 19:11). **39:18** 'Bashan' – a region east of Galilee renowed for the quality of its cattle and oak-trees. **39:25–29** This section does not denote yet another gathering of Israel. It can be seen as summing up God's intentions for his people.

40:1 – 48:35 Visions of the new temple and the new land

This last oracle is the largest in the whole book. It belongs to that group of oracles which Ezekiel introduces with the expression 'the hand of the LORD was upon me' (40:1). It is thus one of those visions which Ezekiel experiences physically; he finds himself transported inside the vision to another place.

The date of the vision was around April 573 BC (40:1). Both Jerusalem and the temple had been devastated over twelve years previously. The people of Israel were scattered abroad or else living in poverty in their own ruined land. The royal line had vanished. There was little to indicate that their old way of life would return.

It is at this point that Ezekiel experiences his vision. It is a mixture of the ideal and the real. He is brought to and conducted around a new temple. He sees the glory of the Lord enter the temple and hears the Lord declare that he will stay there for ever. He sees the altar and is instructed about the regulations concerning the prince, the priests, special offerings and feast-days. He watches as a miraculous river gushes from under the temple, ever widening, refreshing the land and even reviving the Dead Sea. The borders and divisions of the land are then specified. The oracle ends on the triumphant note that the new name of the city will be 'THE LORD IS THERE' (43:35).

It is important to remember that these chapters represent a vision. This oracle was not purely a revelation of teaching that was new, nor was it a prediction of events that were to come (though some believe that this temple will one day be built). It was also a reminder of what Israel's religion had been and should be.

The vision itself shades from the descriptive to the prescriptive to the symbolic to the apocalyptic. In between the details about the dimensions of the temple and the regulations concerning its priests lies the account of the glory of the Lord returning to the temple. The stipulations concerning offerings and the rules governing the distribution of the land are separated by a passage describing an amazing river which flows from the temple threshold and revives even the Dead Sea.

This mixture of symbolism and practical detail must have drawn the Israelites to reflect on their past and to renew their determination to change the present. Only by abandoning the gods of their conquerors and returning to the faith of their fathers could Israel hope to grasp the promise of the new Jerusalem.

The new temple area described. 40:1–4 Ezekiel has a vision in which he is transported to a high mountain. A man carrying

measuring tools instructs Ezekiel to relay to Israel all that he is about to see.

40:5–16 The man measured the wall surrounding the temple area. He then went to its east (*i.e.* front) entrance and measured all of its features. **40:17–27** He brought Ezekiel through the entrance into the outer court. There were two other entrances to the court, one on the north and one on the south side. They had the same dimensions as the east entrance.

40:28–37 Within the outer court lay an inner court, which also had entrances on the south, east and north sides. They were the same size as the outer ones. **40:38–43** Near these inner entrances lay rooms where the sacrifices were to be washed. There were also tables and implements for the slaughter of the sacrificed animals. **40:44–47** Two other rooms were assigned to the priests in charge of the temple and the altar.

40:48 – 41:4 Inside the inner court lay the temple building and the altar (the altar was in front of the temple). The man brought Ezekiel to the portico of the temple and measured its dimensions. He then led Ezekiel into the outer sanctuary and measured its entrance. He went further, entering the inner sanctuary and measuring it also. This sanctuary was the Most Holy Place. **41:5–26** He then measured both the wall of the temple and its adjacent features. The temple itself stood on a raised base and had a wooden floor. There were carvings of cherubim and palm trees on the walls and doors. A wooden altar stood in the outer sanctuary. **42:1–20** On either side of the temple, facing the temple courtyard, stood the priests' rooms. The priests were to consume the most holy offerings there. These rooms were holy.

43:1–11 The man took Ezekiel to the east gate. Ezekiel saw the glory of God approaching via the east and filling the temple. He was told: 'This is the place for my throne. I shall dwell here with Israel for ever. They will not defile my holy name again. Let them turn from their sin and I shall live with them for ever. Describe the temple to Israel. If they feel shame for their sins, tell them the details of its design and the accompanying regulations. Record all this so that they may be fruitful in their implementation of it.'

Prescriptions for temple worship: the roles of priests and prince. **43:13–27** The measurements of the altar are given, then the manner of its dedication is described.

44:1–4 The east gate is to remain shut. Ezekiel is taken to the front of the temple. There he sees the glory of the Lord filling the temple. **44:5–9** No foreigner is to enter the sanctuary, unlike previous acts of desecration. **44:10–16** The Levites who had previously followed idolatry may still serve in the sanctuary, but only Zadokites may approach the Lord to offer sacrifices. **44:17–37** The regulations regarding the appearance and conduct of the priests are given.

45:1–9 The priests are to dwell on that portion of land which is allocated to the Lord. The prince will have allotted land too. He will no longer oppress Israel through dispossession of property.

45:10 – 46:15 Accurate scales are to be used. The portions for sacrifices are specified. The procedures for priests, prince and people on holy/feast days are laid down.

46:16–18 The prince may only bequeath his own property to his own descendants. **46:19–24** The priestly cooking area and kitchen are described.

The land beyond the temple. **47:1–12** Ezekiel is then shown a great river which flows out from the temple down to the Dead Sea. The water in the Dead Sea is turned fresh by the river, and it teems with fish. Fruit trees grow on the banks of the river, but the marshes remain salty.

47:13–23 Ezekiel is then given a description of the boundaries of the land which is divided up among the tribes of Israel. **48:1–29** In addition, areas are set aside for the Zadokites, the Levites, the city and its precincts. **48:30–34** The city is to have twelve gates, three on each side. The gates are to be named after the tribes of Israel. **48:35** The city will be named 'THE LORD IS THERE'.

Notes. **40** 'Visions of God' – an expression also used in other visual oracles (1:1; 8:3). **40:3** 'Linen cord' – it was used for measuring (*cf.* 47:3). **40:6 – 43:17** Ezekiel is taken on a guided tour of the new temple, though stays outside the inner sanctuary. Only a high priest could enter the inner sanctuary (Lv. 16; *cf.* Heb. 9:7). **43:2** The glory of God returns to the temple in this vision. In a previous vision (11:22–23) the glory of God had left the temple. The implication here is that God was returning to his people. **43:10–11** The significance of chs. 40–48 is explained in these two verses. The people of Israel are to contemplate the plan of the temple. If they feel ashamed of their past actions, then they should be encouraged to follow the accompanying laws and regulations. It is not explicitly stated that they should rebuild a temple according to the plan given here. **43:19; 44:15** 'Zadok' – he was priest in the time of David (2 Sa. 15:24–29). The non-Zadokite priests were to be punished for their past disobedience by being barred from the higher functions of the priesthood. **45:1 – 48:29** A new allocation of the land is envisaged. **47:10** 'En Gedi' – a town on the west coast of the Dead Sea. 'En Eglaim'

may lie to the north of En Gedi. **48:35** 'The Lord is there' – the last words of the book represent both the name of the new Jerusalem and a shining hope for the people of God. The Lord will be not only in the temple, not only in Jerusalem but, by his Spirit, in the hearts of every true worshipper the world over and for all time and eternity.

L. John McGregor

DANIEL

Introduction

The book of Daniel tells the story of a young Israelite taken from Jerusalem in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (605–562 BC). Despite a life-long exile and much opposition he remained faithful to his God. Like Joseph before him (Gn. 37 – 50), he was gifted with the ability to understand dreams and visions (1:17); he rose to prominence in a foreign court and was privileged to receive insight into the future purposes of God in history.

While told largely in the third person, the entire second half of the book (7:2 – 12:13), containing a series of dramatic visions, is presented in an autobiographical fashion. Although in our English Bible the book is included among the Prophets, in the Hebrew Bible it is numbered among the Writings. In that context it illustrates the nature and blessings of a life lived in faithfulness to God's covenant under inhospitable conditions (chs. 1–6) and reveals the conflicts in which God's covenant people will be engaged and divinely kept (chs. 7–12).

Type of literature

It is immediately evident that Daniel is a different kind of literature from most OT history and prophecy. Unlike the former, it is dominated by visions; unlike the latter, its visions are frequently surrealistic, describing a world in which giant statues are demolished by mysterious stones and strange beasts arise to do battle with one another.

While elements of this are to be found in the prophets (*e.g.* Ezk. 1), it is clear that here we have a different type of literature. In a sense, the impressions created on the reader are as important as an understanding of the details. It is theoretically possible to understand the latter and yet fail to experience the impact which the book is intended to produce.

In view of this Daniel is usually classified as apocalyptic literature, like the book of Revelation (see Apocrypha and Apocalyptic). It is, however, probably wise not to define too rigidly what this implies for Daniel. Like the relatively modern literary form of the novel (which is normally dated from around the beginning of the eighteenth century), it did not arise overnight in a complete form with carefully defined features. What is characteristic of the apocalyptic writings, however, is that its message involves an 'unveiling' (Gk. *apokalypsis*) of the transcendent order and how this relates to history as it moves toward the consummation. As an unveiling, it carries the caption 'come and see' as well as 'hear and understand'.

Structure

Daniel divides into two sections and is written in two languages: Hebrew (1:1 – 2:4a; 8:1 – 13:13) and its related language Aramaic (2:4b – 7:28). Chs. 1–6 are biographical; chs. 7–12 are apocalyptic. The texture of the work is, however, more subtle than this, indicated by the use of Aramaic in 2:4 – 7:28 (*i.e.* in parts of both sections). It has been suggested that these are chapters which would have had special significance for non-Hebrews (hence the use of the international language). Furthermore, rather than radically separating the two sections this has the effect of linking them, while hinting that chs. 2 – 7 contain the heart of the book. If this is the case, ch. 1 serves as an explanatory introduction, while chs. 8–12 expand on the pattern of world history already set forth earlier in the book. The way in which the use of Aramaic spans both the biographical and the visionary sections is also a major argument for the literary unity of the book.

Within the central section (chs. 2 – 7) a further pattern, common in OT narrative, can be detected. Chs. 2 and 7 present visions of four world kingdoms set over against the kingdom of God; chs. 3 and 6 are narratives of miraculous divine deliverances; chs. 4 and 5 describe God's judgment on world rulers. Thus, the motifs employed in chs. 2, 3 and 4 reappear in reverse order in chs. 5, 6 and 7. The effect is that of a narrative mirroring intended to heighten certain expectations in the reader who is familiar with the device, as well as to provide increased enjoyment.

Contemporary readers are generally accustomed to books which follow a straightforward chronological order. Even if set in the form of reminiscences related long after the events, themes tend to be developed in a time line. The book of Daniel does not follow this form. The experiences of chs. 1 – 6 do indeed follow a chronological sequence in their settings; but the revelations throughout the book have the form of progressive parallelism, covering the same time period. The literary structure is akin to that of a spiral staircase which moves

round the same point time and again, but brings us to a higher vantage point from which we are able to gain a clearer and fuller view of things. Hence, the material covers the same ground on more than one occasion, but develops it more fully each time. The same pattern may be detected in Jesus' teaching in Mk. 13 and in the book of Revelation itself.

Message

The context in which the life of Daniel is set is summed up in the question asked by the exiles in Babylon, recorded in Ps. 137:4, 'How can we sing the song of the LORD while in a foreign land?' The entire book, biography and visions, teaches us that this world will always be a 'foreign land' to the people of God (*cf.* Jn. 17:16; Phil. 3:20a). God's people are 'strangers in the world' (1 Pet. 1:1,17), surrounded by malignant and destructive enemies (1 Pet. 5:8–9). Yet, it is possible to live in a way which brings praise and honour to God, just as Daniel did. He is the embodiment of the teaching of Ps. 1.

Such a life of faith (*cf.* Heb 11:33–34) is nourished on the knowledge of God (11:32b), consecration to him (1:8; 3:17–18; 6:6–10), and fellowship with him in prayer (2:17–18; 6:10; 9:3; 10:2–3, 12). It draws its confidence from the knowledge that God is sovereign over all human affairs (2:19–20; 3:17; 4:34–35), and that he is building his own kingdom (2:44–45; 4:34; 6:26; 7:14). Our times are in his hands (1:2; 5:26), since the affairs of earth are not unconnected with those of heaven (10:12–14, 20). He is a God who makes himself and his purposes known, so that his people may know him and rely on his word (1 17b; 2:19, 28–30, 47). Such knowledge enables God's people to resist pressure knowing that they will share in the fulfilment of his kingdom (7:22, 26–27; 12:2–3).

Author and date

No explicit statement about authorship is made in the book of Daniel, although approximately half of it is in autobiographical form. Contemporary OT scholars widely (but by no means universally) adopt the view (first argued by Porphyry, the third century Neo-platonist opponent of the Christian faith) that the book was composed, not in the sixth century (its literary setting), but in the second century, in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes (see on 8:9–14, 23–27; 11:4–35).

According to this view, the stories in chs. 1 – 6 doubtless have their origins in the traditions of the Hebrew people. Daniel is presented as a hero figure, faithful to God's law in the face of all opposition. The visions are largely interpretations of the past rather than supernatural revelations of the future. Rather than providing a historical account, Daniel's autobiography and visions in various ways employ, expound and apply other Scriptures in order to bring strength and encouragement to second-century Jews. Thus, for example, his own experience is seen as modelled on that of Joseph (the exile who rose to power in a foreign nation yet remained faithful to God); his prayer in ch. 9 is seen as dependent on the prayers in Nehemiah; while parts of the visions are seen as subtle expositions of Scripture (11:33; 12:3 being viewed as an exposition of Is. 52: 13 – 53:12). The author was composing his book in the 160s BC, when God's people were suffering the fierce persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes and desperately needed to know that there was meaning to life, that faithfulness to God was significant, that suffering was not permanent, that God reigned and his people would triumph. The question raised in 12:6 ('How long will it be?') thus echoes the cries of God's people. The cryptic prophecies contain the answer: It will not be for ever.

This view also suggests that the book of Daniel can be dated with greater precision than any other OT book. The author was aware of the profanation of the temple (which can be precisely dated in December 167 BC; *cf.* 11:31) and the heroic resistance led by Judas Maccabeus in 166 (11:33–35), but he apparently did not know of the death of Antiochus in 164 (11:40–45 is read as a genuine, but mistaken, attempt at prophecy). Critics suggest that, whatever earlier periods of composition and revision the book may have passed through, the final edition can be dated accurately around 165/164 BC. This, in turn, becomes a major argument for believing that the fourth kingdom in chs. 2 and 7 is Greece.

According to critical scholars, therefore, Daniel is a book of edifying legends and dramatic visions, a powerful piece of second-century BC resistance literature. Because it was written in such a way that none of its first readers would have mistaken it for a history of the past, or for prophecy of the future, they would have accepted it for what it was, would have been challenged by it and gained strength through its message – just as a reader today might be moved by reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In seeking to confirm this view, appeal has often been made to evidence in the book itself, *e.g.* the use of Greek terms for some of the musical instruments in 3:5; the lack of solid evidence for Nebuchadnezzar's madness or his decrees in ch. 4; the uncorroborated references to Darius the Mede in chs. 5 and 6 and the historical inadequacy of the description of the end of Antiochus Epiphanes. While discussed briefly in the commentary, more detailed

consideration of these issues will be found in the commentaries of J. G. Baldwin (*Daniel, An Introduction and Commentary* [IVP, 1978] and E. J. Young (*Daniel* [Eerdmans, 1949]).

This view, formerly held only by theologically liberal scholars, has more recently come to be shared by others from more conservative traditions. It is argued that the book itself indicates that the stories are not meant to be understood as literal history and that the visions are obviously interpretations of the past (not revelations of the future). A passage such as 11:4 – 12:3 is 'quasi-prophecy' and would not have been read as actual prediction by the audience for whom the book was originally intended. In undergirding this position theologically, it is said that while God could, if he so wished, save men from burning flames while others died, and give detailed predictions of future events, these are not the kind of things the God of Scripture actually does.

While this view has for the past century virtually overwhelmed the conservative view, it faces considerable difficulties, only some of which may be mentioned here.

1. Were the book so obviously fictional in character, we would expect to find the first hints of this in the tradition of interpretation, prior to and independent of Porphyry's attack on Christianity, but these are absent. If the book is 'obviously' composed of legend, it is hard to understand the apparently unbroken tradition of interpreting it as theological and auto-biographical history and vision.

2. The writers of the NT viewed the book of Daniel as historical. Jesus regarded Daniel as a prophet (Mt. 24:15) and, therefore, the contents of his book as genuinely prophetic of the future. The author of Hebrews refers to two events from the book in the context of other historical events and characters (Heb. 11:33–34). It is hard to resist the conclusion that Jesus and the NT writers regarded the book of Daniel as truly historical and prophetic. If so, both the knowledge and the authority of Christ as the Lord of Scripture are put in doubt by a late dating. So too is the NT writers' ability to detect fiction two centuries after it was written – a remarkable failure, akin to someone today reading Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as though it were history.

3. There is a theological and psychological flaw in the notion that a piece of known and obvious fiction is well suited to inspire readers to be faithful to death. According to the second-century dating theory this is not merely a possible *effect* but the actual *function* of the book. But this is asking people to trust in the power, knowledge and wisdom of God when in fact the evidence for these attributes was a figment of the writer's imagination, not the actual revelation and activity of God. Despite protestations that God *could* work the miracles of Daniel and reveal the future in detail *although he has not done so*, we are left with no grounds for believing he can or will do such things. Here Paul's logic in relation to another miracle is not inappropriate (see 1 Cor. 15:15–17).

4. A number of incidental features in the book point to a Babylonian origin and a knowledge of Babylonian life which could hardly be expected of a second-century BC Palestinian Hebrew. These include the use of the Babylonian dating system (1:1); familiarity with the Babylonian love for the number six and its multiples (3:1; NIV mg); the implication that Belshazzar's title 'king' implied his acting as regent (5:7); and the reference to the Persian custom of punishing the relatives of a guilty party (6:24). Even the reference to 'the plaster of the wall' (5:5) is striking since we know from archaeological discoveries that the walls of the palace at Babylon were covered with white plaster.

5. The second-century dating theory assumes that Daniel was written in 165/164 BC and was mistaken in its genuine attempt to prophesy Antiochus Epiphanes's downfall. Given the authority of the canon of the OT it is inexplicable (on this view) why the book was not revised for accuracy or how the book was accepted as canonical in the full knowledge that it contained errors.

The approach adopted in this commentary follows the long-held view of the Christian church that the book of Daniel has its origin in the sixth century BC and in Babylon. This is not to say that there are no difficulties concerning the historical contents of the book, or in believing its prophecies and miracles. The former continues to require the research of scholars; the latter, however, is related to our view of God. Part of the message of the book of Daniel is that God can and does do what his creatures cannot do (2:10–11). No interpreter of this book can avoid the challenge it brings to trust in a God who quenches fire and shuts the mouths of lions (Heb. 11:33–34), or, for that matter, in a God who raises the dead (12:2; *cf.* Mk. 12:18–27). (See also the chart on page 628.)

Further reading

S. B. Ferguson, *Daniel*, CC (Word, 1988).
R. S. Wallace, *The Message of Daniel*, BST (IVP, 1979).
J. G. Baldwin, *Daniel*, TOTC (IVP, 1978).
G. L. Archer, *Daniel*, EBC (Zondervan, 1985).
E. J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel* (Eerdmans, 1949; Geneva Series, Banner of Truth, 1972).

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Commentary

1:1–21 God's reign and his servants' faithfulness

1:1–2 Man proposes, God disposes

The story of Daniel is introduced by two statements which provide both the historical and theological context for the entire narrative. *Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.* Nebuchadnezzar invaded Palestine on several occasions. The siege referred to here took place in 605 BC, the third year of Jehoiakim's reign (by Babylonian

reckoning. Je. 25:1, which refers to the same incident, uses Jewish reckoning, counting from the new year prior to a king's accession.) Notice that this horizontal perspective on history is coupled with a vertical or theological one: *the LORD delivered Jehoiakim*. Immediately we are introduced to the underlying themes of the entire book:

1. Babylon versus Jerusalem, the city of this world against the city of God (Augustine), a conflict traced in Scripture to its climax in Revelation (see Rev. 14:8; 17:5; 18:2–24). Ultimately this conflict is rooted in the declaration of Gn. 3:15.

2. The sovereign reign of God, despite all appearances to the contrary. In the fall of Jerusalem prophecy was fulfilled (*e.g.* Is. 39:6–7; Je. 21:3–10; 25:1–11) and the judgments of God's covenant (of which the prophets had warned) were inaugurated (*i.e.* Dt. 28:36–37, 47–49, 52, 58). The exile was a judgment on Jehoiakim's reign (2 Ch. 36:5–7), but the rot had set in long before (2 Ki. 24:1–4). To outward appearances Nebuchadnezzar was triumphant, and God's name shamed (the placing of the temple articles in *the treasure-house of his god* marking the triumph of the pagan deity Nabu over Yahweh). In reality, however, nothing is outside the divine rule (*cf.* Is. 45:7; Eph. 1:11b) as Nebuchadnezzar himself was eventually brought to recognize (4:35). In Daniel the experience of Joseph is repeated (Gn. 45:4–7; 50:20).

1:3–7 Re-programming in Babylon

In Babylon selected Israelites were given specialized education. Those chosen were the most likely to be natural leaders (*from the royal family and the nobility*), (3) and had already demonstrated intellectual prowess. They were to be re-educated intellectually and treated royally. Several aims were in view, *e.g.* religious re-programming (language, literature and diet all carried religious as well as cultural meanings) and a 'brain-drain' which would simultaneously weaken the prospect of a capable future leadership among the Israelites and potentially strengthen Babylonian society when the process was completed (5b).

The education in view doubtless involved astrology, divination and other 'arts'. The young men needed to depend on the promise of Is. 3:1–3 long before the events of ch. 3!

The re-programming was inaugurated by the giving of new names, each of which was religiously significant as the suffixes of the Hebrew names indicate – Dani-el means 'God is my judge'; Hanan-iah, 'Yah has been gracious'; Misha-el, 'Who is what God is?' and Azar-iah, 'Yah has helped'. While the forms in which their Babylonian names appear may be deliberate corruptions (a signal to the reader of the untruth involved in them), the names of pagan gods (*e.g.* Bel, Nabu and possibly Aku) are enshrined in them. A change of identity (no longer God's children) and of destiny (Babylon, not Jerusalem) was in view, both of which would be reinforced by constant use.

1:8–21 Passing the first test

Having carefully explained the obstacles to faithfulness, the narrative now recounts how God carried through his sovereign plan to sustain his faithful people against all odds. The one who is in control in the affairs of nations (1–2) also works in the lives of individuals. *Cf.* 'the Lord delivered' (1) with *God caused the official to show favour* (9) and *God gave* (17).

Daniel believed that by taking *the royal food and wine* he would *defile himself* (8; *cf.* Ezk. 4:9–14). The reason was probably more subtle than simple allegiance to the levitical dietary laws against eating 'unclean' food (since no prohibition was placed on wine) or that the food had been offered to idols (unless vegetables escaped such consecration). In view of this, his resolution may simply have been his determination not to allow himself to be assimilated to (and spiritually conditioned by) the Babylonian culture when it was possible for him actively to resist. Concerning his education and his new name there was little he could be expected to do. The narrative thus underlines Daniel's wisdom in knowing at which point his resistance should be focused.

Daniel is presented here as a model of faithful witness in the attractiveness of his life, the graciousness of his resistance (*he asked*, 8; *Please test*, 12) and the way in which his deportment evoked the favour and sympathy of the official (9) and the agreement of the guard (14).

Through their vegetarian diet, Daniel and his companions flourished physically. By implication this was also God's doing. Human resources provide meals, but only God provides physical nourishment. The ten day test (14) became a permanent menu (15–16).

In addition, Daniel and his companions were given special divine gifts (17–19). Intellectual development and true success can be achieved without spiritual compromise; the godly may master and employ the learning of the ungodly. God makes foolish the wisdom of the world and perfects his strength where his people seem weakest (1 Cor. 1:19–25; *cf.* Is. 44: 24–26). Not only is Daniel's life and character portrayed in a manner deliberately reminiscent of Joseph; it is also a reflection of that of the coming Messiah (Is. 11:2–3).

The concluding comment (21) is thought by critics to be contradicted by 10:1. But the point here is not to provide the date of Daniel's death; it is theological, not simply chronological. The first year of Cyrus (538 BC) marks the beginning of the restoration era (2 Ch. 36:22–24). The point is that Daniel lived to see the actions of Nebuchadnezzar reversed. When the king of Babylon was long dead, God's servant continued to live and his people were restored. Thus, we are prepared for the conflict narratives which follow and for the book's visions of the final triumph of the kingdom of God.

2:1–49 God's reign in subduing kingdoms

2:1–13 Nebuchadnezzar's disturbing dreams

The events of the second chapter are set during *the second year* of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (604 BC; *cf.* 1:1–2).

In the ancient Near East kings were believed particularly to receive messages from the gods. Nebuchadnezzar's dreams were therefore especially interesting, set as they were in the context of his ambitious foreign policy. (His victory over the Egyptians at Carchemish and Hamath had secured control of Syria; further campaigns ensued in the following years.) The contents of his dreams left him a restless and troubled man (1). He thus summoned his various advisers whose titles are indicative of the nature of Babylonian science and religion (*e.g.* for *sorcerers* see Dt. 18:10–12; Mal. 3:5).

Uncertainty exists concerning how much of his dream Nebuchadnezzar could remember (3; *cf.* NIV mg.). Some statements imply that he had retained at least a general sense of it (*e.g.* v 9c). The dream had left such a disturbing impression that he demanded the assurance of an accurate interpretation under threat of death (5). Thus, only if his counsellors could tell him the content of a dream of which they were naturally ignorant would he be confident of their ability to interpret it. The counsellors' response was both reasonable (4, 7) and increasingly desperate (10–11) – an intentional indication on the part of the narrator of the perversity of the king and the bankruptcy of the wisdom of his court.

The words *in Aramaic* (4) signal the change of language from Hebrew to Aramaic which is sustained until 7:28 (see the Introduction).

Nebuchadnezzar's threat of excessive and capricious (but by no means unparalleled) punishment (5) and his suspicion of a conspiracy among his advisers (9) betray a deep sense of insecurity despite his accomplishments. The decree he passed (12) includes Daniel and his companions whose (unexplained) absence heightens the drama of the narrative.

2:14–23 Daniel receives illumination

The strength and grace of Daniel's character are manifested once more (*cf.* 1:8, 12) in the *wisdom and tact* with which he spoke to the commander of the death squad, as well as in his polite request to Nebuchadnezzar (16). There is a time for patient politeness as well as straightforward rebuke (*cf.* 5:17–28; Mk. 6:18).

No characteristic of Daniel's life stands out more clearly than his prayerfulness (18; *cf.* 6:10; 9:3–23; 10:12). Here he and his companions pray for *mercy* (18), since the future of the kingdom of God and its witness in Babylon appeared to depend on their preservation. Daniel believed he had access to realms which the Babylonian astrologers held to be barred (11). The character of God, the Revealed and the Revealer (22–23a), formed the basis for his petition. He is the Lord of wisdom and power (20), Ruler of all history (21a) who communicates with his people (22; *cf.* Acts 4:24–30). In a manner not wholly explained *the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision* (19).

2:24–49 The dream explained

Daniel returned to the king's presence, now in a position to speak at greater length and with an appropriate boldness, contrasting the impotence of the king's counsellors with the knowledge of Daniel's heavenly counsellor.

Nebuchadnezzar had seen a great statue, shaped like a human being and significantly made of metals of diminishing value (gold, silver, bronze, iron mixed with clay). In this dream appeared a quarried rock which struck and destroyed the statue (note the echo of Ps. 2:9b in vs 34b–35a). The rock had two noteworthy features: it was cut *but not by human hands* (34), *i.e.* its origin lay in the activity of God, and it *became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth* (35), *i.e.* its activity was universal.

The dream referred to *what will happen in days to come* (28). Since the head of gold was specifically identified as Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom (38), we may assume that the other parts of the statue also represented specific empires or dynasties. Their identity was not yet unveiled to Daniel and his contemporaries (but see 8:19–21). If they are to be identified in retrospect (and in the light of 8:19–21), the *chest and arms of silver* (32) represent the Medo-Persian Empire (which the book of Daniel views as a single entity embodied in the ascent of Cyrus in 539 BC; *cf.* 5:28; 8:20). The *belly and thighs of bronze* (32) would then symbolize the Greek Empire which would *rule over the whole earth* (39) followed in turn by the Roman Empire (although some conservative interpreters have taken the legs and feet to refer to the successors of Alexander the Great).

This interpretation has often led to the understanding of the *rock* as Christ and its growth as a reference to the advance of the kingdom of God. There may be allusions to this interpretation in Lk. 1:33 and 20:18. It should, however, also be noted that the stone shatters *all* of the kingdoms signified by the statue. In a more general sense, therefore, the message of the vision is that while the kingdoms people build give way to one another in a process of the survival of the fittest, it is the hand of God that ultimately destroys them as he builds his own kingdom, one that will endure.

Critical scholars, viewing the idea of a Medo-Persian Empire as unhistorical, generally see the kingdoms represented here as Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece and Daniel's interpretation as a 'prophecy after the event' (see the Introduction).

The effect of this revelation is described in what follows (46–49). Nebuchadnezzar honoured Daniel and made a profession of recognizing his God. The appointment of Daniel's companions (49) explains their presence at the event which follows in ch. 3, which, in turn, reveals that Nebuchadnezzar's profession was only superficial.

3:1–30 God's reign in fiery trials

3:1–18 Idolatry or death

The author of Daniel clearly intends us to see a close connection between Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the statue which he erected *on the plain of Dura* (1). It may have been a representation of the king himself (*cf.* 2:38, 'You are that head of gold'). In this case, the fact that by contrast with the dream-statue (2:31–33) it was made entirely of gold (*i.e.* probably covered in gold-plating) suggests Nebuchadnezzar's insanely self-centred reaction to Daniel's interpretation (2:44–45). Note the sevenfold emphasis that 'Nebuchadnezzar . . . set up' the statue (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 12, 14). Given 'dominion and power and might and glory' (2:37) by God, he misused it on himself. The key to interpreting the superficiality of his confession in 2:47 is now clear.

The unusual proportions of the statue (*ninety feet high and nine feet wide*) suggest that the height included a substantial base.

Two features in the narrative heighten the tension which surrounds its message. First, the repetition of lists of sights and sounds (vs 2–3 for sights; vs 5, 7, 10 for sounds. Lyre, harp and pipes appear to be of Greek origin, and may indicate the widespread character of Greek culture.) The reader is 'there'. Note that the event was surrounded by a religious aura and doubtless made a magnificent aesthetic impact. By contrast, the three Hebrews recognized that acceptable biblical worship involves the submission of the mind to truth (*cf.* Jn. 4: 24; Rom. 12:1–2). Secondly, the blatant nature of the conflict between the city of this world and the city of God. The choice was idolatry or death (4–6). At stake was not only obedience to Ex. 20:4–6, but whether those made to be, and being recreated into, the image of God (Gn. 1:26–27; Eph. 4: 24; Col. 3:10; *cf.* Mt. 22: 20–21) should bow before the image of man. In these circumstances the faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego shines brighter than the flames of the furnace (Heb.11:34), as they powerfully illustrate faithfulness to God's word (2 Cor. 4:11, 13b, 18).

Nebuchadnezzar evidently believed that each person had his or her price; none would defy his command. Certainly this was an even more severe test for the Hebrews than those already experienced in chs. 1 and 2 (which now may be seen as preparatory to this). Their faithfulness and courage received a true, if maliciously exaggerated (they *pay no attention to you*) and intended, testimony from the astrologers. They did, however, grasp the issue at stake: *They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold* (12; *cf.* Ex. 20:3–4, 23).

The king, who had previously had contact with the three Hebrews (1:18–20; 2:49), already knew the answer to his question (14) and now challenged their God as well as their courage (15). He did not reckon with their two leading characteristics: their knowledge of the power of God (17) and their commitment to his revealed word (18). Their faith was suffused with expectation (17; *cf.* 1:12–13; 2:16) but displayed no presumption (18) and echoed Abraham's example (*cf.* Rom. 4:20) and Job's testimony (Jb. 13:15a).

3:19–30 'The flames will not set you ablaze'

The climax of the hostility of the king of Babylon to the citizens of Jerusalem is reached. Formerly 'furious with rage' (13; *cf.* v19), now *his attitude towards them changed* (19) in the face of their calm resoluteness. He commanded the furnace to be heated to its full strength (the probable meaning of *seven times hotter than usual*) and *the strongest soldiers* to bind them (20) so that they were *firmly tied* (23). So hot was the furnace that *the flames of the fire killed the soldiers* (22). By these details the narrator underlines the human impossibility of the Hebrews' survival, but the description of their clothing serves as a signal of the unexpected triumph about to take place. While the king raged and the soldiers were burned to death, the three friends appeared in festal attire (note the colourful

account of their *robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes*; 21); by contrast with the kingdoms of this world, the kingdom of God is 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17). This is underlined by the activity of the Hebrews in the furnace (*walking around unbound*; 25).

Apparently the furnace had both upper and lower level access, so that the execution by cremation might be viewed as a public spectacle. Nebuchadnezzar was forced to reverse his earlier dogmatism (26; *cf.* v 15c) when he saw the three confessors alive, joined by a fourth god-like figure (24–25). He now recognized that it was by the miraculous intervention of their God that the three Hebrews were saved. The event is a literal fulfilment of Is. 43:1–4: 'Fear not . . . I will be with you . . . When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze . . .'. Early Christian commentators viewed the fourth figure as an appearance of the Son of God or as the angel of the Lord (*cf.* v 28) and have been frequently followed. The emphasis, however, is on the completeness of God's protection, shown by the fact that they emerged without even the *smell of fire on them* (27). Ps. 34:19–20, which was to find fulfilment in Christ (*cf.* Jn. 19:26), finds an earlier fulfilment here.

Ch. 3 begins with a decree from Nebuchadnezzar which threatened to destroy the kingdom of God; it ends with a further decree in which all other kingdoms (*people of any nation or language*; 29) were threatened with destruction should they offend the kingdom of God. While this registers a triumph for the kingdom of God, and (by contrast with 2:47) expresses the humiliation of the king (28b), the narrator provides us with hints that Nebuchadnezzar was by no means a man of genuine faith. He was impressed exclusively by the miraculous (*cf.* Acts 8:9–23); his response was to promote the Hebrews (30), not to share their trust (28). While in some respects his humiliation had changed his perceptions, it had not softened his heart (*cf.* v 29, and contrast Jonah's confession following his humiliation; Jon. 2:8).

4:1–37 God's reign humbles Nebuchadnezzar

4:1–18 The dream of the cosmic tree

The narrative of the fourth chapter is set within the context of a somewhat poetic letter (1–18, 34–37, possibly composed with Daniel's guidance). The centre-piece is the narrative of Nebuchadnezzar's fall, told in the third person, thus emphasizing that, during the recorded events, the king was in no condition to assess his own experiences. The ascription of praise (3) prepares us for the work of God to be described.

Nebuchadnezzar is described at the height of his powers: *at home, in my palace, contented, prosperous* (4). Here, by contrast with vs 2–3, there is no hint of the goodness or greatness of God, thus heightening the reader's expectation that a great reversal is about to take place (*cf.* Lk. 12:16–19).

Nebuchadnezzar had a terrifying dream. Despite the lessons of chs. 1–3, and the confessions of 2:47 and 3:28–29, it was to his magicians that he again turned (Pr. 26:11; 2 Pet. 2:22), only to find them bankrupt (7). The entrance of Daniel (8) brings light into a dark place (*cf.* Mt. 5:14; Phil. 2:14–16).

The central motif in the dream was a cosmic tree, clearly representing a world empire which reached to and provided for all (10–12; *cf.* 2:37–38). Over it a heavenly decree was pronounced; it was to be reduced to a stump (15a). But the empire was personalized (*let him . . . let him . . . let him*; 15b–16); an individual will be humbled, living like an animal, *drenched with the dew of heaven* (15b). It was, presumably, this element in the dream that filled Nebuchadnezzar with foreboding (5) and puzzled the royal society of magicians (7). Again it was Daniel, God's 'outsider', who alone could help.

Note that Nebuchadnezzar instinctively interpreted the reality of Daniel's spiritual life in terms of his own religious framework (*spirit of the holy gods*; 18b). His earlier confessions had not delivered him from polytheism. He is portrayed as having experienced religious convictions but not a biblical conversion (*cf.* v 8).

4:19–27 A warning of judgment

Daniel's perplexity and terror (19) were related to the interpretation of the dream rather than to any inability to understand it. His sensitivity is noteworthy (*e.g.* his use of a courtly Near Eastern prologue to the interpretation; 19b). The revealed humiliation of the king did not give him pleasure, and in this he reflects the divine heart and the Messianic Spirit (Ezk. 18:23; Mt. 23:37). No doubt Nebuchadnezzar was a frequently repeated name in Daniel's regular life of prayer (*cf.* 6:10).

The interpretation was then given (24–26). The heavenly decree was one of judgment. It was *against* Nebuchadnezzar (24), set in the context of God's absolute sovereignty (25, 27). But it was both righteous and tinged with mercy: the awful judgment which would transform Nebuchadnezzar into an animal was not inappropriate for one who had behaved like a wild beast to the people of God (in addition to his attitude to the oppressed, 27; always a significant indicator of the heart in the OT, Is. 1:17, 58:6).

Further, its function was to humble the king to a repentance encouraged by the hope that the God who puts down also raises up.

The judgments of God are never arbitrary; they are always morally righteous. This is underlined by Daniel's (again, courtly) counsel to the king. Since judgment is God's response to flagrant violation of his moral law, repentance, shown by obeying that law, may lead to mercy (*cf.* Pr. 28:13; Is. 58:9b–10; Jon. 4:2). Even the merciless may find mercy; but the evidence that they desire it from God is that they will display it to others (*cf.* Mt. 6:12; 18:21–35).

4:28–37 Humbled and healed

God's decree was fulfilled. Following a year of opportunity for repentance (29), Nebuchadnezzar was found again in self-exaltation (30): *I have built . . . by my mighty power . . . for the glory of my majesty (cf.* Is. 13:19). His achievements were remarkable indeed, including a major renewal and reconstruction programme. He built the Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, to remind his Median wife Amytis of her homeland. But he had consciously pursued a policy of expansion, claiming he had been appointed to universal kingship by Marduk; he had not reckoned with Ps. 127:1.

The divine judgment (announced in vs 31–32) involved a complete humiliation of the king; his *authority* (31) and his *sanity* (34) were *immediately* (33) removed. His confession in v 33 that his *sanity* was restored lends credence to the view that the king's response to God's judgment evoked a psychotic condition (now known as lycanthropy). Such was the staggering impact of God's word on his mind (*cf.* Je. 25:15–16). Having portrayed himself as superhuman (3:1–6; 4:30), he became subhuman; having set up his own statue to be worshipped as the image of a god, he forfeited life as the image of God (Gn. 1:26–27) and the last remnants of true glory (*cf.* Rom 3:23). Having behaved in bestial fashion he now reaped the harvest of which he had sown the seeds (Gal. 6:7–8).

Earlier repentance by Nebuchadnezzar might have met with mercy (27). Even now God's humbling work was no longer than necessary; the divine *until* (32) held out the possibility of restoration. But his remission was not 'spontaneous'. It was set in the context of humble prayer (*I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven*; 34) and led to worship and a confession that God alone has unlimited power (35). The king's words for the first time contain a recognition of God's covenantal activity (*from generation to generation*, 34; *cf.* Ex. 20:5–6; Ps. 103:17–18), as well as a recognition of his truthfulness and righteousness (37). He opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble (37; *cf.* 1 Pet. 5:5). In Nebuchadnezzar the words of Ps. 18:25–27 find rich illustration.

Christian commentators have frequently doubted the reality of Nebuchadnezzar's 'conversion'. If it were short-lived, it is not surprising that secular records of it are not extant.

A document entitled *The Prayer of Nabonidus*, recently discovered in the Qumran caves, has given strength to the critical view that this chapter originated in a story told of the illness of King Nabonidus (who reigned from 556 to 539 BC). The prayer records an illness lasting seven years brought on by divine judgment. In it Nabonidus tells how God gave him a Hebrew exile to explain his experience who also wrote a decree in relationship to the worship of the Most High God. While there are significant differences between Dn. 4 and this document, it is possible (as E. J. Young held) that its author has confused the tradition about Nebuchadnezzar with Nabonidus. It is strange that many critics tend automatically to assume that other documents are more likely to be historically accurate than those of the OT.

5:1–30 God's reign in removing Belshazzar

5:1–9 The writing on the wall

The book of Daniel, even the parts which may be viewed as historical, should not be thought of as merely a balanced and orderly account of affairs in Babylon. Rather, it portrays select moments of high tension in the ongoing conflict between the kingdoms of light and darkness. From the record of divine intervention in such dramatic events the reader is intended to gain encouragement for all contemporary spiritual struggles.

Strictly speaking, the last king of the neo-Babylonian dynasty was Nabonidus (556–539 BC), but for a decade he set up his royal residence in Teiman leaving his son Bel-sar-usur (Belshazzar, 'Bel protect the king') as regent. Note that Belshazzar's offering of the *third highest* place in the kingdom in vs 7, 16 and 29 assumes this. (*Cf.* Gn. 41:40 where Joseph was given second place.) Belshazzar was possibly the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar ('father' in vs 2, 11, 18 and 'son' in v 22 would have been readily understood as elastic terms by the original readers).

Again the author prepares us to anticipate activity of divine judgment in vs 1–4. At the *banquet* wine flowed freely from the cups held by the mixed company (3) and had the effect of deadening the king's conscience and any sense of an innate fear of God: *he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets . . . taken from the temple in Jerusalem* (2). Blasphemy soon flowed

equally freely (4), but God's judgment signals interrupted the easy assumption that all was well (*cf.* Is. 47:10–11). All eyes were on Belshazzar (*drank wine with* [before?] *them* in v 1 may convey the idea of public display), preparing the reader for an illustration of the proverb 'Before his downfall a man's heart is proud' (Pr. 18:12).

The divine intervention was as dramatic as it was terrifying for Belshazzar. Already presumably in a near-drunken stupor, the startling appearance of a hand writing on a wall had a sobering effect on him and transformed him from a proud reveller into a petrified and pathetic figure (6). In the fashion we have now become accustomed to he turned to the wisdom of this world, but found it impotent (*cf.* 2:2; 4:6). No explanation is given for the inability of the wise men to read the writing. Several are possible – indistinct formation of letters, the use of a code or uncertainty over the real meaning. In its wisdom the world neither knows God nor understands his revelation (1 Cor. 1:21; 2:14).

5:10–17 Daniel is remembered

In a manner reminiscent of Gn. 41:1–16, the name of Daniel surfaced once more in the royal family. The queen (probably to be understood as the queen mother here), in tones verging on open rebuke in the contrast she drew between Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar (now some twenty years deceased), referred Belshazzar to Daniel's proven wisdom. Her apparent respect for him was underlined by the use of his Hebrew as well as his Babylonian name and in the reference to his outstanding gifts (12; *cf.* Is. 11:2–3). Apparently Daniel no longer played his former prominent role in Babylonian society. Belshazzar appears to have been guilty of the sin of Rehoboam (1 Ki. 12:7–8).

Belshazzar's words (13–16) are most effectively read as those of a man still under the influence of alcohol. The allusions to Daniel's origin and to his age (he must now have been around eighty years old) as *one of the exiles my father* [*Nebuchadnezzar*] ... *brought from Jerusalem* (13) is the self-assured and demeaning speech of a drunkard.

5:18–31 A king weighed on God's scales

Daniel's sharp response (17–24) contrasts with the style of his reaction to Nebuchadnezzar (2:16; 4:19; see also comments on 8:1–4 for further explanation) and is reminiscent of Peter's words in Acts 8:18–20. His address resembles other OT examples of the lawsuit (*cf.* Ho. 12:2–6; Mi. 6:1–8). First of all, the historical background to Belshazzar's sin was outlined (18–21). These details served as an indication of the revelation of God's character and ways which Belshazzar should have known about and acted upon. On this basis the accusation followed (the pronouns 'you', 'yourself', 'your' occur fifteen times in vs 22–23). He knew God, but he did not glorify him or give thanks to him (Rom. 1:21).

The three words in the message (25) refer to weights and therefore worth or value (*Mene* = mina; *Tekel* = shekel; *Parsin* = parts). Daniel's interpretation combined the basic idea of being weighed and valued with a suggestive linguistic word play. *Mene* is derived from the verb 'to number' or 'appoint'; *tekel* in its verbal form means 'weigh' or 'assess' and *parsin* (*peres* is the singular) is 'parts' or 'shares'. Belshazzar's kingdom had been weighed and valued; it would be shared out between the *Medes and Persians* (a word play on *parsin*).

Belshazzar could afford to keep his promise. If Daniel's words came true, his role as *third highest ruler in the kingdom* (29) would be short-lived. If not, his life probably would be. In any event, *that very night* saw the end of Belshazzar (30; *cf.* Pr. 29:1).

Daniel offered no further explanation (the fact of the divine judgment, not the details, was his concern here). Both Herodotus and Xenophon record that Babylon was taken during a nocturnal festival by means of a temporary diversion of the River Euphrates, the invaders entering the city by means of the now-dried river bed. Xenophon (who describes the expedition of Cyrus) also records that the Persians killed the young, irreligious Babylonian king.

A major difficulty arises here. Daniel records that *Darius the Mede took over the kingdom* (31). Elsewhere in Scripture, however, Cyrus the Persian is responsible for the liberation of God's people from Babylon (2 Ch. 36:22–23; Ezr. 1:1–8). Critical scholars, therefore, regard the name of *Darius the Mede* either as deliberate fiction or as historical error, in which Darius I (King of Persia 522–486 BC) has been confused with Cyrus, who was in fact around *sixty-two* (31) at this time. Proposals of conservative commentators include the attractive suggestion that *Darius the Mede* was the Babylonian royal name for Cyrus the Persian (for an extended discussion, see J. Baldwin, *Daniel*, TOTC [IVP, 1978], pp. 23–28).

6:1–28 God's reign over wild beasts

6:1–9 Darius deceived

The reign of Darius brought sweeping changes to the government of Babylon with a system of 120 local governors (*satraps*; 1), themselves subject to a small central administration directly responsible to the king. (The existence of further strata is suggested in v 8.)

The motivation for this arrangement (*so that*

the king might not suffer loss; 2) speaks volumes about the temptations of political life and the fact that high office is no guarantee of high morals. Daniel (now in his eighties) again demonstrated the outstanding nature of his God-given wisdom, but his promotion aroused envy among his colleagues and subordinates (4).

The plot which followed is not the first or last time that the sacrifice of traditional hostilities, in this case between higher and lower levels of government, has been regarded as a price worth paying for concerted opposition against the Lord's anointed (*cf.* Ps. 2:1–2; Mt. 16:1; Lk. 23:12; Acts 4:25–27).

Daniel's colleagues were unable to find ground for complaint against him and therefore had no leverage to remove him as an administrator (4; *cf.* Jn. 14:30). While his colleagues had come to hate him they could not but recognize his integrity. They knew that their only hope lay in employing Daniel's well-known spiritual strength as a political weakness, knowing that he would obey God rather than men (5; note the further contact with Acts 4:19). This they did by turning the king's spiritual weakness into their own political strength (6–7). The irrevocability of *the laws of the Medes and Persians* (8; *cf.* Est. 1:19) was not unique in the ancient Near East, any more than the temptation to totalitarianism was to be limited to Darius (7). The significance in Persian law of the decree being put in writing is explained in Est. 8:8.

6:10–17 Obeying God rather than men

The plot was itself straightforward, but it contained a subtle testing of Daniel: all that was required was a brief period without vocal prayer (7). In addition he was now in his eighties, long past the age when heroics might be expected.

Characteristically, however, Daniel recognized that any gain made at the price of faithfulness to God's word proves ultimately to be loss (*cf.* Phil. 3:7–8).

While the critical issue in the narrative is the bare fact that Daniel prayed, in a marked spirit of reverence, it also provides several details of his praying, thus using him as an exemplar of a life of prayer (*cf.* 2:17–18; 9:3–19; 10:2–3, 12). It was his custom to worship in an attic (*upstairs room*; 10) where the *windows opened towards Jerusalem*. While knowing that God is everywhere and therefore hears prayer in Babylon, he prayed to the Lord who had made his presence known particularly in Jerusalem where the ark of his covenant was brought (note the covenant orientation of his praying in ch. 9). The regularity of Daniel's praying also elicits comment (10b) as does the note of thanksgiving which pervaded it, even in the context of grave personal danger, and the posture he adopted (*he got down on his knees*, 10), indicating the earnestness of his supplication (11).

In their subtlety the plotters caught both Daniel and Darius (11–12). The characteristic which made Daniel the only completely trustworthy member of the king's administration, namely his trust in a covenant God, received a radical reinterpretation at the hands of his foes. His reliability was now categorized as rebellion (13). Darius's folly was now clear to him, but he was powerless to reverse it (14), as, apparently was Daniel (17). Notice, however, the brilliantly drawn contrast which underlies the entire narrative: both the plotters and the king were feverishly active in scheming and planning (3–9, 14). By contrast, Daniel's life exuded regularity and spiritual integrity. Before v 21 he is portrayed as speaking to no-one but God.

6:18–28 Shielded by God's power through faith

Daniel was shielded by the power of God through faith (Heb. 11:33b; 1 Pet. 1:5), not *from* danger but *in* danger. To the king's astonishment and relief, angelic intervention preserved Daniel, God's witness (*cf.* v 22; Ps. 91:9–16). By faith (23) he had experienced the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5) in which lions are tamed (Is. 11:7). Like all OT miracles, this one is a foretaste of the great miracle of the resurrection of Christ (*cf.* v 17 with Mt. 27:60–66), which itself points to the final resurrection and restoration (1 Cor. 15:20–28; *cf.* Ps. 2:4–8). In an apparently 'closed universe' (17), God had demonstrated that he cannot be excluded; if believers make their bed in the depths, he is there (Ps. 139:8)! As a result, Daniel's protection and deliverance, like that of his three friends, was complete (23b; *cf.* 3:27 and, later, Jn. 19:31–36).

Contrary to a common assumption, there are very few dramatic miracles in the OT . Here, as in the only other concentrated periods of miracles in the OT (the days of the exodus and entry into Canaan and the time of Elijah and Elisha and the establishment of their prophetic ministry), the miraculous occurs at crisis points in the kingdom of God. The miracles in Daniel, as elsewhere, are not merely 'contrary to nature' or 'above nature'. They are primarily 'contrary to evil' and the powers of darkness. They are expressions of 'the powers of the coming age' when all evil will be vanquished.

A dark epilogue is recorded in v 24. It is probably not necessary to suppose (either here, or in v 4) that all the administrators were involved. According to Herodotus, the punishment of an entire family in this way was in keeping with Persian law. The narrative itself offers no moral

comment (*cf.* Est. 8:1–10), but the underlying message is clear enough: to obstruct the progress of the kingdom of God is to risk all in the venture. Those who oppose God will ultimately be broken in pieces. Here again the narrative makes contact with the principles of Ps. 2 (*cf.* Ps. 2:9–12).

Daniel's deliverance was celebrated in the decree of the king (perhaps under Daniel's own direction), in the context of doxology to God as *living* (26, *i.e.* actively engaged in the affairs of the world), sovereign and saving. Daniel himself is a vivid illustration of the most basic principles of a godly life (*cf* Ps. 1, especially vs 2–3). If Darius is indeed to be identified with Cyrus, 'and' (28) should be translated (as it quite properly may be) as 'that is' (NIV mg.).

7:1–28 God's reign over bestial kingdoms

7:1–14 Four beasts, one man

Ch. 7 both introduces the second half of the book and links its two sections together. While it introduces a new section containing Daniel's apocalyptic visions, it also takes us back to the reign of Belshazzar (*cf.* ch. 5) and concludes the Aramaic section of the book. The reader is thus advised to see important connections between history and apocalypse In content the vision in this chapter is reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in ch. 2. There, however, the focus was on the successive powerful kingdoms which stood against the kingdom of God but were ultimately overpowered by it; here it is on the depravity but short-lived character of those kingdoms (represented by bestial figures) by comparison with the everlasting kingdom of God.

As elsewhere in apocalyptic literature, the visual dominates (note the emphasis on seeing in vs 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13). While it is important to try to interpret the historical significance of the vision, the fact that the revelation is given in visual form underlines the importance of its appeal to the senses as well as to the reason; it is intended to create impressions, not merely communicate propositions.

The vision took place during the first year of Belshazzar's reign (*cf.* comment on 5:1). Doubtless Daniel's intimate knowledge of the royal family would have filled him with foreboding for the immediate future (that he has little time for Belshazzar is clear from 5:17).

Now God filled his mind with a more cosmic vision of *the great sea* (possibly the Mediterranean, but more probably a general picture of the world in its frightening godlessness and instability). It is, however, churned up not by the beasts which emerge from it but by *the four winds of heaven* (2), an indication that behind even the most fearful of events lies the activity of God. This is further emphasized in the use of the passive in the descriptions of the beasts, which evidently represent empires: the lion-like creature whose wings *were torn off was lifted* from the ground and the heart of a man *was given* to it (4; possibly a picture of Nebuchadnezzar); the bear-like creature *was told*, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh' (5); and the leopard-like creature *was given* authority to rule (6). Totalitarianism there may be, but there is never ultimate autonomy in human rule. Believers will always be able to look beyond what kings do to how God rules. The close connection between these creatures and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar suggests that they represent the same empires (Babylonian, Medo-Persian and Greek, according to the above interpretation). Interestingly, Nebuchadnezzar is elsewhere compared to both the lion (Je. 4:7; *cf.* 49:19; 50:44) and the eagle (Ezk. 17:3, 11–12). *Cf.* v 4 with 4:33–34. No better description could be found of the conquests of Alexander the Great than a leopard with wings which had developed four heads. (In fact a fourfold division of the Greek Empire followed his death.)

The fearful character of these creatures pales into insignificance before the description of the fourth beast and its brutality. Whereas the earlier creatures resemble a lion, an eagle, a bear and a leopard, this one has no likeness in the animal world. While Daniel was still puzzling over its ten horns (7–8), his attention was caught by a new horn; it apparently represented an individual, but one whose humanity was self-engrossed (8).

As Daniel watched, three scenes were brought quickly before his eyes. It may be wisest to think of them as parts of a tapestry which together convey one great impression.

The first scene (9–10) is a vision of the throne of God. In contrast to the previous scenes, it is marked by order, tranquillity and ultimate sovereignty. While no connection between this and the second scene (11–12) is explicitly stated, it is clearly implied that the judgment of God lies behind the destruction of the beast and the breaking of the power of the other beasts (10; *the court was seated . . . books were opened* suggests that a judicial verdict was about to be issued). Before *the Ancient of Days*, the kingdoms of this world are short-lived. His presence as a holy and righteous judge is conveyed by an impression of burning brightness and perfect whiteness (9; *cf.* Ps. 50:3–4). The third scene returns to the throne-room of God where *one like a son of man* is presented to *the Ancient of Days* (13) and receives universal authority from him. This figure is True Man by

contrast with the beasts. He is able to bear the holiness of God and remain in his presence. In this figure the rock of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (2:35, 44–45) becomes a man in whom the true image of God shines forth (Gn. 1:26–28), the Messianic Man who will be God's true regent (*cf.* Pss. 2:8; 8:4–8; 72:1–11, 17; Heb. 2:5–9; 12:28).

7:15–28 The horn that waged war

Daniel was given a series of clues to explain these scenes. The interpretation of the beasts as empires is in keeping with them. The vision was intended to assure him that *the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom* (18). This should not be taken to suggest that the 'son of man' (13) and the *saints of the Most High* are identical, but that they are related in some way, ultimately made clear in the coming of Christ (*e.g.* Rev. 1:7). His coronation is the guarantee that his saints will share in his triumph (Rev. 20:6).

Although having thus been given an assurance of the triumph of God's kingdom, Daniel was especially troubled by the identity of the terrifying fourth beast, its horns and particularly the *little one* (19; *cf.* v 8). The interpretation he received illumines the vision but by no means makes it plain. It is not surprising that commentators have differed in their interpretation of the passage. Its difficulty should warn us not to be dogmatic in explaining it.

The little horn appears in the context of the last empire. How we identify it depends on our general scheme for interpreting the whole vision (and Nebuchadnezzar's dream in ch 2). Special note should be taken of the little horn's threefold character in v 25. It is guilty of blasphemy, persecution of God's people and some form of self-deification (since to *change the set times*, v 25, is the prerogative of God alone, 2:21).

Those who set the readership of Daniel in the second century BC usually identify the fourth kingdom as Greece, and view the little horn as Antiochus Epiphanes. It is not possible, however, to read this passage from a NT perspective without recognizing that the figure of the 'son of man' (13) is fulfilled in Christ (*cf.* Mk. 13:26; Acts 7:56; Rev. 1:13; 14:14).

This (retrospective) interpretation suggests that the figure of the fourth beast is fulfilled in Rome. It is probably best to regard the 'horns' (7, 8, 24) as a continuation of the 'spirit' of Roman dominion, in the context of which arises the little horn, the man of lawlessness, the final antichrist (20–21, 25; *cf.* 2 Thes. 2:4–12; 1 Jn. 4:3b), who fiercely oppresses the saints (25) *for a time*. His power will then be consolidated and intensified (*for . . . times*), but will suddenly be broken (*and half a time*). The son of man, being granted universal dominion for himself and his people, will then reign for ever (14, 26–27).

Daniel was affected both physically and mentally by the vision. There is an important lesson for all who have unusual spiritual experiences in the fact that he kept the matter to himself (28).

8:1–27 God's reign endures for ever

In his visionary experiences Daniel was given a fuller understanding of the conflict in which he was personally involved. It was not limited to his own experience; rather, his experience was but one aspect of a cosmic struggle between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom God is establishing.

Daniel's second vision reminded him of the first one (1), but this time he saw himself on the banks of the River Ulai in Susa, the capital of Persia. His vision consisted of two central visual images (1–4; 5–12) followed by two spoken revelations (vs 13–14 given by *a holy one*; vs 15–26, given by *Gabriel*; *cf.* 9:21 and Lk. 1:19, 26). Since the visual and the audible parts are correlated, the chapter is best examined in these segments.

8:1–4, 15–20 The two-horned ram

The two-horned ram in the first vision (3) *represents the kings of the Medes and Persians* (20), the longer horn doubtless representing Persia. Daniel saw it butting its way forward, expanding its territory in every direction. In fact the Persian Empire spread west to Babylonia, Syria and Asia Minor, north to Armenia and the Caspian Sea, and south into Africa. Daniel's knowledge of this (in the third year of Belshazzar's reign) is consistent with the boldness of his later address to the king in the year of his downfall (*cf.* 5:18–31). He had already seen 'the writing on the wall' for the Babylonian Empire. As a man of faith he was learning progressively that this was simply a pointer to the greater reality – that the writing is already on the wall for all empires except that of the Most High (*cf.* 2:44).

8:5–8, 21–22 The one-horned goat

As Daniel pondered the meaning of this first image, prior to receiving the interpretation of it, he caught sight of a *goat with a prominent horn* (5). Three things characterized it: its extraordinary speed; its apparently omnipotent ferocity in overwhelming the ram (6–7); and the dramatic breaking of its large horn and the emergence of four horns in its place (8), from one of which emerged a further horn (9).

The goat represents the Greek Empire (21). The imagery of the large horn was perfectly fulfilled in Alexander the Great who became a world conqueror between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-six, overwhelming the Persian

forces in a series of decisive battles between 334 and 331 BC. He was, however, to die, a tragic figure, at the age of thirty-three (*cf.* v 8) and his empire was fragmented into four regions represented by the four horns (22). From one of these grows *another horn* (9) which is to form the climax of the entire vision.

8:9–14, 23–27 The small horn that grew

The descendant of one of the horns is now pictured engaging in a vigorous policy of expansion which reaches to Palestine (*the Beautiful land*, 9; *cf.* Dt. 8:7–9; Je. 3:19). In self-exultation (*cf.* Is. 8:12–15) this figure will deify himself and blasphemously forbid biblical worship (11–12). Daniel saw this continuing for *2,300 evenings and mornings* (14), probably to be understood as days (*cf.* Gn. 1:5, 8, 13 *etc.*). The fact that this information was relayed to Daniel by the holy ones (13) is an indication that, despite the horror of the events, they are known to God and mysteriously within his purposes (*cf.* 1:2). So, too, is the little horn whose rise is *not by his own power* (24) and whose fall is *not by human power* (25).

Syria, one of the four divisions into which Alexander the Great's empire fragmented, was governed by Seleucus Nicator, head of the Seleucid dynasty from which Antiochus IV emerged in 175 BC. He took the title Theos Antiochus Epiphanes (Antiochus, the Illustrious God). Others referred to him as Epimanes ('the madman'). In his expansionist policy he overran Palestine (*the Beautiful Land*; 9) and sacked Jerusalem amid terrible bloodshed. He abolished the daily morning and evening sacrificial offerings (11; *cf.* Ex. 29:38–43) and committed the blasphemy of sacrificing a pig on the altar of burnt offering, later placing a statue of Zeus in the temple and making human sacrifices on the altar. He forbade circumcision and profaned the Sabbath (*cf.* vs 11–12).

The emphasis on Daniel understanding this vision is noteworthy (5a, 15–16). This illumination is not only a matter of foreknowledge of the events of history but also of insight into the nature and working of evil in its destruction of life, its opposition to godliness (24; with a focus on destroying the worship of the people of God, 11; *cf.* Acts 20:29–31), its falsehood and its pride (25). In the light of this Daniel learns vital lessons: that no-one should allow themselves to be lulled into a false sense of security (25, *feel secure*; *cf.* 1 Cor. 10:12; Gal. 6:1), and that God will ultimately destroy all opposition to himself (25; *cf.* Pss. 2:8–12; 46:8–10; Rev. 11:15–18).

The focus on the little horn, to which the roles of the greater empires of the ram and the goat are secondary, is a reminder of the distinct biblical perspective, which sees not the great empires but God's covenant people as the key to history. The ultimate significance of empires and their rulers is determined by their treatment of the people of God (9–12; *cf.* Mt. 25:31–46).

Two phrases point toward the fulfilment of Daniel's vision: these events will take place *later in the time of wrath . . . the appointed time of the end* (19) and in *the distant future* (26). The 'end' in view here is best taken as the last part of the period of history under review (*i.e.* not the end of the ages).

As in 7:28, Daniel's reaction is instructive. The seriousness of the conflict in which God's people are to be involved overwhelmed and appalled him, but it did not paralyse him. Even in an ungodly environment he fulfilled his daily responsibilities (27; *cf.* 2 Pet. 3:11).

9:1–27 God's reign undergirding prophecy and prayer

9:1–3 Daniel searches the Scriptures

Gabriel then brought further revelation (21; *cf.* 8:16) which is given careful and significant chronological setting in the *first year of Darius* (1). Daniel was engaged in spiritual exercises. He had been meditating on Jeremiah's prophecy that the *desolation of Jerusalem* (2) would last for seventy years (*cf.* Je. 25:11–12; 29:10). The prayer which followed was deeply influenced by the spirit of Je. 25. As elsewhere in Scripture, the motivation for Daniel's earnest intercession is twofold: the need of the hour and God's covenanted word of promise. While abstract logic might lead us to ask why he needed to pray when God had already given his promise, Daniel himself understood that God employs prayer as the means by which he is pleased to fulfil his word. Genuine repentance and intercession affected Daniel outwardly as well as inwardly (3). This was presumably a part of Daniel's private devotions, but his actions were not in contradiction of the spirit of Mt. 6:16–18, which concerns our appearance in public and in any event has in view those who seek the reward of others' praises rather than God's approval.

9:4–19 Prayer, a covenant work

Daniel's praying was dominated by a sense of the character of God especially as that is revealed in his righteousness. The righteousness of God is his absolute integrity, his conformity to his own perfect glory. In his relationships with his people this takes the form of his faithfulness to his covenants with them. In that covenant relationship he has promised to be their God and to take them as his people; he has promised that they will enjoy blessing as they themselves respond to his covenant love in faithfulness, but

judgment should they respond to him in unbelief, ingratitude and disobedience (*cf.* Dt. 27; 28). It is significant that the covenant name of God, Yahweh, used in the book only in this chapter, appears frequently printed in the NIV as LORD (v 2, 4, 10, 13, 14, 20; *cf.* Ex. 3:13–15).

These principles underlie all of God's dealings with his people in the OT and come to the surface in Daniel's prayer. In his longsuffering with his disobedient people God had sent prophets to summon them back to covenant faithfulness (5–6). Their exile was the result of their indifference to his warning and a fulfilment of the covenant curse (7; *cf.* Dt. 28:58, 63–64; Je. 18:15–17). In a true spirit of repentance, Daniel, the most faithful of all God's people, took to himself their guilt as though it were his own (*we* is repeated eight times in vs 5–10). In this respect his heart reflected the heart of God (*cf.* Is. 63:8a, 9a); they are his people (*cf.* v 20). The ultimate remedy awaited the time when God's Son would take his people's guilt as though it were his own (*cf.* Is. 53:4–6, 10–12; 2 Cor. 5:21). But the hope of forgiveness does not minimize the seriousness of their condition. Indeed Daniel ransacked the OT vocabulary as he described and confessed Judah's failure (sin, wrong, wickedness, rebellion, turning away, not listening, unfaithfulness, transgression, disobedience; 5–11) and its consequences (shame and scattering; v 7). Such judgment is the expression of God's covenant righteousness in response to the sin of his people. He has kept his promise (7, 11–14).

As he prayed over the plight of his people, Daniel did not ask God to abandon his righteousness. Paradoxically, it is the people's only hope. As in the first exodus, for his own glory God revealed his covenant righteousness in mercy to the oppressed as well as judgment on the wicked (*cf.* Ex. 3:7–10, 20; 6:6). Encouraged by the divine promises through Jeremiah, Daniel appealed to God to defend his glorious Name which he had bound to the people and the city of Jerusalem (16). The *goal* of his intercession is the glory of God's Name; its *foundation* is God's covenanted word of promise concerning the restoration; its *motivation* is the knowledge of the righteous mercy revealed in God's saving deeds in the past (15–19).

9:20–27 Another 'seventy'

The time of the revelation was *about the time of the evening sacrifice* (21; *i.e.* mid-afternoon) – a remarkable indication of Daniel's city-of-God-centred approach to life, since he had now been absent from Jerusalem for about seventy years (*cf.* 6:10). Gabriel appeared with dramatic swiftness in response to his prayer, bringing a further divine communication which extended Daniel's horizon beyond the seventy years of Jeremiah's prophecy to a period of *seventy 'sevens'* (24). There is a further peak in the mountain ranges of God's purposes on which he is now to focus.

The enigmatic revelation which follows first outlines the divine programme, including six things to be accomplished within the period of *seventy 'sevens'* ordained by God (24). The first sixty-nine 'sevens' lead to the coming of the *Anointed One* (25) and are divided into two unequal periods (*seven 'sevens'* and *sixty-two 'sevens'* = sixty-nine 'sevens'). This division is one of the most enigmatic features of the whole book. Possibly the first 'sevens' look towards the completion of the temple. Vs 26 and 27 may contain a miniature 'progressive parallelism': v 26 describing the final 'seven' in panoramic terms while v 27 describes it in specific detail.

Interpretations of this message vary enormously, and depend on the interpreter's wider view of the fulfilment of prophecy. Critical scholarship, setting the writing of Daniel in the context of the second century BC, sees the period in view as intended to stretch from the sixth century to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes (the four hundred and ninety years being understood either in round terms, or literally and, perhaps, mistakenly). But from the perspective of the NT, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the *Anointed One* (25) is fulfilled in Jesus Christ whose coming brings atonement and the end of guilt (24). Some conservative interpreters have, in addition, employed various chronologies to show that the figure of four hundred and ninety is a chronologically exact prediction of the death of Christ. No agreement has been reached either about this or about the detailed interpretation of the final 'seven'.

If the Christological analysis is generally correct, the sixty-nine 'sevens' may represent the period beyond the restoration until the coming of Christ and the kingdom he inaugurates. While difficult, v 26, *the Anointed One will be cut off* (the verb is one also used of confirming a covenant) *and will have nothing* (see NIV mg.) is reminiscent of Is. 53:8 and an indication of absolute desolation (*cf.* Mt. 26:31; 27:46). V 27 could then be taken to refer to *the ruler who will come* (26), finding its fulfilment in Titus Vespasian, the defilement of the temple and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (*cf.* Mt. 24:3–25). Alternatively, v 27a could refer to Christ confirming the covenant of God for *one 'seven'*, *i.e.* for all future ages (*cf.* 1 Cor. 11:25–26); vs 27b and 27c to the desecration of Jerusalem.

For seventy years Daniel had longed for the restoration of the city and temple of God (16–19). Now that it was about to take place his attention was directed to a more distant and

loftier peak in the history of redemption. Even a new temple in a rebuilt city made by human hands could be destroyed; Daniel's eyes were therefore to be fixed on a final temple (*cf.* Jn. 2:19), on one that would be beyond all desecration (Rev. 21:22–27).

10:1 – 12:4 God's reign over all history

10:1–3 In spiritual mourning

The narrative of Daniel's final vision extends from the beginning of ch. 10 to the end of the book. It is precisely dated *in the third year of Cyrus* (1) during the period of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread and is set on the banks of the Tigris (4). On the anniversary of the exodus from Egypt a new exodus began in the first year of Cyrus (Ezr. 1), but it met with early discouragement (Ezr. 3:12 – 4:5). Eventually the work of rebuilding the temple came 'to a standstill' (Ezr. 4:24). Intimations of these early discouragements seem the most likely reason for Daniel's prolonged period of spiritual discipline (2). The opening verse summarizes the character of the vision which follows.

10:4–9 A glorious vision

Daniel's vision (7) had an overpowering effect on him (8). Although he alone saw the figure, it appears that his companions heard the voice which was *like the sound of a multitude* (6) and fled (7). While the figure was dressed in the linen of a priest (5; *cf.* Ex. 28:42; Lv. 6:10; 16:4), his whole being radiated such light and beauty that Daniel ransacked the vocabulary of precious metals, stones and even the elements to find adequate similes to describe him (5–7). No attempt is made to identify the man. The description of him surpasses that of other heavenly visitants in Daniel (8:15–16; 9:20–21) but clearly parallels other appearances of God and of Christ in Scripture (*e.g.* Ezk. 1:26–28; Rev. 1:12–15). This vision was given to emphasize God's covenant grace (priestly garment) and holy power and glory (the overwhelming brightness). In a special sense God himself is the source of the message and the guarantor of its truth (*cf.* v 1).

10:10 – 11:1 'Forces of evil in the heavenly realms'

The first part of Daniel's vision faded from view leaving him overwhelmed in a *deep sleep*. Then, apparently, a second figure addressed him (11), explaining that an answer to his prayers for insight (unstated, but implied in v 2) had been sent immediately he began to pray (12). The messenger had been *resisted*, however, by *the prince of the Persian kingdom* (evidently also a supernatural figure; 13) until Michael had come to his aid. The archangel Michael (*cf.* Jude 9) is the leading defender of God's people (*your prince*, 21; *cf.* 12:1) against the powers of darkness (*cf.* Rev. 12:7–9).

It is clear that behind the scenes of the conflicts of history lies a conflict 'in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12), in which Daniel had become involved in his intercession. Spiritual powers tried to prevent his receiving revelation of the future (and therefore an understanding of the sure purposes of God). Implied in this is the recognition that the forthcoming revelation will strengthen Daniel and, indeed, all the people of God (14).

It is not clear whether the *one who looked like a man* (16) is a third figure or should be identified with the figure(s) in vs 5 or 10 (vs 20–21 seem to indicate the latter). This uncertainty is explained both by the nature of the visionary character of the revelation and by Daniel's mental condition (15–17). In either case, encouraged and strengthened by his touch, Daniel was able to receive the revelation (18–19). The heavenly messenger would soon return to his ongoing task (11:1) in spiritual warfare (20). Currently it was *Persia*, soon it would be *Greece* (20) that, humanly speaking, dominated the experiences of the people of God.

Part of the answer to the question Daniel was asked in v 20 is that he needs to know that there are heavenly powers defending the people of God (*cf.* 2 Ki. 6:15–23). But first he learns *what is written in the Book of Truth* (21), *i.e.* how the purposes of God will unfold.

11:2–45 The kings of the North and South

While the revelation which follows appears to modern readers to be a foretelling of future events it is so detailed that most scholars assume that the original readers would have instantly recognized it as a literary device used by a second-century author. According to this view, the close detail in the account of events in vs 21–35 indicates that the author had personal knowledge of them. Vs 40–45, on the other hand, describe events which were still future to the author, and his prophecy about them turned out to be mistaken. Scholars who hold this view, therefore, date the final writing of Daniel in 165 or 164 BC. (For the implications of this view see the Introduction.)

Throughout the chapter it is evident that what Daniel has previously learned in pictorial fashion is now set before him in the linear fashion of history. The viewpoint from which these events are seen is, however, *the Beautiful Land* (16) which God had covenanted to his people, and in relationship to which rulers in the

south or north arise (*e.g.* vs 11–12). Contrary to other readings of history which marginalize the people of God (Palestine being seen as merely a land bridge between north and south), biblical revelation sees the kingdom to which they belong as the centre point and key to history.

11:2–4 The immediate future. The messenger sketches the immediate unravelling of history. The power of the Persian empire is viewed as growing until the appearance of a figure of immense power, who would have no dynasty, his empire being fragmented after his death (4).

The *fourth* Persian king (2) following Cyrus (*cf.* 10:1) was Xerxes (reigning from 486–465 BC). He is known to have gathered enormous resources through taxation and depleted them in his hostilities against Greece (2), by whom he was defeated at the battle of Salamis in 480 BC. The portrait of a *mighty king* whose empire would be fragmented (3–4) rather than passed on to heirs was fulfilled in Alexander the Great (Daniel already knew that the ascendancy would pass to Greece; 10:20), whose two sons were assassinated. He became a broken horn (8:22).

11:5–45 North versus South. There is widespread agreement on the interpretation of this section among commentators of quite different schools of thought, so closely does this vision coalesce with the following outline of history.

When Alexander's empire was divided into four (4), Ptolemy I became ruler of Egypt (*the king of the South*; 5) establishing the Macedonian dynasty from 304 BC (when he took the title of king) until 30 BC. Meanwhile Seleucus I (the *king of the North*) controlled Syria, establishing the Seleucid dynasty for approximately the same period. What follows is the story of the dynastic development and power struggles within these two kingdoms and the rivalry between them.

The initial attempt at alliance between the two powers is represented by the marriage (6) between Antiochus II (grandson of Seleucus I) and Berenice (daughter of Ptolemy II). The peace was only temporary and was followed by the invasion of the north by Ptolemy III (7–8) and the counter-attack by Seleucus II (9) and his sons Seleucus III and Antiochus III, who pushed as far south as Raphia in southern Palestine (10).

The struggle for domination continued under Ptolemy IV, a man of profligate life-style. The reference to him being *filled with pride* (12; *cf.* v 18) prepares the biblically sensitive reader for his downfall (2:21a). While he did inflict a massive defeat on Syria at Raphia, his ascendancy did not continue and eventually, when Ptolemy V had been enthroned at the age of four, Antiochus III conquered (13–16). He too displayed the self-exaltation which merits divine judgment (16; *cf.* v 19). V 14 may refer to the unsuccessful activity of Jewish zealots who supported the Syrian forces against Egypt under whose domination they lived.

With a view to further expansion, a political marriage was planned between Antiochus III's daughter Cleopatra and the young Ptolemy V (17); but this also failed. When Antiochus sought further conquests in the west (Greece) he was defeated by the Romans and forced to return home. Retreating, he was to disappear from the stage of history, dying within two years (19).

Seleucus IV, who followed as king of Syria, inherited a large empire but one bankrupted by long years of military action. He sought to replenish the treasury by raising taxes (20), but was soon succeeded by the figure who now dominates the rest of the chapter, *a contemptible person* (21), his brother Antiochus IV (Epiphanes).

He came to the throne in 175 BC by means of two coups. By various means, including intrigue and deceit (21, 23) he promoted a policy of Hellenization, which brought him into direct conflict with Jews who were committed to orthodox piety. Again the danger of feeling secure is underlined (v 24; *cf.* 8:25), as is the time limit which God places on hostile human activities (*only for a time*; 24).

Antiochus prevented an Egyptian invasion of Palestine by himself invading Egypt, now ruled by Ptolemy VI, succeeding partly by intrigue (according to vs 24–25). But full success eluded him (27), and when disorder emerged in Palestine, he returned to Syria. Again, the divine limits feature in history (27), and the sinister nature of opposition to the people of God is emphasized (28).

Antiochus invaded Egypt again in 168 BC, when the Ptolemies agreed on a joint reign. This time he found himself faced with a humiliating Roman ultimatum to leave (*cf.* v 30), after which he vented his fury against God and his people (30), enlisting the help of Jews sympathetic to the Hellenization process (30–32). This culminated in the massacre of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the ravaging of the city. The sanctuary was defiled, the daily offerings abolished, an altar to Zeus was set up, and pagan rites were celebrated on the altar of burnt offering (*the abomination that causes desolation*, 31; *cf.* Mt. 24:15).

In the midst of Jewish apostasy (described in vs 30, 32), others were faithful to death (33). It was in this context that the famous resistance of the Maccabees took place. As in all resistance movements, spiritual as well as political, the

faithful received support which they could have done without (34).

Possibly the most difficult section in the book follows in vs 36–45. The description seems to exceed all that is known of even the blasphemous Antiochus (hence the conclusion of many commentators that this section is indeed predictive prophecy on the part of the author, which, because erroneous, enables us to date the final edition of the entire book). 13:1–3, however, suggests that the end of all history may now be in view. In this case, v 35 may be pointing forward to the experience of God's people, not merely during but beyond the time of Antiochus. Nevertheless, identifications of *the king* (36) vary (*e.g.* the Roman Empire [Calvin], the papacy and the antichrist).

Precise identification of the meaning of prophecy always depends on its historical fulfilment. In any event, we at least have here a portrayal of the spirit of antichrist (1 Jn. 2:18) in the radical autonomy of the king (*cf.* 3:15; 4:30; 8:25; 11:3, 12, 16), who exalts himself as divine (36–37; *cf.* 3:5) and the marriage of ungodliness and unrighteousness. The reference to *the one desired by women* (37) is difficult. Sometimes taken as a reference to Tammuz, the pagan deity mourned by the goddess Ishtar (*cf.* Ezekiel's alarm at this abomination in Ezk. 8:13–14), the words may also signify 'the love of women' and denote the king's complete disregard for human affection (*cf.* 2 Tim. 3:2–4) or indeed for the creation ordinance of male-female relationships.

Vs 40–45 portray a final struggle. Some interpreters suggest this will be fulfilled in the precise geographical terms in which it is described, but the statements are best taken as a portrayal of future conflict in terms of a then contemporary political map. *Edom, Moab* and *Ammon* (41) represent the ancient enemies of God's people. The traditional enemies of the king of the north with their allies will be mastered by him (42). Yet, his end will come unceremoniously (44–45).

If we have here a reference to the final scenes of history, it should be remembered that they are described in terms of the ancient world order. Prophecy does foretell the future, but also speaks to its contemporary world in terms drawn from its own time.

Even if the climax of godlessness is here portrayed, it would be a mistake to anticipate that history's dénouement will involve *chariots and cavalry* (40). Nor should we forget that the function of this entire section is to emphasize that no matter how radically godless a ruler of the nations may be, *yet he will come to his end, and no-one will help him* (45).

12:1–4 The last things

The angelic messenger promises Daniel that the people of God will be protected against the ravages of the powers of darkness, as always, by Michael (*cf.* 10:13, 21). But like the testing of himself and his companions this will not mean that they will be shielded from the *time of distress* (1; *cf.* 2 Tim. 3:1–9) but delivered out of it. God's purposes (*cf. the book*, v 1) will not fail; he keeps his people for 'the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time' (1 Pet. 1:5). V 2 points forward to this resurrection as the reversal of the curse of death (*everlasting life*, v 2, contrasts with *sleep in the dust of death*, *cf.* Gn. 2:7, 17; 3:19), or its confirmation (*everlasting contempt*). The *wise* (*cf.* 11:25) who have been faithful to God's word, despite shame and suffering, will be glorified (3). This is the message of hope and comfort which will strengthen future believers. For this reason, Daniel is to *seal the words of the scroll* (4), not in the sense of keeping them secret, but in order to preserve them until they are needed, keeping them for those who seek a word from God by contrast with others who *go here and there to increase knowledge* (4; *cf.* Am. 8:12).

12:5–13 God's reign and his servant's rest

The exquisite conclusion focuses again on Daniel himself (*cf.* 10:2–18). He sees *two others*, possibly to be viewed as confirmatory witnesses (Dt. 19:15), standing one on each bank of the river. One of them asks the question which was certainly already in Daniel's mind, and frequently asked by God's distressed people, *How long . . . before these . . . things are fulfilled*? (*cf.* 8:13; Rev. 6:10). The divine figure (*cf.* 10:5–6) raises both hands indicating the solemnity and dependability of what he will say. As before *a time, times and half a time* (*cf.* 7:25) expresses both a general and extended period of time and a sense that these periods are known to and limited by God. Just when God's people have no defences left God himself will intervene (7).

Daniel was understandably puzzled and sought further illumination on *the outcome* of these events (8). Significantly (for all later interpreters as well as for Daniel) he was informed that the unfolding of the meaning of the vision will await its historical fulfilment; then the divison between the wise and the wicked will be made plain (10). The former, with Daniel's book in hand, *will understand* the true significance of the events through which they are passing. The wicked will know only confusion and bewilderment.

The figure provides one final explanation (which builds on 11:31). From the time of *the*

abomination that causes desolation (11) the *time of distress* (1) will last for approximately three and a half years, stretching out for a further month and a half (11–12). This may be intended as a microcosm of the final *time, times and half a time* (7) and relate to the suffering under Antiochus Epiphanes. It seems likely, however, that it also looks beyond to the final days, these three and a half years bringing to completion the seventy 'sevens', only sixty-nine and one half of which had been fulfilled in 9:24–27.

Fittingly the final words are of promise to the aged Daniel himself. He too must persevere to the end. Then he will enter into his rest. His works continue to follow him until his resurrection (v 13; *cf.* Rev. 14:13).

Sinclair B. Ferguson

HOSEA

Introduction

Hosea was one of four 'writing prophets' (prophets whose prophecies were written down and preserved for us in the Bible) who lived in the eighth century BC. These four were (in roughly chronological as well as alphabetical order): Amos and Hosea, who prophesied in the northern kingdom, Israel; and Isaiah and Micah, who prophesied in the southern kingdom, Judah.

They lived in times of comparative affluence in Israel and Judah. This affluence, however, was not shared. The rich and powerful got richer and more powerful at the expense of the poor and vulnerable. All the prophets addressed this situation but they have different emphases. Whereas Amos concentrated on the social injustices of the people, Hosea stressed their unfaithfulness to God in their idolatry.

Hosea the prophet

Although we do not know much of the details of Hosea's life (*e.g.* where he came from, or who his father Beeri was) his circumstances were of supreme importance for bringing home the significance of his message. For Hosea married Gomer, a woman who turned out to be like the people of Israel – unfaithful. She left him for someone else and in doing so, gave an accurate picture of the people of Israel who forsook God to 'go after other gods'. Hosea, however, was commanded to go and take back his former wife, and so provide a powerful visual aid for the message that God had for his people: 'You have sinned and must be punished, but I will take you back to myself and restore our relationship' (see on chs. 1, 3 especially).

The prophet's wife bore him three children and each of them was give a prophetic name: 'Jezreel', 'Not-shown-compassion' and 'Not-my-people' (see on 1:4–9). Together they speak of God's judgment, but the judgment is also reversed (1:10 – 2:1, 21–23).

Hosea seems to have had a prophetic ministry of over thirty years as we can see from the kings listed in 1:1, and from allusions to historical events in the book. He probably received his call to prophesy around 760 BC, towards the end of the reign of Jeroboam II (*c.* 793–753) and continued for about thirty years. In this year the so-called Syro-Ephraimite war took place. Syria and Israel (the northern kingdom, often referred to as Ephraim) tried to force Judah to join them in a rebellion against Assyria. Judah refused to join and appealed to Assyria, which then crushed Syria and Israel without trouble. Hosea may well have prophesied almost up to the time of the fall of Samaria in 722.

Hosea proclaimed his message verbally at the natural meeting-places. These would include sanctuaries (*e.g.* Bethel and Gilgal; 4:15) where people came to worship and offer sacrifice, and the city gates, where the elders gathered to settle legal disputes. He probably spent some time in the capital Samaria, which features in several prophecies (*e.g.* 7:1; 8:5–6).

In view of the references to Judah in the book (*e.g.* 1:1, 7, 11; 4:15; 5:10–14), it is possible that Hosea took refuge there at some point in his ministry. This would also explain how his prophecies came to be preserved when the northern kingdom was destroyed (see also chart on page 628).

Historical background

During the first part of the eighth century BC the great powers of the known world were less dominant than they had been: Assyria and Babylon were engaged elsewhere and Egypt was comparatively weak (see time chart on page 22). This allowed the smaller states of Palestine to expand and engage freely in trade. Jeroboam II was a bad king, according to 2 Ki. 14:23–29; he achieved military success but caused suffering to the people of Israel. He was the fourth and last but one in the dynasty of Jehu, who had been anointed king by a representative of the prophet Elisha (2 Ki. 9:1–10) to destroy the line of Ahab. Jehu then killed Joram (2 Ki. 9:24) who had been recovering from his wounds in Jezreel, and followed this up with a massacre of the rest of his family (2 Ki. 10:1–8), also in Jezreel. Having got the taste for blood he apparently went way beyond God's commands. He killed Ahab's 'chief men', 'close friends' and 'priests' (2 Ki. 10:11), and followed this up by killing a temple-full of Baal worshippers (2 Ki. 10:18–28). The commendation given in 2 Ki. 10:30 is severely modified by Hosea's reference to the 'blood of Jezreel', as it is by the statement that 'he did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit' (2 Ki. 10:29). Jehu was followed by his son Jehoahaz and his grandson Jehoash. The third king after Jehu was the above mentioned

Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash.

2 Ki. 15 tells how when Jeroboam died (753) there was a series of brief reigns and assassinations. Jeroboam's son Zechariah (not the prophet of Judah) was killed by Shallum, who was killed by Menahem. Menahem's son Pekahiah succeeded him, but after two years was killed by Pekah, who was killed by Hoshea. (This name is spelt the same in Hebrew as Hosea the prophet, but clearly they were not the same person.) Ho. 1:1 does not refer to these kings although they overlap with the kings of Judah mentioned. This is possibly because they were each so insignificant.

The kings of Judah were Azariah (also known as Uzziah; *c.* 791–740), Jotham (*c.* 750–732), Ahaz *c.* 744–716) and Hezekiah (*c.* 716–687). Note that the dates overlap. This is because they adopted a system of co-regency: the king's son was appointed co-ruler before the king died. This served to make the change-over smoother and less vulnerable to uprisings and attempted *coups*.

The religious context in which Hosea prophesied is reflected in many parts of the book. The Israelites under Joshua had conquered the land of Canaan but had failed to destroy the peoples already settled there. They and their descendants, and their religion, continued. The Canaanites worshipped many gods, the chief of which was called Baal. Baal was supposed to be the god who gave fertility to the land. According to a widespread myth he was killed by Moth, the god of summer and drought, but rose from the dead after the goddess Anath avenged his murder. This dying and rising reflected the annual cycle of the seasons. Canaanite religion was designed to give fertility to the land; it did not place a high value on morals. At the temples, men were able to 'worship' Baal and stimulate him to acts of fertility by having sexual intercourse with 'sacred' resident prostitutes.

Israel was supposed to worship one God, 'the LORD', who had no goddess consort. He could not be manipulated by ritual but required strict obedience instead. Clearly, the two religions were incompatible, but the Israelites tried to mix them (1 Ki. 18:21).

The text of Hosea

The text of the book of Hosea is one of the most obscure in the OT. It seems to have suffered in the process of being copied by one generation after another of scribes. Often, therefore, we cannot be sure of the detailed meaning of a particular passage. Nevertheless, the overall teaching is rarely in doubt; we must simply be satisfied with less precision than we might like.

The theology of Hosea

The basic message of Hosea is that God loves Israel. However, they have sinned so grievously that he is forced to punish them. Nevertheless, he has not given them up for good and will restore them to himself again. Hosea makes use of a number of powerful images in order to enable his hearers to realize what he is saying.

Hosea emphasizes as strongly as possible that there is only one God for Israel: 'the LORD'. There is no place at all for other gods. The Israelites had fallen into thinking that the Canaanites were right about Baal and the fertility of the land. 'The LORD' may well have done some things for the Israelites, like bringing them out of Egypt, but they thought that perhaps they needed to be on good terms with the god of the land as well (2:5). Hosea points out the seriousness of this error (2:8): because of it God will take away the blessing which *he* gave in the first place, and will bring Israel to realize the actual source of those blessings. She will have a time of deprivation (2:3, 6, 9) but will finally return to God and find restoration.

God's covenant with Israel forms the basis of Hosea's message. He chose Abraham and his descendants to be his people. They entered into an exclusive relationship with him which is expressed several times in the Bible in the words, 'They shall be my people and I will be their God' (*e.g.* Gn. 17:7–8; Je. 31:31–33; Zc. 8:8). In Hosea the word 'covenant' occurs only in 6:7 and 8:1 but there are many allusions to it. The name of Hosea's third child, 'Not-my-people' signifies the most serious judgment possible: the breaking of the covenant and a rejection of Israel as God's people. Hosea refers frequently to events in the nation's early history, when God brought Israel out of Egypt and made them into his people (*e.g.* 2:15; 9:10; 11:1–4). It is interesting that he does not refer to the bare facts of the deliverance (the exodus, crossing the Red Sea, *etc.*) but to the personal implications of these events.

This amounts to a forceful statement about the uniqueness of 'the LORD'. He alone is God, and has power to harm or to heal. He alone has entered into a covenant with Israel. Therefore, it is both wise and right for Israel to be committed to him alone. The consequences of turning away are dire, but there is a gracious invitation to return to the loving God who chose them in the first place. This is clearly the God of the New Testament as well as of the Old.

The prophet uses many metaphors and similies in order to bring home his message. God is portrayed as a husband (with Israel as the wife; 2:2–20); as a father (with Israel as a son; 11:1–11); as a healer (healing the sick Israel; 5:13; 6:1–2; 7:1; 14:4); and as a fowler (with Israel as the birds caught in his net; 7:12; 9:11). He is compared to a lion (5:14), a leopard and a bear (13:7–8); to dew (14:5), the winter and

spring rains (6:3), a green pine tree (14:8) and even moth and rot (5:12)! Other imagery used of Israel is that of a heifer (4:16; 10:11), a vine and wine (10:1; 14:7), grapes and figs (9:10), a lily, and olive tree and a cedar of Lebanon (14:5–6), an unwise unborn son (13:13), a cake not turned over (7:8), a faulty bow (7:16), and morning mist, chaff and smoke (13:3).

Further reading

F. D. Kidner, *The Message of Hosea*, BST (IVP, 1981).
P. C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, Vol. 1, DSB (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1984).
J. M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Zondervan, 1983, 1986).
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J. L. Mays, *Hosea*, OTL (SCM/Westminster/John Knox Press, 1969).
T. McComiskey, *Hosea*, in T. McComiskey (ed.), *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (Baker Book House, 1992).
D. Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, WBC (Word, 1987).

Outline of contents

The book of Hosea is more like an anthology of his prophecies than a book with a continuous theme running through it. But the prophecies have been grouped together into two main parts. In chs. 1–13 we find biographical (and autobiographical) details concerning Hosea's marriage, together with prophecies relating to its significance for the LORD's bride, Israel.

In chs. 4–14 there is an alternating pattern of judgment and hope. We are given the very strong picture of God's struggle to restore his unfaithful people to himself. The book ends with a gracious invitation and promise to Israel, and a note to the reader to learn from what has been told (*cf.* Jesus' words in Mk. 4:9, 23; 7:16).

1:1 **Title**

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13:1–16 Further pictures of judgment
14:1–8 An appeal to repent and a promise of blessing
14:9 A concluding wisdom saying

Commentary

1:1 Title

See the Introduction (Hosea the prophet). This verse stands as a heading over the whole book. It should not be taken too literally, for clearly it includes some narrative which sets the actual prophecies in their context (chs. 1, 3).

1:2 – 3:5 Hosea's marriage and its message

The view taken in this commentary is the traditional one: Hosea married a wife who proved to be unfaithful. She left him but Hosea took her back. See on 3:1–5 for the reasons for retaining this view.

1:2–3 Hosea marries according to God's instructions

There is great stress in these verses on one word which means 'harlotry' (*i.e.* prostitution) or 'fornication' (*i.e.* improper sexual intercourse). Literally, v 2 says: 'Take for yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land does indeed commit harlotry in departing from the LORD'. The straightforward meaning would be 'marry a prostitute/fornicator . . .', but it is unlikely that Hosea would be commanded to do something so much against the law (see *e.g.* Lv. 21:13–15; Dt. 22:13–21). Perhaps, therefore, it means 'marry someone who comes from a situation where prostitution is normal', or (more likely) 'marry someone who will turn out to be a prostitute'. In other words, Hosea, looking back on his broken marriage, sees it as God's will that he should have married such a person.

Children of unfaithfulness (prostitution/fornication) may simply describe the situation into which they were born (*i.e.* children who would grow up among prostitutes/fornicators *etc.*), or it may mean 'born to a woman who is a prostitute/fornicator'. Some feel that Hosea was not the father, but this is unlikely. At least we can be sure that the first child was Hosea's (v 3 says that Gomer *bore him a son*).

As with many passages where there is uncertainty, we can be sure of the basic facts: Hosea married someone who acted immorally at least after marriage. This is important for the analogy with Israel and God (3b), but the exact nature of the immorality is unimportant. Hosea's experience was to give him a deeper understanding of God's love for Israel, and a more effective way of communicating that to his fellow-Israelites than any words could have done on their own.

1:4–9 Three children with prophetic names

Hosea's wife Gomer bore three children: a son, a daughter and then another son. The first one was called *Jezreel*, the name of a valley plain between the mountains of Samaria and Galilee and a prominent battle arena in Israel. The name is a reminder of 'the bloods of Jezreel' (see the Introduction), an expression which often means bloodshed or bloodguilt. There was more than one massacre in this place. Although Jehu was authorized to wipe out the house of Ahab, he went beyond his brief. His motives were influenced by self-interest, and he failed ultimately to control Baal worship. It is salutary to note that the promise of 2 Ki. 10:30 did not prevent Jehu from incurring God's wrath and judgment. To be an instrument of God's judgment should inspire fear.

The judgment on Israel is that they will be defeated in the place where the sin was committed; the punishment fits the crime. *Israel's bow* signifies the military might of the nation. *Jezreel* is an especially useful name because: it signifies a particular instance of Israel's sin that stands for the whole of the nation's sin; it means 'God scatters' or 'God sows', *i.e.* has a negative or a positive meaning (1:11; 2:22–23); and it sounds quite like 'Israel' in Hebrew, which satisfies Hebrew writers' love of puns.

Lo-Ruhamah is the name of Gomer's daughter (possibly not Hosea's, since it does not say 'bore him a daughter', but we cannot be sure of this). *Ruhamah* is connected with the word 'womb', and indicates the sort of warm compassion that a mother has for her child. The OT often speaks of God in this way (*e.g.* 14:3; Pr. 28:13), but here it is announced that he will not deal with Israel like this any longer.

The name of the third child, *Lo-Ammi* ('Not-my-people') signifies the most devastating word of judgment. Israel is no longer the elect people of God. The events of her salvation-history – the exodus from Egypt (12:9, 13), the crossing of the Red Sea, the wilderness wanderings, the conquest of Canaan – all these are denied (*cf.* also those places where a 'return to Egypt' is spoken of *e.g.* 8:13; 9:3, 6; 11:5). It is still, of course, open to individuals to be faithful to the LORD and find acceptance (as many foreigners did throughout Israel's history, including Ruth and Rahab). And the way back to God is still open, as we shall see (11:8–9; 14:1–7).

1:10 – 2:1 Promise to follow judgment: a glimpse of a brighter future

It seems premature, at first sight, to mention hope beyond judgment at this point in the prophecy. Hosea still has a lot more judgment to announce (2:1–13 and most of chs. 4 – 14!). However, the book is arranged so as to give an outline of the whole plan of God in chs. 1–3 in terms of the husband-wife imagery, before going on to more detailed prophecies. Moreover, the first three chapters are arranged as a double-decker sandwich: narrative (1:2–9) – hope (1:10 – 12:1) – judgment (2:2– 13) – hope (2:14–23) – narrative (3:1–5).

This structure helps to achieve at least three things. First, it shows that God's plan is unified; he is not an opportunist who just goes along looking to see how things will turn out. Secondly, it shows the movement of the action from start to finish chronologically, from harmony to disharmony, and back (via the turning point in 2:7b) to harmony between 'the LORD' and Israel. Thirdly, it shows how the events of Hosea's marriage were bound up with his message about God and his people.

The Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore ... (10) recalls the promise to Abraham (Gn. 22:17; 32:12), and is, therefore, an indirect way of saying that the covenant will be restored. *In the place where* either refers to a location where names were publicly given, or simply means 'instead of'.

The promise that Israel and Judah will be reunited occurs in several places in the OT (*e.g.* Is. 11:12–13; Je. 23:5–8; Ezk. 37:15–28). It is difficult to see how it was fulfilled historically, since the northern kingdom of Israel ceased to be a nation in 722 BC when the capital city Samaria fell to the Assyrians. People were deported, and populations were mixed up over vast areas of the Assyrian empire. It is possible, however, to see fulfilment in a number of ways:

a. The people from the north maintained their identity and remained worshippers of 'the LORD'. Many came to join with Judah, and there are references in the later OT books to Judah as containing both Judah and Israel (*e.g.* 2 Ch. 34:21; 35:18; Je. 50:33; Zc. 8:13; 11:14).

b. When Jesus came as Messiah he was the king of Israel, the *one leader* of 1:11b, and all true people of God are intended to be united under his headship (*e.g.* Mk. 15:2, 26 and parallels; Jn. 1:49; Acts 17:7).

c. The church unites people of all nations, including people from Israel and Judah (see how Hosea is applied in Rom. 9:25–26 and 1 Pet. 2:10).

The day of Jezreel (11) means both 'the day on which the punishment due to the sin at Jezreel is reversed' and 'the day of God-scatters' (*i.e.* no longer scatters his people among the nations, but sows seed for the future).

2:1 reverses the other two names, and so rounds off the prophecy. *My loved one* is simply one word in Hebrew, 'shown compassion'. The plurals *brothers* and *sisters* makes it clear that the whole people of Israel is meant, not just Hosea's son and daughter.

2:2–13 Prophecy of judgment: chastening for Israel, the unfaithful wife

Vs 2–3 are addressed to Hosea's children. The imperatives form an abrupt new start, and the content of the first sentence is intended to give the reader or hearer a shock. This is the first time we have come across a reference to the breach between Hosea and Gomer. It is clear, as the speech continues, that it is not so much Gomer who is in mind but the people of Israel, now rejected from being God's wife. This bold image is quite striking when we remember the religion of Israel's neighbours, for Baal was imagined to have a goddess consort, Anath. Hosea, in effect, says that God has a consort, the people of Israel. The marriage is, of course, metaphorical.

The word translated *rebuke* (2) is the one used for 'strive' in lawsuits. Much of Hosea's imagery reflects the legal disputes which took place at the city gate.

Let her remove her adulterous look [lit. 'harlotries'] ... *and* ... *unfaithfulness* [lit. 'adulteries'] might well refer to specific forms of ornament associated with prostitutes (*cf.* v 13). The sense, then, is 'Let her remove the signs of her unfaithfulness, lest I strip her of everything' (2b–3a).

V 3b implies that Israel will go back to the desert, the time before God had fulfilled his promise to make them his own people in their own land. *Her children* (4) are the individual members of the people of Israel (see also on 1:2).

Israel has played the harlot (5; the NIV's *been unfaithful* is weak). The implication is that she has had many lovers. This refers to Gomer's prostitution with other men, and also to Israel's attempts to gain the favour of other gods. In both cases she wrongly assumed that the good things she enjoyed came from them. God's response to this is not to destroy Israel immediately, but to initiate a programme of education (6–7a). A series of pictures shows her experiencing barriers of various kinds (*thornbushes*; *wall her in*), chasing and not catching *her lovers*, looking but not finding them. This brings her to the turning point of the procedure (7b): she realizes that she was better off with her first husband 'the LORD', and she returns to him. Of course, tribulation comes to the righteous as

well as the wicked (*cf.* Ps. 44:17–22; Jn. 16:32–33), but a nation or individual experiencing hardship and failure needs to ask whether God may be trying to tell them something (*cf.* Am. 4:6–11).

From this point on, we find a summary of material mentioned before. '*She did not know*' that God was the one who supplied food and drink, and even the precious metals that were used to make images for Baal (8). So God will take these gifts away (*cf.* v 5) and expose her nakedness (*cf.* v 3), and no-one will be able to deliver her out of his hand (10). In other words, the other gods can neither provide for Israel nor prevent her from being punished by *the* LORD.

Vs 11–13 focus on Israel's religious feasts and festivals which God will cause to cease. This could be done either by disruption due to war, or shortage of food and drink for sacrifice and celebration. Both are envisaged here (12). V 13 rounds off this judgment section with another reference to spiritual and physical harlotry (*cf.* vs 2b, 7–8).

2:14–23 Promise to follow judgment: wooing back the unfaithful wife

In the previous verses God acted in judgment upon his unfaithful people, in order to bring them to their senses that they might return to him. Here the figure is of a lover attracting his beloved back, speaking tenderly and giving gifts (14–15, 22), and protecting from attack by wild animals or humans (18). It is a new start: Israel and her husband in the desert again, with no distractions, betrothed *for ever ... in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion.* And Israel will *acknowledge* ['know'] *the* LORD. This word often carries a sense of intimacy, and may include 'acknowledgement' (*cf.* 6:3, 6; see also on 4:6; 13:4–5).

I will respond (21) should be understood in the light of Israel's response to God in v 15b where the same verb is used and should be translated, 'There she will respond ...' (not *sing*; see NIV mg.). In fact, vs 16–20 could be put in brackets and regarded as an expansion of Israel's response to God. They are not easy to translate literally, but signify God's responding graciously by speaking to *the skies* which have been shut up from sending rain on the earth. This sets up the chain: *the skies* send rain to *the earth*, which then brings forth grain, new wine and oil, which in turn satisfies Jezreel (Israel represented by the name 'God sows'). The pun continues in v 23 'I will sow [NIV *plant*] her ...'. All the names of Hosea's children are now recalled and given a positive meaning. The most serious judgment, 'Not-my-people' becomes *You are my people*, and the covenant promise is completed by Israel's answering cry, *You are my God.*

3:1–5 Hosea takes 'a woman' to be his wife again

In ch. 3 Hosea himself tells the story of how he bought his wife back. Some scholars have regarded it as an account of the same events as those told in the third person in 1:2–3. The word *again* in v 1 rules this view out. Moreover the facts are quite different. So we must regard this as a later action. Since the narrative in ch. 1, Gomer has left Hosea and become enslaved in some way, for Hosea has to buy her back (2). This is a picture of God and his people of Israel (4–5).

V 1 is ambiguous. Literally it says either, 'The LORD said to me again, "Go, love a woman ..."', or 'The LORD said to me, "Again go, love a woman ..."'. There is no real difference in meaning. But why does it say 'a woman' rather than *your wife* (as the NIV)? The answer may be found in 2:2; Gomer has no claim to be his wife any longer, and the people of Israel have no claim on God. They are 'not his people', which means, using the alternative imagery, they are not his wife. *Loved by another* (lit. 'a friend') may mean simply another man, or 'a paramour', the illicit partner of someone else's wife. *Adulteress* means that she was married to one man but had sexual intercourse with another. It is possible that Gomer had actually remarried, but it is more likely that her legal husband (who had the right to divorce and disown her) is still Hosea.

In 1:2 it said 'Go, take ...', but here it says *Go, love* .... This emphasizes God's love for the people of Israel, even *though they turn to other gods and love* – what do they love? – *raisin cakes*! These were probably used in Canaanite rituals. They show just how carnal and unworthy is Israel's outlook.

Hosea buys back his 'former' (but probably not legally divorced) wife. She may perhaps have become a temple prostitute, who had to be bought out of the service. The price is puzzling, for it was not normal to pay by means of a combination of silver and grain. This may indicate that Hosea had difficulty in raising the money, which would be a picture of the cost of redemption for Israel. We do not know exactly how much *a homer* and *a lethek* was, but it could be about fifteen shekels of silver, making the total equivalent to thirty shekels, the price paid in compensation for the loss of a slave (Ex. 21:32), or the redemption price of a female 'dedicated to the LORD' (Lv. 27:4).

For a limited period (*many days*, v 3; *afterwards* v 5) Gomer is to undergo a period of discipline, which corresponds to a period when the Israelites will suffer deprivation (4). The sense of v 3 is somewhat obscure, but if we

consider the meaning of the whole, we should understand that Gomer is to 'live to Hosea', *i.e.* belong to him alone; she is not to act as a prostitute. Nor is she to have intercourse with *any man* (lit. 'not be to a man') – including Hosea himself. Hosea will act in the same way towards her (lit. 'And also I [will be] to you'). This temporary abstinence stands for a time when the Israelites will be deprived of various things, both good and bad. They will be without a proper leader, *king or prince*, and unable even to offer *sacrifice*. These things are all fine, and the deprivation must be temporary for the purpose of chastening Israel. *Sacred stones* or pillars were associated with Canaanite worship (even though Jacob had once set up a pillar as a remembrance of his dream vision; Gn. 28:18). They were a clear sign of idolatrous religion and would be removed. The same is true of the *idol* (lit. 'teraphim', or household gods). Apparently there were some of these in David's household (1 Sa. 19:13, 16), but they are usually regarded as pagan (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 23:24). This leaves one item unaccounted for: the *ephod*. The word refers both to a linen garment worn by priests which was quite acceptable (Ex. 28:6–14) and to some sort of metal object which was not (Jdg. 8:27; 17:5).

The overall meaning of v 4 is that both good and bad will be swept away as Israel undergoes a time of purifying. But the result of it is given in v 5: *the Israelites will return and seek the* LORD *. . . and David their king* and find blessing. The reference to David, meaning the line of David's descendants, is surprising because Hosea prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel, which had departed from following David's descendants when Solomon had died nearly two hundred years earlier (1 Ki. 12). This is an indication of a far-reaching prophecy about the re-uniting of the two kingdoms, which can only be seen to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ the king, the Son of David (see on 1:10 – 2:1).

4:1 – 14:9 Prophecies of judgment and promises of restoration

4:1–3 The LORD*'s controversy with Israel*

The language used here implies that God has entered into an argument or quarrel with Israel. Perhaps we should think of a lawsuit, such as was carried out at the gates of the city. We can imagine Hosea approaching the elders sitting for judgment, and announcing that God himself has a dispute to bring. Those *who live in the land* are accused of two things.

On the one hand, they lack the positive qualities that God requires of his people. Truth (which includes both telling the truth and acting in faithfulness), steadfast *love* (the quality which expresses above all God's way of acting towards his people in the covenant, and what he requires in return (see especially 6:6; Dt. 5:10; Dt. 7:9, 12) and knowledge of God (see on 13:4–5). On the other hand, they exhibit bad characteristics that God hates. *Cursing* (in the sense of seeking to harm others by speaking a curse against them; *cf.* Jdg. 17:2) or else swearing falsely (*cf.* 10:4, 'false oaths'), *lying*, *murder*, *stealing* and *adultery*. What the Ten Commandments require with respect to other people is being blatantly disregarded (Ex. 20:13–16).

V 3 speaks of the judgment of God, but is also partly a vivid poetical picture of a land under God's curse. When Israel is restored, the land and its living creatures will also be blessed (2:18, 21).

4:4–9 The law rejected: the priests are especially guilty

V 4 is extremely difficult to understand, but the thrust of the section is a condemnation of the priests, who should have observed and taught the law. Wolff renders it, 'No, not just anyone (should be accused), nor should just anyone (be reproved). But my lawsuit is with you O Priest', and although this is uncertain it is along the right lines.

The priests ignore the law of God entrusted to them, and consequently they do not walk securely in his ways, but *stumble* (5), as do the other religious leaders, the prophets. They have rejected *their Glory* (7), *the law* (6) which told them how to please God, in exchange for immoral and disgusting pagan rites. They now get their living from satisfying people's desire to worship other gods (8). Because the priests do not teach the law, the people do not know it and *are destroyed from lack of knowledge* (6a; the same word that is translated 'acknowledgement' in 4:1). The result is punishment for the nation (*your mother*, v 5) and for priest and people alike (9).

4:10–19 A spirit of prostitution in worship

V 10 continues from the preceding passage in outlining the punishment in more detail. The people will never have enough to eat, and their prostitution will bring them no increase. Children were always regarded as a blessing, and one of the promises to Abraham was to make his descendants a great multitude (*e.g.* Gn. 15:5). Intercourse with many prostitutes will not produce what God would do with one old couple (Rom. 4:18–21)! God continues with a description of their foolishness: they overindulge in drink (10) and lose their sense; they seek guidance from wooden objects (12). They are carried away by a wild enthusiasm for pagan worship, and engage in sacrifice and [whole]

burnt *offerings* on the high places, those shrines which were not authorized by the law and at which all sorts of corrupt practices developed. They will sacrifice anywhere at all, under any tree providing only that the shade is good (13a)!

Consequently, the daughters of those who engage in these things go the same way. Physical prostitution or promiscuous sex, and adultery are in focus here. The women are innocent (14) when compared to the men, who should have been setting an example to their daughters, but instead are going with prostitutes – both secular and sacred. In Canaanite religion, sacred prostitution was thought to be a means of ensuring fertility for the land. It is likely that the idea of 'imitative magic' lies behind the practice: intercourse with a 'sacred prostitute' brought about some similar action between the gods of nature, and resulted in the land's bringing forth fruit.

Today there are no sacred prostitutes in any of the places I have been, but there are many who practise religion in such a way as to satisfy their own desires rather than to glorify God. It is quite a good idea to ask ourselves from time to time what things we really enjoy about the Christian faith. Do they include emotional experiences, power, pleasure in being right, security, respect, the company of physically attractive people? Ps. 139:23–24 is a useful prayer!

V 15 is an aside to Judah; a warning to them not to follow Israel's example. This would have been relevant to readers of Hosea's prophecies in Judah in the periods following his ministry.

Gilgal was one of the chief shrines of Israel. *Beth Aven* ('house of wickedness') is probably a deliberate corruption of the name of the main shrine Bethel meaning 'house of God'. The prophet urges the people not to go to these corrupt places of worship, and not to take careless oaths, using God's name (15b). A series of different pictures follow in swift succession. The Israelites are described as *stubborn*, refusing to respond to *the* LORD who would like to restore them (16); they are idolaters, *i.e.* prostitutes who hang on to their shameful practices even when it is clear that there is no benefit to be gained (18). The end result is that *a whirlwind will sweep them away*. Their sacrifices will not bring them the blessings they sought to obtain, but only *shame*.

5:1–7 Priests, Israelites and royalty condemned

The opening of this section suggests that it may have been delivered in the capital of Israel, where leaders and people would hear. The priests are still in focus (as in ch. 4) but Hosea also brings in the king and royal family, and the people generally. There are several places named *Mizpah* in the OT. This one was probably where Samuel went on his circuits to settle legal cases (1 Sa. 7:16) and where, in Hosea's time at least, there would probably have been a religious shrine. *Tabor* is a mountain in the north of Israel. It was there that Deborah and Barak won a great victory over Jabin and Sisera (Jdg. 4:6, 12–16). We do not know the nature of the sins at these places, but it must have been something that would trap the people in sinful habits, so that they cannot *return to their God* (4).

The Israelites, described by the strong word *rebels*, are *deep in slaughter* (2). This word is used of child sacrifice in Is. 57:5 and Ezk. 16:21, but it also refers to the bloodshed that follows self-seeking and greed. However, God knows all about their corruption and will take action. The same is true today (*cf.* Rev. 2 – 3, especially 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15).

Again Hosea combines different metaphors to describe the people's situation: *a spirit of prostitution* (4: *cf.* 4:12) is within them; *they do not acknowledge the* LORD; Israel's pride or *arrogance* is like a witness against them in court; as they carry on in their daily walk they *stumble*. A note is added at this point about Judah (see the Introduction).

The result is that when they decide to take sacrifices to *the* LORD (6) he will not be there to meet them (*cf.* also v 15). They have been *unfaithful to the* LORD, and therefore their children, those younger members of Israel, born into a society already far from God, do not belong to him either. The corrupt *New Moon festivals* were no doubt intended to secure some sort of blessing for *them and their fields*, but instead they brought destruction to both.

5:8–12 Ephraim/Israel will be laid waste by an enemy

From this point in the book until the end of ch. 7, there are frequent references to Israel's foreign policy. Instead of doing right and trusting in God she tried all sorts of political manoeuvres, making alliances with the big powers, Egypt or Assyria (13; 7:8–16), or joining with Syria and other smaller nations in order to gain virtual independence within a coalition.

The calls to *sound the trumpet* (8) signify the beginning of the new section. An alarm is raised, for an enemy is coming who will lay waste the countryside. The places mentioned were major religious centres, and the judgment is basically against the false religion that is carried on in these places. All of them have a significant and often honourable, but at least respectable history. *Gigbeah* (Gibeon) was where Solomon sacrificed and received a dream from God (1 Ki. 3:4–5); *Ramah* was another of Samuel's regular

places of judgment (1 Sa. 7:17); *Beth Aven*, Bethel (see on 4:15) was where God appeared to Jacob in a dream. But now all these places are under attack at God's command. Hosea again gives us some vivid metaphors of judgment. Moving *boundary stones* was forbidden by the law, and represents the people's disregard of God's guidelines. So God will *flood* them with his wrath, will cause them to be *trampled* on, will eat them away like a moth or dry rot.

5:13–15 Assyria cannot help Israel

Judah is included with Israel in the condemnation recorded here. Most probably the events referred to are described in 2 Ki. 15:8–31; 17:1–6. At least Menahem (2 Ki. 15:19) and Hoshea (2 Ki. 15:30; 17:3) submitted to Assyria and paid tribute. King Ahaz of Judah asked for Assyria's help against Syria and Israel (2 Ki. 16:7–9; *cf.* Is. 7).

So Israel and Judah both seek an answer to their sores and sickness in an alliance with Assyria. But the real problem is that God is against them, and the best doctors in the world cannot help. Worse is to come for God will attack them, *tear them to pieces* and carry them off *like a lion, like a great lion* (the words are used to reinforce one another, not to specify two types of lion). Then they will know for certain that there is no escape.

V 15 forms a transition between 5:13–14 and 6:1–6. It describes the result of God's frustrated attempts to get the people to respond to his chastening: he will withdraw from them. If God's presence is terrifying, his absence is worse. The words of 6:1–3 express just what he is waiting for: the people's detemination to know him and to trust him.

6:1–6 Israel's fickle love and what God requires

There is no connecting word with the preceding verse, but this is clearly what God wants to hear. Israel acknowledges that he has torn them to pieces (as 5:14), and that only he can heal them. V 2 gives the only specific references in the OT to being raised up *on the third day*. Clearly this is not primarily a prophecy of an individual, the Messiah, but a metaphor of the coming to health of the nation. Nevertheless, there is a real similarity between the two situations: God works a totally impossible healing. What was done metaphorically for the nation of Israel, God's son (*cf.* 11:1), was done literally for Jesus Christ, God's Son. This passage, as well as the reference to Jonah in the fish's belly, may have been in Paul's mind when he spoke of Jesus as 'raised on the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:4).

It is much more likely that v 3a should be translated, 'Let us know . . . let us press on to know . . .'. This is the normal primary meaning of the word rendered *acknowledge* by the NIV (see on 13:4–5). The people express a heartfelt desire for a personal relationship with God. This is a daring metaphor, for 'to know' one's wife would normally indicate sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, Hosea and other biblical writers do not shrink from using marriage as a picture of this close and exclusive relationship (Is. 62:5; Rev. 21:2).

God is as reliable as the sun, and brings blessing like the seasonal rains on which Israel depended for her very life. In Palestine most rain occurs between early December and early March. The winter rains come at the beginning of this period in the autumn, softening the ground for sowing. The spring rains (sometimes called 'latter rains') are showers from March to May which strengthen the crops. The summer is almost completely dry, and rain is eagerly sought and appreciated as a great blessing.

In vs 4–6 the mood changes. It is as if God says, 'Even if you said such things, you wouldn't stay faithful and committed to me for very long. Your "steadfast love" is like the morning mist and dew, which simply disappears early in the day' (see on 2:21; *cf.* 4:1; 10:12; 12:7). It is for this reason that the prophets came with stern, cutting words, to bring the people's sin to light and to call for repentance. When that was not forthcoming, a message of judgment had to be pronounced. When a prophet speaks 'in the name of the LORD', the judgment announced is certain (*cf.* Gn. 1:3; Ps. 33:4–9; Is. 55:10–11).

Mercy (6) is the same word as that translated *love* in v 4. It signifies the steadfast love shown by God in his covenant with Israel. He does not want sacrifice in place of steadfast love; he desires that Israel's steadfast love should be the real thing. He does not want whole burnt offerings but a genuine, deep personal relationship. The importance of this verse is seen in its use in Mt. 9:13 and 12:7 (*cf.* Mk. 12:33).

6:7–11a Israel has been unfaithful to the covenant – and Judah also

These verses describe appalling behaviour from people who had made a covenant with God. It is possible that *Adam* refers to the first man and his disobedience to God's direct command, but the word *covenant* is not found anywhere before Noah (Gn. 6:18) in the story of Adam and Eve and their descendants. Most commentators read 'as at Adam', a place mentioned in Jos. 3:16 where the waters of the Jordan were cut off, allowing the people of Israel to cross over into the promised land. If this reading is right, Adam, a town in Gilead on the way to Shechem, had become a place of violent robbers (8–9). We

do not know of specific violent acts there, but the *coup* against Pekahiah was carried out by Pekah and fifty men from Gilead (2 Ki. 15:25). It is quite likely that priests were involved in this or in similar deeds (9: *cf.* 2 Ki. 11, where the priest Jehoiada played the major role in a useful *coup*). V 10 sums up the situation again in terms used before.

Again the prophet has a side swipe at Judah (11a). Those who hear of another's condemnation approvingly need to examine themselves.

6:11b – 7:2 God wants to heal but Israel's sin prevents it

This is a graphic picture of God who is just looking for a way to restore the fortunes of Israel. But their sins are always there staring him in the face, *exposed* and *revealed*. They *engulf them* and there is no way through for God – and no way out for the people. In the middle of these descriptions Hosea refers to two specific sins which he has mentioned before: deceit and robbery (1b). V 2a observes a common human problem, that of thinking that what we see is all there is. They do not know that their sins engulf them, nor *realise* ('say in their hearts') that sins now past are remembered by God. Remember the fearful statement that Samson 'did not know that the LORD had left him' (Jdg. 16:20b; *cf.* 2 Ki. 6:17; Ps. 50:21a).

7:3–12 Israel's sin described by various metaphors

Vs 3–7 form a double-decker sandwich such as we have seen before. The sequence is: king and princes (3) – oven (4) – king and princes (5) – oven (6–7a) – (rulers and) kings (7b). This suggests that this is a picture which should be considered as a whole.

The leaders, the king and the princes, do nothing to correct the climate of dishonesty and wickedness (3). They relish it, for it is the way to satisfying the personal lusts of those who are strong, and scruples do not interfere. But see v 7b for a nasty shock that is coming to them!

They are like an oven (4) that generates its own heat. Their passions, once aroused, continue at full heat. It seems that *the baker* is simply part of the picture, rather than representing a particular person. V 5 is quite obscure, but the NIV looks reasonable: the king and princes join in some sort of unsavoury revelries. Some feel that *the mockers* are those who plot against the king. He himself is unaware of this and joins hands with them, while the princes are unable, in their drunken state, to protect him.

The oven metaphor continues in vs 6–7. It looks as if it is simply expanding on what was said before: the oven carries on burning. In the morning it has not died down at all, but blazes up. But v 7 tells us of an unexpected result: there are plots to overthrow the leaders. There were several such plots at the end of the northern kingdom's history (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 15; 17; and see on 5:13–15). Those who take the law into their own hands should not be surprised when others do the same, and do it more efficiently and ruthlessly. The kings fall, but it does not occur to them to call upon God (7b).

In vs 8–12 Hosea gives us a string of metaphors, all describing something horrible. Ephraim (*i.e.* Israel) *mixes with the nations*, losing his purity and single-minded devotion to God (8a). Israel is a *flat cake not turned over*, raw on one side and overdone on the other (like a barbecue sausage!). *Foreigners sap his strength but he does not realise it.* They take a heavy tribute from him (giving nothing in return) and he seems unaware of what is happening. He does not notice that he is going grey; he thinks he is still in his prime, a sign of the arrogance mentioned in v 10. Despite all the misfortunes suffered, Israel *does not return to the LORD his God* or even *search for him.* Surely Hosea is justified in calling Ephraim a silly and *senseless dove*, that tries in turn to find a solution from Egypt or Assyria (11). What will happen to this silly bird? God will catch it in a net, and it will be unable to fly anywhere, completely at his mercy.

7:13–16 They refuse to turn back to the LORD

There is no strong break here, and the picture of Israel straying from God is clearly similar to vs 8 and 11. The motif of refusing to return to God occurs throughout ch. 7 (vs 1–2, 7b, 10). *Woe* is used as a cry of lament for oneself and for others. In the latter case it also implies a cry of judgment, and here this is shown in the parallel expression *Destruction to them* (13b).

Throughout these verses two things are clearly evident: God's love for Israel and the fact that the people have other priorities. He longs *to redeem them*, he wants them to turn to him but they *speak lies against* him. When they are in trouble they just *wail upon their beds*, ignoring the one source of effective help. When they *gather together*, their minds are on food and drink, not on God. He had *trained them*, but in return they *plot evil against* him (15).

The first part of v 16 is obscure (lit. 'They turn, not to/upon/against') and some corruption of the text must have taken place. The sense of the NIV must be roughly right. Perhaps we should read: 'They return, but not to me' (Wolff), or 'They turn to No-God' (*cf.* Dt. 32:17, 21). The *faulty bow* is probably one that is feeble: the arrows do not reach the target. The end of the section shows the leaders killed in battle, and the formerly arrogant people forced

to flee to the land of Egypt (a sign of a return from salvation), where they are *ridiculed* or derided.

8:1–14 Sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind

In this chapter there is a series of judgments against Israel associated with different sins: their choice of kings (4–6), their foreign alliances (7–10) and their corrupt religious practices (11–14). Throughout we see an unhealthy self-reliance. They carry on as those who are worldly-wise but give no thought to whether their actions are acceptable to God.

8:1–3 Judgment by an enemy. As in 5:8 there is a sudden call to sound an alarm. The threat is described as an *eagle . . . over the house of the* LORD. There is doubt as to whether the word means *eagle* (NIV) or *vulture* (RSV). Does this signify a vulture waiting to devour something already dead, or an eagle about to swoop on something small and slow, and defenceless before its great talons? The latter seems more likely, for it agrees better with v 3, *an enemy will pursue him* (*cf.* Job 9:26; Ps. 103:5; Hab. 1:8, where the NIV and RSV choices are reversed!).

In v 1 Hosea again draws attention to the people's unfaithfulness to God in rejecting the *covenant*, the basis on which they could claim to be God's people, and the *law*, which enabled them to please God and remain within his blessing.

8:4–6 Kings and idols to be judged. In these verses Hosea refers back to the start of northern Israel as an independent kingdom. Jeroboam I, the son of Nebat, broke away from Solomon's son Rehoboam, and set up rival sanctuaries to Jerusalem at Bethel and Dan. In each one he placed a golden calf (1 Ki. 12:26–30) and these, along with the shrines on the 'high places' (1 Ki. 12:31–33), became a source of idolatry and unauthorized practices. Jeroboam was actually encouraged to become king by a prophet named Ahijah (1 Ki. 11:29–40), but virtually all the kings of the northern kingdom are condemned in 1 and 2 Kings, and they were hardly ever chosen with reference to God. It is possible that one of the golden calves was transferred to Samaria, the capital city of Israel, but perhaps more likely *that calf of Samaria* indicates that this prophecy belongs after Dan had fallen into the hands of Assyria (2 Ki. 15:29) and only one calf remained for Samaria and its territory. God's opinion of the calf is clear: it arouses his anger; *it is not God*; it prevents the people from becoming pure; it leads only to their destruction. The beginning of v 6 is unclear. Literally it is simply 'For from Israel' and may refer to the calf.

8:7–10 Opportunist politics: sowing and reaping. V 7 is a powerful and evocative picture: they sow what is worthless and insubstantial, and what comes up is the same with interest, something worthless and destructive (*cf.* Gal. 6:8). The primary reference is to Israel's foreign policy, trying to make friends with each nation in turn, in the hope of backing the winner. But Israel has nothing much to offer, and the nations simply devour what she has (7–8). Even though Israel buys a place among the nations and is dispersed, God will gather them together again – but not to save them. V 10b is very difficult, but the NIV is as likely as anything here. *Like a wild donkey* is the description given to Ishmael, the child of Abraham and Hagar (Gn. 16:12), and definitely *not* the child through whom the promises were to be fulfilled.

8:11–14 Israel's religious substitutes. Here is evidence of great religious enthusiasm. They have *built many altars for sin offerings*. The word is actually 'sinning' as at the end of the verse, but the same Hebrew consonants will give the NIV's translation. If this is right, as seems likely, then there is a play on words: the altars intended to remove the results of sin and restore fellowship with God actually add to the sin. The people reject the many things written in the law of God, as if they were something foreign and peculiar. They offer their own sacrifices and *eat the meat*, *i.e.* take part in sacrificial meals intended to express fellowship with God, but *the* LORD *is not pleased with them*. Only by sticking strictly to what *the* LORD himself has specified can a worshipper find acceptance (*cf.* Lv. 10:1–11). The sacrifices do not remove sin from God's memory (Is. 64:9; Je. 31:34); they are still there, and that implies that he will act against them. *They will return to Egypt*, *i.e.* they will be returned to bondage (see also 2:15; 7:11, 16; 9:3, 6; 11:1, 5, 11; 12:1, 9, 13; 13:4).

V 14 returns to the theme of self-reliance in political matters, and Judah reappears here. *Israel has forgotten his Maker* and instead (and this is the heart of the problem: instead) has *built palaces. Judah has fortified many towns.* 2 Ki. 18:13 describes what happened to these towns at the hands of Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. Only Jerusalem survived, and that was because of the direct intervention of God, in response to the challenge from Assyria and prayer (2 Ki. 19:5–7, 20–36). *Fire* describes judgment both literally and metaphorically.

9:1–6 Judgment: religious festivals will be cut off

Here the prophet focuses upon the judgment previously threatened, that Israel will return to Egypt (7:16; 8:13), and its effect upon Israel's festivals. Hosea tells the people, *Do not rejoice* like the nations (as you have been doing). Even

if they get away with it for a while longer, you won't, because *you have been unfaithful to your God*, the God who revealed himself to you, brought you out of the land of Egypt, showed you how to live, *etc.* You have gone after other gods, acting as a *prostitute*, especially at threshing-floors, where certain religious celebrations took place.

The prophet then comments that their threshing-floors and their winepresses (which served a similar function) will not give them any cause for celebration. They won't even feed them; *the new wine will fail*, giving the promise of a lean and joyless year ahead.

In fact *the* LORD*'s* covenant with them will be broken. He brought them out of the land of Egypt and made them his people, but they will return to bondage (in Egypt). God gave them his law and told them how to be clean in his sight (see especially Lv. 11:1–23; Dt. 14:3–21), but they will be taken to Assyria and there be forced to eat what is *unclean*. Both these judgments will be a sign of their separation from God.

Wine will be in such short supply that *they will not pour out wine offerings*, *i.e.* quantities of wine offered *to the* LORD along with other sacrifices by being poured out. (These are also called drink offerings, or libations.) *Nor will their sacrifices please* him for they are unclean and unable to offer in the right way. When they eat at a sacrifice it will be like eating at a funeral. The food will serve no religious purpose: it will simply satisfy hunger (4b).

So the prophet challenges them with a rhetorical question: what will you do on feast days? The answer is obvious: there is nothing worthwhile that they can do. Hosea then comments that even if they escape from destruction by fleeing to *Egypt* (*Memphis* is in northern Egypt), they will die there.

9:7–9 Ridicule for God's servants

After a brief repeat warning of judgment to come, Hosea moves on to a new theme. Israel is so deep into sin and hostile to the true God that those who faithfully speak his words are regarded as fools and maniacs (*cf.* 2 Ki. 9:11). But they are not only ridiculed people actively plot against them (*cf.* 1 Ki. 18:4; 19:10; Mt. 23:29–36). *As in the days of Gibeah* (see also 10:9) refers back to a dark age in Israel's history, and the story of the Levite's concubine and its aftermath (Jdg. 10 – 21). The verdict of the writer of Judges was, 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit (what was right in his own eyes)' (Jdg. 21:25). That would fit Hosea's time very well too. And many of the evils of the modern world could be put down to a similar attitude.

9:10–17 More lessons from history: the roots of Israel's sin

Hosea describes Israel in its earliest period as a nation, *in the desert*, *i.e.* during their wanderings between crossing the Red Sea and their entering the promised land of Canaan. God was delighted with them, as one would be delighted at finding the first grapes and figs of the season. But very soon they grumbled and complained against him. An appropriate incident which Hosea selects as a particularly bad, but typical, example of their behaviour is their immorality at *Baal Peor*, where many of the people indulged in immoral behaviour with Moabite women and offered sacrifices to Baal (Nu. 25:1–5). *Consecrated themselves to that shameful idol* is lit. 'consecrated . . . to shame'; the word is often used as a substitute for 'Baal'.

Ephraim's glory here means primarily the numerous children promised by God to Abraham. Now there will be no birth, not even pregnancy, no, not even conception. And even if children are born they will die. This does not mean, of course, that there will be absolutely no births; it is a poetic and powerful way of saying that the nation will not grow. The second mention of the death of Ephraim's children is a chilling picture: bringing out their own children *to the slayer*. Between these two references is the real cause: God has turned away from them (see on 5:15), and there can be no blessing where he is not present. V 14 is a variation on the same theme, couched as a cursing prayer of the prophet.

V 15 turns to another geographical and historical example of Israel's sin. Gilgal was the place where Israel crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan and reconsecrated themselves to *the* LORD by performing circumcision (Jos. 4:19 – 5:9). Samuel visited it regularly as judge (1 Sa. 7:16), and there Saul was confirmed as king of Israel (1 Sa. 11:14–15). There David was welcomed after surviving Absalom's rebellion (2 Sa. 19:15). But in Amos and Hosea's time Gilgal had become a centre of corrupt religion (4:15; Am. 4:4; 5:5). This is probably the reason why God *hated them* (*cf.* Is. 1:10–17; Am. 5:21–24). We know also that their false religion was coupled with injustice and oppression. Various typical themes are hinted at: *no longer love them* (*cf.* 1:6); *blighted* and *they yield no fruit* (*cf.* 2:3, 9–12; 9:2); slaying *their cherished offspring* (*cf.* vs 12–13; 2:4; 4:6). The chapter ends with another comment from the prophet, again re-emphasizing former statements.

10: 1–10 Agriculture, wrong religion and kings: judgment and a choice

This section is quite diverse, and the text is even more difficult than usual. It deals with

agricultural matters (a *vine*, v 1; a *ploughed field*, v 4) religious practices (*altars*, vs 1b–2; *idols*, vs 5–6, 8), and political events (a king, v 3; defeat by *Assyria*, vs 6–7, 9b–10).

It starts with a reference to Israel as a *vine* (*cf.* Ps. 80:8–16; Is. 5:1–7; Je. 2:21; Ezk. 15:6; 17:1–6). As Israel prospered (the vine *brought forth fruit*) *he built more altars* and *adorned his sacred stones* (see on 3:4), *i.e.* practised more unauthorized, or downright idolatrous, religion. The people deceived themselves (2a) into thinking that this was acceptable to God, and the result is that *the* LORD will *destroy* these objects.

Hosea now turns to the subject of kings: the time is coming when Israel will no longer have a king (*i.e.* after the fall of Samaria in 722 BC), and they will recognize that their state is so hopeless that a king could not help them anyway. Kingship was always a tricky subject in Israel. In the book of Judges it seems that one of the reasons for the chaos in the land was the lack of a king (Jdg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). God regarded the request for a king in order to be like the nations as a rejection of himself and so did Samuel (1 Sa. 8:4–9). Yet God gave them a king and transformed their wrongly motivated request into a means of security and teaching, and hope for the future.

Hosea mentions a variety of sins in a variety of ways. Dishonesty (4) leads to *lawsuits* which are like *poisonous weeds in a ploughed field*, preventing and spoiling the expected crops. The people in Samaria are afraid on behalf of the calf of Bethel (again corrupted to Beth-Aven; see on 4:15). The word is actually 'calves' here, though it was singular in 8:6. It might be a plural of majesty meaning 'the great calf of House-of-wickedness', obviously intended ironically. This idol will be taken into exile, unable to save itself (as Isaiah points out concerning the idols of Babylon, 46:1–2). The people and the idolatrous priests, far from acknowledging its uselessness, will mourn over it, as it is *carried to Assyria, as tribute for the great king.* Literally this is 'King Yareb' which is probably related to the word for 'strive' or 'quarrel'. George Adam Smith translated it 'King Pick-Quarrel'! This seems likely to be right, for it certainly fits in with the character of the aggressive Assyrian kings. The picture then changes to the city of Samaria and its king floating away like *a twig* on the water, powerless to do anything about it.

In v 8 Hosea returns to the subject of altars, and the high places where they were set up. They will fall into disuse, and be covered by *thorns and thistles.* The people's cry to the hills to hide them from the punishment, or to put them out of their misery, is also found in Lk. 23:30 and Rev. 6:16 (*cf.* Is. 2:10, 19–21).

V 9 returns to *Gibeah* (*cf.* 9:9). The evil of the men of Gibeah led to civil war, and to the tribe of Benjamin almost being wiped out. This time it will be foreign nations that carry out God's judgment in battle.

The reference to *double sin* may well refer to the sins of idolatry and reliance upon foreign alliances rather than on God.

10:11–15 Ploughing, sowing and battle: metaphors of judgment

In vs 11–15 we have an extended agricultural picture which moves into the battle arena at the end of v 13. *Ephraim is a trained heifer that loves to thresh, i.e.* pull the threshing-sledge over the corn. It was a comparatively light job, and the beast would not be muzzled. The next picture is less pleasant: the yoke is put on for the heavier work of ploughing. This may be thought of as discipline rather than retribution. In any case it leads to an urgent invitation to engage in useful activity (*sow ... righteousness, break up ... unploughed ground*) and reap a good harvest of steadfast love (as in 6:4, 6). In the past they have sowed and reaped what is bad (13a; *cf.* 8:7).

The prophet moves into the interpretation of the agricultural metaphor. Israel has been self-reliant, trusting in physical might. Because of this they will suffer a terrible defeat, as *Beth Arbel* did at the hands of *Shalman. Beth Arbel* is thought to be either a site near the Lake of Galilee, or a town east of the Jordan. *Shalman* may be Shalmaneser III or V (858–824 and 726–722 BC respectively; 2 Ki. 17:3; 18:9) or a Moabite king, Salamanu (*cf.* Am. 1:3, 13). We do not know precisely what events are referred to, but we can deduce from the passage that they were particularly horrific. *Bethel* is mentioned probably because it was the chief shrine of Israel, and also to form a play on words with *Beth Arbel.* In 722 the king of Israel was destroyed, and his descendants were wiped out.

This has been a stern section, but the invitation and promise of v 12 remains.

11:1–11 Israel as God's beloved child

There is no more passionate and moving expression of God's heart than this anywhere in the Bible. God speaks as the loving father of Israel, who called his son out of bondage in Egypt. At that time Israel was like a helpless child, a new nation facing the might of the Egyptian empire, wandering in the desert with no prospects of food or drink. God taught them to walk, either *taking them by the arms* or (as the RSV) *taking them in his arms.* He led them gently, guided them with *cords of human kindness, with ties of love.* If the metaphor of parent and child continues, then we should translate v 4b as: 'I became for them as those who lift a child to their cheeks. And I reached out to feed him'. This

seems better than assuming that there is a change to animal imagery with God removing the yoke from the beast's neck (lit. but surprisingly, 'jaws') and bending down to feed it. Either way, the picture is of tender care bestowed on Israel. Israel, however, showed no response. In fact the more *I called Israel, the more they went from me* (2, 7). They did not realize that God was the one who healed them (3).

Because of this total lack of response God has no alternative but to punish them. The description has been used before: return to bondage in Egypt (7:16; 8:13), or loss of independence as a vassal in Assyria (9:3; 10:6). They won't return to God, so they will return to Egypt. Vs 6–7 describe the method of judgment – defeat at the hands of their enemies – and again emphasize Israel's stubbornness.

Matthew (2:15) uses 11:1 to describe the way that God acted in saving Jesus from the hand of Herod. Having escaped death he could in due time return from Egypt to fulfil his intended work. Hosea's statement is not primarily a prophecy about Jesus, but an interpretation of a historical event. But the parallels with Jesus are very striking: God preserved Israel (Jacob and his household) from famine by giving them a place in Egypt. From there he brought them out to fulfil his purposes.

All the signs are that Israel must be utterly destroyed, but God cries out in anguish. How can he make them like *Admah* and *Zeboiim*, cities which perished forever along with Sodom and Gomorrah (Dt. 29:23; *cf.* Gn. 14:2, 8)? To human reason it seems there is no alternative, but God is God, not man (*cf.* Mk. 10:25–27).

The last part of v 9 means either 'I will not come against a city' (see the NIV mg.), or 'I will not come in wrath' or 'burning'.

The end of this section is a promise of salvation which takes some previous metaphors and reverses their sense. *The LORD* will be like a *lion*, not to destroy (*cf.* 5:14) but to give a signal for his sons to come home from wherever they have been scattered. They have previously been described as a silly dove, fluttering to get help from Egypt or Assyria (7:11), and about to be snared in God's net. Here they are fearful, but not silly, and fly eagerly back to *the LORD* and to their homes (10a, 11b).

The prophecy is an amazing testimony to God's grace, perhaps only surpassed by the events of the gospel: 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .' (Jn. 3:16).

11:12 – 12:8 Israel's deceitfulness illustrated and condemned

It is difficult to decide where to divide the text into units, for the various small sections flow into each other, and are interrelated in several ways. Many of the sins condemned have been mentioned before, and the repetition serves to impress upon us the root causes of Israel's plight. In 11:12 we meet with lies and deceit (*cf.* 4:2; 7:1–3), and this continues in 12:1a. Particular examples of deceitfulness are given. One is from contemporary history: Israel tried to make an alliance with both Egypt and Assyria who were enemies of each other. The other is from Israel's more distant past: Jacob took the heel of his brother even before they were born, thus supplanting him and depriving him of what was naturally his. The name Jacob is connected with words meaning 'follow at the heel', or 'supplant' and means figuratively 'to deceive' (Gn. 25:26; 27:36). Although God gave a message to Rebekah before the birth of Esau and Jacob to say that 'the older will serve the younger' (Gn. 25:23), this did not give Jacob (or Rebekah) a licence to cheat (*cf.* 1 Sa. 16:6–13; 24:1–22). There was no sin attaching to baby Jacob's taking his brother's heel in the womb! Nevertheless Hosea uses the picture to illustrate how Jacob/Israel has been deceitful right from the beginning of his existence.

Hosea, however, moves on to recall how God made something of this twister. Jacob hung on in the wrestling match with 'a man', who was actually God's representative, and received God's blessing and his new name, 'Israel' (Gn. 32:24–29). God also found Jacob at Bethel (Gn. 28:10–22) and gave him a gracious and totally undeserved promise. So, says Hosea, you must follow Jacob's example, and turn from your deceitful ways to your God (6). The fact that he says *your* signifies an offer to reverse the prophecy of judgment implied in the name of Hosea's son Lo-Ammi, 'Not-my-people' (1:9). Note that *your God* also comes at the end of the verse. Hosea exhorts them to *maintain love* (*i.e.* the steadfast love mentioned in 6:4, 6) *and justice*, and to *wait for* their God. In other words they are to continue to trust in God even when it seems that his help is delayed.

We must ask what part Judah plays in 11:12 – 12:2. In v 2 they are definitely linked with Jacob in a prophecy of judgment; so the NIV seems to be justified in its understanding of 11:12, which is literally, 'Judah wanders restlessly with God'.

Vs 7–8 give a rare picture from the world of business. Ephraim is like a crooked dealer who defrauds by giving short measure. In his wealth he feels self-satisfied and secure. He does not acknowledge any sin. The picture is left as it is. No word of explanation is needed to show how wrong and how dangerous this is.

12:9–14 Brought from Egypt and to be judged

There follows a word of judgment (9). Although *the* LORD has been their God from the land of Egypt, the people will be taken out of their 'promised land' and sent back to *live in tents again*. Every year they did this at the Feast of Tabernacles (or Booths), one of the *appointed feasts* (Lv. 23:42–44; Ne. 8:14–17).

God recalls how he spoke to them through the prophets by means of dreams and parables. Nathan's parable is the best known in the OT (2 Sa. 12:1–10; *cf.* Jdg. 9:7–15; 2 Ki. 14:9–10; Is. 5:1–7; Ezk. 15 – 19; 23), but the word here probably covers a variety of communications from God through the prophets.

V 11 is difficult but it clearly prophesies judgment on *Gilead* (east of the Jordan, where the town of Adam was, 6:7–8), which is described as vanity or emptiness, and *Gilgal*. The original play on words used in naming Gilgal 'rolled away [our reproach]', is replaced by another pun: *piles of stones* (Heb. *gallim*, from the same root as Gilgal).

V 12 again refers, rather abruptly, to the story of Jacob. After supplanting his brother Esau and meeting with God at Bethel, he went to his mother's brother, Laban, in Mesopotamia. There he served a total of fourteen years for two wives, Leah and Rachel (Gn. 27:41 – 29:30). Hosea draws attention to his service, *he tended sheep* (lit. 'he kept' and we understand 'sheep' is intended). V 13 seems unrelated – *the* LORD used Moses, to bring Israel out of Egypt and to care for (lit. 'keep') him. It is emphasized by repetition that this was by means of *a prophet*. The relation between the verses may be that as Jacob fled to a strange land and was reduced to keeping sheep in order to get a wife, *the* LORD brought him out of a strange land and provided his own servant (the prophet Moses) to keep him. It is an example again of God's care for Israel. But v 14 describes (again) Israel's ungrateful response, provoking God to anger. So he will not be relieved of *the guilt of his bloodshed* (though, as we have seen, God longed to persuade him to turn from it and be forgiven). He will be repaid *for his contempt* for God and his gracious invitation (*cf.* Heb. 10:29; 12:25).

13:1–16 Further pictures of judgment

Ephraim was the largest tribe of the twelve (or thirteen, since Joseph produced both Ephraim and Manasseh), and is often used as a way of referring to the whole of the northern kingdom, as we have seen. Here it must mean the tribe, since it is *in Israel*. In former times Ephraim had authority and respect. But this was lost through idolatry, and he *died*; he could be completely ignored. Far from learning from their mistakes they now sin more and more, putting a lot of money and talent into making images (2a).

V 2b is very obscure, but it may well mean that these people sacrifice human beings on the one hand, and kiss calves made of metal on the other – truly outrageous behaviour, showing a completely wrong sense of values, or appreciation of God's work in making humankind in his own image.

The result is that they will become nothingness, *morning mist* and *early dew* (like their 'steadfast love' in 6:4), *chaff swirling from a threshing-floor*, and *smoke escaping through a window* (3).

The LORD repeats the fact that he is their God from the time that they were in Egypt. V 4 is similar in content to the first commandment along with its introduction: 'I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me' (Ex. 20:2–3). On the other hand, the form and vocabulary are quite different. We should probably translate it: 'You know no God but me, there is no saviour except me'. In other words, it is a statement rather than a command. The word 'know' (NIV *acknowledge*) also occurs in v 5 where the NIV translates it *cared for*. It is better to keep to the primary meaning 'know', recognizing that there are various implications of 'knowing', sometimes including 'acknowledging'. One of Hosea's main concerns is the relationship between God and Israel: they should know each other intimately, as a husband and wife should.

V 6 describes the tragic results of disregarding the warning in Dt. 8:11–14 which are, unfortunately, seen throughout the world to this very day: affluence breeds pride and forgetfulness of God's grace, even after hearing the warnings of Jesus himself (Mk. 10:21–25). The judgment for this is expressed again in terms of wild animal attacks, this time the lions are joined by *a leopard*, *a bear* (unpredictable at the best of times) *robbed of her cubs*, and an unspecified *wild animal* (7–8).

Vs 9–12 emphasize themes mentioned earlier. Israel is destroyed because of his rebellion against the one who had helped him, the only one who could help him in his present plight (9). *Where is your king?*, God challenges Israel. *Where are your rulers* [lit. 'judges'] *in all your towns . . .?* In Samuel's time the people had asked for a king like the nations (1 Sa. 8). This also implies a request for princes, since kings have sons (some had too many for comfort: Jdg. 9:1–2; 2 Ki. 10:1). God granted their request, but was angry at their attitude, which expressed a lack of trust in him and a desire to be like the nations around. He gave them kings, knowing

that Israel would suffer through them; and he took their king away because of his anger at their blatant rejection of their true king.

Ephraim will not escape judgment, for his guilt and sins will not disappear. They are *stored up . . . kept on record* (12). V 13 gives us a ludicrous picture of Ephraim as an unborn son: it's time to be born, but *he does not come to the opening of the womb!*

V 14 is famous because Paul quotes the second part of it in 1 Cor. 15:55 as a rhetorical question. Paul uses a different translation, but the same sense could be obtained from the text that we have in Hosea: 'Where are Sheol's plagues (*i.e.* the plagues that bring death, and send people to Sheol, the place of the dead)? Where is death's destruction?' – nowhere, they have been done away with in Christ's victory on the cross. But the context here is different. The whole of ch. 13 is a prophecy of judgment, so it would be strange indeed to find such an abrupt promise of salvation, especially one immediately followed by *I will have no compassion.* It is likely, therefore, that we should translate v 14a as two questions: 'Shall I ransom . . . shall I redeem . . .?' followed by a call to death to come and punish Israel with its plagues. An alternative understanding would be that v 14a expresses God's desire to save, which the Israelites spurn, and therefore cannot receive compassion but plagues and destruction. The words *ransom* and *redeem* are used of buying back from debt or slavery (*e.g.* Ex. 13:13–15; Nu. 18:15–17; Ru. 4:4–6).

The final part of this chapter, the last word of judgment in Hosea, uses first the picture of a hot desert *wind* that comes from the east, drying up all sources of water, even springs and wells. It will plunder his storehouse. A military picture is used to describe the wind: no food will grow and so those supplies that are stored up will vanish. V 16 gives a final picture of the horrifying effects of war: what happens when a nation deliberately removes itself from God's protection and refuses to return.

14:1–8 An appeal to repent and a promise of blessing

14:1–3 An appeal to Israel to return to acknowledge the LORD alone. *Return O Israel, to the LORD your God* looks like a normal appeal, but notice that the promise is already there in the word *your.* The cause of their *downfall* has been their iniquity. So now they are recommended to make a specific prayer and statement of their reliance upon God alone. This is similar to the confession of trust that God looked for in 6:1–3, but here there is a more explicit acknowledgment of their concrete sins. They throw themselves upon God's mercy, resolving to praise him (*offer the fruit of our lips*). They renounce their former trust in two wrong sources: Assyria (and military might) and idols. And they confess that in God alone is there compassion for the weak and vulnerable.

14:4–8 Israel restored: a gracious promise from the LORD. In 6:4–6 God expressed his distrust of Israel's resolve in seeking him. Here he responds with a far-reaching promise. The desert wind of 13:15 has gone, and the picture of Israel now is something like the garden of Eden. Food and drink will be there, together with certain luxury items: beautiful flowers, olive trees (and therefore olive oil), cedars (great trees, such as are found in Lebanon) giving shade from the hot sun and a fragrant smell. He will be strong and secure, and famous.

This is truly a wonderful promise, and a wonderful climax to the book. Israel failed to appropriate these blessings in the eighth century BC, but the promise remained and was fulfilled for many Israelites who joined themselves to Judah in Jerusalem, and to many who joined themselves to God through Jesus Christ.

14:9 A concluding wisdom saying

This independent saying is similar to those found in Proverbs and other Wisdom Literature. It is easy to imagine an (inspired) editor adding this to Hosea's prophecies as an invitation to read and learn. 'He who has ears to hear let him hear' (Mt. 11:15). The book is marked as relevant to whoever reads it including us. The only way to live is the Lord's way.

Mike Butterworth

JOEL

Introduction

Dating

The heading in 1:1 gives no information about the prophet apart from his father's name. The divine message, rather than the messenger, is what matters. So background knowledge can be gleaned only from internal evidence. It is useful to discover as much as possible about the historical and social background to prophetic writings. Then we can enter intelligently into the message of the prophet for his own times, and this helps us to apply it to our own situation.

It used to be thought that the order of books in the minor prophets was significant for the dating of Joel. Certainly there is a loose historical sequence, but we must not be locked into an early date just for that reason. The placing of the book of Joel is an interesting topic, to which we shall return later (see also chart on page 628).

The clearest clue for dating Joel comes from the historical information supplied in the accusations of 3:2–3, 5–6. It is now generally accepted that they fit best the terrible events of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and its aftermath. The temple was destroyed at that time, but both it and its rituals are conspicuously present in the messages of Joel (1:9, 13–14, 16; 2:14, 17; *cf.* 3:18). Therefore a date not only after the Judeans came back from exile in Babylon but after the rebuilding of the temple in 515 BC is indicated. The Sabeans (3:8) were displaced by the Mineans as important Arabian traders by 400 BC. In line with this general timeframe is the impression that Joel cites a number of Scriptures and traditions as evidently written earlier and well known to his hearers.

Occasion

We know from other post-exilic books that this period was a very difficult time politically and economically for the Judean settlers. Haggai mentions a bad harvest that devastated the community when they had insufficient resources to tide them over (Hg. 1:6, 10–11; 2:19). It was an agricultural crisis that was the burden of Joel's ministry, one that threatened the survival of the struggling settlers. They experienced a severe locust plague that affected more than one year's harvest (1:4; 2:25). Locusts are still a serious threat, notably in African countries, although the spraying of pesticides, especially from the air, has decreased their harmfulness by killing them before they mature and breed. To this end in a single week in September 1986 four DC-7 aircraft sprayed nearly one million acres in Senegal with malathion. One swarm can contain up to ten billion individual locusts. As many as a thousand newly hatched hopping locusts can occupy one square foot. A single locust can travel 3,000 miles during its lifetime, stripping vegetation wherever it and its swarm land. A swarm can devour in one day what 40,000 people eat in one year. In a 1958 visitation Ethiopia lost 167,000 metric tons of grain, enough to feed more than a million people for a year. (Most of these facts are taken from *World Vision*, Dec. 1986 – Jan. 1987.)

Such an infestation meant that a large question mark was placed against the survival of the Judean community. What could they do? Religion played an important role in ancient society, and Judah was no exception. Prophets were accepted figures in Judean religion. So it was Joel's function to interpret the locust plague in religious terms and guide the community to take suitable religious measures to cope with the problem. Joel seems to have been an official temple prophet. The crucial part played by such prophets at times of national crisis is illustrated by the narrative in 2 Ch. 20:1–20. There the prophet has authority to answer a national prayer of lament in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, and to promise deliverance from the crisis. That same power is claimed by Joel. The Psalms too provide evidence of these prophets' ministry of warning the people to mend their ways (Pss. 81:8–16; 95:7–11). This role is evident in the first half of the book of Joel.

Purpose

What religious significance did Joel find in the plague? He interpreted it as a warning from God to return to him, just as Amos did at an earlier period: '"Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me," declares the LORD' (Am. 4:9). 'Return' refers to the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people. This concept underlies the whole of Joel's prophetic ministry. It is evident in such phrases as 'your God' (2:13, 26–27; 3:17), 'my people' (2:27; 3:2–3) and 'his people' (2:18; 3:16). Moreover, while the political name of the community is Judah (3:1, *etc.*), Joel also uses its covenant name, Israel (2:27; 3:2, 16).

In the OT the covenant is a three-sided concept that includes the land. The triangle is clearly expressed at 2:18: 'Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people.' It is also revealed in the description of the Judeans as 'all who live in the land' (1:2, 14; 2:1; *cf.* Ho. 4:3). God's gift of the land was a sensitive instrument that registered the spiritual state of the people. It was fertile in times of fellowship and obedience, but barren and lifeless in times of disloyalty. Indeed, locust plagues feature as one of the covenant curses in Dt. 28:38, 42, while agricultural prosperity is credited to Yahweh's blessing (Dt. 28:4, 8, 11, 12).

This close dependence of material fortunes upon doing God's will underlies Joel's messages. Other parts of the OT, notably the book of Job, qualify it and the NT does not often appeal to it (see Mt. 6:33; 2 Cor. 9:6–11; Phil. 4:15–19). Yet there remains a basic kinship between humanity and the rest of creation that we ignore at our peril. The environment is a human and therefore Christian concern.

The covenant system, with its delicate balance of blessing and curse, was conditional (*cf.* Je. 14:21). In fact God had the right to annul it, if his people refused to play their proper part, although it was up to him whether he exercised that right. There were obviously degrees of cursing, the intent of which was both to punish and to warn, as in Am. 4:6–11. The ultimate judgment is expressed in Am. 4:12, to 'meet your God' in a sinister confrontation that would transcend earlier providential punishments (but see on Am. 4:12).

The confrontation is further described in Am. 5:18–20 as 'the day of the LORD' which ironically would bring 'darkness, not light'. This concept, which Amos related historically to the permanent destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BC, had a strong influence on later prophets. Joel made great use of it; but whereas for Amos God was to employ human forces to wage war on his people, for Joel a natural force was to be his instrument. He strikingly interpreted the locust plague in terms of 'the day of the LORD', as the first stage in the annihilation of the covenant people (1:15; 2:1, 11). He had precedents in Ezekiel and Obadiah, who understood the destruction of the state of Judah, together with its monarchy and temple, in 586 BC in terms of the 'day of the LORD' (Ezk. 7; 34:12; Ob. 8–14; *cf.* La. 2:21–22). However, Joel held out a chance of reprieve for post-exilic Judah, if the God-honouring rites of a public service of mourning, sincere repentance and prayer were performed (1:14; 2:16–17). Evidently these steps were taken, and through Joel a favourable response from God was delivered. It promised an end to the locust plague and also promised agricultural blessings (2:18–27).

There the book might have ended, but it does not. In the post-exilic period there was a keen expectation of a coming age of ultimate blessing. The divine judgment of the exile was regarded as a turning point in the people's relationship with God. Restoration to the land was to spell restoration to divine favour and the coming of a golden age promised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel and in Is. 40 – 55. A major task of the post-exilic prophets was to explain why these hopes had not yet materialized. The concept of the day of the Lord was woven into these hopes, which included vindication and so political advancement for Judah at the expense of the national neighbours at whose hands it had suffered. La. 1:21 and Ob. 15–21 are expressions of this development, which Joel inherited. So the day of the Lord covered both judgment and salvation for God's people, and the latter spelled judgment for other nations (*cf.* Ezk. 30:2–4). In its most complex form it also included salvation for other nations (Zp. 3:9; *cf.* Zp. 1:14–18; 3:8), but, as in Joel's case, it was not always pastorally wise to think or say so.

Quite logically, then, once the theme of the day of the Lord had been applied to the locusts, it snowballed in 2:28 – 3:21 to include other aspects closely associated with it.

Position in the canon

In the Psalms there are sometimes pairs with related subject matter, such as Pss. 105 and 106, and 111 and 112. Among the minor prophets, which in the Jewish canon represent a single book, Joel and Amos appear to have been placed together for literary reasons. Links between the two books are the shared themes of Joel 3:16 and Am. 1:2, and of Joel 3:18 and Am. 9:13. An earthquake, mentioned in Joel 2:10 and 3:16, reappears in Am. 1:1; 8:8; 9:5. The locusts of Am. 4:9 recall Joel 1 – 2, while the day of the Lord theme in Am. 5:18–20 connects with the whole of Joel. Placing the books together served to shed light upon each, though more than 300 years of history separate them.

Meaning

We need to overhear the message Joel brought to his contemporaries before we can hear it for ourselves. That involves appreciating the book's own spirituality. Joel was given an insight into human experience, which enabled him to relate it to the purposes of God. God's displeasure does not always lie behind human misfortune, as within the OT the book of Job clearly shows. But the NT sometimes sees Joel as relating believers' misfortunes to divine judgment (1 Cor. 11:30–32; Heb. 12:5–11). The warning

passages in Hebrews (*e.g.* Heb. 10:26–31) and the letters to the churches in Revelation, especially to Laodicea (Rev. 2:5; 3:3, 14–22) sound like Joel, as they speak in strong terms of the perils of spiritual treason. Yet, if Joel had to speak harshly to hardened sinners, he knew too when to speak coaxingly of the tender love of God (2:13), rather like Heb. 6:9–12 (*cf.* 2 Pet. 3:9).

Joel functioned as a teacher, quoting Scripture and religious traditions and applying them to his own time. For instance, in 2:13 he quoted the beautiful description of God found in Israelite worship (*cf.* Ex. 34:6; Ps. 86:15) and used it as an incentive to repent. Also he was careful to pave the way for divine oracles, as when he issued his challenges to different groups of people (1:2–18) and offered a sample prayer (1:19–20) before God's summons for the people to assemble in repentant worship at Jerusalem (2:1). Moreover, he explained oracles, once they were given: in 2:13 ('Return to the LORD . . .') the divine call of 2:12 is reinforced with reasons for obeying it, and in 2:32 the significance of God's intention for his people (vs 30–31) is clarified.

Joel's prophetic ministry included the role of pastor. In God's name he was sensitive to the frustrations and heartaches of an ethnic minority. He replaced despair with hope, and a poor self-image with confidence in God's positive purposes. God would recognize and reverse the suffering of his people at the hands of the nations (3:2–3, 5–6, 19) by vindicating and blessing them. Whenever the church feels insecure and threatened by a hostile world, it can turn to Joel for support.

The Christian interpreter of Joel must ask whether the NT made direct use of the book. As we shall see in the course of the commentary, there was a twofold use of the material which looks forward to the end times. First, in a straightforward fashion the coming of the day of the Lord was related to the second coming of Christ, when God would mount a final attack on the forces of evil. Secondly, the promise of the outpouring of the Spirit in 2:28–29 and the day of the Lord language in 2:30–32 were given a sophisticated interpretation in Peter's speech at Pentecost in Acts 2:16–21, 33 and 38–40. The dual usage reflects a conviction that for the church the last days have already begun, but are not yet completed, while for the world they still lie in the future.

Some consider that the national and material blessing for Judah in 3:17–21 will one day be enjoyed by the Jewish people. However, there is very little support in the NT for this claim (see Lk. 21:24). The general tenor of its teaching claims for the church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, a spiritualized version of OT promises. Yet there are clues that a renewed earth is part of God's ultimate purposes (Rom. 8:21; 2 Pet. 3:13).

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 Heading

The heading to a prophetic book can be a mine of historical information, as it is in the case of Hosea (Ho. 1:1). Here a bare minimum is provided, which focuses on the fact of prophetic revelation and points beyond the human agent to God himself. Joel means 'Yahweh is God': it represents his parents' affirmation of faith in the God of Israel. The fact that his father's name is supplied rather than his place of residence (*cf.* Mi. 1:1) suggests that he was a native of Jerusalem, like Isaiah (Is. 1:1). The expression *the word of the* LORD [Yahweh] *came to* is a formula that primarily introduces an individual message from God to a prophet, as in Je. 1:4. Here it refers to a collection of oracles given through Joel, as in Ho. 1:1.

1:2 – 2:17 Summonses to prayer

The first half of the book is a series of attempts on the prophet's part to encourage the people of God to turn to him in prayerful repentance, in reaction to the dire event of a locust plague. The procedure for such an emergency is supplied in Solomon's prayer at 1 Ki. 8:37–38: for the people to come to the temple as the house of prayer and to stand in its courts spreading their hands in supplication towards it and so towards the God enshrined there. It is such a spiritual reaction that Joel endeavoured to arouse. The prophet prepared his hearers in 1:2 – 2:11 for the short oracle from God in 2:12. Then he backed up the oracle with a further appeal in 2:13–17. As the heading in 1:1 has implied, whether the prophet speaks or Yahweh speaks through him, the whole consists of divine communication. The prophet was expressing the mind of God.

1:2–4 The seriousness of the situation

Joel begins with a general call to the *elders*, the political representatives of the people, and to the rest of the Judeans. He challenges them to admit the uniqueness of their experience. It stood out as unprecedented; a historical landmark for future generations. For those with ears to hear, the prophet uses the language of religious education: *cf.* Ex. 10:2; Pss. 48:13; 78:4, 6. It was a clue that God was somehow at work in the human situation and that they needed to relate it to him. The situation is described in v 4 as a severe locust plague, a series of croppings until vegetation was totally destroyed. Various terms for locusts are piled up, rather than presenting their biological development; a different order is given in 2:25. The second term (*great locusts*) represents the general Hebrew word for locusts and is better translated 'locust swarm'. The first and fourth terms relate to their destructive power. The third term (*young locusts*) means 'hoppers'.

1:5–12 Challenges to different groups

The comprehensive call of vs 2–4 is now broken into a series of calls to various sectors of society. Joel urges each in turn to interpret the plague spiritually, by focusing upon their particular point of need. He means to summon them to a service of public lamentation, as v 14 will make clear.

1:5–7 Drunkards. Ordinarily the drunk are the last people to be aware of what is going on around them. Joel ironically warns them of a consequence of the plague that would shake even them: their wine supply has been cut off. In vs 6–7 he seems to speak passionately of his own hurt in order to stimulate his audience to feel that they too were personally involved. The locusts were virtually an invading army: Joel will develop this idea theologically in 2:1–11. Their quantity had given them the power of large beasts of prey. They had attacked the grape vines, among other fruit trees, and even *stripped off their bark*, guaranteeing the death of the plants. No wonder the drunkards should *weep* and *wail*.

1:8–10 Jerusalem. The feminine singular verbs in the Hebrew, the mention of temple priests and the singling out of the 'people of Zion' at 2:23 in the complementary list of invoked groups suggest that Jerusalem, a feminine entity in Hebrew, is in view. In the exhortation to *mourn*, either its citizens are meant or a religious gathering of the people at the capital. The simile of poignant bereavement conveys the highly emotional form which the mourning should take as a reflection of the crisis. The alternative translation 'betrothed' (8) is more probable. In ancient Israel betrothal was legally binding, like the modern signing of a contract before the completion of a business deal. The unexpected death of a partner before the culminating marriage ceremony and consummation would have caused a frenzy of disappointment and despair. Such shock should now be felt in Jerusalem. The reason given is that the temple which lay at its heart had been deprived of the daily cereal offerings and libations of wine that accompanied animal sacrifices (*cf.* Ex. 29:38–40; Nu. 28:3–8). The clock of perennial worship had suddenly stopped ticking. The cycle of divine blessing upon the crops and human

offering of worship (*cf.* 2:14) had been broken. As in vs 6–7 the prophet pointed to his own sorrow, so now he refers for confirmation to the anguish of the *priests* who worked in the temple. Their awareness that a crisis had occurred had driven them to engage in mourning rites. The cause of the crisis was the destruction of the raw materials of worship. *Oil* was used to mix with the flour for the cereal offerings.

1:11–12 Farmers. Not unnaturally after v 10, farmers and fruit-growers are the next group to be challenged. They of all people had reason for lamentation. The cereal crops had been destroyed; so had the grape vines and fruit trees, now desolate and withered. The Hebrew term for *dried up* has associations with mourning, as the footnote to v 10 observes. It was as if the plants in their sorry state gave a cue for human mourning. Again the prophet is supporting his call with a motivating example. Just as the prophet in v 6–7 spoke of his own hurt to encourage others to consider theirs, so here he supports his call to lament by pointing to the 'mourning' of the plants as an example. This year there would be no harvest festivals, which were bywords for communal *joy* and merrymaking (*cf.* Ps. 4:7; Is. 16:10).

Joel has marshalled a series of arguments to persuade the people, with their different viewpoints, to unite in a common religious venture. The function of each sector of the people had been undermined. Their worries should be turned into prayers: only God could meet their needs. Joel has worked to communicate such truths to each group in turn and to show them that human experience has a spiritual meaning. Every preacher can learn from his efforts.

1:13–20 A call for public prayer

Instead of a harvest festival it was the time for a grim service. Joel encourages the *priests* to continue in their mourning rites of v 9, but he advocates that the tragedy of the interruption to the regular offerings needs further measures. First, the mourning should be intensified with appropriate dress and an all-night vigil. *Sackcloth* was worn in times of grief (*cf.* Am. 8:10). There is careful distinction in the references to *your* and *my* God. The priests had their role of serving God, a role that in its usual expression was under threat. Joel claims his own prophetic role as authorization for directing them to a different aspect of their role, to engage in ardent prayer expressing their sense of loss.

Secondly, he urges that they should extend their efforts by organizing a service of lamentation for the nation. They were to declare a public holiday for that purpose (*sacred assembly* is literally 'stoppage of work') and proclaim the rite of fasting that accompanied prayer and proved its sincerity (*cf.* Jdg. 20:26; Je. 14:1–2, 12). With the authority vested in them as priests, they are exhorted to *summon* to prayer both elders and those they represented. The reference to *elders* and *all who live in the land* recalls v 2 and reveals Joel's purpose in vs 2–13 to pave the way for this demand for a period of national prayer.

15–20 Joel provides a model prayer, as the people's leader in spirituality. His constant concern is to point the people beyond themselves by giving them an example to follow. In vs 6–7 he had referred to his own feeling of loss, and in v 9 to the priests' mourning, while in v 12 he had alluded to the mourning of the plants. The prayer corresponds to the national lament found in the Psalms where, however, it is usually a response to military invasion (*e.g.* Pss. 44; 74; 80). V 15 begins with a quotation from Is. 13:6, a cry of distress that features the *day of the* LORD. This is the first mention of a phrase that dominates the book. It refers to the dynamic intervention of Yahweh in human affairs. It had appeared for the first time in Am. 5:18–20, where its popular associations of national salvation and blessing were replaced with judgment for Israel. The prophets also used it of divine judgment upon foreign nations, and it has this sense in Is. 13:6. Joel strikingly reapplied it to the people of God as victims of his judgment. The citation was in itself a powerful statement because of its wordplay, *šōḏ* (ruin) and *šadday* (Almighty). The Israelite ear was extremely well tuned to wordplay; it was a means of arousing emotion that the prophets often exploited. Already Joel had spoken of ruin (10, *ruined, destroyed*: Heb. *šuddaḏ*). Now he shockingly traces it back to God as its source, interpreting the locust plague as the very work of God. [*That day* is literally 'the day' (NRSV); 'comes' (NRSV) or 'is coming', as in 2:1, suits the context better than *will come*.] Implicitly it was the outworking of a covenant curse (*cf.* Dt. 28:38). The plague was the beginning of the end for the covenant people.

16–18 It was customary in a prayer of lament to give a factual description of the crisis, to move God to intervene on the victim's side. This is now supplied, although the first sentence of v 17 is of uncertain meaning. Starvation stared the helpless people in the face. Now that the cereal crops had failed they were no longer able to discharge their sacred trust of presenting regular offerings to God in joyful worship. The flimsy storage buildings, not needed and so left in disrepair, were blatant monuments to that failure. The pastureless herds and flocks were further evidence of the crisis.

19–20 There is a turning to direct prayer as God himself is now addressed. It was permissible for the prayer leader in a national lament to interject a personal note (*cf.* Pss. 44:4, 6, 15–16; 74:12). If God was the cause, he was also the cure. A lament typically worked with a double image of God, as providential judge and potential saviour (*cf.* Ps. 22:11, 15). The prophet laid before God the tragedy of the stricken land. If it meant much to Joel (6–7), it must surely touch God's heart. The reference to *fire* implies drought conditions. Locust plague and drought do not coincide: evidently the drought followed the destruction caused by the locusts and aggravated it. *Pant* should probably be 'cry' (AV, NRSV). The piteous noises of parched beasts are strikingly interpreted in terms of prayer to their creator (*cf.* Jb. 38:41; Ps. 104:21; Rom. 8:22). Surely he heard them as such and would be compassionate to their suffering (*cf.* Jon. 4:11).

2:1–11 Preaching for a verdict

The emotional pressure is increased in preparation for the divine appeal of v 12. Again there is a national call, as in 1:2 and 14. The people's only hope is to turn to God in a service of lamentation. To encourage them to do so Joel sensationally sounds a military alarm and then describes the locusts as a national enemy. Sinister hints that had been dropped in the earlier message, in referring to an invading 'nation' and to the 'day of the LORD', are now developed, as Joel engages in a nightmarish, hell-fire type of preaching. Sometimes appeals to reason are not enough and only gut fear of terrible consequences can give a sense of the reality of God (*cf.* Heb. 10:26–31).

Some commentators interpret the passage in terms of a literal army, but this is less natural. The use of military similes in vs 4, 5 and 7 implies that the accompanying martial statements are meant as metaphors. Moreover, the clear references to locusts and the harm done by them in vs 19–26 suggest the development of a consistent theme throughout 2:1–27. The prophet interprets the locust plague with language well known to his audience from religious teaching: he adds to it dread imagery associated with the *day of the LORD*. Thematic references to it in vs 1 and 11 and related quotations from Is. 13:6 and 10 in vs 1 and 10 provide the framework and key thought of the passage.

1–2 The warning cry in the first sentence of v 1 evidently came from God himself (*my holy hill*). The sounding of an alarm warned that an enemy force was invading (*cf.* Ezk. 33:2–4). In fact the *trumpet* was also blown to announce temple services (*cf.* Nu. 10:1–10), and there is a play on ideas here, which v 15 will eventually clarify. God was really calling for the manning of the temple, not the ramparts. Joel explains the danger in terms of the *day of the LORD*, first quoting Is. 13:6 once more. Different aspects of God's intervention are then presented in terms of the locusts. The black mass of millions of insects covering the *mountains* is described in the frightening language of another scripture from the prophets, Zp. 1:15. For *dawn* it is better to read 'blackness', revocalizing the Hebrew *šaḥar* as *šeḥôr* with the NRSV, GNB and REB, since the evident intent is to justify the application of traditional prophetic language to the locusts. *Dawn* in the NIV presumably refers to the reflection of the sun on the locusts' wings. Here was the judgment day for the people of God. Joel picks up from 1:6 the imagery of a gigantic *army* before developing it later in this passage. Then, in an intensification of 1:2, he draws upon the language of Ex. 10:14, which described the locusts in the plagues of Egypt. Now, however, God's people were the victims.

3–5 V 3 contains a skilful allusion to Ps. 97:3, which describes a theophany, a dramatic appearing of the mighty God on earth, enveloped in fiery glory. The locusts were God's representatives, and the devouring *fire* was the barrenness they caused to the landscape. With their 'scorched earth policy' they turned green beauty (*cf.* Ezk. 36:35) into a gaunt *desert*. Joel exploits the uncanny resemblance of a locust's head to that of a horse. They were God's cavalry charging to attack. The noise they made while feeding, which modern observers have described as 'the crackling of a bush on fire', is described with military and destructive analogies. The locusts were a veritable army waging a campaign of terror. Metaphor and simile are used to open up a new horizon of understanding, to reveal the underlying significance of the plague as the very work of God.

6–9 The imagery of the attacking army (v 5) is now developed. But first another allusion to a theophany of judgment is supplied. The Hebrew for the expressions *At the sight of them* and *are in anguish* correspond to 'tremble before him' in Ps. 96:9. The locusts represented the very power of God at work against his people. The plural *nations* heightens their terrifying impact. The prophets often described the national enemies of Israel as the providential agents of God through whose attacks he punished a sinful people (*e.g.* Is. 10:5–6; Am. 2:13–16). Joel applies the concept to the locusts. They marched invincibly on, infiltrating even Jerusalem and its houses, unchecked.

10–11 This is the climax. If in v 6 'nations' intensified Joel's description of the locusts, now cosmic references do so even more. Again the prophet speaks in terms of theophany. In the OT an earthquake is a standard reaction of the

world to a visitation from God (*cf.* Pss. 18:7; 77:18). Cosmic references were features of the *day of the LORD*, as Is. 13:10 and 13 attest, scriptures to which Joel's hearers doubtless caught a reference. As waves of locusts crawled over the ground, it seemed to be shaking to the rhythm of their undulating motion. As countless myriads took to flight for fresh pastures, they blotted out the sun by day and the moon and stars by night.

To Joel's eyes, however, these natural phenomena were eclipsed by their supernatural meaning. With prophetic insight he presents Yahweh himself as commander of the locusts, whose legions marched at his orders. It was Is. 13:4 all over again, yet now God's enemies were not foreigners but his own people. The final question is meant to evoke helpless despair. Through the crisis Israel was brought face to face with its divine judge.

Joel was deliberately straining the feelings of his hearers to breaking point. He created a sense of utter foreboding and intolerable tension. In tone and in intention vs 1–11 might be compared to the bad news of Rom. 1:18 – 3:20 before the good news of 3:21–26.

2:12–17 The only chance

Joel has depicted Yahweh in the uniform of an enemy general. However, when he brings from this terrifying figure the message for Judah to surrender to him, it seems to be their former ally who is speaking. As the prophet explains, when once Yahweh's lordship is acknowledged, he can reveal himself as a God of love. But first in v 12 the prophet transmits a divine oracle that is a summons to repentance (*cf.* Je. 3:22; 7:3; 18:11; Am. 5:4–5). It is the culmination to which Joel's own appeals in ch. 1 have been leading. *Return* evokes the covenant relationship, as Joel comments in v 13 (*your God*; *cf.* 2:26–27; 3:17). God's people were prodigal sons and daughters who needed to come home to their heavenly father. They were to do it *now*: this was the psychological moment to act. The note of immediacy belongs to the OT's calls to repentance (Jos. 24:14; Je. 26:13; *cf.* Acts 17:30; 2 Cor. 6:2) and has passed into evangelistic preaching and hymns. Every salesman or saleswoman knows its necessity if a deal is to be clinched.

Spirituality always has its outward religious forms. In this case total commitment of will (*heart*), a quality that comes to the fore in Deuteronomy (*e.g.* Dt. 11:13), was to be expressed by the standard ritual of a public service of lamentation. The prophet's challenges to weep, mourn and fast in 1:5, 13 and 14 are here gathered up in the divine call.

13–17 Joel provides an interpretive commentary on God's message. There is a parallel in Ps. 85:8–13, where a one-word oracle of 'peace' (*šālôm*) is interpreted at length by the temple prophet in response to a national lament. First, Joel underlines the need for sincere repentance, calling for consistency between the inner and outer forms of spirituality. Ancient Israel tended to wear its heart on its sleeve and thereby doubtless gained a psychological release harder to achieve in less extrovert cultures. There was a danger, however, that outward emotions could be a cover for wills relatively unmoved. The custom of tearing one's clothes was part of the cultural reaction to crisis (*cf.* 2 Ki. 19:1), which still survives in the Jewish practice of tearing the jacket lapel at a funeral. *Hearts* too had to be torn, or broken: Israel's response had to be more than skin deep. *Not* is idiomatically used in the sense of 'not only', as in Ho. 6:6 and 1 Jn. 3:18. Joel did not pause to analyse the people's sin. 'In the heat of the emergency cure and not diagnosis is his concern' (Hubbard). The onus was on them to 'examine and test' their ways, as part of the process of returning to Yahweh (La. 3:40).

Secondly, Joel comments on *return* and notes its associations with the covenant. He goes on to cite the covenant loyalty of God (*gracious, love*) as motivation for the call to repentance and as incentive for Judah to respond. He uses well-known credal language (*he is gracious . . . love* [13]: *cf.* Pss. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8). It went unforgettably back to God's gracious renewal of the covenant with the exodus generation, after they had broken it in the wilderness. (Ex. 34:6). So this statement of faith is associated with another chance that God is ready to give his sinning people.

Sometimes God has to chastise his people as part of his fatherly role (*cf.* Heb. 12:5–11), but his ultimate purpose is to renew fellowship. Therefore, argues Joel, although *calamity* might be his first and fair response to their sin, his deeper longing was to relent. It was for this reason that the prophet could switch from the portrayal of Yahweh as enemy of Israel to the proclamation of Yahweh's appeal for repentence. The term rendered *relents* (also in v 14: read 'relent' for *have pity*) is often used of human repentance, but in God's case it does not imply sorrow for having done wrong. The OT denied the possibility of God's relenting when there was a likelihood that his warnings would not be taken seriously (*e.g.* 1 Sa. 15:29). But otherwise it can mean that God will be flexible in order to achieve a higher purpose (*cf.* Je. 18:5–11).

Yet Joel backed away from an outright promise that Yahweh had to be gracious. He could offer no guarantees. God's response was not

automatic (*Who knows?* in v 14). Whether he demonstrated his loving nature in a particular instance was for God alone to decide. His personal freedom is thereby safeguarded: in his sovereign mystery he cannot be manipulated by humans. Prayer is surrender to his will, not insistence on our own will. There is no magic spell, only a humble asking and waiting. Joel's warning serves to underline God's call for a change of heart and habits, as elsewhere in the prophets (Am. 5:15; Zp. 2:3; *cf.* Acts 8:22; 2 Tim. 2:25).

A positive response from God would mean his turning from a campaign of judgment. The prophet traces an organic link between human and divine turning: *return* in v 12 and *turn* in v 14 represent the same Hebrew verb. So pivotal was the relationship between God and his people their turning was the signal for which he looked; it would trigger his own turning (*cf.* Zc. 1:3; Mal. 3:7). In practical terms it meant that he would *leave* undestroyed a few traces of plant life in the vineyards and corn fields, as tokens of *blessing* (contrast v 3). In grateful response, Joel suggests, when this remnant grew to maturity, part of it should be made the basis of offerings, so that Israel would fulfil its obligation of worship once more.

Before this could happen there were ritual acts of a different nature to be undertaken. Joel alludes to the religious vocabulary of v 12 – *fasting and weeping and mourning* – and translates them into a renewed call to the priests to organize a public service of lamentation (15, *cf.* 1:14). Such a service features in the narrative of 2 Ch. 20:1–13. As there, a response from the whole people is sought: breadth, as well as depth, was a necessary feature of their reaction. The normal leave of absence from public duties granted to the newly wed husband to permit conception (16, *cf.* Dt. 24:5) had to be withdrawn temporarily, so serious was the situation. All had to be summoned to the temple courts to raise their voices in prayer. Even crying babies could add to the volume of supplication.

17 The priests had to take up their traditional position by the steps to the temple building (*cf.* Ezk. 8:16; Mt. 23:35) and recite on the people's behalf a typical national lament. They were to appeal to Yahweh as God of the covenant to come to his people's rescue for his own name's sake (*cf.* Ps. 79:1–4, 8–10). The phrase *your people* complements 'your God' in vs 13 and 14. The combination expresses the two-sided nature of the covenant (*cf.* Ex. 6:7). *Inheritance*, meaning people, refers to those who belonged to God. Repentance meant restoration to covenant harmony: if the people were alert to their covenant responsibilities, they could request the lifting of the covenant curse of the locusts. Loss of face, which was keenly felt in Israelite culture, here finds a double reference. Judah had suffered it before foreign neighbours as a result of the locusts' devastation. So too had Yahweh as their divine patron. His very honour was at stake. Israel at prayer did not scruple to persuade God by argument to give his aid.

2:18 – 3:21 Answers to prayer

God gives a double response. The first is in 2:18–27 and the second, longer one in 2:28 – 3:21. Both culminate in formulas that promise assurance of Yahweh's protective presence with his people as their God (*Then you will know* in 2:27; 3:17). The formulas serve to cancel out with glorious certainty the cautious 'Who knows?' of 2:14. The first response deals with the immediate situation of the locust plague. The second branches out in time (see 2:28; 3:1) and topic to further demonstrations of God's deliverance and blessing.

2:18–27 Victory over the locusts

The verbs of v 18 and the introductory verb of v 19 should be in the past tense, as in the footnotes: this is a short piece of narrative introduction. If vs 15–17 found a parallel in the narrative of 2 Ch. 20:1–13, now there is correspondence to 2 Ch. 20:14–17. A time-lag occurs between vs 17 and 18. It is implied that the priests and people took Joel seriously, duly held a service of lamentation and reached in reality the hypothetical stage of v 17. At that point Joel could switch his role from diagnosis of judgment to proclamation of salvation. In Yahweh's name he is empowered to deliver an oracle of salvation. God might have said 'no' in answer to the prayer; in fact he replies with a glorious 'yes'. Jealousy as a divine attribute denotes passionate concern and zealous love when the object of that loving concern is threatened (*cf.* Ezk. 36:5–6). The verb *take pity* is the same as 'spare' in v 17. It echoes the petition as a specific answer to prayer. So v 18 presents the following oracle as an example of God's faithfulness. What human repentance made possible, divine grace was to accomplish.

19–20 The initial message is full of pastoral concern. It is sensitive to the physical and psychological needs of God's people. Yahweh promises to restore the staple food destroyed by the locusts (*cf.* 1:10), to a level far beyond bare subsistence, and so to remove the ridicule of pagan foreigners (19, *cf.* v 17). The issue of saving face is so crucial that it begins and ends the first answer to prayer (19, 26–27). Yahweh now presents himself as his people's ally in a war against the locusts. They would be driven right away from Judean territory and destroyed, doubtless by means of strong winds (*cf.* Ex.

10:19). In echo of the military language of 1:6 and 2:1–11, the locusts are described as 'the northerner' (NIV *the northern army*). The term recalls Jeremiah's theme of the 'foe from the north', with which he described the enemy army providentially launched against Israel by God (*e.g.* Je. 6:1). At the end of v 20 'it' should be preferred to *he*, as in the footnote and the clause taken with what precedes. The army of locusts had acted too savagely, and this was the warrant for their judgment. There is reminiscence of Isaiah's oracle about Assyria's double role, first the instrument of God's judgment against his people and then its victim, for overstepping God's limits (Is. 10:5–12). Mention of the stench of their decaying remains serves to seal the promise of destruction.

21–24 A series of calls rhetorically addressed to the *land, wild animals* and the *people of Zion* are presented in vs 21–23. The *people of Zion* are the congregation of Israel met together in the temple courts at Jerusalem. The calls are a happy counterpart to the series of grim challenges in ch. 1. There are links in vocabulary between the two passages. The correspondence expresses the reversal of judgment and teaches that God satisfies his people's needs. The assurance that there is no need to be afraid is typical in a divine promise that follows a cry of lament (*cf.* 2 Ch. 20:15, 17; La. 3:57). Also typical in such a promise is the use of six Hebrew past tenses, two of which the NIV has rendered literally (*has done, has given*). The past tense are employed for future action, as if to say that God's promise is already as good as kept. The calls function as a prophetic hymn of praise that invites the people of God to trust in what he will do and to rejoice even now (*cf.* Rom. 5:2). As in Ps. 35:26–27 those who (literally) 'say great things against' God meet their match in the great God, so here in vs 20–21 the negative power of the locusts loses out to Yahweh's positive might. The people of God could look forward (23) to his gift of the healing rains of late autumn and spring and so to the greening of the barren landscape. Eventually they would enjoy a harvest of figs and grapes, in marked contrast to 1:7, 12. There is a revelling in the prospect of rain, which only those who live in hot climates can appreciate.

The footnote 'the teacher of righteousness' (v 23) testifies to an old misunderstanding current in early Judaism, from which the Qumran sect derived the title of their founder, the 'Teacher of Righteousness' or 'true teacher', by association with Ho. 10:12. In the fourth century AD Jerome learned it from his rabbinic teachers and incorporated it into the Latin Vulgate as a messianic promise. But both the context and the underlying appeal to the covenant blessings of Lv. 26:4 and Dt. 11:14 with reference to rain, favour the usual interpretation. *Righteousness* here refers to covenant harmony: the rain would signify a right relationship between God and his people. V 24 harks back to v 19 and spells out the consequence of this blessing, a welcome excess of *grain, wine* and *oil*.

25–27 An oracle of blessing comes directly from God. As gracious compensation for the bad *years* of harvest after the locusts' ravages, God would give crops that made up for the loss. There is a glancing back to the negative vocabulary of 1:4 and 2:11, at the beginning and end of Joel's appeals, but only as an assurance that the nightmare was over. Cries of lament would be replaced by hallelujahs, in response to the writing of a new chapter of God's power at work in Israel (*cf.* Ex. 15:11; Mi. 6:15). In closing, the healing of psychological hurt broached in v 19 is twice repeated. *Never again* or 'no longer' functions in the prophetic literature as a pastoral term that soothes deep-seated anxieties (*cf.* Ezk. 34: 28–29; 26:30). Comfort also comes from the protective title *my people*, to which the prophet proudly referred in his introduction at v 18. God would prove himself a very present help, the champion of his covenant people. Then they would be able to give a positive answer to the sneering question of v 17, 'Where is their God?' They would also be convinced of his exclusive claims to their allegiance, for privilege never comes without responsibility. The references to the ending of shame triumphantly reflect the same Hebrew verb used repeatedly in 1:10–12 ('is dried up', 'despair', and 'is withered away') and so bring the locust problem to a satisfying conclusion.

God's answer is linked to the land-based theology of the OT, whereby the land is the barometer of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. The catalogue of land-related covenant blessings serves to underline the lesson that the locust plague was the outworking of a covenant curse upon a rebellious people.

2:28–32 Renewal and protection for God's people

Joel has used the motif of the day of the Lord to interpret the locust plague as a doom-laden visitation from God. Traditionally it had to do with a climactic judgment upon a sinful world, from which his own sinful people could not escape (Zp. 1:2–3, 18; *cf.* Is. 2:6–21). For Joel the plague had set this period in motion, as for Obadiah it had been inaugurated by the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC (Ob. 10–21).

V 32 seems to be Joel's commentary on a further divine oracle cited in vs 28–31, especially in its latter half, vs 30–31. (In v 31 the *day of the* LORD appears to be a stereotyped expression on

Yahweh's lips: the expression 'my day' in this sense never occurs in the OT.) Joel evidently takes a cue from the promise of survival in Zion at Ob. 17 (*as the Lord has said*) and links it with the message in vs 28–31 given to the people gathered at the Jerusalem temple (*cf.* Zp. 2:1–3). He associates the message with the unfolding of the day of the Lord in the rest of its phases, on the lines prophesied by Obadiah. God's people had already experienced their version of the day and so would be exempt from its judgment.

28–29 The oracle speaks of a new era of perfect relationship between God and his people. Jeremiah had described this era in terms of the law written on their hearts (Je. 31:31–34; *cf.* Ps. 40:8) and Ezekiel in terms of the gift of new hearts (Ezk. 36:26–27), in order to convey the notion of a people perfectly obedient to God's will. The language of prophetic inspiration is used to the same end: the Spirit is here a medium of prophecy (*cf.* Nu. 12:6; 2 Ch. 20:14). The promise takes up Moses' wish in Nu. 11:29, 'that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!' Earlier in the ministry of Joel the whole nation had been out of step with Yahweh. Only one person, the prophet Joel, had seen the situation through God's eyes; with God's voice he had spoken of both judgment and hope. Now a whole nation of Joels is envisaged. Every sector of its society, young and old, male and female, slave and free (*cf.* Gal. 3:28), would share a prophet's understanding of God (*cf.* 1 Cor. 13:9–12).

All people, lit. 'all flesh', here means 'every one in Israel', as the explanation in terms of members of the community shows (*cf.* 3:1; for the relative use of 'all flesh' *cf.* Je. 12:12 AV; compare the relative use of 'everybody' in English and 'tout le monde' in French). The message Joel brought to his contemporaries is that, as Calvin said, 'the whole people would prophesy, or that the gift of prophecy would be common and prevail everywhere among the Jews.' In v 29 *my* should be omitted (*cf.* NRSV): it is an attempt to harmonize with the quotation in Acts 2:18, which quotes the ancient Greek version rather than the Hebrew text.

30–32 Against Israel's fortune is dramatically set the fate of the other nations. As v 32 will explain, God's people would be safe in the eye of a raging storm. In response to Yahweh's call through Joel they had called on his *name* in prayer (*cf.* 1:19; 2:17). So they would be *saved* or escape the danger of coming catastrophe. That would be reserved for others, as 3:2 will make clear. Israel had barely survived the destruction of the day of the LORD, but that destruction had still to materialize in the world outside. The signs of its coming in sky and earth are explained in reverse. First, *blood, fire* and *smoke* are grim tokens of the destructive war that Yahweh would wage on his enemies. Details of this display of judgment will be supplied in 3:1–14. Secondly, the language that Joel applied metaphorically to the locusts in v 10 concerning Israel's experience of the *great and dreadful day of the LORD* (*cf.* v 11) is now re-used in relation to the nations. It has its traditional sense of cosmic convulsions heralding a theophany of judgment (*cf.* Is. 13:9–13). These heavenly signs will be reaffirmed in 3:15.

The NT has an intense interest in this passage, in the light of the unfolding purposes of God in Christ. First of all it links the passage with the return of Christ (Mk. 13:24; Lk. 21:25; Rev. 6:12, 17; 9:2). But NT eschatology (teaching on the end times) is complex. Apart from the standard view inherited from the OT and Judaism, it holds that the last days have already begun in the first coming of Christ and in the establishment of the church, while the old age is still rolling on (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5:17). So, secondly, Joel 2:28–32 is interpreted in this light, especially in Peter's speech at Pentecost (Acts 2:16–21, 33, 38–40). Peter was claiming that God's final work had begun in the filling of the disciples with the Holy Spirit and in the opportunity of salvation for the penitent. Detailed explanation is not supplied in the abbreviated text of the speech, but the earthly and heavenly signs and wonders are linked with the miracles done by Jesus and evidently with the darkness at the crucifixion (Lk. 23:44–45). The relation of 'all flesh' to Israel is retained: 'men of Israel' are addressed, including Gentile converts to Judaism (Acts 2:11, 22).

Later, Paul argued in Rom. 10:12–13 that for Christian purposes 'all flesh' should be interpreted as both wider and narrower than the Jewish nation (*cf.* Acts 10:45). To this end he cross-referenced Joel 2:32 with Is. 28:16 and associated it with the doctrine of justification for all believers established in Rom. 4. Now the chosen people of God no longer takes the form of a nation, but of an international church, whose boundaries are drawn by faith and not by race (*cf.* Eph. 2:11–22). 'All flesh' is still Israel but a greater Israel. Both Jews and Gentiles who do not believe in Jesus stand outside the present people of God. One should think not of a new universalism imposed on the passage but of its particularism being defined in a new way.

3:1–17 Tribulation for the nations and safety for Israel

Judah had experienced and survived their version of the day of the Lord and would experience great blessing, a change of *fortunes*

indeed. However, as 2:31 intimated, the day was to be a catastrophe suffered by the other nations. This next passage unfolds its character: the Hebrew begins with 'For' (*cf.* AV, NRSV) and 2:30–32 are virtually headlines for this section.

The teaching about the end times in the Bible serves not to give information to the curious but the bring pastoral assurance to the suffering people of God. So it does here, as v 2 makes clear with its reference to Yahweh's covenant care. The passage throbs with a sense of grievance and injustice that mirrors Judah's own feelings. Its NT counterpart is 2 Thes. 1:5–10, which likewise mingles pastoral assurance, punishment for the persecutors of God's people and the day of the Lord. The meting out of judgment is an adjusting of the balances of justice, to vindicate victims of oppression and violence, as in the parable of the persistent widow in Lk. 18:1–8. There is the same note of divine championship in vs 2–3 (*my inheritance, my people*) as there was in 2:17, 26–27.

1–3 An oracle of judgment for *all nations* is delivered. The *Valley of Jehoshaphat* (2, 12) is not identified: only its purpose is given, in its name that means 'Yahweh judges', and also in its other description in v 14, 'valley of decision'. *Valley* here denotes a broad plain between mountains, a suitable gathering place for large crowds. It is clear from vs 2–3 (*cf.* vs 5–6, 17) that *all nations* are those who were involved in the invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, especially local vassal contingents of the Babylonian army and its collaborators. A divine version of the Nuremberg trials is promised in judgment on those who inflicted suffering in war. The military campaign resulted in deportation, confiscation of land and the selling into slavery of the next generation of Judeans. God takes upon his own shoulders their sense of grievance and promises as Lord of the covenant to use his power to secure justice for them.

4–8 The form changes to an oracle against particular foreign nations, which is meant as an assurance to God's own people. The Phoenicians (*Tyre, Sidon*) and the Philistines, divided into five city-states or *regions*, are singled out in a rhetorical address intended for Judean ears (*cf.* Ezk. 25:15–17; 28:20–24). Similarly in the book of Obadiah Edom was the particular object of attack. The oracle begins with an angry challenge that warns that they would have to answer to Yahweh. He would see that the tables were turned for their crimes against him as well as against Judah (*cf.* Mt. 25:41–45). They are charged (5–6) with looting the temple treasury for trophies to devote to their own gods and also with involvement in the dehumanizing slave trade of prisoners of war, which was mentioned in general terms in v 3. Yahweh promises the return of Judean slaves and a boomerang of enslavement for the slave traders. The Judeans are ironically cast in the role of middlemen. While their own citizens were sold to the *Greeks* in the far west (*cf.* Ezk. 27:13), their oppressors were to vanish into the commercial pipeline to the far east, controlled by the *Sabeans* in Arabia. So the punishment would fit the crime. The oracular formula, *The* LORD *has spoken*, functions like a closing signature to a document, endorsing the authority and certainty of the message.

9–13 A divine oracle in vs 9–11 begins with a rhetorical call to *the nations* to rally to the battlefield where justice would be done. In v 10 there appears to be a deliberate reversal of the promise of peace in Is. 2:4 and Mi. 4:3, where peace for the nations evidently follows the war to end all wars (*cf.* Pss. 46:8–10; 76:3; Zp. 3:8–10). Joel reverted to an earlier stage in the divine calendar. There were still scores to be settled, unfinished business of a sinister kind for God to transact. The final call in v 11 appeals to Yahweh to bring his heavenly hosts (*cf.* Zc. 14:5), anticipating v 13. However, it interrupts the divine oracle, as the NIV acknowledges by printing it separately. The ancient Greek version, reflecting mainly the same Hebrew consonants, has 'Let the timid man become a hero', which aligns with the end of v 10. V 12 recapitulates Yahweh's call for the rallying of the nations and identifies the battlefield as Yahweh's seat of judgment, in explanation of its name in v 2 (*cf.* Je. 1:15–16). In v 13 Yahweh issues a command to his own troops. The agricultural metaphors refer to a blood bath: they are echoed in the warfare of Rev. 14:14–20 and 19:15, so that the present passage is pointing forward to the time, still future, when God winds up world history. The victims of the carnage are described as ripe for judgment. Yahweh could wait no longer to punish *their wickedness*, a term that summarizes the charges of vs 2–3.

14–17 The prophet reverts by way of summary to the themes of 2:30–32. First, in vs 14–16a Joel links the scene of war and judgment with the motifs of the day of the Lord mentioned in 2:30–31. The *valley of decision* or 'verdict' is an explanatory name for the 'Valley of Jehoshaphat' mentioned in the divine oracle at v 2. Secondly, in the meantime God's own people would be safe, as 2:32 had affirmed. The prophetic assurance of v 16b, which is an eschatological version of Ps. 46:1, is backed by a divine promise in v 17. *Jerusalem* would live up to its role as the seat of God's holy presence, his *holy hill* (*cf.* 2:1). It would be put out of bounds to foreign infidels, who had neither political claim nor spiritual desire to be there. This

promise is set in a concluding formula that matches the one in 2:27. The covenant relationship was backed by Yahweh's presence in the Jerusalem temple (*cf.* Ex. 29:45; Rev. 21:3), which shed an aura of holiness over the whole city. His presence as Lord of the covenant would be openly manifested in the security of the holy city. His people would *know* from visible evidence, not just by faith. Rev. 21:1–8 transposes Joel's vision to a new Jerusalem where God dwells but strangers to his will have no place.

3:18–21 Blessings for God's people

This supplementary oracle of blessing is typically introduced by *In that day*. It spells out for the land and people the implications of God's presence in Zion (21b). While 2:28–29 forecast the spiritual blessings to be enjoyed by Israel, now accompanying material blessings are promised. In the OT the spiritual and the material are the double evidence of blessing. Yahweh's presence would bring fertility to the land via a miraculous water supply from the temple (*cf.* Ezk. 47:1–12; Rev. 22:1–2). It would water even dry places where acacias grow. The promise of *new wine* nicely recapitulates an element of the previous answer to prayer (2:24). The agricultural blessings belong to the land-based theology of the OT as tokens of covenant fellowship between God and his people. The promise goes on to include the healing of their emotional wounds, by decreeing barrenness for *Egypt* and *Edom* as punishment for crimes committed on Judean soil (*cf.* 2 Ki. 23:29–34; Ob. 10). As two nations were singled out in vs 1–8, so are two others here. These two nations function as typical, long-standing enemies of God's people. His dealing with them carries an assurance of the total vindication of his people. Their destruction serves as a negative foil for Judah's blessing in vs 18 and 20–21. The union between God and Judah is sealed with a pledge of perpetual occupation. The first half of v 21 is difficult. It seems to echo the *innocent blood* of v 19. A likely rendering, which underlies NIV, is 'I will show to be innocent the blood (which) I have not (hitherto) shown to be innocent' (*cf.* REB). It promises redress to the hurting people on lines paralleled in Revelation 6:10 (*cf.* Ps. 9:11–12).

Leslie C. Allen

AMOS

Introduction

The times of Amos

The date of the earthquake (1:1) cannot now be settled and therefore we do not know exactly when Amos prophesied. Uzziah of Judah reigned from 767–740 BC and Jeroboam II of Israel from 782–753 BC and, within these limits, a date around 760 BC is suitable for Amos. See the chart on p.628.

Jeroboam was an energetic king, ready to take every opportunity for his country's expansion. The time favoured him: in 805 BC Adad-nirari of Assyria had conquered Syria, thus disposing of a long-standing enemy of Israel. Assyria itself then entered into a period of decline and so the way was open for Jeroboam to restore his kingdom to the boundaries it had enjoyed under Solomon. This in turn gave him control of trade routes and therefore commercial prosperity which was reflected in a dominant wealthy class living in great luxury. As often happens this went hand-in-hand with exploitation of the poor (5:11; 6:6). Amos's prophecy against the excesses of Israel, the northern kingdom, were even more unwelcome in that he came from Judah in the south (7:10–17).

While, therefore, the land had known its troubles within living memory (4:6–11) the prospects seemed good. It was possible to defer anxiety to the remote future (5:18; 6:3) and to forget that while Assyria might be asleep it was not dead.

The teaching of Amos

God

While Amos stresses the unique privilege of Israel (2:9–11; 3:2) he never speaks of the LORD as 'the God of Israel'; neither, indeed, does he use the word 'covenant'. He seems to avoid anything that might foster Israelite complacency or false security. His favoured divine titles are 'the Sovereign LORD' (*e.g.* 1:8; 8:1, 3, 9, 11; 9:8) and 'the LORD God Almighty', *i.e.* the God who is in himself every potentiality and power (4:13; 5:14–16, 27; 6:8, 14). Amos does, of course, use the divine name 'Yahweh' ('The LORD') more than any other name, but throughout his prophecy he stresses the features of God's character which underlie universal rule and government. He sees the LORD as Creator (4:13; 5:8; 9:5, 6), the agent in all history (3:6; 4:6–11; 9:7) and the moral governor or judge of all the nations (1:3 – 2:16). He acknowledges one only God but recognizes that there are other objects of worship (5:26f; *cf.* 1 Cor. 8:5f.) to which people can be drawn away.

Judgment

The only God is the judge of all the earth. Over the whole wide world, crimes against humanity, wherever, whyever and however committed, whether recorded by man or noted only by God, are abhorrent to him and will receive an appropriate recompense. To be brought near to such a God through the privilege of being his chosen people carries the consequence of weightier and more certain judgment (3:2), for the sins of God's people are not just offences against conscience (as in the case of the nations) but specific rebellions against the light of revelation (2:4ff.). Both affronts to God and offences against mankind are offensive to God and his judgment will fall.

Society

The assumption that crimes (social offences) are sins (offences against God) lies at the heart of Amos's sociology. In every aspect of society it is with the LORD that we have to deal, whether conduct pleases him and comes under his blessing, or offends and merits wrath. Society does not rest on independent, mechanical principles – market forces, money supply, Gross National Product – for its prosperity. Prosperity comes with divine blessing and no matter how efficient the economy it cannot prosper if it is under his curse.

The LORD is concerned with how war is waged (1:3, 13), how commerce is carried on (1:6; 8:5–7) and whether obligations solemnly undertaken are fulfilled (1:9). He is offended by the acquisitiveness which allows the end to justify the means (4:1–3), when ruling classes become self-important and callous (4:1; 6:1), and when wealth is only a means to luxury for some to the neglect of those less well supplied (3:12–15; 4:1; 6:4–6). The perversion of justice in the courts rouses his animosity (2:6, 7; 5:7, 10, 12, 15) as does commercial dishonesty – the petty fraud of the shopkeeper who tampers with his scales (8:5–7) and the inhumanity of 'big business' when it treats people as commodities (1:6). On all these grounds, Amos's people came under judgment and by extension our modern

industrialized, post-biblical world falls under God's judgment too. These aspects of commercial and materialistic society, which makes a god out of prosperity, have an ominously familiar ring.

Hope

For Israel, as for the world, will judgment spell an utter end? Amos is a prophet of Yahweh, and this alone should have been sufficient to preserve him from the charge that he lacked a message of hope (possibly more unhesitatingly made twenty years ago than today) and that passages like 9:11–15 are later contributions by other writers. 'Yahweh' revealed the meaning of his name (Ex. 3:15; 6:6–8) in a single exodus-event which both saved his people and overthrew his foes. Preaching about such a God cannot exclude hope because it is of the essence of his nature. This becomes clear in 7:1–6 where Amos is made to face the full consequence of Israel's sin in great judgments which would leave no survivor. When he prays against such eventualities he is assured that 'this will not happen'. The commentary will show that the negative statements of 7:3, 6, denying total destruction, develop into the positive hope of 9:11–15: a restored 'David', a restored creation and a restored people.

Prophecy

Ch. 7:14 is a key verse. In Hebrew the omission of the verb 'to be' (lit. 'I not a prophet') usually implies a present tense (RSV, 'I am no prophet'). Those who follow this interpretation (*e.g.* Wolfe, *Joel and Amos*, Fortress Press [1977], pp. 306, 312f.) suggest that Amos is denying that an office or official position has anything to do with the case, for what matters is the proclamation of the divine word. Wolfe must deny that 2:11 and 3:7, which are positive about the prophetic office, come from Amos himself, and then assert that Amos says 'I am not a prophet' (7:14) immediately before he says that 'the LORD sent me to be a prophet' (7:15).

As far as the Hebrew is concerned, while possibly the majority of cases where the verb 'to be' is left unstated needs a present tense, each case must be decided by its own needs. Thus, in the present context, in reply to the challenge from the priest, Amos looks back to a time when he was a prophet neither in fact nor prospect, until divine appointment and commissioning gave him prophetic status and work, as the NIV correctly implies. He also stands within the tradition of classical OT prophecy as one endowed with the divine word. Like all the prophets who speak on this point (*cf.* Je. 1:9; Ezk. 2:7 – 3:4) Amos asserts the exact identity between his words and the LORD's words (1:1, 3).

This is the unique fact of verbal inspiration: that the LORD did not just share with the prophets the 'drift' of what he wanted them to say but that they were people so worked upon by God that the words which were naturally theirs, bearing the imprint of their times, personalities and studies, were the very words in which the LORD intended his truth to be perfectly enshrined.

Religion

Israel in Amos's day was extremely religious but it was a religion astray from the law of God (2:7–8), devoid of spiritual benefit (4:4–5), incapable of protecting its devotees (3:14; 5:5–6) and lacking moral and social justice (5:21–25). Did Amos then swing to the opposite extreme, looking for a religion of ethical behaviour without cultic, sacrificial expression? His question in 5:25 seems to suggest this and, indeed, has often been so understood (C. F. Whitley, *The Prophetic Achievement*, Blackwell [1963] p.73). But for a preacher to ask a question makes him dependent on the answer his hearers will give, and there can be no doubt that Amos's congregation would have replied heartily that indeed they were obeying divine law that reached back to the days of Moses. On any view of the dating of the Pentateuch, but particularly if the Pentateuch stems from Moses, sacrifices were a fundamental part of the Israelites' religion as received from God. This leads us to the view taken in the commentary (*cf.* H. H. Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible*, Carcy Kingsgate [1953] p.42) that Amos's question is not whether sacrifices were right but what place they were intended to have. The LORD's priority was that his people should obey him (Ex. 19:4–5; 20:2–3ff.), and the sacrificial code was a provision for their lapses in obedience. Then, as now, the divine call was to holiness, but if people sinned they had an advocate and a propitiation for their sins (1 Jn. 2:1–2). Ritualized religion, then and now, is a reversal of this priority. (See further on 5:24ff.)

The book of Amos

The book of Amos has come to us as a carefully edited piece of literature and there is no reason to doubt that Amos was his own editor. In fact, when we consider his conviction that his words were God's words it is unlikely that he would have left them to the risk of oral tradition or to unpredictible later editors (*cf.* Is. 8:16–20; Je. 36). But the question must be asked, nonetheless, whether there are parts of the book as we have it that might more reasonably be seen as the work of others.

(i) The oracles against Tyre, Edom and Judah (1:9–12; 2:4–5). These are often treated as

additions because they are briefer than the oracles against Damascus (1:3–5), Gaza (1:6–8), Ammon (1:13–15) and Moab (2:1–3). But when the evidence is added up there are, after all, three oracles in the short form and four in the longer form and, as Hubbard says (TOTC, p. 97), 'variety may be as strong an evidence for authenticity as similarity is'. Furthermore, as a Judahite (1:1) the condemnation of Judah is the one thing Amos dare not leave out unless he wishes to discredit his message by partiality.

(ii) The hymn-like fragments (4:13; 5:8–9; 9:5–6). Hyatt ('Amos', *Peake's Commentary* (1963), p. 617) urges that the doctrine of God the Creator evident in these passages requires a later date than the time of Amos (*cf.* H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament, OUP* (1946). p. 22). But archaeology has shown that the concept of the gods as creators is as old as religion. It would be remarkable indeed if the OT was laggard in ascribing this glory to the LORD! Furthermore, as the Commentary shows, the passages are carefully embedded in their respective contexts. So perhaps Amos was quoting well-known hymns on the topic of God the Creator, but doing so with an eye to the needs of his message at each point.

(iii) The words of 9:11–15 are much disputed because they have such a golden message of hope as compared with the solemnity of the rest of the book. It used to be held that, in any case, such a doctrine of hope required a post-exilic date. The language of the passage fits well with the rest of the book, however. Besides this, there is an inherent absurdity in thinking that it was a later editor who added the note of hope, presumably when the full-blown message of doom did not eventuate and an Israelite people continuing to exist after the exile. For if Amos is only a prophet of doom, foreseeing only the end of the covenant and of the covenant people, hope could only be added at the expense of making him a false prophet! On the other hand, if Amos really believed his own message about fire on Judah and Jerusalem (2:5) it is reasonable to expect that he would look to the LORD for some word about the future beyond the fire and then express it in symbols and motifs familiar in his own day.

Further reading

J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos*, BST (IVP, 1974).
P. C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, Vol. 1, DSB (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1984).
J. M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Zondervan, 1983, 1986).
D. A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, TOTC (IVP, 1989).
T. McComiskey, *Amos*, EBC (Zondervan, 1985).
J. Niehaus, *Amos*, in T. McComiskey (ed.), *The Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (Baker Book House, 1992).

Outline of contents

The three main sections of Amos are marked out by what is known as 'inclusio', which means that each begins and ends on the same note: the roaring lion (1:2; 3:8), the surrounding foe (3:9–11; 6:14) and (by contrast) the judgment that will not happen (7:1–6) and the hope that will (9:11–15). Each section has a symmetrical pattern: the first (1:2 – 3:8) takes the form ABBA; the second (3:9 – 6:14) the form ABCCBA and the third (7:1 – 9:15) the form ABCDCBA.

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Commentary

1:1 Title

As the book proceeds we learn that the words of Amos are in fact the words of the LORD (*e.g.* 1:3, 6; 3:1, 11; 5:1, 4: 9:11–15). But Amos clearly did not lose his personality through becoming the vehicle of the LORD's words. This is the miracle of inspiration. *Shepherds* is a word only used elsewhere of 'sheep-breeder' (2 Ki. 3:4). The LORD chooses whom he will, making the very ordinary his agent for unique purposes. Only the work of God – not human training or even personal choice – could have made Amos what he became. *Tekoa*, 12 miles (19 km) south of Jerusalem. *Saw* is often used, as here, to describe the spiritual 'perception' granted to the prophets (Is. 1:1; Hab. 1:1), not necessarily visionary experience but the ability to 'see what is true'. It blends revelation and inspiration, for it implies both an objective truth 'seen' and the subjective faculty to 'see' it. God gave both the truth and the ability to grasp and express it (*NBD*, 'Prophecy, Prophets'). *Uzziah . . . Jeroboam . . . earthquake*, see Introduction.

1:2 – 3:8 The Lion's roar: universal judgment and its grounds

1:2 The Lion's roar: the Lord's voice

Like a good open-air preacher, Amos gathers hearers by telling them what would arouse their enthusiasm – the judgment about to fall on hated foes. Imperceptibly, however, he moves their attention from pagan nations (*e.g.* Damascus in 1:3) to 'cousin' nations (*e.g.* Edom in 1:11; *cf.* Gn. 36:1), then to the 'sister' nation Judah (2:4), and finally the crowd finds itself listening to its own condemnation (2:6). Though judgment is pronounced throughout in parallel terms (sending 'fire'), the ground of judgment changes. The nations around are brought to trial for 'crimes against humanity' (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1), things conscience should have warned them not to do; but Judah (2:4) and Israel (2:11–12) are judged for abandoning revealed truth. The cardinal sin of the LORD's people is to depart from the LORD's word. Their cardinal virtue is obedience to revelation.

The great Lion's roar heralds the judgment to follow (1:3 – 3:2) by underlining three general aspects. (i) It is imminent. *Roars* is the 'pouncing roar' intended to terrify the prey into submission (Jdg. 14:5). Both verbs, *roars* and *thunders*, express repeated action; *i.e.* in the following series of condemnations we hear roar after roar. (ii) It is comprehensive. The whole land from the lush, low-lying pastures of the shepherds to the heights of the top of Carmel, is blighted. (iii) It is divine. The words *the LORD . . . from Zion . . . from Jerusalem* are emphasized, the holy LORD in his earthly dwelling place. The roar is the expressed anger of the Holy One but, even in wrath, his name, Yahweh, and his chosen residence in a house where sacrifices for sin are provided prompts the question whether wrath is the whole story. In this God there is always the blessed ingredient of grace; in wrath, he remembers mercy (Hab. 3:2). The triumph of grace begins to emerge in the final section of Amos (7:1ff., see outline above), but until then the roar predominates.

1:3 – 2:3 Against the pagan peoples

The grounds of judgment. Everything written in the Old Testament is a contemporary word of God (Rom. 15:4). We must listen to the 'roar after roar' of this section and learn what angers the LORD, as he accuses first the surrounding pagan nations (1:3–10), next the related pagans (1:11 – 2:3) and finally the people of God themselves (2:4–16). In 1:3 – 2:3 we learn that, for Amos, the law written on the human conscience (for these nations knew no special revelation of God; see Rom. 2:14–16) is spelt out in terms of human relationships. The first two condemnations (3ff., 6ff.) are linked simply by the thought of gross cruelty (3, 6); the second pair (9f., 11f.) by unbrotherly action (9, 11); and the third pair (1:13ff., 2:1ff.) by the contrasting ideas of destroying the future (13) and desecrating the past (2:1) and by condemnation of what instinctively commands respect, the pregnant mother and the human corpse.

3–5 Damascus. Hazael of Syria (842–806

BC) pursued an expansionist policy, extending his kingdom into Israelite territory with vicious cruelty (2 Ki. 8:12). But Damascus fell to Assyria in 732 BC. God is not mocked. 3 The numerical idiom, *three ... four*, here and throughout this series of oracies (*cf.* Ps. 62:11; Pr. 30:15, *etc.*) basically suggests that three transgressions would have been sufficient for divine judgment to fall, but the fourth transgression puts the matter beyond doubt. It suggests the patience of a God who waits beyond the point where action is merited, who longs for repentance and leaves space for it (Gn. 15:16; 2 Pet. 3:8f), who never acts without evidence (Gn. 18:21) but in whose eyes there are the 'fourth sins' which are truly intolerable to him so that, when they are committed he will not *turn back his wrath* (lit. 'turn it back', *cf.* Nu. 23:20; Is. 14:27).

The 'fourth sin' was in this case barbarity in war: *sledges having iron teeth* (heavy wooden platforms, weighted above and studded with sharp metal underneath) were made for chopping the crop prior to winnowing, but here were used on people, treating them as things, a mere crop for personal profit. 4 *Benhadad* (2 Ki. 8:7ff.; 13:3), the dynasty of Hazael. Vengeance comes upon persons, the family of the perpetrator of the crime. 4–5 Vengeance falls on things, such as palaces (signifying wealth and pomp), the *gate* (lit. 'bar'; *i.e.* the security they made for themselves) and home territory (*Aven ... Eden* was probably north-east of Damascus). The wrath of God, spreading from the instigator of the sin to his family and land finally brings all to total ruin. From the unknown *Kir* the Aramaeans came (9:7) and into the unknown they disappeared, with Tiglath Pileser of Assyria (2 Ki. 16:9) having been the agent of God.

6–8 Gaza. Representing the LORD's judgment on Philistia, *Gaza* fell to Assyria in 734 BC (the other Philistine cities followed: Ashdod, 711 BC; Ashkelon and Ekron in 701 BC). They were involved in the same sin as Damascus, treating people as a commercial crop with *Edom* acting as their middleman. They were so obsessed with the profit motive that no other consideration mattered – no plea of age or sex, of child for parent or parent for child. The saleable were sold; market forces alone mattered, to the exclusion of humanity. No word could be more timely than this of Amos for our present generation. 'The Sovereign Yahweh', is a term used only here in the list of condemnations, as if to suggest that nothing calls for the omnipotence of God in punitive action like using people merely as commodities.

9–10 Tyre. Renowned for commerce, the Tyrians are revealed as handling the business side of the slave trade, but the particular accusation is not the same as in vs 6–8 – though doubtless the sin under this heading was every bit as serious – but breach of covenant. Solemn undertakings must be kept, for such infidelity is a 'fourth sin'. *Treaty of brotherhood* (1 Ki. 5:1, 12; 9:13 note references to friendship, treaty and brotherliness). Amos is looking back 250 years, but the passing of time does not absolve anyone from their obligation to keep their word. Tyre became tributary to Assyria, surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar (585–573 BC) and fell to Alexander (332 BC).

11–12 Edom. Edom's 'fourth transgression' was a ceaseless animosity which *pursued* (*i.e.* sought every opportunity to express itself) in those hostile actions in which neighbouring states could easily vent their spleen without ever declaring war. Historically, the bitterness between Esau and Jacob reached back to the original brothers (Gn. 27:41). In Nu. 20:14ff. hostility became open and a pattern for the future was established. Saul found it necessary to go to war (1 Sa. 14:47); David conquered and annexed Edom – the only king to do so (2 Sa. 8:14). Solomon faced rebellion from Edom (1 Ki. 11:14ff., 25) as did Jehoram a century later (2 Ki. 8:20). Fifty years on, Amaziah was fighting Edom (2 Ki. 14:7, 10). The accusation of anger that raged continually is proved, but not justified, before God. It was contrary to nature (*brother*), a denial of the emotion of *compassion* (the spontaneous overflow of pity or love; *e.g.* 1 Ki. 3:26), and constantly maintained at fever pitch (*continually ... unchecked*). Such rage, whatever its origin and supposed justification, is inadmissible. It lives in the heart but it is seen on high. 12 *Teman* was Edom (Ob. 9); *Bozrah* was its chief city.

13–15 Ammon. The Ammonite–Gileadite war is not otherwise known, but it was recorded in heaven. Its motive was acquisition (*extend his borders*) and in the interests of territorial increase they were ready to destroy human increase (*pregnant woman*). Once more the material is prized above the human: if there is a single thread uniting Amos's list of 'fourth transgressions' this is it. Here they ministered inhuman savagery to those who, more than any other, merit tenderness – the expectant mother and the unborn child. No amount of national aspiration (maybe even appeals to 'national security') can excuse such behaviour before the automatic wrath of God. Compare the elaborate detail of v 14 with the parallel vs 5, 7, 8, 10 and 12. *Fire* is the motif of divine holiness (Ex. 3:2, 5; 19:18). *Violent winds ... stormy day* or 'day of whirlwind' indicate how the 'forces of nature' can be a picture of personal divine intervention (Ps. 18:9–14).

2:1–3 Moab. A pagan people and violence to a corpse – all this lies within the concern of the holy God. Wherever crimes against humanity are committed in violation of conscience, for whatever reason, the LORD is the criminal's implacable foe. 2 Ki. 3:26 hints at particular animosity between Moab and Edom. The same nationalistic enmity probably fuelled the outrage described here, revealing a vengeful spirit. What could not be settled while the parties were alive followed the king into his tomb. Could anything more clearly expose the senseless irrationality of nourished hatred than to see a venerable corpse dragged out to suffer purposeless indignities? Hatred is like that: poisoning the heart of the doer, inviting the anger of God. 2 That *fire* should recompense the cremation fire described in v 1 exemplifies the law of exact equality between crime and punishment that undergirds divine law and is held up as a standard for human courts (Ex. 21:23; Lv. 24:19f; Dt. 19:21).

2:4 – 3:2 Against the chosen people

4–5 Judah. The roll-call of condemnation now takes a significant turn. Judah, one section of the LORD's people, is summoned to the bar, no less under divine scrutiny and sentence than the surrounding heathen, as the identical formula, *three ... four*, implies. But what is Judah's fourth transgression? *They have rejected the law of the LORD.* (i) *Law* means 'teaching' (*e.g.* Pr. 3:1), such as a loving parent imparts to a dear child. The people of Judah have spurned the LORD's personal, fatherly word. (ii) *Decrees* are something engraved in rock for perpetuity: they have changed the unchangeable. (iii) They have replaced truth not with *false gods* but 'falsehoods' (2 Tim. 4:4). (iv) *Their ancestors* or 'fathers': their guilt is deeply ingrained, for the Bible never uses the moral inheritance from past generations as an excuse. The present generation is accountable for an accumulated guilt (Ps. 51:3–5; Mt. 23:31–36). *False gods ... gods* narrows the accusation too much. Such gods would be included by implication but the words of Amos are stronger: 'their falsehoods have led them astray, after which their fathers walked'. Outside revealed truth there is only human error. 5 *Fire ... consume*, see 2 Ki. 24 – 25.

Note. The oracle recorded in 2:6 – 3:2 has a symmetrical shape common in the prophets:

(a^1) 2:6a, b Threat stated
(b^1) 2:6c–8 Sin exposed
(c) 2:9–12 The goodness of God
(b^2) 2:13–16 Punishment announced
(a^2) 3:1–2 Threat renewed and justified

Central are the good acts of God which made Israel special and to which they failed to respond: in particular, the gift of the land (9), redemption from Egypt and care in the wilderness (10), and the revelation of the LORD's requirements (*Nazirites*) and of his word (*prophets*).

6–8 Israel's sins. Amos reviews Israel's sins socially (6–7) and religiously (7–8). Their lawlessness against the righteous, callousness against the poor and rapacity towards those who can be oppressed is first described. 6 *Righteous*, innocent before the law. Judges were open to bribery (*silver*), verdicts were sold for as little as a *pair of sandals* or cases were brought over as small a matter as shoes – such was the covetousness of the time. The word *needy* implies those who cannot resist or who have to bend to superior will and strength, those who socially have no means of redress.

7 *Trample* arises from a slightly altered text which reads lit. 'pant after the dust' – they had such covetousness for land that they grudged the *poor* (those lacking money and influence) even the earth they daubed on their faces as a sign of mourning (Jos. 7:6)! *Oppressed*, downtrodden, those at the bottom of life's heap.

7–8 Sins against the revelation of God begin here. The LORD has revealed his holy name, letting them into the secret of his inner nature, but they openly defied his prohibition of adultery (Ex. 20:14) and of fornication in the name of religion (Dt. 23:17f.) Canaanite religion used human procreative acts as reminders and stimuli to the god Baal to perform his function of making humans, animals and land fertile. In Amos's day, the holy LORD was being worshipped as a Canaanite Baal. But he will only be worshipped as he dictates (Mt. 15:9), not by our notions of exciting religion. *The same girl*, lit. simply 'the girl'. The condemnation is not of father and son using the same girl – as if it were a charge of aggravated immorality – but of the whole male community, 'father and son alike', being involved in orgiastic Baalism. 8 Divine grace was flouted by their religion. In the very place of atonement, *beside every altar* (Lv. 17:11), they indulged their lusts and made the house of God, potentially the place for enjoying the LORD's fellowship, the scene of revelry. *Lie down*, in the very act of fornication. *Garments ... pledge*, see Ex. 22:26ff., where garments taken as security against a loan were always to be loaned back for the night. *Taken as fines*, the material of their revelry was acquired by the illegal processes described in v. 6.

9–12 Israel's privileges. At every point where they sinned, divine grace had made a very different way open to them. The LORD has given them a land (9) in which to develop a different society, based on his law (contrast vs 6–7), in bringing them out of Egypt (10) he had

revealed his name (Ex. 3:14f; 6:6–7; 20:2) which they had profaned, and in order to save them from a sinful lifestyle and unacceptable worship (8) the LORD had given them special agents of revelation (11). They had reversed his whole work of grace. **9** *I* is emphatic, meaning 'As for me, it was I who'. *Amorites*, general name for the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. Notwithstanding their humanly unconquerable might (Nu. 13:28), divine power destroyed them totally (*fruit . . . root*). **10** See outline above: the central truth of the whole oracle like the central OT act of the LORD – the exodus – is at once liberation, redemption and settlement (Ex. 6:6–8). **11** *Prophets* prolonged in Israel the foundational revelation through Moses. *Nazirites* (Nu 6:1ff.) typified the consecrated life the LORD desired of his people (Lv. 19:2). **12** The people neither wanted to see the example nor hear the word.

2:13 – 3:2 Inevitable divine judgment. 13–16 Amos announces divine action against which neither natural ability, equipment nor courage will avail. **13** Israel under Jeroboam was flourishing (see Introduction) but there are other aspects of harvest-time. The loaded harvest wagon presses down on the helpless ground beneath it. So Israel was heaping up a weight of divine wrath which would press it to destruction. The Hebrew can be translated 'as the purposely filled cart presses the sheaves' (a method of threshing), but the picture is the same. **3:1–2** address *the whole family I brought up*, and thus form a conclusion not only to 2:6–16 but also to 2:4–16. After the call to *hear* there is reference to the acts of God and the exodus-redemption which made them his people. V 2 begins with the unique position which they occupy and ends with its inevitable consequence: punishment for sin belongs in the very constitution of the people of God. *Therefore*, there is an automatic sequence involved: much will be required of those to whom much has been given (Lk. 12:48). This is the heart of Amos's message. Privilege is wonderful but it is not a shelter; it is a responsibility and a treasure for which we shall have to give account.

3:3–8 The Lion's roar: the prophetic word

3–6 The Lion roars again: the message authenticated. Amos rounds off the first cycle of his prophecies (see Introduction) with a series of sayings about cause and effect. He builds up to the double climax; first that calamity does not come without divine agency (6), and secondly that no true prophet speaks without divine revelation (7–8). In summary, nothing short of divine compulsion would make Amos preach such a message to his people, but the LORD has spoken to him and he has no option.

3 *Walk together* expresses habitual companionship such as can only arise from the LORD and Israel being 'in agreement'. They are together in covenant but can their fellowship continue if they are at odds? The law of cause and effect would operate to separate them. **4** Two illustrations from the angle of a predator: the *lion* does not *roar* to attack (1:2; Judg. 14:5) unless *prey* is sighted, nor *growl* (contentedly) *in his den* if he has no prey to eat. **5** Two illustrations from the angle of the prey: a *bird* does not venture into a *trap* unless there is a *snare*, *i.e.* 'bait', nor does a trap snap shut unless the bait has been taken and there is something to catch. **6** The application: the prey hears the warning of the predator's coming and trembles. It is the great 'divine predator' who stands behind every disaster. The thrust of Amos's argument is to invite people to explain disasters past and future. Do they accept the Bible view of history that the LORD is the agent in history, that just as behind every event there is a cause so behind history there is the LORD? If so, then their only reasonable action is to make sure they stand in a right relation and fellowship with him.

7–8 A true understanding of the function of a prophet confirms the interpretation that God is in control. First (7), the prophet has been let into the secret of the LORD's plans. *Revealing his plan* or 'opening his fellowship' (Je. 23:18): the essential experience of the prophet was to be brought near to God. This explains how they could both speak God's words and also be completely themselves, for the nearer a person comes to God the more he or she becomes a person. But the OT prophets also expected to be aware beforehand of what the LORD would do (*cf.* Elisha's surprise when this was not so, 2 Ki. 4:17). If this is so, then in Amos's message, *the lion has roared . . . the Sovereign LORD has spoken.*

3:9 – 6:14 An enemy around the land: The Lord's anger

The bracketing verses of 3:11 (lit. 'an enemy all around the land') and 6:14 (*I will stir up a nation . . . from Lebo Hamath to . . . the Arabah*) state the theme of this section. Within the brackets the onset of the foe is explained by the self-indulgence and social carelessness of the ruling classes (4:1–3; 6:1–7) and, centrally, by religious failure (4:4 – 5:27). These are the age-old faults of failure to love one's neighbour, arising from failure to love the LORD our God.

3:9–15 The shattered kingdom

With telling drama Amos calls pagan nations to see what is afoot in Samaria (9) and then, themselves, to announce divine judgment (13). It is as if even the heathens have sufficient moral

awareness to judge the LORD's people! The evidence is of *unrest* and *oppression* (9); failure in character and conduct (10). Here is a religion (14) and an affluent society (15) meriting divine wrath. The agent of overthrow is both the surrounding foe (11) and the avenging LORD (13–15). The plan of the passage is:

(a¹) v 9 Nations called to observe
(b¹) v 10 Report on character and conduct
(b²) v 11 Punishment by overthrow
(b³) v 12 Illustration: nothing to survive
(a²) vs13–15 Nations called to testify

9 The sins of Israel are so blatant that even the most despised heathen, the ancestral enemies of *Ashdod*, the Philistines (Jdg. 14:3; 1 Sa. 17:36), and *Egypt* have sufficient moral superiority to discern that Samaria was under divine judgment. *Fortresses* or 'palaces', the appeal is to the ruling classes to act as examiners of ruling classes (*cf. fortresses*, v 10; *mansions*, v 15), a fair trial by their peers. *Unrest* means uneasiness, instability in society. *Oppression* is extortion and persecution. **10** *Know not to do right* (omit *how*; 'right-doing' as such is beyond them), devotion to wrong-doing blunts moral perception and their sole concern is what they have stored up in the *fortresses* or 'palaces'. They are unaware that illgotten gains are like so many barrels of unstable explosive: they are actually storing up for themselves lit. 'violence' (*plunder*) and 'destruction' (*loot*). What they at present hand out to others will, at the end, be their own portion.

12 *Cf.* Ex. 22:10–13. If a shepherd could bring back the tattered remnants of a sheep, he absolved himself of the charge of negligence: he had tried to save the beast and failed. But what he rescued was only evidence of a total loss! So for Samaria: what is left will speak only of total overthrow, but just as *leg bones* and ears were evidence of a destroyed animal, the typical remains of Samaria would be *beds* and *couches*, evidence of an indolent, luxury-loving, effete society.

14 Amos passes easily from speaking of the historical agent in Samaria's overthrow (11) to speaking of the LORD as the destructive agent. In this direct way the LORD is behind all history (*cf.* 9:7). *Sins* ('rebellions') are the wilful flouting of the LORD's law. The social crimes described in vs 9–10 are sins against the LORD. In his punitive action the LORD starts with false religion and moves to false society (14–15). Just as true religion is the root of true society so false religion is the root of social corruption. *Horns*. In pagan, though not in Israelite practice (1 Ki. 1:51), holding the horns of the altar afforded sanctuary. In the day of judgment, false religion offers no sanctuary; its altars have no horns! **15** The main blow falls on the affluent, the 'two-home' element in society with its *winter* and *summer* residences and its ostentatious luxury (*ivory*). Like the rest of the Bible, Amos has no complaint against wealth as such. The questions are always how it was gained (Je. 17:11) and how it is used and, especially for Amos, how people used the power wealth bestowed. But like their false religion, their gain by oppression leaves them defenceless in the day of visitation.

4:1–3 The leading women

From general accusation (3:9–15), Amos comes to particular issues. **1** The indolent women of Samaria, who *oppress the poor* (those financially poor and vulnerable in life), who dominate their *husbands* in their insistence on gratification, what are they but prime beasts from that great cattle country, *Bashan* (Dt. 32:14; Ps. 22:12), living a purely animal existence, fattened for slaughter? **2** In 3:9 we read of social offences; in 3:14 rebellions against God, but here affronts to his *holiness* are recorded. Crime is crime and sin is sin because the holy God is holy and his holiness erupts against all that offends him. Captive to indulgence, the criminals and sinners of Israel become captives in fact (2–3). *Hooks . . . fishhooks*, the doublet stresses the impossibility of escape. Captives were in fact led away by cords attached to hooks in their lips. **3** *Breaks*, caused by the enemy described in 3:11. *Harmon* is an unknown location; nor is there any satisfactory suggested identification or emendation.

4:4–13 Religion without repentance

Amos now comes to the heart of the matter. In the long run the serious thing is not their crimes (3:9–10), rebellions (3:14) or offence to God's holiness (4:2) but that, given the chance to repent they did not do so. The heart of the passage (6–11) teaches that in all the varied circumstances of life the LORD is the cause and that his purpose in every act of affliction is to bring his people right back to himself. The initial, ironical command *Go* (4), introducing an exposure of a religion that failed (4–5), is balanced by a final call to be ready to meet the LORD (a religion that will not fail) in vs 12–13. In between these calls there are seven acts of God aimed at bringing his people back to himself (6–11). In Israel's case the specific aim of the divine acts was repentance, but the principle is that in every experience of life the LORD is directly at work to bring us close to himself.

4–5 *Bethel* (Gn. 28:10–22) and *Gilgal* (Jos. 4:19) commemorated new beginnings with God but the worshippers' use of the shrines involved no new start but simply confirmed them in *sin*. (i) It was mere religion. The religious act was everything. *Every morning* and 'on the third day'

(NIV mg.) may point simply to punctiliousness: the sacrifice had to be offered on day one and the tithe on day three. It may, however, be evidence of acts repeated beyond the law of God: *sacrifices* not once a year (1 Sa. 1:3) but once a day; *tithes* not every three years (Dt. 14:28) but every third day – for if the act is everything, the more the merrier! (ii) Its basis was self-pleasing and self-praise: *what you love to do*, even if it contravenes God's law (see Lv. 2:11, where to *burn leavened bread* brings together what God forbade). Even personal acts of devotion (*freewill offerings*) were turned to the praise of self (*brag . . . boast*). But true religion 'must be conformed to the will of God as its unerring standard' (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, SCM [1961] p. 49) (Mk. 7:6). Outside that revealed will, religion is simply another form of rebellion (4).

6–11 Seven divine acts: famine (6), drought (selective rainfall) (7–8), blight (9), locusts (9), plagues (10), military defeat (10) and natural disaster (11). Things which are ordinarily attributed to chance, natural causes or human folly are all the direct acts of God aiming to produce what he wishes to see in his people. He wants a personal nearness to himself couched in whatever terms are appropriate to the circumstances; repentance if sin has been involved, fleeing to him for comfort, *etc.* Without relationship there is no religion. In Amos's day, while they were being religious, the LORD was working for and looking for repentance.

12–13 Is v 12 a message of hope (there is still time to prepare to meet him in peace) or a dire warning (the LORD is drawing near in unspecified judgmental action and your last chance has gone)? V 13 can suggest 'yes' to both these possibilities, for the LORD is fully in command of his whole world – things visible (*mountains*), invisible (*wind*), and the human mind (lit. 'declares to man what is his [inmost] thought'). He is the LORD of all change, turning *dawn to darkness* (*i.e.* bringing the judgment that may be implied in v 12, darkening every human hope) or, a rather more likely translation, turning 'darkness to dawn' (*i.e.* bringing hope where there seemed to be none). Furthermore, he dominates the earth (*treads the high places*) and can therefore do what he pleases for he is *the LORD God Almighty*. Like Moses (Dt. 30:19f.) Amos sets before his people life and death: the choice is theirs; they have come to the moment of decision. The idea of 'meeting God' (12) looks back to Ex. 19:17 where both grace and law were combined in one revelation. It was for Amos's people and it is ever the portion of the people of God to live in the place of choice (Dt. 27:4–6). This is what Amos sets before them in v 12. It is as if he said, they can choose in what character the LORD will come to them: repentance will summon the LORD of sovereign grace to turn their darkness to dawn; religion without repentance will expose them to the Sovereign LORD with all the terrors of his law and the fading of light in the darkness of judgment.

5:1–27 Religion without reformation

This passage is built around three appeals: (i) for spiritual reformation, *Seek me . . . seek the LORD* (4–6); (ii) for personal and social reformation, *Seek good . . . maintain justice* (14f.); (iii) for religious reformation, *Let justice roll . . . did you bring me sacrifices . . .?* (24f.) But the appeals are bracketed by affirmations of disaster (1–3, 26–27) and interspersed with diagnoses of how things are (7, 10–13, 16–20). The *therefore* of v 16 gives us a clue how the chapter is to be understood: how can an appeal (14–15) have as its consequence (*therefore*, v 16) a forecast of unconsolable sorrow? Only if Amos is recalling appeals made and refused! The chapter, therefore, is a record of an opportunity lost and of the grim consequences now inevitable. Once more, God is not mocked.

1–3 A funeral lament: death and its cause. Though the death described is still in the future (3) it is so certain that the dirge may be composed and sung already (2). 2 *Fallen* in death, the dead girl has no inherent power of recovery (*never to rise*) nor any external aid (*deserted . . . no-one to lift*). 3 The immediate cause of this helplessness and hopelessness in death is military overthrow in which national forces have suffered a 90% casualty rate. But what is the ultimate cause? The remainder of the chapter declares that this is what death due to sin is like.

4–13 The LORD could have given life but they chose the way of death. It is better to restore the original 'For' at the start of v 4. The great disaster (1–3) is traced to a root cause. The Israelites were invited to seek the LORD and live (4, 6), warned of the way of death (5, 11), reminded that the LORD can give light but also darkness (8). They were put in the place of choice and chose wrongly.

4–5 The LORD is loving in his invitations and faithful in his warnings. He offers himself as the remedy they need; *seek me* is an invitation to closeness, fellowship and newness of life. On the other hand, however, *Bethel* and *Gilgal* are honoured by time and tradition (*cf.* 4:4). Gilgal, the place of entrance upon the promised land (Jos. 4:20), will prove to be the place of *exile*; while Bethel, 'the house of God' (Gn. 28:17, 19) will become *nothing* ('Aven', NIV mg.), as useless as an idol.

6–7 Loving in his invitations, God is faithful in his denunciations. Once more he is himself all

that his people need (*Seek the Lord and live*), but outside of him there is no life. *Bethel* may claim tradition and veneration, but it is useless against the *fire* (the symbol of energized holiness) that will rage against perverted *justice* and humiliated *righteousness*. Where these two words are used together (see Is. 5:16), 'righteousness' is a summary word for the principles inherent in divine holiness, and 'justice' is the practical application of those principles personally and socially.

8–9 It is better to remove the NIV's brackets. The verses are meant to be abrupt in context. Angrily Amos switches attention from people who have wrought a bitter transformation on earth (7) to the great Transformer himself. On the one hand, human perversion cannot win against God: he has the power to make the threatened *fire* (6) *flash* out in *destruction* (9). On the other hand, should they *seek* him, as invited, they will exchange death for the promised life (6) because he can just as easily turn *blackness into dawn* (8).

Pleiades and Orion were seasonal markers; the rising and setting of the Pleiades marked, for sailors, the season of navigation and marked the seasons on nomad calendars. *Blackness ... dawn ... day ... night*, the regular transformations every twenty-four hours. *Turns* (8) is the same verb used in v 7: do their 'turnings' cause transformations? How inexpressibly greater are his in comparison! *Waters ... pours*, the LORD is not bound by his own general rules, holding the waters in their place (Ps. 104:8–9). He can bring about occasional transformations also when he commands floods to engulf the land. The rulers of Amos's day had wrought transformations (7) and silenced all opposition (13), but the one who controls the seasonal, daily and occasional transformations is well able also to overthrow what man has made strong and fortified against attack (9). What a vision for a day, like Amos's, when ungodliness is rampant, values are reversed (7) and the godly person is chiefly aware of impotence (13)!

10–13 A neatly balanced statement:

(a^1) v 10 Hated of those who speak truth
(b^1) v 11 Oppression of the poor
(c) v 11 Judgment by dispossession
(b^2) v 12 Oppression of the poor (different word)
(a^2) v 13 Silenced opposition

10 The just judge (*who reproves*) and the honest witness (*who tells the truth*) are equally detested. **11** *Poor* (2:7; 4:1), financially poor and socially defenceless. *Force him*, 'take exactions from'. Amos does not specify which powerful interest is doing all this: the landlord who *trampled* by exorbitant rent and still found ways of making further 'exactions'? The moneylender? The LORD is not concerned with 'who' but with 'whom' – the sufferer. *Therefore* indicates a heavenly agent is at work. The LORD runs his world on moral lines whereby those who gain unjustly will not enjoy perpetually. There is a principle of frustration built into the nature of things (Is. 5:8–10; 14–17). As the outline above shows, this is the central truth of the passage. Humanly speaking the people have built to last (*stone mansions*), planted to produce (*lush vineyards*) but it will not be so.

12 *Offences ... sins*, 'rebellions' (against God) ... 'missing the mark' (of his requirements). Social misdemeanours are spiritual sins; hence, a mere reformation will not do: there must be a return to God. *Righteous*, those 'in the right' in a court case. *Bribes*, the use of wealth to gain a verdict. *Deprive* ('turn aside'), of a judge refusing to hear a case – particularly dismissing that of the 'unimportant' person, the *poor* (not the word in v 11), the uninfluential who can be easily overridden. **13** The 'hatred' mentioned in v 10 easily ushers in the era of the 'heavy mob', the reign of terror in which people are no longer free to speak out.

14–20 Moral reformation: understanding the day of the LORD. The negative threat of dispossession (11) now becomes the positive threat of a coming 'day' of unrelieved weeping (16f.) and darkness (18). The 'day of the LORD' was apparently part of current popular expectation, with the assumption that it would bring 'light', *i.e.* every glad experience, to the LORD's people. Hence, they looked forward to it with confident hope. (i) Amos ironically uses the language of hope to preach doom (*e.g. pass through* in v 17 is Passover terminology; Ex. 12:12). The people have forgotten the character of their God. Passover night was a night of judgment for the unready. (ii) Spiritual blessings rest on moral conditions (14–15). God's favourable presence is a reality for those whose objectives (to *seek*) and hearts (which *hate evil, love good*) match his own and who apply these personally cherished values to the society they live in (*maintain justice*). (iii) *Perhaps* (15) indicates that God opposes arrogance. This is not to question that mercy is mercy, but to rebuke the presumption that assumes it must be so in my case.

14–15 (i) Seeking goes along with shunning *evil*. (ii) Holiness of action (*seek good*) must be accompanied by holiness of emotion (*hate evil, love good*). (iii) The deed must not wait for the feeling: *seek good* is placed before *love good*. If we wait for emotion to prompt action we might often wait in vain. We must learn to exalt duty over inclination and to discover how the loving act will presently create the

loving heart. (iv) The repetition of the exalted title *the LORD God Almighty* imparts seriousness to our moral endeavour: this is the God we seek to please. We are at his disposal; it is for him to dictate. 15 *Joseph* is used as a comprehensive name for the northern kingdom because its tribes were mostly descended from his sons (Gn. 48).

16–17 On *therefore*, see introduction to ch. 5 above. *The Lord, the LORD God Almighty*, note how the message of doom is reinforced by an even more extended title: *Lord* (lower case) means 'Sovereign'; LORD (upper case) means 'Yahweh', the exodus God who saves his people and destroys his foes; *Almighty* means 'of hosts', the One who is, in himself, every potentiality and power. The lamentation will be open (*in all the streets . . . in every public square*), heartfelt and without exception, involving not only the (professional) *mourners* but also *farmers*. Traditional places of joy, *vineyards*, will be places of grief; all because the Lord 'passes through'. It needs no exceptional action, just his holy presence, to reduce all to mourning.

18–20 Popular optimism is countered by stressing the darkness of the day. Just as we expect the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ, so the OT church looked for the day of the Lord: the day of his personal coming. As we read the OT we find that what is described in advance (as here) as 'the day' turns out (27) to be an interim divine intervention and not the ultimate day of the Lord. The illustration in v 19 (instead of the second *as though*, read 'and') tells the story of inescapable fate. Looking back over vs 4–20, for whom is the day 'darkness'? Those who professed to be the LORD's but did not 'seek him' (4), did not please him in their behaviour to the needy and helpless (7ff.), did not do good and shun evil (14) nor love what he loves (15). People of profession without reality, of religion without the evidence of spiritual and moral transformation are moving in precisely the wrong direction, away from God.

21–27 Religious reformation, returning to the old values. The LORD rejects current religious practice (21–22). At first sight vs 23–24 appear to be an 'either/or' – stressing that God desires not a religion of 'services', but a religion of 'service'. V 25, however, redresses the balance, calling for a return to original priorities (see Introduction on Society). Failure to respond to the message of v 24 is implied in v 26; continuance in a self-chosen, man-made religion, which will result in exile (27).

21–24 Religion without morality attracts divine hatred, (Is. 1:11–15ff.; Je. 7:9–11). **24** *Justice . . . righteousness*, practice and principle, (*cf.* v 7). **25** But Amos does not call for morality without religion, service without services. The emphasis in his question is, 'Was it sacrifices (only) that you brought me in the wilderness?' The religion of Sinai was firstly one of moral, ethical response to the redeeming God (Ex. 19:4–5; 20:2ff.). The sacrifices were introduced as a logical consequence. When the people committed themselves to obedience they were brought 'under the shed blood' (Ex. 24:7–8). For them, as for us, these things were said to them that they might not sin (1 Jn. 2:1) but in the inevitable event of sin, they had a propitiation (1 Jn. 2:2). This is what Amos recalls in his question. They had isolated the ritual of sacrifice and marginalized obedience, whereas it is commitment to obedience that makes the sacrifices necessary and meaningful. See further on 7:7–8.

26 Their self-pleasing religion (4:4–5) opened the door to a self-made religion. Without the control of the word of God it is not that people will believe nothing but that they will believe anything. *Shrine . . . pedestal* (Heb. '*sikkut . . . kiyyun*'), are words known from Mesopotamia to be Sakkuth and Kaiwanu, names of the planet Saturn, a star god worshipped as *king* and *god* (see Hubbard, p. 185). The love of ritual often manifests itself in processions. **27** This procession ends in an *exile* whose destination Amos hides in the vague *beyond Damascus*. But they go, not as the victims of a conqueror or of chance, but because *I will send you*, the Sovereign LORD bringing on his people the consequences of their folly and obduracy.

6:1–7 Leading men

The women described in 4:1–3 are balanced by the men described in 6:1–7, *i.e.* all without exception are implicated. Here is the lordly pride which can find no fault with itself. The women were like 'cows', thoughtlessly indulging their desires; the men are animated by conscious pride: they consider themselves *notable* in 'the first of the nations' (1) and indulge themselves with 'the first' (same word) of *lotions* (6). They will be *the first* (different form of the same word) (7) to go captive! The proprieties will be observed! Complacent, indulgent, socially uncaring, exiled! It is hard for those whose position centralizes them in other people's minds to avoid centralizing themselves in their own minds, until self-concern finally obliterates concern for others. This is the particular temptation of those 'at the top'.

1 *Zion*, prophets operated in one of the kingdoms (Amos was in the north) but always kept both kingdoms in their sights. Isaiah (28:1–4) and Micah (1:5), both southern prophets, also concerned themselves with the north

(see also Ho. 5:13; 6:11). It would strengthen Amos's ministry to the north for him to show impartiality in this way: pride is pride wherever it rears its head. **2** There are no verbs in the questions. Probably a present tense is intended in each. Different interpretations are suggested. (i) Amos invites his hearers to observe by comparison how great their prosperity is – and therefore how certain their judgment if they fail to be grateful to the LORD. However, the whole section implies that they would not need such proof but were already convinced of their superiority. (ii) *Gath etc.* are examples of fallen prosperity and constitute a warning of what will happen to Samaria. It is, however, doubtful if these cities were in ruins in Amos's day. (iii) Amos is quoting a propaganda 'handout' from the rulers, drawing advantageous comparisons with distant and inferior places. This has the 'ring of truth'; it is the way rulers behave and it matches the arrogance depicted in v 1. It also leads into v 3 as a deliberate concealing of the dangers which the rulers knew were on the horizon.

3 Samaria was enjoying a 'never had it so good' prosperity. The rulers knew that it could not last but they *put off the evil day* in an 'enjoy it while you can' spree. Following the boom years of Jeroboam (see Introduction) the nation did fall into disarray. Of the remaining six kings of Israel, only one passed the throne to his son; the rest were assassinated (2 Ki. 15, 17). The description *reign of terror* undoubtedly became all too apt. **4** But even if they were to die tomorrow, why not enjoy the good life today (see Is. 22:12–13)? **5** Lesser men try to justify their frivolities by comparison with greater men. After all, *David* was a musician and composer! **6** *Bowlful* (Ex. 38:3; Nu. 7:13), very large bowls indeed; we would say 'They drink wine by the bucketful'. *Do not grieve*, 'have not made themselves sick'. Their revelry may have given them a bilious attack (Is. 28:7–8) but the *ruin*, the 'broken-down state' of *Joseph* (see on 5:6) does not 'sicken them'.

6:8–14 The shattered kingdom

The concluding condemnation, matching 3:9–15, renews the divine assault on pride (8), moral indifference (12) and self-conceit (13), and dwells dreadfully on the awesome end to which these things lead (9f., 11, 14). The passage is balanced as follows:

- (a^1) v 8 Divine hatred
- (b^1) vs 8–10 Overthrow of state: total loss illustrated
- (a^2) v 11 Divine judgment
- (b^2) vs 12–13 Reversal of values: absurdity illustrated
- (a^3) v 14 Divine management of history for moral ends

8 *By himself*, 'by his soul', *i.e.* an oath involving the divine person 'heart and soul'. *Abhor* requires a small alteration to the Hebrew text (which reads 'I desire'). An even smaller alteration yields 'Truly I am the foe of'. **9–10** In siege conditions famine and plague take their toll and the 'death-carts' become a familiar sight. The sole survivor of a family acknowledges that there is no-one else, but before such news can be greeted with any sort of response (exasperation or pity) involving the name of God, his mouth is stopped: the sense of alienation from God is too great; he has departed from his people. **11** It is by divine *command* that this has happened: v 11 tells what God commands; vs 12–13 tell why he commands; and v 14 explains how he will fulfil his command. *Great ... small*, the idiom of comprehensiveness by means of opposites, meaning 'every house whatsoever'.

12 The illustrations are of what is contrary to the nature of things. This sums up the life of the nation: justice was intended to heal (Dt. 19:16–20), not *poison* society, and (as we might say) talk about *righteousness* in public life had become a sour (*bitterness*) joke. The judgment of God is provoked by the state of society, not just by private sins. To fail to maintain true principles (*righteousness*) and sound practices (*justice*) is to promote social and national ruination. The 'righteous LORD loves righteousness' (Ps. 11:7). **13** *Lo Debar and Karnaim*, places in Transjordan (Gn. 14:5; 2 Sa. 9:4); may be scenes of Jeroboam's victories when he restored Israelite territory to its Solomonic extent (2 Ki. 14:25). However, the Israelites' glory was to be short-lived, for **14**, the very same boundaries would mark the range of enemy success, from *Lebo Hamath* in the far north to the *valley of the Arabah*, by the Dead Sea. The LORD is the enemy of vainglorious boasting of military prowess: he has his agent to hand.

7:1 – 9:15 The Lord God: judgment and hope

The judgment that will not be (7:1–6) and the hope that will be (9:11–15) bracket the final section of Amos. Within these brackets, a judgment of fearful proportions (8:1 – 9:6) will fall but it will be a discriminating judgment (7:8f.; 9:7–10), not a total destruction. The title 'the Sovereign Yahweh' which was used nine times in chs. 1 – 6 occurs eleven times in chs. 7 – 9. The LORD is never so gloriously sovereign than when he keeps his gracious promises.

7:1–6 The devastation that will not be

Intercession was part of a prophet's task (Gn. 20:7; Je. 7:16). Amos does not pray against judgment but against the particular form he sees judgment taking. (i) Vs 1–3, a locust plague so

timed that survival is out of the question. (ii) Vs 4–6, a fire capable of devouring even sea and land. Amos pleaded against the utter destruction of *Jacob* and his plea was heard. The repetition of the matter underlines its certainty (Gn. 41:32); the contrast between a natural plague (*locusts*) and a supernatural visitation (*fire*) embraces every sort of plague. Totality is expressed by contrast (see introduction to 6:1–7). However, the total destruction of the LORD's people is ruled out. Hope is established.

1 *He was preparing*, the hand of God was directly behind the event. *After the king's share* . . ., presumably a royal tax. The *second crop* was that on which the farmer would depend. Without this, destitution would follow. 3 *Relented* may mean 'repented', but does a truly 'sovereign God' change his mind? According to 1 Sa. 15:29 he 'does not lie or repent (change his mind)', but according to 1 Sa. 15:35 'the Lord repented that he had made Saul king' (not as NIV). The former verse states the 'absolute' truth about God; the latter indicates that his unalterable will has in fact taken into account all the variableness of human experience and response. Consequently, it necessarily appears to us that God changes course and this is what the Bible calls his 'repenting': the will of God, though inflexible, is not unfeeling but takes loving regard of our weaknesses and foolishnesses in his perfect and sovereign ordering of his world. 4 *dried up* . . . *devoured*, the same verb is used twice (lit. 'devoured . . . began to devour'). Such a *fire* inevitably points to the judgmental aspect of divine holiness. Only God's fire could 'eat up' his total creation (2 Pet. 3:10, 12).

7:7–9 Discriminating judgment

Against the third vision described in this chapter Amos offers no prayer. The LORD comes as a master-builder to inspect the finished wall. The Hebrew does not say that the wall had been built *true to plumb* (7) but simply that it had been built 'with a plumb-line'. In other words, the standards applied at the end had been there at and from the beginning. The Lord's people were 'constructed' according to the double specification of law and grace: as his redeemed they were to obey his law (Ex. 20:2ff.), but equally as his redeemed they were 'under the blood' (Ex. 24:8) and were given the whole sacrificial code so that, even as failures in the task of obedience, they could still live in the presence of the Holy One. It is the holding of these two in balance (see 5:25) that constitutes the true life of the people of God and marks them out from legalists (obeying the law is everything) on the one hand and ritualists (offering the sacrifices is everything) on the other. This is why Amos here makes no plea: the plumb-line, the twin standards of law and grace, are the very essence of the redeemed people; they can only evade this test by ceasing to be what they are.

8 *I will spare* ('pass over'), on Passover night they sheltered under the blood (Ex. 12:7), eating the lamb, dressed for pilgrimage (Ex. 12:11) – alive by grace, alive to walk in the LORD's way. But Amos's people were not true to the double standard of their constitution and could not receive 'passover' blessings. 9 The LORD goes on to specify what will perish in his judgment, for judgment using a plumb-line is discriminating. There is always a true people within a professing people, a believing company within a formal grouping, a Church within a church. The plumb-line will spare such (*cf.* 9:8–10), but it will devastate the *high places* . . . *and the sanctuaries* which were festering points of delusion and *the house of Jeroboam* who 'did what was evil in the sight of the LORD . . . and made Israel to sin' (2 Ki. 14:24). *High places* are man-made centres of false (Baal) religion where the LORD was worshipped with Baal-rites as if he was a Canaanite god. *Isaac* is used only here as a synonym for Israel. He was linked with Beersheba (Gn. 26:33; 28:10). Maybe in Amos's day they attempted to legitimize the rites at Beersheba (5:5) by urging the patronage of Isaac.

7:10–17 The inescapable word

The heart of this section is that *Amaziah the priest* sought to rid the land of Amos's message (12) but could escape it, neither for himself nor the land (17): *You say, 'Do not prophesy . . . Therefore this is what the LORD says'* (16–17). The word is inescapable. The sequence of the passage (10–12), suggests that Amaziah did not persuade Jeroboam to act and therefore took up the cudgels himself. As priest of Bethel he was a man of significance and it cannot have been easy for Amos to outface his authority, but he did so by reiterating his call: *i.e.* by asserting the authority of the LORD as opposed to the human authority defying him (see Acts 5:29). 10 *Bethel* had figured in an unfavourable light in Amos's preaching (4:4; 5:5). No wonder Amaziah was stung! *Conspiracy*, authorities customarily use the 'scare' of 'national security' to get their own way! Amos had to bear the burden of misrepresentation. *The land*, here we glimpse the sort of influence Amos was wielding.

12 *Seer* is not sarcastic or derogatory (Is. 29:10) but the advice to go and earn a living in Judah suggests that Amos is in the job for the money – and that a word against Israel would pay well there. 14 (see Introduction on Prophecy) The NIV correctly uses past tenses in a perfect rebuttal of the charge of prophesying to

earn a living. In this regard Amos was well placed with an income from his flocks and crops. For him, (i) it was not a matter of personal capacity or inclination (*I was not a prophet*); nor (ii) of enrolment by or the attractiveness of a prophetic figure. *Prophet's son* (*cf.* 2 Ki. 2:3, 5; 6:1ff.; 9:1ff.), 'schools' of 'prophet's sons' were drawn to prophetic men, to receive instruction and share their work, but not so Amos. (iii) It was not his choice to be a prophet: he was settled as a shepherd farmer. **15** It was (iv) sovereign divine choice (*the* LORD *took me*), and this (v) brought him into the divine fellowship (*the Lord . . . said to me*), within which (vi) he was commissioned as a prophet to *Israel*.

All the prophets who have left an account of their call agree with Amos on the essentials of divine initiative (Is. 6:1; Je. 1:5; Ezk. 1), fellowship (Is. 6:6–8; Je. 1:6–16); Ezk. 2:1f.) and appointment (Is. 6:9; Je. 1:5b, 10, 17–19; Ezk., 2:3ff.). **16–17** Amos was no mere preacher, as Amaziah would have him. His word was the word of the LORD (See Introduction on *Prophecy* and commentary on 1:1) and could not be dismissed. When such evasion occurs the word that could have saved becomes a word of judgment (17). In Amaziah's case the judgment brought suffering and degradation (*your wife will become a prostitute*), bitter bereavement (*by the sword*) and personal loss – a *priest* (10) in a *pagan* ('unclean') *country*. Amaziah was a case in point of religion without repentance before the word of God.

8:1–14 'In that day'

This is the central section of the third cycle of prophecies (see Outline of contents). It consists of an initial symbolic vision (1–2) developed by four messages beginning *In that day* (3, 9, 13) and *The days are coming* (11).

1–2 Ripe fruit: the end. As a crop comes to harvest as a result of its own inner development, so divine judgment coincides with the ripening fitness of people to be judged. **2** *The time is ripe*, or better 'The end has come'. Amos says he has seen *ripe fruit* (Heb. '*qayis*)' and the LORD responds that 'the end' (Heb. *qēs*) has come.

3–8 The first message. The end explained. 3 Their religion will not save them: its *songs* will become part of the general 'howlings'. In four savagely sharp lines Amos catches the utter horror of the end day: 'Many a corpse . . . everywhere . . . flung down . . . silence!' But why should such a grim thing happen? **4** The general cause is stated: the oppression of those who have no means of protection or redress. On *needy* see 2:6b; on *poor* see 2:7c (NIV *oppressed*). *Trample* ('pant after'), implies covetous intent. **5–6** The details of v 4 are spelled out: the triumph of the profit motive (i) over religious devotion (5); their punctiliousness (4:4) made them observe *New Moon*, the feast of the first of the month (Nu. 28:11), and the *Sabbath* but their hearts were in their money-making; (ii) over commercial honesty (5), selling less (*measure*) but for more money (*price*), tampering with weights and measures; (iii) over humanity – maybe *silver* (6) is a loan made to the *poor* (as in 2:7a) and *sandals* the purchase he has made on credit, while privately the trader has in mind to take the poor into slavery for defaulting on the debt (2 Ki. 4:1). *Sweepings*, selling worthless and reject goods. **7–8** The effect of this bowing to 'market forces' will be nationwide disruption and disaster figured as a earthquake, as dramatic, overwhelming and all-embracing as the Nile inundations (8). **7** *Pride*, used sarcastically. An oath requires an unalterable base on which to rest. Nothing is more stable than national pride! The LORD will *never forget* the land which allows economic forces to have the last word.

9–10 The second message. Enveloping darkness, bitter sorrow. Factually this darkness has been associated with an eclipse of the sun, along with an earthquake, recorded in June 763 BC, but this is marginal to the intended meaning: darkness once figured in judgment on Egypt (Ex. 10:21ff.) but now it is evidence of the LORD's anger with his own rebellious people. Once Egypt mourned its firstborn (Ex. 12:30), but now Israel laments with equal bitterness (10). *Sackcloth* implies a mourning directed towards God. But there is a time when even penitence is too late.

11–12 The third message. Spiritual famine. The day of trouble reveals how strong (or weak) inner resources are. A life nourished only on the sweets of this world is soon stripped to the bone when they are gone. Then comes hunger for an authoritative word. But the LORD's just recompense is grim: the neglected word becomes the absent word. Like the place of penitence (10), the place of the word (12) cannot be found. Without the revealed word mankind flits here and there, *from sea to sea*, the Dead Sea in the south and the Mediterranean Sea in the west, then *north* and *east*, boxing the compass. *But they will not find it*, first because they ignored it for so long, but secondly because the northern Israelites will go anywhere except back to Jerusalem where the LORD was still in residence (1:2). Even in despair, pride can be expressed!

13–14 The fourth message. The final fall. The hope of the future, the *young*, is held in mortgage for the sins of the past. When the word of God is not believed, people will believe anything and the cults will grab the young,

taking them by the hand in order to take them by the throat, till they *fall* and cannot *rise again.* 14 *Shame* (see NIV mg.), 2 Ki. 17:30 records the worship of Ashimah, but the name as a word means 'guilt' and the double meaning would not have been lost on Amos: 'the guilt-laden worship of Ashimah'. For 'guilt' is one need that the cults can never meet: nothing but the divinely provided shed blood can do that, in the OT and NT alike. *God of Beersheba* ('the way of or to Beersheba'), perhaps spiritual merit was attached to making the journey to Beersheba.

9:1–6 The inescapable judgment

(See Outline of contents.) The LORD himself superintends the destruction of the shrine: all the fabric from the top down; *all the people* (1). There will be no escape (1) in the supernatural realms (2), in the physical creation (3), or throughout the earth (4). Such cosmic rule belongs to the LORD (5–6): he can do what he has threatened. 2 *The depths of the grave* ('to Sheol'), the place-name for the abode of the dead. 3 *The serpent* was a mythological sea-monster of contemporary paganism, appearing in stormy opposition to the Creator God and his purpose for a stable world. Amos makes use of this in two ways. (i) Imaginatively: just as, for the sake of argument, Amos allows the possibility of climbing into heaven (2) so he allows the existence of such a monster, waiting to devour and to cut off an avenue of escape. More importantly, Amos uses this imagery (ii) theologically: what in pagan thought was the implacable enemy of the Creator is totally at the bidding of the LORD (*I will command*) – there for his divine purposes! Amos compels mythology to serve truth: the omnipresence and omnipotence of the only God.

God's power is effective in three ways. (i) Horizontally (5): the whole earth is subject to his touch; it offers no resistance but *melts*; *all* its peoples *mourn*; it loses stability, rising and falling like the *Nile*. (ii) Vertically (6): *the heavens*, for all their lofty inaccessibility, are his 'stairway' (better than *palace*, though not certain) where he moves in sovereign freedom; or, from another view, the heavens are his vaulted 'chamber', overarching and 'binding' (a possible reference of the word translated *foundation*) the earth together. (iii) Dynamically: 'forces' like *the waters of the sea* (6) do what he makes them do.

9:7–10 Discriminating judgment

(*Cf.* the parallel in 7:7–9 and see Outline of contents.) This is how the judgment of the plumbline will work out: there is no privileged position before God (7) such as guarantees an automatic immunity from divine moral scrutiny (8). Wherever there is sin there must be judgment. Yet it is all with discrimination so that *the house of Jacob* will not be destroyed out of hand but will be sieved (8–10) and specified impurity will be gathered out. The pattern of these verses is:

- (a^1) v 7 The groundlessness of complacency
- (b^1) v 8a–d The inevitability of judgment on sin
- (b^2) vs 8e–9 The discriminating nature of judgment
- (a^2) v 10 The fate of the complacent

7 At first sight this is a typical Amos-type statement of monotheism: there is only one God and every movement and migration on earth is equally his work. *Israel* came from *Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor, the Arameans from Kir*, and (Amos would allow us to add) every movement of peoples, voluntarily or under compulsion, that happened before that or has happened since is under the LORD's command. The LORD is indeed LORD of history. This is true but it is not the central thrust of the verse. All Amos's hearers would have agreed so far but would have been horrified by the assertion which he is using this truth to enforce that the *Israelites* are *the same to me as the Cushites*! It is not that Amos is denying Israel's special position – which he affirmed in 3:2, and will affirm in vs 8–9. What he is teaching is this: Israel is associating 'speciality' – the privilege of being the LORD's people – with a date and fact in the past, the exodus. But considered merely as a date and historical fact, the exodus is no different from the migratory experiences of Philistines and Arameans.

A popular song of the 1950s, still wheeled out for an airing at Christmas says 'Man shall live for evermore because of Christmas Day' – as if the mere occurrence and passing of a date was the key to eternal life. Certainly, without Christmas day there would be no salvation, but the date does not save. Everything depends on what happens next, and in particular whether there is a personal response to the Saviour who was born and whether that response is validated by the moral commitment of ensuing life. In the same way there was nothing special about the people of the exodus, any more than the *Cushites*, unless they respond to the grace of divine salvation by commitment to the holiness of obedience. It is not past dates which the LORD looks upon, but the validation of the past by holiness and abhorrence of sin in the present.

The *Cushites* occupied land from Aswan south to Khartoum, typical in the OT of earth's remotest bounds. The Philistines came from *Caphtor* (Crete), moving from the Aegean area to settle on the coast of Palestine. *Kir*, see ch. 1:5. 8 *Surely* ('Behold' or 'Look at it this way'), what the LORD sees is not a date in history but the moral quality of those who claim to be his

people, and where there is merely complacent reliance on a past date, devoid of present concern to flee sin and follow holiness, there can only be a fearful expectation of judgment (Heb. 10:26ff.). **8–9** *Yet*, a very strong word ('But always safeguarding this fact that . . .'). *Kemel* (*lit.* 'pebble'), the word is only used elsewhere in 2 Sa. 17:13, and the NIV's suggestion that 'pebble' might mean the 'kernel' of good, sound grain, is without parallel. But in any case such a translation would contradict the ordinary significance of a *sieve*, which selects out the worthless and lets the good filter through. The picture here is rather of sieving soil to remove stones. Amos, consistently with his vision of the plumb-line (7:7–9) insists on a principle of discrimination within divine judgment. Nothing will be allowed to remain in the LORD's people that does not belong and at the same time, no soil will be removed with the pebbles.

10 But who are these 'pebbles', destined for removal? Not just *the sinners among my people* but a particular class of sinner: those who are complacent in the face of divine judgment, those who are sinners and who assert that sin is a permitted way of life by discounting the reality of coming judgment. *Overtake or meet, i.e.* neither catch up with us out of the past nor face us in the future, as if they were saying, 'There is nothing in our past to merit judgment, nor will there be in the future.' This is not the voice of those (the people who pass the plumb-line test in 7:7–9) who are building their lives on the level of grace with the straight edge of law, but of complacent, uncaring sinners in a world of make-believe. Neither for Amos nor for us is this a word intended to put our salvation at peril. But it reminds us that there is a double seal on the foundation of the LORD's house: 'the LORD knows those who are his' (2 Tim. 2:19) (hence our security in the unchanging will of the God who chose and took us for himself), and 'Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity' (see 2 Pet. 1:5–11) (the moral determination which is evidence of elect status).

9:11–15 The hope that will be

Amos brings the third cycle of his messages full circle (see Outline of contents). It began with a drawing back from the utter destruction of the people (7:1–6) and now ends with an affirmation of glorious promises for the future. They fall into three sections: royal (11–12), creational (13) and personal (14–15) promises.

11–12 Royal promises. In one sense David's *tent* fell when the northern tribes withdrew (1 Ki. 12), and Amos may be looking back to that and forward to the restoration of the full unity of the people of God under the coming 'David' (Ezk. 34:23; Ho. 3:4–5; Lk. 1:32). Or, knowing as he did that Jerusalem was doomed (2:5), Amos may be envisioning the end of even the remaining tatters of David's tent as if it had already happened. Or, since *fallen* can be translated 'falling' or 'about to fall', he may have in mind the deterioration which he foresees in Judah and its ultimate collapse. In any case, the vision is of Messianic fulfilment. The originally intended glories will be realized (*as it used to be*; *cf.* Is. 1:26–27) and the promised world-empire of David (Pss. 2:7f.; 72:8–11; 110:5–7; Is. 9:7; 11:4–10) will come into being.

12 *Edom* was accused (1:11) of ceaseless enmity and this matches the biblical record of the relationship between Edom and the LORD's people, from Gn. 27:41 and Nu. 20:14 onwards. This leads in turn to the use of 'Edom' as a symbol of world-enmity to the LORD and his people at the end of history. Also, David was the only king to conquer and hold Edom in subjection (2 Sa. 8:14) and because of this 'Edom' came to symbolize the defeat of all enmity by the coming messianic 'David' and his dominion over the whole world (Is. 34; 63:1–6; Ezk. 35; *etc.*). Also Amos singles out *Edom* in order to affirm that the coming Davidic rule will bring all enmity to an end and introduce a new oneness on earth.

That bear my name, 'over whom my name is proclaimed'. The words suggest both royal dominion (2 Sa. 12:28) and also the oneness of marriage (Is. 4:1). Certainly the coming King will assert his sovereign rule and erstwhile Gentiles will acknowledge it, but after that their status is not of second class citizens and their role is not one of subservience: they become part of the 'bride' of the Christ. Rightly, James (Acts 15:15) sees this prediction as fulfilled in missionary and evangelistic terms, the outreach of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ bringing in the formerly separated Gentiles, for within the OT the kingdom of Messiah is one of spreading peace (Is. 9:7) not spreading war! Naturally, since the metaphor used for the Messiah is a kingly one, he does kingly things and extends his kingdom by force of arms (Is. 11; 14; *etc.*). However, this is metaphorical: it is the high truths about their God which constitute the two-edged sword the Lord's people carry and by which they subdue nations (Ps. 149:6–8).

13 Creational promises. Amos envisages an agricultural economy so prosperous that one year's harvest is still being reaped when the ploughman turns out to prepare for the next year; one year's vintage is still being trodden when next year's seed is waiting to be planted. The clue to understanding this description follows: when man fell into sin there was a sad

consequence in the physical creation. Instead of the Garden of Eden showering bounty on the man and his wife, now only grudgingly, under pressure, and through hard labour would a living be extracted from the soil (Gn. 3:17–19). The reward of labour and the spontaneous bounty of the Messianic day, therefore, indicates that the curse has ended and is gone. Adam was king in Eden (Gn. 1:28), heir and monarch of the abundance implied in the permission to eat of every tree in the Garden save one (Gn. 2:16–17). But when sin came, liberality dried to a hard-won trickle. When, however, its rightful king returns to Eden (Is. 11:6–9) all the energies, pent up while sin abounded and death reigned, will explode in an endless burgeoning as creation itself hastens to lay its tribute at the feet of him whose right it is to reign.

14–15 Personal promises. *Bring back my exiled*, a possible translation but one that suggests that the prediction is of the return from Babylon. To avoid this we should translate the phrase 'bring back from captivity' (in the same general sense as in Ps. 126, where everything that binds, limits and oppresses the LORD's people is removed). However, 'restore the fortunes' (NIV mg.) is equally possible and more suited to this place in Amos. The LORD will gather his *people* (Mk:13:27; Rev. 14:14–16) and just as the 'royal' metaphor was extended to picture the extending kingdom in military terms, so the gathering of the people is seen here in territorial terms of re-occupying and re-building, in a threefold picture. (i) Recovery: everything that was lost, ruined or marred in the past will be recovered and restored – nothing of the damage sin has done will be left. (ii) Enjoyment and fulfilment: to plant and not to eat is a symbol of the frustration and the lack of fulfilment that sin brings into life (Dt. 28:30; Zp. 1:13). (iii) Eternal security: the final words of Amos set a divine seal on the promises: *says the LORD your God. The LORD*, the God of the exodus whose unchanging nature (Ex. 3:15) it is to save his people. *Your*, singular, covering the LORD's people as a whole and in their individuality. It means not 'by your choice' but, 'who has pledged himself to you' (Dt. 7:7f; Ezk. 20:5ff.; Jn. 15:16; Eph. 1:4, 11). *Says*, lit. (a perfect tense) 'has said'. All the Messianic promises – the rightful king, the new creation and the perfected people – are brought under an umbrella of certainty: 'on these things the LORD your God has made up his mind.'

J. A. Motyer

OBADIAH

Introduction

Places and people

Geography and history play important roles in this prophecy, with sharp hostilities evident between Israel and its neighbour to the south-east, Edom. This ill-feeling had deep roots. Esau, Isaac's eldest son and the grandson of Abraham, saw himself as cheated by his younger brother Jacob, losing the privileges which were his due as eldest son (Gn. 25:27–34; 27:1–29, see v 41), though according to the writer of Hebrews, Esau himself was in the wrong (Heb. 12:16). While not exonerating Jacob, the episode shows that a sinful person can still receive God's blessing (*cf.* Heb. 11:9, 21). During their lives, both brothers received other names; Esau was also known as 'Edom' (Gn. 36:1, 9) and Jacob as 'Israel' (Gn. 32:22–32). These names were adopted by the nations of which the two men were the ancestors. The animosity beginning with these two brothers continued between the two nations as well.

After the exodus from Egypt, the Edomites would not let the Israelites pass through their territory in Transjordan (Nu. 20:14–21; Jdg. 11:17–18). Their own conquest was prophesied by Balaam (Nu. 24:18). King Saul fought against Edom (1 Sa. 14:47), and David conquered it (2 Sa. 8:13–14, but see the NRSV and NIV mg.; 1 Ki. 11:15–16). Solomon had the run of Edom (1 Ki. 9:26–28), though not with Edom's approval (11:14–22). During the reign of Jehoshaphat (ninth century BC), Edom, in a military alliance, raided Judah (2 Ch. 20:1–2). They rebelled against Jehoram (Joram), freeing themselves from the Judean yoke for some forty years, until late that century (2 Ki. 8:20–22; 2 Ch. 21:8–10). (See map on page 238.)

Early the next century, Amaziah of Judah recaptured Edom with much bloodshed (2 Ki. 14:7; 2 Ch. 25:11–12), moving into its territory as far as Sela, the capital. Tables were turned later that century when Edom raided Judah when Ahaz was king (2 Ch. 28:17), taking prisoners of war and permanently freeing itself from Judah's domination.

Edom became an Assyrian vassal, and later came under Babylonian domination, though it did periodically consider rebellion (Je. 27). Biblical and extra-biblical sources are relatively quiet regarding Edom's activities at the time of Judah's destruction by the Babylonians in 587 BC, but 1 Esdras 4:45 places the blame for burning the temple upon Edom's shoulders. This is not confirmed elsewhere (*cf.* La. 4:21–22).

In the sixth century BC, Edom itself was waning, as is revealed by archaeological sources. Towns were abandoned and populations shifted (*cf.* 1 Macc. 5:65). Arabs gained control of this geographical area between the sixth and fourth centuries BC (*cf.* Ne. 2:19; 4:7; 6:1). The Nabateans, in particular, displaced the Edomites, forcing some of them into southern Judah, which became known by the Hellenized name Idumea (1 Macc. 4:29), based on the Hebrew 'Edom'.

This prolonged antagonism between Judah and Edom is in evidence in Obadiah, serving as the prophecy's framework.

Geography also plays a role in the prophecy. Edom's location east of the Jordan was among the rocky crags towering above the Dead Sea. The famous rock city of Petra, built by the Nabateans, is a model of the natural defences upon which Edom was able to rely. Their inaccessibility to attack led to arrogance and self-centred assurance in their own invulnerability, and this ultimately led to their downfall.

Obadiah and his book

Obadiah is not only the shortest OT book, it also has one of the shortest titles, providing little information about its author. No genealogy, birthplace or residence are indicated. We are told only that this is a 'vision of Obadiah'. Even the prophet's name could be simply a title, since its meaning, 'servant of Yahweh', is often used to describe OT prophets (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 14:18). The proper name 'Obadiah' is not rare in Hebrew, however, so there is no compelling reason to deny it to the author of this short prophecy.

Since we have no further information explicitly supplied about the author's identity, it is difficult to provide an accurate date for the prophecies. Any suggestion must be based on evidence in the book itself (and see chart on page 628).

It would seem that the background to the prophecy is an attack upon Israel by Edom (10–14), but as the brief overview of the history of the relations between the two nations shows, this could have been at any of a number of times in Israel's national life. The most likely reference of these verses in Obadiah is to the fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. This is

the clearest event in which Israel was defeated and looted (2 Ki. 25; 2 Ch. 36:17–21) and for which there is at least some evidence of Edomite involvement (1 Esdras 4:45). If this reconstruction is correct, the prophecy would be a cry of judgment upon Edom for their misdeeds against God and his people, and also a message of hope to God's own that their enemies would not go unpunished.

Though the shortest of the prophetical books, with only twenty-one verses, Obadiah is divided into two interrelated sections. The first oracle is directed specifically against Edom and itself is made up of three smaller oracles: the perils of pride (2–4), treacherous behaviour (5–7), approaching judgment (8–9), and a list of reasons for Edom's punishment (10–15). The second major oracle in the book describes the tables being turned against the nations who opposed Judah (15–18), and the final restoration of her kingdom (19–21).

The two oracles are unified by sharing such key terms as 'day' (8, 11–15), Yahweh as speaker and actor (1, 4, 8, 15, 18, 21) and the concept of the mountain, that of God (Zion, vs 17, 21) ultimately gaining superiority over those in which the Edomites placed such confidence (8, 9, 19, 21). The theological concept of 'tit-for-tat' also unites the brief book, occurring at least five times: the proud will be humbled (2, 3); passive observers of pillage will suffer that fate themselves (5–9, 11–14); because survivors of attack were molested, Edom will have no survivors of her own (14, 18); and dispossession will face those who dispossessed others (7, 14, 19). The concept is spelled out explicitly in the transitional v 15.

Further reading

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Commentary

1a Heading

The type of literature and its human writer is identified at the outset. Revelation comes through *Obadiah* in a *vision*. This shows a wider use of the word than simply literal visual revelation (see Is. 29:7; Ezk. 12:27), since here it concerns spoken communication (see Is. 1:1; Na. 1:1). 'Vision' does not involve the ordinary word for seeing, so an extraordinary *perception* is granted here to the one whose name means 'servant of Yahweh', already hinting at the ultimate source of the message.

1b–15 Edom – prototype of God's enemies

1b–9 Impending doom

1b Introduction. The author of Obadiah's message, and the one giving it authority, is *the Sovereign LORD*, who is introduced in a typical report formula (*cf.* Ezk. 2:4; the title is used 432 times of God). The Lord is sovereign not only over Israel but also over all nations, including Edom. God's personal, covenant name

'Yahweh' (*LORD*) reminds God's people of his covenant promises to them, including that of the land in which they would dwell (Gn. 12:1; 15:7). They especially needed this reminder at this time of exile, having just undergone serious national loss (10–14; *cf.* 19–21).

The subject of this particular oracle is Israel's old enemy *Edom* (see the Introduction). Situated on Israel's south-east flank, Edom was not a stranger to Israelite prophecy (see Is. 34; 63: 1–6; Je. 49:7–22; Ezk. 25:12–14; 35; Am. 1: 11–12; Mal. 1:2–5).

Rather than the expected oracle from Yahweh immediately following the report formula, additional information is given. This concerns either a previous message about Edom which is also appropriate for the current situation, or another message which is being delivered at the same time as Obadiah's oracle, only this one is *to the nations.* The former suggestion is supported by the numerous similarities in content, if not in structural ordering, between these verses and another message concerning Edom in Je. 49:7–16. Obadiah could have been referring to this message by Jeremiah of which he was aware, either having heard it himself as it was preached in Jerusalem, or by reputation. This cannot be proven, however, because of the difficulty in accurately dating Obadiah's ministry, and so not being able to establish the relative dates of the two prophets.

The message apparently concerns *an envoy* or messenger who had been sent by Yahweh to instruct all of the surrounding peoples to join in confronting Edom in battle. As will be seen, Israel, Yahweh and the neighbouring nations all take part in her defeat.

2–4 The perils of pride. Yahweh's oracle now begins. Though directed towards Edom as *you*, it is unlikely that the Edomites were ever actually confronted by Yahweh's prophet. In most prophecies against foreign nations, the prophet was speaking to God's people for their encouragement, since their foes would be defeated, or warning, since they themselves could expect the same fate if they did not truly follow their covenant Lord.

Edom, especially proud of its seemingly impregnable geographical setting among the rocks and crags of Transjordan, will be brought low. Though the Edomites vaunted themselves in their own pride-filled hearts, they will be demeaned and *despised*; their hearts having *deceived* them just as Eve was deceived, and ultimately judged, in the Garden of Eden (Gn. 3:13). *The rocks* can be simply read as 'Sela' (see the NIV *mg.*), the Edomite capital (see the Introduction).

Its self-vaunting pride made Edom consider its security even as that of the soaring eagles or as the distant stars. The Edomites had forgotten that there were other things to fear besides military assault from ground forces. They will be confronted, and ultimately defeated, by God himself, the maker of both heaven and earth, against whom no rocky fortress was proof. From their heights he will bring them low, and of that they can be assured since Yahweh himself is declaring it.

Arrogance is a fault in God's people just as it was in Edom. They had forgotten their vulnerability to his searching gaze in their arrogance at their 'safety' in the hills. The church also must not only live in awareness of the scornful and constantly watching world, but also in awareness that even their most secret vices and squabbles cannot be hidden from God.

Edom learned a lesson we all need to keep in mind, whether individuals or nations. It is much more beneficial for us and for God's kingdom to assist someone when they are down rather than mocking or attacking them in their infirmity. Such scorn is contrary to God's desire that we care for the downtrodden. It is also contrary to good sense, since those who are down may yet arise and have the last word, as did Judah, who triumphed under the rule of her God.

5–7 Treacherous behaviour. 5–6 The author brings his hearers back to their everyday experience, after the imagery of the last verses. They were only too aware of *thieves* and *robbers* surreptitiously coming to plunder and destroy. These criminals who were only able to steal what they could carry away with them, are likened to *grape pickers* who were required by law (Dt. 24:21) to leave some of the crop for the poor. The pillage and plunder of Edom will be even more devastating by comparison. *Esau*, the father of the Edomites (Gn. 36:1, 9), whose name is at times used to identify the people, will have even *his hidden treasures*, taken; nothing will be left.

7 Edom, emphatically addressed as *you* seven times in this verse, will find itself betrayed even by its *allies* and *friends*, called 'men of peace' in Hebrew. Another parallel group of former cronies are identified in Hebrew only as 'your bread', probably to be understood as [*those who eat*] *your bread* (see Ps. 41:9, where this phrase occurs in parallel to 'men of peace'). Since eating together after ratifying a covenant relationship was customary in Israel (Gn. 31:54; Ex. 24:11; *cf.* 1 Cor. 11:23–26), these were apparently covenant partners who have reneged on their relationship.

This *trap* laid by its erstwhile friends will so surprise Edom that it will not even *detect it.*

8–9 Approaching judgment. Edom will lose what human support it had: its *wise men*, who were well known (Job's counsellor Eliphaz

was from Teman, Jb. 2:11; Je. 49:7; *cf.* 1 Ki. 4:30), as well as her army. These supposedly intrepid forces *will be terrified*, and all will face *slaughter*. This climaxes the progression of loss, from material goods (5–6), through counsel and understanding (7–8), to military capability (9). All the structures of society will fall.

10–15 Edom's misdeeds

With a relatively regular structural form, and an ever increasing violence and brutal involvement in doing harm to Israel, Edom is condemned with great emotional vehemence.

10–11 The unexpected placing of *brother* with *violence* highlights the shocking treachery of Edom against Israel, here called *Jacob* (*cf.* Nu. 20:14; Dt. 23:7; Am. 1:11). This is a reminder of Esau's earlier conflict with his blood *brother* (Gn. 25:19–34; 27:1–28:9; 33), a conflict carried on by their descendants. This shameful *violence* is detailed in the next verses.

The first stage was passively observing enemies looting. Even though Edom could say, 'We didn't do this. It was rather your enemies, *strangers . . . and foreigners*', since they were not helping, they were acting *like one of them.*

12–14 The opposition to Israel became more hurtful and increasingly direct. From passive observation, Edom progressed to 'gloating' (NRSV) or *rejoicing* over Judah's problems, entering into the very *gates* (*cf.* La. 4:12–13) to see more closely, and then even looting their abandoned possessions. Finally, they stooped to attacking the refugees from Judah (2 Ki. 25:4–5), handing the already hard-pressed *survivors* over to their oppressors. As they *cut down* the helpless, they will suffer the same fate (9–10), being left themselves without survivors (18).

15 This verse bridges the halves of the book, uniting the more particular oracle against Edom (2–15) with the more general one concerning Israel and the nations (16–21; see Introduction).

The *day of the LORD* is the ultimate goal towards which history is heading. In it, God will punish those who oppose him and bring relief to his own people. Israel understood herself as included in the latter category, but found that she was rather in the former, due to rebellion and breach of covenant (Joel 1:15; 3:14; Am. 5:18–24). She will be among the punished *nations* (Dt. 32:35–36; Zc. 14:1–3), here exemplified by Edom. Edom will be punished in ways related to her own wrong doings, an example of 'tit-for-tat' or, more technically, of *lex talionis* (*cf.* Lv. 24:19; Je. 50:15, 29). God's justice is being vindicated in not letting the guilty go unpunished.

15–21 Israel and the nations – judgment and deliverance

15–18 The tables are turned on Israel's enemies

15–16 Edom, still addressed as *you* (*cf.* v 7), is a prime example of all of the nations who will also be judged. Instead of rejoicing at Israel's downfall through drunken revelry in Jerusalem, God's *holy hill*, they will now *drink* totally the cup of God's wrath (*cf.* Is. 51:17; Je. 25; Hab. 2:15–16; Mk. 14:36). Their complete ruin will leave them *as if they had never been.*

17 *But*, in contrast not only to Edom (1–15) but also to the nations (16), *on Mount Zion*, God's 'holy hill' (16), will be *deliverance* instead of refugees (14). (This is a play on words as the Hebrew root is the same for both words.) God's ultimate grace to his people is shown by their final restoration to their covenant *inheritance*, the promised land, a promise which was held in suspension due to their sin (*cf.* Dt. 30). This clause of deliverance, the very word of God, is quoted in Joel 2:32, which suggests that Obadiah preceded Joel. Here, two aspects of the Davidic covenant, God's presence in his holy place, and the people's presence in the person of a remnant in the promised land, are revived.

18 Edom, identified as *the house of Esau*, had set out to destroy Israel, or at least benefit from her downfall (10–14). It will be destroyed by the *fire* of God's wrath (*cf.* Ps. 18:8; Am. 5:6) through his people, identified as *the house of Jacob* (either the entire nation of Israel [*cf.* Ps. 22:23], or only Judah in the south) and *the house of Joseph* (the ten tribe coalition; *cf.* 1 Ki. 11:28; Am. 5:6). Thus, the entire nation of twelve tribes will ultimately be restored, to the detriment of those who persecuted her (*cf.* Ezk. 37:15–28). The nation which betrayed Israel's refugees (14; *cf.* v 17) will itself be without *survivors* (*cf.* La. 2:22). Whereas the few remaining Israelites, the remnant, will re-emerge as a nation, for Edom the destruction will be total.

The guarantee of these words is shown by it being *the LORD* who *has spoken.*

19–21 The restoration of Israel

These next three verses are prose – not poetry like the preceding oracles. Some have suggested, on the basis of this switch, that these verses were added later by someone else. The argument for this is not convincing, however, since all writers, ancient or contemporary, are capable of writing in more than one style. Alternation between literary forms does not prove multiple authorship. The Hebrew in this section is obscure at several points, but the general message is discernible.

19 This and the next verse concern territorial

occupation. Israel now can *possess* its 'inheritance' (17). *The Negev*, the wilderness south of Beersheba, is the location of people who appear to be dispossessing the Edomites. This could have involved some of its residents moving into the Edomites' Transjordanian homeland (*the mountains of Esau*), but we have little evidence of this. More likely this verse refers to Israelites moving back into the area of Judah usurped by Edom when they lost their territory to the Nabatean Arabs in the sixth to fourth centuries BC (see the Introduction). *The foothills* or lowlands (the Shephelah, NRSV) between the sea coast and the highlands are identified by its most famous inhabitants, *the Philistines*, who also will lose their land. Israel gained control of this area under the Maccabees (1 Macc. 10:84–89; 11:60–62), as it did of *Samaria*, the former capital of the northern kingdom of Israel (*cf.* 1 Ki. 16:24; 21:1), under John Hyrcanus in 106 BC (*Ant.* 13.5.2–3). The area surrounding Samaria (called after the main northern tribe, *Ephraim*) was controlled by Judah as early as 153 BC (1 Macc. 10:38). More unclear is the meaning of *Benjamin*, a small southern tribe, possessing *Gilead*, located directly to its east in Transjordan. This area also fell to the Maccabees, in 164 BC (1 Macc. 5:9–54).

20 It is difficult to understand this verse because of the obscure Hebrew. The situation is helped, however, by the parallelism of the two halves of the verse. It seems to involve two groups of *Israelite exiles*. The second group, *from Jerusalem*, are those taken to Babylon in 587 BC. They are currently in *Sepharad*, but will return to retake their southern land. The site of their exile is unclear, with suggestions ranging from Spain to Asia Minor. A site in Media, Saparda, mentioned in an inscription of the Assyrian king Sargon II (late eighth century BC) well fits the historical situation of the exile. The other *company of exiles* is likely to belong to the northern nation of Israel which fell to Assyria in 722 BC. Rather than 'company', the NRSV suggests reading 'Halah', a change in the Hebrew involving a reordering of only one letter. This place in Assyria was home to some northern exiles (*cf.* 2 Ki. 17:6; 18:11; 1 Ch. 5:26). They will return to their original territory and beyond, *as far as Zarephat*, a coastal town north of Israel between Tyre and Sidon (*cf.* 1 Ki. 17:9). In the final day of the Lord the entire nation of Israel, from far south to far north, will be restored, even surpassing the territory held during the monarchy.

21 *Deliverers*, ones who bring salvation (Ne. 9:27), will come to Jerusalem (*Mount Zion*), from whence they will rule over the other mountains of this prophecy, those of *Esau* (*i.e.* Edom). This will be an indicator to the world who the true and universal king is. He is none other than the *LORD*, Yahweh, who is 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' who has reigned, does reign and 'will reign forever and ever' (Rev. 11:15; *cf.* Ps. 22:28; 47:7–9).

The significance and authority of God is shown by his name being used to bracket the book (1, 21), and being indeed sovereign not only over Edom and Israel, but over all the nations of the earth.

David W. Baker

JONAH

Introduction

The book of Jonah is a story about a prophet who bitterly resented the fact that God loves and cares for evil people. The book does not teach that God loves evil people because they are evil, but rather because they are human, of intrinsic worth to him in spite of their behaviour and their disregard for the true God. Much is made in the book of how Jonah attempted to resist the assignment that God gave him, which was to preach a warning to the people of Nineveh, a great city in ancient Assyria. Jonah knew that this warning might prompt the people of Nineveh to repent and be forgiven.

This is precisely the outcome that he opposed, since the ancient superpower Assyria was a cruel enemy of the Israelites, among many other nations, and Jonah, a nationalistic Israelite, wanted the Assyrians to be harmed, not helped. Nevertheless, the Lord forced Jonah to carry out his prophetic assignment, and in the process taught Jonah – and the readers of the book – that he is a God who has concern for peoples and nations beyond his own special chosen people.

The book does not suggest universalism, that all peoples or nations are chosen, but does teach that non-believing peoples may still benefit in some ways from God's compassion. In this regard the book teaches the biblical doctrine of common grace (*i.e.* that some of God's blessings in this life are given to all people in general, not just believers). The book also represents one of several OT foreshadowings of the new covenant enlargement of the kingdom of God to include believers from the Gentiles as well as from the Israelites. And most especially, it is an early version of Jesus' radical teaching that his followers must love their enemies.

There is no hint in the book that Jonah thought of himself as trying to introduce the people of Nineveh to the one true God that they, in their mistaken polytheism and pagan worship, had nevertheless been dealing with all along (as Paul does for the Athenians in Acts 17). Nor does the book give any indication that the Ninevites thought of themselves as converting to faith in Yahweh in any way whatever by their repentance described in ch. 3. Thus the book does not attribute to the Ninevites what is commonly called 'special grace', the benefits of actually knowing and obeying the one true God revealed in the Bible.

The person of Jonah and the book's authorship

Outside the book of Jonah itself, Jonah is mentioned at only one place in the OT (2Ki. 14:25) where he is identified as a northern Israelite prophet who rightly predicted during the days of King Jeroboam II that Israel would recapture territory from Syria that was traditionally part of the promised land. Both Jonah and Jesus were prophets from Galilee. Jonah was from Gath-Hepher (1:1), a city in the district of Zebulun, just three miles north east of Nazareth. It is not surprising therefore, that Jesus, who grew up in Nazareth, should take the story of this well-known local prophet to symbolize his own resurrection, and to use Jonah's warning to the people of Nineveh to repent as a symbol of his own call for repentance (Mt. 12:38–41; Lk. 11:29–32).

Jonah's name means 'dove' in Hebrew, but there is no symbolism to his name. Many Israelites bore similar animal names (*cf.* Peter's father Jonah, Mt. 16:17). His father's name was Amittai (1:1) but otherwise nothing can be known of his family or personal background. It is usual for prophetic books to give few family details about their authors or subjects. Like virtually all ancient prophets, Jonah was a poet, so that his composition or recitation of a poem, even from inside a great fish or whale (ch. 2) is hardly surprising. He appears in the book as an ardent nationalist, pro-Israelite and anti-foreign. Presumably, whatever advanced Israel and contributed to the decline or defeat of its enemies, he would have favoured. His strong nationalism led him to sin by resenting God's compassion towards an enemy people, and resisting God's command. His theology was also imperfect in regard to God's sovereignty. His attempted flight indicates that Jonah may have thought, as many ancient peoples did, that a god or goddess had greatest power in those regions where he or she was known and worshipped, and that geographical distance from Yahweh's land meant at least some degree of freedom from Yahweh's control. Alternatively, he may have believed that he could best resist the call of God by heading in the opposite direction to Nineveh (which was to the east), sailing as far west as possible (out to sea on the Mediterranean) hoping that God would then choose some

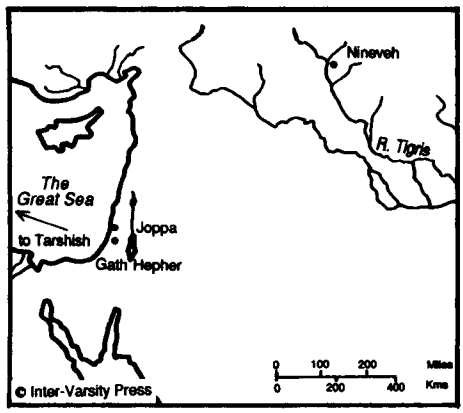
other prophet to preach to Nineveh and leave him alone. Getting away from Israel meant getting away from the Lord's assignment in this view. Jonah quickly learned better, of course, but the book honestly portrays him as one whom God spared and used in spite of his follies and failures, as is the case with all human beings whom God uses. Jonah, in other words, is hardly a model for us to follow. Some of his behaviour and some of his beliefs were absolutely reprehensible, but he was a genuine, inspired Israelite prophet.

The author of the book is not identified. All the information in the book could have come to the author's attention from as few as two human sources: Jonah himself, who knew the details of most of the story, and the sailors mentioned in ch. 1, who knew that they had brought sacrifices to the Lord after their sudden deliverance at sea from the storm (1:16). The fact that the book is so often critical of Jonah does not mean that he could not have been its author. Comparably, the NT gospels are frequently critical of the disciples, among whom are their authors. The book shows no evidence of composite authorship or of insertions or deletions from the original text (See chart on page 628.)

Date and setting

Virtually no evidence exists to tell us when the book itself was composed. We cannot be sure of the precise date, since its language does not betray any features known to be either especially late or early in the development of Hebrew. Attempts to discern supposed 'Aramaisms' (Hebrew word forms derived from Aramaic after about 600 BC) or dependence of statements in Jonah on other prophets, such as Jeremiah, have been unsuccessful. The psalm in ch. 2 does employ some early terminology (*e.g.* Hebrew *nephesh* in the sense of 'throat'; v 5 is [lit] 'water enveloped me to my throat') but such is characteristic of Hebrew poetry so often as to be insignificant. Assyria was widely hated after 745 BC, when Tiglath-pileser III revived and institutionalized its imperialism and began threatening Syria and Palestine, so that one of the book's central emphases (that God loves even the Assyrians) would certainly have been greatly needed in Israel any time after that date. The book could have been composed in advance of 745 in anticipation of that need, or thereafter in response to it. The message of the book is virtually timeless at any rate, and the language simple and direct – standard, classical Hebrew.

As to the events described, these are easier to pin down. 2 Ki. 14:25 links Jonah to the period of the long reign of Jeroboam II in Israel (793–753 BC). 1:1 refers to Nineveh's 'trouble' (or hardship, calamity, misery; NIV 'wickedness' is a less likely translation, especially since throughout the book God's attitude towards Nineveh is not denunciatory but merciful, in sharp contrast to Jonah's). This suggests a date in the decades prior to Tiglath-pileser III, during which Assyria experienced a period of political turmoil and economic decline (*i.e.* 'trouble') under a succession of weak kings. Any date between about 800 and about 750 would fit. But it may be possible to be even more precise. Assyria's weakest point during that half-century came during the reign of Ashurdan III (772–756) under whose leadership Assyria suffered both major military losses and economic reversals. Anti-government riots forced Ashurdan to flee his royal residence at least once, and a total solar eclipse on June 15, 763 BC (considered an omen of severe divine displeasure by the highly superstitious Assyrians) may well have provided the occasion for the sort of popular repentance rituals described in 3:5–9. There was probably good reason for a weak king to join and support officially the popular outpouring of repentance at Jonah's preaching on the part of a war-weary, famine-stricken population frightened by a solar eclipse. A date for Jonah's mission in the late 760s BC cannot be too far afield.



The seventh century BC setting for the book of Jonah

Message and purpose

The book of Jonah presents a contrast between Jonah's self-centred hatred of his enemies and God's compassion for them. It is clearly intended to teach readers of the book that they ought not to reflect Jonah's attitude and practice. Twice in ch. 4 God asks Jonah what right he has to be angry – first, about God's sparing Nineveh (v 4) and then about the loss of the leafy gourd (NIV, *vine*) that had shaded Jonah's hut from the blazing sun (v 9). This latter God

made an object lesson for the prophet. If Jonah cared about a plant, not wanting to see it die, should not God care about a whole city of people, not wanting to see them die (v 11)? Are not people (or animals, for that matter, v 11) much more valuable than plants? Don't they have intrinsic worth? Even if they are our enemies, that should not mean that we think that they deserve no compassion from God.

The contrasting of the relative values of plant and people in ch. 4 is only one of the two major object lessons in the book, however. The other is the contrast between Jonah's gratitude for being rescued from a fate he well deserved, and his resentment at the Ninevites' rescue from a fate they well deserved. In ch. 1 he confesses to the sailors that the divinely sent storm that threatens their lives is his fault and that his drowning will spare them. About to drown, he is suddenly swallowed, and thus rescued from death, by a large fish or whale (1:17). Ch. 2 records Jonah's eloquent prayer of thanksgiving for his own rescue, thus setting up a contrast with his hypocritical dissatisfaction at the rescue of the people of Nineveh in ch. 4.

Form and style

The form of the book is biographical narrative, a sub-category of Hebrew historical narrative, similar to that found in biographical portions of the prophetical books (most notably Jeremiah) and the stories of Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings. The sentence constructions, transitions, scene descriptions and prominent use of dialogue are all standard characteristics of OT Hebrew historical narrative. So also is the presence of a poem (ch. 2) in the midst of what is otherwise prose. The occasional inclusion of poetry in the course of historical narrative is the norm, not the exception, in OT historical books. Throughout the Pentateuch and Former Prophets one finds dozens of examples. The fact that the book is a teaching narrative is also not exceptional; all OT narratives are, to some degree.

Those inclined to regard the book as fictional usually classify it as either an allegory, a parable or a fable. It bears the form of none of these, however. OT allegories are characterized by groups of obviously stylized characters fitted to a simple contrived plot, together symbolizing known historical developments (*e.g.* Ps. 80:8–19; Ezk. 19). Parables are very short stories (normally a few sentences) told in a spare style, as a way of illustrating a single point or principle (*e.g.* Isa. 5:1–7; Ezk. 17:22–24). Fables are stories involving talking plants or animals to highlight symbolically some facet of history, culture, or personal experience (*e.g.* Jdg. 9: 7–15). Jonah is too long, too complex, too historically detailed and too straightforwardly biographical and narrative to be any of these.

The book's style is simple and normal for Hebrew narrative. It reads easily in the original, and contains no humour or lurid descriptions. Those who find the book somehow humorous or lurid are interpreting parts of the story according to their own expectations, not analysing the style of the book itself. The language is not exaggerated, the events not silly, and Jonah's own demeanour is anything but humorous. While the book contains irony (*e.g.* Jonah's resentment at the sparing of Nineveh after his own willingness to be spared personally, or his valuing the life of a single plant above many human lives) it is, like much biblical irony, not humorous but tragic. Jonah is not a hapless oaf or bungler at whom (or with whom) we should laugh – even ruefully. He is deadly serious about his hatred of the enemies of his people, and distraught to the point of death that God should be willing to spare rather than to crush Nineveh. To laugh at Jonah would be to fail to take seriously the sober purpose of the book – which is to keep us from viewing our enemies as Jonah did his. Those who speak in the book – God, the sailors, Jonah and the king – do so naturally, according to the norms of Hebrew narrative dialogue. The poem in ch. 2 is a typical example of a thanksgiving psalm, of which there are several in the Psalter.

Unity and integrity

The story of Jonah is complete and self-contained and shows no evidence of having lost any content by reason of textual corruption or deliberate manipulation. The text, in fact, is remarkably well preserved. Some scholars have argued that the psalm in ch. 2 is out of place, added by a later editor, since the story still supposedly reads nicely if the psalm and the words of introduction to it are omitted. However, virtually all poetic sections of OT historical narratives are similar in this regard. Moreover, an important element of the original story would be lost if the psalm were left out: the hypocrisy of Jonah's eloquent gratitude at his own undeserved rescue from death (which the psalm clearly reflects) over against his petulant resentment at the undeserved rescue of Nineveh from death (ch. 4). On the close interconnection of the psalm to the rest of the book see also G. Landes, 'The Kerygma of the book of Jonah', *Interpretation* 21 (1967) 3–31.

Historicity

Did the events described in the book really happen? Aren't parts of the story so unusual as to be obviously fictional? Did a man live for three days in a large fish, and a great city repent en

masse at the preaching of an obscure foreign prophet? Did a large plant grow next to Jonah's hut and then die suddenly in order to teach Jonah a lesson? Did God really manipulate nature – from a mighty storm to a small grub – for the sake of one rebellious prophet?

The book claims that all these things did happen. Of course, if one believes that miracles can't happen, that God never intervenes decisively in human affairs, then the book of Jonah as well as all other accounts that speak of supernatural matters must be false. Such a rigid refusal to consider the supernatural a part of reality is, of course, unprovable, and the mere denial that certain sorts of events can occur is hardly a worthy means of argumentation. Could and would a supernatural Creator manipulate nature to his ends, sometimes so intensely as even to threaten or take human life? The Bible in general and the book of Jonah in particular certainly portray God in exactly this manner.

In any case careful examination of the events described in the book reveals that none is especially outlandish if one is willing to grant the possibility of supernatural events in a world still controlled by its divine Creator. For example, the storm in ch. 1 is by no means unusual for the eastern Mediterranean; its interception of Jonah and the ship he was on being more a matter of timing than of quantity or quality. It is well documented that several people (mostly whalers) have survived long periods of time inside sea creatures. The ability of the body to concentrate oxygen in critical tissues, including the brain, in the presence of cold water is so well established medically as to be commonplace. The conditions necessary for the highly superstitious Assyrians to respond to Jonah's preaching with wide-scale repentance, however ritualized, were in fact present during the early decades of the eighth century BC in and around Nineveh. Numerous examples of short-lived regional and national periods of repentance such as that described in the book are in fact chronicled in Assyrian historical records. As to the plant that died quickly in broiling heat when its roots were consumed, timing and placement are the primary requisites. There is nothing otherwise about its growth or death that is especially unusual.

The circumstances surrounding these supernatural events are addressed in further detail in the commentary, below.

Further reading

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J. M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Zondervan, 1983, 1986).

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H. L. Ellison, *Jonah*, EBC (Zondervan, 1985).

D. Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, WBC (Word, 1987).

Outline of contents

1:1–3	**Jonah's rebellion at God's assignment to give Nineveh an opportunity to repent**
1:4–16	**A storm from God preventing Jonah from fleeing from the assignment**
1:17–2:10	**Jonah's gratitude at God's grace for rescuing him from death**
3:1–3a	**A second beginning on the assignment to preach at Nineveh**
3:3b–10	**Repentance resulting from Jonah's preaching at Nineveh**
4:1–4	**Jonah's ingratitude at God's grace for rescuing Nineveh from death**
4:5–11	**Flashback: An object lesson when Jonah was still hoping for Nineveh's destruction**

Commentary

1:1–3 Jonah's rebellion at God's assignment to give Nineveh an opportunity to repent

1 Jonah is identified as the northern Israelite prophet of the early eighth century BC (known from 2 Ki. 14:25).

2 The NIV translation, *preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me* is less likely than 'preach to it because its trouble is of concern to me.' The Hebrew word *rā'āh*, sometimes meaning 'evil' or 'wickedness', often rather means 'trouble', 'calamity' or 'disaster'. The LXX has 'preach *in* it' which may be more original than 'preach *to* it'. What Jonah heard was an assignment born from God's compassion on Nineveh, not an assignment that would necessarily result in judgment on the city.

3 *Tarshish*, sometimes a place name, means 'open sea'. Jonah hoped to run *away from the LORD* by taking a sea-going ship from the Philistine port of Joppa out into the Mediterranean to a distant site. He probably didn't care which. OT prophets could be used by God even if their theological understanding was not perfect in every area, and Jonah's theology apparently included, incorrectly, the virtually uniform ancient idea that a god had power only in those places where he was actively worshipped. Away from Israel, Jonah hoped to be away from God's power to make him do what he didn't want to do – preach to Israel's hated enemy, Assyria.

1:4–16 A storm from God preventing Jonah from fleeing from the assignment

4–6 Jonah's deep sleep, perhaps reflecting either exhaustion after his rushed travel from the Israelite hill country down to the coast or depression at the prospect of a self-enforced exile, shocked the captain. He, like his polytheistic crew, assumed that some god was angry with them and that that god (or some other) might stop the storm if prayed to.

7–9 Using lots (small stones thrown from a container that 'come up' certain ways indicating yes and no answers) in typical process-of-elimination fashion, the sailors rightly concluded that Jonah's relationship with his god was the problem. The true God was clearly behind their results (*cf.* Acts 1:26). It should be noted that Pr. 16:33 (the lot's 'every decision is from the LORD') is a way of saying that God – not our divination techniques – controls the events of life, and is not a promise that the use of lots always tells God's will. Nevertheless, should he choose to do so, God can in any given instance use lots, or any other means of prediction, to reveal his truth, even if the lots are in the hands of pagans. Jonah identified himself as a Hebrew would do to strangers, and showed in his words that he was already accepting the fact that the Lord, as Creator of all, was hardly limited in his influence to any geographical region.

10 All OT narratives are terse and condensed in style, and throughout the book of Jonah we must remember that many words and actions are left unmentioned, as actually explained here. Likewise unmentioned is the full extent of Jonah's preaching, summarized in 3:4 by just a few key words. Here, 'What have you done?' is rhetorical, meaning essentially 'Think what a terrible thing you have done!' It indicates the sailor's recognition that the sin deserved a severe penalty.

11–13 Jonah proposed his own death, an end for his sadness at having left his home and livelihood to try an escape that had now failed, as well as a solution to the ship's danger. The sailors, following a coastal route as virtually all ancient shipping did, hoped in vain to row to shore because the alternative, killing Jonah, was so odious to them.

14–16 With no other option, they obtained the desired results by throwing Jonah to his death. As syncretists (believers that all people's gods really did exist and should be feared as needed) they had no trouble praying to Israel's god, the Lord, and later, after reaching shore, going to one of the Israelite Yahweh shrines to offer thanksgiving and appeasement sacrifices to him, even though they were Philistines, not Israelites. (Joppa was then a Philistine city.) In this era, unfortunately, many Israelite priests would have happily accepted offerings from non-orthodox foreigners. The fact that they were not ethnic Israelites would not be an issue. 1 Ki. 8:41–43, in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Jerusalem temple, reflects the hope that foreigners might worship there who will 'know your name and fear you as do your own people Israel.' However, the text does not say that they converted, nor that they worshipped at Jerusalem. Because Joppa adjoined (northern) Israelite, not Judean territory, it is highly likely that the sailors worshipped at one of the northern shrines that existed contrary to biblical law (Dt. 12; *cf.* 1 Ki. 12:25–33). Worship by unconverted aliens was improper even in Jerusalem (Ex. 12:43–49; Lev. 22:25) though worship by converted aliens was welcome on the very same basis as was worship by Israelites (*cf.* Num. 9:14; 15:14).

1:17–2:10 Jonah's gratitude at God's grace for rescuing him from death

17 Death by drowning was what Jonah expected. The words *the LORD prepared a great fish* indicate to the reader that Jonah would not die, but be rescued. Several reliable accounts exist of people's survival at sea after being swallowed by whales (see D. K. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* [Word Books, 1987]). Those were natural survivals, due to the body's remarkable ability to live on small amounts of oxygen (though normally unconsciously) in cold water, something medically well established. Also a factor is a whale's frequent surfacing for air. Jonah's rescue was by divine arrangement, however, and thus supernatural in considerable measure. *Great fish* in Hebrew nomenclature could designate either a whale or one of the larger sharks. *Three days and three nights* is a special phrase used in the ancient world with the meaning 'long enough to be definitely dead'. It derives originally from the ancient pagan notion that the soul's trip to the after-world took three days and nights. Jesus' use of the same phrase for the duration of his death before his resurrection (Mt. 12:40) carries a similar force: it is a way of saying that he would really die, not that he would be literally dead for exactly seventy-two hours.

2:1 Whether or not he remained conscious at all times, Jonah was sufficiently alert some time during his days in the fish or whale to realize that he had not drowned but was being kept alive, and to utter the thanksgiving psalm that follows in vs 2–9. The form and structure of the psalm indicate that Jonah well understood that he had been given life instead of the death he deserved. A thanksgiving psalm was a musical poem prayed in gratitude after deliverance from some sort of threat or misery. Twelve psalms in the Psalter are exclusively or partially individual thanksgiving psalms (Pss. 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 40, 66, 92, 103, 108, 116, 118). Six are exclusively or partly corporate (community) thanksgiving psalms (Pss. 65, 67, 75, 107, 124, 126). Such psalms are also found outside the Psalter (*e.g.* 1 Sa. 2:1–10; Is. 38:9–20). Thanksgiving psalms have usually five elements: (i) an introductory statement of appreciation for rescue; (ii) a description of the misery rescued from; (iii) a description of the appeal for rescue; (iv) an indication of the rescue itself; and (v) a testimonial or vow to continue to show gratitude via future worship. The psalm of Jonah includes all five elements, in the order listed above. There is no way to tell whether Jonah composed this psalm himself (as a prophet he was a musical poet by training) or whether he simply used a psalm he already knew to express his gratitude. At any rate, the psalm is an eloquent statement and may well have been polished before the event.

2 This verse is the psalm's introduction, summarizing Jonah's rescue.

3–6a These verses recount the misery Jonah was in. Several psalms use the metaphor of drowning as a kind of all-purpose statement of misery, so Jonah's psalm should not be viewed as unique to his personal situation. Psalms tend to describe a few severe trials (mainly enmity, illness, entrapment, drowning and death) as typical hardships for which the reader may mentally substitute his or her own misery. In v 4 *yet I will look again* . . . is better rendered '*How can I look again* . . .' on the basis of ancient Gk. manuscript readings.

6b This verse constitutes the brief description of the rescue.

7 Here Jonah includes words of appeal for rescue, typical of psalms of this type.

8–9 These verses are the concluding testimonial/vow section of the psalm. *Worthless idols* in v 8 is in Hebrew (lit.) *empty nothings.* Idolatry is dangerous for many reasons, one of the most prominent being that idols cannot save. Only the Lord, Israel's God, can save. The last words of the psalm, *Salvation comes from the LORD* (lit. '*Salvation is the Lord's*') can also have the sense that he saves whom he will – he is in charge of the whole business of salvation. This, from Jonah's own mouth, foreshadowed the possibility that the Lord would choose to rescue the Ninevites from their troubles.

10 Again we are reminded that the actions of the fish or whale were controlled by God. The sailors had failed to get Jonah to shore (1:13). God did it, however, via the fish, preserving Jonah from death. Notions that Jonah's skin would now be stained by stomach acid, *etc.* are all purely speculative.

This type of psalm at this point in the book sends a clear message. Ancient Israelites who heard or read the story of Jonah could not miss the implication. A thanksgiving psalm is a song of gratitude. It is not an all-purpose prayer suitable for any occasion. People prayed thanksgiving psalms because they had been rescued from danger or hardship, as a way of thanking God for showing mercy to them. Jonah was stating, in the common manner of worshipping Israelites of his day (*i.e.* via a psalm), that he was grateful for the *mercy* God had shown him. He was alive even though he did not deserve to be. He had not drowned, even though death was the punishment he had merited (1:12). Jonah had experienced the grace of God, and he knew it and said so eloquently and at length. God had not treated him as his sins deserved. That is the message of the psalm prayed from the inside of the great fish.

3:1–3a A second beginning on the assignment to preach at Nineveh

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Since 1:2 Jonah had been experiencing God's control of the events in his life, but he had not heard God speaking directly to him. Now he again heard a direct, verbal divine assignment. The second assignment was essentially the same as the first. The wording in v 2, *proclaim to it the message I give you*, is a common sort of divine command, indicating that God would inspire Jonah with the appropriate words once he arrived on the scene in Nineveh. V 3a indicates that Jonah obeyed, and was now prepared to say whatever God would tell him to say at Nineveh. He no longer would resist telling a positive message to his nation's enemies.

Jonah got a second chance. And so, in God's mercy, may we. But this cannot be interpreted as a moral to the story. There is no principle enunciated here that God always works this way with those who rebel against his will. Jonah is by no means a typical figure and his situation is by no means typical of all believers. His wrong attitude towards his enemies is definitely a warning to believers, and its error is overtly dealt with in ch. 4 for our benefit. But not all parts of his life function as examples for ours. Accordingly, we must not assume that God would ever go to such lengths to correct our own rebellion against him. And we must not forget that Jonah continued to hate his divine assignment even though he now submitted to it, and later suffered yet more. So this story does not teach us that God will never debar us from his service even though we missed the road the first time around (*cf.* Lk. 9:57–62).

3:3b–10 Repentance resulting from Jonah's preaching at Nineveh

3b Nineveh was not technically the capital of Assyria at this time (even though 'capital' is a more modern notion), but was emerging as its most important city, a place where formal diplomatic visits required three days according to Assyrian diplomatic convention. The NIV translation of v 3b (*Now Nineveh was a very important city – a visit required three days*) is correct in contrast to some other major English versions which obscure or misinterpret the meaning of the Hebrew (*e.g.* the RSV, '. . . an exceedingly large city, a three days journey in breadth'; the NRSV 'an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across'; or the NEB 'a vast city, three days journey across'). The point is not that Nineveh had a certain circumference, but that three days were needed for a proper visit by a foreigner. On the first day a state visitor (ambassador, visiting royalty, *etc.*) would arrive, get settled, locate the appropriate government officials and present credentials to them. On the second day the visitor would be received by the official(s) in charge and the desired business would be conducted. On the third day an official send-off would be provided, with any responses to the government of the visiting state handed over to the emissaries at that time.

4 Jonah was only at the first day's part of the schedule – just making contact in the manner of an ambassador. Prophets in the ancient world were often viewed as having an office akin to that of ambassador, since they represented a god. Thus they enjoyed a kind of diplomatic immunity and court status, which we observe, *e.g.* in the story of 1 Ki. 22 or the close association of Isaiah with the kings of Judah. The message God inspired him to give provided *forty* days of warning, thus implying that repentance could prevent punishment. '*Forty*' is a word used sometimes in the OT to imply an indefinitely large amount, much like the English word 'dozens'. The people of Nineveh recognized this common way of giving a warning. They knew that if no chance for repentance were present, no time period, definite or indefinite, would have been specified.

5–9 Repentance broke out on the first day – even before the official second day reception. The king (presumably Ashurdan III, who was either in town or reached by messenger elsewhere) capitalized on the wave of public sentiment and made it official, perhaps issuing his official proclamation (7–9) on the second or third day. Records of similar general proclamations calling for fasting and the donning of sackcloth (prickly fabric worn as a means of self-denial), even by animals, have survived from the ancient neo-Assyrian empire.

The term *king of Nineveh* (6) is a standard way of referring to a king who ruled over a given city as part of his empire, and does not mean that he was king only over Nineveh (*cf.* 1 Ki. 21:1 where Ahab, elsewhere called 'king of Israel' is called 'king of Samaria').

What would have led a large population of Assyrians to react so favourably and penitently to the preaching of an obscure foreign prophet? From Assyrian omen texts, we know of four circumstances that could move a people, and its king, to fasting and mourning: invasion by an enemy; a total solar eclipse; famine and a major outbreak of disease; and a major flood. We know that enemy nations, such as Urartu, had beaten the Assyrians in a number of military encounters in the time of Ashurdan III and that a major earthquake occurred in the reign of one of the kings with the name Ashurdan – but not for certain Ashurdan III. Moreover, on June 15, 763 BC in the tenth year of Ashurdan III, there

was a total solar eclipse over Assyria! Above and beyond all this, the sovereign Lord purposed that they should repent. Little wonder then that a nervous, superstitious population would have responded so readily to what must have seemed to them the answer to their problems. A foreign god was warning them by these events, and now here in their midst was his prophet giving them a verbal warning of their need for repentance! The wording of the decree recognized the possibility, but not certainty, that repentance might produce rescue (9). Jonah also did not know what the outcome would be. Would God regard the fasting and mourning of the Ninevites as heartfelt and sufficient for forgiveness? Jonah, as we soon see, hoped not. The Ninevites, on the other hand, hoped that it would.

10 The Ninevites' repentance was genuine, although temporary. The language of his verse does not imply a permanent repentance, nor a conversion to worshipping Israel's God. The people had acted according to their own religious traditions, on what little they knew, and their actions were graciously accepted by God. Later he caused Nineveh's destruction (in 612 BC in fulfilment of the preaching of Habakkuk and others). Now, however, he spared them, just the opposite of what Jonah wanted.

4:1–4 Jonah's ingratitude at God's grace in rescuing Nineveh from death

Jonah's hatred for his enemies was so great that he even resented the very nature of God! He protested it via prayer! He said, in effect, 'This is just what I was afraid would happen because it is just like you, Lord, to do this sort of thing.' His confession about God's character (*gracious and compassionate . . .*) used a common wording found often in the OT (Ex. 34:6; Ps. 86:15). His request to die (3) was the despondent plea of one who has seen things important to him go in just the opposite direction from what he hoped. He had lost his purpose for living, which was so wrapped up in the expectation of the defeat of his nation's enemies. God's question in reply, *Have you any right to be angry*? was posed for the benefit of the reader as well. Can we, or any among us, ever resent God's compassion on anyone, including our enemies?

4:5–11 Flashback: an object lesson when Jonah was still hoping for Nineveh's destruction

The events in 4:5–11 occurred during the 'forty' days between the first day of Jonah's visit and Jonah's recognition at the end of that period that Nineveh had been spared (1–4). V 5 is thus better translated, 'Jonah had gone out and . . .'. Thus the book ends with a part of the story that is specially chosen to illustrate the deficiency of Jonah's attitude, rather than to tell the reader whether or not Nineveh was destroyed, which is already known. The wrongness of Jonah's attitude, and by implication the wrongness of any similar attitude, is indeed the most important lesson of the book.

5–8 Jonah went out of the city probably on the third day of his visit, as expected by protocol, and on the barren, open plains to the east constructed a shelter. He probably hoped to see a great show of fire and brimstone. Because Mesopotamia is largely treeless, he would have made his shelter of stone, without a roof. Here again, God used his control of nature to affect Jonah. He caused a leafy gourd (NIV *vine*) to grow next to and over Jonah's shelter, so that he had shade – in effect, a roof. Then God caused the plant to die, through a worm or grub, and then again used nature to affect Jonah, this time by means of a withering Near Eastern heat-wind and bright sun. Jonah, in effect out in the midday sun, was eventually in such misery that death would be a relief to him. With his plant gone, he was suffering. How he missed that plant!

9–11 Jonah (and the reader) must learn about the relative value of human life. Jonah, in his heat prostration, was furious at the death of his plant. Not stupid, Jonah surely had realized that God was behind these events. But he still protested in his anger that he wanted to die. The prophet who had recently eloquently thanked God for rescuing him from death now wanted to die! And it was over nothing more than a plant that had lived only briefly!

If Jonah could care so deeply about a vine, and desire so strongly that it should not die, could not God care all the more about people – or even animals? Since all cultures value animals above plants and people above animals, God's point to Jonah is clear. Jonah had wanted a plant to be spared, but not people. His values were completely amiss.

Implicitly the readers are asked: Are we like Jonah? Are our values also distorted? Do we hate our enemies and wish – or pray – ill for them while accepting forgiveness and grace for ourselves? Jesus taught that his followers must love their enemies (Mt. 5:44). It is a teaching often hard to bear, but a teaching that cannot be disobeyed.

Douglas Stuart

MICAH

Introduction

The man Micah

Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Micah does not describe his initial call to ministry (*cf.* Is. 6; Je. 1; Ezk. 2). The book's heading (1:1), however, claims that 'the word of the LORD' came to him in a 'vision' (*i.e.* supernatural sight and/or supernatural hearing), making him the Lord's messenger (*cf.* Is. 21:10). In his book the invisible God becomes audible.

Micah came from Moresheth Gath (1:1, 14), modern *Tell el-Judeidah*, a rather imposing mound about 400 m (1,240 ft) above sea level in the foothills of south-western Judah. It overlooked the undulating coastal plain to the west, dotted with fortified cities. About 35 km (22 miles) south-west of Jerusalem it was connected with a network of 'hedgehog' fortifications along the eastern edge of the foothills. These fortifications protected Jerusalem (on the spine of Judah's central ridge) from attacks mounted by invaders from the coastal highway connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia.

His name means 'who is like Yah[weh]'. By this name his parents celebrated the incomparability of Israel's God. Micah added to God's lustre by associating this name with his incomparable forgiveness and fidelity (7:18–20), the theme of Micah's book.

His message

The book's jerkiness of style is due to the binding together of formerly independent oracles into this coherent whole. These originally isolated prophecies vary in form, but broadly they can be classified as oracles of doom and of hope. Micah arranged them into three series (chs. 1 – 2, 3 – 5, 6 – 7), each beginning with the command rendered either 'Hear' (1:2) or 'Listen' (3:1; 6:1) and moving from doom to hope. The hope oracles, all of which refer in part to the remnant (*cf.* 2:12–13; 4:6–7; 5:6–7; 7:18), match the topics of doom and so resolve the crises. Micah's austere messages of judgment rest on the lofty ethical laws of God's covenant handed down at Sinai (6:1–8); his consoling messages of hope rest on God's unchanging covenant with Israel's ancestors (7:20).

In the first series, Israel is sent into exile and their holy land dislocated on account of their sin (1:2 – 2:11). The Lord, however, promises to gather his elect remnant into Jerusalem to survive the Assyrian siege and to become their king (2:12–13). In the second series, after dismantling Jerusalem for its failed leadership (3:1–12), the Lord will exalt Jerusalem high above the nations (4:1–5) and there reassemble the afflicted remnant, who will restore God's dominion over the earth (4:6–8). That prophecy finds fulfilment today in Jesus Christ who rules human hearts from heavenly Mt Zion (Acts 2:32–36; Heb. 12:22). Moreover, in Micah's time Israel was afflicted by invading nations and could not save itself (4:9 – 5:1), but God promised the birth and reign of the Messiah who would regather the purged remnant and lead them to victory (5:2–15). This too is fulfilled in Christ's church (*cf.* 2 Cor. 2:14–16). In the third series, from the spiritually depraved (6:1–16) and disintegrating nation (7:1–7), an elect remnant of the chosen people will be forgiven and saved by God (7:8–20). That remnant now constitutes a part of Christ's church (Rom. 11). No matter how stained and tattered the world becomes, God's purposes to triumph over Satan and his minions through his elect people will prevail (Rom. 16:20).

In his doom oracles Micah did not flinch from delivering his ever unpopular message that the wages of sin is death. He felt fiercely for Judah's middle-class who were oppressed by Jerusalem's rich upper-class (2:1–5, 8–9). The rich landowners were defended by corrupt magistrates (3:1–4) and encouraged by self-serving prophets (2:6–11; 3:5–8) and priests (3:11). Micah, however, full of the Spirit for justice, could not be bought (3:8). He was no moralizing poet, but a dynamic reformer calling the nation back to its spiritual heritage (3:8; *cf.* Je. 26:18).

Historical background

Many commentators attribute most of chs. 1–3 to Micah and the rest to anonymous successors spanning the exilic and post-exilic periods. The inspired heading (1:1), however, identifies Micah as the author of all the book's prophecies. The editorial comment at 3:1 suggests that Micah himself edited the book. No linguistic or historical data refutes the Bible's own assertion.

Micah prophesied from the time of Jotham (740–732 BC) to that of Hezekiah (715–686), a period when the Neo-Assyrian empire was rising to power (see chart on page 628). The determined Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III

(744–727) launched Assyria on an ambitious policy of imperial expansion. He assaulted Israel's coastal plain in 734 and annexed northern Israel in 733 (2 Ki. 16; 2 Ch. 28; Is. 7 – 8). Shalmaneser V (726–722) attacked Samaria from 725 to 722, and it fell to Sargon II (721–705; 1:2–7; *cf.* 2 Ki. 17). Periodic rebellions by the nations in Syria-Palestine against the tributes imperial Assyria exacted from them kept them in a constant dread of Assyria's reprisals. The invincible and cruel Assyrians invaded the area in 721–720 and from 714 to 701. The last proved most devastating to Judah. Sennacherib (704–681) captured all of Judah's foothill fortifications. Only Jerusalem miraculously survived (1:8–16; 2:12–13; 2 Ki. 18 – 20; 2 Ch. 32; Is. 36 – 39) because Hezekiah repented in response to Micah's preaching (Je. 26:18).

Micah's language, though drawn from this historical background, is poetic and abstract so that God's people under similar circumstances can identify themselves with his messages.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 The heading

For more details about Micah, his message and its historical setting see the Introduction.

1:2 – 2:13 First series of prophecies: God gathers the elect remnant into Jerusalem

1:2–16 God punishes Samaria and Judah

Two oracles of doom, against Samaria (2–7) and Judah (8–16), have been joined here. Note *Because of this* in v 8 – the fall of the former points to the fall of the latter. The wages of sin is death, and the reward of righteousness is life (Rom. 6:23; Gal. 6:7–10).

1:2–7 God descends from heaven and earth to level Samaria. The oracle consists of four parts: an address to the nations to hear God's testimony against them (2); the Lord descends from his heavenly palace (3) to

convulse the earth (4); Samaria and Judah are accused of breaking God's covenant (5); and God sentences Samaria to annihilation (6–7).

2 Micah delivered this oracle against Samaria and Jerusalem before 722 BC, when Samaria fell. He summons the *peoples* of *the land, all of* them to a trial as defendants (the Lord witnesses *against you*).

3–4 Micah sees behind the Assyrian troops the coming of *the* LORD from his heavenly *dwelling-place.* Under the heat of his glowing wrath and his heavy tread the land's enduring *mountains melt* and flow *like* hot *wax.* Israel's mountains were critical for the defence of the land. Whoever controlled those heights controlled the land. Its fertile *valleys* give way and *split apart like water rushing down a slope* of a mountain ravine. The punishing descent of God (4) is linked with the levelling of Samaria (6–7) by the same Hebrew word translated *rushing down* in v 4 and *pour* in v 6, and by *fire* (4, 7). 5 This visitation is *because of Jacob's* (*i.e.* the northern kingdom's) *transgression* and the *sins* of the *house of Israel* (*i.e.* the southern kingdom). The southern kingdom is called 'the house of Israel' because Jerusalem, not Samaria, embodied the nation. The leaders in the two capitals of *Samaria* and *Jerusalem* are principally responsible for this breach of covenant.

6–7 *Therefore* shows that the sentence, handed down by God himself, fits the accusation. He will *make Samaria a heap of rubble*; he *will pour* her magnificently hewn stones down the slopes of the capital's acropolis (see v 4). Her *idols* on which she trusted will in fact bring her destruction. The silver and gold of these *images*, collected from the *wages of* [temple] *prostitutes, will again be used* by the Assyrian conquerors to hire temple prostitutes in their capital, Nineveh. This deplorable behaviour of depraved people demands the purifying *fire* of God.

1:18–16 Micah laments Judah's exile. 8–9 *Because of this* links the judgment of Samaria with that of Judah; both have sinned (5), and so both must be punished. Micah introduces his judgment oracle against Judah by sorrowfully dramatizing exiles who *weep and wail* and *go . . . barefoot and naked* into captivity (*cf.* Is. 20:2–4). Behind the *incurable wound* afflicted by the Assyrians, Micah again sees the hand of God. *It* [or He] *has reached the very gate of . . . Jerusalem*, but the capital itself is spared.

10–15 Micah predicts the fall of Judah's towns by a word play on their names which become an omen of their destruction. All the identifiable towns lie within a 14 km (9 mile) radius of Micah's hometown and were visible from there, but many of them cannot be identified today. Micah makes elaborate use of puns on each of the names mentioned. The meaning of each is explained in the NIV mg. For instance, *Beth Ophrah* (10), which means 'house of dust', is summoned to *roll in the dust*, symbolizing its abject and humiliating defeat (*cf.* Gn. 3:14; Ps. 44:25; Je. 6:26; Ezk. 27:30). The puns and literary symmetry of the chapter correspond to God's moral order for all time. Within that order sin brings punishment, just as surely as neglect leads to loss. A nation that lives for pleasure will die through venereal diseases and drugs, and a nation that worships money will find itself bankrupt.

2:1–11 Woe to the oppressors

The reproach oracles against Jerusalem's greedy landowners who loved money (1–5) and its equally greedy false prophets (6–11) are linked by accusing them of greed and of plundering the middle-class (2, 8–9).

2:1–5 Woe to the greedy landowners. The rich had wrested fields from Judah's ordinary people (1–2), *therefore, the* LORD will send a hostile army to wrest the promised land from them (3–5). The accused, who *plot* [plan] *evil*, are linked to the accuser who is *planning disaster* and by the repetition of the word *fields* (2, 4).

1 Micah introduces this doom oracle with prophetic thunder, *Woe to. On their beds* at night they *plan* their black deeds, *at morning's light* (the time when court met) these legal sharks *carry it out*, probably by perverting the courts (*cf.* 7:3) and then forcing their victims off their lands. Ironically, at the time when the oppressed middle-class (see 2:8–9) expected justice, they found fraud and foreclosures from the officials and military elite who had the *power to do it.* 2 These powerful men *covet fields.* 'You shall not covet' is the only command repeated twice in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:17) and is at the root of the other wrongs against one's neighbour. The law carefully safeguarded a man's *fields*, his permanent *inheritance*, for in a farming society a man's freedom and life depend on them.

3–4 As the powerful elite plotted evil against their victim's *fields* (2a) and *home* (2b), so *the* LORD is *planning disaster* against *this people* (3) and their *fields* (4). 3 As a master enslaves an animal with a yoke, so God, through the Assyrian captors, will overpower the greedy upper-classes so that they *cannot save* themselves. 4 Their punishment is phrased as a satirical dirge put in the mouth of their enemies: '*We* (*i.e* wicked landowners) *are utterly ruined*'. As they ravaged others by taking their fields, so others, using the same ethic that might makes right, take theirs (*cf.* Mt 26:52). They hypocritically refer to the land as *my* (*i.e.* God's) *people's possession.* As they had redistributed plundered fields among themselves, so now

their fields are *divided up* by the enemy (*cf.* Am. 7:17). V 4b would be better translated 'How they [the enemies] take away [what] belongs to me [the wealthy landowner]. They assign our fields to rebels [Assyrians].' God gave the Israelites the land as a trust (Lv. 25:23) to be enjoyed as long as they used it according to the covenant's designs, but he retained the right to take it away from them if they failed to keep the covenant and give it to their enemies (Lv. 26:33; Dt. 28:49–68).

5 *Therefore* links the landowners' immediate loss of land (4) with their future and eternal loss of land, the severest judgment of all. When God returns the remnant to the land (4:7), these greedy traitors *will have no-one in the assembly of the* LORD to represent them when he again divides the land by the sacred *lot* as he did in the beginning through priests (Nu. 26:55).

2:6–11 False prophets support the greedy landowners. 6 *Do not prophesy* is plural. The false prophets, the liberal theologians of Micah's day, address him and other true prophets, telling them not to predict *these things, i.e.* the judgment foretold in vs 3–5.

7 *The* LORD rebukes the *house of Jacob* by quoting their doubly false theology that 'the LORD never grows impatient' (NIV, *angry*) and never does *such things* (*i.e.* bring judgment). On the contrary, God's words *do good* only to those who are *upright.*

8–9 God elaborates upon Micah's accusation in v 2. Israel's free farmers should have felt as secure as *men returning from battle.* Instead, these defenceless farmers, says the Lord, find *my people* (an ironic reference to the powerful, as the rest of the verse shows) *have risen up like an enemy* against them. *You,* presumably referring to the wealthy landowners supported by the false prophets, destroy Israel's formerly prosperous families, men, women and children. *You strip off the rich robe* from the unsuspecting men (8), *drive the women . . . from their pleasant homes* and *take away* God's rich *blessing from their children* (9). The Lord's wealth, once spread across the breadth of the nation, is now concentrated in the hands of the rich predators.

10 God now hands down the sentence against the rich landowners, probably using the very words they used to drive the innocent off their lands: *Get up, go away!* They must leave their *resting place,* the place of their physical and spiritual well-being. The reason is now given. By their idolatry and immorality the land *is defiled* and so it spits them out (*cf.* Lv. 18:25), it has become a sickening ruin *beyond all remedy.*

11 In response to the Lord's sentence, Micah scathingly and sarcastically taunts the landowners. They are willing to accept as a prophet anyone who joins them in their greed. Such a false prophet is not merely deluded, he is *a liar and deceiver. Wine and beer* were favourite themes of these carnal rulers, who indulge their swollen appetites with a greed condemned by true prophets (Is. 5:11–12; 28:7–8; *cf.* Am. 4:1) and warned against by the wise (Pr. 20:1; 23:20–21; 31:4–7). A false prophet who preaches a 'wealth and prosperity' gospel, not holiness, is *just the prophet for this people.* The very prophet they deserve!

2:12–13 God preserves a remnant in Zion

The book's first section ends with an oracle of hope consisting of two parts: God's promise (12) and Micah's prophecy (13). 12 Israel's Shepherd-King *will gather . . . bring together the remnant of Israel* who survived the Assyrian invasion (see 1:8–16) *in a pen* (a picture of the security of Zion). The reality behind the figure is Sennacherib's blockade of Jerusalem in 701 BC. The difficult Hebrew text behind the second half of the verse should be rendered, 'Like a flock in its pasture they [the remnant] shall be thrown into confusion with no man [*i.e.* the king] to protect them'.

13 Micah unfolds the three subsequent stages of the remnant's salvation. First, the *one who breaks open the way* (a title for Israel's Shepherd-King) *will go up* to battle *before them.* Secondly, *they will break through the* blockaded *gate* of Jerusalem (see 1:9, 12). Thirdly, *their king* (better, 'King') *will pass through before them,* assuming his rightful position *at their head.* The first two stages were fulfilled in the Lord's miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the invading Assyrians (see the Introduction). The third stage, as will become clearer both within the book (see, *e.g.* 5:1–6) and in the unfolding revelation of the NT (see, *e.g.* Col. 1:18–20), finds its fulfilment in Christ and his church.

3:1 – 5:15 Second series of prophecies: God restores Jerusalem's former dominion to the purified remnant

3:1–12 Old Jerusalem and its corrupt leaders fall

Three doom oracles share a common topic (justice; see vs 1, 8, 9), common length (four verses) and a common form consisting of naming those addressed (1, 5, 9–10). Each is followed by an accusation introduced by *who* (2–3, 5, 9, 11) and a sentence introduced by *then* (4) or *therefore* (6–7, 12). The first two oracles move to the climax of the third. Those addressed move from the unjust magistrates (1), to the unjust prophets (5), to these two plus unjust priests (11). The judicial sentences develop from God's silence (4), to his silence plus

darkness (6–7), to his absence when the temple is destroyed (12). Jerusalem falls because its leaders failed.

3:1–4 Shepherds turned cannibals. 1 With an emphatic *Listen*, Micah brings first into the dock the *leaders and rulers* (both terms signify judges) *of Jacob and Israel* (meaning the nation). These judges had the responsibility to *know justice* both in their heads and hearts. This was based on the case laws collected in the Mosaic law (Ex. 21:1 – 23:19; *cf.* Dt. 17:8–11) and, in their light, the judges were to formulate new laws and decide cases fairly (*cf.* 1 Ki. 3:28; 7:7). 2 Without regenerate hearts, however, the depraved judges in fact *hate good and love evil* (*cf.* Is. 1:17, 21–23, 26; 5:7; and see Pss. 1:2; 19:7–11). In a grotesque and sustained picture Micah portrays the magistrates as cannibals. By reducing their subjects (*my* [Micah's] *people*) to grinding poverty and living off their fields and labours (see 2:1–2, 8–9), they were sending them as skeletons to an early grave. 3 By repeating the gruesome picture, God underscores its truth.

4 As the heartless rulers refused to relent when their subjects cried out to them for mercy, so also at the time of judgment (see 2:3–5) *they will cry out to the* LORD, *but he will not answer them*; rather *he will hide his face from them*, the sign of no mercy. The worst form of judgment is not affliction but the absence of God in it (*cf.* Heb. 12:15–17).

3:5–8 Greedy prophets. Instead of 'barking' against the greedy and grasping overlords, the prophets (who should have been the moral watchdogs of God's nation) 'wagged their tails' and joined the cannibals to gratify their own swollen appetites (*cf.* Je. 2:26; Ezk. 22:25–29; Zp. 3:3–4). 'Eating' indicates the love of money by both parties.

5 *This is what the* LORD *says*: Micah's authority lies in God, not in himself (*cf.* v 8). The professional clergy *lead* the *people astray* from God's covenant by rewarding the evil and punishing the good (*cf.* Dt. 13:1–5), turning the moral order on its head. *If one feeds them* represents the Hebrew 'those who bite like a snake with their teeth'. Like evil serpents they kill their victims to feed themselves. To those who satisfy their appetites they solemnly *proclaim 'peace'* (*cf.* 2:11). *If he does not* (lit. 'whoever does not give what they demand'), *they prepare* (lit. 'they consecrate') *to wage war against him.* Rulers looked for divine guidance from prophets, whether to keep the peace or to wage war (1 Ki. 22:1–29). Money talked louder than God to these false prophets.

6 *Therefore* God will take away their clairvoyancy, the source of their illicit gain. They will experience *night and darkness* instead of *visions* (revelations) and *divination* (forbidden omens of the occult; *cf.* Dt. 18:10; Ezk 21:21–22). *The sun* setting and *the day* going *dark* is a picture of the loss of the prophets' gift of *visions.* 7 Deprived of divine revelations *they will be ashamed and disgraced* and regarded as unclean (*cf.* La. 4:13–15). Like unclean lepers *they will all cover their faces* (lit. 'moustaches' = mouths) (*cf.* Lv. 13:45; Ezk. 24:17–22), the very area of their misused talents. Micah speaks here of *God*, not 'the LORD', so as not to associate their unholy activity with the sacred name.

8 In contrast to his deflated opponents, Micah says of himself: *I am filled* (*i.e.* endowed) *with power* (*i.e.* dynamism from the *Spirit of the* LORD; *cf.* Ezk 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24) and *might* (*i.e.* triumphant valour), making him equal to his adversaries who also wage war against him (*cf.* 2:6) as he involves himself in the cause of *justice.*

3:9–12 Jerusalem to be levelled. 9 Micah again summons the depraved *leaders and rulers* (see 3:1) and accuses them that they *despise* (*i.e.* regard as destestable) *justice* and *distort all that is right* in legal matters. 10 They *build* the monumental edifices of *Zion with bloodshed* (*i.e.* through their corrupt courts that took away the life of their defenceless victims). 11 In an aside Micah elaborates upon his accusation. *Leaders* (civil magistrates who were to execute the law), *priests* (who were supposed to *teach* it; Dt. 17:8–10; 33:10; Ho. 4:6) and *prophets* (who were to apply it through revelation) were Israel's safety nets against injustice, but they broke under the strain of the love of *money* (*cf.* 1 Tim. 6:3–10) and the false theology that because they blasphemously profess to *lean upon the* LORD they are secure (*cf.* 2:7). God's covenant, however, is based on ethics and truth.

12 *Therefore*: God's sentence will match the crime (*cf.* Je. 26:18). On account of *you* (the magistrates; *cf.* vs 9–10), their proud and profaned buildings *will become a heap of rubble* and *the* [no longer the LORD's] *temple hill*, will become a *mound* in *thickets* where unclean animals roam.

4:1–8 New Jerusalem exalted over the nations

The next four oracles refer to renewed Zion (*cf.* vs 2, 7, 8, 10–11). As old Jerusalem fell because of corrupt leaders, the new Jerusalem will triumph because it will be ruled by the Messiah over the saved remnant.

4:1–5 Jerusalem exalted over the converted nations. (*Cf.* Is. 2:2–4). 1 The promises in chs. 4 – 5 will be fulfilled *in the last days* (better 'in days to come') commencing with the restoration of the remnant from Babylon (6–7), fulfilled in the church today (Acts 2:17; Heb.

1:2), and consummated in the new heavens and earth at the end of time (2 Pet. 3:12; Rev. 21 – 22). In a breathtaking shift, Micah moves from the destruction of 'the temple hill' (Heb. *hār*) (3:12) to the exaltation of the *mountain* (Heb. hār) *of the* LORD*'s temple*, the earthly replica of heaven itself (*cf.* Ex. 25:9; Heb. 9:23–24) *as chief* (the same Hebrew word as 'leaders' in 3:1, 9) *among the mountains* (the pagan, political and religious centres). Restricted to the language and society of his own age, Micah exaggerates the OT imagery to predict the glorious future when all nations will worship Israel's God in heavenly Jerusalem through Jesus Christ (*cf.* Heb. 12:22). Whereas peoples used to stream along the Euphrates to worship Bel in Babylon (*cf.* Je. 51:44), now they will *stream* to heavenly Jerusalem. 2 Whereas formerly only Israelites went to worship at Jerusalem, in this glorious Messianic kingdom, *many* (or 'great') *nations* will *go up* to heavenly *Jerusalem* to worship in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:21–24). They will go so that God through true 'priests' might *teach* them *his ways* (*cf.* Mt. 5:17; 28:18–20; 1 Pet. 2:9). When the *law* and the prophetic *word of the* LORD *will go forth* from heavenly *Jerusalem*, the benefits of vs 3–4 will follow.

3 God *will judge* (see 3:11) through gifted individuals ministering his word and so *settle disputes* among *many* (better, 'great') and *strong* peoples. 4 With no need for instruments of war, the pacified peoples *will beat their swords into ploughshares* (better, 'hoes'). 4 No longer filled with covetousness (see 2:2) nor living by the sword (*cf.* Mt. 26:52), the converted person (*cf.* Je. 31:31–34) will live without fear of reprisal and will be content to *sit under his own vine*. The concluding formula, *for the* LORD *Almighty has spoken*, guarantees that the vision will be fulfilled. Today the church consists of true believers from all nations, who know it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), have the law writen on their hearts and experience the promised grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

5 Waiting upon God to fulfil this promise, the faithful remnant pledge to *walk in the name of the* LORD (*i.e.* in conformity to his covenant) *for ever and ever* (*cf.* Is. 40:31). They are the heralds of the future peace.

4:6–7 The lame remnant becomes strong. 6 *In that day* refers to 'the last days' of v 1. *Declares the* LORD guarantees the divine inspiration of this prophecy, and so its authority and truth. The Shepherd-King will again *gather the lame* and *assemble the exiles* (better, 'scattered'), looking forward to the afflicted Judahites restored from Babylon.

7 After restoring them to Jerusalem God *will make* (better, 'transform') them into *a remnant*, which now becomes the goal of sacred history. Other nations of Micah's world did not survive the upheavals of history because God did not preserve a remnant from them (*cf.* Am. 1:8; Rom. 11). *Those driven away* on account of their sin, now restored and purified, will become *a strong nation* (1 Pet. 2:9). Micah then reflects upon this figurative oracle. When *the* LORD sets up his *rule over* the restored remnant through the Messiah from his heavenly throne on *Mount Zion* (*cf.* 5:2–4; Acts 2:32–36), their kingdom will endure *from that day and forever* (*cf.* Is. 9:6–7).

4:8 Jerusalem's dominion restored. God addresses his third prophecy about Zion directly to her. He calls the restored capital a *watchtower* (*i.e.* a fortified tower in a vineyard from which shepherds kept an eye out for beasts and poachers) *of* ('for the sake of') *the flock* (the subjects of his kingdom; *cf.* vs 6–7). The old rulers plundered them (ch. 3), but in the new era God will protect them through the Messiah (see 5:1–6). He addresses her also as *stronghold* ('hill'; 2 Ki. 5:24), the strongly defended eastern hill of Jerusalem (originally called 'Ophel'). This old title, associated with David's greatness, gives the remnant a vision of its future glory when its *former dominion will be restored*, 'a kingdom belonging to the Daughter of Jerusalem'.

4:9–13 Zion's present pangs will give birth to a new era

The prophet continues on the trail of Zion's restoration. The oracle develops in two stages (9–10, 11–13) with a similar form pointing to a coherent meaning. Both move from *now* (*i.e.* the present distress of Micah's situation; 9, 11) to the glorious future by means of a vocative, *O Daughter of Zion* (*i.e.* Jerusalem and its citizens), with commands, *writhe in agony* (10) and *rise and thresh* (13), followed by *for* and a description of the future.

9 The rhetorical questions *Why do you now cry aloud?* rebukes Zion for her unbelief as the remnant (on whom God banks the future of history) goes into the Babylonian exile. The second question, *have you no king?* (better, 'King'), explains the first. The 'King' is God, as the parallels in v 12 and Je. 8:19 suggest. Their *counsellor* (better, 'Counsellor') who is sending them into exile has a secret strategy behind their birth pangs: through *pain* they will give birth to the new era. 10 To bring Zion's history to fulfilment the remnant that survives Jerusalem's fall is commanded to *writhe in agony . . . like a woman in labour*. The birth pangs *now* indicate that the remnant *must leave the city* (*cf.* 2 Ki. 25:2–7; Je. 52:7), *camp in the open field* (Je. 6:25;

14:18), and *go to Babylon*, the supreme example of spiritual darkness. But *there* (repeated twice for emphasis) *the LORD will redeem* them *from the hand of* their *enemies*; the first glimmer of the dawning of the new era (see 4:1). In 705 BC Isaiah predicted the Babylonian captivity in connection with the visit by the embassy from Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon (2 Ki. 20:12–19 = Is. 39:1–8). The prophecy that the preserved remnant would return to Jerusalem was fulfilled under Zerubbabel and Joshua in 538 BC.

11 Whereas the *now* of vs 9–10 refers to the Babylonian exile, the *now* of v 11 refers to the Assyrian blockade of Jerusalem (see the Introduction). The Assyrian imperial army consisted of mercenaries from *many nations* (Is. 29:7), hired from the hated tribute collected from her subjugated peoples. In pride the defiant armies (each under its own flag) *are gathered against* Zion with the result that the holy city will *be defiled* by them tearing down the walls protecting its sacred precincts, especially the Most Holy Place. They will also *gloat* over the city that claimed to be the true representation of heaven on earth and so condemned them. 12 But *they do not know* God's battle *plan*; namely, *he gathers them* about Zion's walls *like sheaves to the threshing floor* (a common picture of judgment; Is. 21:10; Je. 51:33; Ho. 13:3). They are the unwitting tools of their own defeat, just as God outwitted Satan in the cross of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 2:7–8). 13 So Micah commands the remnant gathered with him within Jerusalem's blockaded walls to go out (*cf.* 2:13), *Rise and thresh*, for God has given them invincible *horns of iron* to gore their enemies and *hoofs of bronze* to *break to pieces* (like husks and chaff) these *many nations*. The remnant will take the Assyrians' *ill-gotten gains* (the plunder of Judah that had not already been sent back to Assyria) and will *devote them to the LORD* in his protected temple (*cf.* the fate of Samaria in 1:6–7). The secret strategy, which began to be fulfilled in 701 BC (2 Ki. 19), continues to be fulfilled in sacred history (Je. 51:33; 1 Cor. 2:7–8).

5:1–6 The birth and exaltation of the Messiah

The focus now shifts from renewed Zion to the renewed house of David. The oracle is framed by a reference to Micah and the remnant with him in the first person plural ('we' and 'us') as they endure the Assyrian invasions.

1 'Now' (unfortunately omitted by the NIV) links this oracle with the preceding (9, 11); all of them begin with the present distress (1) and move to salvation (2–6). To fortify spiritually the blockaded city Micah commands: *Marshal your troops, O city of troops.* The *siege . . . laid against us* is Sennacherib's blockade in 701 BC (*cf.* 1:9, 12; 2:12–13; 4:11). *They* [the Assyrian horde] *strike Israel's ruler* [Hezekiah] *on the cheek with a rod* ('sceptre'), showing that he has no defences of his own, even as God's enemies later struck the greater Son of David to humiliate him (Mt. 26:67; 27:26, 30).

2 The word *But* shifts the scene from besieged Jerusalem to Bethlehem, Israel's future hope. Like the personification in 4:8, God addresses Bethlehem directly. The names, *Bethlehem Ephrathah* and *Judah*, recall the days of Jesse, David's father (*cf.* 1 Sa. 17:12). God is about to start all over again. David's decadent line will be cut down like a dead tree but, as Isaiah expressed it, 'a shoot [the Messiah] will come up from the stump of Jesse' (Is. 11:1). Though ancient Bethlehem was *small* ('least'; *cf.* Jdg. 6:15; 1 Sa. 9:21) *among the clans of Judah* (and even omitted from the extensive lists of Judah's towns in Jos. 15:33–60) today it has achieved universal acclaim through Christ's birth, which was itself as inauspicious as Bethlehem was before his birth (*cf.* 1 Sa. 16:1–13). Matthew (2:6) interprets the verse to emphasize Jesus Christ as ruler, not as one of Jesse's descendants. He omits 'Ephrathah', changes 'clans' to 'rulers' thereby forming a better contrast with 'ruler over Israel', rightly explains the text's intention by adding 'by no means least', and replaces the end of the verse with 2 Sa. 5:2.

In contrast to Israel's self-serving rulers (*cf.* 3:1–4), the Messiah will come *for me* (*i.e.* for God's advantage, not his own). The veiled reference to the Messiah's historical roots, through the allusions to Jesse by the names at the beginning of the verse, is unveiled at the end of the verse: his *origins are from of old, from ancient times*, referring to the times of Jesse. The Hebrew behind *from ancient* means from 'the remotest times', 'from time immemorial' ('long ago' in Jos. 24:2; Je. 2:20) when used with reference to some historical event; when it is used of God, who existed before creation, 'everlasting' is an appropriate translation (*e.g.* Ps. 90:2). The addition of *times* (lit. 'days') shows this to be a historical reference. The full phrase is rendered 'as in days long ago' in 7:14, 20.

3 From the promise that Zion's new age will be inaugurated with the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, Micah concludes that *Israel will be abandoned* without a human king until *she who is in labour gives birth* (see 4:9–10) to the Messiah. The prophecy found fulfilment about 700 years later through the faithful Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, Joseph and, above all, Mary (Lk. 1:5 – 2:40; *cf.* Is. 7:14). The

nucleus of Zion's new kingdom centring on the Messiah consists of *the rest of his brothers*, who are related to him not only by blood and history but also in spirit. They *return* (a word that signifies conversion) from their captivity to sin and judgment *to join the* true *Israelites* (a term that has a religious meaning). Having gathered the elect remnant, Christ inaugurated his kingdom from heavenly Zion when he sent the Holy Spirit on the brothers gathered in the upper room, and they turned the world upside-down (Lk. 3:16; Acts 2).

4 The reigning Messiah *will stand* (*i.e.* endure forever; *cf.* Ps. 33:11; Is. 14:24) *and shepherd his flock*, providing for their every need, including spiritual food, and protecting them (Jn. 10; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4). Through faith he will rule *in the strength of the* LORD, not through human engineering and manipulation (*cf.* 5:10–15). His subjects *will live securely* for, conquering Satan (Mt. 12:22–29; Rom. 16:20), he will extend his kingdom *to the ends of the earth* (4:3–4; Mt. 28:18–20; Jn 17:2). Christ gives his elect people eternal life and no-one can snatch them from his hands (Jn 10:28).

5–6 The theme that Christ's universal rule secures the peace of his kingdom is now elaborated. Micah uses *we*, *our* and *us* (see above) to identify himself and the faithful with him as part of that triumphant kingdom (see 5:1). He surrounds this conclusion with the promises that the Messiah *will be their peace* (5a) and *he will deliver us* (6b). The Messiah will both defend his kingdom from enemy attack (5b) and rule over his enemies (6a).

5 Micah refers to future attacks against the Messiah's kingdom as being carried out by *the Assyrians*, who were destroyed in 612 BC, centuries before Christ's advent. Prophets did not see the centuries that separated them from the fulfilment of their predictions but saw future happenings as imminent events on a flat tableau. Moreover, they described the future in terms drawn from their own experience (see 4:1; Is. 25:10; Am: 9:12). Under the Messiah's rule the faithful community *will raise up seven* (the perfect number) *shepherds* (an image for protectors), even *eight* (*i.e.* more than enough) *leaders* (a rare word found in Sargon's annals for his commanders). **6** *They*, the Messiah's undershepherds (*cf.* 1 Pet. 5:1–4), *will rule the land of Assyria*, which represents all the enemies of the kingdom of God especially the spiritual forces arrayed against it under its arch-enemy, Satan (Eph. 4:7–12; 6:10–18). *The land of Nimrod* is Babylon (Gn. 10:8–12), the Rome and Mecca of Micah's pagan world. The mention of Babylon after Assyria supports the date in the book's heading (1:1). In Micah's time Babylon was subordinate to Assyria. The later Neo-Babylonian empire destroyed Assyria in 612 BC and was itself destroyed in 539. In the light of the NT the *sword* symbolizes God's word ministered in the Holy Spirit.

5:7–9 The remnant rules the nations

7–8 *Will be* (lit. 'and it will be') introduces another prophecy in the sequence of prophecies about the last days (*cf.* 4:1) and indicates its time of fulfilment after the coming of the Messiah. *The remnant* (see 4:7) *of Jacob*, Micah's term for all Israel (see 1:5), has now become a strong nation *in the midst of many* (better, 'mighty'; see 4:2–3) *nations*, bringing life to believers and death to unbelievers. The similar construction of vs 7 and 8 contrasts the effect among the nations. **7** On the one hand, the remnant is *like* pervasive and penetrating *dew* and *showers* (always signs of life and blessing) which originate mysteriously in the initiative *from the* LORD in heaven, and *do not wait for* (better, 'look expectantly to') *man or linger for* (better, 'or depend on') *mankind* to send their refreshment to the earth. **8** On the other hand, the remnant among the nations is *like a lion among the beasts of the forest* (*i.e.* surpassing all in pride, prowess and ferocity). It is *like a young lion* in search of prey *among flocks of sheep* (*i.e.* it *mauls and mangles and no-one can rescue*). This prophecy is fulfilled in the church. Among those being saved God's people are the fragrance of life, but among those perishing, they are a savour of death (2 Cor. 2:14–16). **9** Micah and/or the remnant respond to the vision with a prayer: 'Let' *your* (singular) *hand be lifted up in triumph over . . . all your foes* (*cf.* Is. 26:11). None will be exempt when his rule is established over all his creation (*cf.* 5:4).

5:10–15 God protects his purified kingdom

The great seventh prophecy of hope in chs. 4 – 5 also refers to *that day* (see 4:1, 6), the day the remnant under the Messiah conquers the nations. The addition, *declares the* LORD (see 4:6), guarantees its fulfilment. It refers to the protection of Israel in two ways: the purification of Israel within (10–14) and the punishment of the disobedient nations without (15).

10–14 The prophecy, *I will destroy* (10–13), is God's answer to the prayer of v 9. The Hebrew verb behind 'destroy' frequently refers to the removal of persons that have violated Israel's holiness (*e.g.* 'cut-off' in Lv. 17:10; 20:3–6), a measure to preserve Israel in the face of God's wrath against the unholy. The objects, the works of their own hands, consigned for annihilation *from among* them (10, 13, 14) threaten Israel's faith in God: military might (10–11; *cf.* Dt. 17:16–17), sorcery (12; *cf.* Dt. 18:9–13) and

idolatry (13–14; *cf.* Dt. 7:5). Isaiah (2:6–8) accuses Israel of placing their confidence in these very things. The military hardware includes the offensive *horse*-drawn *chariots* (10) and the defensive *cities, all* the *strongholds* (11). 12 The NIV omits after *witchcraft* 'from your hand', a phrase that stresses they are human fabrications. 13 The same point is made with *carved images and sacred stones*, the stylized representations of the male deity, Baal.

15 *Vengeance* in the Bible is a legal term signifying that a ruler secures his kingdom by protecting his subjects and punishing their persecutors. The disrespect of the unbelieving nations for his holy kingdom incurs his *anger and wrath*. Throughout history God has protected his rule *against the nations that have not obeyed* him, but he will finally execute his protective power at Christ's second coming (Lk. 18:7–8; 21:22; 2 Thes. 1:8; Rev. 6:10).

6:1 – 7:20 Third series of prophecies: God forgives the remnant of his sinful people

Listen (plural), addressed to the book's audience, introduces the third section of the book. *What the LORD says* invests the section with heavenly authority. For the coherence of this section in the light of the book as a whole see the Introduction.

6:1–8 Israel accused of breaking covenant

This oracle against Israel develops as a complex legal suit. God, the plaintiff, summons Micah, his messenger, to call the mountains as witnesses to the trial (1), and Micah obeys (2a). The rest of the lawsuit unfolds dramatically in the form of a dialogue by use of the keyword *what* (*cf.* vs 3, 6, 8).

1–2 The command *stand up* (singular), gives Micah authority and stresses the urgency of the message. The Hebrew word behind *plead case* means 'to make accusation'. Since it is God's case, not Micah's (see v 2b), we should read 'my' in v 1, not *your*. As Jacob and Laban erected a stone pillar to serve as a witness to their covenant (Gn. 31:43–47), and the eastern tribes erected a stone altar as witness to their covenant with God (Jos. 22:21–28), so God summoned 'the heavens and earth' as a cosmic forum of witnesses to his covenant with Israel (*cf.* Dt. 4:26). Now, about 700 years later, he summons *the mountains* (1–2) and the *everlasting foundations of the earth* (2) as a forum of witnesses to the truthfulness of his *case* and *charge against his people, Israel*. Incidentally, the appeal to these silent witnesses could have carried conviction only if the parties assumed that the treaty had been handed down unchanged from generation to generation.

3–5 The plaintiff seizes the initiative. 3 He has not *burdened* his people, as they implicitly complain, but had dealt so graciously with them at their founding that their only reasonable response should have been a heartfelt commitment to him. After they fall silent to his invitation to *answer* him (*cf.* Rom. 3:19), he develops his own accusation in two parts, each introduced wooingly by *my people* (3–5). 4 The first presents his saving acts at the beginning of their history, namely, God *brought* [them] *up out of Egypt* and *redeemed* ('liberated') them *from the land of slavery*. He also gave them supernatural, godly leadership in the persons of *Moses*, the founder, *Aaron*, the high priest, and *Miriam*, a prophetess and poet (Ex. 15:20–21). Israel's later lack of leadership is not due to God's lack of grace and power but Israel's stubborn heart. 5 The second part presents God's mighty acts at the end of their formative period, namely, their protection from the demonic political and religious leaders, *Balak king of Moab* and *Balaam son of Beor* respectively, and their miraculous *journey from Shittim* in Transjordan through the swollen Jordan to *Gilgal*, their first camp in the promised land. These opposites signify all of God's initial *righteous* ('saving') *acts*. If God miraculously saved Israel from the affliction of Egypt and Moab, can he not unshackle their descendants from the tyranny of Satan in whatever guise he takes? And can he not do similar deeds for his servants down the ages?

6–7 Perhaps one of Israel's kings, to judge from the magnificence of his gifts, responded in such a way as to condemn himself. Instead of repenting of his ingratitude and unfaithfulness he tried to gain access to God's exalted presence through his own good works and ritual, transforming the spiritual covenant (*cf.* Dt. 6:4–5) into a commercial contract. 6 He hoped to *come before the LORD* through costly gifts. This unbelieving approach to God's grace can never satisfy the conscience, and so he escalated the quality and/or quantity of the gift ever higher: *burnt offerings, calves a year old* (representing the best), *thousands of rams* (*cf.* 1 Ki. 3:4; 8:63), *ten thousand rivers of* [olive] *oil*, which is otherwise measured in fractions of a litre. He even offered to sacrifice *my firstborn*, an obscene pagan custom (Lv. 18:21). 8 What God requires is faithfulness to the covenant, which is based on faith in him and expresses itself fundamentally in right living and only secondarily in ritual (see Ex. 20–24; 1 Sa. 15:22; Mt. 5:24). The king's ignorance of what pleases God is inexcusable, for in the covenant God *has shown* humankind *what is good*, a term that summarizes the law's requirements: *to act justly* (see ch. 3) *and to love mercy* (*i.e.* from the heart, to protect the weak), *and to walk humbly* (or 'to walk

thoughtfully' in the light of the covenant's requirements) *with your God.*

6:9–16 The covenant curses fulfilled on Jerusalem

This doom oracle consists of an address (9), accusation (10–12) and sentence (13–15). V 16 repeats the accusation (16a) and sentence (16b).

9 The address has two parts. First, Micah commands *Listen!* [or 'Hark!'] *The LORD is calling to the city* (Jerusalem). In an aside to God, Micah adds, *to fear your name is wisdom* ('sound judgment'). Secondly, God addresses the people. V 9b may well read: 'Hear, O tribe and the assembly of the city.'

10–12 The accusation of commercial dishonesty also unfolds in two stages: God, using the first person, directly accuses its citizens of using false measures (10) and weights (11), and then, speaking of the city's elite in the third person, accuses them of false speech in the courts (12). **10** The first part of the verse says in fact, 'Shall I forgive the unjust bath'. This was the liquid measure, paralleled here with the ephah (the dry measure), each being a tenth of a homer or 22 litres (half a bushel). If God were to acquit the liars and cheats, he would be an accomplice with them. He upholds righteous weights and measures (Lv. 19:35–36; Dt. 25:13–16; Ezk. 45:10) and considers *the short* [or scanty] *ephah accursed* (*i.e.* it will bring God's judgment, not blessing). **11** Neither will he *acquit a man with dishonest scales* and *false weights.* The unrighteousness on the part of Israel's elite (2:1–2; 3:1–4) had worked its way through the whole nation so that God had to deal with the whole community. **12** *Her rich men are violent* and *are liars* (*i.e.* they abuse the powerless in the courts by false accusations and unjust judgments; see 2:1–2; *cf.* Pss. 27:12; 55:11; 58:1–2).

13–15 God *therefore* passes the sentence that matches the crime. **13** The text actually reads, 'As for me, I am going to make you [singular, *i.e.* the individual sinner] sick', not *I have begun. Ruin* means 'to devastate physically'. **14** God now specifies the ruining sicknesses: *You will eat but not be satisfied;* 'you will be stricken with dysentery. You shall come to labour but not bring forth, and even if you bear a child I will give it to the sword.' The disasters threatened in the covenant curses are now being executed (*cf.* Lv. 26:26; Dt. 28:15, 18). **15** In addition, they will lose their crops, also in accordance with the covenant curses (Lv. 26:16; Dt. 28:40, 51). The repeated curses function as a code to enable Israel to interpret these horrors as coming from God, who had warned them beforehand of the consequences of their abandonment of the covenant.

16 In a summary, God accuses Jerusalem of following the sins of the infamous *Omri* (1 Ki. 16:25) and his son *Ahab* who was legendary for his swindling and extortions (1 Ki. 21). *Therefore* God hands them over to ruin and derision (*cf.* Dt. 28:25).

7:1–7 Jerusalem's social structures break apart

1 Micah commences his lament with the telltale sign of sorrow, *What misery is mine!* The reason reads as an accusation: there are no upright officials (1b–4). In an allegory the prophet, who represents God, enters his vineyard in *summer* (*i.e.* June) looking for the first ripe *cluster of grapes* and *the early figs* from the trees that grow among the vines, but finds *none* for vandals have stripped it clean. **2** The vineyard is the house of Israel (*cf.* Is. 5:1–7; Ps. 80:8–16) and the fruit is *godly men* (*i.e.* men who keep the covenant). The allegory (1) and its interpretation (2) are linked by *none* and *not one*, both rendering the same Hebrew word. Micah now specifies the crimes of *all men* (*i.e.* the decadent judges of v 3 who oppress their innocent victims). He likens them to hunters who *lie in wait* (use underhand practices) and *hunt . . . with a net* (are effectively deadly; *cf.* 2:1–2; 3:1–3, 9–11). **3** He elaborates the hunting theme. *Both hands* (the judges and the king) *are skilled in doing evil* (*i.e.* in making the deadly net). *The ruler* and *the judge* probably mean the magistrates and *the powerful* (lit. 'the great one'), the corrupt king over them. They not only fail to turn a blind eye to the bribe (Ex. 23:8; Dt. 10:17), but *they all conspire together* to wring it out of their brothers. **4a** *The best of them is like a brier . . . worse than a thorn hedge.* By obstructing justice these stubbornly complacent and indifferent magistrates frustrate and hurt those seeking justice. What irony to call them *upright*!

4b The lament now abruptly shifts from accusation to judgment. *Your watchmen* (*i.e.* lookouts posted on a city's wall to warn of approaching danger; Is. 21:6) are Israel's true prophets who announced a day of judgment (2:6; 3:8; Am. 5:18–20). Because the nation paid no heed to these faithful sentinels (2:6–11; 3:5–6; Is. 30:10; Ho. 9:7–8; Am. 2:12), *the day God visits* them in judgment has *now* come (Is. 10:3; Ho. 9:7). The Assyrian invasion will throw the nation into panic and *confusion* (*cf.* Is. 22:5). **5–6** Specific illustrations of the confusion, the social anarchy, in the besieged city are now given (*cf.* Is. 3:4–7). **5** The strongest ties of social solidarity – *neighbour* and *friend* (5a), loving wife *in your embrace* (5b) – will break apart under the strain of the siege. A person must not confide to his most intimate companion how he hopes to cope with the crisis, otherwise the companion will

abuse it for his own survival. **6** Indeed, the closest *members of his own household* will disdainfully rise up as *enemies against* one another to save their own skins. The coming of Jesus Christ brought the same divisions (Mt. 10:35–39; Lk. 12:53).

7 The prophet swings his song from black lament to bright confidence by *But as for me* . . . Whereas before he watched for judgment (4), now he will *watch in hope for the* LORD to save him and the righteous remnant. Basing himself squarely on the covenantal promises to Abraham (20; Gn. 17:7, 19; *cf.* Dt. 30:1–10), Micah will confidently *wait for God* his *Saviour* who *will hear* him.

7:8–20 Victory song: Who is like the remnant's pardoning God?

The hymn which concludes the third series of prophecies and the book falls into four relatively equal stanzas: Zion's faithful confession (8–10); Micah's promise that all nations will find salvation in rebuilt Zion (11–12) followed by worldwide desolation (13); his request that God will again shepherd his people (14), followed by God's answer (15) and Micah's reflection upon the ensuing universal salvation (16–17); and the people's hymn celebrating God's incomparable grace and fidelity to them (18–20).

8 Personified Jerusalem commands her *enemy* (probably Nineveh; see v 12) to *not gloat* (*i.e.* rejoice in a victory). She explains that, *though I sit in darkness* (the gloomy imprisonment of captivity; Is. 42:6–7; 49:9), *the* LORD, who has committed himself forever to Israel (see vs 7, 20), *will be my light* (*i.e.* deliver her from the dungeon-like captivity). **9** Because her fall is due to her sin, not to God's impotence or her enemy's potency, she is ready to *bear the* LORD*'s wrath* because it is just and only for a limited time. After it has been paid in full (*cf.* Is. 40:2), God will plead her *case* as an advocate, not as a prosecutor (6:1), for she had done no wrong against her enemy. Then Zion *will see* (or 'gaze on') *God's righteousness* in fulfilling his covenantal obligations to her. **10** Zion prays, 'Let my enemy see your righteousness, and let her be covered with shame.' Zion's *eyes will see* (or 'feast on' – the Hebrew is the same as in v 9) *her* [Nineveh's] *downfall.*

11–13. *The day*, repeated three times to signify the same period, is as much a state as a time chosen by God in the near future. It is a day for Zion to rebuild her *walls* (those of a sheep-pen, not ramparts; *cf.* 5:11). It is also *the day for extending* her *boundaries* so that there will be ample space for all nations to come (13) under the protection of her Shepherd-King. **12** *In that day people will come* from all over the earth, even from Zion's ancient enemies, *Assyria* in the north and *Egypt* in the south (*cf.* Ps. 87; Heb. 12:22). **13** And then *the earth will become desolate.* After the elect (composed of Jews and Gentiles) find salvation within Zion, then desolation will come on the earth and *its inhabitants as the result of their* sinful *deeds.* The prophecy finds its consummation in the final judgment (2 Thes. 1:6–9; 2 Pet. 3:12; Rev. 20:11–15).

14 So Micah petitions God *to shepherd your people*, both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:16–18; Eph. 1:3–4). That picture is extended in the remainder of the verse: secure protection (*staff*) and ample provision (*feed*). *Inheritance* refers to the ancient and permanent land providing the family with livelihood (see 2:2; *cf.* Nu. 26:56). Today God gives his elect a permanent source of life in Christ (Jn. 10:28). The elect *lives* forever *by itself* in freedom. The compound *in a forest, in fertile pasture-lands* signifies a 'garden-like forest'. *Bashan* and *Gilead* were the first lands conquered by Moses with mighty wonders (Nu. 21:33). Bashan was well known for its stately trees (Is. 2:13; Zc. 11:2) and its well-fed domesticated animals (Dt. 32:14); Gilead was famous for its good pasture-land (Nu 32:1, 26). Micah is petitioning God to restore Israel's original blessings. **15** God promises to answer this prayer according to his will.

16–17 As Micah reflects upon the preceding promises, he realizes that all *nations will see* God's *wonders* (15) and *be ashamed* for risking their honour on powerless false gods. To *lay their hands upon their mouths* means 'they will shut up', and *their ears will become deaf* means 'they will turn a deaf ear'. When God performs these wonders, the nations will stop taunting Israel and turn a deaf ear to the vain boasts of others and their empty arguments. **17** The nations will also renounce their power. The vanquished kings *will lick dust* as they grovel before *the* LORD. Confronted with his power, they *will come trembling out of their* old strongholds to worship him.

18 Micah artfully weaves his name, 'Who is like Yah', into the beginning of the people's hymn, *Who is a God like you* . . .? None compares to him *who pardons sin* [guilt] *and forgives* . . . *transgression* (see 1:5). Israel's breach of covenant was so great that none, apart from God, would have forgiven it (*cf.* 1 Tim. 1:15–17). Yet without that forgiveness Micah's ministry would have been pointless. He would have had the satisfaction of venting his spleen, but the people would have been hardened in their sin (*cf.* Ps. 130:3–4). He now piles up God's benevolent qualities, *do not stay angry, show mercy* (twice), *have compassion* and *be true.* God showed these same qualities when Israel sinned in making the golden calf and Moses

asked him to show his glory (Ex. 34:6). **19** On account of his mercy, God will *hurl all* of his people's *iniquities into the depths of the sea* so that they no longer threaten Israel's existence, even as he had hurled Pharaoh's army into the sea. **20** These qualities also guarantee that he *will be true* to keep his covenant *he pledged on oath to* their *fathers in days long ago.* All of this is possible because of Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for his people's sins and is God's 'Amen' to his covenant promises.

Bruce Waltke

NAHUM

Introduction

Nahum the prophet

All we know about Nahum comes from the book itself. He came from Elkosh, but we do not know where this was. At least four different locations have been suggested, from Judah to Assyria! Most commentators assume that he delivered his prophecies in Jerusalem (or at least Judah), but he could perhaps have been one of the people previously deported from Israel to Assyria or scattered among the nations (Je. 23:1–3; Ezk. 11:16; Joel 3:2).

Nahum means 'consolation, comfort'. The root has a meaning 'be relieved by taking vengeance' (Is. 1:24; 57:6), and this would be especially fitting for Nahum. Comfort and relief is brought to God's people when he takes vengeance on their enemies!

Nahum probably lived shortly before the destruction of the Assyrian Empire which was assured by the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC and which is the event upon which he focuses. He probably prophesied after the sack of Thebes on the Nile in 663 as this seems to be referred to in 3:8. (See chart on page 628.)

The historical situation

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, the most cruel and ruthless nation of the ancient world. The Assyrians terrified their intended victims because not only did they destroy and burn the cities they conquered, they also subjected the inhabitants to various kinds of suffering and humiliation.

One king, Ashurbanipal, boasted in the following terms about some plotters that he had foiled: 'As for those common men who had spoken derogatory things against my god Asher and had plotted against me, the prince who reveres him, I tore out their tongues and abased them. As a posthumous offering I smashed the rest of the people alive by the very figures of the protective deities between which they had smashed Sennacherib my grandfather. Their cut up flesh I fed to the dogs, swine, jackals, birds, vultures, to the birds of the sky, and to the fishes of the deep pools'.

The Assyrians were the ones who had destroyed Samaria and with it the northern kingdom. In 2 Ki. 17:5 it says, 'The king of Assyria ... laid siege to it [Samaria] for three years'. We can imagine the people getting hungrier, more desperate and more hopeless, as they looked out on the Assyrian army, an invincible multitude. They also knew that these soldiers were completely ruthless. They would flay people alive – strip the skin off them and drag them off with hooks in their flesh. And if the people didn't already know what their enemies were capable of, the Assyrians would have reminded them every day (*cf.* the speech of the Assyrian field commander to Hezekiah in Is. 26:4–10). In the British Museum there are stone carvings taken from Nineveh which show how the Assyrians dealt with conquered cities. One shows a great heap of heads. The picture of the siege of Lachish shows three men impaled on wooden stakes outside the city, a grisly visual aid to those who were still shut up inside. Captives were often mutilated by cutting off hands, feet, noses, ears or tongues. A relief from Khorsabad shows Assyrian chariots driving over mutilated bodies. Infants were often dashed in pieces (Na. 3:10; *cf.* Ps. 137:9). Women might be taken as spoil and pregnant women were usually disembowelled.

Having conquered a city, the Assyrians would take steps to see that they did not have any more trouble there in future. So, when Samaria fell in 721 BC 27,000 were exiled and a comparable number of deportees from other places was brought in. This destroyed the unity and even identity of the nation and made it very difficult to organize resistance in future.

We can see why people were (and still are) worried about the idea that God would allow Assyrians to carry out judgment on his behalf. Nevertheless, the Bible says in several places that the Assyrians were his instruments of judgment.

Nahum comes long after the fall of Samaria. The city of Nineveh fell in 612 BC, and Nahum is to be placed shortly before this. Ninety years is a long time to wait for the judgment of an evil nation. Incidentally, Jonah carried out his ministry to Nineveh quite some time before 721. He is mentioned in 2 Ki. 14:25 (which refers to the reign of Jeroboam II, 782–753) as having prophesied previously.

Though God's judgment may be delayed, it is never forgotten; he cares passionately about right and wrong. The book of Nahum makes that abundantly clear.

The message of Nahum

Nahum is a passionate little book with one main message: the LORD brings punishment upon Assyria because of their gross sin. The way that Nahum expresses his message has caused distress to some sensitive commentators! The tone is set at the outset (1:2) where it says literally, 'The LORD is jealous and avenging, avenging and a lord of wrath, taking vengeance on his adversaries, keeping [it] with respect to his enemies'.

The word translated 'jealous' comes from a root meaning 'ardour, zeal, jealousy'. It can indicate jealousy in a wrong sense or envy (Gn. 26:14; 30:1; 37:11; Ps. 73:3), but most often it means to be justifiably jealous (*e.g.* Nu. 5:14, 30) or to have a right zeal (*e.g.* Nu. 11:29; 25: 11). The words translated 'avenging, takes vengeance' come from a root which can be used in a bad sense *i.e.* to entertain vengeful feelings against a neighbour. This is forbidden in Lv. 19:18 and contrasted with love, 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.' Usually, however, as here, it is used of vengeance that is right and just (Nu. 31:2–3; Dt. 32:43). 'Filled with wrath' indicates heat, rage, burning anger and fury (Gn. 27:44–45; Dn. 8:6).

So, the book of Nahum is a passionate book. The God of the Bible is not cool, remote and imperturbable like the Greek philosophical ideal. He looks down upon humankind, sees their wickedness and says in effect, 'How dare you behave in my world like this? I made you, and you have no life, no right of existence without me, no future unless you are in harmony with me. Whatever is wrong in the world has got to be put right – and I'll see that it is.'

This sort of idea does not go down well with the average educated person today, and the book of Nahum provides a powerful reminder to us that God cares about his world, and will judge sin. Of course, we need to remind ourselves that God's passion is not like our passion, his anger is not like our anger. It is righteous and pure; 1:3 provides the corrective we need, 'The LORD is slow to anger and great in power'. The prophet then returns, however, to his original emphasis: 'The LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished'.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 The title

V 1 describes the whole book as *an oracle* or 'burden'. See the note on Zc. 9:1. *The book of the vision* implies at least that the prophet saw things which were not apparent to the natural physical eye. On *Nineveh* and *Elkosh* see the Introduction above.

1:2–8 A hymn to the Lord

2–3a These verses tell us that God is a God who *takes vengeance,* but only in accordance with what is right. He is patient and punishes unwillingly, but he will not let iniquity go by the board. It has to be dealt with (see on the book's message above). God is *jealous* for his name. The truth of these things is confirmed in the NT also (*e.g.* Mt. 7:21–27; Mk. 11:15–17; Rom. 1:18–32; Rev. 2 – 3).

3b–6 These verses show God's power over all the earth. They could easily be included in the Psalter as a psalm of praise to the Lord. They still have Nahum's main concern strongly to the fore. We know from Isaiah that the Assyrians attributed their success over the nations to their own power and might and to their own gods (Is. 10:12–18; *cf.* Zp. 2:13–15). Nahum describes God in relation to various impressive and frightening natural phenomena. Compared to this the Assyrians and their gods are completely insignificant.

V 6 contains four words for anger (*fierce anger* is lit. '[burning-]anger of his anger'!). So this repetition marks strong emphasis, as in vs 2–3a.

The people of Nahum's day (unless they were quite rich and important) built their houses out of sun-dried mud bricks, with a roof made of wooden beams and twigs, covered with a layer of clay and whitewash. In a storm they would be aware of their smallness in the face of nature's power. And yet, says Nahum, the Lord's way is in the *whirlwind* and *storm*; he is quite at home there, that's where he walks about. *The clouds* which seem so vast to us, are *the dust of his feet.* The Israelites were not a sea-going people, and the sea was something that inspired awe. With all our knowledge and technology, ships are still lost at sea. But God *rebukes the sea and dries it up.*

There are at least two allusions which we should note here. There is a reference back to the dividing of the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape (and to drown the Egyptians who tried to stop them) and also to the crossing of the River Jordan when Joshua led the people of Israel over into Canaan. In both cases the water was held back by God to allow the people to cross. When Jesus stilled the waves on Lake Galilee (which was and is famous for its fierce and unpredictable storms) he was indirectly showing his deity (Mk. 4:35–41). The disciples responded, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'. Who could it be but the LORD, Yahweh himself?

Bashan and Carmel (4), together with Lebanon, were the most luxuriantly wooded areas of Palestine. Lebanon was famous for its mighty, invincible trees. But before the Lord its bloom *fades.* The solid enduring *mountains quake before him* (5). This suggests the idea of trembling in fear as well as vibrating (*cf.* Ezk. 12:18). The earth is laid waste before him, *the world and all who live in it.* Nahum was probably thinking of the results of some of the storms, and possibly floods, that he had seen or heard of.

7–8 Here we have something similar to v 3a: a balancing statement about God's goodness, and a quick return to the main theme. *The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for* [lit. 'knows'] *those who trust in him.* Quite often in the OT the word 'know' signifies not just head knowledge, but a concern to take care of something (*e.g.* Ex. 33:12; Ps. 103:13–14). The NIV introduces *Nineveh* into the verse (as also in 1:11, 14; 2:1). The prophet himself does not mention the name until 2:8, possibly to produce questioning and tension in his hearers, and a greater impact when the name is finally revealed.

1:9–15 Announcement of judgment for Assyria and salvation for Judah

1:9–11 Judgment for plotters

9 Here we have a new beginning. Having made the point at some length that it's good to be on God's side and not against him, Nahum turns to address the enemies (as the NIV mg.): 'What do you foes plot against the Lord? He will make a full end; trouble will not arise a second time.' Note that it would not have been easy for first-time hearers to work out who Nahum was referring to. Nineveh has not been mentioned yet (not until 2:8) and Judah is not referred to directly until v 15.

10 This verse is very difficult to translate. If the NIV is right, we have three different pictures of distress: *entangled among thorns* and unable to move; staggering from too much *wine* and unable to control or defend oneself, and with a hangover still to come (*cf.* Ps. 107:27; Pr. 23:29–35; Is. 29:9); and *consumed* ['burnt up'] in a moment. An alternative possibility is: 'For though they be like tangled thorns, and be drenched as it were in their drink, they shall be

devoured utterly as dry stubble.' In other words, although they seem to be drenched and unburnable, in the Lord's fire they will certainly burn up. 11 This is thought to be a reference to Sennacherib, the Assyrian king who set himself up against the Lord when he destroyed 46 cities of Judah and besieged Jerusalem in 701 BC.

1:12–14 Contrasting futures for Judah and Assyria

12–13 Here we find the first direct address to Judah (the NIV adds *O Judah* to make the point clear). There are frequent changes in the person addressed in Hebrew prophecy. *The LORD says* that, however strong the Assyrians may be, they will *be cut off and pass away . . . and I will afflict you* [Judah] *no more*. Judah's *yoke* (the mark of servitude) and *shackles* (the sign of captivity) will be broken. 14 The prophet again turns to Nineveh/Assyria saying, *The LORD has given a command concerning you.* This emphasizes the fact that this is a firm decision. *You will have no descendants to bear your name* is lit. 'No more of your name will be sown'. It was regarded as a great curse for a line to be cut off (*cf.* Ps. 37:22; 28–38; Is. 48:19). The Lord will cut off both wooden (*carved*) and metal (*cast*) images from the Assyrians' temple, and they will know that their gods are nothing. *Vile* means here, 'trifling, of no account'.

It is worth asking about today's equivalent of the Assyrians' gods who were supposed to give them desirable things like power, security, riches and luxury. For some it might be their business corporation which gives great reward to those who give unquestioning obedience and remain useful, but ruin to those who step out of line. Whatever apparently powerful false gods we face, it is good to know that their power is transient and illusory, and that the Lord alone is God over all.

1:15 The herald brings good news

This verse forms a transition from a general announcement of God's purposes to a description of the fate of Nineveh. It is similar to the better known verse in Is. 52:7 (Is. 40:9 also has some similarities). The NT alludes to it in Acts 10:36 and Rom. 10:15. It expresses in poetic form the fact that victory has been achieved. The feet belong to the herald who brings *good news*: the battle is won, oppression is ended and *peace* can now be established. *Celebrate your festivals, O Judah* means enjoy the victory celebrations at which thank offerings would have been sacrificed and the worshippers would have eaten the meat. *Fulfil your vows* refers to those that were common before going to battle. Probably the best known, and certainly the stupidest, was Jephthah's vow (Jdg. 11:30–31).

2:1 – 3:19 The fall of Nineveh: description and interpretation

2:1–12 gives a vivid but chaotic description of the Ninevites desperately fighting to survive an attack and failing. They suffer anguish and their hearts fail as the enemy plunders their city. V 13 picks up two of the items mentioned in the preceding verses: the 'chariots' which have dashed about trying to save the city wall be burnt (4) and the 'young lions' who have received the prey previously in their den will be cut off by the sword and their supply of food removed (11–12).

The reason for this outcome is stated at the beginning of v 13: 'Behold, I am against you . . .'. The same pattern of description-plus-oracle occurs again in the following verses. 3:1–4 describes the bloody city and in 3:5 the Lord says again, 'Behold, I am against you . . .'. Direct address to Nineveh continues to the end of the chapter (and the book). This sort of repeating pattern is often found in Hebrew literature. Many scholars appreciate it as an effective way of bringing out some emphasis.

2:1–13 The death throes of Nineveh

Here we find not a chronological sequence of events, but a series of little cameos which conjure up the picture of Nineveh in its last days.

Nineveh is addressed directly (the NIV supplies the name from the context; see v 8). *An attacker* (lit. 'the scatterer') *advances against you* refers to Babylon, which was conquered by Assyria. Assyria, which had scattered so many other nations, is now to be scattered itself. *Guard the fortress* is lit. 'Guard the ramparts or siegeworks'. The rampart was the huge pile of earth built up outside the city wall in order to get the besieging troops over the wall. So we should expect the besieging troops to be manning it. It is possible, however, that it refers to the ramp inside the wall. As the ramp outside the wall got bigger, the people inside the city built up the inside. The besiegers would eventually win because they had more material and more space to build up a higher wall. In any case, this is a way of depicting furious activity on both sides. The attackers building higher and higher outside, watching that no-one escaped over the top, preparing for the final push to victory that they now smelt. And the defenders, weak through lack of food and water, desperately summoning their last reserves of strength to try and delay the final defeat, humiliation and torture.

2 This verse is in brackets. It gives the reason why all this is happening: *because the LORD will restore the splendour of Jacob like the splendour of Israel* and therefore its oppressor must be judged. It is possible that this should be translated:

'the LORD is turning away the pride of Israel', which could mean that there is no longer any need for punishment and Nineveh may be dispensed with.

3–5 The prophet now returns to the description of the siege. There are two ways of understanding this. The first is to take vs 3–4 as referring to the Babylonians who are a terrifying sight. They are either inside Nineveh already, or else dash about in the streets and squares of the suburbs outside the walls. In v 5b they go to the wall under the cover of their movable shelter (*protective shield*) in order to undermine the foundations. V 5a may be a rather abrupt reference to the action of the Assyrian commander inside Nineveh, or else *stumble on their way* simply indicates the haste of the attackers to reach the wall and finish the job. Alternatively, vs 3–5 may be a description of the confusion of the Ninevites *inside* the walls, rushing to the place of greatest danger. The chariots described in vs 3–4 look impressive, but they are all in confusion.

6 *The river gates* would naturally refer to the points at which the various canals around Nineveh entered the city. This *may* refer in some way to the role of the river in the city's downfall. The river, which formed a mighty protection for the city, became an enemy. *Collapses* is lit. 'melts' and could mean 'is dismayed'. **7** The Hebrew is obscure but the overall meaning of vs 7–12 is clear: the people of the city are carried away into exile; even the slave girls moan their fate; Nineveh's riches are plundered; and people are terrified at what may happen to them at the hands of the Babylonians.

11–12 Nineveh is presented as a *lions' den* into which the lion (Assyria) brought the results of his rampaging among the nations. The lion family had dwelt safely and eaten well in their lair, but what now? The reason for Nineveh's downfall can be stated very simply: *'I am against you,' declares the LORD Almighty.* The verse then recaps on the two main images of the preceding description: defeat in battle and destruction of the lions. *The messengers* would be those sent out to demand surrender and/or tribute from the nations (*cf.* 2 Ki 18:19–35; 19:8–14). This verse would still make us tremble. 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' (Rom. 8:31). But if God is against us, what then? What use is any ally?

3:1–4 Woe to Nineveh

1 *Woe* was a cry that the prophets often proclaimed against those whom the Lord was to judge. Its primary use was probably as a lament for the dead, and it always indicates a serious calamity of some kind. *The city of blood* is obviously Nineveh, which was responsible for much shed blood. We can understand the reference to *plunder* and *victims* which are connected also with battle and killing. Why are *lies* mentioned? Probably because lying is one of the characteristics of those who oppose the Lord, the God of truth. Idols are regarded as false, deceitful and lying. This is a reminder and a warning to the reader that lying is much more serious than our modern society would acknowledge.

2–4 The prophet continues with a vivid but ambiguous description of a battle (2–3). It could be a description of Assyria attacking other nations because of its *wanton lust* (4). Alternatively, it could be a description of Assyria under attack as a judgment for its *wanton lust.* Either way, v 5 continues to give the judgment due to it. The term *wanton lust* or 'whoredoms' is used many times of Israel, indicating infidelity to Yahweh. When applied to political alliances it signified both trusting in other powers and (hence) distrusting God. Such foreign policy led to corruption of the worship of the Lord under the influence of these other nations, who seemed to the people to have powerful gods and attractive customs. The reference to *sorceries* signifies possibly literal witchcraft or sorcery, or possibly the art of 'statecraft and diplomacy' which acts on the nations like a spell.

3:5–19 'I am against you,' declares the LORD Almighty

We noted this spine-chilling statement in 2:13. Here it introduces an extended address to Nineveh, mixing together description of judgment and reasons for the judgment.

6–7 *I will lift your skirts over your face . . . show the nations your nakedness* indicates disgrace and an appropriate punishment for pride. As the harlot 'uncovers her nakedness' (a phrase meaning sexual intercourse in places like Lv. 18:6–23) in plying her trade, so the punishment involves uncovering the 'nakedness' of Nineveh. The reference may be to the practice of exposing a harlot or adulteress (Ezk. 16:37–41; *cf.* also Is. 20:2–4; Je. 13:22, 26). *I will pelt you with filth . . . treat you with contempt . . . make you a spectacle* (6) all emphasizes that as Nineveh showed no pity, no-one will pity her. The rhetorical questions in v 7 imply that there will be no-one to mourn for or comfort Nineveh.

8–9 These verses describe the glory of Thebes (lit. 'No-of-Amon') a city that was formerly great but perished. Amon was the name of the god worshipped in Thebes, to whom the city was reckoned to belong. *Are you better?* means 'Is there any reason why you should fare any better?' Thebes was the most famous city in Egypt from 1580–1205 BC. It was adorned with magnificent monuments and even today its ruins are a wonder. On the eastern part

of the Nile was the city of the living; over on the west was a huge necropolis, or city of tombs and monuments to the dead. There was also a large artificial harbour. The Nile apparently divides into four channels at low water at this point, which would explain the literal meaning of the next part of the verse: 'Thebes that sat among the streams/channels, water round about her'. Thebes had been the centre of a great empire stretching from N. Syria to Nubia, but it perished (10); so will Nineveh (11).

10–11 *Her infants were dashed to pieces.* This barbarous practice is referred to in 2 Ki. 8:12; Is. 13:16 and Ho. 13:16. Children were taken hold of and their heads dashed against a wall or on stones. The object was to exterminate the whole population, and this was also the reason for ripping open pregnant women (*cf.* Am. 1:13). *You too will become drunk* (11). The drunken man staggers around in a bewildered state, helplessly and defencelessly. Unable to fight, the people of Nineveh will try to hide and find refuge somewhere.

12–18 Several pictures follow in these verses. The *fortresses are like fig-trees* laden with ripe fruit (12). A shake of the tree will make the figs fall off – right into *the mouth of the eater.* The people of Nineveh are just as vulnerable. The soldiers are like *women* (13). Not like women in the modern armies of the world, physically strong and trained to fight, but like the women of the time who had never been expected to be involved in battle and would be untrained and defenceless. *The gates . . . are wide open* – they no longer offer any protection from foes.

Nineveh is compared to a well-defended city under siege (14–15a). They have water, their defences are strong, their breaches are repaired. But then fire burns them up and the sword cuts them down. The Assyrian *guards* and *officials* are said to be like locusts (15b–17). They seem to be everywhere and then suddenly they are gone. There is a similarity to the promise to Abraham (Gn. 15:5; 22:17). Although the Assyrians seem to be as successful as the descendants of Abraham, it is only God's covenant that guarantees continuing success. The *shepherds* are said to be asleep (*i.e.* leaders are dead) and they are therefore unable to gather the scattered sheep of the Assyrians.

19 The final word is that there will be no lessening of the hurt, no sympathy for Assyria. Rather, there will be rejoicing on the part of all who hear of Nineveh's downfall, because everyone has experienced her unceasing evil. (See Ezk. 25:6 for the expression 'clap the hands' as a malevolent gesture associated with rejoicing over suffering.) There will be no sorrow when evil is finally destroyed. God's judgment is seen to be absolutely right. There is no element of regret or failure. This is quite a difficult thing for us to take in. How could it be that many people will end up in hell and there be no sorrow about it? Of course there will be sorrow – as is portrayed in the picture of weeping for Babylon in Rev. 18 (which is replaced by rejoicing in Rev. 19). All the effects of evil will eventually vanish.

So the book of Nahum tells us in very straight terms that evil will be punished. It warns us about our own sin, and it encourages us when we are oppressed by great evils by reminding us that God will have the last word. We need this message bringing home to us at times when our persecutors 'increase like the locust', or on the other hand, at times when we think we are getting away with behaviour which is not strictly honouring to God. The book may have a limited scope, but its message is a vital one.

Mike Butterworth

HABAKKUK

Introduction

Who was Habakkuk?

Habakkuk is a shadowy figure, with neither parentage nor time indicated in the prophecy. Only his role as prophet, an intermediary between Yahweh and Israel, is given. His name is apparently Hebrew but reflects the influence of the Mesopotamians, who ruled over Israel from the ninth to the sixth century BC. In their Akkadian language his name means a plant or fruit tree.

In later Jewish tradition of the apocryphal 'Daniel, Bel and the Snake', Habakkuk brings Daniel food in the lions' den. The musical notation and the form of the psalm in Hab. 3 have suggested he was a Levite, which was a tribe associated with music (Ezr. 3:10; Ne. 12:27). This is supported by one manuscript which identifies his father as Jesus, a Levite. Others suggest he was an official court or temple prophet. All suggestions are speculative, with no compelling evidence for any of them.

While Habakkuk's identity is in doubt, his character is clear. A sincere, devoted follower of Yahweh, he not only submitted himself to his Lord's will, but also confronted that same Lord when he felt God was ignoring his own promises. Like Job, Habakkuk does not hesitate to question God, in a form of literature called a 'theodicy'. He questions God for different reasons, however. Where Job maintains his innocence, asking why, in the light of it, he is punished, Habakkuk has the opposite question – since the wicked are clearly not innocent, why are they *not* punished, even though they are unjustly treating the righteous? Not praying for relief from suffering (*cf.* Pss. 10; 12 *etc.*), he asks why judgment does not fall.

Habakkuk's questioning does not lessen his faith in God, with whom he enjoys a personal bond (1:12). He is aware of the awesome power of the King and Creator of the universe (3:16), but he also knows this one's care for him (3:17–18). Habakkuk the prophet teaches us that questioning God is acceptable; it is refusing to trust God that causes our downfall.

The historical setting

No date for these prophecies is given, though the events referred to can be dated. Some have suggested a composition as late as the second century BC, but the necessity of rewriting the text of 1:6 to support this proposal tells strongly against it. As it now stands, 1:6 anticipates the impending invasion of the Babylonians. The nation previously ruling over Israel was Assyria, whose capital Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC. They consolidated their hold, establishing the Neo-Babylonian Empire by defeating an alliance headed by Egypt at Carchemish in Syria in 609 BC (Je. 46:2). The Babylonians finally attacked Jerusalem, sacking it and destroying the temple in 587 BC. Since the prophet anticipates this event in the text, it was apparently written, or the message given, before then. Babylon's own downfall at the hand of Cyrus, the Persian king, in 539 BC is also anticipated. (See chart on page 628.)

The book and its message

The prophecy divides into two sections: a dialogue with God (chs. 1–2) and a hymn of praise (ch. 3). The dialogue comprises two queries by Habakkuk to God, each with his response. The first concerns God's slowness in punishing the wicked among his chosen people (1:2–4). Does he allow sin? God responds that the Babylonians are soon to bring judgment on the wrongdoers (1:5–11), an apparent reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BC. This answer does not allay Habakkuk's perplexity, however, since the cure seems to be too extreme for the disease. While the wicked of Israel are bad, the ferociously cruel and inhumane Babylonians are even worse. Surely there is disproportion between Israel's wrongdoings and God's punishment (1:12–17). God shows that this is not the end, however. His people deserve punishment, but Babylon is not without blame, since its barbarity will also come under God's judgment (2:2–20), a reference to the Persian conquest of the area in 539 BC.

A sharp contrast is drawn between the arrogant, misguided Babylonians and those within Israel who act justly (2:4). This verse, especially its second half, is undoubtedly the most familiar in the book. This is not due to familiarity with Habakkuk, but rather to its quotation in various forms in Hebrews (10:38) and by Paul (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11). Grappling with the interpretation of this verse led Martin Luther to question the prevailing doctrine of justification, ultimately precipitating the Protestant Reformation.

Seeing God as just, contrary to what might at first glance be the case, in ch. 3 Habakkuk praises him for his provision, knowing that he can put his trust in him (3: 17–18). The place of the third chapter within the book has posed a problem. It has its own psalm-like heading and conclusion (3:1, 19), possibly indicating that at one time it had an independent existence. The commentary on Habakkuk from Qumran discusses the first two chapters, but not the third, suggesting its later inclusion. The argument is not compelling, however, since the chapter is included in the LXX and other early texts. Whether the prophet composed the hymn himself or adapted it from some earlier source, it functions beautifully in its canonical context to express Habakkuk's relationship to his God, and the book can only be read and fully appreciated if it is left intact.

In some ways, Habakkuk's role and message is the opposite of that normally found among prophets. Instead of chiding Israel on God's behalf, he confronts God himself, demanding an account of his actions, or lack of them. The covenant at Mt. Sinai was between two parties, God and Israel, and neither can ignore his obligations. Habakkuk reminds God of the promised curses should Israel renege on her duties (Dt. 28: 15–68), curses which seem a long time coming. He is confident that God will hear his prayers and act mightily towards Israel and Babylon. He is so aware of the justice of God that, even with no response, even if God did not bless his people in general, or Habakkuk in particular, he is still worthy of praise.

Habakkuk for today

Many view questioning God as sinful, but Habakkuk and Job show this is not so. Rough passages in life can produce honest doubt and perplexity, and God condemns neither Job nor Habakkuk for expressing these doubts. Only in open dialogue are misunderstandings resolved and differences righted. Even today it is better to express vexation than to let it fester, erupting into bitterness. While an answer might not come immediately (2:1), or might itself cause consternation (1:12–17), God does not ban honest questioning.

God already knows the beginning from the end (Is. 46:10). He does not act in secrecy, but reveals himself to inquiring believers (Am. 3:7). It is important to address the great and awesome God with the respect due him (Hab. 3:16), but one may still address him. Comfort awaits the doubter, questioner or sufferer because part of what God is about involves salvation and help for his own (3:19). We also, like Habakkuk, expect his reponse to our questions and needs, not only because he met with Habakkuk in the first millennium before Christ (3:3–15), but also because he has already met us in our own personal past approaching the third millenium after Christ, and will do so again. Whether the problem arises from the acts of national entities, as Habakkuk's did, or because of individual wrongdoing, God is there.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 Title

In one of the shortest prophetic introductions, Habakkuk, known in the Bible only here, is a *prophet*, a spokesman from God. God is not specifically mentioned (*cf.* Jon. 1:1; Mi. 1:1; Zp. 1:1; Mal. 1:1), but an *oracle* in this context indicates a prophetic message from God (*cf. e.g.* Ezk. 12:10; Na. 1:1). Not necessarily an oral message, this is rather a more general revelation, received by the prophet in a vision (*cf.* Mi. 1:1).

1:2 – 2:20 Dialogue with God

Unlike other prophets who brought God's messages to the people, Habakkuk addresses God himself in the form of two questions, to which God responds.

1:2–4 Problem: why is wickedness unpunished?

In a traditional lament form, the prophet asks God *how long* he must plead his cause before he answers (*cf.* Ps. 13:1–2). Is God able or willing to *save* him from oppressive *violence*? Habakkuk, like Job, is not hesitant to question God if his theological understanding of him and his ways does not correspond with experienced reality.

Misfortune severely befalls God's servant in a string of unpleasant synonyms. What is particularly vexing to the writer is not the misfortune, but its source. Usually external foes, personal or national enemies, are the source of the woe, but here the source is internal, the *wicked*, unrepentant element within Israel itself. While some propose the Assyrians as the wicked, fitting the prophecy's historical context, an alternative explains the paralysis of *the law* which is rampant. This regulating influence came to God's own people to order society (Ex. 18:16, 20; Is. 2:3), and Assyria was not subject to its guidance. Now in Israel justice, rather than being a hallmark of godly living (Am. 5:24), is noticeably absent or, even more serious, is perverted.

In Habbakkuk's day, as also today, great problems of injustice can be found among God's people. Rather than condoning sin, or asking that it be ignored, the prophet calls for punishment as required by God's own covenant. While the evil of pagan neighbours needs to be confronted, God's people today, as in Habakkuk's time, are too tolerant of things among themselves which are explicitly contrary to God's will as revealed in Scripture and creation. While seeking to restore the sinner, too often we condone the sin, or at least seek to reduce the severity of its negative consequences. A lack of confrontation, rather than restoring the wrongdoer, tacitly gives permission to continue in the sin (*cf.* 1 Cor. 5). A child of God is called to withstand public wrongdoing, whether corporate, social or political, but the confrontation is hollow if evil is unchecked within the believing community. There is even now a need for prophets who do not espouse 'safe sin', but insist rather that sin be eradicated.

1:5–11 Response: coming judgment on the wicked

Habakkuk's plea for justice will be answered soon, even in his own *days*, and the response will be astounding. It will take place among *the nations*. The LXX, by altering one Hebrew letter, has here 'scoffers; traitors'. The incredulity of the writer arises from the identity of God's instrument of punishment as the *Babylonians*. Known for their impulsive ferocity, they will completely dispossess everyone.

Habakkuk's problem with the Babylonians is twofold. They are an arrogant people, not taking guidance from others or fearing military opposition. They seek their own *honour*, following their own *law*. Wielding mighty offensive forces, their *cavalry* compares to beasts and birds known for ferocity, voracity and speed. These two elements, pride and ferocity, are integral to the self-identity of these people, since they worship their own power.

1:12–17 Problem: isn't the medicine worse than the disease?

Rather than rejoicing in God's response to his psalm of lament, Habakkuk takes up another such psalm. He asks how, in the light of his character of holiness and justice, God can tolerate a punishment which itself seems unjust.

Habakkuk starts from the foundational belief that God is not only *holy* and eternal, but also covenantally related to his people Israel. This is apparent from the use of his personal, covenantal name Yahweh (Ex. 6:2–8), *the* LORD. The appellation *my God* shows not only that he is personally close to the writer, but also an objective deity who exists apart from his people. This is in stark contrast to the Babylonians, whose object of veneration does not exist beyond themselves, but is rather their own military power (11). God is the unshakeable *Rock* (*cf.* Dt. 32:18) to Habakkuk. Even though questioning the choice of this wicked nation to *punish* and to judge God's own people, he does not question that God has a reason. He is ready to discuss the

issue, confident that God does ultimately seek to preserve his covenant people for himself.

The theological problem facing Habakkuk is how a holy God, one who is *pure* in all things and completely separate from sin, can *tolerate wrong* and treachery as practised by the Babylonian instruments of his punishment (13). While the sinful in Israel are wicked (4), in comparison they are eclipsed by the even greater perversity of Babylon. Beside Babylon, sinful Israel can be called *righteous*, here a relative rather than an absolute term. They are so far removed from the standards expected of God that the prophet can only express wonder that he can even *look* at them.

Habakkuk is bold enough not only to confront God regarding his actions, but to blame him for dehumanizing humanity (14–17). God originally created people in his own image (Gn. 1:26; 5:1) and they were the pinnacle of his creation. Now he metaphorically degrades them into lesser creatures, *fish* and pre-human crawling things (*cf.* Gn. 1:26–28). If God deprives Israel of humanity, Babylon cannot be condemned for now treating them as objects of sport, fish for the net and hook. They even worship the tools of their destructive craft since they bring their succulent repast – the flesh of their captives. Can this blasphemy and cruelty continue unchecked?

It is still a perversion when people are dehumanized for either self-gratification or economic advantage. Worship of the 'bottom-line', of increasing revenue no matter what the cost in terms of human dignity, can be even more invidious today than the overt Babylonian barbarity.

2:1 Awaiting a response

Habakkuk is concerned that Yahweh should speedily respond to his queries, so he will take up a position at *watch* like a soldier (*cf.* Is. 21:8; Ezk. 33:7). His expected vigilance, one role of a prophet, is in two directions, towards God (*cf.* 1:2) and also towards himself. He is immediately concerned with God's response, but he also needs to know how he himself will react to God's new revelation. Rather than fearing God's anger towards an impudent doubter, Habakkuk waits patiently for a response which he knows will come.

2:2–20 Response: coming judgment on the wicked

God does not leave his prophet in despair; in his justice, he also holds Babylon responsible for their excesses. He reveals them in five taunt songs against Babylon.

2:2–5 A vision written. Habakkuk's faith in God is justified when God responds to his perplexity. This shows that God considers honest questions. The revelation is not just for Habakkuk's comfort, however, but for all who ultimately suffer at the hand of Babylon. The good news of final deliverance is to be placarded in such a way as to be plainly visible to passers-by. The phrase translated *herald* is obscure, either referring to anyone passing being able to read the notice even if they are hurrying (NRSV) and then passing the news on by word of mouth, or to a professional runner or *herald* whose role is to broadcast such a report. In either case, the news will spread, even if the announced judgment may not be immediately forthcoming. In fact, God will move in his own *appointed time*. All history is in God's hands, moving inexorably towards the climactic day of the Lord. Faith in God compels one not to chafe at apparent delays, because they are illusory. God's promises will most *certainly come* (2 Pet. 3:3–9) at his own time. God will deliver his people, ultimately through a personal deliverer, who could be referred to in one possible reading of the text (*cf.* the NIV mg.), though a more general, unspecified deliverance, with the revelation coming true, is the most common understanding of the passage.

Habakkuk is told to record his message *on tablets*, the ordinary medium of writing in Babylonia. They were made of clay (which when baked became like stone), ivory or wood. These tablets would be enduring reminders that God's word would ultimately be realized.

The part of Habakkuk's prophecy which comprises the message of hope is not indicated, but possibly it is this whole book in some form. Alternatively, it could simply refer to the message of the next two verses, to which the prophet emphatically draws attention.

In the best known passage in Habakkuk, the prophet draws a multifaceted contrast between the just and the wicked (4–5). The latter are unnamed, simply referred to as *he*. The reference to capture and other evils suggest that Babylon is meant. The contrast highlights the actions and the end of the two parties. The *arrogant* Babylonians are *puffed up* with pride. Drunk on the spoils of conquest (*cf.* 1 Sa. 30:16) and rapacious, insatiable greed, they have abandoned common norms of decency and moral integrity. The habitual nature of this intoxication is shown by the Hebrew verb form used in v 5.

In contrast to the perverse and the falsely proud is the *righteous* (*cf.* 1:4, 13), one who is *upright*. His deeds conform to God's revealed will, and they are a credit to him and a model to the world. The Hebrew word has a breadth of meaning, including the status of being justified, vindicated before God himself (*cf.* Is. 53:11). The righteous in Judah will not only act

uprightly, their righteousness will be acknowledged by God.

Life for the upright is directed by *his faith*, a stark contrast to the greed controlling the wicked. This word also has a breadth of usage, from trusting belief in human beings (Ex. 19:9) or God and his promises (Gn. 15:6) to a trust which motivates one to obedience, being trustworthy or faithful in conduct (2 Ki. 12:15), even to showing perseverance in times of testing. The latter two uses, the most common for our word, are better translated 'faithfulness' (see the NIV mg.), or even 'integrity'. Both of these show a close correspondence between a commitment and actually carrying it out in action.

The end of each party is also contrasted. Faithfulness will bring life to the righteous. This is not simply physical existence, in contrast to the Babylonians who soon will fall. Special blessing is associated with the word in Dt. 30:19, where the life promised to Israel is associated with the land, which is now threatened by Babylon. Israel's life and land will endure, while those of her mighty enemy will perish.

This text became well-known due to its citation in theologically significant NT passages (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The concept found here regarding faith as the means of justification, pricked Martin Luther to the quick, thus launching the Protestant Reformation.

The NT's shades of meaning have been influenced by their use of the LXX rather than the Hebrew text. Paul in Rom. 1:17 expresses the result of faith, with the Greek emphasis on intellectual commitment, which leads to righteousness. This is the first step into God's kingdom – justification in God's eyes through belief in the gospel of his Son (*cf.* Rom. 3:22; 5:1). Gal. 3:11 contrasts obedience to God as a legalistic requirement which cannot justify anyone to a faithful commitment to him resulting in the unearned gift of life. Heb. 10:38 brings out the force of the call to persevere, living in faithful obedience to God's will in times of personal trial. It adopts a possible Messianic reading of the LXX ('my righteous one'). Another LXX reading speaks of God's faithfulness, which could also be the reading of the Habakkuk passage. God's people are urged to endure faithfully through the Babylonian oppression, for life will come, and God himself will be faithful to bring his message of deliverance and hope (2:2–3) to fruition. Some suggest that the prophet himself provides a commentary on faithful trust in ch. 3, especially in vs 16–19.

2:6–20 Five taunts against Babylon.

6–8 Woe sayings often characterize funeral dirges (*cf.* 1 Ki. 13:30), but here the form is used ironically, since an Israelite prophet would not be terribly concerned about the impending downfall of an enemy oppressing his people. Habakkuk's faith in God is evident in his belief that God will prevail. The exact object of the oracles is unclear. The Babylonians would fit the immediate literary context, and the Assyrians would fit the historical context of the time of writing the prophecies. Either of these were, in their heyday, a seemingly invincible world power. Assyria was soundly defeated by Babylonia in 605 BC, while Babylon itself came to an end in 539 BC, defeated by the Persians. The prophet is not alone in taking up these taunts, but is joined in them by *all* those whom the aggressors had exploited in the past (*cf.* v 5).

In a parody of a funeral dirge (*cf.* Je. 22:18), Habakkuk mocks the Mesopotamians for their ill-gotten gains. As for an individual who takes goods through theft, misappropriates the pledges securing debts or draws *blood* (either literally or metaphorically in exploitation), suffering will rebound upon the head of the oppressor. In a tit-for-tat response, the plunderer will himself be *plundered* by his erstwhile victim. Misappropriation of funds is still common among those in positions of trust. Their exposure and condemnation by court and press shows that this sort of behaviour is not only unacceptable to the holy God, but even to the sensibilities of fallen humanity.

9–11 This woe is directed towards national gain through injustice and perversity. *Gain* itself is morally neutral, so is not condemned. These acquire it through treachery, however, seeking security from others' greed by placing themselves *high* above others' threats. They will suffer a shameful death. Even inanimate building material from the captured cities will *cry out* against evil exploiters. National policy, as well as individual behaviour, must constantly be subjected to the demands of God's word.

12–14 Habitual cruelty, *bloodshed* and *crime* which were intended to secure permanent territorial holdings will not reach their intended goal. There will be no lasting benefits because they will go up in smoke. Those who still engage in nationalistic self-aggrandizement and 'ethnic cleansing' must be reminded of God's unchanging abhorrence of this behaviour (*cf.* Am. 1:13). Seeking additional territory or resources such as oil or other strategic minerals without care for human life or territorial rights will ultimately prove futile when divine justice rights nationalistic wrongs.

Habakkuk's contemporary, Jeremiah, uses the same words of prophetic doom (Je. 51:58), though it is not clear which of the two prophets originally used them. Their ultimate author, as well as the author of the punishing judgment, is

Yahweh himself, the *LORD Almighty* who, as the Divine Warrior, takes up the cause of his people (3:8–15).

In the midst of the darkness of woe comes a verse of light and hope for those who trust in God rather their own perverse acquisitions. Rather than a time-bound prophecy of defeat for a historical nation, this free adaptation from Is. 11:9 places the future hope in the context of the end times. *Knowledge* of God, an intimate, experiential relationship with him, will bathe the entire earth. The outward manifestation of God's awesome power, his *glory* (Ex. 40:34; Is. 6:3), will be perceptible not only to the oppressing Assyrians and Babylonians, but to all of creation.

15–17 The wicked not only engage in perversion but lead others into doing the same, providing their *neighbours* intoxicants in order to exploit their inebriated lack of decency. One thinks today of purveyors of pornography, gambling and drugs. They do not seek personal gratification but to exploit others by ensnaring them. The pervasive power of perversion continues to cross national and international boundaries, threatening not only individuals but also governments through its corruption. It seems that divine judgment might be the only means of breaking these ever-tightening chains.

The punishment meted out again matches the wrong committed. In this case, the intoxicator will become intoxicated and licentious. This time the *cup* is a metaphor of the wrath of God's judgment (*cf.* Ps. 75:8; Ezk. 23:33; Lk. 22:42). The violence of the wicked is seen as going beyond the borders of Israel to neighbouring *Lebanon*, possibly referring to the battle at Carchemish in 605 BC. This turmoil harms not only people, but results in the slaughter of dumb *animals*, which is also condemned. This is a needed corrective to the misunderstanding that humanity is the Creator's sole interest. Rather, all creation suffers because of sin, and awaits restoration (Rom. 8:20–22; *cf.* Gn. 6:5–7).

18–20 Babylon's pagan worship practices alluded to earlier (1:16), are now spelled out in greater detail in this oracle. The pointlessness of seeking advice from a dumb creation of human hands is stated in this passage, in which the typical *woe* statement is in a different location from the previous examples. Some have suggested its misplacement from the beginning of 2:18, but there is no manuscript evidence for this, nor is there sufficient evidence that a biblical author was slavishly bound by the patterns of his chosen literary forms.

In contrast to the silent idol, true revelation can come only from Yahweh himself, in whose presence all must bow in silence. This silence is not of inanimate objects but of awe-filled worshippers faced with the true, living God (*cf.* Ps. 46:10; Is. 41:1) rather than with false, dead and death-bringing idols. Not only Israel, but all of creation will be struck dumb in the presence of this One.

This verse serves as a transition from the sinful deeds of Israel's oppressors to the mighty acts of God.

3:1–19 Psalm of petition and praise

The final chapter is a concluding prayer. It is in the form of a psalm in which the psalmist brings glory to God for his person (2, 3b, 4) and his actions (3a, 5–15). He remembers the mighty acts of God in the exodus, law-giving at Sinai and conquest of the land. His awesome power before mighty armies causes the psalmist to quake in awe, but he knows that this mighty God is love and will care for him. His terror can thus be safely replaced by a joyful calm.

Questions have been raised concerning the psalm's inclusion, as to whether it is a secondary addition (see the Introduction), but in its current canonical location it provides a moving conclusion to this pious prophet's discussion of crises in his faith with his faithful God.

3:1–2 Request for God's continued active presence

The technical notes opening and concluding the psalm have their counterpart in the book of Psalms. The type of psalm, a *prayer*, heads other psalms of request or lament (*e.g.* Pss. 17:1; 86:1). It is said to be *On shigionoth*, an obscure term (*cf.* Ps. 7:1) which apparently gives some musical information. The piece is played on 'stringed instruments' (19; *cf.* Pss. 4:1; 6:1), under the auspices of a professional musician of some kind, who appears in fifty-five other psalm headings. Another unclear musical notation, *Selah*, is scattered through the psalm (3, 9, 13).

The knowledge of God's *deeds* in Israel's past leads the prophet to a two-pronged response. He personally experiences an awe-filled respect at the power of God, the one who sustains and provides for his creation. He also uses this knowledge of God's previous acts to request that they be repeated in Israel's present. In the very *wrath* which Habakkuk has prayed befall the sinners of his day, he requests that God allow his tempering *mercy* (*cf.* Ex. 34:6; Lk. 1:54).

Both wrath and mercy are part of the multifaceted nature of God. Even when he is wilfully ignored or blatantly disobeyed, the love of God for his people draws him inexorably to them in spite of their actions towards him (*cf.* Ho. 11:8–11). This is not an expectation of universalism, that God will ultimately forgive all wrongs and restore everyone to a relationship

with himself. It is a prayer that if and when the sinners return in true penitence to their Creator, he would forgive and restore them to himself. This prayer for grace is not unique in the OT, since the foundation for it is laid in the constitutional covenant document for the people of Israel (Dt. 30:1–10). Here, forgiveness is provided in anticipation of its being needed by sinful Israel. This verse in Habakkuk thus encapsulates the message not only of the book, but of the very gospel itself.

3:3–15 God's hand in history

God's arrival and presence is described. Extraordinary natural events take place (*cf.* Ex. 3:1–5; 1 Ki. 19:11–12).

3–7 The description of God's coming uses terms reminiscent of his appearance at Mt Sinai. An old poetic form for *God* is associated with him as *the Holy One*, a term elsewhere relating to the exodus tradition (Lv. 11:44–45). He comes from *Teman* and *Mount Paran*. These are two sites in Transjordanian Edom which are associated with God's appearance at Mt Sinai. He comes in splendour of light, with twin lightning *rays* (or 'horns', themselves symbolizing *power*). This is possibly a word-play on the two meanings of the one Hebrew word. *Plague* and *pestilence*, also associated with the exodus and Sinai (Ex. 5:3; 9:3, 15), accompany him. They are presented in terms reminiscent of the personal attendants of ancient Near Eastern dignitaries (*cf.* 1 Sa. 17:7; 2 Sa. 15:1). These feared phenomena are under God's jurisdiction, serving him and showing his awesome power.

Power is also evident in the convulsion of nature, as it was at Sinai (Ex. 19:16–19). The far-spread *nations* will feel God's presence, as will the ancient *hills* and *mountains*. Their seeming eternity and permanence are illusory in the presence of God, who is truly *eternal*. God's approach is magnified beyond the experience which Israel had at Sinai to his coming at the end, which will have universal and not just national significance (*cf.* Ps. 97:4–5; Joel 3:16; Rev. 16:18).

The section concludes with reference to two southern nomadic tribes who also will be struck with awe and terror at the power of the coming God.

8–15 Drawing on some of the same references as the last passage, God is now described as the powerful Divine Warrior who stands in opposition to those oppressing his chosen ones (*cf.* Ex. 15:1–18). He faces *rivers* and *seas* (8), as at the parting of the Red Sea and the Jordan (Ex. 13:17 – 14:31; Jos. 3:13–17) and at creation (Jb. 26:12–13; Ps. 29). The image looks forward too, showing God's continued sovereignty over creation (*cf.* Is. 11:15; Mt. 14:22–33; Rev. 21:1).

God's armoury includes *bow* and *arrows* (9), though the adjective describing the latter is not clear. It probably refers to sevenfold volleys that are echoed in Canaanite texts. Here they are used as instruments of judgment by Yahweh (*cf.* v 11; Dt. 32:23; Ps. 7:13).

The presence of the mighty Warrior also affects nature, water dividing the surface of the *earth* (9; *cf.* Ps. 74:15), as it was itself split at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:16, 21). The mighty *mountains* and even the sun and moon are affected, moving or standing in contrast to their customary patterns (*cf.* Jos. 10:12–14; 2 Ki. 20:9–11).

The presence of God is relative in its impact, depending on the relationship which those to whom he comes share with him. Those who oppose him and his people will experience the Warrior in *wrath* (12) as he moves throughout the earth. They will be surprised at their defeat when they went forth expecting victory. Those who are in God's will know this same Warrior as the gracious Saviour and Deliverer. This knowledge is the real answer to Habakkuk's queries (1:12–17).

The opening metaphor (8) is resumed in v 15, with the *sea* trampled as it was in the exodus (*cf.* Ex. 14:21–29).

3:16–19 Trembling yet trusting

Now the speaker is the prophet reflecting on his own experiences and his reactions to the revelation which he has received. In the light of God's responses to him, Habakkuk is able powerfully to express his faith in him.

Habakkuk's physical reactions (16) reflect the awful fear he experienced upon realizing the power of the Creator-Warrior God. He does not remain cowering, however, but waits in calm certainty, knowing that God will meet him as he had done before (2:1). This time he will bring the promised judgment on Israel's enemies. The long-awaited *day* and time (2:3) will come.

In the final verses the writer comes to realize that his faith can ultimately and finally be left in the God who keeps his covenant for ever. Israel received a large portion of its livelihood from agriculture, but the psalmist now realizes that his ultimate source of succour is Yahweh alone, and that he is still God whether he continues to provide these things for his people or not. Habakkuk's assurance does not rest in visible yet temporal blessings, but rather in an unshakeable relationship with his covenant God (*cf.* Jos. 1:5; Rom. 8:38–39). In the midst of all of this questioning and dialogue, the writer can still call God his own. All this explains in practical terms the meaning of the faith espoused in 2:4.

As a result of this faith, the powerful Lord will strengthen the psalmist to endure, but also

to leap joyfully in the exhilaration of life like a *deer* (*cf.* 2 Sa. 22:34; Ps. 18:33[34]). This strength is still available to those who find that they can yet have this faith in the God of Israel and of the church.

David W. Baker

ZEPHANIAH

Introduction

The author and his times

Zephaniah, the prophecy's author, was of godly stock, as is shown by his name, which means 'Yahweh has hidden or protected'. While not unique in the OT (*cf.* Je. 21:1; Zc. 6:10), it shows his parents' assurance of the providence of Israel's God even at their son's birth. He was apparently descended from the fourteenth king of Judah, Hezekiah (716–687 BC), as described in his genealogy (1:1), the longest found in any prophetic book. The same verse dates the prophecies during the reign of Josiah, the sixteenth king of Judah (640–609 BC), himself a descendant of Hezekiah. (See chart on page 628.)

The period between the godly kings Hezekiah and Josiah was marked by religious decay. True worship was perverted by the evil Manasseh (2 Ki. 21:1–18) and his son Amon (2 Ki. 21:19–26), Josiah's grandfather and father respectively. Perhaps God's preservation of a righteous family and their son during this turbulent period led to his parents giving Zephaniah his name.

When during Josiah's reign Zephaniah's prophecies were spoken is debated. Some suggest a date before Josiah restored Yahwism, the correct response of Israel to Yahweh, the God to whom she had sworn allegiance at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19 – 24). The entire life of the people, political, social and religious, was to be directed by God's will as revealed at Sinai in the law as recorded in the Pentateuch, but they repeatedly chose to ignore it, living by their own devices. It was only under Josiah that a vision for Yahwism was recaptured (2 Ki. 22:1 – 23:30; 2 Ch. 34:1 – 35:27). A date prior to Josiah is suggested, since pagan practices still existed (1:4–9). This dates the book before 621 BC, the beginning of his reforms. The argument is not convincing, however, since national religious reform instituted by a king was not universally followed by the people, or even future rulers.

While officially banned by Josiah, pagan practices undoubtedly continued among the people, thus not ruling out a date any time during his reign. Zephaniah's contemporary, Jeremiah, condemned some of the same practices (1:4–5; *cf.* Je. 2:8; 8 2; 19:5, 13; 32:35), and the need that arose at about the same period for other prophets, Nahum and Habakkuk, also suggests that Josiah's reforms were not complete and permanent.

The striking parallels between Zephaniah and Deuteronomy (see on 1:5, 13, 18; 3:5) support a date after the beginning of Josiah's reform which was prompted by the discovery of the 'Book of the Law' in the temple (2 Ki. 22:8). It is generally accepted that the document which was discovered was a form of Deuteronomy, which served as the basis for re-establishing Yahwism. The apparent references by Zephaniah to Deuteronomy leads one to suggest that he prophesied after the book's rediscovery.

Several nations are mentioned in chs. 2 – 3, and the reference to Assyria (2:13–15) in particular helps determine the book's date. Zephaniah foretold the destruction of Assyria's capital, Nineveh (2:13). Assyria, since its defeat and deportation of Israel in 722 BC (2 Ki. 17:4–41; 18:9–12), was the major threat looming over Judah. Though appearing invincible to Judah, under God's hand using the might of the neighbouring Babylonians, Assyria's days were numbered. By the end of the sixth century it was rapidly fading. In 612 BC Nineveh fell to Babylon and the whole empire was taken by 605, so Zephaniah's prophecy must precede 612 BC.

Other nations mentioned include the Philistines (2:4–7), Moab and Ammon (2:8–11) and Cush (2:12). The Philistines had been antagonists of Israel since their return from Egypt after the exodus, and were eventually subdued, though not eradicated, by David. Their five city-state league, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron and Gath, was on the Mediterranean, west of the Dead Sea. Gath had apparently declined by the time of Zephaniah's prophecy, since it is not included in his judgment oracle, which was not unique in its warnings concerning these people (*cf.* Is. 14:28–32; Je. 47; Am. 1:6–8; Zc. 9:5–7).

The two Transjordanian nations, Ammon and Moab, were related through their ancestors, the sons of Lot by his daughters (Gn. 19:36–38), and so (through Lot's kinship with Abraham; Gn. 12:5) were also related to Israel. This kinship was not close, however, since there was frequent opposition between Israel and her 'cousins' across the Jordan (*cf.* Jdg. 3:12–30; 1 Sa. 11:1–11; 2 Ki. 3:4–27).

Cush, or Ethiopia, had been defeated by the

Babylonians in 663 BC when they invaded Egypt, over which Cush had seized control during the twenty-fifth dynasty (*c.* 716–663 BC). 2:12 could be a memory of this destruction, or, more likely, Cush is being used as an alternative designation for all of Egypt (see Is. 20:4 and Ezk. 30:4–9). God's judgment would thus not only fall on Judah's smaller neighbours, but also on the major world powers, Egypt and Assyria, which were further away.

The book and its message

Some have questioned whether portions of the book are original, especially 3:14–20. This is on the questionable grounds that the erring nation, facing judgment and being warned to repent, would not have been given a message of hope, as is found in these verses. It is claimed that judgment was the rule before the exile, with hope only entering into the prophets' messages after that event. This apparently logical reconstruction falls foul of the OT as a whole, which time after time places together two aspects of God's character, holy justice and compassionate love, which are not mutually exclusive (see the mixture in Is. 1 – 2; Ho. 2; Am. 9). This mixture of hope and judgment should not be a surprise if one considers the nature of the covenant between God and his people. Integral to it were both blessing for obedience (*e.g.* Dt. 28:1–14) and cursing for disobedience (Dt. 28:15–68). Even the event of the exodus, so central to the faith of God's people, is a combination of both: hope for those who obeyed God (Ex. 12:21–28) and punishment for his opponents (12:29–30; 14:26–28).

A theological theme which unites the book is judgment. Preaching on this theme (1:2–6) leads the prophet to the ultimate judgment, the day of Yahweh (1:7 – 3:20), which will be precipitated in the 'last days' by human actions. While Zephaniah is not unique in discussing the day (*cf.* Is. 2; Je. 46 – 51; Ezk. 7; Joel 2), nowhere else does it serve as a book's uniting theological theme, as it does here.

Zephaniah shows the dual nature of this day as a time of both punishing judgment as well as blessed hope. The punishment will fall upon Judah for her failure to follow the covenant. Specific pagan practices are listed for condemnation (1:4–6), as are Judah's leaders (3:3–4). Her apathy (1:12–13) and pride (2:3) are particularly condemned.

The nations are not free from judgment either (ch. 2); their corruption is like that cited in Gn. 6:5–7. Pride precipitates their downfall (2:10, 15).

Hope is offered if Israel humbles herself, reversing her foolish pride (3:12). There is immediate hope for Israel (2:3) as well as promises of future blessing for her (3:13–17) and the nations (3:9). National, social and individual hope can only flourish in the context of humility. Pride and hope cannot exist together.

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1 Heading

The LORD, Yahweh, Israel's covenant God (Ex. 6:2–6), is the ultimate source of this prophecy, which is described very generally as his *word*. The person proclaiming God's message is *Zephaniah*. He has the longest of any of the prophetic genealogies (*cf.* Je. 36:14), going back to *Hezekiah*, the fourteenth king of Judah (716–687 BC; see the Introduction). This unusually long genealogy was possibly included to avoid concern that Zephaniah's father was from Ethiopia (a *Cushi* in Hebrew), itself the subject of one of the oracles (2:12). Egyptians and Ethiopians were not allowed entrance into the Israelite community until the third generation (Dt. 23:7–8).

A more likely explanation, however, was the desire to link the prophet with his righteous royal ancestor. This was especially important following the erring predecessors of the present king *Josiah*, who was, like Hezekiah, a committed Yahwist (see the Introduction).

1:2–6 Judgment

Immediately, with no further introduction, Yahweh delivers a terrifying message of dire judgment, not only generally to the whole world (2–3), but also more specifically to Judah and its capital Jerusalem (4–6). Not acting from a distance, Yahweh personally takes a hand in this devastation.

2–3 Yahweh warns that he will *sweep away* all his original creation *from the face of the earth*. The list of beings facing destruction, *men, animals, birds* and *fish*, shows that he proposes an act of 'un-creation'. These are listed in exactly the opposite order of their appearance in the original creation account (Gn. 1:20–28). This destruction will exceed even that of the flood (Gn. 6–9), since here fish will also feel the brunt of God's wrath. All creation will suffer as a result of the sin of humankind (*cf.* Rom. 8:20–21). Humanity is especially singled out by a double mention, being the *wicked* sinners who precipitated God's response. They will be *cut off* or annihilated (4; *cf.* 1 Ki. 9:7), a term indicating carrying out the death penalty on lawbreakers (Ex. 31:14) which is very appropriate in this context.

The hearer can be sure that these severe words are true since they are a declaration of Yahweh, the *LORD*, himself (see also 1:10; 2:9; 3:8, 20). He not only speaks, he will act, as seen by the six occurrences of *I* in vs 2–4.

4–6 Though all creation will suffer, *Judah* and her capital city *Jerusalem* are singled out. They, God's covenant people, having willingly pledged themselves to him, have a greater degree of responsibility. Similarly God's people are chief among many in Am. 1:3–2:16. Jesus made this into a principle which applies universally: 'from the one who has been entrusted with much, much, more will be asked' (Lk. 12:48.) God will *stretch out* his *hand*, not to help Israel as he had previously done (*e.g.* Dt. 4:34), but to punish, much as Aaron's outstretched rod initiated the Egyptian plagues (Ex. 7:19).

Those who will face removal from *this place* (either Jerusalem itself or else the temple, which is indeed 'the Place', Dt. 12:5), are identified by their misdeeds. Some still worshipped *Baal*, a title meaning 'lord, owner, master' which was not only used of pagan deities, but also of Yahweh himself (the name Bealiah means 'Yahweh is Baal'; 1 Ch. 12:5). God is here either denouncing the worship of the Canaanite fertility god Hadad (*cf.* Jdg. 6:25; 1 Ki. 16:31, 32; 18) or else the Assyrian god Bel (Baal). Though some suggest that Josiah's religious reform, initiated in 621 BC, completely stopped pagan practices, the fact that a *remnant* was still worshipping Baal could indicate that the newly initiated reforms were taking effect, though not yet complete (see Introduction). *The pagan and the idolatrous priests* (2 Ki. 23:5) will also be wiped out, even as far as obliterating their names. The object of their worship, *the starry host*, are the star-gods (*cf.* Dt. 4:19; 2 Ki. 21:3–5; Je. 8:2) which Israel knows were created by Yahweh himself (Gn. 1:14–17).

Syncretism, or mixing religious systems, was another problem. The Hebrew of v 5, which says the people 'swear by their king [*Malcam*], may indicate that they worshipped not only Yahweh (using his name in oaths) but also did the same to his human representative. Though there is no evidence for this practice in Israel itself, it was common elsewhere in the Ancient Near East. This verse could also refer to Milcom (*Molech*), (NRSV; LXX and other versions), a pagan Ammonite god (1 Ki. 11:5, 33). There might even be a combination of the two possible interpretations, that, even though feigning loyalty, to Yahweh as King, they were in reality living under the authority of a usurper, the pagan Milcom. In any case, the people mixed worship of the one true God with that which was not worthy of worship (Ex. 20:3). As in Jeremiah (2:12–13), Yahweh is shocked at Judah turning from the truth to follow lies.

1:7 – 3:8 The day as judgment

The warnings of doom lead to those of the final judgment day, the day of the Lord, which is the theme of the rest of the book (see the Introduction). This day appears in its dual nature, as not only a day of painful judgment (1:7 – 3:8) but also one of blessed hope (3:9–20). It will affect both the nations (1:14–18; 2:4–15) and Judah (1:8–13; 2:1–3; 3:1–7), both in looming historical events (2:4–15) and also in the great happenings of the end times (1:14–18; 3:8–13). It is the 'Lord's day' because in it he alone will act, not only in holy power and justice but also in loving grace.

1:7–13 Judah

7 We are told to 'Hush' (*be silent*), *before the Sovereign* LORD (lit. 'Lord Yahweh'; *cf.* Hab. 2:20). One can quiet oneself as in the caring arms of a mother (Ps. 131:2), but this has a different flavour since it refers to a silence which falls in the awesome presence of the creator, sustainer and judge of the universe. This is the respect demanded by the court official when he commands 'All rise' at the approach of the judge. The Lord is now approaching because his day, the day of Yahweh, is *near* (*cf.* v 14; Is. 13:6; Ezk. 30:3; Joel 1:15; Ob. 15).

In anticipation of his day, Yahweh has already personally made preparation, as shown by his acts in this verse and also the uses of *I* in vs 8, 9, 12, 17 and 18. Like a priest, he has made ready a *sacrifice* or sacrificial feast (*cf.* Je. 46:10). He has also *consecrated* or set apart his guests for a special function (*cf.* Lv. 21:8; 2 Sa. 8:11). In a macabre play on words, one can understand the invited guests either being made ready to partake of the sacrificial feast or to be themselves the sacrifice. Those who oppose Yahweh will be offered up to his judgment.

8 On this same *day of . . . sacrifice*, the first punishment is directed towards both the nation's leaders, the royal house and those who are following *foreign* influences, possibly indicating pagan religious practices (*cf.* 2 Ki. 10:22). Josiah himself is not mentioned, perhaps because this is from a period early in his reign when the actual reins of power were held by other officials (2 Ki. 22:1), *i.e.* those alluded to here.

9 Yet another apparently religious perversion involves those who 'leap' (RSV) over the *threshold* (a term used in the OT only in association with a temple; 1 Sa. 5:4–5; Ezk. 9:3). This most probably means the pagan Philistine practice of not stepping on the threshold of the temple of Dagon (1 Sa. 5:4–5), another intrusion into Israelite Yahwism. Another possibility is that the second half of this verse is an explanation of the obscure first half. What then is involved is not a religious but an economic or social wrong. Leaders who should protect their charges through just and righteous rule are instead filling their royal residences with *violence* (*cf.* Hab. 1:2–3) and *deceit*. Whatever interpretation is adopted, the final clause of the verse indicates that Yahweh does not view the wrongs being committed as minor errors but rather as of the same magnitude as those which led to the first 'uncreation' at the time of the flood (*cf.* 1:3; Gn. 6:11).

10–11 The author presents the geographical development of God's judgment on the *day* of Yahweh. The north provides easier access to Jerusalem due to hills in other directions. This is thus not only the most natural route for *merchants* and traders, but also for attacking armies. The location of the first two mentioned areas are known, the *Fish Gate* was probably a main gate to the north of the city (2 Ch. 33:14; Ne. 3:3). The *New* or 'Second' *Quarter* lay north of the temple and was, according to its name, a more recent addition (2 Ki. 22:14; Ne. 11:9). *The hills* is a more general reference, but could well point to a specific feature in north Jerusalem. The inner *market district* or business quarter, called 'the Mortar' (see the NIV mg.), was apparently located in a depression, possibly a quarry hollowed out into a mortar shape (*cf.* Jdg. 15:19; Pr. 27:22).

A serious calamity befalls the inhabitants of these places, and they respond with a distressed *cry* and *wailing*. The crashing destruction is also translated as cries of anguish elsewhere (*e.g.* Is. 15:5; Je. 48:5), fitting well into the present context. Part of the calamity will involve economic collapse. This is a further reference to unwanted foreign influence, since *merchants* is lit. 'people of Canaan' whose trading skill under their later name 'Phoenicians' was well known.

12 Acting like the police on a raid searching for contraband, Yahweh will perform a lamp-lit *search*. His goal is not to look for an honest person (*cf.* Je. 5:1) but to catch those who have displeased him in order to *punish* them. Their sin is not in the clear and public commission of evil (4–11), but in their secret and more private omission of any good, a complete complacency. They are compared to part of the fermentation process of *wine* which, when undisturbed, collects the heavier particles at the bottom of the cask. This residue, the *dregs*, can cause coagulation making the wine undrinkable. These people deny God's activity, and are condemned for their apathy, much as Martin Luther King chided our generation by saying, 'We shall have to repent in this generation, not so much for the evil deeds of the wicked people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.'

13 God will show the apathetic rich how misguided they have been. They have perverted

the very theological foundation of Israel's understanding of history, that God actively intervenes in the world, bringing blessing or judgment. A misdirected theology is at least as serious as misdirected deeds. As punishment, the means of power and position by which the sinners attained their stature will be removed (*cf.* Dt. 28:30–42; Am. 5:11; Mi. 6:13–15).

From the NT perspective of God's love as shown in Christ, it is too easy to forget that God's character also includes holiness and justice. As in the OT God's grace overflowed towards his people and those who followed his revealed will, so in the NT his holy wrath will not be withheld from those who turn their back on his revelation as did the apathetic people of Judah. Even identification as his people is not proof against his wrath if there is no corresponding application of his will in life and in relationships.

1:14 – 2:3 The day of the Lord

Zephaniah now describes the cataclysmic day of Yahweh in the form of a hymn. This day will not only affect his own people but the whole world. A naive understanding of the day was that God would bless Israel, his people, while those who opposed him and his people he would judge and condemn (see Am. 5:18–20). Israel forgot that election brings responsibility (Am. 3:2), and that a right relationship with God is not based on birth but on obedience. They suffer if God is not honoured, as do all nations, but blessing is also available to all righteous people, whatever their ethnic heritage. This two-sided nature of the day, as well as its universality, will culminate in Christ's second coming. This ultimate day of the Lord (2 Thes. 2:2) will also be universal and two-sided (Mt. 24:3–31; Rev. 19 – 22).

1:14–18 General threats. 14–16 The *day* is imminent, *near and coming quickly*, a theme important to the prophet (see v 7). His warning is not for some distant day, but for now; and it is not something to anticipate with joy. *Bitter* cry and warrior's shout (either in blood-lust or in terror) will increase the tumult.

The terrible day is described in a staccato catalogue of horror, arranged in a six-part counterpart to the six days of the original creation. From the point of view of Yahweh, it is filled with his *wrath* (*cf.* Ezk. 7:19; Ho. 5:10; Hab. 3:8), while its impact on humanity is described in five pairs of synonyms. The emotions are assaulted with *distress and anguish*, accompanied by physical suffering through *trouble*/'destruction' (NEB) and *ruin*. Adding to the emotional trauma are *darkness and gloom*. For Amos, this characterized God's judgment (Am. 5:18–20; *cf.* Is. 8:22; Joel 2:2) and also calls to mind the pre-creation chaos (Gn. 1:2) into which the light of God's power had not yet shone. These horrors, accompanied by the clash of *trumpet and battle cry*, are typical of 'theophanies', where God, the almighty creator and judge of the universe confronts his creation (*cf.* Ex. 20:18; Dt. 4:11). Even strongholds are not proof against the Lord's advances.

17–18 In graphic terms intended to shock his hearers, Yahweh himself describes the results of his judgment upon humankind. The people who received the covenant for guidance will stagger as if they were *blind*, a curse promised by that very covenant which they had ignored (Dt. 28:28–29). Humanity's very *blood* of life (Lv. 17:11) will be considered as worthless as cheap and plentiful *dust* (*cf.* 2 Ki. 13:7; Zc. 9:3). Humankind cannot buy its way out of God's judgment with their *silver* and *gold*, referring either to their accumulated and misused wealth (11, 13) or, more likely, to their powerless idols which were often covered with these metals (*cf.* Is. 30:22; Ezk. 7:19–20). God's *jealousy*, his strong desire to protect his unique position as Israel's creator, redeemer and covenant ruler, is stirred up at the pagan interests of his people. As a result, the *fire* of his *wrath* (*cf.* Dt. 4:24) will consume not only her, but *the whole world* (*cf.* vs 2–3; 3:8; 2 Pet. 3:10–12). No further warning should be expected, since the *end* will come suddenly as well as quickly. This dire promise was only too quickly realized for Judah, with the devastating destruction of Jerusalem and her temple taking place in 587 BC, during the prophet's own lifetime.

2:1–3 What to do? After describing the day of the Lord affecting the whole earth, Zephaniah again singles out Judah (see 1:4–13). God's wrath, while still approaching (2), may be tempered if the people respond correctly to Yahweh's claims on their lives (3). In the midst of awful and deserved judgment, there is still the very real possibility of grace.

1–2 The *day of the LORD's wrath* is still coming, so this oracle continues the previous one. God expresses his displeasure not only in his *anger*, but also by the titles which are used to address his people. They are called a *nation* (*gôy*), a term generally reserved for pagan peoples. It could be here equating God's elect with the pagans in their unacceptable behaviour and attitude towards God. This nation has become *shameful* to God, or 'not desired' (AV) by him. They must *gather* themselves *together* like so much worthless straw (Ex. 5:7, 12), awaiting the wrath of the God who had originally gathered them to himself as his beloved at Sinai.

3 The *humble* among God's people, those poor in spirit (*cf.* 3:12; Mt. 5:3) who are known by obedience, have another opportunity to fulfil the covenant's demands. Rather than relying on

syncretistic religion and wealth or power, they should *seek* three things. The first is Yahweh himself, the covenant-giving God whom many had abandoned (1:6). They are also to seek *righteousness*, right living as directed by God, and a life-style of self-effacing *humility* (*cf.* Nu. 12:3; Pr. 15:33).

Only this complete abandonment of themselves and their agendas to God's will could possibly lead to salvation, shelter from his destructive wrath. This cannot be blithely presumed upon by God's people, however, as evidenced by the theologically pregnant word *perhaps* (*cf.* Ex. 32:30; Am. 5:15). Zephaniah seems unconvinced that the people will respond *en masse* to his call for repentance (3:7), so the outcome does not seem to lie with the people, but rather with God. His justice and holiness demand the recognition and punishment of sin, but he has other characteristics as well, including mercy, grace and love which allow forgiveness of sin when repentance is real (*cf.* Ex. 34:6–7; Dt. 30:1–10). The 'perhaps' here guards God's sovereignty, and not our licence to sin. We cannot assume God's forgiveness as a kind of 'cheap grace' allowing sin with impunity (Rom. 6:1). God, on the other hand, cannot but forgive in the presence of true repentance. In the light of its sinful nature humanity is called to do its part, repent and obey. In the light of the gracious nature of God, the appropriate response on his part can safely be left with him.

2:4 – 3:8 Individual nations

The prophet uses judgment oracles against Judah and her neighbours as an incentive for Judah's response to God's call for obedience (1–3). In the Hebrew 'for' at the start of v 4 links these verses with vs 1–3, but the impact is lost in the NIV where it is omitted. The oracles are structured in a pattern straddling Judah on different sides (2:4–15), until finally her own capital, Jerusalem, is addressed (3:1–8; *cf.* Am. 1:3–2:16 for the same pattern).

2:4–7 Philistia. Philistia comprised five city-states, *Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron* and Gath. The first four, presented geographically from south to north, are warned of destruction and desolation. The exclusion of Gath could indicate that it had already been destroyed (see the Introduction). Depopulation will follow a violent assault *at midday*, indicating either a surprise attack during the stifling heat (*cf.* 2 Sa. 4:5; Je. 6:4), or one so invincible that the battle will be decided in half a day.

5 The Philistines were part of the 'Sea Peoples' who migrated from the Aegean, with a sub-group from Crete (hence *Kerethites* in 1 Sa. 30:14 and Ezk. 25:16). Unable to settle in Egypt, they moved northwards along the Mediterranean coast in the thirteenth century BC, and were a thorn in Israel's side for many years. In a designation unique in the OT, they are here called *Canaan*, residing in territory elsewhere reckoned as Canaanite (Jos. 13:3). God addresses them directly in this oracle of *woe* (*cf.* Am. 5:18; 6:1). With the *word* of the creator of the Universe *against* them they have reason to fear, especially as he promises them annihilation.

6–7 The population centres of Philistia will be emptied, with scattered *shepherds* grazing their flocks. These will be among the *remnant* from *Judah*. The theologically important concept of the remnant has more than one meaning. At times it alludes to God's destructive judgment which is so complete that only a few survivors will remain (*cf.* Gn. 7:23; Is. 17:6). On the other hand, hope is also implicit in the concept, since the destruction, while devastating, is not complete. There will still remain at least a few survivors. The concept is not rare in the prophets (Je. 23:3; Mi. 5:7–8), and indicates both God's holy justice and his loving grace.

This prophecy shows the relativity of God's working in blessing and in punishment. Here, punishment for Judah's opponents results in good for Judah who will receive again what was originally taken from her (see 3:20). This restoration of fortune, at times referring to return from exile (Je. 29:14), points in this context to the restoration on the day of the Lord, the final inauguration of the reign of God to which all previous restorations pointed.

Note. 6 The *Kerethites* (*cf.* v 5) are apparently mentioned here too (see the NIV mg.). A vowel change in the Hebrew would result in a reference to pastures, which also fits the context.

2:8–11 Moab and Ammon. Situated in Transjordan, these nations were ethnically related to Israel through Abraham's nephew Lot (Gn. 19:36–38) and were often in conflict with Israel. For example, they resisted the passage of the wandering Israelites trying to move to their promised homeland (Nu. 22 – 25). Each are the subject of separate oracles elsewhere (*e.g.* Is. 15–16; Je. 48:1–49:6; Am. 1:13–2:3) and this is the only time when they are both addressed in one oracle.

8 These two nations verbally attacked Judah, showering it with *insults* and *taunts* (*cf.* Ezk. 5:15; 16:57). They also threatened, a term used elsewhere of boasting (*cf.* Ezk. 35:13). All this was to demoralize Judah (see this strategy used against it in Ne. 4:1–3).

9 The sureness and severity of their punishment is highlighted by God's solemn oath using his powerful and awe-inspiring names. He is *the* LORD *Almighty* or 'Yahweh of Hosts', the

Divine Warrior, commander-in-chief of the heavenly hosts or armies (*cf.* Hab. 3:8–15). He is not only powerful but personal, having a direct and intimate relationship with Judah, since he is their *God.* This very fact should in itself give Moab and Ammon pause. In verbally assaulting his people, they are in effect assaulting God himself.

The punishment will be like that of the proverbial *Sodom* and *Gomorrah*, the two cities located near the Dead Sea which were destroyed for their misdeeds (*cf.* Gn. 19:24–26; Dt. 29:23; Is. 1:9). Destruction will be so complete that even useful vegetation will perish, the *salt* in the soil letting only useless *weeds* flourish. Not only will they lose the produce of the land, the Transjordanians will lose the land itself to those whom they had originally mocked, the *survivors*, the small remnant of God's people, whose blessing will be that mentioned already in v 7. The ultimate blessing for God's people, Israel and more broadly the church, still lies in the future, when all of creation will enjoy the bliss experienced before the fall (Rom. 8: 18–23).

10–11 In a summary of the two preceding verses, God shows the underlying sin as *pride* (*cf.* v 15; Is. 13:11). As a just response to the nations mocking the true and powerful God, he will vindicate his people. He will demonstrate his real power by destroying their ineffectual and powerless *gods.* As a result, recognition and *worship* of the true God will spread through all of the pagan *nations.* Yahweh will show himself not geographically bound but universal in power and in place.

2:12 Ethiopia. On Judah's southwest flank, Egypt was for a period during the late eighth and early seventh centuries BC ruled by the Ethiopian (or Cushite) twenty-fifth Dynasty. This title of the mighty Egypt, implying their own ignominious subjugation in the past, could well emphasize a similar fate which awaits them at the hands of the even more powerful God of Israel. He personally, as the Divine Warrior (9), will wield his own *sword* bringing about their destruction and death.

2:13–15 Assyria. Turning northwards, Yahweh confronts Judah's most indomitable foe, *Assyria* with its capital city *Nineveh* (see the book of Nahum). This cruel and mighty nation, which had held the Middle East in its grip for decades, will itself be *destroyed* by the *hand* or power (see on 1:4) of Israel's God. Their bustling capital will be an empty and arid *desert.*

14–15 The completeness of the destruction is pictured by indicating some of the animals and birds which will inhabit the *rubble*, in contrast to the throngs of people who had previously lived there. This metropolis had claimed to be unique, a characteristic of God himself (*cf.* Is. 45:5–6, 18, 21). Their security is illusory, since now the passers-by will look at the ruins of this once proud city in amazement and scorn (*cf.* Je. 19:8).

3:1–7 Jerusalem. Almost like an artillery man using test shots to bracket his target, the prophet has finally found his range when he fires at Jerusalem. This is a powerful rhetorical device in which the audience has been drawn into the message because they agree wholeheartedly that their pagan neighbours and longtime foes should be punished. It is only after they are well into the spirit of condemnation that God presents the most hardened evildoers, the audience themselves, with their sin (1–4), shamelessness (5) and refusal to repent (6–7).

The rhetorical power is increased by not identifying the city which is being condemned. Following immediately upon an oracle against Nineveh, the hearers will assume that she is still the subject. It is only when the specific sins against Yahweh, the national God of Israel, are mentioned in v 2 that they realize that they themselves are the culprits.

The two-edged sword of God's punishment is evident here. While those who unjustly oppose God's people will suffer, their very punishment will bring release and healing to those whom they had oppressed. It is important to maintain a correct relationship with God rather than assuming it actually exists, as Judah herself is reminded in the next verses.

1 Jerusalem, the capital of the covenant nation of God which had been singled out as a model of godly holiness and faithfulness in a pagan world, is instead acting worse than her neighbours. She rebels against the covenant (*cf.* Je. 4:17; 5:23) and herself oppresses others instead of nurturing them. Rather than being a holy, pure people, they have become *defiled* as one whose hands are soiled through violently shedding blood (*cf.* Is. 59:3; La 4:14).

2 Jerusalem's rebellion (1) is against her own *God.* The people do not listen when the prophets speak (Is. 30:8–12; Am. 2:12). They do not learn when he corrects or disciplines them by his mighty acts in the history of their nation (Is. 1:5–9; Je. 5:3). Rather than seeking the help offered by the giver of the covenant, they turned their back on him, refusing to *trust* the promise-keeping God.

3–4 Jerusalem's oppression and defilement are brought upon her by her leaders, both civil (3) and religious (4). The former devour those in their care like ravening beasts of prey. The latter completely pervert their calling. Rather than speaking God's truth in his name, the *prophets* seek glory for themselves by their own lying treachery. Rather than maintaining the

sanctity of the temple and teaching obedience to the *law*, the *priests* pollute the former and pervert the latter (*cf.* Ezk. 22:26).

5 There is a contrast between Jerusalem and her leaders on the one hand and the *righteous* God who is in no way involved in any wrongdoing (*cf.* v 13) on the other. This should inspire repentance, but it does not come. In contrast to the unfailing *justice*, the continual equitable judgment of God, the wicked *unrighteous* act without *shame*, not even acknowledging their actions as wrong.

6–7 God is grieved when he must punish, and he provides for his people examples of nations who have met his wrath, and as a result have been *destroyed* (*cf.* 1:3–4, 13; 2:4, 9, 13, 15; 3:7) and completely depopulated. Jerusalem, however, does not listen. God is not capricious, striking without warning or reason. In fact, he is long-suffering, willingly withholding anger if repentance might be forthcoming (Ex. 34:6–7; Nu. 14:18–19; Am. 4:6–11; Rom. 9:22–24). He wants people to live under his covenant, fearing him and accepting his instruction. This involves not only right attitudes towards him, but also right actions in the light of his covenant instruction. His heart cry is that his people be spared from the horrible *punishments* that have befallen their neighbours and which await them; but to no avail. They not only continue their corruption but eagerly pursue it. They spurn God's grace.

8 *Therefore, i.e.* in the light of all of the wrongs of the nations and of Jerusalem itself (1:14 – 3:7), God will initiate a covenant lawsuit against the whole earth. As prosecuting counsel, he will *gather* all peoples and *nations*. He will serve as witness, testifying (*cf.* Je. 29:23; Mi. 1:2) of their wrongdoing. As judge, he will decide the case, and as executioner he will perform the sentence, consuming the entire *world* by the *fire* of his *wrath* and *anger*.

3:9–20 The day as hope

God is bound by his righteous and just holiness to punish sin in his people and in all the earth (8). He is also, however, a loving and compassionate God, so the earth will not be entirely obliterated. Punishment will function as a purifying agent for all nations (9–10), but most specifically for his own people (11–13). This grace, totally unmerited and a free gift of God alone (18–20), is a matter for rejoicing (14–17).

This change of tone and outlook is not the result of another author from a later period having his optimistic piety added to an otherwise depressing book, as some have suggested. Rather, it is a portrait of God in several of the multi-hued aspects of his character. He is not only judge before the exile and only saviour after it, but, like a parent (*cf.* Ho. 11:1–4), loves even while in the act of meting out discipline. The pain caused by the punishment is not an end in itself, but the means for restoring a right relationship.

3:9–10 The nations. *Then*, on the day of the Lord, God will restore those who have fallen by purifying the polluted. Their *lips* are singled out for renewal (*cf.* Is. 6:5–7) to be used now to *call on the name of the* LORD in worship and service. This service will be characterized by unity (*shoulder to shoulder*; *cf.* Je. 32:39) and universality, since *all* can respond. The original unity of speech lost at Babel (Gn. 11:1–9) will ultimately be restored so that all of creation may worship God.

One among the distant peoples responding will be those beyond Ethiopia (*Cush*) on the Upper Nile. There is some textual difficulty in the latter half of the verse, but whether it means some of God's exiled peoples (so the NIV) or new converts to Yahweh (*cf.* 2:11), the recipients of God's grace will worship him by bringing *offerings* (*cf.* Ps. 72:10). Whoever they are, these people are now acknowledged by God himself as being his own.

3:11–13 Jerusalem. Speaking directly to *this city*, Jerusalem with her temple perched on God's *holy hill*, God offers hope. Punishment and *shame* will be averted from the city through God's direct intervention. *Pride* and haughtiness, the arrogance of self-determination without God, will be eradicated. In contrast to those expelled will be those of low estate, those remaining in the city who are the *remnant* of 1:4 and 2:7. They are those who rely on God for provision rather than upon their own devices. Those downtrodden by circumstances (2:3; *cf.* Mt. 5:3) and the impoverished will find their refuge in Yahweh and his powerful *name* (9).

These survivors are described negatively, in contrast to the evildoers of the preceding verses. They are those practising *no wrong* (5), *no lies*, and no *deceit*. Their very mouths will be purified by God (9). While wrongdoers sought their security in their own wiles and did not find it, these poor will find it, along with rest (*cf.* 2:7, 14; Ps. 23:2) and freedom from fear.

3:14–17 Rejoicing. Visualizing the blessing from God's hand as already accomplished, the prophet calls his people to rejoice. This self-contained little psalm of salvation (*cf.* Ps. 98; Is. 12:1–6; 52:7–10) could have been delivered by Zephaniah or it might have been adopted from the existing liturgy. It continues to praise God for his presence in Zion as promised in his covenant with David (2 Sa. 7; cf. Pss. 2; 89).

14–15 The call to the remnant of Judah is to sing for joy, repeated threefold. Jubilation does not arise from their own actions, but rather

because of the presence of their God. Their *punishment* (8) is over, and the foreign *enemy*, the instrument of God's wrath, has been removed. Now, in the benevolent presence of their loving *LORD* and *King*, Yahweh, they have no more reason to *fear* (*cf.* 1 Jn. 4:18).

16–17 *That day*, the day of Yahweh, before seen in its more sobering aspect (see 2:7, 14), is now shown in its positive aspect. *Fear*, and its physical manifestation, powerlessness (*limp hands*; *cf.* Is. 13:7; Je. 6:24), are things of the past because of the very presence of Israel's God who is also her King (15). In his might as the Divine Warrior (2:9) he is powerful enough *to save* them. As he acted on the behalf of his people in the past (Dt. 4:34) so he will again, then and today (Ps. 24:8; 2 Cor. 10:4). Power and gentleness are combined in the same figure (*cf.* Is. 40:10–11). The Warrior is also like a parent, delighting in the return of a lost child and quieting her fears. The cry of battle (1:14) will be replaced by the gentle crooning of a mother for her infant.

3:18–20 Further promises. Though the people already have reason to rejoice, the depths of God's blessings are not plumbed. While v 18 is textually obscure, it is apparently a blessing imparted by God, allowing those who sorrow, possibly at the earlier lack of pious worship of God (*appointed feasts*), to approach him with joyful desire rather than religious obligation.

Previous oppression, from external threat and internal corruption (3:3–4), will be removed and those physically maimed (*cf.* Mi. 4:6–7) and geographically or socially outcast (*scattered*; *cf.* Dt. 30:4) will be *rescued* (17) and *gathered* (8, 20). Even *honour* will be restored to those once a people of *shame* (*cf.* 2:1; 3:5).

Yahweh is actively and personally present in blessing as he was in judging (see 1:3). He speaks directly (*I*) eight times in these last three verses. He also directly addresses Israel as *you*. In spite of the strain they brought upon their relationship by their sin, Israel is still God's people and he is still their God (Ex. 6:7). They still address each other in intimate terms.

God summarizes by reiterating his plan to restore his people. This not only benefits them, but also causes *all the peoples of the earth*, those who felt his hand of punishment (1:2; 3:7–8), to acknowledge his care for his people who have turned from byword to object of *praise*.

The whole prophecy is sure, ending as it began, in the name of *the LORD*, Yahweh. God's ultimate desire is not to inflict punishment, even upon those who disobey. Rather, it is to restore everyone to a right relationship with himself. Whether nationally, as with his people Israel, or individually, in each of our own lives, he longs to be able to restore our fortunes.

David W. Baker

HAGGAI

Introduction

The text

It has been said that the best commentary on Scripture is Scripture. This is particularly the case with the book of Haggai. The events of the book took place during the second year of King Darius (1:1), which is also the occasion of the early chapters of Zechariah, and part of Ezra (Zc. 1:1, 7; Ezr. 4:24 – 6:15). To gain a fuller picture, therefore, we can read these three passages alongside each other. In addition, it will help to read about God's attitude to the disobedience of his people in Dt. 28 and Am. 4.

It is not known who committed the book of Haggai to writing. It could have been Haggai himself. Interest in authorship is a modern concern; OT books seldom mention who wrote the text. In contrast, the name of any person who gave prophecies is almost always recorded. All the prophecies in this book are attributed to Haggai (1:1, 13, 2:1, 10, 20).

The text of the book is in good repair. Some have proposed that the repeated phrase 'the twenty-fourth day' (1:15, 2:10) is a sign of the text being corrupt, but there is no need to create difficulties. The text makes good sense as it is.

The events

The background to Haggai can be read in Ezr. 1 – 4. The returning exiles had begun to rebuild the temple in 536 BC (Ezr. 3:8), but had stopped work as a result of local opposition (Ezr. 4:1–5, 24). In the second year of King Darius (520 BC) they started building again, prompted by the word of the Lord through Haggai (1:14–15). The building was finished in 516 (Ezr. 6:15), about 70 years after the earlier temple had been destroyed in the fall of Jerusalem in 587 (see Je. 25:11; 29:10; Dn. 9:2). (See also chart on page 628 and map on page 434.)

The future is also in mind. God promises that environmental and political upheaval will cause his temple to be filled, and that his leader will be kept safe in the coming turmoil (2:6–7, 22–23).

The people mentioned in the book

Haggai is simply referred to as 'the prophet'. No family history is given, and his name does not occur in any lists of returning exiles. Given this silence, it seems unhelpful to guess about his origins. The idea that he was ignorant of priestly affairs because of his questions to the priests in 2:11–13 is not convincing. From the fact that his word was acted on promptly, we may take it that he had already been accepted as a true prophet.

Darius (1:1) is known to be Darius I, son of Hystaspes, who ruled Babylonia from 522–486 BC. He followed Cambyses (530–522), who had followed his father Cyrus (539–530; see Ezr. 1).

Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, was a member of the royal line. He was descended from Jehoiachin, who was taken into exile in 597 BC (2 Ki. 24:15; *cf.* Mt. 1:11–13). He was the son of Shealtiel according to 1:1. This is not easy to relate to 1 Ch. 3:18–19, where he is said to be the son of Pedaiah. Perhaps there was an adoption, or even a Levirate marriage, that has not been recorded (Dt. 25:5–6). Maybe the crown did not pass in direct descent, as happened in the UK in the eighteenth century.

Joshua the high priest (also called 'Jeshua' in Ezra and Nehemiah) was the son of the Jehozadak who had been taken into exile in 587 (1 Ch. 6:15). He was a leading priest, if not already the high priest, from 537 onwards (Ezr. 2:2, 36, 40; 3:2). God had special words for him in Zc. 3 and 6:11–13. His name suggests 'God saves', and is the Hebrew form behind the Greek 'Jesus'.

Those described in the book as 'the people' were the remnant of those who had gone into exile in Babylon, and had now returned to Judah (1:14; Ezr. 4:1). Their first attempt to rebuild the temple had been opposed by the local people then living in Samaria (Ezr. 4:17–24).

While there is no explicit reference to the coming Messiah, it has long been felt that the promises made to Zerubbabel (2:23) and Joshua (Zc. 6:11–13) were such that they would find their ultimate fulfilment in the promised Messiah. See also comment on 2:7.

We may note that apart from the brief 'yes' and 'no' of the priests, nobody other than Haggai speaks in the book. They simply act in response to the word of God through Haggai. This highlights the fact that the word of God achieves its purpose (*cf.* Is. 55:10–11).

The prophecies

There were five prophecies, on three days during four months in 520 BC. All of them came through Haggai, and were addressed to specific people in each case. In these words of prophecy, God desired to open the eyes of the people,

encouraged them to repent and obey, and promised that blessing would result.

One feature of the word of God is its recurring relevance in successive generations. The fulfilment of prophecy is not necessarily limited to a single application It can be compared to the art of sending a flat stone skimming across a lake. Rather than sinking when it first hits the water (as the law of gravity would suggest) the stone rises up and touches the lake in a number of places because of the spinning energy it carries (*cf.* 1 Sa. 3:19–20).

An example of this in Scripture is the recurring theme of deliverance through water. Noah was saved in the ark (Gn. 7:1); later Moses was preserved in his ark (the same word in Hebrew; Ex. 2:3); later the people were delivered at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21–29). This theme recurs in a number of later passages, and became part of the symbolism of Christian baptism (*e.g.* Jdg. 5:21; Is. 43:2; 51:10; 1 Cor. 10:1–2).

So, in the book of Haggai we can expect the words from God to have more than one level of application. As well as anticipating fulfilment of the prophecies within a few months or years, it is helpful to look ahead to later periods as well, especially the life of Jesus and the church, in fact to our own day too.

This leads us to the phrase 'in a little while' (2:6). Although this may give us the impression of a short period of time, when seen from a human viewpoint, it may instead be a short time from God's viewpoint to whom a thousand years are like one day (2 Pet. 3:8). If this is the case, then discerning further fulfilments of Haggai's words hundreds of years later would not be a difficulty.

This brings us finally to the possible application of Haggai's words to our own day. Some would find hope for peace on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, and protection for modern Israel, in Haggai's words (2:9, 21–23). Others would see a spiritual application of these promises in the church, arguing that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36; see 1 Cor. 3:26; 6:19; Rev. 21:22). Others again would anticipate fulfilment in both arenas. We do well to be cautious; few people expected Jesus to fulfil prophecy in the way that he did. It is easier to recognize the fulfilment of prophecy after the event than before.

The curse

While the word 'curse' does not appear in the book of Haggai, the description of what was happening to the people corresponds closely to the 'curses' of the Pentateuch, to what God had promised to do to his people if they did not obey him or heed his voice (Dt. 28). The people had been under God's curse in the exile (Zc. 8:13) and evidently they still were, despite the fact that they had come home (1:6, 11).

Such language may sound strange to us, but we need to hold in mind that in Scripture, God not only blesses, he also curses. This did not lapse with the coming of Jesus who cursed the fig-tree. This story comes either side of a visit to the temple (Mk. 11:12–21) and Jesus' action can be seen as a comment on what would happen later to the temple community of God's people. The temple, which had been rebuilt since Haggai's day (Jn. 2:20), was destroyed in AD 70, and the people were scattered to the nations (Mk. 13:1–2; Lk. 21:24).

God's curse still operates today, since it will only be removed at the very end, in the era of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 22:3). Believers do well to grasp the damaging and continuing effect sin has on our lives. We can be set free from any curse now by true and full repentance from whatever has allowed the curse to operate, asking God to apply the effects of the cross to our lives (Pr. 26:2; Gal. 3:12–14).

Repetition

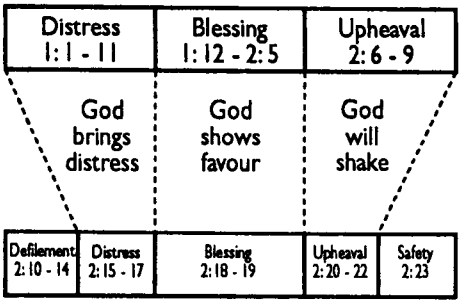
The use of repetition in OT texts is often worth noting. In the book of Haggai, the words that God says tend to be repeated. The people are told to give careful thought to their ways four times (1:5, 7; 2:15, 18); the state of God's house and their houses is compared twice (1:4, 9); they are told 'I am with you' twice (1:13; 2:4); and the instruction to 'be strong' comes three times (2:4). Lists of disasters that have hit the country are repeated (1:6, 10–11; 2:16–17, 19). Similarly, the prophecy that the nations will be shaken is repeated (2:6, 21–22).

In view of the amount of repetition in so few verses, we may ask what its purpose might be. Perhaps it was for added emphasis; the people needed to hear things more than once, so that the message would sink in (2 Pet. 1:12–13). Another possibility is suggested by Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. The dreams came twice in order to show that God was firmly decided, and would 'soon' do what he intended (Gn. 41:32). On how long 'soon' might be, see under 'The prophecies' above.

Structure and theme

The contents of the first half of the book are repeated in miniature in the second half, as is shown in this diagram.

One theme which emerges from this is that where God's people repent and turn to God, and adopt his requirements, God will not only respond by blessing his people, but there will be turbulent effects in society and further afield.



Outline of contents

1:1–11	**God's message to the leaders of Judah: 'My house and your lives are in ruins'**
1:12–15	**The response of the people: the rebuilding starts**
2:1–9	**God's message about the new temple: 'I will transform your lives'**
2:10–19	**God's word on the curse: 'I will replace it with a blessing'**
2:20–23	**God's promises to Zerubbabel: 'I will keep my leader safe'**

Commentary

1:1–11 God's message to the leaders of Judah: 'My house and your lives are in ruins'

1:1–4 Whose house comes first? The book opens by setting the date (520 BC), the people to whom God's word came, and through whom it came. (For the details, see the Introduction.) Although it affected the whole community, the word was to be given only to the two leaders at this stage.

The people were against building the temple. Previously, there had been attempts by their neighbours to discourage and frighten them (Ezr. 4:4–5). However, there is no hint that this was still the case. By now, the people were living in *panelled houses*. This phrase implies prosperity and comfort, and that the building of their homes was complete.

The Lord's reply picks up the people's own words *time* and *house*. Why was it time to work on their houses but not on God's house? In building for themselves but not for him, the people apparently didn't mind whether the Lord lived among them or not. Their priorities are revealed by their attitude.

The words *ruin* and *drought* (11) are very similar in Hebrew. Rain was thought of as a blessing in Israel (see Ps. 65:9–10) and the lack of rain matched the lack of attention paid to God's house.

1:5–11 Open your eyes. The people were under a curse (Dt. 28:15–68).One effect of being under a curse is to come into confusion, and so fail to recognize what is happening (Dt. 28:28). This was the case here. The curse affected their food, drink, clothing and money. This experience of failing to see God's hand in our troubles is common among believers today; we do not realize the effects of the sin that we tolerate in our lives (Am. 4). This is not to say that all disaster is because of sin, but rather that sin has consequences (Ho. 8:7).

The people's problem with money was not a lack of it, since they had panelled houses and earned wages (4, 6). Rather, it was that their money quickly lost its value. The damaging effect of inflation is seen here as having a spiritual origin, a fact which is often ignored today when attempts are made to deal with inflation without investigating its underlying cause.

The drought even extended to the dew (see Dt. 11:10–17; 28:23). The marked effects of the curse are further emphasized (*cf.* Dt. 28:18,

38–40). The disobedience of the people had made the kind of life as described in Ps. 104:10–23 seem like a distant dream.

God's words suggest that his house was to be rebuilt on the same site and layout as before (see on 2:20–23). The purpose was so that God might take pleasure in it, and receive honour from it. This continues to be his desire today for his people, who function as a spiritual building (1 Cor. 3:9–17).

1:12–15 The response of the people: the rebuilding starts

The leaders and people accepted Haggai's message and acted upon it. We have been told that the people were against building the temple, but we do not know whether that also applied to Joshua and Zerubbabel. If they had shared the people's view, then their change of heart is remarkable, since their forefathers had opposed the prophets ever since following Moses through the desert. Haggai must have known how to speak to the people as well as to God. It seems easiest to see the leaders as godly men, able to accept God's word and also able to take the people with them. No wonder God thought so highly of Zerubbabel and Joshua (2:23; Zc. 6:11–13).

Once they obeyed, a short message came from God to the people through Haggai. In view of the curse, they might have expected 'I am against you'; instead, they heard God say *I am with you*. God's curse is not a sign that God has rejected his people; rather, it shows his love for them. He wants to draw them back to him, and uses disaster to wake them up (Am. 4:6–11; *cf.* Am. 3:2; Is. 7:13–25, where Immanuel means 'God with us').

As they humbly obeyed God's word and started work, God helped them. We have a role in bringing about the blessing of God by choosing to act in submission to God's will (2 Tim. 1:6–7). In Hebrew, the words *messenger* and *work* are similar. Their use close together here reminds us that a prophecy is not a 'blessing' to be pleased about, but an instruction that should lead to action.

Some think that the repetition of 'on the twenty-fourth day' (15) in 2:10 is an indication that the text is corrupt but there is no reason to doubt its authenticity.

2:1–9 God's message about the new temple: 'I will transform your lives'

2:1–5 God's present purposes. Once again God spoke through Haggai; this time the word came to leaders and people together. God responded to the thoughts of the older people who remembered the first temple and were disappointed with its replacement. These feelings may have been vocalized, as they had been earlier (*cf.* Ezr. 3:12). They could, however, have been secret thoughts. If this was so, then God would have been speaking directly to people's minds in a way which was beyond the prophet's natural knowledge (*cf.* Lk. 7:39–40). This would arrest their attention.

The instruction *be strong* was given to Moses' successor Joshua on the first entry into the promised land (Jos. 1:6–7, 9, 18). We may note that on both the first entry to the promised land and the re-entry in Haggai's time, there was a leader named Joshua. This may be a matter of chance, or we may choose to compare the latter era with the former. Both Joshuas acted on the word of the LORD to be strong, and so inherited God's promises. In both situations, although God strengthened the people (1:14), it was up to them to apply their effort as he directed. The same partnership is required today in God's service.

The repeated *I am with you* (5; see on 1:13 and the Introduction) may be linked to the next clause, which says that the covenant remains in force. Some of the people may have thought that the exile was a sign that the covenant was finished, or that the continued curse indicated God's rejection, but this was not so. God's gifts and call are irrevocable (*cf.* Rom. 11:29).

Similarly, God's Spirit is not driven off by his people's sin, or at least not for long (see 1 Sa. 4:22; 6). In Ezekiel's visions, the glory of God finally left Jerusalem due to wickedness in the temple, but only to go to the exiles in Babylon. (*Cf.* Ezk. 10:18–22; 11:22–23 with Ezk. 1:1; 11:16.) Now the people are reassured that God's Spirit has returned from Babylon with them, to stay. This reassurance is for all who earnestly seek God's presence and obey his commands (Jas. 4:8).

The people were told not to fear, but to press boldly on. This instruction shows that God's people should not allow themselves to be prevented from obeying God by fear (1 Jn. 4:4, 18).

2:6–9 God's future purposes. These verses are quoted in Heb. 12:26–27. This would suggest that any fulfilment during Zerubbabel's lifetime (see 2:22–23) is best seen as partial rather than complete (see the Introduction). The writer to the Hebrews saw the description of God shaking the earth as a reference to Sinai (Ex. 19:18). This implies that God's voice will be heard in the shaking that is to come, and that is why *the desired of all nations will come* to God's house.

When God comes on the scene, his creation shakes (*cf.* Jdg. 5:4–5). At Sinai, the shaking was limited to one mountain, but this time it will involve the whole environment. The idea may be

figurative, along the lines of our phrase 'earth-shaking events'. It may, however, suggest turbulent weather conditions and pollution. (For the idea of God being the author of violent cosmic events, see Rev. 6:12–14; for God causing pollution in a disobedient world, see Rev. 8:3–12.) Such things will happen before the great and glorious day of the Lord (*cf.* Acts 2:19–20, quoting Joel 2:30–31). This suggests that if a Messianic reference is to be seen in this passage and 2:23, then the second coming may be primarily in mind rather than the first.

The phrase *the desired of all nations will come* has, in the Hebrew, a singular subject and a plural verb. It might be literally translated 'What is desired by the nations, they will come . . .'. The phrase can be taken several ways. We can either try to make sense of the text as it stands, or change the Hebrew to be either singular or plural throughout.

Before we hasten to amend the text, we may notice that in Daniel, there is a similar use of both singular and plural in a prophecy about God's chosen leadership. The Son of Man receives the kingdom (Dn. 7:13–14), then the saints also receive the kingdom, and the text switches abruptly from 'they' to 'he' (7:26–27). We may, therefore, want to try to keep hold of the singular and plural nature of our phrase. This has been achieved to some extent by the NIV with *the desired of all nations will come.*

Some translators (including Luther and the AV) have followed the Latin Vulgate of the fifth century AD by making the whole phrase singular: 'the desired one of the nations shall come'. This would allow us to see a reference to the Messiah here, which fits the context (2:23 seems to have a Messianic flavour). There are, however, problems in making the Hebrew singular.

It is easier to change the Hebrew to be plural throughout (as the Greek translation the Septuagint does): 'the treasures of the nations will come'. This might refer to God's intention to include all the nations of the world in his plan of redemption (Is. 49:6–7; 60:10; Zc. 6:15). It might also mean that the day will come when what the world regards as the finest and best will come into the temple, rather than what is poor and despised (*cf.* Zc. 8:20–23; 1 Cor. 1:26–29; Rev. 21:24). It might even mean that there will be no shortage of earthly riches and finance, looking forward to v 8.

While the first option may be most attractive, if one had to choose between the other two, the latter seems preferable. This emphasizes the breadth of God's plans for the world coming to pass, suggesting that world leaders will one day turn to God for direction and vision in a way that they have not done up to now (see Is. 2:1–5).

We are twice told that God's house will be filled with *glory*. This word may simply suggest wealth here, because of the reference to silver and gold between the two statements. However, the word for glory, which also suggests 'weight' in other contexts, has a rich OT usage, including the description of the awesome presence of God which causes worship (Ex. 33: 18–20; 34:8). When the former temple, and the tabernacle before it, had been completed, they had been so filled with the glory of God (in the form of a cloud) that no-one could enter (Ex. 40: 34–35; 1 Ki. 8:10–11).

God's *silver* and *gold* are inflation-proof, in contrast to the earnings of believers under a curse (1:6; *cf.* Mt. 6:19–20). God promised that *peace* was to come; this would replace their fear (5). It would have its first fulfilment shortly (Ezr. 6:14–16).

2:10–19 God's word on the curse: 'I will replace it with a blessing'

2:10–14 A priestly ruling. The next word that came to Haggai involved asking the priests to give a ruling. They explained that holiness was not communicated by touch, but defilement was. For example, anyone who touched *a dead body* became unclean for a week, and anything he touched became unclean (Nu. 19:11, 22). God said that this teaching could be applied to the people. Their indifference to God's presence spoiled not only their offerings but also everything else they did. So today, believers need to be ruthless with careless attitudes, which are not merely neutral but positively defiling, and ask God for cleansing (Mt. 5:29–30; 2 Tim. 2:20–21; *cf.* Zp. 1:7). Failures in this area will blight a church and society.

2:15–19 From curse to blessing. Haggai now seems to be talking to the people. Although they have started work, there is little progress. Perhaps the three months have been spent mainly preparing the site. During that time, the effects of the curse have still been present. Blight, mildew and lack of fruit are all aspects of God's curses (Dt. 28:22, 38–42; Am. 4:9).

God was at pains to show that it was the laying of the foundation stone which brought about a sudden, marked change. This calls for an explanation. It seems likely that at the ceremony the people would have gathered together. In the days of the former temple, the greatest spiritual advances were made when the people assembled together (1 Ki. 8:14; 65–66; 2 Ki. 23:1–2, 21–23). This gathering at Haggai's prompting was in contrast to their earlier actions, when they worked separately on their own houses (1:4, 9). We might say that the one main achievement in our text was that the people began to act together and so became united.

The significance of a nation-wide act of obedience on a particular day can also be noted during the first entry into the promised land (Jos. 5:9). Here too we might have expected that the 'reproach of Egypt' would have been removed long before, but it seems there was a delay which was only ended by the whole nation obeying the instruction about circumcision. This was because circumcision and the ownership of the land were connected in the covenant made with Abraham (Gn. 17:1–14).

If we understand the laying of the foundation stone of the temple as a significant occasion in this sense, then this day would have been a turning point ('the end of the beginning', to quote Winston Churchill's phrase). God seems to have been noting the commitment of the people, and rewarding it. We may learn then that God rewards decisive action taken by his people acting together. For the shape that the Lord's blessing would take, see Zc. 8:9–13.

2:20–23 God's word to Zerubbabel: 'I will keep my leader safe'

Once again, God says he will *shake the heavens and the earth* (see on 2:6–7). The emphasis this time is on political upheaval, the defeat of powerful armies, and civil strife. Israel's history taught them that even the most powerful enemy is shaken when God acts (*e.g.* Jdg. 4:15; 7:22; 1 Sa. 14:20). This theme emerges strongly in the prophecies about war against Israel in Ezk. 38 – 39 (especially 38:19–22). Although war involving Israel is not mentioned here, the promise to Zerubbabel that he will be kept safe makes most sense in a context of the danger of attack.

The similarity between the passages in Ezekiel and Haggai is such that it is worth asking why the pattern of the new temple in Ezk. 40 – 46 was ignored in Haggai's day. There is no obvious answer to this. Perhaps they did not interpret the vision as a detailed scheme to be put into practice; seeing its primary purpose rather as an encouragement that God was with them despite the exile (see on 2:1–5 above). Maybe the Lord's words in 1:8–9 were taken as an instruction to rebuild on Solomon's original site with his original plan. In any event, Ezekiel's temple has never been built and, with the ending of animal sacrifices at Calvary, it is hard to imagine what precise function it might now have (see Ezk. 43:13–27).

Zerubbabel and Joshua had obeyed the word of the LORD promptly and exactly. Joshua was rewarded with a crown in Zc. 6:11. God speaks of his approval of Zerubbabel here by calling him *my signet ring*. This seems to be a reversal of the judgment on Jehoiachin, king at the time of exile (Je. 22:24). Jehoiachin had been rejected; his descendant is now affirmed.

Such a ring was a costly item and may have been worn on the finger or round the neck on a chain; either way, it was always attached closely to its owner, and would never be lost or abandoned. This speaks of Zerubbabel's value to God. It seems that such rings were used to stamp the royal seal on a document; this suggests that God entrusted Zerubabbel with authority to carry out his will.

In addition to any fulfilment of God's promise to Zerubbabel which may have taken place in his lifetime, it has been felt that Joshua and Zerubbabel together foreshadow the Messiah, God's chosen leader who receives his authority (Dn. 7:13–14). God delights in those who obey him, and loves to be close to them, but he withdraws his blessing from the disobedient (1 Sa. 15:22–23; Mk. 1:11; Jn. 4:34).

David F. Pennant

ZECHARIAH

Introduction

The book

The book of Zechariah falls naturally into two parts: chs. 1 – 8 and 9 – 14. The first eight chapters clearly come from Zechariah the son of Berekiah, son of Iddo, and are dated between the eighth month of the second year of Darius (520 BC) and the fourth day of the ninth month of the fourth year of his reign (518 BC).

Chs. 9 – 14 are very different in style from the first part of the book. They fall into two parts, 9 – 11 and 12 – 14, each introduced by the heading 'An Oracle' (or 'Burden'; see commentary). The book of Malachi begins with the same word.

The prophet

Zechariah's grandfather was probably the 'Iddo' listed in Ne. 12:4 among the leaders of the priests and Levites who returned from exile to Jerusalem. He seems to have been an important man from the way he is referred to in Ezr. 5:1 and 6:14, 'Zechariah . . . a descendant [son] of Iddo'. Zechariah's father is omitted from this list but his grandfather is included. If this connection is right, then Zechariah himself was both a priest and a prophet.

Matthew refers to 'Zechariah son of Berakiah' who was 'murdered between the temple and the altar' (23:35). If this was our prophet, then it may throw light on the meaning of Zc. 12:10 and 13:7 (see Commentary below).

The name Zechariah means 'Yah remembers' ('Yah' is an abbreviated form of 'Yahweh' meaning 'the LORD'). The name was a common one; probably about thirty different individuals were called by it in the OT. It was, however, an appropriate name for the prophet, for he called on the people to remember the past and to change their behaviour accordingly (1:2–6; 7:5–14; 8:14–17).

Zechariah probably returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 BC. He prophesied from 520, along with Haggai, urging the people to rebuild the temple, and so to show that they had put God first in their thinking (*cf.* Hg. 1:9). To leave the temple as an unusable ruin was to show that they did not really care whether God dwelt in the midst of them or not.

There is nothing biographical in chs. 9 – 14 concerning the writer. See below (under 'The compilation') for a discussion of the authorship of these chapters.

Historical background

In 538 BC King Cyrus conquered Babylon and published a decree allowing exiles from many countries, including Judah, to return home. The Jews had permission to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem (Ezr. 1:1–4) and came back full of joy and hope, under the leadership of Zerubbabel (who may also have been called Sheshbazzar; *cf.* Ezr. 3:8; 5:14–16). They managed to lay the foundations of the temple, but were hindered in their work by the neighbouring peoples throughout the reign of Cyrus (538–522 BC; Ezr. 4:4–5).

Zechariah and Haggai urged the people to take heart and take up the rebuilding again; Tattenai, governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates objected to this work and demanded to know their authority to carry it out (Ezr. 5:3). The authorities searched the royal archives in Babylon and discovered Cyrus's decree (Ezr. 6:1–5), which not only allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem but specified that financial help should be given from the royal treasury (v 4) and that the temple gold and silver should be returned (v 5). So it was that Darius himself encouraged the Jews, complying with the earlier decree, paying for the rebuilding, providing animals for sacrifice (vs 8–10), and discouraging others from hindering their work (v 11).

Zechariah puts great stress on the completion of the temple under Zerubbabel's direction (4:9–10; 6:12). It will be a sign that God has returned to dwell in the midst of his people (2:10; 8:8; *cf.* 1:17; 2:12). There was, therefore, great rejoicing when, in 516 BC, the temple was actually completed (Ezr. 6:14–16). The people renewed their dedication to God and looked forward to a time of blessing. Unfortunately, their expectations were not satisfied. They assumed that life would be wonderful, but it turned out to be very hard. No golden age dawned, and many began to ask whether God was really with them after all.

Our knowledge of the history of the post-exilic period is patchy. Some of the few sources of knowledge that we have cannot be dated accurately. Nevertheless, we can be sure that right through the period when Judah was part of the Medo-Persian Empire they remained an outwardly insignificant and powerless people,

facing opposition from their neighbours (*e.g.* Ezr. 4:6–24). This continued when the Greek Empire was established through Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great.

Add to this uncertainty the fact that we cannot be sure of the date of chs. 9 – 14, and it is clear that we cannot specify very precisely the historical background for these later chapters. We must be satisfied with rather general knowledge of the whole period, and remember that there may have been many variations in the situation, and many events of which we have no record.

The outline of events may be set out as follows:

538–536	Cyrus's decree Many exiles return to Jerusalem. They start to rebuild but are forced to discontinue, and become discouraged.
522	Darius comes to the throne
520	Haggai and Zechariah urge the people to rebuild the temple
516	Temple building completed
486–465	Reign of Xerxes Opposition mentioned in Ezr. 4:6
465–424	Reign of Artaxerxes Opposition mentioned in Ezr. 4:7–23
445	Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city
333	Beginning of the Greek Empire

See also the chart on page 628.

Text and canon

The text of chs. 1 – 8 is generally clear and free from the mistakes which often result from the copying out of manuscripts over several centuries. The grammatical sense is almost always clear, though the prophet's precise meaning is sometimes obscure (*e.g.* 2:8–9; 3:8–9; 4:10b; 5:6). Chs. 9 – 14 are much more obscure (*e.g.* 11:13; 12:10) and many have suggested 'corrections' to the text. Some scholars have also proposed a rearrangement of sections of the book to make it more logical. For example some would remove the section in ch. 4 that begins with 'This is the word of the LORD . . .' (v 6) and ends with '. . . the hand of Zerubbabel' (v 10). This would have the effect of restoring a connection between 'So he said to me . . .' (v 6) and the second part of v 10. In view of the careful arrangement of the text by the author and/or editor, this would not seem to be a wise course of action (see the Commentary). Further changes are suggested in chs. 9 – 14, and 13:7–9 is sometimes moved to the end of ch. 11 so as to keep the 'shepherd passages' together.

Ecclus. 49:10 (*c.* 180 BC) refers to 'the twelve prophets', and this would suggest that the prophetic canon was already fixed by the beginning of the second century BC. The order of the so-called 'minor' prophets varies between different manuscripts, but chs. 1 – 14 of Zechariah are always found together.

The compilation

The bulk of chs. 1 – 6 consists of a series of eight visions (1:7 – 6:8) to which have been added additional oracles (2:6–13; 6:9–15; *cf.* 4:6–10a).

Chs. 7 – 8 consist of a question about fasting put to the prophet by some men from Bethel. Zechariah gives an extended rebuke, command and promise, before finally answering the question.

There is no doubt that the basic material of chs. 1 – 8 comes from Zechariah himself. There may well be passages which come from an editor or editors (*e.g.* 1:1; 1:6b; 2:6–13; 4:6–10 [see above]; 6:9–15; and parts of Zc. 7), although the most likely explanation for the additions to the visions is that they came from the prophet himself at a later time.

The last six chapters have been more hotly disputed. Conservative scholars have generally held that they came from the author of chs. 1 – 8, Zechariah the prophet. Liberal scholars have universally denied it and often argued that this section of the book is a patchwork of prophecies which are often unrelated to each other; and come from a wide historical period much later than 520 BC.

A change in climate came with the work of P. Lamarche who argued that the whole of Zc. 9 – 14 forms an intricate structure in which the 'Messianic' passages occur at points which correspond to each other and may be taken together to give a picture of the Messiah. This study received a fairly warm reception generally, and was particularly appreciated by conservative scholars.

While there are reasons why this cannot be accepted in detail (see the Introduction above) there is, nevertheless, a unity to these chapters. They deal with recurring themes, notably judgment and blessing through military action, and the leadership of God's people (under the figures of 'humble king', 'shepherd and flock' and 'pierced one'). There are several passages which are referred to by Jesus in the NT. (See also 'Contents and structure' below and the Commentary.)

The theology of Zechariah

Throughout the book of Zechariah there is an emphasis on God's power over the whole world. He has allowed the nations to visit judgment on his people, Judah, but there are strict limits to what they may do. Judah has been and remains

God's elect and his judgment is for the purpose of restoring them to a pure relationship with himself. Those nations that have overstepped the mark will now be judged. Within this plan there is an important role for certain individuals. The historical characters Zerubbabel (the governor) and Joshua (the high priest) are mentioned as restoring the temple and its worship. But they have a more far-reaching significance than this. They represent the 'anointed ones' who stand before 'the Lord of all the earth' (4:14), and Zerubbabel is identified in some sense with 'the Branch' (3:8; 6:12), which is a word used to describe the Messiah in Je. 23:5 and 33:15 (*cf.* Is. 4:2).

Chs. 1 – 8 form a very clear unity with certain important recurring themes:

a. God's anger with 'the fathers' and the judgment that followed (1:2–6; 7:7–14).

b. God's anger transferred to the nations (although they started out in accordance with his intentions), and his compassion for Judah and Jerusalem (1:12–17, 21; 8:1–2, 15; *cf.* 3:2).

c. God's intention, therefore, to dwell in the midst of his people in Jerusalem again, and to be their God (2:10–12; 8:3, 8).

d. The concern that people should know that God has sent a messenger to them (2:8–9, 11; 4:9; 6:15).

e. The provision of harmonious civil and religious leadership authorized by God (3:7–9; 4:6–10; 6:11–14).

f. The purifying of God's people, and their future obedience (3:3–5; 5:3–4, 5–11; 6:15b; 8:16–17).

g. The eventual blessing of peoples outside Judah, who will join themselves to God/come to entreat his favour (8:20–23).

In chs. 9 – 14 we see similar concerns, though they are expressed differently:

a. God's 'impatience' with 'the flock' and his judgment, partly expressed in the attack by the nations and partly somehow related to his provision of bad leaders (11:4–14; 14:2).

b. God's giving victory to Judah and Jerusalem (and David) over the nations, although they succeed at first (9:1–8; 12:1–9; 14:1–4, 12–15).

c. His promise to be their God (13:9; *cf.* 10:6; 12:5), worshipped in Jerusalem (14:16, 20–21).

d. The implicit concern that the people should recognize God's word (11:11; *cf.* the staffs and the pieces of silver? 12:5; *cf.* 10:1–2).

e. The provision of a humble and righteous king/shepherd (9:9–10; 10:2–4; 11:4–17; 13:7–9).

f. The purifying of the people from all uncleanness, somehow related to the cursing/piercing of an individual, who belongs to, but is treated with hostility by, God. He achieves God's purposes by being judged; also the purifying of the temple (12:10 – 13:9; 14:21).

g. The eventual (only ch. 14) blessing of nations (including Egypt) outside Judah, who will come to worship God in Jerusalem (14:16–21).

The connections are not strong enough to establish that one editor put the whole book together as a unity.

Structure

As mentioned above, our understanding of the book of Zechariah has been enhanced by an appreciation of the sometimes intricate structure that the author/editor has woven into his material.

Very often we can discern what scholars call a 'chiasmus' (or 'chiastic structure'). The word is derived from the Greek letter *chi* (χ, which has the form of a cross). This implies that the first part of the passage is reversed (or crossed over) in the second part. So ABCD becomes DCBA. At the centre of a chiasmus we generally find the most important emphasis or point of the passage – sometimes a turning point in a narrative. Quite often the final part is similar to the first, but the situation has also been transformed. Progress has been made, and the structure of the whole brings this fact home to the reader or hearer.

An analysis of each of the main sections of the book is given at the appropriate point in the body of the Commentary. (For more detail on this see, M. Butterworth, *Structure of the Book of Zechariah* [Sheffield Academic Press, 1992].)

Further reading

J. M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, 2 vols. (Zondervan, 1983, 1986).

J. G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, TOTC (IVP, 1972).

D. R. Jones, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, TBC (SCM, 1962).

D. L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1 – 8* OTL (SCM/Westminster/John Knox Pres, 1984).

K. L. Barker, *Zechariah*, EBC (Zondervan, 1985).

Outline of contents

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Commentary

1:1–6 The prologue to chapters 1 – 8

This small section gives us the important features of the situation in which Zechariah prophesied: his hearers are descended from people who were disobedient to God's express warnings and therefore were judged.

The events took place in the second year of King Darius I (*i.e.* October – November 520 BC), eighteen years after the exiles' return from Babylon. This prophecy belongs between those of Hg. 2:1–9 and 2:10–23.

V 2 has only five words in Hebrew but it has a very powerful effect. Literally it is: 'Angry was the LORD with your forefathers with anger'. The emphasis on 'anger' is unmistakable. This is picked up in v 15 where there is a similar emphasis on anger (lit. 'And [with] great anger I am angry'), but this time the anger is turned away from Judah to the nations. The Bible often speaks of God's anger; it is not bad temper, but righteous anger at sin. Remember Jesus in the temple (Mk. 11:15–17; *cf.* Mk. 3:5).

God's words spoken in the past will not be contradicted; they have outlasted the disobedient *forefathers* (ancestors) and even the prophets who spoke the words (5). The judgment prophesied came upon God's people (6a). V 6b may be the continuation of the report of what happened in the past (so the NIV), or we could end the quotation marks after v 6a. We should then understand that Zechariah's hearers repented and acknowledged that God's judgment had been just.

Note how the prophet uses repetition in order to emphasize various aspects of the message: *LORD Almighty* ('of hosts' or 'armies'; *i.e.* the Lord who conquers all opponents) occurs three times in v 3 alone; *return* occurs three times in vs 2–3 and *repented* in v 6 represents the same Hebrew word). Zechariah is a great artist whose language repays careful study.

Note. The NIV translates 'Yahweh of hosts [armies]' by the expression *the LORD Almighty*. It also uses 'Almighty' to translate the Hebrew word *Shaddai*. Throughout the article 'the LORD of hosts' is used since it is more accurate and unambiguous. It is especially appropriate for the book of Zechariah, where armies play a large part in the prophecies. The title signifies that God has unlimited resources at his disposal.

1:7 – 6:15 Series of night visions with attached oracles

Three months after his initial prophecy (early in 519 BC) Zechariah receives a series of eight visions, apparently in one night. Many scholars have noted the difference between the fourth one and the others and have denied that it came from the prophet himself. It is different, but we see no reason to believe that Zechariah could not have received this also. In any case, it is part of the series of eight visions in our canonical text. The visions are different from most earlier ones in that the prophet is actually 'in the vision', able to question the angel he sees.

Before we examine each of the eight visions individually it will be helpful to look at them as a whole in order to appreciate their arrangement and significance. As was mentioned in the Introduction, structure was very important to the author/editor of Zechariah and is the key to understanding the message of the book.

The eight visions form the following chiastic (ABCD/DCBA) structure (see Introduction):

1	Horses patrol the earth; the nations are at ease (1:7–17)	A
2	Horns that scattered Jerusalem to be punished	B
3	Jerusalem inhabited without walls	C
4	Joshua the high priest reclothed ('Branch' mentioned)	D
5	Two anointed: (Joshua) and Zerubbabel	D¹
6	Scroll/curse going forth against thief *etc.*	C¹
7	Basket and woman: wickedness removed far away	B¹
8	Horses and chariots patrol the earth: God's Spirit is at rest (6:1–8)	A¹

Visions 1 and 8 are obviously similar, but the situation changes from God being angry with the nations to his being content. We assume from the contrast and from the content of the intervening material that the nations have been dealt with, and Judah and Jerusalem are cleansed and protected.

The two pairs of visions 2–3 and 6–7 match each other. Note that each of them (and vision 8 also) is introduced by the phrase *then I looked up*. Visions 2 and 3 are linked together in that their form is similar and both focus on Jerusalem. The oracle 2:6–13 further emphasizes their unity and ties them to vision 1 with the phrase *again choose Jerusalem*. It also introduces new elements which become important over the whole of chs. 1 – 8: '*You will know that the* LORD *Almighty* [of hosts] *has sent me*...' (*cf.* 4:9; 6:15); many nations will join themselves to God (8:20–23; *cf.* 6:15a); and God will dwell in the midst of his people and be their God (8:3, 8).

There are grounds for linking together visions 2 and 7. Their internal structure is similar, in that both have two parts: horns and craftsmen/women in a basket and winged women. They both also have a lot of vocabulary in common. This is a very obvious link in the original Hebrew but has been obscured in the English translation. These two visions also include a direct prophetic oracle (2:4–5; 5:3–4). Visions 3 and 7 also share certain words.

Visions 4 and 5 occupy the central position and, in their present form at least, present a divinely authorized dual leadership of Joshua the high priest, and Zerubbabel (the 'Branch') who rebuilds the temple and, according to 6:13, bears royal honour. They stand before the Lord of the whole earth.

Visions 6 and 7 belong together: both speak of 'going forth', and deal with the removal of evil from the land. 'Going forth' also forms a link with the last vision.

Vision 8 rounds off the whole, forming its own climax to the series as it describes the accomplishment of God's purposes: the Lord of the whole earth.

6:9–15 is an account of a prophetic word and action, which picks up some of the most important themes mentioned previously: the two leaders, the temple and re-gathering of people to rebuild it, and '*you shall know that the* LORD *Almighty* [of hosts] *has sent me to you*'. V 15b refers back to 1:2–6 (especially v 4).

1:7–17 The first vision: horses patrol the earth

There are three descriptions of individuals in the vision: *a man riding* ... (8, 10), *the angel* [messenger] *who was talking with me* (9, 13–14) and *the angel of the* LORD (11–12). Probably the first and third of these are the same (see especially v 11). The expression *the angel who was talking with me* occurs in most of the visions.

Zechariah reports that he had a vision of (lit. 'saw') a man on a red horse *among the myrtle trees* (whose exact meaning and significance is uncertain). Behind him were three more horses of different colours: red, brown (RSV: 'sorrel') and white. Attempts have been made to give meaning to these colours (*e.g.* blood, confusion, peace) but it seems more likely that the details are merely background. The four horses in 6:2 have a different combination of colours (*cf.* also Rev. 6:2, 4–5, 8).

The horses have been patrolling the earth and found it at rest. The significance of this is that the nations who have oppressed Judah seem to be getting away with it. *The angel of the* LORD cries out for God to act (12) and receives the assurance that: his anger is now directed at the nations: he was a little angry with his people, but the nations went too far; and he has already returned to Jerusalem. This last point will be

seen in the building of the temple (accomplished four years later) and of the city (*measuring line* signifies marking out the site for rebuilding houses).

Note the emphasis on jealousy (in the sense of 'vehemence in devotion') for Jerusalem and anger against the nations in vs 14b–15a. This is achieved by repetition and the arrangement of the words (*cf.* v 2) lit. 'I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion – with great jealousy. And with great anger – I am angry against the nations who are at ease [NIV *feel secure*].' The description 'at ease' may signify both escape from punishment and self-satisfied arrogance, as in 2 Ki. 19:28 ('insolence') and Ps. 123:4 ('proud' parallel to 'arrogant').

V 17 brings the first vision to a strong conclusion. The repeated *again* emphasizes the continuity with the past history of the chosen people, the people descended from Abraham with whom God made a covenant. He has chastened them but never rejected them. The phrase *again . . . choose Jerusalem* is found also in 2:12 and 3:2 and serves to prepare for the prophecies to the divinely appointed leaders mentioned in the two central visions (chs. 3 – 4).

1:18–21 The second vision: four horns and four craftsmen

The prophet goes from the first vision to the second as if there was no time gap: *then I looked up*. He saw *four horns*. Horns were a symbol of strength (Dt. 33:17), often signifying aggression and/or pride (Ps. 75:4–5, 10; Dn. 8:3–9). The four horns represent the nations who have *scattered Judah, Israel and Jerusalem*. Then *four craftsmen come to terrify* [or 'rout'] *them* and throw them down. The exact process is not specified. In fact, there is surprisingly little emphasis on the craftsmen, and huge emphasis on the horns. Note the 'unnecessary' repetition of the words *horn* (19, 21) and *scatter* (21). The prophet does not ask who the craftsmen are, but what they are going to do. It is unlikely that the four horns represent four individual nations. Rather, 'four' is a number expressing completeness, as when the four horses go in all directions (1:10; 6:5–7; *cf.* the references to 'four winds' in 2:6; 6:5).

Clearly, then, the prophet intends his readers to form a vivid picture of the strength of the nations, and to remember the devastation of Judah that they caused. God does not want the people to forget or underestimate the greatness of his deliverance. These nations *lifted up their horns* against Judah and God's people were utterly cowed, *no-one could raise his head* (21). But, ominously for the nations, they are going to be dealt with.

2:1–13 The third vision: Jerusalem inhabited without walls

Vs 1–5 describe Zechariah's third vision proper. To this is attached a closely related oracle. The last verse of ch. 2 is addressed directly to the whole world and stands powerfully on its own.

2:1–5 The vision. Zechariah sees *a man with a measuring line* (a different expression from 1:16 but with a similar function) who is going to find out the width and length of Jerusalem. We gather from God's message to him in vs 4–5 that his purpose is (at least partly) to prepare for the rebuilding of the city walls.

It is difficult to keep track of the angels in this vision! The NIV makes good sense of the Hebrew and has three angels in all. The first (A1) is the man with the measuring line who went to measure Jerusalem; the second (A2) is the angel who had been speaking to Zechariah and who *left* (lit. 'went forth'); the third (A3) is *another angel* who *came* ('went forth') to meet A2 and to give him a message for A1. A3 might well be 'the angel of the LORD' as in 1:11–12.) In other words A3 tells A2 to give a message to A1. Why should it be so complicated? Perhaps it is to emphasize the importance of this unexpected message. It would be natural to rebuild a city wall and strengthen its fortifications and this might well be part of God's will for Jerusalem. But the message here is that this is not necessary, for two reasons: the city will be too big, and *the LORD* himself will be their wall, *a wall of fire*.

How literally is this to be taken? The wall of Jerusalem did have to be rebuilt in 445 BC under Nehemiah's direction. On the other hand, the city spread out well beyond its walls. The important thing to note is that, when 'God is within her, she will not fail' – with or without walls (Ps. 46:4; *cf.* 48:1–3, 8; 32:7; Jb. 1:10).

This fact, of God being in the midst of his people, is strongly emphasized in a number of ways in chs. 1 – 8: by direct statement (2:10–12; 8:3, 8; 13:9; 14:4); by the completion of the rebuilding of the temple as part of God's plan (4:8–9; *cf.* 9:8); by the cleansing and recommissioning of the high priest, the representative of the people (3:1–7); and by the promise that many peoples will come to 'seek [the favour of] the LORD' in Jerusalem (8:20–23; *cf.* 2:11; 14:16–19).

2:6–12 The oracle. This prophetic oracle follows on smoothly from the first three visions. They have all been concerned with the reversal of the fortunes of both Judah and the nations. We are now given a picture of the first step in the restoration of the people – their release from exile in Babylon. In 520, of course, many had already returned. But many remained

behind, and this oracle urges them also to flee Babylon and return to where God is re-establishing his dwelling.

In the first part (6–9), the prophet urges the exiles to leave Babylon immediately as that nation is about to be punished (the spoilers will become the spoil). When this happens they *will know that the LORD Almighty has sent* him. In the second part (10–11), the people are told that the Lord is coming and will live among them in Jerusalem, where *many nations* will join them. This also will be a sign that the message the prophet received was from God (*'then you will know that the LORD Almighty has sent me to you'*). There is a concluding promise in v 12 that *the LORD will inherit Judah . . . and again choose Jerusalem.*

The promise of v 11a is framed by the repeated *'I will live among you'*, forming a chiastic structure. The refrain of vs 9b and 11b (*and you will know . . .*) emphasizes the concern that God may be glorified as a result of his actions. This also occurs in 4:9 and 6:15. The phrase *will again choose Jerusalem* shows the connection between this oracle and the first vision (see 1:17) and also prepares a link with the fourth vision (see 3:2).

'Come!' (6–7) is simply a word to gain the attention of potential hearers. *'After he has honoured me and has sent me against the nations . . .'* (8) is an attempt to make sense of a very difficult phrase: 'after glory sent me [or he sent me] to the nations . . .'. Other suggestions are that 'glory' is a name for God himself (*cf.* v 5b) or else a way of referring to the vision. The 'me' has been taken to be either Zechariah (who was not actually sent to the nations, except in a very indirect way) or one of the angels. Whichever is correct, the main concern is to establish that what God has said to this situation (via the angel via Zechariah) is truly from God.

2:13 A call to the whole world. This appeal is wholly appropriate here. After waiting for a long time, the Lord is going to act against the nations who have oppressed his people. Let all the earth keep silent with awe before him (*cf.* Hab. 2:20), hardly daring to breathe.

3:1–10 The fourth vision: Joshua the high priest

Chs. 3 and 4 contain the two central visions of the whole series of eight. They are both concerned with two leaders; the high priest and the civil leader (governor). Together these figures represent the Lord's rule over his people. Ch. 3 focuses on Joshua the high priest but mentions also *my servant, the Branch* (8; *cf.* 6:12, where it is said that he will build the temple of the Lord).

Ch. 4 has a picture of two olive trees who represent the 'two anointed who are anointed to serve [lit. 'stand by'] the Lord of all the earth'. The NIV's 'anointed to serve' is inexact and misses the connection with the rest of the chapter established by means of the word 'stand' (*cf.* 3:1, 3, 4, 5, 7). (Note that the expression *all the earth* ['land'] occurs in 4:14; 5:3, 6; 6:5. This helps to give unity to the last four visions.) 3:1 and 4:14 together establish Joshua as one of these two anointed.

3:1–5 Satan's accusations dealt with. This section describes how Joshua the high priest is accused by 'the Satan'. The word 'satan' in Hebrew means 'adversary' and occurs as a proper name only in 1 Ch. 21:1. The only other place in the OT where it means a superhuman adversary is in Jb. 1 – 2. Otherwise it indicates human adversaries, either personal or national. The Adversary's function here and in Job is to accuse one of God's servants.

Joshua, as high priest, should have stood before the Lord only in the clothes specified in Ex. 28. They signified the purity which was necessary in order to stand before a holy God. When we are told that Joshua stood before the Lord in filthy clothes, it signifies his uncleanness (4b), and, since he is their representative before God, that of the people also.

The accusation of 'the Adversary' is true. The result, however, is not condemnation, but cleansing. This aspect of God's restoration of his people is emphasized in the sixth and seventh visions: the thief and the one who swears falsely will be banished (5:3), and wickedness itself will be removed far from the land (5:7, 10–11).

The high priest also had to wear a turban (AV/KJV 'mitre'; Ex. 28:4, 37–39). We are not told whether Joshua had any sort of turban on at first, but he is given a clean one. The word is different from that used in Ex. 28, but from the same root (*tsaniph/mitsnepheth*).

It seems strange for the Lord himself to say *'the LORD rebuke you'* (2), but its meaning is 'I, who am the LORD, rebuke you', and it assures the reader that the Satan's accusations are completely set aside (*cf.* Ps. 9:5; Is. 17:13). *Burning stick snatched from the fire* (2) recalls Am. 4:11, and implies that Joshua (and therefore the people of Judah) have escaped from just chastening. *While the angel of the LORD stood by* (5) probably signifies the fact that this action is approved by God.

3:6–7 Joshua receives a charge. Having been cleansed, Joshua is able to be in God's presence. He receives the charge to walk in God's ways and keep his requirements. Both expressions signify living and acting as God wants. The second is especially used of priestly duties or the care of the sanctuary (*e.g.* Nu. 3:7–8, 25–38). *These standing here* means heavenly

beings who stand in God's presence, as in v 4.

3:8–9 Joshua receives a further message. This looks like an addition to the original vision (it has an imperative such as often begins a new speech; and it introduces features not hinted at in the preceding description: *the Branch*, *the stone*, *seven eyes*). Nevertheless, its climax, '*I will remove the sin of this land in a single day*' (*i.e.* swiftly and completely) is wholly appropriate to this vision, for the high priest represents the whole people.

Joshua's *associates* or 'companions' are presumably his fellow priests. They are *men symbolic of things to come* (lit. 'men of portent'). This probably means that the coming of *the Branch* has priestly significance.

The Branch is a Messianic title (Je. 23:5–6; *cf.* Is. 4:2; 11:1; see also the Introduction above). It has some connection with Zerubbabel, whose name is not found in any of the main parts of the visions themselves. The reason for this is not clear. It is possible that Zerubbabel fell out of favour with the Persian authorities and that his name had to be kept quiet. It is more likely that the reader is meant to connect the present leadership of Judah and Jerusalem with the promise of the Messiah, known from Is. 9:1–7 and 11:1–9. Zerubbabel was not thought to be the Messiah but a type of the Messiah. He gives insight into the nature of the Messiah's rule. This will be spelt out in ch. 4 and 6:9–15.

It is not clear what *the stone* set before Joshua signifies. The context must help us to form a picture of it. The engraving suggests some type of commemoration, perhaps of the Lord's commission to Joshua. *Eyes* might be connected with 4:10, where the seven lamps are explained as the 'seven ... eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth', signifying his knowledge of everything that happens on earth. The word could just possibly mean 'spring', in which case it would fit with the end of the verse: cleansing the land of sin.

3:10 A concluding promise. The *vine* and *fig-tree*, which required a long time to produce fruit, are symbols of peace and prosperity. The picture is used in 1 Ki. 4:25 to describe the peaceful conditions of Solomon's reign. In 2 Ki. 18:31 it is a tempting (but untrustworthy) promise of the Assyrian king, and in Mi. 4:4 it describes the conditions of blessing 'in the last days' (Mi. 4:1).

4:1–14 The fifth vision: two anointed

The structure of this chapter is quite strange in that a question is asked in v 5 which is not answered until v 10b, and the joins between the outer sections and the oracle in the middle are quite abrupt. This has led many commentators to regard vs 6–10a as a later insertion, or to move the section to another place. The pattern can, however, be seen as deliberate. The chapter proceeds as follows:

1–3 A description of the vision, in particular about the *seven* lamps and *two olive trees*. 4 Then follows the question '*What are these?*' assumed to be about the 'seven'. The angel responds with a counter-question (5) '*Do you not know ...?*', which is not answered until after the *oracle about Zerubbabel* (6–10a). Finally the prophet receives the answer to his question in **10b** concerning the 'seven'. **11–14** Further questions about the *two olive trees* and two gold pipes follow, with the same response from the angel as in v 5 '*Do you not know ...?*' In v 14 the prophet receives the answer to the question concerning the *two*.

Apparently one of the means Zechariah uses to heighten the impact of his message is a sort of delaying tactic. In chs. 7 – 8 a question is asked in 7:3 which is not answered until 8:18–19! So here, there is a minor delay caused by the counter-questions, and a major delay caused by the oracle of vs 6–10a.

A further function of the oracle in its present position is to show the connection between Zerubbabel and the two anointed. Zerubbabel is not mentioned by name in any of the visions themselves.

4:1–5, 10b–14 The fifth vision. Zechariah sees a central lampstand with seven lamps (NIV *lights*). On each side is an olive tree. It is usually assumed, from what follows in vs 11–12, that the *olive trees* supply the lamps with oil.

The Hebrew text most naturally means that each of the seven lamps had seven lips (as RSV). The Greek text suggests that there were seven channels leading from the central bowl to the seven lamps (as NIV). Either way the picture is of a very bright lamp. The interpretation of the seven lamps (10b; the brackets in NIV should be ignored) is that they represent *the eyes of the LORD, which range throughout the earth.* (Note that this is the same expression as in v 14, which is lost by the NIV; see also on 3:1–10 above.) The figure suggests lighting up dark places so that nothing can be hidden from the Lord's view. It is unlikely that *these seven* refers back to 3:9, since it is too far away from the answer and obscured by a question about another 'seven'.

The two olive trees represent *the two anointed who stand by the LORD of all the earth.* At one level these are the priest and governor of the time: Joshua and Zerubbabel. There is a difficulty in supposing that these could supply oil to the Lord to keep his lamps going! It could be that we are not meant to follow through the implications of the symbolism, since all symbols have their limitations. Perhaps, however, the pipes do not go from the olive trees to the

lampstand, for the text does not state this explicitly. Some have supposed that the bowl supplies the trees with oil. This has the advantage of making the Lord the source of anointing for his anointed. On the other hand it is not in accord with what happens in life: olive oil comes from an olive tree, and thence to the lamp.

V 12 is very obscure, especially since neither the branches nor the pipes have been mentioned earlier. One proposed solution is to assume that the central bowl represents the Lord, and this supplies both the lamps and the olive tree.

4:6–10a An oracle about Zerubbabel. This section both delays the answer to the prophet's question (4) and helps to identify Zerubbabel as one of the *two olive trees* or *two anointed.* It is in two parts.

A word assures Zerubbabel that he does not need might or strength, but God's Spirit (6–7). If it were a matter of strength then there could be no contest between Zerubbabel and a great mountain, but, in this situation, a great mountain will be flattened before him. The opposition to Zerubbabel's work will vanish away. The shouts of '*God bless it!*' are literally 'Grace! grace to it!' and signify both the beauty of the building and God's graciousness in enabling them to rebuild it. *The capstone* is literally 'head stone', an expression that does not occur elsewhere. It is obviously an important stone in the temple, signifying the completion of the building (*cf.* v 9), and probably signifies the 'head of the corner' (Ps. 118:22), the stone placed at the top corner of two walls to hold them properly together.

The second half (8–10) has its own introduction. It is a promise that Zerubbabel will be able to finish the temple rebuilding. It will not be as it was when the exiles came back from Babylon: they started to build and were persuaded to give up (Ezr. 4:4–5, 24). '*Who despises the day of small things?*' (10) would apply to those who were discouraged in the face of the opposition and the powerlessness of the people who had returned to Jerusalem. They thought that they could not succeed, but they will rejoice when they see Zerubbabel's success. The prophet gives them a gentle rebuke, aimed also at encouraging them (the way a nurse might reprimand a patient). The phrase translated *plumb-line* in NIV is (lit.) 'the tin stone', or possibly 'the separated stone'. It is unlikely that tin would be used for a plumb-line, and so the meaning may be that the stone which finished the temple (7) indicates that Judah is separated off from other peoples, chosen to be God's own people. The completion of the temple will signify that God's message via Zechariah is true (see above on vs 9, 12).

5:1–4 The sixth vision

The next two visions belong together, as did the second and third. Both deal with the cleansing of God's people. The *flying scroll* represents a curse that goes through all the land (*cf.* 4:10b, 14; 5:3, 6; 6:5) as a judgment upon evildoers. In the next vision (5:5–11) a woman representing 'wickedness' is removed far away to the land of Babylonia (Heb. *Shinar* is Sumeria in Mesopotamia).

The scroll is described as *flying* which probably means that it is not rolled up, but open for anyone to read. This would make it possible to see its size: 30 ft. by 15 ft. (20 by 10 cubits). The size is enormous, giving emphasis to the message. The words on it presumably would be a curse against evildoers.

The curse also means 'oath' and is especially associated with a failure to satisfy an obligation, as in Dt. 29:20–21.

The two types of sinner mentioned are representative of evildoers, rather than the only ones who will be judged. *Every thief* would represent all who wrong their neighbour; and swearing falsely, which involves using God's name, is an insult to the Lord himself (*cf.* Lv. 19:11–12). *Be banished* is from a root meaning 'be clean, be purged'. It signifies being removed from the covenant people, and therefore outside of God's salvation. In days when 'lying' is regarded as comparatively unimportant, it is salutary to remember this prophecy and compare passages like Je. 28:15–17 and Acts 5:1–11.

The curse, which is a word from the Lord, is personified in v 4. It will *enter the house . . . remain . . . and destroy it* – completely: both *timbers and its stones.*

5:5–11 The seventh vision

Both the sixth and seventh visions have something to say about how God deals with sin. Whereas the former concentrates on judgment, this one is concerned with the purifying of the land by the removal of sin.

Zechariah sees a *measuring basket*, (lit. 'an ephah'), which was a unit of measure. We cannot be sure how large an ephah was, but it was probably not more than ten gallons. Perhaps it was enlarged in the vision, as was the scroll (5:2). *This is the iniquity* makes sense more easily than the Hebrew text 'this is their eye', and is supported by the ancient Greek and Syriac versions. It is possible that the ephah is chosen because of passages like Am. 8:5: 'skimping the measure, boosting the price', (lit.) 'make the ephah small and the shekel great'. It was a sign of dishonesty and a lack of concern for others.

The (heavy) cover is removed, and there sits a woman: *wickedness.* This does not mean that

woman represents wickedness better than man. It may simply be that the word is feminine. Note that those who remove wickedness from the land are also women (9–11). *The wind in their wings* (9) could equally be translated 'the spirit . . .' (*cf.* 6:5). This would indicate that the cleansing was the work of God's Spirit. The Hebrew for *stork* is from the same root as 'steadfast love', and this may be why these particular birds feature here: the cleansing is a sign of grace.

Babylonia (11), (lit. 'Shinar'), was in Mesopotamia. It was the place that Abraham left when God made a covenant with him and where the tower of Babel was built – and destroyed by God (Gn. 11:2, 9; note also the further connection with this story through the phrase 'the face of the whole earth/land', Gn. 11:4, 9; *cf.* Zc. 5:3). The *house for it* may mean a temple of some sort (*cf.* the expression 'house of the LORD'). In any case it implies that wickedness has no place among God's people.

6:1–8 The eighth and final vision

The final vision is similar in several ways to the first vision. The two together have the effect of unifying the whole series: they form an 'envelope' for the other visions. In addition we note that this vision forms a climax to the whole series: in ch. 1 the nations were at ease and the Lord was angry with them and zealous for Jerusalem and Judah. In ch. 6 the Lord's spirit is at rest (and the nations have been judged).

There are also some surprising differences between the two visions *e.g. chariots* are mentioned in ch. 6 as well as *horses*. The colours of the horses are different. In ch. 1 there are two red horses, one brown and one white. In ch. 6, the four horses are red, black, white and dappled. The reason for the variation is not known, but a similar type of variation occurs in 6:10 and 14.

The horses go out to the four corners of the earth (the four points of the compass), although we have to infer that the red one goes to the east, since it is not explicitly stated. This expresses the fact that God's influence covers all the earth (*cf. LORD of the whole world*, 6:5; 4:14). There is a play on words which cannot be captured in English: the word for 'spirit' is the same as 'wind' (*cf.* John 3:8).

When the report is given (8) it simply mentions the north. Most probably this is because the north had various associations: it was the place where rival gods were said to have their headquarters (*cf.* Ps. 48:2); it was where the land of Shinar or Babylonia was situated (2:7; 5:11; *cf.* Je. 23:8); and it was the direction from which all major attacks on Israel and Judah came (Is. 41:25; Je. 1:13–15; 16:15), including the foes of the last times (Ezk. 38:6, 15). We are certainly meant to assume that in the end God is satisfied with the condition of the whole world.

Two mountains (1) seem to represent the gateway of heaven (*cf.* 5); *of bronze* may indicate either the rising sun (a new day is dawning; remember that the first vision was at night [1:8], and this might be significant), or the two pillars of the temple entrance. Bronze is used to indicate strength (*e.g.* Je. 1:18) against attack: the Lord's heavenly temple is impregnable.

It is unlikely that the colours of the horses (2–3, 6–7) have particular meanings (see on 1:8). *Dappled horses* is a rendering of two obscure words. The expression might mean 'dappled horses, powerful ones': the second word is used in v 7 to refer to all the horses.

Four spirits (or 'winds') (5) is intentionally ambiguous. The wind is invisible and everywhere, as is God's presence. 'Winds' is probably the primary meaning in view of v 8. But there is no need to look for consistency in poetic imagery (*cf.* 'seven spirits' in Rev. 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6).

6:9–15 An oracle

This oracle serves as a most important climax to the visions, and draws together some of the central ideas in the preceding chapters. The structure of it is basically chiastic. The outer envelope is strongly indicated by the names of the exiles who have arrived from Babylon (*cf.* also chs. 7 – 8). The oracle can be set out as follows.

9 Introduction to the oracle.
10 *Take from . . . Heldai, Tobijah and Jedaiah . . .* and *go . . . to the house of Joshiah son of Zephaniah.*
11 *Take the silver and gold and make* (lit. crowns) *and set* [it/them] *on the head of . . . Joshua.*
12 Say to him . . . Behold, a man, *Branch* is his name *and he will branch out . . . and build the temple of the LORD.*
13 He *will sit and rule on his throne and he/*there *will be a priest on/*by *his throne* and there will be peace between the two of them.
14 The crown will be(long) to *Heldai* (Heb. *Helem*), *Tobijah*, *Jedaiah*, *and Hen* the *son of Zephaniah as a memorial in the temple of the LORD.*

The strange features of this section are listed below.

(i) Two of the names of the people mentioned in v 10 are changed in v 14. *Heldai* (meaning 'mole'!) becomes Helem (NIV mg. meaning 'strength'), and *Josiah* becomes *Hen* (meaning 'grace', the same word used twice in 4:7 in connection with rebuilding the temple).

(ii) The word translated *crown* is actually a

plural form, but it is used with a singular verb (14). Perhaps it is meant to hint at the two characters involved in the leadership of Judah. (See below.)

(iii) It is not clear from grammar alone whether there is one figure or two. In ch. 4 it was Zerubbabel who rebuilt the temple; and in ch. 3 'the Branch' was different from Joshua. *Harmony between the two* (13) most naturally means between priest and civil leader, but might just possibly mean 'priestly and political aspects of rule'.

(iv) Zerubbabel is not mentioned by name, and the fact that the crown(s) is put in the temple as a memorial, suggests that the oracle has to do with events after his death.

When we remember that 'Branch' is a term used of the Messiah, and apply the prophecy to Jesus, many features fall into place: he is both king and priest; he is the reality that Joshua and Zerubbabel imperfectly pointed to; he is the builder of the temple of God, the church.

The final verse is similar to the climax of chs. 7 – 8. Many people will come from far away, not just the few mentioned at the beginning of the section. This will be a sign that the Lord has really spoken through his messengers (15, see above on 2:9–11).

Notes. 11 'Crowns', the plural form has been explained in different ways: as a type of circlet crown which could be worn singly or fitted together to make a composite crown (*cf.* Rev. 19:12); as a 'plural of excellence', *i.e.* there was one wonderful crown; or the text is either wrong or the word is an unusual singular form. It seems highly likely that there is an intended ambiguity here.

14 This verse is difficult to translate and understand. J. A. Motyer suggests 'and the crown will be for a memorial of Helem *etc.*', meaning that 'when the Messiah sits as Priest-King, people from afar will come to own allegiance to him'. Perhaps there is a play on words: the crown will be a reminder of strength, goodness (Tobijah meaning 'the LORD is my good'), knowledge (Jedaiah, 'the LORD is knowing') and grace – a commendation of the action of the exiles (10) who made the long journey to the temple bringing the silver and gold from which the crown was made, and a promise of blessing to them.

7:1 – 8:23 A question about fasting

Zechariah 7 – 8 is constructed as a large chiasmus with a promise mentioned at the centre (8:8). It refers to themes introduced in 1:1–6, giving an exhortation to obey, a promise for Jerusalem and Judah, and a wider promise (based on the visit of people from Bethel to 'entreat the favour of the LORD') to many peoples. This coherent whole is marked out for the reader or hearer by the use of key words and phrases which connect corresponding sections together. Despite the fact that there are passages where it is impossible to be sure what the intended meaning is in detail, the result is a very pleasing and powerful unity.

These two chapters begin a new section of the book of Zechariah. The message reinforces and fills out what has been said previously: the Lord punished his people for their disobedience, and withdrew his protection and the sign of his presence, the temple. But now he will again 'dwell in their midst' in a restored Jerusalem. He exhorts them to keep the commands they previously ignored.

The section starts with a question about fasting: the people of Bethel send a delegation to ask the priests and prophets (presumably including Zechariah) if they should observe the fast they had traditionally kept in the fifth month of the year. The prophet challenges them about their motives for fasting, and recalls the previous disobedience of the people which led to the judgment of the exile. He goes on to make a tremendous promise for the future of Jerusalem. This forms the centre of the section. He reiterates the commandments that the Lord expected the forefathers to keep, and at last answers the question about fasting. The answer is not what they would have expected: the fast of not only the fifth month, but the fourth, seventh and tenth also, will become seasons of rejoicing. God's grace, his delight to give more abundantly than they could imagine, comes through in these verses. And that is not all: his grace extends to the nations around, and they will come to Jerusalem to entreat the favour of the Lord.

The structure of these chapters is as follows:

7:1*
A (v 2) Men of Bethel come to ask favour of Yahweh.
  B (v 3) Questions about fasting.
    C (vs 9–10) Former prophets said 'don't devise evil in your heart'.
      D (vs 12b–14) Great wrath came as the land became desolate.
8:1* E (vs 3–8a) Promise of blessing *for the remnant of this people.*
        F (v 8b) *They will be my people, and I . . . their God.*
      E^1 (vs 9–13) Promise of blessing *for the remnant of this people.*
    D^1 (vs 14–15) But now God determines good for Jerusalem.
  C^1 (vs 16–17) Don't devise evil in your heart.
8:18*
  B^1 (v 19) Fasts will become feasts.
A^1 (vs 20–23) Many will ask favour of Yahweh.

This 'chiasmic' form is described in the Introduction on page 865. The most important point is found at the centre (F).

An asterisk (*) indicates an introductory verse, which emphasizes the importance of what follows it. Notice how the passages with the same letter correspond to each other. All parallel sections have significant words or phrases which draw attention to the correspondence. Setting out the plan like this enables us to see the most important features of the whole section.

It leads from a comparatively unimportant question by an insignificant group of men, from a town in Israel, to a tremendous confirmation of God's election of his people and his constant purposes (8:8, the NIV obscures the continuity between this verse and the string of promises related to Ex. 6:7; *e.g.* Gn. 17:8; Je. 31:33; *etc.* lit. in each case: 'I will be to them/you for God'; *cf.* 2:11 '... will be to me for a people'). This occurs at the centre of the whole unit, often where the turning point of a chiastic passage like this is found. The important position of the first half of the promise in ch. 2:11 was noted, and it occurs again in 13:9 at an important climax.

7:1–3 A delegation

The fourth year of King Darius (I) is 518, two years after Zechariah's first oracle, and two years before the completion of the temple (Ezr. 6:15). Bethel, in the northern kingdom of Israel, was where one of the idolatrous golden calves of Jeroboam I was set up. A promise to people from Bethel shows grace! The emphasis on Jerusalem as the authorized centre for the worship of the LORD is understandable. We do not know who *Sharezer* and *Regem-Melech* were. It could be translated: 'And Bethel-Sharezer sent Regem-Melech [possibly a title meaning "royal spokesman"] and his men'.

The expression *entreat the LORD* is only found here and in 8:21 and 22 in Zechariah. The envelope formed around chs. 7 – 8, by this and the question of fasting, is therefore very strong. The fasts mentioned in 7:3, 5 and 8:19 are thought to commemorate the following events: fifth month, destruction of the temple (2 Ki. 25:8–9); fourth month, wall of Jerusalem breached (Je. 39:2); seventh month, murder of Gedaliah the governor of Judah (2 Ki. 25:25; Je. 41:1–2); tenth month, beginning of the siege of the city by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Ki. 25:1–2; Je. 39:1).

7:4–14 A challenge for the present

7:4–7 A counter-question about fasting. Zechariah does not have to reason out the answer on the basis of the Law, but receives a direct word from the Lord. He asks them about their motives: were they fasting for the Lord or for their own benefit? He points out that the *earlier prophets* had given similar messages.

7:8–10 Words formerly given. The NIV is misleading here, for there is no word *again* in the Hebrew, and vs 8–14 refer to the past message and (lack of) response (see v 14). It would be better to translate vs 8–9: 'And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah saying, "Thus did the LORD say ..."' V 8 implies (as is often true of this formula) that Zechariah continued to speak according to the word of the Lord. *Administer true justice* is slightly expanded in 8:16, *render true and sound judgment in your courts. In your hearts do not think evil of each other* is the same basic expression as in 8:17, which is more accurately translated there: *do not plot evil against your neighbour* (*cf.* Gn. 50:20; Je. 48:2; *etc.*). These similarities draw attention to the fact that the requirements of the Lord are the same in the new situation as they were previously.

7:11–14 The fathers' response and its results. This section refers to the response of the forefathers to the former prophets (as in 1:4). *They made their hearts as hard as flint*, impervious to God's word. As a result 'there was great wrath from the LORD' (12). This is the literal translation, and it describes the action of wrath rather than a feeling. Since they refused to listen to the Lord, he refused to listen to them: they were scattered among the nations and the land was left desolate. The verdict to be passed on this account is that it is exactly what they deserved. However, God moves on from this to something totally undeserved.

8:1–8 Promise to Jerusalem renewed

8:1–3 Jealousy for Jerusalem. The themes of jealousy for Jerusalem/Zion and the Lord's return to dwell in the city have been prominent previously (1:14, 16; 2:10–12). And when God dwells in the city, then she must be a city of truth and holiness. *The mountain of the LORD Almighty* [of hosts] was the raised part of Jerusalem on which the temple was built.

8:4–6 Peace in the city. The city will be at peace and safe from attack. People will not be rushing here and there repairing or building up the wall (see on Na. 2:4–5); there is no danger that a missile will fly over the wall. Even the most vulnerable members of the city can sit or play in the streets. To Zechariah's hearers this still seemed a dream, for they had constant harassment from the people around. *Marvellous* is used in the sense of 'extraordinary' or 'difficult': it is not too hard for the Lord (see especially Gn. 18:14; Je. 32:17, 27, where the same root is used, and *cf.* Mk. 10:27). The word *remnant* occurs also in vs 11 and 12. It is a

significant word which implies both the judgment of God (only a remnant is left) and the mercy of God (a remnant will be saved).

8:7–8 The covenant promise renewed. When Judah went into exile to Babylon many fled to neighbouring countries. They also will be able to return to Jerusalem. It is difficult for us to realize how important Jerusalem was to the people of Israel and Judah, for we take it for granted that we can worship God anywhere in the world. Even those who put great stress on Rome, Canterbury or Geneva do not regard them in the same way as the Jews do Jerusalem. It was the one place where sacrifices could be offered, the one temple authorized to be built as God's house, a sign that the Lord was in the midst of his people. So here, the restoration of the temple in Jerusalem means the confirmation of God's covenant promises (see on 2:10–12).

8:9–13 Renewed promise

This section begins and ends with the same word: *Let your hands be strong*, and this sets the tone: an encouraging challenge. Before the foundation of the temple was laid, people did not experience blessing. They had put themselves first, and had not prospered. Now they are to get their hands to work on the temple and they will prosper (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:58).

8:14–17 A challenge from the past

This repeats Zechariah's message that the Lord is no longer angry with his people, but intends to do them good. He exhorts them to keep the sort of commands that the forefathers failed to keep (*cf.* 7:9–10).

8:18–23 Fasting and feasting

The 'answer' to the question about fasting (7:3) is that the fasts will become feasts. The events connected with the fall of Jerusalem will be totally transformed; occasions to inspire wonder at God's forgiveness and grace. The prophet goes on unexpectedly to an even greater promise; all nations (23) will seek God in Jerusalem, recognizing that he has blessed his people the Jews (*i.e.* people of Judah). There will be ten times as many as belong to God's people now (23). The section reaches a tremendous climax here as we note the contrast between the small delegation of 7:2 and this final vision.

9:1 – 14:21 Battles, leaders, and the goal of history

The last six chapters have been hotly disputed. Some argue that the heading 'An Oracle' (9:1; 12:1; *cf.* Mal. 1:1) marks these off as separate books, which should perhaps be treated along with Malachi rather than Zechariah. They do seem to reflect a later situation, though the question how much later is not easy to answer. They are so different from Zechariah 1 – 8 in language and imagery, and so similar in basic concerns, that they are likely to have come from a disciple of Zechariah. Most conservative commentators favour the view that Zechariah himself added to and edited his own original work. This cannot be ruled out. See also Introduction.

The same basic themes are found throughout chs. 9 – 14 in an alternating pattern. There are frequent references to Judah and Jerusalem and their enemies/the nations on the one hand, and the question of leadership on the other. The contents may be set out as follows.

9:1–8 Judgment for Judah's enemies (with a hint of salvation).

9:9–10 Judah's righteous, saved, humble king comes; peace is established.

9:11–17 Judgment for enemies and salvation for Judah/Ephraim.

10:1–5 Further concern about leadership: judgment of corrupt leaders; provision of true leadership.

10:6–12 Strengthening for Judah/Joseph/Ephraim (with mention of judgment for enemies).

11:1–3 Judgment on pride/shepherds/nations?

11:4–14 Judgment against bad leaders and stubborn people.

11:15–17 Judgment of a leader.

12:1–9 Judgment for Judah's/Jerusalem's enemies: victory in battle.

12:10–14 The pierced one. Yahweh's spirit of compassion brings mourning.

13:1 Cleansing 'on that day'.

13:2–6 Idols and false prophets are removed.

13:7–9 Judgment of 'my shepherd' brings refining and fulfilment of the promise: Yahweh their God *etc.*

14:1–15 Judgment for Judah's/Jerusalem's enemies: destroyed in battle by God's intervention. Phenomena of the last days; plagues for Yahweh's enemies.

14:16–21 Blessing for the nations: they come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles (or else they suffer plagues). Jerusalem is purified ('holy to Yahweh').

It is not possible to reduce this to a neat diagram without distorting the picture. It is clear that there is a unity about the whole, despite the wide variety of materials from which this is composed.

The structure that does appear may be described in simplified terms as a sort of multi-layer sandwich, where the 'bread' consists of passages concerning the enemies of Judah and Jerusalem: it contains varying amounts of judgment and/or salvation for the enemies and for

Judah/Jerusalem. The climax is that the nations are given the same opportunity to worship Yahweh as Judah. The 'filling' concerns the question of leadership. Here there are also variations in content: the right leader is to be installed and bad leaders purged; cleansing is to be achieved somehow in connection with God's representative. See also Introduction on Compilation above and the Commentary.

9:1–8 The Lord takes action

There are many obscure words and phrases in this section, as in chs. 9 – 14 as a whole, and it is necessary to check the overall sense by looking at the whole context. Even when precision is not possible, the central meaning is clear.

Oracle comes from the root 'lift up' and can be translated 'burden', *i.e.* something laid upon someone by compulsion. (Note the play on words in Je. 23:33.) This a highly suitable way of describing a prophetic message (Je. 20:9). It is either a heading referring to chs. 9 – 11, or part of the opening sentence of this section: 'The burden of the word of the LORD is . . .'.

The tone of almost all of vs 1–8 is judgment. Only in v 7 do we find a promise to Ekron, one of the Philistine cities. It will be incorporated into the people of Judah, as the Jebusites were, the inhabitants of Jerusalem before David took the city (2 Sa. 5:6–10). This comes after judgment (5) and cleansing (7). Four of the five main Philistine cities are mentioned (5–6) (Gath may be omitted because it had been destroyed by this time). The Philistines were, of course, Israel's traditional enemies, a thorn in Israel's side from the days of the Judges (*e.g.* Jdg. 13 – 16; 1 Sam. 13 – 14; 31). They were not very important in themselves after the exile, and the appearance of 'Philistia' here is not simply as a concrete nation, but as a symbol of the enemies of God and his people (*cf.* the use of 'Edom' in Is. 11 and 34).

The tone of vs 1–8 indicates that vs 1–3 are also a message of judgment against *Hadrach* (somewhere in the far north of Palestine), *Damascus* (capital city of Syria or Aram), *Hamath* (120 miles farther north) and the Phoenician ports of *Tyre* and *Sidon*. Tyre was very rich through its trading, and particularly difficult to conquer since it had to be reached by a causeway. But even Tyre will be destroyed, and its pride in its wealth and strength will be shown up as a hollow thing.

V 8 is also difficult to translate, but the NIV gets the right sense. The Lord will not allow his house (*i.e.* either the temple or the land of Judah) to be destroyed again, as he did when the people were taken to Babylon.

9:9–10 The humble king comes

V 9 is probably the best known in Zechariah. All the gospels tell how Jesus fulfilled this prophecy when he entered Jerusalem on an ass. Are we to assume that this is a prophecy of the Messiah with no reference for the prophet's own times? After the exile there was no king in Judah. The emperors of the major powers, Medo-Persia, Greece and finally Rome were sensitive on this matter (Jn. 19:12–15), and, although there was a brief period of Jewish independence following the Maccabean revolt in 167 BC, no-one remotely resembling this king ever appeared on the scene. The prophecy was still relevant for the people living five hundred years before Christ, for it spoke of God's intention and therefore his relationship with them. They remained his people and their king would come.

The coming king is to be *righteous and having salvation* (lit. 'saved'). The RSV gives the wrong impression with 'triumphant and victorious'. This king has been declared righteous and saved by God. This suggests a situation in which the king is both accused and attacked by his enemies but is vindicated and saved by the Lord. Clearly this fits Jesus very well! (*Cf.* Ps. 118, especially vs 22–23, also applied to the Lord Jesus).

In earlier times the ass or donkey was not thought of as a lowly beast, but important men rode on them (Jdg. 10:4; 12:14). Even the king of Israel only rode on a mule (1 Ki. 1:33; *cf.* 2 Sa. 13:29; 18:9). A horse or chariot would have been the normal conveyance for the king in a victory procession. The emphasis here is on humility and peacefulness. He will reign from sea to sea (*i.e.* the Mediterranean in the west and the sea known only vaguely to be in the east [the Dead Sea – NIV mg.] as in 14:8), and from the River Euphrates in Mesopotamia to the ends of the earth. In other words he will reign over all the world.

These qualities are surprising, so surprising that this prophecy was largely neglected by those who waited eagerly for the Messiah. (See comment on Pss. 22; 69; 110.)

Note. The expression *donkey* and *colt, the foal of a donkey* are parallel; they are two descriptions of one animal. In Mt. 21:1–7, Matthew mentions two animals, and 'sat on them' is best taken to mean 'on the cloaks'! *Ephraim* was the largest of the northern tribes of Israel, and is often used, as here, to mean the whole of Israel.

9:11 – 11:3 Prophecies of judgment and hope

At first sight this looks like a mixed bag of unrelated prophecies relating to a period long after Zechariah (Greece is mentioned in 9:13, and the Greek empire was not established till after 333 BC) There are, however, many points of contact between the various sections and also 9:1–8 (*e.g.* half the words in 10:11 have already occurred in this opening section). The themes

going through the whole are the defeat of Judah's and Israel's enemies and the provision of a purified leadership (10:3–4).

9:11–12 A promise to prisoners. The Lord makes promises on the basis of the fact of his covenant with them, sealed by the blood of sacrifice (Ex. 24:5–8). *I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit* recalls Gn. 37:24 and Je. 38:6, for the expression is almost identical in Hebrew, 'pit/cistern/well ... there was no water in it'. This would recall the plight of Joseph and Jeremiah, both delivered from desperate situations because the Lord was with them. So these contemporaries of the prophet are now prisoners of *hope*, allowed to *return* to their *fortress* with the promise that the Lord is restoring to them double that which they lost.

9:13–17 Victory to Judah and Ephraim. After this promise of peace (9–12), we are told how this will come about; a military victory over 'Greece', the enemy of Judah and Israel (Ephraim). Greece was not a prominent power until *c.* 333 BC, and many believe that this verse has either been inserted into the prophecy at a late stage, or indicates that chs. 9 – 14 is a late prophecy. The word *Javan* does occur in Gn. 10:2, 4 and Is. 66:19 to refer to distant peoples at the edge of the known world. This would fit the sense very well (*cf.* 10b).

The pictures emphasize the fact that it is the Lord who gives victory in enabling his people to be successful in battle. Trumpets were used in battle to give clear signals to inspire confidence in the soldiers, and to terrify the enemy. This also recalls the victories of Joshua at Jericho, and Gideon over the Midianites (Jos. 6:3–5; Jdg. 7:16–22), where the Lord's part was obvious. The storms (or whirlwinds) of the south were especially destructive (14). V 15 describes the boisterous victory celebration! *A bowl used for sprinkling* implies that their rejoicing is centred on the Lord.

Vs 16–17 sum up the result of the victory: the people are saved by the Lord, who regards them as his flock, and precious as jewels. They have grain and new wine (young men and women are mentioned as examples, not because the young women get all the new wine!), signs of prosperity which are often found as part of the description of Canaan as the promised land (Dt. 7:13; 11:14; Ho. 2:8, 22).

10:1–5 Blessing, leaders and battle. The transition from one section to another is not at all clear. Here we find all three main subjects that have occurred in the previous section: an invitation to ask for rain so that the crops *etc.* may grow (1, *cf.* 9:17); provision of a good leader (4, *cf.* 9:9) to replace corrupt ones (3); and a continuation of battle imagery (3b–5, *cf.* 9:10, 13–15). The prophecy appears disjointed, but a logical progression can be detected.

1 *Ask the* LORD *for rain* and not idols and those who serve them.

2 *The idols speak deceit* (or wickedness), and the result of trusting sources other than the Lord is that *the people wander like sheep, oppressed for lack of a shepherd.*

3 Therefore the Lord will act: *My anger* burns *against the shepherds ... leaders.*

3b Narrator's comment and expansion, or else the Lord continues to speak of himself in the third person. God cares for his people and will therefore make them successful in battle and will provide a good leader.

4 The leader is described as (a) a *cornerstone*: a different word from capstone in 4:7, meaning that on which the building is supported; (b) a *tent peg*: which keeps the tent up.

4b means either that Judah will bring forth (effective) weapons and rulers, or else that *battle-bow* and *every* (oppressive) *ruler* will depart from Judah, giving peace to the land.

5 Description of the battle continues. This leads naturally into the next section.

10:6–12 I will strengthen them. This section is in the form of a promise spoken by God himself. Its basic content is indicated by the envelope formed by '*I will strengthen* ...' (beginning of 6 and 12).

Throughout these verses the past judgment is acknowledged: they *have* been scattered among the nations by the Lord (6b, 9 ['scattered' is better here], 10–11), but in his compassion he will bring them back home, and give them as much as they had previously (6, 8).

The emphasis on Ephraim as well as Judah signifies the unity of God's people. The northern kingdom was actually destroyed in 721 BC, at least two hundred years previously. At that time the Assyrians deliberately mixed up the population of Israel with those of other nations, seeking to destroy their identity, but the Lord has not forgotten his people. There are still those who *remember* that they are part of Israel, and the Lord will signal for them to return home. Even today the sense of looking to Jerusalem is very strong among Jews all over the world.

Some Jews fled to Egypt from the Babylonian armies (Je. 43 – 44) and not all returned from Assyria. In fact there were Israelites all over the known world. But Egypt and Assyria also signify oppression and bondage in all its forms. The references to passing through the sea and to the Nile, recall the exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21–28) and the judgment of God in turning the Nile to blood (Ex. 7:17–21). Assyria and Egypt had been proud and acknowledged rulers, but this would change.

It is good to be cautious in speaking today of Egypt and Israel as if the modern nations known by these names are those to which the promises apply (see *e.g.* Is. 19:19–25!). We need to see the underlying concern of the prophet and realize that the Lord is God who redeems his (repentant) people from situations where they are helpless in themselves.

11:1–3 A call to lament. Lebanon has been mentioned in 10:10 as a destination for returning exiles, so we might think that '*Open your doors*' would be simply to let them in. Not so. It is for fire to come in and burn up Lebanon's impressive cedars. They are often used as a symbol of pride. The oaks of Bashan, in the far north of the land east of the Jordan, are similar. Both occur in Is. 2:13 (*cf.* Ezk. 27:5–6). It is possible that the regions of Lebanon and Bashan were guilty of particular wrongs against the Israelites, but their main purpose here is to stand for all proud opposition to God's purposes.

This type of 'call to lament' is often used in prophetic passages of judgment as a graphic way of describing a coming disaster (Is. 13:6; 14:31; Je. 25:34; Zp. 1:11). The *shepherds* and *lions* indicate the leaders to be judged: their environment is destroyed and they cannot operate any more.

The passage has several links with the preceding verses (especially 9:4 *consumed by fire*; 10:2–3, *shepherds*; 10:10, *Lebanon*; 10:11, *pride* (of Assyria), translated *lush thicket* in 11:3). So it acts as a transitional passage, preparing the way for the allegory of the shepherds that follows.

11:4–17 Shepherds and sheep

This section describes the prophet as a shepherd of the *flock marked for slaughter* who acts on their behalf for a while and then abandons them, breaking his shepherd's staffs (4–14). Then he represents a *foolish shepherd* who does not care for the flock and is cursed (15–17).

The passage is among the most difficult to interpret. V 13 is well known because of its use in Mt. 27:9–10, where it represents the price paid to Judas for betraying Jesus. In this passage it also represents the value placed on the shepherd appointed by God, though it is paid to the shepherd himself, and not to a betrayer.

It is not an account of actual events, for several references cannot be taken literally, *e.g. revoking the covenant I had made with all the nations* (10) and *in one month I got rid of three shepherds* (8) (*cf.* other occurrences of the same verb: *perishing* in v 9; Ex. 23:23, 'wipe them out'; 1 Ki. 13:34, 'destruction'). The allegory is a graphic way of describing the Lord's dealing with his flock.

11:4–6 A shepherd of the doomed flock. The prophet reports a commission from the Lord ('said' would be better than *says*) to become a shepherd of *the flock marked for slaughter*. They are at the mercy of unscrupulous merchants and shepherds who only keep them for profit (5). V 6 adds an interpretation: the Lord's pity is to be suspended, for the people must be judged. People will be oppressed by their neighbours (a sign of internal unrest) and their leaders. There was no king of Judah until the second century BC, so the word must be used figuratively. It shows a contrast with the 'humble king' of 9:9 and the Lord who will be 'king over the whole earth' (14:9). For a while the Lord will not rescue his people from their plight.

11:7–14 The fate of two staffs. The prophet pastures the doomed flock with staffs indicating that he will do the job well. *Favour* is a characteristic of God mentioned in Pss. 27:4 ('beauty') and 90:17 ('favour'). It signifies some sort of protection for God's people from attacks by the nations (10). *Union* is lit. 'bands', *i.e.* that which binds together (Israel and Judah, 14).

In the month . . . three shepherds. Many have tried to identify three historical leaders, usually kings or priests, who were destroyed in *one month*, *i.e.* a short space of time, but it cannot be done with any confidence. In any case, it signifies the Lord's action against bad leaders, but on behalf of an unresponsive people (9). Therefore, the shepherd abandons them to their fate, breaking the staff *Favour* and allowing the nations to oppress them again.

Either *the afflicted of the flock* or *the traders in the sheep* (as in the Gk. version of the Bible) observed this and *knew it was the word of the* LORD, *i.e.* recognized that the Lord had spoken to them through the shepherd's actions (*cf.* also 2:9, 11; 4:9; 6:15).

In vs 12–13 the prophet asks for his wages, if they want to pay him. *They paid . . . thirty pieces* (lit. weighed out thirty shekels) *of silver*, which he refers to ironically as *the handsome price at which they priced me!* The same sum was demanded as compensation for the death of a slave (Ex. 21:32). The shekel varied between about a third and two thirds of an ounce, but silver was quite valuable (see Ne. 5:15). *Into the house of the* LORD *to the potter.* It is possible that a potter would be there to make vessels used for the service of the temple. The word might also mean 'metal worker'. A very slight change in the Hebrew would give 'into the treasury' and this is what one ancient version, the Syriac, reads. It may be correct.

The second staff, *Union*, is broken (14), signifying disunity between Israel and Judah who should have been united as God's people.

11:15–17 A foolish, worthless shepherd. *Take again . . . of a foolish shepherd* is

strange, because the prophet started as a good shepherd. The meaning is either that he became a *foolish shepherd* when he broke the staffs, or, more likely, that the meaning is 'Take again the implements of a shepherd, this time a foolish one'. The word *foolish* in the OT indicates 'wilfully bad', rather than simply lacking in intelligence.

It is strange to find one of God's servants commanded to do something actually bad. The Lord uses evil instruments from time to time (Is. 10:5–11; Hab. 1:5–6) but this is different. Compare the ironical speech of Micaiah (1 Ki. 22:19–28; *cf.* Ezk. 20:25–26).

This indicates that God will punish the people by means of an oppressive ruler (16). Because of the shepherd's deserting his flock a curse is pronounced against him (17): *Woe to the* (or 'my') *worthless shepherd.* It is difficult to know how the prophet's hearers would have understood his words. They give a paradoxical picture of a shepherd who acts badly according to the Lord's express command, and is punished for it. Christians can see a similar paradox in the cross: he made him who had no sin to be sin for us . . . (2 Cor. 5:21).

The figure of the shepherd is continued in 13:7–9, but before that there is another paradoxical passage to deal with.

Notes. 7, 11 *Particularly the oppressed of the flock* is an attempt to make sense of a difficult Hebrew phrase. If this is allowed, then the passage makes sense. Many feel that it does not, and we must accept the ancient Greek version's rendering 'for the traders in the sheep', which requires only a small change. The word 'trader' occurs in 14:21: it is the same as 'Canaanite'.

12:1 – 13:9 Battle, victory and purification

It is difficult to be sure that this section belongs together, for it contains a variety of material. Yet there is an underlying unity to it, and we can see how one part leads on to another. The whole is constructed as follows:

12:1–9 The nations attack Jerusalem (and Judah [?] see v 2 below) but are defeated. Tension between Jerusalem and Judah is resolved.

12:10–14 The people who have pierced the Lord's representative (*the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem*) will mourn and grieve for him.

13:1 *On that day* these same people will be cleansed.

13:2–6 *On that day* idols and (false) prophecy will be removed.

13:7–9 The LORD's shepherd is struck, the sheep are scattered, there is severe purifying, and the covenant promise is reaffirmed.

12:1–9 Victory over the nations. There are some unusual features in this passage: (a) *David* is mentioned six times, but nowhere else in Zechariah, and the *house of David* is distinguished from the inhabitants of Jerusalem; (b) Judah and Jerusalem seem to be disunited (7); also in v 5 the people of Judah speak of those in Jerusalem as different (*their God*), and it is possible that v 2b means it (*i.e.* the cup of wrath) will be against Judah (as well as the nations) in the siege of Jerusalem.

The prophet starts with a reminder of the greatness of the Lord: he made the universe, and he gives life to each person, for it is the spirit within that makes a person a living being. This immediately puts the nations in their right place: they are nothing compared to this God. The Lord decrees that Jerusalem will be like a cup containing wine or something similar. The nations will drink and go reeling! The Lord will make Jerusalem a rock and anyone who tries to move it will simply injure themselves, meaning 'lacerate', as in Lv. 21:5. The panic and blindness mentioned recall other stories of judgment (Gn. 19:10–11; Jdg 7:19–22; 2 Ki. 6:18–22.) (See also ch. 14:12–13 and *cf.* Acts 9:3–9.)

The people of Judah realize that it is the Lord who gives strength and victory (5). In v 6 the metaphor changes: the nations attacking Jerusalem are like sheaves attacking flames, and they are consumed. Jerusalem will be unmoved and unharmed.

Judah will gain victory first (7–9), thus removing both Judah's envy of Jerusalem and Jerusalem's feelings of superiority over Judah, and restoring harmony. Even the feeblest will be as mighty as David and the house of David *will be like God, like the Angel of the LORD* (*i.e.* the Lord when he comes to visit his people). For a similar metaphorical expression see Ex. 7:1, where Moses is 'like God to Pharaoh' and Aaron is his prophet.

Are these events a literal description of something that happened or will happen? Or are they a figurative description of God's protection of his people against overwhelming odds? It is impossible to demonstrate a detailed historical fulfilment, though it might conceivably have happened in one of history's obscure periods. It seems more likely that this gives us a pattern for God's working which may be seen in more or less detail at various times in history. The same is true of ch. 14, where there are more amazing events, connected with God's final purposes in history.

12:10–14 God's representative pierced: repentance. There follows a description of what happens to *the house of David . . . and the inhabitants of Jerusalem* (7, 10). They have obviously 'pierced' someone whom we have not been told about. The text actually says: *They*

will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him . . . The change from 'me' to 'him' is abrupt and might be a mistake. But among the ancient versions of the OT, only Theodotion reads 'look on him . . .' The other striking thing is that the Lord should say they have pierced him. It could be used metaphorically, since God is often spoken of as having human feelings (*e.g.* Ho. 11:8–9; *cf.* also the metaphorical expression 'pierced by hunger' in La. 4:9). The word 'pierce' is rare and usually refers to killing. In two instances it is used of a *coup de grace* (Jdg. 9:54; 1 Sa. 31:4; *cf.* Jn. 19:34–37).

Perhaps the best way to understand this is that the people have killed a historical figure, who was the Lord's representative, and in doing so they have pierced the Lord himself. This was, of course, literally true when the soldier pierced Jesus, God the Son, who was also a *firstborn son*. There may well have been a previous historical figure to whom these words refer.

After this piercing the people realize what they have done and mourn and grieve for him. The words imply repentance for what they have done, and this is confirmed by 13:1. *Hadad* and *Rimmon* are both names for pagan deities, and *Rimmon* is also a place name (14:10; Jos. 15:32; 19:7). *Hadad Rimmon* may therefore be a place or a god. In Canaanite mythology Hadad's son was killed by the god of death (Mot) and there was probably an annual ritual marking these events. Our text, therefore, refers to some form of (pagan) festival, either at or for Hadad Rimmon. The prophet does not hereby approve of such rituals, but describes the intensity of the weeping.

The whole land will mourn. *each clan by itself*, and *their wives by themselves*. Probably this signifies genuine repentance: they are not weeping simply because others are. Even husbands and wives weep separately. *Nathan* and *Shimei* were the names of sons of David and Levi respectively, who may be singled out for their part, as political and priestly leaders, in the crime.

13:1–6 Cleansing continues: idols and false prophets removed. *On that day* occurs in vs 1, 2 and 4, and serves to bind these verses together. Some regard the formula as evidence of a later insertion into the text, but they add significantly to the sense of the whole. Following heartfelt repentance the same people again (*cf.* 12:7, 10) will be cleansed from sin and impurity, and thus fit to be in the Lord's presence.

V 2–6 elaborate on the theme of cleansing: idols and prophets who rely on the *spirit of impurity* will be removed from the land. If a false prophet utters a prophecy, even his parents will not tolerate him: they will 'pierce' him (the same word as in 12:10). The prophets themselves will be ashamed of their false prophecies: they will not put on the prophetic 'uniform' of hair (an animal skin: *cf.* Elijah in 2 Ki. 1:8; and John the Baptist in Mk. 1:6); they will deny that they have anything to do with prophecy (5), and if they have marks on their body from initiation as prophets or self-inflicted while prophesying (*cf.* 1 Ki. 18:28) they will pass them off as received during a brawl at *the house of my friends*. There is perhaps an ironical hint at the truth here, for 'friends' can be used of 'lovers', *i.e.* companions in idolatrous worship (Ho. 2:7–13; Ezk. 23:5, 9). He does not mention the names of the idols, as in v 2.

13:7–9 The Lord's shepherd struck and the sheep scattered: refining and restoration. This could be an alternative way of describing the piercing of 12:10. The one struck is described as *my shepherd* and *the man who is close to me*, and yet it is at God's express command that he is struck. As a result his followers are scattered and undergo a severe period of refining: first they are cut down to a third, and even these are tested further. The purpose is that what is pure and genuine may be saved. The climax of the section is v 9b, a reaffirmation of the covenant promise (see on 2:10–12: 8:8; *cf.* also Ho. 2:23).

14:1–21 Judgment and salvation of the nations

Ch. 14 is similar to ch. 12 in that it describes a battle of the nations against Jerusalem. Here, however, there is a greater emphasis on the final fulfilment of the Lord's purposes (9 especially). The first section (1–15) is arranged chiastically in a large ABCBA pattern:

A (vs 1–3) Judgment and the Lord's intervention
  B (vs 4–5) Geographical upheavals
    C (vs 6–9) Ideal conditions: the Lord is king
  B^1 (vs 10–11) Geographical upheavals
A^1 (vs 12–15) Judgment and the Lord's intervention

This leads into vs 16–19, which prophesy that the nations will go to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at the *Feast of Tabernacles*. This represents a great transformation from judgment to blessing for the nations.

The final section (20–21) tells of the holiness of Jerusalem at that time: even the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots will be *HOLY TO THE LORD*, and there will be no *Canaanite* or 'merchant' in the temple.

14:1–15 Battle in Jerusalem: the Lord becomes King over all the earth. We

may set out the contents so as to show the logical flow of the section as in the summary below. Some changes have been made to the NIV in order to show how particular words emphasize the dominant ideas of each part.

1 Behold a day is coming for the Lord . . .
plunder divided among you.

2 And *I will gather all nations to Jerusalem* for battle . . . Half city go forth into exile . . .

3 The Lord go forth and *fight against those nations* as he fights on a battle day.

4 And *his feet will stand*, on that day, on the *Mount of Olives* . . . on the east . . . the *Mount of Olives* will be split in half eastwards and westwards, a very *great valley* and half the *Mount* depart northwards, and half southwards.

5 And *you will flee, by my mountain valley* for the *mountain valley will extend to Azel*, and *you will flee as you fled from the earthquake* in days of *Uzziah king of Judah* and *the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.*

6 And *on that day there will be no light, nor cold* (precious things?) *nor frost.*

7 And there will be one day; it is *known to the Lord.* No day and no night, and *when evening comes there will be light.*

8 And *on that day living waters* will go forth *from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea, and half to the western sea, in summer and winter.*

9 And *the Lord* will be *King over all the earth on that day* the Lord will be one and his name one.

10 And all the land/earth, *from Geba to Rimmon, south of Jerusalem, will become like the Arabah. But Jerusalem will be raised up and remain in its place, from the Benjamin gate to the site of the First Gate, to the Corner Gate, and from the tower of Hananel* as far as the wine presses of the *king.*

11 And they will dwell in it, and there will not be destruction and Jerusalem will dwell in trust/security.

12 And this the plague . . . all peoples . . . against Jerusalem *flesh will rot* while *standing on their feet, eyes rot in sockets, tongues rot in mouths.*

13 And on that day . . . great panic from the Lord and each man will seize the hand of his neighbour, and each man's hand will be raised against the hand of his neighbour.

14 And also *Judah* will *fight* with/against *Jerusalem* and *the wealth of the nations* around will be gathered, *gold and silver* and garments, in great abundance.

15 And thus will be plague on the *horses etc. in those camps* like this plague.

The Lord himself apparently instigates this attack on Jerusalem (1–3), but the purpose is not to destroy his people. He allows the nations to inflict suffering on them, but not destroy them: a remnant of half the people is left in Jerusalem. Then the Lord himself will intervene.

In vs 4–5 the picture is of the Lord standing astride the mount of Olives, a ridge 2½ miles long, running from north to south, on the east side of Jerusalem. The mount is split by a valley which forms from east to west as the mount moves apart to north and south. This has not yet happened: some believe that it will happen literally; others that it is a figurative expression of the intervention of God (see note on the interpretation of chs. 9 – 14). Am. 1:1 refers to the earthquake in King Uzziah's time, and this may be reflected in Is. 6 (1–5; note the contrast between King Uzziah and the Lord the King, in both Amos and Zechariah).

Vs 6–9 form the central section and turning point of vs 1–15. The text is difficult, but the overall picture is clear: there is continuous daylight (a sign of banishing all the darkness of evil), and from Jerusalem (where the Lord dwells) living water will go forth to the eastern and western seas (bringing life to the whole breadth of the earth). The Lord will be king: this forms a contrast with the division mentioned previously in the use of the word 'half'. There will be one Lord and people will acknowledge only one Lord (*his name the only name*).

More geographical references (10) form a frame around vs 6–9. This time the purpose is to exalt Jerusalem, now delivered and inhabited by the Lord. It stands above the rest of the land, which has now become a plain. It is inhabited and secure.

Vs 12–15 match vs 1–3 in describing the nations' attack on Jerusalem. They give details of how the Lord defeats them. It may seem unsatisfactory to return to judgment and plagues after seeing the wonderful picture of vs 6–9, but this is how a chiastic arrangement often works. The climax comes in the middle.

14:16–19 The nations come to the Feast of Tabernacles. Egypt is mentioned here as the people from whom Israel had to be delivered at the start of their existence as a people. They often stand as an example of those who are against God. Here it is emphasized that they are expected to come and worship the Lord. Nations who were previously excluded from worshipping the Lord are now a part of the covenant people (*cf.* Is. 19:18–25). The structure of the section is as follows.

16 And it will be that the survivors from all the nations that *came* against Jerusalem *will go up year by year to worship the King the LORD Almighty* [of hosts] *and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.*

17 And it will be if any of the peoples of the earth *do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King the* LORD *Almighty* [of hosts], there will be no rain on them.

18 *If the Egyptian people do not go up and take part, the* LORD *will bring on them the plague with which the Lord will plague the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.*

19 *This will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.*

This is clearly a positive prophecy (16) followed by exception clauses (17–19). Repetition serves to emphasize: going up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord Almighty ['of hosts'], and to 'feast the Feast of Tabernacles'. There is stern punishment for those who refuse the opportunity to join with Yahweh's people in worship and feast. Egypt is a representative nation. If it remains hostile, as in the days of Israel's bondage in Egypt, then she merits and will suffer plague (as previously, *cf.* Heb. 2:3).

14:20–21 Jerusalem cleansed and holy. The final section begins and ends in Hebrew with the words *on that day*, which form an envelope for the intervening material. The words *HOLY TO THE LORD* were inscribed on a plate of pure gold on the high priest's turban (Ex. 28:36). Here even the horse bells are inscribed: they are as holy as the high priest. There is no distinction between secular and sacred even in disposable pottery: all is sacred in the Lord's presence. The word *Canaanite* also means 'trader'. Probably the term is specially chosen to signify both trading (which does not usually have a holy motive) and impure religion which the Israelites were supposed to remove when they inherited the land of Canaan (Dt. 7:1–6, *etc.*).

Mike Butterworth

MALACHI

Introduction

Author

The Hebrew name Malachi means 'my messenger' or, if Malachi is a shortened form of 'Malachiah', perhaps 'messenger of [the LORD]'. Based on the LXX some scholars have argued that Malachi in 1:1 ought to be understood as a title, 'my messenger', rather than as a proper name. It appears more likely, however, that it is a man's name, as it is interpreted as such in other ancient sources. If this is so, the book of Malachi follows the pattern of each of the other fourteen writing prophets, where the author is introduced by name at the beginning, using language similar to that employed in 1:1 (*cf.* especially Hg. 1:1). Accordingly, 3:1 offers an important word-play on the prophet's name: 'See, I will send *my messenger*, who will prepare the way before me'. The implication of this word-play is that Malachi's own ministry was intended to foreshadow that of the coming messenger, who is identified in the NT as John the Baptist (see on 3:1 and 4:5–6). See also chart on page 628.

Date

In contrast to most of the other prophetic books of the OT, Malachi offers no clear pointer to the date of its composition. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that Malachi was probably a contemporary of Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century BC. The implied existence of the temple in 1:10; 3:1, 8, requiring a date after its reconstruction in 515 BC, supports this. The most compelling evidence for dating Malachi, however, is the substantial parallel which exists between the sins reported by Malachi and those addressed by Ezra and Nehemiah. There are shared concerns with the corruption of the priesthood (1:6 – 2:9; Ne. 13:4–9, 29–30); interfaith marriage (2:10–12; Ezr. 9 – 10; Ne. 10:30; 13:1–3, 23–27); abuse of the disadvantaged (3:5; Ne. 5:1–13); and the failure to pay tithes (3:8–10; Ne. 10:32–39; 13:10–13).

Setting

Malachi's ministry took place nearly one hundred years after the end of the Babylonian captivity and the inspired decree of Cyrus in 538 BC, which allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild the temple (2 Ch. 36:23). This was nearly eighty years after the prophets Haggai and Zechariah had encouraged the rebuilding of that temple with glorious promises of God's blessing, the engrafting of the nations, prosperity, expansion, peace and the return of God's own glorious presence (*cf. e.g.* Hg. 2: Zc. 1:16–17; 2; 8; 9). To Malachi's disillusioned contemporaries, however, these misunderstood predictions must have seemed a cruel mockery. In contrast to the glowing promises, the harsh reality was one of economic privation, crop failure, prolonged drought and pestilence (3:10–11).

After the return from exile Judah remained an almost insignificant territory of about 20 x 25 miles (30 x 40 km) inhabited by a population of perhaps 150,000. Although they enjoyed the benefits of Persia's enlightened policy of religious toleration and limited political self-determination, the people felt acutely their subjugation to a foreign power (Ne. 1:3; 9:36–37), and they suffered persistent opposition and harassment from their neighbours (Ezr. 4:23; Dn. 9:25). Judah was no longer an independent nation, and more importantly it was no longer ruled by an anointed king from David's line.

Perhaps worst of all, in spite of the promises of the coming Messiah and God's own glorious presence (*e.g.* Zc. 1:16–17; 2:4–5, 10–13; 8:3–17, 23; 9:9–13), Israel experienced only spiritual destitution. Unlike the historical records of earlier periods, Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah are frank in their description of post-exilic Judah as lacking miraculous evidences of God's presence. In contrast to both Solomon's temple and the prophetic promise of the restored temple (as in Ezk. 40 – 43), the actual post-exilic temple was physically and spiritually inferior. As 3:1 reveals, the holy of holies in this second temple had no visible manifestation of the glory of God. Though God was certainly alive and well, as revealed, *e.g.* by his remarkable providences in the book of Esther, it was definitely a period of life 'after the fireworks' (*cf.* also Mi. 5:3). In other words, it was a period very much like our own, in which God's people have to live more by faith than by sight (Jn. 20:29; 2 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:8; 2 Pet. 3:3–13).

Malachi's message

Malachi's contemporaries may have been relatively orthodox in their beliefs and free from

blatant idolatry (though *cf.* 2:11), but theirs had become a dead orthodoxy. They were all too ready to make ethical compromises and to dilute the strenuous demands of proper worship. In response to the cynicism and religious malaise of his fellow-Israelites, Malachi's prophecy comes as a wake-up call to renewed covenant fidelity.

In 1:2–5, the first of the book's six 'disputations', Malachi begins by defending the reality of God's elective love for Israel, a love which calls for robust covenantal obedience and sincere worship as its proper response. Far from this expected response, however, the people were dishonouring God by their feckless offerings and the hypocritical formalism of their worship.

In 1:6 – 2:9, the second disputation, Malachi exposes these offences and rebukes the priests for condoning them and thereby violating the Lord's covenant with Levi.

In 2:10–16, the third disputation, Malachi condemns interfaith marriage as infidelity against Israel's covenant with the Lord, and unauthorized divorce as infidelity against the marriage covenant between a husband and his wife, to which the Lord is witness. Malachi warns that these offences not only render offerings unacceptable but also place the offender's life in jeopardy before a holy God.

In 2:17 –3:5, the fourth disputation, Malachi broadens the focus of his indictment as he promises that the Lord will vindicate his justice. This will take place when 'the messenger of the covenant' comes to judge the wicked (when the Lord will function as a witness not only against adulterers, as in 2:10–16, but also against other offenders) and to purify his people so that their offerings will be acceptable at last.

In 3:6–12, the fifth disputation, Malachi returns to the subject of Israel's begrudging offerings. The people had experienced material adversity and were under a curse, not in spite of their behaviour but because of it. Accordingly, Malachi challenges them to conscientious tithing, which will be rewarded with divine blessing.

In 3:13 – 4:3, the sixth disputation, Malachi assures his querulous contemporaries that evildoers, who may seem to escape divine justice because of their prosperity, will yet be judged, while the Lord will deliver those who fear him.

Finally, in 4:4–6 Malachi summarizes the main points of his prophecy: remember the law of Moses (the focus of disputations 1–3) and the promise of Elijah and the coming day of the Lord (the focus of disputations 4–6).

Malachi's message is arranged in a structured 'mirror-image' pattern – ABCCBA – and this is reflected in the sections into which the commentary has been divided.

Further reading

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Outline of contents

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3:13 – 4:3	**A The good and the arrogant wicked: God's love vindicated in judgment**
4:4–6	**Conclusion**

Commentary

1:1 Heading

Malachi, like the other prophets, emphasizes the authoritative *word of the* LORD. In this summary heading, Malachi acknowledges his own role as an intermediary and explicitly identifies his work as *the word of the* LORD. In keeping with this identification, nearly half of the remaining fifty-four verses of this concise and profound book are punctuated with 'says the LORD', 'says the LORD Almighty' *etc.*

Similar to the headings found in Zc. 9:1 and 12:1 (*cf.* Hab 1:1), 1:1 describes this work as *An oracle* or, perhaps better, 'a burden', with implications of urgent responsibility and even dread (*cf.* Je. 23:33–40). While Malachi directs his message to the undersized post-exilic rump state of Judah, he boldly confers on this people the ancient comprehensive designation of *Israel*, thereby identifying them as those who are accountable for all of the covenant obligations and heirs of all the covenant promises of God.

1:2–5 The good and the arrogant wicked: God's love vindicated in judgment

When the righteous suffer and the wicked seem to prosper, we are apt to question God's love. In this first disputation Malachi exposes and answers the doubts of his contemporaries. Because of their political, economic and especially spiritual destitution, they had come to question God's love. In a classic text, which Paul later quotes in Rom. 9:13, Malachi responds with an appeal to God's elective and unconditional love of *Jacob* and corresponding hatred of *Esau*. Here 'love' is used to express choice and 'hatred' rejection, rather than personal animosity (which was explicitly prohibited against Edomites, Esau's descendants, in Dt. 23:7). For a similar usage, see Lk. 14:26; 16:13.

Jacob and *Esau* are individuals from Israel's patriarchal history. Although they were brothers, Jacob experienced God's sovereign favour, which allowed him to enjoy a privileged role in redemptive history as a bearer of the Messianic promise, while Esau experienced God's rejection in terms of this same role. Malachi's concern, however, was primarily with the nations of Israel and Edom, of which Jacob and Esau were the representatives and founding fathers (*cf.* Gn. 25:21–23). Accordingly, it is no more possible to conclude that every Edomite was rejected or damned than to conclude that every Israelite was saved.

To Malachi's contemporaries it must have seemed that the prophet had committed a terrible blunder in appealing to the contrasting national fates of Israel and Edom as a proof of Israel's favoured status. If God had chosen Jacob/Israel over Esau/Edom, why did he allow his people to suffer the total devastation of their country in 587 BC by Nebuchadnezzar and then seventy years of Babylonian captivity, while Edom remained intact and seemed rather to benefit from Israel's loss? Not only did the Edomites gloat over the ruin of their Israelite brothers, but they also actively helped the Babylonian invaders by acting as informants and cutting off escape routes (Ps. 137:7; Ezk. 25:12–14; 35:15; Ob. 8–16).

Malachi makes his point, however, by quoting Je. 9:11. Two hundred years before Malachi Jeremiah had announced what was at that time the Lord's impending judgment against Judah: 'I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals; and I will lay waste the towns of Judah so that no-one can live there.' By applying this same threat to Edom, Malachi makes it clear that like Judah Edom would not escape God's righteous judgment. It seems likely that Edom experienced this judgment through the agency of Nabatean Arabs who gradually forced the Edomites from their homeland in the period between 550 and 400 BC, causing them to resettle in southern Palestine in an area later called Idumea. Being semi-nomadic, the Nabateans allowed the cities of Edom to go to ruin while their grazing herds ate much of the plant life, thereby destroying previously arable land. While Judah would be graciously restored, reflecting the Lord's love for his people, Edom's judgment would be permanent and irreversible. Individual Edomites would continue to exist (as is implied by 1:4; *cf.* the Idumeans who later came to Christ in Mk. 3:8), but they had permanently forfeited their national identity.

The first disputation ends with a confession of the Lord's universal sovereignty. This universal perspective, often misunderstood as if it implied a universalism where the religions of other nations are deemed acceptable to God, is a sub-theme of Malachi, to which the prophet returns in 1:11, 14 and 3:12.

1:6 – 2:9 Israel's begrudging offerings condemned

Do we really love God above all else? Does it show in the quality of our worship and service to him? In this second disputation Malachi 'turns the tables' on the complaint treated in the first. It is not God's love for Israel which is to be

questioned, but Israel's for God. While recognizing that all the people were guilty of dishonouring God, as revealed in their begrudging offerings (1:14), Malachi focuses his attack on Israel's priests. This is so because it was their responsibility to guard the sanctuary from defilement and to inspect all sacrifices so as to prevent the offering of blind, lame or sickly animals (Lv. 22:17–25; Dt. 15:21; 17:1).

As a kind of shock therapy to bring the priests to their senses, Malachi contrasts the honour they readily give to people whom they respect with the heinous dishonour they have shown God. Malachi challenges his countrymen to test the quality of their sacrifices by offering them to their Persian *governor* instead. Malachi's logic is incontrovertible. Even a merely human governor, master or father deserves and receives greater honour than was being offered by Israel to its God, who was its supreme *father*, *master* and *great king* (1:6, 14; in its secular use the title *great king* is typically reserved for the emperor or suzerain king, as in 2 Ki. 18:19, 28).

When challenged by Malachi, the priests were nonplussed. Apparently they had deluded themselves into thinking that when it came to worship or offerings, something was better than nothing, lukewarm was better than cold. In fact, the Lord would prefer that such slovenly, irreverent, hypocritical worship would cease altogether (v 10; *cf.* Is. 1:11–15; 29:13; and Rev. 3:15–16).

Since the priests had failed to guard the purity of the temple, the Lord threatened to punish them in a manner which fitted their crime. Because they 'have shown *contempt for*' ('despised'; 1:6) and failed to honour the Lord's name (2:2), they will be despised and humiliated before all the people (2:9). Because they had defiled God (1:7), he will figuratively defile them and disqualify them for service at the altar by spreading on their faces the offal taken from their rejected sacrifices. Since that offal was to be removed from the sanctuary and burned (Lv. 4:11–12), so now they too would be expelled (2:3). Because they had presumed to bless the people of God as if Israel's sacrifices had been accepted and atonement made, God would now curse their blessings (2:2). As Matthew Henry wrote, 'Nothing profanes the name of God more than the misconduct of those whose business it is to do honour to it.'

1:11 has proved to be the most controversial verse in this book. Especially disturbing is the fact that Malachi refers to the presentation of *incense* and *pure offerings* in many places, rather than exclusively in the temple in Jerusalem, as would have been required by Dt. 12 in Malachi's day (*cf.* 3:3–4; 4:4). A key to the interpretation of 1:11 is to understand the expression *from the rising to the setting of the sun* as eschatological language (*cf.* Ps. 50:1; 113:3; Is. 45:6; 59:19). The two texts from Isaiah include a reference to an ultimate engrafting of the nations, suggesting a similar reference in Malachi. This hope finds further definition in such texts as Is. 19:19–25 and 66:19–21, where the nations are made to be 'Levites' and will offer acceptable offerings on approved altars to the true God. (*Cf.* also Ps. 47; Je. 4:1–2; Zp. 2:11; Zc. 2:11; 8:23.)

Malachi may have considered that these promises were beginning to be fulfilled in his own day in the conversion of Gentiles to Judaism. The bold language of 1:11, however, in contrast to the modest numbers of converts likely to have existed at the time, would seem to suggest that Malachi's reference pointed to a still future, more comprehensive fulfilment.

This reminder of the Lord's purpose for the conversion of the nations, a plan involving Israel's calling to be a blessing to them (*cf.* 3:12 and Gn. 12:2–3), features the temple as its focus (*e.g.* Is. 2:1–5). This is typical of Malachi's prominent interest in the end times (*cf. e.g.* 3:1–5, 17; 4:1–6) and adds force to his condemnation of the apathetic sacrificial cult of his contemporaries. Having exposed the priest's hypocrisy by contrasting the way they honour mere human authorities with the way they dishonour God, Malachi further rebukes that hypocrisy in 1:11 by contrasting their dishonour with the honour and acceptable offerings that will come to God one day from those who are truly redeemed. (*Cf.* Mt. 8:10–12, where Jesus uses a similar argument to rebuke his contemporaries.)

2:10–16 The Lord's witness against foreign marriages and divorces

Why is it that God requires a marriage to be in good repair before he will listen to a husband's prayer (see 1 Pet. 3:7; *cf.* Mt. 5:23–24)? Malachi reveals the answer: marriage is not just a contract, a two-way relationship between a husband and wife, but a *covenant*, a three-way relationship of responsibilities and privileges which involves God as a witness to whom the couple is permanently accountable.

In v 10 Malachi introduces his third disputation with a general description of Israel's infidelity against one another, which profanes their covenant with God, the Father and Creator of Israel (Dt. 32:6; *cf.* Is. 27:11; 43:15; Je. 31:9). Malachi condemns two parallel, though not necessarily related, marital offences. The first offence is that of intermarriage with pagans (11–12; *cf.* Ne. 13:29, where interfaith marriage by priests profanes the covenant of the priesthood), and the second is divorce based

merely on aversion or incompatibility (13–16).

Malachi expresses a view of marriage that is radical in its conception (identifying marriage as a covenant between husband and wife). The demands it places on the husband are equal to those made by our Saviour and the apostles of the NT. Indeed, this exalted perspective on marriage has caused many interpreters to doubt whether Malachi was referring to literal marriage at all. Some suggest that Malachi only intended marriage as a metaphor for Israel's relationship to the Lord. Against this, however, is the observation that everywhere else in Scripture where the marriage metaphor appears God is uniformly depicted as the husband, not the wife, as would be the case here. Others suggest that the expression *the wife of your marriage covenant* (14) simply means a Jewish wife, *i.e.* a wife who shares in the same religious covenant with the Lord as her husband. The traditional view, reflected in the NIV, that Malachi intends a marriage covenant, however, is still to be preferred.

Malachi's contemporaries were distressed because God was refusing to accept their offerings (13), a fact which they perceived, presumably, from his withheld blessing. Malachi explains that God was acting as a *witness* against those husbands who were being unfaithful to their wives. Because marriage is a covenant, fidelity to one's spouse is of a piece with one's relationship with God.

V 15a may be a reference to Gn. 2:24, as is suggested by the NIV. If so, it is possible that Malachi derived his understanding of marriage as a covenant, and therefore his emphasis on the primacy of the husband's duty, from the pattern marriage of Adam and Eve. The translation and meaning of this verse is obscure, but the general approach taken by the NIV does account for the dire warnings in vs. 15b and 16b. These warnings show that for an unfaithful spouse divorce is an offence against one's own life. (*So guard yourself in your spirit* might be rendered, 'Therefore watch out for your lives'). In other words, concern for one's life and fidelity to one's legitimate spouse are virtually the same thing (*cf.* Eph. 5:28). This suggests the profound communion of life which God effects between a man and a woman within marriage, as established in Gn. 2:24. Thus interpreted, there is a remarkable similarity between the logic of 2:15 and the teaching of Jesus in Mt. 19:5–9.

Furthermore, this verse asserts that the Lord intends marriage to produce *godly offspring* ('seed of God'). In Malachi's view, divorce may have frustrated this purpose in a manner similar to interfaith marriage (*cf.* Ne. 13:23–27; Ezr. 10:3, 44). The expression 'seed of God' reflects the imagery established in v 10 (and 1:6) of God as our *one Father*, *i.e.* God as a father to his people in virtue of his redemptive acts and covenant, and it is an intentional contrast to the phrase, the daughter of a foreign god in v 11.

It is only with great difficulty and some changes to the text that the underlying Hebrew of v 16 can be made to say *I hate divorce* .... This apparent blanket condemnation of divorce seems to contradict the more lenient view of divorce in Dt. 24:1–4. Similarly, a more general right to divorce may be suggested by Dt. 22:19, 29, the Lord's figurative divorce of Israel in Je. 3 and certain NT texts (Mt. 1:19; 5:32; 19:8–9; 1 Cor. 7:15). It may be preferable, therefore, to understand the verse in this way: 'If a man hates and divorces (*i.e.* divorces merely on the ground of aversion or incompatibility, rather than for cause, such as sexual misconduct), says the LORD, God of Israel, he covers his garment with violence (*i.e.* visibly defiles himself with violence; for this metaphoric use of *garment cf.* Ps. 73:6; 109:18; Je. 2:34) says the LORD of hosts. Therefore, take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless [against your wife]' Besides requiring no changes to the Hebrew text, this rendering has the advantage that it understands the subject of 'hate' as the divorcing husband, rather than God. In support of this interpretation it may be noted that this verb for 'hate' appears frequently in marriage contexts, where it invariably refers to the attitude of the husband towards his wife (Gn. 29:31; Dt. 22:13, 16; Jdg. 15:2)

2:17 – 3:5 The Lord's witness against adultery and other sins

The prophet begins by accusing the people of wearying the Lord with their cynical complaints (*cf.* 3:13–15). Now that the people had returned to the promised land and the temple had been rebuilt, what had become of the promise of restored prosperity, international prominence and wealth (*cf. e.g.* Hg. 2; Zc. 1:16–17; 2; 8; 9)? In reality Israel was experiencing continued social and political oppression and economic privation (Ne. 1:3; 9:36–37). Still worse, it had been promised that God would return to Jerusalem and to his temple, which he would again inhabit with his own glorious presence (Zc. 1:16–17; 2:4–5, 10–13; 8:3–13). Since Moses' tabernacle and Solomon's temple were filled with the visible glory of God as soon as they were completed, it was natural to expect (though *cf.* Mi. 5:3) that the same would happen for the rebuilt temple (*cf.* Ex. 40:34–35; 1 Ki. 8:10–11; Ezk. 43:1–12). Indeed Hg. 2:9 had promised that this second temple would be filled with an even greater measure of glory than Solomon's temple. What glory could be greater than that described in vivid detail in Ezk. 1 and

10? As revealed in the fulness of time, only the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ could be greater (Jn. 1:14). Far from enjoying such glory, however, the temple of Malachi's day was devoid of any visible manifestation of God. Yet it would not always be so: '... *the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the* LORD *Almighty* (3:1). We can see part of the fulfilment of this prophecy when Simeon encountered the infant Jesus in the temple and spoke of him as the one who had come to be 'a light ... for glory to your people Israel' (Lk. 2:32).

From the *desire* mentioned in 3:1 it appears that Israel had repeated the error of their forebears in the days of Amos (Am. 5:18) by supposing that the Lord's appearance would be unmitigated good news. The answer to their complaint, *Where is the God of justice?* is that the God of justice is on his way! When he comes, however, it will be not only for blessing, as they assume, but also for judgment – he will come to be a 'witness' (the term in 3:5, rendered by the NIV *testify*, is the same as in 2:14) against all evil doers, including these blasphemous cynics! In preparation for this fearful visitation, the Lord promises *I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me* (3:1).

The name Malachi in 1:1 means 'my messenger/angel'. The fact that this term reappears in 3:1, where it is generally translated *my messenger*, and the fact that *the messenger of the covenant* appears in the same verse raise some difficulties. Are these three messengers the same person, two different persons or three different persons?

The poetic parallelism in 3:1 shows that *the messenger of the covenant*, who is both desired and who will come, is one and the same divine person as *the Lord*, who is also desired and who will come. The ministry described in vs 2–3 confirms the divine nature of this *Lord*, who is *the messenger of the covenant*.

On the other hand, v 1 distinguishes *my messenger* from the divine LORD *Almighty*, who is the speaker and to whom the pronouns *I*, *my* and *me* refer. The forward looking context and the parallel between this verse and 4:5–6 imply that *my messenger* cannot be Malachi (see on 4:4–6).

The NT sees John the Baptist as the promised *messenger* who prepares the way for the Lord (Mt. 11:10–14; Mk. 1:2; Lk. 1:76; 7:27; *cf.* also Is. 40:3). Nevertheless, it is apparent from the play on Malachi's name that his own ministry of preparation was intended to foreshadow the work of the messenger who was to come.

When the Lord comes, he will perform two complementary works: he will purify some sinners (2–4) and judge others (5). The images used for that purifying work, the *refiner's fire* and the *launderer's* (or fuller's) *soap*, stress both its thoroughness and its severity. The heat of the refiner's fire was intense in order to separate the dross from the molten pure metal (Is. 48:10; Ezk. 22:18–22; 1 Pet. 1:7; *cf.* also Mt. 3:11). Similarly, the ancient launderer washed clothes using a strong lye soap, after which the clothes would be placed on rocks and beaten with sticks. If modern sinners prefer their Lord's cleansing work to his judgment, here is the price that must be paid (*cf.* Heb. 12:7–11).

3:6–12 Israel's begrudging offerings condemned

The prophet returns to Israel's begrudging offerings (*cf.* 1:6 – 2:9). There, however, the emphasis was on the priests' failure in this matter; Malachi's concern here broadens out to include *the whole nation of you* (9).

Although the translation of v 6 is uncertain, Malachi may have cited the example of Jacob in order to highlight the people's sin. After Jacob's exile in Paddan Aram, when he 'returned' both to the promised land and to the Lord, he built an altar at Bethel, and he offered a tithe to the Lord according to his vow in Gn. 28:20–22 (*cf.* also Gn. 35:1–7). When Jacob's descendants similarly returned from their exile, they rebuilt the altar at Jerusalem, but they were grossly negligent in offering their tithes (*cf.* also Ne. 13:10–13). This negligence may have seemed justified because of crop failure, drought and pestilence (10–11), which would have been more than enough to deter such complacent worshippers. The Lord reveals, however, that these natural disasters were the result, and not the cause, of the nation's disobedience (8; *cf.* Hg. 1:6, 9–11; 2:16–19).

Without omitting the need for holiness (*cf.* 2:13; 3:3–4), God promises in vs 10–12 that as soon as his people become faithful in presenting their full tithes, the desperately needed rain will come (10), pestilence and crop failure will cease (11), and the Abrahamic promise wherein *all the nations will call you blessed* (12; Gn.12:2–3; *cf.* also Ps. 72:17; Is. 61:9; Zc. 8:13) will be fulfilled. In short God promised to meet all their needs, but not necessarily all their greeds. The NIV interprets v 10 '... *and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.*' A more literal translation is '... and pour out for you a blessing until there is no more need'.

3:13 – 4:3 The good and the arrogant wicked: God's love vindicated in judgment

The sixth disputation begins with Israel's audacious and blasphemous complaint that it is futile to serve God. *What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?* (14). After the list of sins exposed already by Malachi, one may wonder to what requirements they could be referring. The parallelism between *carrying out his requirements* and *going about like mourners* suggests an allusion merely to cultic requirements, probably the same ritual mourning about which Israel boasted in Zc. 7:1–6 and which was a case of hypocritical outward show (*cf.* 2:13; Is. 58:3–9).

Not all of Malachi's contemporaries were so arrogant and ready to charge God with wrongdoing. A second group is mentioned in v 16 and described as *those who feared the LORD and honoured his name*. Just as the Lord recounts the contemptuous blasphemies of the first group, so he overhears the faithful conversation of the second. Similar to the honour roll kept by King Xerxes, which recorded the long-unrewarded faithfulness of Mordecai (Est. 6:1–3), *a scroll of remembrance* is written in God's presence concerning these believers (*cf.* also Ps. 139:16; Dn. 12:1).

The insolent complainers had claimed that *evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape*. The Lord Almighty promises that a day is coming when they will see how wrong they were (*cf.* v 2). For those listed in the *scroll of remembrance* it will be a day when they will be God's treasured possession (17; Ex. 19:5). It will be a day when he will *spare* these faithful ones who serve him and show them *compassion*. It will be a day when *the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings* for those who revere God's name (4:2, *cf.* Is. 60:1–3, although the image in Malachi may be drawn from the winged sun disc found throughout the ancient Near East; *cf.* also Lk. 1:78), and they will subdue the wicked (4:3). For the rest it will be a day when *the arrogant and every evildoer* will be burned up like *stubble* (4:1).

4:4–6 Conclusion

The closing appeals of Malachi (4:4–6) appear to summarize the main points of his prophecy: remember the law of Moses and the promise of Elijah and the coming day of the Lord. Malachi's own thorough-going dependence on the law of Moses and the many allusions to texts from the Pentateuch scattered throughout his work prepare the reader for the first climactic charge. The reason for the identification of the coming prophet as *Elijah* in the second charge is less obvious. Perhaps the need for an Elijah-like ministry was suggested by the problem of a long-standing drought in 3:10 (1 Ki. 17:1; *cf.* Jas. 5:17). Alternatively, Malachi's concern with the corrosive effects of interfaith marriage (2:10–12) may have caused him to recall Ahab's notorious marriage to Jezebel, which proved so troublesome to Elijah and so disastrous to Israel (1 Ki. 16:31; 18:4, 19; 19:2). No doubt Malachi would have welcomed an Elijah-like challenge to the religious compromise and complacency of his own day. It seems most likely, however, that Malachi recognized that of all the OT prophets, none fitted the portrait of the Messianic prophet 'like Moses', as predicted in Dt. 18:15, more exactly than Elijah (*cf.* Dt. 34:10–12). As such, Elijah stands alongside Moses in 4:4–6 as the representative of the entire OT line of prophets, much as he functions on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:3; Mk. 9:4; Lk. 9:30; *cf.* also Rev. 11:3, where the two witnesses are patterned after Moses and Elijah).

The promise to send *Elijah* before the *day of the LORD comes* confirms the interpretation of 3:1 that the promised messenger is not Malachi himself but some future prophet (the figure in both texts is *sent* by the Lord and precedes the coming day of the Lord). It is likely that this future prophet was identified with Elijah not because Elijah was spared from death, as if this might permit a literal return to this life, but because the future messenger would be called to carry on a prophetic ministry similar to that of the historical Elijah. Here one may compare the many predictions of the coming of a future 'David' that need not imply a literal return of Israel's second king (Je. 30:9; Ezk. 34:23–25; 37:24).

The NT identifies John the Baptist as the fulfilment of this prediction (Mt. 11:10–14; 17:10–13; Mk. 9:11–13; Lk. 1:17; but *cf.* Jn. 1:21, 25). Though separated by over 400 years, John was the next canonical prophet to follow Malachi in the course of redemptive history. Wearing the same distinctive garments of camel's hair and a leather belt as Elijah (2 Ki. 1:8; Mt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6), John functioned as Elijah in his courageous and uncompromising denunciation of sin. In a ministry which put him at odds with the king and his evil wife (1 Ki. 19; Mk. 6:17–18), John went 'on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children . . . to make ready a people prepared for the Lord' (Lk. 1:17).

Gordon P. Hugenberger

APOCRYPHA AND APOCALYPTIC

This article is partly concerned with biblical books (notably Daniel and Revelation), but partly also with a range of non-biblical books (technically known as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha), some of which reappear, along with kindred works, among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The link is provided by apocalyptic, a kind of literature which occurs both within the Bible and outside it. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha date mainly from the period between the two Testaments and tell us something of Jewish history and thought in that period.

The terms 'Apocrypha' and 'apocalyptic'

Though the two technical terms 'Apocrypha' and 'apocalyptic' look similar, they are widely different in their meaning and application. 'Apocrypha', from the Greek word *apokryphos* meaning 'hidden', is a name given to certain books and part of books which have been recognized to lie outside the canon of Holy Scripture. 'Apocalyptic', from the Greek word *apokalypsis* meaning 'revelation', is a term used to denote a particular kind of literature which conveys, or professes to convey, a revelation of secrets. Some of the Apocrypha is apocalyptic literature, but by no means all. The main apocalyptic works in the Bible are Daniel in the OT and the Revelation (*apokalypsis*) of John in the NT, though parts of other books have a similar character.

The name 'Apocrypha' is normally applied to books of Jewish origin which lie outside the canon of the OT, and it is used in that sense in this article, though the phrase 'New Testament Apocrypha' has also been coined to denote late works which imitate NT literature. Some of the apocryphal books, though by no means all, were written under assumed names, but this is more characteristic of a larger body of literature called Pseudepigrapha (writings under false names), many of which are apocalyptic in character.

Since most Jewish books lie outside the canon of Holy Scripture, it needs to be explained why certain of them were singled out as 'apocrypha'. These were the ones most valued by the early church as edifying reading. For this reason they started being copied into Greek and Latin biblical manuscripts and then into biblical manuscripts in other languages. This was a gradual process, extending by the early fourth century to just three books (*The Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit* and *Ecclesiasticus*), and the learned, at least, continued to distinguish such books from the canonical books. (The idea that such books were in Greek biblical manuscripts from the outset, as part of the LXX, is a mistake.) By the time of Jerome, at the end of the fourth century, the process had advanced far enough for there to be serious danger of confusion, and he therefore judged it necessary to single out such books by a special name, and he chose the term *apocrypha*. This is an expression which Origen, a century and a half earlier, had stated that the Jews applied to the more esteemed of their non-canonical books; and since Origen and Jerome were two of the most distinguished scholars of Judaism among the Fathers of the church, they were probably both using the word in the same Jewish sense. If so, it explains why 'hidden' was an appropriate term to use for the purpose. For when the rabbis were confronted with an object which they were not allowed to use but which, because of its religious associations, they were not allowed to destroy either, they 'hid it away' and left it to decay naturally. Among the objects which they sometimes treated in this way were books which were in danger of being mistaken for Holy Scripture. Paradoxically, it was the more esteemed of their non-canonical books which were liable to be 'hidden away', because the more esteemed they were the greater the danger that they might be mistakenly treated as Holy Scripture.

Despite Jerome's warning, the confusion of the Apocrypha with the canonical books of the OT continued, especially in the west. At the Reformation in the sixteenth century it was necessary for the Reformers to reassert his distinction with great emphasis. The church of Rome, meanwhile, attempted to obliterate the distinction, and the Council of Trent put the Apocrypha on a complete parity with the canonical books (though omitting *1 and 2 Esdras* and *The Prayer of Manasseh*). In the Roman Catholic Church, consequently, the Apocrypha is known as the deutero-canonical books. In their vernacular Bibles the Reformers gathered the Apocrypha together as a separate section of books, but in Roman Catholic Bibles (such as the Douai and Jerusalem Bibles) they continue

to be intermingled with the canonical books of the OT.

Apocalyptic literature, biblical and apocryphal

Apocalyptic literature is a form of literature akin to prophecy but concentrating on the revealing of secrets. It sets forth great secrets, revealed by God to a favoured saint or prophet, about his purposes for the future, or the constitution of nature or the unseen world. The form in which the revelation is made is sometimes highly symbolical but sometimes literal and unusually detailed.

Outside the Bible, apocalyptic literature was frequently written under an assumed name, usually a famous name from ancient times. In such cases the apparent author was often represented as predicting events which had since come to pass, as evidence of his access to divine secrets. A device like this is at best a pious fraud. The Revelation of John is a conspicuous proof that it is no necessary feature of apocalyptic writing, since the author of Revelation wrote under his own name and made no use of 'prophecies after the event'. The book of Daniel, on the other hand, is today widely supposed to have been written under an assumed name and to date from the second century BC, *i.e.* after many of the events it predicts had already occurred. The evidence for this supposition has never been very strong, and much indirect evidence against it has recently come to light, especially since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In literary and spiritual quality the book of Daniel leaves the apocryphal apocalypses far behind, and it differs from them in other marked respects as well. It does not, as they do, take for its author a prominent figure from another part of the OT, already known to have received revelation. It does not have the sectarian Essene features which characterize the oldest apocryphal apocalypses (see below). Also, the book of Daniel is included among the Jewish Scriptures, a sort of recognition which was accorded to no other apocalypse. These differences in character and treatment are most easily explained if Daniel is older than the other Jewish apocalypses and prompted imitation both because of its quality and because when they began to be written it was already a contender for a place in the canon.

The earliest Jewish writers of pseudonymous apocalypses seem to have been forerunners or representatives of the Essene school of thought. Four of the five books of which *The Book of Enoch* is made up, the Aramaic (and possibly the Greek) *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and various fragmentary apocalypses found among the Dead Sea Scrolls are of this outlook. Later Jewish apocalypses, such as the 'Parables of Enoch', *The Assumption of Moses* and *2 Esdras* (which are mentioned below) have a strong admixture of Pharisaic thought.

The content of the Apocrypha

The Apocrypha proper

1 Esdras is a Greek version of the story of Ezra (Esdras is the Greek form of Ezra) with a little of Chronicles and Nehemiah included as well, and with an additional narrative in chs. 3 and 4 about a debate in the Persian court on the strongest thing in the world. Those OT books which were not read in the synagogue tended to be translated into Greek and Aramaic much more freely than others. Ezra was one of the nine books in this category, so *1 Esdras* may be just an old free Greek version of Ezra, whereas the other Greek version included in the LXX is a much more literal translation. The extra material is characteristic of Jewish *haggadah*, homiletic writing, such as fictional stories told just for edification.

2 Esdras is an apocalypse, written about AD 100 and preserved in Latin, not Greek. It is supplemented by two later Christian chapters at the beginning and two at the end.

Tobit is a moral tale about almsgiving, burial of the dead and marriage. Its background is Persian, and it is one of the oldest of the books of the Apocrypha.

Judith is a stirring narrative, wildly unhistorical, about a pious heroine who saves her people.

The *Additions to Esther* is a medley of items added in the LXX translation of Esther, mainly to bring out its religious character. Esther was another book freely translated into Greek, with these various expansions, although in this case the book was one of those which *were* read in the synagogue.

The Wisdom of Solomon is a work in the tradition of OT Wisdom Literature, but was written, probably in Greek, by a Jew of Alexandria influenced to some extent by Greek philosophy. As late as the end of the second century AD, we find it described as 'written by the friends of Solomon in his honour' (*Muratorian Fragment*), so its pseudonymity was probably not intended to deceive.

Ecclesiasticus is another Wisdom book, this time modelled more closely on Proverbs, ending with the well-known eulogy in praise of famous men. It was originally composed in Hebrew, as the prologue explains. It is one of the oldest books of the Apocrypha, dating from about 180 BC, and it gives the name of its author as Joshua ben-Sira.

Baruch, ending with *The Letter of Jeremiah*

(originally a separate work), is added to the book of Jeremiah in the LXX as a twofold appendix to the biblical book. It represents Jeremiah's companion Baruch as prophesying in rather the same vein as the prophet, and Jeremiah as writing another letter to the exiles, this time on the dangers of idolatry (*cf.* Je. 29).

The Song of the Three Holy Children, Susanna and *Bel and the Dragon* are three additions to the LXX version of Daniel. The first is an expansion of Dn. 3, consisting of a prayer and hymn put into the mouth of the three companions of Daniel when they were in the fiery furnace. The hymn is often called the *Benedicite* and is used in traditional Christian worship. The other two are pious stories prefixed or appended to the book, in the manner of *Baruch* and *The Letter of Jeremiah.*

The Prayer of Manasseh is an expansion of 2 Ch. 33:11–19, putting Manasseh's repentance into words. It is not known, however, to have originated in a translation of the Bible, and may have been composed independently.

1 Maccabees is the primary historical source for the exploits of the Maccabees in their revolt against the Hellenistic Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, and his campaign of persecution in the mid-second century BC. It is a fine record of heroic faith.

2 Maccabees covers some of the same ground. It is a book composed in Greek which combines valuable historical material with legend. Some LXX manuscripts also include *3 and 4 Maccabees,* which are rather less important.

The Pseudepigrapha

This is a wider collection of books than the Apocrypha, likewise mostly composed by Jews but preserved by Christians, though not as highly esteemed by the church as the Apocrypha. They are not all pseudonymous, despite the name commonly given to them, though many are. Among the oldest and most important of them are the following.

The Story of Ahiqar is an old story surviving in various forms and different languages, and including proverbial material but little that is definitely religious. It is referred to in *The Book of Tobit,* and an Aramaic manuscript of part of it (dating from the fifth century BC) was found in the excavation of the Jewish settlement at Elephantine.

The Letter of Aristeas and *The Sibylline Oracles* are examples of a number of works ostensibly composed by pagan authors but really written in the Jewish interest. The former gives a partly legendary account of the translation of the LXX Pentateuch, written in the second century BC, a century after the event.

The Book of Enoch (1 Enoch) is a compilation of five apocalyptic books of varying date, four of which have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and are of Essene outlook, setting out the distinctive calender and end-time beliefs of the Essenes. The oldest of them probably go back to the third century BC. The second book, The 'Parables of Enoch', is of somewhat different outlook and contains the famous teaching on the Son of Man, developed from Dn. 7. It has been suggested, but with insufficient reason, that this book is of Christian authorship. *1 Enoch* 1:9 is quoted in Jude 14–15.

The Book of Jubilees is written in the person of Moses, just as *1 Enoch* is written in the person of Enoch. It supports the same Essene calender. It divides up chronology into forty-nine-year jubilees, from the creation onwards, and retells patriarchal history, carrying back the observance of the Mosaic law to the creation. Like *1 Enoch,* it seems to have been designed to prove that the Essene interpretation of Scripture existed in OT times. Pseudonymity in cases of this sort appears to be intended to deceive.

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs is probably of the same outlook again, at any rate in its Aramaic form. In it each of Jacob's sons leaves a dying message with his offspring, foretelling their future and giving them instruction on how to behave.

The *Assumption of Moses* and *2 Baruch* are apocalypses of more Pharisaic outlook. The former is incomplete and does not actually include (as it once did) Moses' supposed assumption into heaven or the event referred to in Jude 9. The latter is closely related to *2 Esdras.*

The Martyrdom of Isaiah is the supposedly Jewish part of the Christian *Ascension of Isaiah* and tells the story of Isaiah being martyred by being sawn in two, a story which probably influenced the wording of Heb. 11:37.

The Psalms of Solomon are pious hymns, ascribed to Solomon perhaps in order to make their contemporary allusions more readily acceptable.

Though none of the books of the Apocrypha are directly referred to in the NT, two of the Pseudepigrapha, as noted above, are referred to in the letter of Jude. It may be that those to whom this was addressed were specially devoted to such literature, or that the heretics who troubled them were. So Jude used two passages from this literature with his readers in mind, rather than ascribing any authority to the literature himself.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are fragmentary manuscripts, dating from between the third century BC and the first century AD, which were discovered at various ruined centres in the

Judean desert between 1947 and 1965, notably at the Essene centre of Qumran. Many of them, of course, do not have anything to do with the Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha, but others have. Manuscripts of three of the books of the Apocrypha (*Tobit*, *Ecclesiasticus* and *The Letter of Jeremiah*) were found there, the first two in their original languages (Aramaic and Hebrew, respectively). Three books of the Pseudepigrapha were also found there (*1 Enoch*, *Jubilees* and *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*), again in their original languages (Aramaic, Hebrew and Aramaic respectively), and the *Testaments* in a very different version of the text. In the case of three of these six works, it was the first time that any part had been found in the original language, though portions of *Ecclesiasticus* in Hebrew and the *Testaments* in Aramaic had been discovered at the end of the last century in the Cairo Genizah (the storeroom at the old Cairo synagogue, where disused manuscripts were 'hidden away').

Another work found in the Cairo Genizah was at first called the *Zadokite Fragments*, but since more of the text was discovered in the Dead Sea finds, it has been renamed the *Damascus Document*. It is a rule for Essene community life and is matched by another such rule, the *Manual of Discipline*, also among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Further works reflecting the same outlook, and first found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, are the *War Scroll* and the *Temple Scroll*. The former contains directions and forecasts regarding the expected final war of the Jews against the Romans, and the latter contains a harmonized restatement of the laws about the sanctuary and ceremonial, supposedly written by Moses.

The remainder of the Dead Sea Scrolls include a great many biblical manuscripts, extending to every book of the OT except Esther, a book of hymns and numerous expository and liturgical texts.

The teaching of the apocryphal literature

The books we have been looking at are not the whole of the literature which provides the non-biblical Jewish background to the NT, though they are, in general, the oldest part of that literature. The literature includes also the writings of Philo (a Greek-speaking Alexandrian Jew of the early first century AD), who wrote philosophical commentaries on the Pentateuch, and the writings of Josephus (a Palestinian Jew of the later first century AD), who wrote histories. Moreover, the background literature is not complete unless one includes some part of the rabbinical writings, in which the oral traditions of the Pharisees were written down. The oldest rabbinical compilation of importance is the Mishnah, written about AD 200 but comprising sayings of named rabbis going as far back as the the first century BC, or even earlier. One of the tractates from the Mishnah has frequently been included, under the title *Pirqe Aboth* ('The Sayings of the Fathers'), in collections of the Pseudepigrapha, although it had no proper place there.

When, after the judgment of the exile, the Jews at last set their face against their besetting sin of including features of other religions in their own, and, guided by Ezra and Nehemiah, deliberately adopted the Pentateuch as their rule of life, it was almost inevitable that different schools of thought about the interpretation of the Law would arise. By the second century BC, three distinct schools of thought had emerged, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and Essenes, each having its own interpretation of the Mosaic law. The Pharisees were at first in the ascendant, but from about 110 BC the Sadducees managed to acquire and hold on to the high priesthood. Nevertheless, the Pharisees retained such influence with the people that in practice the high priests usually had to fall in with Pharisaic views. The Essenes played a less prominent part in public life and lived in separate communities in the wilderness and the suburbs of cities.

The three schools of thought also developed different views on four other theological subjects, besides the interpretation of the Law. These were oral tradition, divine sovereignty, angels and eschatology (theories about the end times to come). The Sadducees took a negative attitude to each of these matters and the Pharisees a positive one. The Pharisees emphasized the importance of oral tradition for the interpretation and application of Scripture, the sovereignty of God, the existence of angels and a future personal judgment, all of which the Sadducees denied. The Essenes agreed in general with the Pharisees, except over oral tradition, where they emphasized instead their own sectarian writings.

Naturally, the literature produced in this period reflects the influence of the differing views that existed and exhibits the sympathies of the writer concerned. Most of the intertestamental literature is broadly Pharisaic, apart from the sectarian Essene writings found at Qumran and those other writings found there which display similar features. It is doubtful whether any genuinely Sadducean writing has survived.

Religion between the Testaments, as reflected in its literature, is at its best the true faith of the OT. There were, however, considerable developments in religious thought in this

period, partly due to Persian and Greek influence (during the periods of Persian and Greek rule) but especially due to the way OT teaching was interpreted. Those developments of religious thought which are usually attributed to Persian or Greek influence, particularly those relating to angels and demons and to the life to come, are probably from another viewpoint interpretations of the OT. The foreign influence is sometimes very apparent, as when *Tobit* 3:8,17 uses a Persian name for a demon, or when *Wisdom* 2 – 5 (followed by Philo and Josephus) teaches the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, the developments were probably justified in the minds of those who made them as interpretations of the OT. The OT does speak of angels and demons, however little it tells us about them, and it does affirm (especially in the Prophets and Psalms) a future life for believers more significant than the shadowy existence of Sheol. The inter-testamental developments are in some ways speculative developments of what the OT has to say, and an important consideration for Christians is whether the NT endorses them. In some respects the developments are rejected by the NT and in others ignored, but in others again they are endorsed.

God and his angels

Although God's fatherly care for his people Israel is often mentioned in this literature, his transcendent holiness is underlined. The name of God, Yahweh, had come to be thought too sacred to be pronounced and the word *Adonai* ('Lord') was substituted for it. Consequently, in the LXX translation of the OT, God's name is rendered *ho kurios*, 'the Lord'. Passages containing this translation are often quoted in the NT, and it also the divine title applied most frequently to Jesus.

The sovereignty of God, as we have seen, was a prominent concern in this period. The apocalyptists, with their expectation of a great intervention of God in human history to judge and to deliver, laid much emphasis on this. It was also believed, except by the Sadducees, that God was sovereign in the lives of individuals, but this was not held, at least by the Pharisees, to exclude human responsibility (*Psalms of Solomon* 9:7; *2 Baruch* 54:15, 19). The predestinarian belief of the Essenes seems to have been rather more extreme.

The emphasis in this period on the 'otherness' of God is generally thought to explain why intermediate beings like angels and demons were such a subject of attention. In *Tobit*, a prominent role in human affairs is played by an angel, and by analogy with the OT angel names Gabriel and Michael he is given the name Raphael. In the book of *Enoch* a large number of angels are named, including seven archangels whose names all end in '-el', and who each have responsibility, under God (*El*), for different classes of people or parts of the creation (*1 Enoch* 20). In *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, angels intercede in heaven for men (*Testament of Levi* 3:5–6; *Testament of Dan* 6:2). Little of this speculation about the angels is endorsed by the NT, but their role as intercessors may be implied in Mt.18:10. Angels do appear, however, notably at the annunciation (Lk.1:26–38) and the resurrection (*e.g.* Mt. 28:2–7).

Scripture

The influence which the written law, as the permanent form of God's law, was already exercising in OT times, is maintained and further developed in the inter-testamental period. *The Letter of Aristeas* 177 refers to the Pentateuch as God's 'oracles'. Twice in the Apocrypha the book of the law of Moses is effectively identified with the personified Wisdom of God (*Ecclus.* 24:23; *Baruch* 4:1). Of books outside the Pentateuch, *Tobit* 2:6 and 14:4 quotes predictions from two of the prophets by name, and *1 Macc.* 7:16–17 quotes the Psalms as predictive. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, OT books are quoted with what became standard formulas for quoting authoritative Scripture, and this was continued in Philo, the NT and the Mishnah.

Sin and salvation

Since the law was the way of righteousness, the Jews of the inter-testamental period were much occupied with the problem of the proneness of humanity to disobedience. One influential view was that the righteous were marked out as such from the womb, by the gift of a good soul (*Wisdom* 8:19–20; *Ecclus.* 1:14), and that their good deeds atoned for their evil deeds (*Tobit* 12:9; *Ecclus.* 3:3). This is akin to the rabbinical doctrine that salvation is by works and that, when judging people, God will weigh their good deeds against their evil deeds, to see which are the greater, rather than requiring absolute goodness, as the NT teaches (hence the NT doctrine that justification in God's sight is only possible through faith).

The life to come

Any such doctrine of salvation implies the survival of the human spirit (if not also the resurrection of the human body) and a future personal judgment for every individual. We find these beliefs distinctly taught in the inter-testamental literature. We have already mentioned the teaching on the immortality of the soul in *Wisdom* 2 – 5, where the wicked

apparently survive to come into judgment, as well as the righteous to be blessed. In Essene texts, the survival of the spirits of both the righteous and the wicked is very distinctly taught in *1 Enoch* 22 and *Jubilees* 23:31. They experience a foretaste after death of their final lot on the great day of judgment. The resurrection of the body was more prominent in Pharisaic thinking than in Essene. It is distinctly taught in *2 Macc.* 7:11; 14:46 and elsewhere, and bodily punishment for the wicked is envisaged in *Judith* 16:17. NT teaching is in general harmony with this, though the immortality of the soul is not taught in the NT explicitly.

The Messiah and the last things

We know from the NT that the Jews were looking forward to a number of end-time figures, the Messiah, the end-time Prophet of Dt. 18:18–19 and the returning Elijah of Mal. 4:5–6. The OT also gives hints of an end-time priest (Ezr. 2:63; Ne.7:65; Ps. 110:4; Je. 33:14–21; Zc. 6:9–15). It is a peculiarity of the Dead Sea Scrolls that they link the Messiah and the coming priest as the two Messiahs, but there are also clear signs of this in *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, where the Messiah is expected from the tribe of Levi as well as the tribe of Judah.

In Pharisaic thinking, however, the emphasis was on the Messiah from the tribe of Judah, the son of David or shoot from the stock of Jesse (2 Sa. 7:11–29; Is. 11:1–10).He would be a great warrior like David and would deliver his people, but how far he would himself bring about the other future purposes of God, in judging the world and inaugurating the new creation, is left as obscure in most of the inter-testamental literature as it is in the OT. An exception, however, must be made in the case of the 'Parables of Enoch' (*1 Enoch* 37–71), the one part of the book of *Enoch* which has not been found at Qumran. Here the Messiah is identified with the Son of Man from Dn. 7 and is a pre-existent being who himself will establish the kingdom of God.

The centrality of the Davidic Messiah in God's purposes is a theme taken up and developed in the NT. He is there identified with Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who comes to save his people from their sins rather than from foreign domination, and is himself the expected great high priest.

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Further reading

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READING THE GOSPELS

What is a gospel?

A new type of book?

'Gospel' means simply 'good news'. 'The gospel' is the good news about Jesus which is preached, heard and believed.

Why then do we talk about the first four books of the NT as 'the gospels'? There is no record of any book being known by this title before then. By the early second century, however, Christians could talk about 'the gospel' in reference to a book, and distinguished one such 'gospel' from another. Before the end of the second century Irenaeus took it for granted that there cannot be more or less than four 'gospels', just as there are four regions of the earth and four winds!

It was probably Mark who, unknowingly, coined this new term. He began his account of Jesus with the words, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. No doubt by 'good news' he meant the subject-matter of his book, not its literary type; but it formed a convenient label, and as other such books came to be written the label was transferred, and each came to be known as 'the good news according to x'.

Mark's is probably the earliest such account of Jesus which has survived. But it may not have been the first to be written, since Lk. 1:1 mentions 'many' who have already attempted the same task which he is now undertaking (though he does not use the term 'gospel' to describe either their work or his own). At first, no doubt, Jesus' followers shared their memories of his life and teaching mainly by word of mouth, whether in conversation or in more formal teaching, but before long written records began to be compiled and kept. These early records, which were probably shorter and more limited than the gospels we know, would naturally fall into disuse when longer texts became available, and so did not survive.

Once the pattern had become established through the four gospels we have in our NT, further 'gospels' continued to be written. But since these later gospels did not become part of the canon of Scripture, many of them also failed to survive. Some are known to us only by name, where early Christian writers mention them and occasionally quote from them. Others have come to light quite recently, as old copies have been discovered in the sands of Egypt. The early second-century Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus which range from single sentences to quite lengthy parables. Also from the second century comes a section of a Gospel of Peter, giving a more detailed account of Jesus' death and resurrection than we find in the canonical gospels. From the same period comes the 'Proto-gospel' of James, an imaginative record of the birth and life of Mary, and of the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. Other writings which are called 'gospels' (*e.g.* the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of Truth) turn out in fact to be not stories about Jesus at all, but religious or philosophical treatises which bear no resemblance to the canonical gospels.

Most of these second-century 'gospels' clearly derive from circles in which gnostic (exclusive and mystical) thinking was displacing the theology of the NT writers, and were designed to propagate such ideas. While they were widely used in gnostic circles, it is clear from mainstream Christian writings of the second century that they were never treated as on a par with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Before the middle of the century there was virtually universal agreement that these four gospels, and only these, preserved the true apostolic witness to Jesus. While discussion continued for some time over some other books, the place of the four gospels was so firmly established as the foundation of Christian faith and teaching that soon after the middle of the second century Tatian felt the need to compile his famous *Diatessaron*, an attempted harmony of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. For him, as for the majority of Christians, by that time the category of 'gospel' was clearly defined, and it consisted of only four members.

What sort of book?

It is often stated that the gospels are not biographies. They are certainly not like most modern biographies. The gospels offer little information on Jesus' family background, upbringing and education; nor do they make much effort to set his story in the context of contemporary history. They do not unravel his psychological development, or discuss his motives and ambitions. They do not even tell us what he looked like. They pass over most of his life-story in silence, and focus on a few years at

the end of his short life. They devote what seems a disproportionate amount of space to the events leading up to and following his death.

Much space is devoted to recording Jesus' teaching, sometimes in quite long 'sermons'. And even where the authors are telling stories about Jesus, you often have the impression that the story is itself a sermon. They are not just recording; they are preaching. They expect a verdict, a commitment to follow Jesus.

Modern biographies are not usually like this, but in the ancient world the style would have been more familiar. Lives of philosophers, poets, political and military leaders were written not so much to satisfy historical curiosity, but to offer their subjects as models for imitation, or perhaps to win public support for their teaching and ideals.

It was not the *style* of the gospels which would have been surprising, but the nature of their *subject*. For to the gospel writers Jesus is not just a great teacher and a noble example in the past, but a risen, living person, in whom salvation is to be found, and who is to be worshipped as Lord. No other ancient biography could have been described as John describes the purpose of his gospel: 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (Jn. 20:31).

A book written with such a purpose will not be a mere 'objective' record of events. The gospels were written by believers, leading figures in the new religious movement which Jesus began, and their aim was either to win new converts or to encourage and direct those already committed to the church into more effective discipleship.

So their material was selected and presented with this end in view, rather than to satisfy the academic historian. In particular, they were not concerned with constructing a detailed chronological account of the events of Jesus' ministry (let alone of his whole life). Each writer has his own distinctive way of arranging the material. There is a basic development from the early preaching in Galilee to the final climax in Jerusalem, but within this framework the individual incidents and teaching are collected more in the manner of an anthology than of a consecutive diary.

The events of the final days in Jerusalem are recalled in considerable detail, and it may be possible to discern some turning-points in the earlier development of Jesus' ministry (especially the feeding of the 5,000, Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, and the entry to Jerusalem). But the gospels do not offer us the sort of record we would need to write a chronological 'Life of Jesus' in detail. What they offer is a portrait, or rather four portraits, of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, in word and deed, and a call to follow him in the way of salvation.

The gospels as history

Some have concluded that if the gospels are not presenting us with 'objective history', they cannot be trusted to give us history at all. That is really an extraordinary conclusion.

The 'objective' historian, who records bare facts for their own sake with no sense of their value and no effort to interpret them to the reader, is a poor historian – if indeed he or she exists at all! History is studied and recorded because we have something to learn from it, and this is particularly clearly so in the case of biography: you don't write a biography unless you think the person concerned is important, and you want the reader to learn from them. The greatest and most influential histories and biographies have been written from a position of commitment, 'with an axe to grind'. But they are not therefore assumed to be factually unreliable. You may not agree with the author's viewpoint, but you do not for that reason refuse to recognize the reliability of his or her research.

Similarly with the gospel writers: the fact that they were committed to Jesus does not mean that they must have invented or misrepresented the events and teaching they record. Indeed, Luke makes it very clear that his aim was to offer an accurate, carefully researched account of the facts on which his faith was founded (Lk. 1:1–4). When someone offers his work to the public on such a basis (and there is no reason to think that the other gospel writers would have disagreed with Luke's aim), it is reasonable to take the claim at face value unless the evidence is against it. And a Christian commitment and an evangelistic purpose are not in themselves evidence of historical incompetence or misrepresentation!

This is not the place to record the complex debates in modern scholarship over the historical value of the gospels. A readable but quite detailed account and assessment of the debate is available in C. L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IVP, 1987). Through a patient and well-informed discussion of the various causes of scholarly scepticism, Blomberg shows how a respect for the gospels as factual accounts of Jesus and his teaching may be justified by the normal canons of historical study, not merely asserted on the basis of unquestioning faith.

The gospels were written within one or two generations of Jesus' lifetime. They were based partly on written records (see above) and partly on traditions preserved in the teaching of the churches, together with the personal reminiscences of their authors and their informants.

While the process of handing on the material allowed for variation in the way events and teaching were recorded, as the gospels clearly show, it took place within the life of a Christian community which was committed to preserving the truth about Jesus, and within which there was still the continuity of living memory of those who had been there at the time.

It is worth remembering too that oral tradition was generally regarded in the ancient world (as in non-literary or semi-literary cultures today) as a reliable means of preserving information and teaching. This was particularly true in the Jewish world. Rabbinic scholars developed a sophisticated system of memorization, which they valued more highly than written records, and which was capable of passing on vast bodies of material unchanged from one generation to another. While the NT church was not a rabbinic academy, there is no reason to doubt that the traditions about Jesus which Christians continued to share and to study together could be carefully preserved and controlled.

This is not to say, of course, that no verbal variation would occur. The gospels provide plenty of evidence of such variation, both in narrative and in the recorded sayings of Jesus. We must also remember that Jesus probably spoke normally in Aramaic, so that his sayings were translated at some stage before they found their way into our Greek gospels – and any translator knows that there is no such thing as an exactly equivalent translation into another language.

But to recognize an appropriate variety in the ways in which Jesus' words and deeds were recorded is not at all to cast doubt on their historical origin, or on the 'accuracy' which Luke claimed for his work. The gospels, for all their literary and theological sensitivity, are historical documents.

The four gospels

One story, four witnesses

It is rare for us to have more than one record of any person in the ancient world; to have four biographies written by contemporaries or almost contemporaries is unparalleled. But this unusual wealth of information about Jesus has not always been welcomed in the Christian church. It has even been regarded as an embarrassment!

We noted above the attempt by Tatian in the second century to produce a single 'harmony' of the gospels, and the same task has been undertaken frequently since his time. This desire may be due to discomfort over the differences between the gospels, since these are sometimes used as a basis for questioning the truth of the gospel records. Or some may feel that the present situation is too untidy, with four personal portraits rather than one 'authorized biography'. But the fact is that we have four, not one, and they are not all the same.

Recent trends in gospel scholarship have encouraged us to take this diversity seriously. 'Redaction-criticism' has been concerned with discovering the individual perspective and theological message of each of the four gospel writers. It has taught us to view them not as faceless compilers of tradition, but as men with their own clear viewpoint and purpose in writing, each concerned to put across a slightly different perception of Jesus, and each angling his gospel to the special needs of the church for which he wrote it.

More recently emphasis has been laid on the fact that each of the gospels is an independent literary work, intended not for analytical comparison with the others, but to be read and appreciated in its own right as a whole. This has resulted in a clearer perception of the dramatic power of each of the gospels, as each in subtly different ways brings Jesus and his ministry to life, and enables the reader to become part of the story from which Christianity began.

This is not to suggest that it is wrong to make a comparative study of the gospels, and to try to gain from them, taken together, an understanding of Jesus himself. They are, after all, first and foremost books about Jesus, not about their authors' special theological ideas. But our understanding of Jesus and his message is greatly enriched when we take seriously also the individual contribution of each of the writers. The result is not just a single 'authorized biography', but the multiple witness of several of those who knew and followed Jesus in the formative early days of Christianity.

John – the odd man out

It is wrong, however, to speak of four 'independent' witnesses, since it is clear that Matthew, Mark and Luke share a common overall outline, and in many ways a common perspective, and most scholars agree that they were not written in isolation from each other. They have therefore been traditionally regarded as the three 'synoptic' (from the same point of view) gospels, over against John, whose book is strikingly different. We shall consider the relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke shortly, but first it will be useful to consider why John is felt to stand apart from them.

The opening of John's gospel, with its mysterious but thrilling language about Jesus as the 'Word made flesh', immediately signals a different perspective. At the beginning of the

third century, Clement of Alexandria suggested that John wrote a 'spiritual' gospel to supplement the 'bodily' information supplied by the other three. While this betrays a very superficial understanding of the nature of the synoptic gospels, it does appropriately express the different 'atmosphere' that most readers perceive in John's book, with its profound reflection on faith and salvation, and its more daring presentation of Jesus as God incarnate (including the famous 'I am' sayings).

John offers none of the homely parables of the synoptic teaching. Indeed, very little of what Jesus says in John's gospel finds any echo in the other three. The 'kingdom of God', so prominent in Jesus' teaching in the synoptic gospels, appears only once in John. John's gospel (like his first letter) makes vivid use of symbolic opposites, light and darkness, life and death. Through long discourses and theological dialogues John's Jesus confronts the reader directly with issues of knowledge and belief, and of the basis of eternal life, and with himself as the only solution to them. He talks, it has been said, with a distinctly 'Johannine accent'!

Apart from the outline of the last week in Jerusalem (which John tells at greater length than the others), there is little overlap in the narrative part of the gospel either. Some stories are shared (though usually in a quite different form), but most are new. Of the several miracles John records, most are not mentioned in the synoptic gospels, and John introduces them distinctively as 'signs', which point to theological truths about Jesus' ministry.

Even the basic outline of the story before the final week in Jerusalem is quite different. In the synoptic gospels Jesus' earlier ministry is focused entirely in and around Galilee, and the journey to Jerusalem for the final Passover forms the dramatic background to the central part of the story. But in John Jesus appears as a relatively frequent visitor to Jerusalem, and has become a familiar figure in his dialogue with the Jewish leaders there long before the final confrontation.

It seems clear then that John's gospel stands apart from the others. What is not so clear is whether it is therefore totally independent. There are several places where John seems to assume that his readers already know aspects of the story of Jesus. His omission of such central features as Jesus' birth, baptism and temptation, the transfiguration, or the institution of the Lord's Supper (despite a very long account of other aspects of the Last Supper) may be because he assumes these are already well known. Occasional echoes of synoptic language have been taken to suggest that John knew one or more of the other gospels (or at least the tradition on which they were based), even though he chose generally not to draw on them.

Matthew, Mark and Luke: the 'synoptic problem'

As mentioned above, there is a basic similarity in the plot of each of the synoptic gospels (to which Matthew and Luke have each added a section on Jesus' birth and childhood, though quite independently of each other). Most of Mark's story is paralleled in one or both of the other synoptic gospels, though sometimes (especially in Matthew) in a drastically abbreviated form. Then there is a substantial amount (more than 200 verses) of material, mainly sayings of Jesus, where Matthew and Luke run parallel even though it is not found in Mark.

The nature of the 'parallels' varies from exact agreement (especially in some of the sayings of Jesus) to quite loose similarity, so that it is sometimes difficult to tell whether it is the same incident which two gospels are relating (*cf. e.g.*, the anointing story in Mt. 26:6–13 = Mk. 14:3–9 with that in Lk. 7:36–50). Even where stories are clearly parallel, there is quite a lot of variation in the way they are told, and in the elements included and excluded.

About a third of Matthew's gospel consists of material to which the others have no parallel, some of it included in the five lengthy discourses of Jesus which are a distinctive feature of that gospel. In the case of Luke (the longest of the synoptic gospels), just over half of his gospel has no parallel in the others; much of this is found in Luke's long account of the journey of Jesus towards Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51 – 19:10).

These are the basic data which make up 'the synoptic problem'. This title has traditionally been given to the attempt to explain how three books came to be written with such a puzzling mixture of similarities and distinctiveness. It certainly is a 'problem', as the following outlines of attempted solutions will show. It is a pity, however, if this forbidding title discourages the reader from thinking positively about the important and intriguing question of how these three gospels came to be written.

Most people have assumed that the similarities are not accidental, and that there was some sort of literary contact between these three writings, rather than their simply sharing in a common oral tradition. The question has usually been put in terms of the 'use' of one book by the author of another, or, to put it more simply, 'Who copied whom?'. The key to that question must lie in deciding which was written first, and here there have been two main contenders, Matthew and Mark.

Until the nineteenth century it was almost

universally agreed that Matthew was written first (hence its place at the beginning of the NT). Then a rapid swing in scholarly opinion occurred, and by the latter part of the nineteenth century most were agreed that Mark, the shortest and in some ways the least sophisticated of the three, was the earliest. This view has been the basis of most modern scholarship, but since the 1960s a significant minority of opinion has developed which wishes to reinstate Matthew as the first gospel. While this remains a minority view, the priority of Mark can no longer be taken for granted in the way it was up to the middle of this century.

If Mark came first, what was the source of the other material which Matthew and Luke have in common but which is not in Mark? While it is possible that either Luke derived it from Matthew or Matthew from Luke, most scholars have preferred to speak of a second source document alongside Mark, to which both Matthew and Luke had access. This source (which remains, of course, a product of scholarly speculation, rather than a document which anyone has ever seen!) has traditionally been known as Q (from German *Quelle*, 'source'). Some envisage Q as a single document, from which most or all of the common material in Matthew and Luke was derived; others prefer to speak of 'Q material', without committing themselves as to whether it was found in one or more sources, written or oral.

In modern scholarship, then, the most common approach to the synoptic problem has been, and remains, the 'two-source theory', which sees Mark and Q as the two sources on which Matthew and Luke based their work. (Matthew and Luke also include other material of their own, traditionally labelled as M and L respectively. There has, however, not been much enthusiasm for the view that either M or L represents the contents of a single documentary source.)

If Matthew, not Mark, came first, there are two options. The first theory sees Mark's gospel as a 'reduced' version of Matthew. (This was the view of the early Christians and Augustine spoke of Mark as Matthew's 'camp-follower and abbreviator'.) Luke subsequently used both the other gospels as the basis of his own work. The alternative, strongly promoted by some scholars today, is the 'Griesbach hypothesis' (named after an eighteenth-century German scholar who formulated it). This views Luke's gospel as based on Matthew alone (together with his own special sources) and suggests Mark then made a deliberate attempt to mediate between his two predecessors by producing a shorter gospel which drew on both, and attempted to reconcile their differences of approach. Either of these theories dispenses with the need for Q, since Luke is understood to have derived the shared material directly from Matthew. Both, however, remain minority views.

The solutions mentioned so far assume that the synoptic gospels owe their similarities to direct literary 'borrowing'. The only problem in that case is to decide who came before whom in the process. Others suspect, however, that the image of a gospel writer sitting at his study desk compiling his work by weaving together pieces from other scrolls unrolled in front of him is based more on modern editorial methods than on any realistic understanding of the first-century Christian scene. The range of different degrees of 'parallel', with many passages far from verbally identical even though they are clearly reporting the same story or saying, suggests something less simple than straightfoward 'copying'.

It seems likely that none of the gospels was compiled simply in a single concentrated editorial effort of a few days or weeks. As memories of Jesus' life and teaching were shared, whether in written or oral form, they were collected together in different churches, and it is quite likely that the process of compiling what eventually became our four gospels was taking place simultaneously in a number of centres, and over an extended period. During this time there was ample opportunity for 'cross-fertilization' to take place as Christians travelled around, so that it is not necessary to see the links between, say, Mark and Matthew as entirely in one direction.

If this is a more realistic scenario, while no-one need doubt that at least some of the synoptic material is the result of direct literary contact, it is not likely that these contacts can be formulated in terms of a simple 'x-copied-y' scheme, and the 'borrowing' may sometimes have happened quite informally, even unconsciously, rather than by deliberately drawing on an already completed book.

My own view is that some such more fluid understanding of the gospel-writing process is more likely, and that therefore a tidy 'solution' to the synoptic problem is not likely to be found. This conclusion does not worry me. After all, what we have to deal with is the gospel texts as we have them, not the various stages of the process which led to those texts. For what it is worth, I think it likely that Mark was the earliest gospel to be completed, and that where it is appropriate to speak of direct literary 'borrowing' it is generally more likely to be Matthew or Luke who derived the material from Mark than the other way. But I am wary of concluding that therefore when Matthew or Luke differs from Mark this must always be understood as a

deliberate 'alteration' of a finished text which they had in front of them.

No doubt the synoptic problem will always remain a 'problem'. But while scholars continue to debate it with vigour, the ordinary reader of the gospels may with profit notice and learn from the different ways in which Matthew, Mark and Luke have told their stories, even if the process by which they did so remains obscure.

Reading the gospels

Dealing with the differences

While the differences between the synoptic gospels and John are far greater than those between any two or more of the synoptics, many readers find the latter differences more troublesome. John simply does not overlap with the synoptics most of the time; the difference is at the level of the selection of material, and of the overall 'tone' of the gospel. But when the synoptic gospels record the same events or sayings in different forms, the possibility of contradiction arises, and this threatens to cast doubt on the reliability of at least one of the records. This has proved fruitful ground for those who argue against the historical reliability of the gospels, and so it is not surprising that 'harmonization' has been a traditional concern of those who regard the gospel as inspired writings.

There are those who regard any sort of harmonization as illegitimate, as a counsel of despair on the part of those who are determined to defend the factuality of the gospels, come what may.

Anyone familiar with the study of ancient history would question this attitude. In those rare cases where there is more than one source for an event there are often differences of perspective, and sometimes apparent factual discrepancies. This may be because one or more of the sources is misinformed, or is deliberately distorting the facts. But unless the historian has reason beforehand to distrust one or more of the sources the normal procedure is to consider first whether there are other reasonable ways of explaining the discrepancy. It may be that one or other of the texts has been misunderstood, or that vital information is missing which would resolve the problem. Where a writer has generally proved to be reliable, it is not unreasonable to give them the benefit of the doubt, rather than to assume that our limited knowledge gives us the right to pronounce them wrong.

So also in studying the gospels we must remember that our historical knowledge is limited, so that we may not always have all the information we need in order to judge one account to be right and another wrong. And sometimes traditional interpretations may need to be re-examined, to see whether the alleged discrepancy is real or imaginary. In the case of the gospels three factors are particularly important.

First, what is a 'parallel'? Some of the frequently alleged 'discrepancies' are based on the assumption that two accounts refer to the same incident or teaching; but similar events (*e.g.* healing mircales) no doubt occurred at different times in Jesus' ministry, and it is also surely likely that in the course of a few years of public and private teaching he used similar phrases and ideas on different occasions. Of course this argument can be carried to ridiculous extremes: some events in the nature of the case are not likely to have happened more than once (*e.g.* Jesus' trial, crucifixion and resurrection!). But at least it is worth asking whether two supposedly contradictory accounts are in fact recording the same occasion. For instance, comparison of the four accounts of the anointing of Jesus (Mt. 26:6–13; Mk. 14:3–9; Lk. 7:36–50; Jn. 12:1–8) might well suggest that two separate incidents lie behind the differing details in the way the stories are told. And a comparison of the 'beatitudes' in Mt. 5:3–10 with the very different tone and content of the blessings and woes of Lk. 6:20–26 suggests to some that Jesus used the 'beatitude' form more than once, to deliver different messages.

Secondly, alleged discrepancies sometimes relate to the order in which events occurred. For instance, Luke records Jesus' sermon at Nazareth at the very beginning of his Galilean ministry (Lk. 4:16–30), whereas Matthew and Mark both have the only visit to Nazareth at a later stage (Mt. 13:53–58; Mk. 6:1–6). But we have noticed above that the gospels are not apparently intended to be read as strictly chronological accounts, but rather at many points as collections of stories and sayings arranged more in the form of an anthology than of a diary.

Thirdly, with special reference to the sayings of Jesus, it is hardly surprising that if he spoke in Aramaic the Greek records of his sayings should show variation in wording. It is of course quite possible that Jesus sometimes spoke in Greek, but most scholars believe that most of his teaching would have been in the common speech, Aramaic. Whatever we have in the gospels, then, it cannot be the exact words of Jesus except in those few cases where the Aramaic is recorded. All translation is to some extent paraphrase, and paraphrase is a perfectly acceptable way of communicating meaning.

Variation in wording is therefore to be expected; it is a difficult judgment as to when that variation passes the limits of legitimate paraphrase. It is interesting, for instance, to look at the different ways in which the synoptic gospels record Jesus' response to the high priest's question at his trial (Mt. 26:64; Mk. 14:62; Lk. 22:67–70). It is arguable that, while they are clearly not the same, the very difference in the way they express it allows us to gain a more rounded picture of Jesus' reply than any one of them on its own would have offered.

So it is reasonable to look for realistic explanations of why the accounts vary before jumping to the conclusion that one or the other is in error.

Harmonization can, however, be carried too far. One danger is that in the desire to have an answer to every problem, we may put forward proposals which are so implausible that the whole enterprise becomes ridiculous. (One attempt to reconcile the very minor differences between the accounts of Peter's denials results in having Peter deny Jesus six times, even though all accounts agree on only three times, and the three synoptic accounts all make a point of the number three!) There is nothing wrong with admitting that in some cases we do not know the answer; suspended judgment is better than an improbable solution.

The other danger is that in our zeal to iron out the discrepancies we fail to take seriously the differing perspectives and insights of the gospel writers. It is these four texts, with all their variety, which constitute our inspired record of Jesus, not some underlying 'original' which has to be artificially created by removing or ignoring the differences.

It is to be hoped, then, that the reader of this commentary will take the trouble to compare the differing synoptic accounts. To this end, we have provided throughout the commentary on each of the synoptic gospels references to the parallel paragraphs in the other two. Because of the problem of deciding what is a true parallel, we have used 'See' for the more obviously parallel passages, and '*Cf.*' for those where the link is more questionable. By careful use of these cross-references it should be possible to get a richer grasp of the total synoptic witness to Jesus.

The gospels as stories

One of the most encouraging trends in recent study of the gospels is the increased willingness to treat each as a complete narrative, a story written in order to be read and enjoyed as a whole, rather than a collection of isolated incidents and sayings.

In these days of easy access to books and of almost universal literacy it is easy to forget that in the ancient world a scroll of even one 'book' of the Bible was an expensive luxury, even for those who could read it. Most members of churches would have known these books not by reading them privately, but by hearing them read aloud in the congregation.

A public reading of Mark's gospel takes about one-and-a-half hours; the longer gospels would take nearer two-and-a-half. We do not know whether a first-century congregation would have heard the whole gospel at one sitting, or would have enjoyed it in instalments. But those who have had the privilege of listening to public renderings of a whole gospel can have little doubt that the authors would have approved of such a use of their work, and probably designed it for that purpose.

To listen to such a rendering, particularly of the gospel of Mark, is to realize that this anthology of stories about Jesus is no random collection. It is rather a carefully constructed whole, with a plot of dramatic intensity, in which various sub-plots are subtly interwoven so that the narrative moves inexorably towards its terrific climax in Jerusalem. Touches of paradox and flashes of humour keep the audience alert and involved, and enable us to become part of the utterly unique events of Jesus' ministry, conflict and death, and to share in the triumph of his resurrection.

It is wrong, then, to treat each story or section of teaching in the gospels as if it existed in isolation. Our normal Bible reading habits tend to lead us into this danger, as we read a short passage at a time, usually without considering how it relates to the whole narrative. Those who preach on the gospels also frequently focus on a single short section (or even a single verse!) without regard to its wider context.

Of course it is not normally practicable in ordinary life to read a whole gospel at one sitting, still less for a preacher to deal with a whole book at once! But at least we should make sure that in reading or preaching we are always aware of, and sensitive to, the development of the 'plot' of the gospel as a whole, and of how our chosen passage fits into it. And it would contribute a lot to our study of a gospel if we began by reading it straight through, enjoying it as a whole story, before embarking on studying it section by section.

Discovering Jesus

A sensitive reading of each of the four gospels will give us a valuable insight into the faith and thinking of each of their writers, and into the issues which were of special concern to them and to the churches in which and for which they were writing.

It was not, however, the primary aim of these men to write about themselves and their ideas. They wrote to help people to know Jesus better. Their books are not intended to promote theological understanding for its own sake, but to foster and encourage faith and discipleship. John wrote, 'these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). The other gospel writers would have echoed this same aim, whether their target was primarily a non-Christian readership to be won to faith, or a Christian congregation who needed to be instructed and encouraged in living out the faith they professed. To that end the writers set out the facts of Jesus' life and teaching as they themselves had learned or remembered them. And it is to these four men that we owe virtually all the historical knowledge of Jesus that we possess.

The very few references to Jesus in non-Christian literature of the first century or so after his death tell us at best that he lived and died as a teacher and wonder-worker in Palestine in the early thirties, and that he gained a following sufficiently devoted to form the basis of a growing religious movement. They tell us nothing about what he was like or what he taught.

References to Jesus' earthly life in the rest of the NT are few and sketchy, and we have no other Christian sources of information until the growth of the so-called 'apocryphal gospels' in the second century. These are mostly less interested in Jesus' earthly life than in his teaching, and the details they do include are mostly drawn either from the four NT gospels or from a steadily developing store of legendary stories about Jesus which were largely the product of popular imagination and of the special interests of the new gnostic brand of Christianity.

If we are to know the historical reality of Jesus' life and ministry, then it is to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John that we must go. And here we are on firm ground. Between them they give us a fuller insight into Jesus as a historical figure and into his life and teaching than we have for almost anyone else in the ancient world. They offer it, however, in their own way, as men of faith calling others to share with them in the way of discipleship. Those who read the gospels merely to discover historical facts about Jesus may succeed in doing so, but they will have missed the point. The gospels are for those who would 'believe' and 'have life'. The facts about Jesus are recorded not for interest alone, but for response.

R. T. France

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MATTHEW

Introduction

Matthew the teacher

Matthew has been called 'the Teacher's Gospel' because its material is so presented that it is very suitable for use in teaching. It was probably for this reason that this gospel was the most widely used of the four in the early church. While Mark offers a vivid, flowing narrative, Luke a sensitive study of Jesus' dealings with people, and John a more explicitly theological portrait of Jesus, Matthew collected stories and sayings of Jesus which bear particularly on the regular concerns of the life of the church and put them together in such a way that a teacher in the church could draw on them. Very probably Matthew was himself such a teacher and included in his gospel the material which he was already used to presenting to his own church members.

Most obvious are the five great 'discourses', or collections of Jesus' teaching, which are all concluded with the formula 'When Jesus had finished these sayings' or the like (a formula which is much more striking in Greek than in our English versions). These discourses comprise chs. 5 – 7, 10, 13, 18 and 24 – 25. Each appears to be based on a much shorter 'address' in one of the other synoptic gospels (Mark and Luke), and each has a clear unity of theme running through it. Many of the sayings so collected occur elsewhere in the other synoptic gospels, so that Matthew seems to have made five careful 'anthologies' of the teaching of Jesus on certain subjects.

Both within these discourses and in the rest of the gospel Matthew likes to give clearly structured divisions of material, which are therefore relatively easy to memorize. Obvious examples are the three balancing sections of the genealogy (1:1–17; note the summary in v 17), the eight beatitudes (5:3–10; note the same conclusion to the first and last), the six 'antitheses' (5:21–48; note the recurring introductory formula), the three types of religious observance (6:1–18; with almost identical structure, apart from the expansion of the section on prayer) and the seven woes on the teachers of the law and Pharisees (23:13–36). Longer sections are also sometimes compiled with a balanced structure, notably the collection of miracles in chs. 8 – 9 and the parable discourse in ch. 13.

Compared with Mark's lively narrative style, Matthew's telling of the stories of Jesus can appear quite dull. While his gospel contains much more material than Mark's, where they tell the same story, Matthew is typically much more concise. For example, the stories which make up ch. 5 of Mark (43 verses) take up only 16 verses in Matthew. He has omitted all the vivid narrative detail and cut out any 'redundancy' in the telling, so as to focus on the main point. But where the point of a story lies in the sayings of Jesus which it includes, he is as likely, while reducing the narrative, to offer the sayings in a fuller form (*cf.* Mt. 8:5–13 with Lk. 7:1–10).

In such ways, Matthew has shaped his material to make it more suitable for teaching in the church. It still serves that function admirably, as many a pastor can testify.

Matthew's special interests

Jesus the Messiah

Matthew writes as a Jew who has found in Jesus the fulfilment of all that is precious in his Jewish heritage. 'Fulfilment' is a central theme of the gospel.

It comes to the surface most obviously in the repeated assertion that 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet' (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9); the wording varies slightly, but these 'formula-quotations', as they have come to be called, are a distinctive feature of Matthew's gospel. Other similar quotations, without using the same formula, reinforce the argument that even in the details of Jesus' life there is a pattern foreshadowed in Scripture which is finding its proper outworking. The OT passages are often not the obvious 'Messianic' texts, but quite obscure verses, some of them not on the face of it intended as predictions at all. But Matthew delights to search out patterns of God's work in the OT and to trace them to their 'fulfilment' in Jesus.

The first two chapters of the gospel (in which an unusually large concentration of formula-quotations occurs) are devoted primarily to setting out the scriptural grounds for seeing Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. His mission was to fulfil the law and the prophets (5:17), and the rest of ch. 5 explores what that fulfilment means. A series of references to Jesus' ministry as 'greater than' key figures and institutions of

the OT in ch. 12 (vs 6, 41, 42) develops an argument for his fulfilment not only of specific prophecies but of the essential dynamics of OT life and religion. In these and other ways Matthew 'claims' the whole OT revelation as the basis of the mission of Jesus.

Israel and the church

Matthew's gospel is rightly seen as one of the most Jewish books of the NT, with its focus on OT fulfilment, its frequent reference to matters of rabbinic debate, its assumption that its readers know about matters of Jewish ritual, and its use of Jewish terminology ('kingdom of heaven', 'Son of David') and occasional untranslated Aramaic words. It is only in Matthew's gospel that the mission of Jesus and his disciples is limited to 'the lost sheep of Israel' (10:6; 15:24), and that the authority of Jewish teachers of the law is apparently taken seriously (23:3, 23).

Yet this same gospel is also seen by many as violently anti-Jewish. It denounces the Jewish leaders (especially the Pharisees) as hypocrites and blind guides and threatens that 'the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit' (21:43). It envisages non-Jews brought in from east and west to the Jewish Messianic banquet, while the (Jewish) 'subjects of the kingdom' are thrown out (8:11–12; *cf.* 22:1–10). In it Jesus declares that the rebellion of God's people has reached the point where judgment must fall on 'this generation'; in particular, the temple in Jerusalem, the symbol of God's presence among his people, is to be destroyed so that not one stone will be left on another. It is only Matthew who records the terrible cry of 'all the people' in 27:25: 'His blood on us and on our children'. Some commentators have gone so far as to suggest that Matthew had given up hope of any further response from Israel, and was urging his readers to concentrate their mission on the other nations.

It is certainly true that this most Jewish gospel contains also a sustained expectation that Gentiles would henceforth be included in the true people of God. The foreign Magi of 2:1–12 give more than a hint of this, and as Jesus meets with Gentiles in the course of the story (8:5–13; 15:21–28), the wide extent of his mission becomes increasingly clear. It is, therefore, no surprise when the book concludes with the risen Jesus sending his disciples out to make disciples of all nations.

Matthew's 'love-hate relationship' with Israel is the wholly natural attitude of a faithful Jew who had found in Jesus the fulfilment of his national ideals, and yet who found the majority of his own people refusing to recognize that fulfilment. In Matthew's gospel we can feel particularly clearly the pain of that tension which eventually led the church, despite its Jewish roots, to see itself as the rival, rather than the sister, of continuing Judaism. For Matthew that separation was not yet complete, but it was inevitable, and his Jewish nature would not accept it with calm detachment. He had to think it out theologically, and Matthew's gospel, more clearly than the others, presents the view of Jesus as himself the true Israel, and of those who have responded to his mission as the true remnant of the people of God in whom his eternal purpose is continued. To be the true people of God is thus no longer a matter of nationality but of relationship to Jesus, and that relationship is open to Gentile as well as to Jew, as is exemplified in the 'faith' of the centurion at Capernaum (8:5–13). Israel as a whole had in OT times constituted the assembly (*ekklēsia*) of the people of God. Even in those days, however, it had often had to be through a faithful 'remnant' that God's purpose had been continued, while the nation as a whole turned away from him. Now that remnant is focused in the *ekklēsia* ('church') *of Jesus* (16:18). That *ekklēsia* is no longer a national body but is to consist of disciples of all nations who are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and who follow all that Jesus has taught (28:19–20).

Jesus the king

The gospel begins with a genealogy which focuses on Jesus the true king of the line of David, the one in whom Israel's monarchy found its fulfilment, and 1:18–25 explains how he came to be officially 'adopted' by Joseph, himself a 'son of David' (v 20), thus ensuring his royal status. He was then sought by foreigners as 'the King of the Jews' (2:2).

As 22:41–45 makes clear, however, Jesus' role is more than a nationalistic one as 'son of David'. He came to proclaim and to effect the kingship of God, but he himself also has a role as the universal king. Only in Matthew's gospel do we hear of the kingdom of the Son of Man (13:41; 16:28; 19:28; 25:31–34), in language hardly less exalted than the OT uses of the kingship of God himself. At the outset of his ministry Jesus was offered, by the devil, the kingship of all the world (4:8–9); but he refused, and by following the way of obedience to his Father at last reached the point where he could declare 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (28:18). Paradoxically, it was as he was mocked on the cross as the (failed) 'King of Israel' that he was achieving his true destiny as king of heaven and earth.

The true dignity of this paradoxical king is

revealed in two phrases which 'bracket' the gospel. His name is declared at the beginning as 'Immanuel', which means 'God with us' (1:23), and he himself declares at the end 'I am with you always' (28:20). Thus Matthew allows us to see in Jesus one who, while never less than the Messiah of Israel, is yet far more.

Authorship and date

Early Christian tradition unanimously attributed this gospel to the authorship of Matthew the apostle, the former tax-collector of Capernaum, whose call it records in 9:9 (Mark and Luke call him Levi). There was also a persistent tradition that it was written originally not in Greek but in Hebrew or Aramaic. Both of these traditions are doubted by most modern scholars.

The Greek of the gospel as we know it does not read like 'translation Greek', and the close literary relationship of Matthew with the (Greek) gospels of Mark and Luke makes its origin in any other language unlikely. It is quite possible that Christians in the first few centuries AD were familiar with a Hebrew or Aramaic work which was traditionally associated with Matthew, but unlikely that it was our gospel. Papias, the earliest writer to mention Matthew's writing, attributes to him a compilation of 'sayings' in Hebrew or Aramaic, and some believe that he was referring not to the gospel we know but to one of its sources (perhaps the source 'Q' which many believe was used by the authors of Matthew and Luke; see the relevant section in 'Reading the gospels'). But Papias' statement is too brief to be clear, and its original context is unknown.

If it is improbable that Matthew's gospel was written in Hebrew or Aramaic, can we take the other aspect of early tradition, the identity of the author as Matthew the apostle, any more seriously? Or does Papias' statement suggest that this tradition arose in connection with a document other than our gospel? We cannot be sure, but the writers of the early Christian centuries offer us no other candidate for authorship, and a tradition which is both early and unanimous should not be simply assumed to be false unless the nature of the book itself makes it clearly inappropriate.

In fact the traditional attribution fits rather well, in that a Jewish tax-collector turned Christian leader might well be expected to exhibit the sort of tension in his attitude to Judaism which we have noticed above. Moreover, tax-collectors were, by virtue of their profession, used to handling records and documents, and so Matthew may well have functioned as a sort of 'secretary' to the apostolic group.

Such suggestions, however, fall far short of proof. Of the early Christians whose names we know, the Matthew to whom early tradition attributed the gospel is not an improbable candidate. But the text of the gospel itself does not say who the author was, and the matter may well be left open.

Until the nineteenth century it was almost universally believed that Matthew was the first gospel to be written. With the growth of belief in the priority of Mark, Matthew began to be dated later, and is now generally placed in the last quarter of the first century. But in recent discussion, both the priority of Mark and the whole relative dating scheme adopted by modern scholarship have been increasingly questioned, and it is wiser to look for any indications of date in the gospel itself. (See the introductory article 'Reading the gospels' for the changing opinions on the literary relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke.)

The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 is a prominent concern of Matthew. But it is always spoken of as a future event (naturally so, since it is Jesus who is presented as speaking of it). Some commentators believe that the language used (*e.g.* in 22:6–7) reflects Matthew's knowledge of the event itself, not just of its prediction by Jesus, and therefore date the gospel after AD 70. Others have no difficulty with such 'circumstantial' prediction, and point out that the language used is similar to that of other such prophecies in the OT and elsewhere, so that it need not depend on observation of the event. There are also some passages in Matthew which presuppose that the temple was still intact (5:23–24; 17:24–27; 23:16–22); and these have not been edited out in the way a writer after AD 70 might have been expected to do.

Other arguments depend on the relative scheme of dating in both the writing of the NT documents and the development of Jewish–Christian relations which is presupposed. There is little room for dogmatism here, and some scholars regard a date in the early 60s as an attractive alternative to the more commonly proposed date around AD 80.

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Outline of contents

The plan of the gospel

The structure of the gospel has been analysed in different ways, none of which is generally agreed. Some use the five discourses with their prominent concluding formulae as 'markers' and suggest that Matthew wrote a gospel in 'five books'. Others suggest that the repeated clause 'From that time on Jesus began to . . .' in 4:17 and 16:21 is intended to mark the beginning of major new sections of the narrative. Others note that the story has the same general outline as that of Mark, with a geographical movement from the early ministry in Galilee towards the final confrontation in Jerusalem, and see this plot as the structural principle of the book. The following broad analysis takes this latter view as its starting-point, though recognizing that the turning-points in 4:17 and 16:21 fit in with it. More detailed divisions of the text will be noted in the commentary.

1:1 – 4:16 Introducing Jesus
1:1–17 The ancestry of Jesus the Messiah
1:18 – 2:23 Scripture fulfilled in the birth and childhood of Jesus the Messiah
3:1–17 John the Baptist and Jesus
4:1–16 Testing and preparation

4:17 – 16:20 Public ministry in and around Galilee
4:17–25 Introduction to the public ministry
5:1 – 7:29 First discourse: discipleship
8:1 – 9:34 A selection of Jesus' miracles
9:35 – 10:42 Second discourse: the disciples' mission
11:1 – 12:50 Varying response to Jesus' public ministry
13:1–52 Third discourse: Jesus' teaching in parables
13:53 – 16:20 Further responses to Jesus' public ministry

16:21 – 18:35 Private ministry in Galilee; preparing the disciples
16:21 – 17:27 Teaching on Jesus' mission
18:1–35 Fourth discourse: relationships among the disciples

19:1 – 25:46 Ministry in Judea
19:1 – 20:34 On the way to Jerusalem
21:1–22 Arrival in Jerusalem
21:23 – 23:39 Controversies with the Jewish leaders
24:1 – 25:46 Fifth discourse: judgment

26:1 – 28:20 The death and resurrection of Jesus
26:1–46 Preparation for the passion
26:47 – 27:26 The arrest and trial of Jesus
27:27–56 The crucifixion of Jesus
27:57 – 28:20 The burial, resurrection and commission of Jesus

Commentary

1:1 – 4:16 Introducing Jesus

The story of Jesus' public teaching and activity begins in Galilee and leads inexorably towards the final dénouement in Jerusalem, before it reverts to Galilee for the triumphant concluding scene. Before that story can begin, however, we need to be introduced to its chief character, and this is achieved by a series of scenes set largely in the southern part of Israel, leading up to Jesus' deliberate move to Galilee in 4:12. In this move, as in all that is recorded in these introductory chapters, Matthew traces the fulfilment of God's plan revealed in Scripture.

1:1–17 The ancestry of Jesus the Messiah (cf. Lk. 3:23–38)

The modern reader finds this list of names a dull way to begin a book. For Matthew and his readers, however, it was far from dull: it was all about the fulfilment of Israel's story in the coming of their true king. *A record of the genealogy* is, in Gk., the title of the 'Book of Genesis', so that the reader thinks of a new beginning. The list

begins with *Abraham* (the hero of the book of Genesis and the patriarch from whom Israel traced its origin), leads on to *David* (the first true king of Israel), and continues down the royal line of Judah to the point where its monarchy was destroyed at *the exile to Babylon*. The division into three sets of *fourteen generations* (17) emphasizes these turning-points (and perhaps for a Jewish reader the point is reinforced by the fact that the three Hebrew letters of the name David, used as numerals, add up to fourteen!).

The prominent repetition of the title *Christ* (1, 16, 17, 18) draws out the theological implication of this list. For modern readers 'Christ' is no more than a 'surname' of Jesus, but Matthew clearly uses it here with its full force as a title, 'Messiah', the true king of Israel in the line of David, whose coming they eagerly awaited.

The names from Abraham to the exile are well known from the OT, but most of those in the third section are otherwise unknown. Luke's list of Joseph's ancestors (even including his father) is different. Probably Luke offers us a 'physical' family-tree, while Matthew gives the official throne-succession list (which would not necessarily pass from father to son, but would remain within the family). His concern is with Jesus' right (through Joseph) to the title 'King of the Jews'.

V 16 indicates unambiguously that Jesus was not the physical son of Joseph (*of whom* is feminine in Gk). The relevance of the genealogy to Jesus will therefore need to be established in the following section.

Notes. 3–6 The mention of four mothers is unusual. All were probably non-Jewish, and in each case there was some irregularity or even scandal. Perhaps Matthew thought that Jesus' birth of a socially insignificant and unmarried mother needed some scriptural support. **8** Three of the kings of Judah (Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah) are omitted (as is Jehoiakim in v11) to keep the number of generations to fourteen. The list is in any case selective, since the thirteen generations after the exile cover 600 years.

1:18 – 2:23 Scripture fulfilled in the birth and childhood of Jesus the Messiah

This section of the gospel, commonly known as the infancy narratives, is not an account of Jesus' birth and childhood as such (indeed his birth is not directly narrated), but a series of scenes designed to show how God's purpose, declared in the OT, was coming to fulfilment. Each of the subsections discussed below focuses on a prominent quotation with a formula of fulfilment. Other scriptural themes run below the surface of the narratives; in particular, the hostility of Herod recalls Pharaoh's attempt to destroy the infant Moses, while the coming of the Magi recalls the visit of another Eastern dignitary, the Queen of Sheba, to the son of David in Jerusalem.

Note that the stories are told from the point of view of Joseph, while those in Lk. 1 – 2 are told from the point of view of Mary. This may reflect the source from which each writer obtained his information on this period.

1:18–25 Joseph accepts Jesus as his son. The previous section showed Joseph to be the descendant of David; but Jesus was not Joseph's son, as this section makes even more explicit. Only if Joseph formally 'adopted' him could he too be 'son of David' (20). It took a divine revelation to persuade Joseph to do so, by accepting the pregnant Mary as his wife and then giving the child a name.

In these verses Jesus' conception without a human father is neither argued nor explained (beyond the double mention of *the Holy Spirit*), but simply assumed as a fact known to the reader, though not at first to Joseph. It is, however, supported by the first of Matthew's formula-quotations, a passage which suggestively combines a virgin mother and a name, *Immanuel*, which has striking implications for who this child is.

Notes. 18 The *birth* of Jesus is not in fact the subject of the section; the Gk. word *genesis* (used also in v1) means rather 'origin' or 'beginning'. **19** Betrothal was a binding contract, requiring 'divorce' to break it. The OT punishment for unchastity before marriage was death, but divorce had by this time become accepted instead, and a private divorce before witnesses was a humane option. **21** *Jesus* is the Gk. form of the OT name Joshua, meaning 'God saves'. **23** *Virgin* is the meaning of the Gk. text of Is. 7:14, though the Heb. is less explicit. The prophecy related to events in the late eighth century BC, but Matthew sees in the name Immanuel and in the developing theme of a special child in Is. 7 – 12 a foreshadowing of a greater fulfilment in the future.

2:1–12 The visit of the Magi. *Magi* were astrologers, who played a prominent part in court life in many eastern states, as advisers to kings. Their insights were derived from sophisticated astronomical observation combined with the sort of 'interpretation' which present-day horoscopes provide. By such calculations made in *the east* (probably Mesopotamia, mod. Iraq) they had concluded that an important royal birth had taken place in Palestine, which called for a 'state visit'. Matthew clearly sees this as an acceptable Gentile response to genuine revelation, despite its dubious means.

The sharp contrast between these well-motivated foreigners and the unscrupulous jealousy of *Herod* , the official *King of the Jews (and all Jerusalem with him)*, foreshadows the response which official Judaism will make to Jesus, and the future welcome of Gentile believers into the true people of God.

In the whole episode Matthew finds rich material for meditation on the fulfilment of Scripture. The formal quotation of Mi. 5:2 shows how Jesus' birthplace indicates his status as the coming *ruler*, and the *star* probably echoes Balaam's prophecy of a 'star . . . out of Jacob' (Nu. 24:17). The coming of foreign dignitaries from the east to Jerusalem reminds us of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon, the son of David, bringing gifts of gold and spices (1 Ki. 10:1–13), and of the prophecies of similar visits in the future in Ps. 72:10–11,15 and Is. 60:1–6 (v 6 'gold and incense').

Notes. 1 *King Herod* ('the Great') died in 4 BC. This episode did not necessarily take place immediately after Jesus' birth, but within two years of it (16), so that Jesus' birth was probably not later than around 6 BC. 2 Many natural explanations of the *star* have been offered, including a comet (Halley's appeared in 12 BC), a nova or supernova (there was a prominent one in 5/4 BC according to Chinese records), or a planetary conjunction (that of Saturn and Jupiter in 7 BC would have suggested to Babylonian astrologers the idea of a king in 'the Westland', as they called Palestine). One or more of these may have contributed to the quest of the Magi, but v 9 suggests something out of the ordinary. 6 The quotation adapts the text of Mi. 5:2, partly by weaving in words from 2 Sa. 5:2, on which Micah's prophecy was based. 12 God communicates by *a dream* to another Gentile in 27:19. Like the star, it is a means of communication which would have been familiar in their culture. The only other such dream-revelations Matthew records are given to Joseph (1:20; 2:13, 19, 22).

2:13–23 Childhood travels. The rest of ch. 2 focuses on the geographical movements of the infant Messiah, from his birthplace in Bethlehem to Egypt, then back to Judea and on to Galilee, where he is established in the village which was to give him his title, Jesus of Nazareth. This section is remarkable both for its frequent formula-quotations (15, 17–18, 23) and for the recurrent dreams by which Joseph was guided from place to place (13, 19, 22). Both these features suggest that Matthew's primary concern was to show that these changes of location were not haphazard but were directed by God and had been foreshadowed in Scripture (notice that each of the formal quotations in ch. 2 contains a place-name: Bethlehem, Egypt, Ramah, Nazareth). Clearly geography matters!

Why is this? A clue may be found in the reaction of Jews to the suggestion that the Messiah might be from Galilee (Jn. 7:41, 52), or still worse, from Nazareth (Jn. 1:46). Everyone knew that the Messiah was to come from the Judean village of Bethlehem, so how could Jesus *of Nazareth* be taken seriously? To this objection Mt. 2 provides the answer. Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem, as Scripture required, but by a series of divinely guided and scripturally justified movements found his way eventually to Galilee, so that the Messiah could after all be *called a Nazarene*.

Notes. 13 *Egypt* was a traditional place of asylum for Jews in political danger. 15 Ho. 11:1 speaks of the exodus of God's *son* Israel *out of Egypt*. Matthew uses it here on the basis of his conviction that Jesus was himself the true Israel. 16 In his last few years, *Herod's* paranoid defence of his throne led him to execute many imagined claimants, including even three of his sons and his favourite wife. The elimination of the handful of male infants in the small village of Bethlehem was entirely in character. 18 The tradition of *Rachel's* burial near Bethlehem makes this quotation appropriate; the *children* in Je. 31:15 were the Jews taken into exile (from *Ramah*, another traditional site of Rachel's burial), but the chapter goes on to promise their return. 22 *Archelaus* proved worse than his father and was deposed in AD 6, to be replaced by a Roman prefect. 23 *He will be called a Nazarene* is not a quotation of a specific text (as the formula indicates by a general reference to *the prophets*) but probably sums up the prophetic theme of a humble, despised Messiah (*cf.* Jn. 1:46).

3:1–17 John the Baptist and Jesus

3:1–12 John's proclamation (see Mk. 1:2–8; Lk. 3:1–18). John the Baptist was the leader of a significant religious movement. His call to repentance in the light of God's coming judgment was a clear warning that Israel, as so often in the past, was not living up to its calling as the people of God. His words about being *children of Abraham* (9) indicate that to be a Jew was not alone sufficient protection against judgment. His practice of *baptizing* those who responded, just as Gentiles who wanted to join Israel had to be baptized, marked them out as the 'remnant' who now represented the true people of God.

Matthew is careful to show the continuity between John's mission and that of Jesus. John's proclamation in v 2 is the same as that of Jesus in 4:17 (and of his disciples in 10:7). Echoes of John's words also occur later in Jesus' teaching

(see 7:16, 19; 12:34; 13:30; 23:33), while 8: 10–12 reinforces John's warning against relying on Jewish racial origin alone. John was thus not just a curtain-raiser for the coming of Jesus; he was already launching the mission which Jesus would develop. (*Cf.* 11:7–19; 21:23–32 for further indications of this close connection.)

John was, however, only the forerunner, as the quotation from Is. 40:3 (v 3) indicates and as his own words about the coming *one who is more powerful* confirm. The contrast between *water* and *the Holy Spirit* (11) leaves no doubt that it was in Jesus' ministry that real spiritual renewal would be found.

Notes. 1 The *Desert of Judea* is the uninhabited area near the Jordan. Passages like Is. 40:3; Je. 2:2–3 and Ho. 2:14–15 show the desert as a place of new beginnings. **2** *The kingdom of heaven* is Matthew's version of 'the kingdom of God' in the other gospels. It signifies God's effective rule on earth. *Is near* is lit. 'has come near' and is virtually an announcement of arrival. **4** John's clothes mark him as a second Elijah (see 2 Ki. 1:8), as 11:14 and 17:10–13 will explain.

3:13–17 Jesus is baptized (see Mk. 1:9–11; Lk. 3:21–22). In view of v 11, John's hesitation was natural. Jesus' explanation (15) is cryptic, but relates to the need for him to fulfil his mission, which involved his identification with the renewed people of God. (*Righteousness* may echo Is. 53:11, where the word 'righteous' is strikingly repeated.) The revelation which followed (16–17) marked Jesus out as the Messiah, anointed with the Spirit, as foretold in Is. 11:2; 42:1 and 61:1, while the declaration from heaven picks up the language of Ps. 2:7 and Is. 42:1. Jesus was thus commissioned as the Messianic king, and his status as Son of God was declared on no less an authority than that of God himself.

4:1–16 Testing and preparation

4:1–11 Jesus is tested in the desert (see Mk. 1:12–13; Lk. 4:1–13). 'Temptation' suggests a purely negative experience; but this was a divinely intended (1) preparation for Jesus' mission. The word more commonly means 'test', and this is a better translation here.

The focus is on Jesus' recently declared status as Son of God (3:17; 4:3, 6): what are its implications for his relationship with his Father? The three tests examine aspects of that relationship, and the ways in which a misuse of that status could ruin Jesus' ministry. He must be ready to accept privation in fulfilling his God-given task without 'pulling rank' (2–4); to trust his Father's care without the need to test it by forcing God's hand (5–7); and to reject the 'short cut' to the fulfilment of his mission which would be achieved at the cost of compromising his loyalty to his Father (8–10).

Each suggestion is rebutted by a text of Scripture, all of which come from Dt. 6 – 8. That passage relates Israel's experience of testing in the desert ('as a man disciplines his son', Dt. 8:5; *cf.* 8:2), and the texts quoted focus on the lessons Israel should have learned by that experience. Now a new 'son of God' is being prepared for his role, and the same principles of obedience, imperfectly learned by Israel, must be the basis of the ministry of Jesus, the 'new Israel'.

Notes. 1 *The devil* was the agent and tempted Jesus to misuse his position; but his hostile purpose was put to the service of God's testing of his Son. **2** Jesus' *fasting* and *hunger* show that the Son of God was not free from real human suffering. **6** The devil's quotation from Ps. 91:11–12 was quite accurate (and no doubt, if tested, would have proved reliable), but even a correct quotation of Scripture can be misapplied. **8** Contrast 28:18, where, by the path of obedience, Jesus has received all authority not only on earth but also in heaven!

4:12–16 Jesus moves to Galilee (*cf.* Mk. 1:14; Lk. 4:14). John's imprisonment left Jesus, as his associate, in danger in the south, and at the same time left the field clear for Jesus to begin his own mission. *Galilee* is now the scene of Jesus' activity right up to his final journey to Jerusalem in ch. 21. It was in Galilee that the light would shine (as Is. 9:1–2 predicted), and there Jesus' mission would grow and flourish. Jerusalem, on the other hand, was to be the place of rejection and death. This contrast is carefully highlighted throughout the gospel, culminating in the return from Jerusalem to Galilee to launch the post-Easter Christian mission in ch. 28.

Galilee (*of the Gentiles*) was geographically and politically cut off from Judea and had a less predominantly Jewish population. Its people were regarded by Judeans as uncultured and irreligious, and there is ample evidence of strained relations between the two provinces in NT times. As a Galilean in Jerusalem, Jesus was virtually a foreigner.

4:17 – 16:20 Public ministry in and around Galilee

4:17–25 Introduction to the public ministry

4:17 Jesus' proclamation (see Mk. 1:14–15). See the Outline of Contents for the function of this verse, to mark a new phase of ministry. See on 3:2 for the link with John the Baptist. In Jesus' preaching *the kingdom of heaven* was to be a central theme: God is King, and his rule was now being made effective.

4:18–22 The first disciples are called (see Mk. 1:16–20; *cf.* Lk. 5:1–11). Jesus' associates in this mission would not be merely supporters but would themselves become *fishers of men*, winning new subjects for God's rule. These verses show the complete commitment which their involvement with Jesus would demand.

Simon, James and John (and to a lesser degree *Andrew*) formed a central core of the disciple group. Their call and ready response may be taken as typical of the group as a whole.

4:23–25 Summary of Jesus' ministry (*cf.* Mk. 1:39; 3:7–12; Lk. 4:44; 6:17–19). This summary shows Jesus as acceptable in the synagogues (contrast the later hostility) and widely popular as a teacher and especially as a healer; the mission in Galilee was essentially a success story. While localized in Galilee, Jesus' ministry attracted attention throughout 'greater Palestine' (which formed part of the Roman province of *Syria*). The prominence of *healing* marks a significant advance beyond the ministry of John: the power of the kingdom of heaven to which John looked forward was now being experienced in action.

5:1 – 7:29 First discourse: discipleship

This, the first of Matthew's great 'discourses' (see the Introduction), is generally known as the 'Sermon on the Mount'. It has the same general outline as the sermon recorded in Lk. 6:20–49 but is very much longer, including both material found elsewhere in Luke and a great deal found only in Matthew. The controlling theme around which this material is collected is that of discipleship, or 'life in the kingdom of heaven'. Having called his first disciples, Jesus set out for them an overview of the privileges and the demands of their new situation.

Several parts of the discourse focus on Jesus himself as the one to whom they now owed allegiance; it is not only a code of conduct for the disciple but a revelation of the Messiah's authority, as 7:28–29 reminds us. A parallel collection of Jesus' miraculous *deeds* in chs. 8 – 9 rounds out a powerful account of the authority of the Messiah.

5:1–2 Introduction (*cf.* Mk. 3:13; Lk. 6:20). The audience is clearly specified as *his disciples*, as opposed to *the crowds*. The latter reappear as a wider audience in 7:28, but they are clearly not the main focus of the teaching, which typically contrasts 'you' (the disciples) with other people (see especially 5:11–16).

5:3–10 The good life (*cf.* Lk. 6:20–22). The discourse begins with a rounded portrait of the true disciple in the form of eight 'beatitudes'. Neither *blessed* nor 'happy' adequately translates *makarios*, which is rather a term of congratulation and recommendation. These qualities are to be envied and emulated; they make up 'the good life'. Each is followed by a reason, pointing out that no-one will be the loser by following this way of life, however unpromising it may appear in the short term. The rewards are at the level of spiritual experience and relationship with God rather than of material recompense. The key phrase, which opens and concludes the series, is *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. This refers to the people who acknowledge God as their King and who may, therefore, confidently look forward to the fulfilment of his purpose in their lives.

Lk. 6:20–22 offers only four beatitudes, balanced by four 'woes'. They are phrased in the second person and focus on the material and social condition of the disciples, rather than on the spiritual qualities set out here.

Notes. 3 *Poor in spirit* suggests the OT theme of the 'poor' or 'meek', the oppressed people of God who, nonetheless, trust in him for deliverance. This and the next verse echo Is. 61:1–2, while v 5 draws on Ps. 37:11, another passage which contrasts the 'meek' with the 'wicked'.

5:11–16 The distinctiveness of the disciples (*cf.* Mk. 9:50; 4:21; Lk. 6:22–23; 14:34–35; 8:16). The change to the second person brings a direct application to Jesus' audience. The last beatitude is picked up to emphasize that the persecution which results from following Jesus puts his disciples in the succession of God's faithful servants. The distinctiveness which makes them the object of persecution is then illustrated by the two images of salt and light; each is essential but has its necessary effect on its environment only if it is both distinctive from it and yet fully involved in it. So disciples must function in society as an alternative and challenging community. It is by their visible goodness that they will bring glory to the God who has made them so.

Notes. 13 Either of the main functions of *salt*, as flavour or as preservative, fits the image. The rabbis used salt as a symbol for wisdom (*loses its saltiness* is lit. 'becomes foolish'). **14** The image is of a brightly lit city on a hill-top, representing the corporate effect of the combined 'lights' of individual disciples. **16** *Cf.* 6:1. The difference is between deliberate ostentation for one's own prestige in ch. 6 and the natural testimony of a godly life here.

5:17–48 Jesus and the law (*cf.* Lk. 16:17; 12:58–59; 16:18; 6:27–36). This long section is all on one theme, and it is important that its parts should not be interpreted in isolation from each other. The theme is Jesus' 'fulfilment' of the law, which is expressed by general statements (17–20) followed by a series of six

examples contrasting Jesus' teaching with the accepted understanding of the OT law (21–47) and a concluding summary (48).

In vs 17–20 Jesus places *the Law* alongside *the Prophets* as finding fulfilment in him (for this sense of the law as 'prophesying' until Jesus came *cf.* 11:13; and Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:24). To *fulfil* is to bring about that to which Scripture pointed, and that is what Jesus has now done. But the fulfilment of the law does not mean its abolition; it remains wholly authoritative and demands the fullest respect of the disciple (18–19). The question remains, however, how its function for the disciple is affected by its fulfilment in Jesus, and v 20 indicates that the meticulous legalism of *the Pharisees and the teachers of the law* is inadequate in the new context of *the kingdom of heaven*. Some higher approach is needed, and that is what vs 21–47 go on to spell out, by showing how Jesus' demand surpasses that of current ethical teaching based on the OT law. It does this not by being more scrupulous in literal observance but by penetrating to the true will of God enshrined in the law.

Thus in the first two examples (21–30) a mere literal avoidance of *murder* and *adultery* does not get to the heart of the problem. Underlying these outward acts are the fundamental attitudes of hatred and lust. Where the heart is not right, drastic action is needed to correct it *before* it results in outward sin.

Thirdly (31–32), a literal appeal to Dt. 24:1–4 had led to the sanctioning of divorce provided the due form of certification was observed, but Jesus restates God's original purpose of the permanence of marriage (see on 19:3–12 for fuller discussion).

Fourthly (33–37), Jesus sets aside the intricate discussion of the relative weight of different oaths (*cf.* 23:16–22) in favour of the ideal of simple truthfulness, which makes oaths and vows unnecessary. Here, as with the issue of divorce, Jesus refuses to allow the law's regulations, which were designed to control human sinfulness, to take precedence over God's original intention. Ethical standards must be built not on the law's concessions but on the positive purpose of God.

Fifthly (38–42), the natural desire for vengeance and retaliation may conveniently be justified from the OT's regulations, which were originally designed to limit the extent of legal retribution (*An eye for an eye etc.*). But to extend this principle to personal ethics makes it a charter for self-interest. By a series of vivid examples (39–42), Jesus calls instead for an unselfish attitude which not only refuses to retaliate but does not *resist*, even when it would be legally right to do so. Such an attitude is one which subordinates one's own rights to the benefit of others.

Finally (43–47), the natural inference that the OT's command to love one's neighbour carries the corollary that one should hate one's enemy is replaced by the extraordinary command to love one's enemies. Here again Jesus goes far beyond the explicit teaching of the OT law and offers an ethic in sharp contrast to natural human values.

Thus, in all these examples a superficial observance of the letter of the law has given way to a radical search for the true will of God. This goes beyond the literal interpretation of the law and may indeed in some cases leave it on one side, as Jesus' sovereign authority (*I say to you*) reveals the radically alternative value-scale which discipleship must involve. It is amazingly but appropriately summed up in the concluding verse, *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*. Legalism has been left far behind, and the law has been 'fulfilled'.

Notes. 19 *Breaks* is not a good translation of the Gk. word, which means *unties, i.e.* annuls; it is a matter of teaching rather than of practice. **22** *Raca* and *You fool* were both everyday terms of abuse. The three parts of the verse equally illustrate the consequences of bad relationships; they are not graded for seriousness. **23–24, 25–26** These two unconnected cameos illustrate the urgent need to take preventive action where relationships are wrong. *The altar* was in Jerusalem, a long journey from the home of Jesus' Galilean hearers. **29–30** *Cf.* 18:8–9. Jesus is talking about drastic corrective action, not literal mutilation. **31** Dt. 24:1–4 legislated for what must follow a certificated divorce (no remarriage of the original couple if the wife has since remarried); permission for legal divorce is assumed rather than stated. **33** This is a summary of various OT regulations relating to oaths and vows. **39–41** There is a legal flavour to these illustrations: a blow on *the right cheek* was a serious insult punishable by a heavy fine; the *cloak* was protected from forfeiture by Ex. 22:25–27; and the Roman soldier's right to commandeer civilian porters (*forces you to go* is the technical term for this) was limited. All involve not insisting on your rights. **43** *Hate your enemy* is not a quotation from the OT law, but was easily inferred from passages like Dt. 23:3–6 and Ps. 139:21–22.

6:1–18 Religion and its rewards. The general summary in v 1 is followed by three parallel illustrations of the wrong and the right way to go about religious observance. Almsgiving, prayer and fasting were central elements in Jewish religion, and all are assumed to be valid for Jesus' disciples. The issue is not whether you should do them, but how and why. And it is

focused in the question of *reward*; the reward for ostentatious religion is the human recognition for which it is seeking; but that is all (*they have received their reward in full*). Secret religion, on the other hand, which is done for God and not for human approval, may expect a heavenly reward. Notice that, as in 5:3–12, there is no embarrassment about the idea of reward.

The neat symmetry of the three illustrations (2–4, 5–6, 16–18) is broken by an extended discussion of prayer, which further explains the wrong way (7–8) and the right way (9–15). The Lord's Prayer thus appears not simply as a prescribed liturgical form but as a model of what true prayer should be like.

Notes. 1 See above on 5:16. 3 This is not a recommendation of unplanned giving! 6 *Room* refers to the storeroom, probably without windows and the only lockable room in the house; it represents the least public place. 7 *Keep on babbling* translates a 'nonsense word' unknown elsewhere in Greek, suggesting what we mean by 'gibberish'. The focus is not on 'repetition' (as the AV suggested) but on meaninglessness and noise, on the attitude to prayer which thinks that God needs to be bullied into taking notice. True prayer is not a technique nor a performance, but a relationship. 9–13 Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer is longer than Lk. 11:2–4. Our normal version is longer still, but the familiar doxology occurs only in later manuscripts of Matthew. 14–15 These verses might seem to suggest that forgiveness is earned by our forgiving others. See, however, 18:21–35, where the link between forgiving and being forgiven is more clearly set out. The word *debts* in v 12 reminds us of that parable.

6:19–34 Possessions and security (see Lk. 11:34–35; 12:22–34; 16:13). A collection of short sayings (19–24) and a more sustained argument (25–34) are united by the theme of possessions. In contrast with the materialistic concerns which occupy our attention most of the time, Jesus calls his disciples to put God first, both by giving priority to eternal issues and also by trusting our heavenly Father to meet our material needs here on earth.

Vs 19–21 focus on our sense of priorities, and point out that to be primarily concerned with material possessions not only shows a wrong perspective but is also foolish, since such possessions cannot last.

Vs 22–23 may seem out of place here, but they depend on a subtle word-play. The word which the NIV translates as *good* is lit. 'single', but it also denotes generosity, and the *bad eye* of v 23 is a metaphor for stinginess and jealousy. These verses, therefore, also attack a preoccupation with selfish materialism and call for wholehearted devotion to God.

V 24 reinforces the same point. *Money* translates the Aramaic word 'Mammon', a general term for material possessions (not necessarily ill-gotten gains).

There is a beautiful simplicity about vs 25–33, with their appeal to the example of the birds and flowers to illustrate God's lavish care for all his creatures. What is forbidden here is *worry*, not responsible provision for one's own and one's family needs; God provides food for *the birds*, but they still have to search for it! The basis of the disciple's confidence, in contrast with the anxiety of *the pagans*, lies in recognizing God as *your heavenly Father* (32). The proper attitude then is to put God first (33) and to trust him for our practical needs.

In today's world many (some of whom are Christian disciples) do not have all their needs met. This passage offers no answer to the problem, but we need to consider how God's provision relates to human misuse of what he has provided.

Notes. 22 The curious description of *the eye* as *the lamp of the body* means either that light enters the body through it or, more likely, that it enables the body to find its way. 27 *Hour* translates 'cubit', a measure of physical length which, like our 'span', can function as a metaphor for length of time. 33 To give priority to God's *kingdom* means to give our first allegiance to him as king; *righteousness* is the way of life which results from this decision. 34 This prudential but rather pessimistic maxim warns us that the preceding verses promise necessary provision but not freedom from *trouble*.

7:1–6 On judging other people (see Lk. 6:37–38, 41–42). 1–5 warn against criticizing other people without considering how open to criticism we ourselves may be; *be judged* may well refer to God's judgment, as well as that of other people. But v 6 indicates that there is also a right kind of judgment which the disciple is called on to exercise (*cf.* also vs 15–20).

Notes. 6 Holy and valuable things should be given only to those able to appreciate them. No specific application is indicated, but we may remember that there is a time to speak and a time to be silent (Ec. 3:7). God's truth must not be exposed unnecessarily to abuse and mockery.

7:7–11 Encouragement to prayer (see Lk. 11:9–13). Persistence in prayer (the imperatives are all in the present tense, which suggests continuous asking, seeking and knocking, not just a single request) can expect an answer not because of the technique used but because of the God who is being addressed. If even human fathers, who are *evil* (a recognition of the essential sinfulness of humanity), can be relied on to do the best for their children, how much more can God? This is not, of course, a

guarantee that any prayer we care to offer will be successful; God gives only *good gifts*, which may not correspond to our ideas of what we should have!

7:12 The golden rule (see Lk. 6:31). This verse concludes and summarizes Jesus' instructions for living as a disciple. *The Law and the Prophets* picks up the issue from which we began in 5:17. For another summary of the law and the prophets see 22:37–40. Other teachers had given a similar instruction in the negative form, do not treat others as you would not wish to be treated; Jesus' positive form is more demanding.

7:13–27 True and false discipleship (*cf.* Lk. 13:24; 6:43–46; 13:25–27; 6:47–49). Four vivid contrasts between true and false conclude the discourse. The division between true and false is drawn at different points in the four scenes, so that the whole complex forms a searching basis for self-evaluation.

First (13–14), comes a straightforward contrast between the saved and the lost; the two *gates* and the two *ways* lead respectively to *destruction* and to *life*. True discipleship is a minority position, a matter of deliberately opting out from the mainstream, but it is a matter of life and death.

Secondly (15–20), there is a more subtle division, which falls within the group of professed disciples. *False prophets* present themselves as insiders (*in sheep's clothing*), but their intention is destructive (*ferocious wolves*). So not all alleged prophecy is to be taken at face value; it must be tested. And the test is not the prophets' profession but *their fruit*. The meaning of *fruit* is not specified, but the metaphor occurs several times in Matthew to indicate behaviour which is genuinely pleasing to God (*cf.* 3:8–10; 12:33–37; 21:43).

Thirdly (21–23), and even more searchingly, we are introduced to those who apparently believe themselves to be genuine disciples and can appeal to their charismatic activities to prove it, but nonetheless turn out to have no real relationship with the *Lord* to whom they appeal. The false prophets of v 15 were deceivers, but these are self-deceived. Acceptance depends not on profession, nor even on apparently Christian activity, but on whether Jesus *knew* them. Note the extraordinary authority he assumes as judge; to *enter the kingdom of heaven* depends on his acknowledgment and consists in being with him.

Finally (24–27), a further division on the basis of behaviour. Both *wise* and *foolish* are depicted as hearing *these words of mine*; the difference is in putting them *into practice* (*cf.* the 'fruit' of vs 16–20). This division too, therefore, runs through the middle of those who belong to the Jesus-circle. This whole concluding section of the discourse thus leaves us with the uncomfortable demand to consider not just what we profess but whether it is based on a genuine relationship with Jesus and issues in the life of a true disciple.

Notes. 15 *False prophets* are familiar in both Old and New Testaments. *Cf.* Dt. 13:1–5; Je. 23:9–32; Mt. 24:11, 24; 1 Jn. 4:1–3. 21 *Lord* translates *kyrios*, hitherto used only as a title for God. In everyday Greek it was a normal term of polite address and is so used commonly in the gospels. Here, however, it is clearly a mark of allegiance, even of worship. 22 *On that day* refers to the final judgment.

7:28–29 Conclusion (*cf.* Mk. 1:21–22). The regular formula to conclude the discourses in Matthew is here expanded to notice the reaction of the audience. The contrast of Jesus with the *teachers of the law* recalls the contrasts drawn in 5:21–47, where Jesus' *authority* was shown in his willingness, unlike the teachers of the law, to declare simply 'I say to you'. The concluding demands of the discourse have reinforced this impression. Jesus had to be noticed and demanded a response. The next two chapters go on to show this same authority exercised in action not just in word.

8:1 – 9:34 A selection of Jesus' miracles

Matthew has here collected together nine miracle stories (one of which contains two miracles woven together; 9:18–26). They are arranged in three groups of three (8:1–17; 8:23 – 9:8; 9:18–34), with short passages in between focusing on the demands of following Jesus (8:18–22; 9:9–17). Matthew tells the stories much more briefly than Mark, leaving out most of the picturesque detail and focusing attention on Jesus himself. The resultant impression is one of irresistible authority, seen both in Jesus' power over illness, demonic power and natural forces and in the radical response which he required of those who followed him. All this complements the authority which he demonstrated in his teaching in the first discourse.

8:1–17 Three healing miracles (see Mk. 1:40–45, 29–34; Lk. 5:12–16; 7:1–10; 4:38–41). These three stories are grouped together so as to lead up to the formula-quotation which draws out their significance in v 17. They are further linked by the fact that each of those healed belonged to a group excluded from full life in society: a leper, a Gentile and a woman!

The fact that Jesus *touched* a leper was a powerful demonstration of his willingness to put loving concern above social taboo. The command to *show yourself to the priest* (as Lv.

14:10–32 required) served as *a testimony to them* both of Jesus' respect for the law and of his healing power as Messiah. But the balancing command *don't tell anyone* reminds us of the danger of attracting popular enthusiasm for the wrong reasons.

The *centurion* and his *servant* were non-Jewish soldiers in the army of occupation. Behind the man's reluctance to be visited by Jesus is the problem of relations between Jews and Gentiles: a Jewish teacher could not be expected to defile himself by entering a Gentile house. His simple acceptance, however, in soldier's jargon, of Jesus' practical authority over illness is evidence of a *faith* beyond that of *anyone in Israel*. By including Jesus' striking saying in v 11–12 (*cf.* Lk. 13:28–29), Matthew draws out the implications of this contrast for the future development of the people of God. *Many will come from the east and the west* (and this Gentile 'believer' is a prototype of them) and join the Jewish patriarchs at the Messianic banquet, which all Jews expected to enjoy as of right. At the same time, however, the Jewish *subjects of the kingdom* who did not share this Gentile's faith would find themselves *outside*, in the place which popular belief assigned to the Gentiles. The basis of acceptance in *the kingdom of heaven* would no longer be racial origin but faith. The unusual healing from a distance (*cf.* 15:21–28, also involving a Gentile 'patient') was thus an appropriate response to this Gentile's faith (13).

The simple story of the healing of *Peter's mother-in-law* then leads into a general summary of Jesus' healing ministry in *Capernaum* (Jesus' home base during his Galilean ministry; 4:13). Note the clear distinction between demon possession and illness and the different terms used for their cure. In describing this delivering ministry as a fulfilment of Is. 53:4, Matthew reminds us that there is more to the mission of God's servant than the atonement for sin which is the main focus of Is. 53; it also embraces our physical need.

Notes. 2 The term *leprosy* was used for a variety of skin complaints; not all were equally serious or contagious. 14 *Peter's house* was probably Jesus' home in Capernaum. 17 The Heb. nouns in Is. 53:4 do refer literally to physical suffering, even though the context suggests that they were used primarily in a metaphorical sense.

8:18–22 The cost of discipleship (see Lk. 9:57–60). Matthew maintains a distinction between *the crowd* of those who were interested but uncommitted and the *disciples*, whose personal commitment to Jesus had to take priority. They shared his homelessness when travelling around Galilee, and even family responsibilities had to take second place. Jesus' refusal of permission even to *bury my father* is astonishing; this was a son's sacred duty which took precedence over all regular commitments. *The dead* is a stark description of those outside the disciple-group as lacking spiritual life. The language, no less than the demand, is uncompromising to the point of offensiveness.

8:23–27 Authority over the elements (see Mk. 4:36–41; Lk. 8:22–25). This is the first 'nature miracle' in Matthew, showing Jesus exercising the same power over nature which Ps. 107:23–30 ascribes to God. The disciples' reaction (*cf.* Ps. 107:31–32) adds a new level to Matthew's account of Jesus' authority. But while the story is recorded mainly for this purpose, Matthew's mention that *his disciples followed him* (23), picking up the language of the preceding section, suggests he may also have seen it as an illustration of discipleship: when the storms come, *faith* in Jesus' saving power will be rewarded. Matthew often warns of the danger of *little faith* (26; *cf.* 6:30; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20).

8:28–34 A spectacular exorcism (see Mk. 5:1–20; Lk. 8:26–39). While exorcisms have been mentioned in general terms already, this first specific account of one adds another dimension of Jesus' authority: his control over supernatural beings. Matthew's drastically abbreviated version of the story omits most of the personal details and concentrates on the conflict of Jesus with the demons. Because of their superhuman insight they recognize Jesus as *Son of God*, but this testimony, though true, is not welcome from such a source.

Mark and Luke mention only one possessed man, but Matthew here (as in 20:30; *cf.* 9:27) says there were two, perhaps because the story is recorded as a witness to Jesus' power and in Jewish law two witnesses were needed.

This was Gentile territory (hence the presence of *pigs*). Matthew mentions no response other than the desire to get rid of this destructive visitor! Nor does he show any concern over the death of the pigs nor the economic loss to their owners. Presumably the liberation of two men was felt to be more important. But the story is told primarily to show Jesus in victorious conflict with an unusually powerful demonic force.

Notes. 28 Gadara was a Greek town which controlled territory on the east side of the Lake of Galilee. 29 *The appointed time* refers to the Jewish belief that demons were to be punished in the final judgment.

9:1–8 Healing and forgiveness (see Mk. 2:1–12; Lk. 5:17–26). Matthew does not mention the crowded house and the hole in the roof; his interest is in the dialogue. The link between

illness and sin is not said to be causal; but the power to give physical healing is used as evidence of the greater authority to give spiritual deliverance. Another dimension is thus added to the account of Jesus' authority. The charge of *blasphemy* is because only God can *forgive sins*; for a man to claim the authority to do so is to put himself in the place of God. Yet Jesus does so as *the Son of Man*, a title which paradoxically combines his humanity with the supreme authority depicted in Dn. 7:13–14.

Notes. 5 It is obviously *easier* to *say* 'Your sins are forgiven', since no visible result is demanded; but if Jesus' word 'Get up and walk' is visibly effective, his hearers may assume that his other saying was not a bluff either. 8 The plural *men* is surprising, since it is Jesus' unique authority which has been demonstrated. Probably it means 'to Jesus as man'.

9:9–17 Breaking the mould (see Mk. 2:14–22; Lk. 5:27–38). V 3 was the first record of opposition to Jesus from Jewish teachers of the law. Here we see further grounds for the growing hostility of the religious authorities (here the *Pharisees*). Both in the dubious company he kept (9–13) and in his apparently lax attitude to the traditional duty of fasting (14–17), Jesus offended their sense of propriety. But in this he was deliberately challenging and superseding their outmoded understanding of the will of God.

Tax collectors were not only notorious for exploitation but also religiously and politically ostracized as collaborators with the pagan Roman government. For a pious Jew to *eat with* them was therefore unthinkable. Jesus' response in vs 12–13 offers the opposite perspective: a healer must 'get his hands dirty', and a mission of salvation cannot be achieved by staying in respectable company. His quotation from Ho. 6:6 (used again in 12:7) indicates that God's priority is costly love rather than careful ritual.

The reply to the question about *fasting* (which Jesus did not disapprove of in itself; 6:16–18) shows the same change of perspective. The formal regulations of the old religion must give way to the joy of the new. The *patch* and the *new wine* are images of a powerful, effervescent new relationship with God which bursts out of the dried-up confines of formal religion.

Notes. 9 *Matthew* is the same person as Levi in Mark and Luke. He would be a sort of customs officer at the border town of Capernaum. 15 This is an early hint of Jesus' coming death.

9:18–26 Raising the dead (see Mk. 5:21–43; Lk. 8:40–56). Here is yet a further escalation of Jesus' authority; even death is subject to him. Matthew's radical abbreviation of the story (23 verses in Mark, 9 Matthew!) suggests that the ruler's daughter was already dead when he made his request, rather than that she died while Jesus was on the way. If this was so, his request was the more remarkable. Matthew clearly does not intend us, therefore, to take Jesus' words in v 24 literally as indicating a false diagnosis (as they could be understood in Mark's account); he must mean that her death, though real, was not permanent.

Tucked into the story is another healing miracle, of a hopeless menstrual disorder. The woman's desire to *touch his cloak* may suggest a rather mechanical view of Jesus' healing power, but it arose from a *faith* sufficient to draw out Jesus' commendation – and her healing.

Notes. 20 The menstrual flow rendered her ceremonially unclean; even to touch *the edge of his cloak* was, therefore, to invite an indignant rebuff from a pious Jew. As with the leper (8:3), Jesus ignored the taboo. 23 *Flute players* were a regular part of mourning ritual.

9:27–31 Two blind men. This brief story closely parallels that in 20:29–34. The appeal to Jesus as *Son of David, i.e.* Messiah, occurs often in Matthew's accounts of healing. It indicates a *faith* which Jesus tests with his question in v 28 and which is the basis of their healing. The command to keep the healing quiet (*cf.* 8:4) was asking a lot: how do you conceal the cure of a blind man?! But apparently they did not even try. There is an inevitable tension between Jesus' desire to avoid inappropriate publicity and the powerful testimony which his miracles offered of who he was (*cf.* 11:2–5).

9:32–34 An exorcism leads to an accusation. This little episode too has a longer parallel later (12:22–24), where the accusation of collusion with Satan is developed and answered. Here this sinister new twist to the official hostility to Jesus is merely noted. Matthew normally distinguishes between demon possession and physical disability; here the one seems to have resulted in the other, but the language is still that of exorcism. The crowd's reaction in v 33 sums up the impression which the miracles in chs. 8 – 9 have been creating.

9:35 – 10:42 Second discourse: the disciples' mission

9:35–38 Workers for the harvest (*cf.* Mk. 6:34; Lk. 10:2). This little passage forms a bridge between the account of Jesus' ministry in chs. 5 – 9 (summarized in v 35) and the extension of that ministry to his disciples in ch. 10. The need was too great for Jesus to meet alone, so he called on some of his closest followers to help him meet it. The basis of this mission was in *compassion*, a strong word for an emotional response which always results in caring action. The imagery of *harvest* (like that of fishing in

4:19) suggests also the call to win new disciples. This is the concern of God, as *Lord of the harvest*, and so he may properly be appealed to for the necessary *workers*. It is worth noting that those who are here called to pray are in the next chapter sent out themselves!

10:1–4 Twelve apostles (*cf.* Mk. 6:7; 3:13–19; Lk. 9:1; 6:13–16; Acts 1:13). *Apostle* means 'sent' and so is appropriate here. This is Matthew's only use of the word; normally he calls Jesus' followers 'disciples' or 'the Twelve'. The *authority* given to them over *evil spirits* and *sickness* was an extension of Jesus' own, and in v 7 the charge to preach his message also is added. Five of this group have already appeared in the story (4:18–22; 9:9). Little is known of the others as individuals, except *Judas Iscariot*. *Thaddaeus* even appears under a different name (Judas, son of James) in Luke's lists. It was as a group, not as individuals, that they played their key role in the early days of the Jesus movement.

10:5–16 Instructions for mission (*cf.* Mk. 6:8–11; Lk. 9:2–5; 10:3–12). Here the 'discourse' begins. It is a specific charge for a limited mission, and we must be cautious of applying it simply to Christian mission in all circumstances.

The startling restriction in vs 5–6 parallels the limitation of Jesus' own mission to *the lost sheep of Israel* in 15:24. It is obvious that this was not meant to be a permanent restriction, both from Jesus' own openness to non-Jews in 8:5–13 and 15:21–28 and from his explicit instructions in 28:19–20. It was, however, an urgent appeal specifically to God's people Israel, which was the primary purpose of Jesus' mission while on earth. After the resurrection things would be different.

The disciples' message in v 7 is that of Jesus in 4:17, and their ministry in v 8 parallels his acts recorded in chs. 8 – 9 (even including *raising the dead*!).

Vs 8b–10 apply the principle of 6:25–34 to the mission. If Jesus' disciples are about God's work, they may expect his provision (*the worker is worth his keep*) and need make no elaborate preparations for their material needs on the way; the task is too urgent. They, and we, should beware of a mercenary approach to Christian ministry (8b).

Necessary sustenance (rather than payment for services rendered) would be provided not by a miracle but by appropriate hospitality (11–15). The standard *greeting* of '*Peace*' (still in use in Hebrew and Arabic today) would be no mere formality but would serve to discern a *deserving* host. Where it met with an unwelcome reception it would return (like an uncashed cheque!). Rejection was sometimes to be expected and must be accepted; but to *shake the dust off your feet* was to mark out that *home or town* as one which had rejected the messengers of the Messiah, and was therefore ripe for judgment.

Disciples in a hostile society are as vulnerable as *sheep among wolves*. To survive and to fulfil their mission they need to be *shrewd* without being harmful; *innocent* without being gullible.

Notes. 10 Mk. 6:8–9 allows both *sandals* and *staff*. The verb translated *take* here in Matthew normally means 'obtain'. Is the prohibition, therefore, not of using normal essential travelling equipment but of buying extra?

10:17–39 Warnings of conflict and persecution (*cf.* Mk. 13:9–13; 4:22; Lk. 21:12–19; 12:2–12, 51–53; 6:40; 14:25–27). The focus is still on the Galilean mission of the Twelve (see v 23), but the discourse continues with principles more generally applicable to disciples facing opposition.

This opposition may have official sanction (17–18), but since it is incurred *on my account*, it provides an opportunity for *witness*. In such threatening circumstances, the disciples may count on the help of *the Spirit of your Father* and, therefore, need not *worry* (*cf.* 6:25–34). (This is no charter for inadequate preparation of sermons, however!) Even family relationships will be affected, and v 22 extends the opposition to *all men*. To follow Jesus is not a route to popularity and influence; it leads to life on the run (23a). But v 23b assures the Twelve that their mission would not be complete *before the Son of Man comes* (see note). However often they were repulsed, there would always be more of *the cities of Israel* to take the message to.

Vs 26–33 are all about the wrong and the right way of *being afraid*. To fear human opposition is to get things out of perspective, for people can do no more than *kill the body*. But God *can destroy both soul and body in hell*. Disciples should therefore be more *afraid* of failing him by concealing the truth which must, in any case, inevitably be publicly proclaimed (26–27). The same God, however, can not only destroy but preserve; within his will there is no need for fear (29–31). It comes in the end to a simple choice of loyalty, which has eternal consequences (32–33).

In vs 34–39 the cost of discipleship is set out in stark terms. V 34 is in striking contrast to 5:9; there are some things which are more important even than *peace*. Loyalty to Jesus may sometimes cause conflict even within a family (see Mi. 7:6), and if so his claims must come first. The language about taking the cross to follow Jesus will be made clearer in 16:21–28; it is the language of martyrdom, as v 39 indicates.

All this sounds very extreme, when read in the comfortable security of a society which at least tolerates Christian commitment. In some parts of the world, however, even today it is only too literally relevant. And the conflict and division of which Jesus warns are real enough for his followers even where their lives are not at risk. You cannot follow Jesus without having to make crucial choices of where your ultimate loyalty lies.

Notes. 18 *Governors, kings* and *Gentiles* point to the wider dimensions of the later Christian mission, not just that of the Twelve in Galilee. **23** Language about the 'coming' of the Son of Man derives from Dn. 7:13–14, where he 'comes' to God to receive sovereign power; it does not there refer to a coming to earth, still less to the specific 'second coming' of Jesus. Here, then, such language looks forward to the enthronement of the Son of Man in power (which we find already fulfilled through the resurrection in 28:18); the disciples' mission to Israel would not be completed before that. **25** On *Beelzebub cf.* 12:24ff, (and already 9:34). **29–31** These verses do not promise immunity from death (the *sparrows* still die, but only within *the will of your Father*), but the assurance that even there God is in control.

10:40–42 Representing Jesus (*cf.* Mk. 9:37, 41; Lk. 9:48; 10:16). After the grim warnings of the preceding verses, this is a welcome relief; to represent Jesus is a privilege as well as a danger. In contrast with the opposition just considered is the glad reception of Jesus' messengers and the assurance of *reward* for those who do so. The phrase *little ones* will be picked up in 18:1–14 (*cf.* 11:25; 25:40, 45); it refers not to children as such but to disciples in general, as they share the vulnerability and the lowly status of children.

Notes. 42 To *give a cup of cold water* is basic eastern hospitality and needs no *reward*; but God's grace goes beyond our deserving.

11:1 – 12:50 Varying response to Jesus' public ministry

So far Matthew's narrative has focused attention mainly on Jesus himself, though the amazement of both disciples and crowds at his authority has been noted. Now Matthew looks more fully at people's response to Jesus' ministry, ranging from the glad recognition of the 'little children' (11:25) to the sinister charge of collusion with Satan (12:24). Between these extremes several different levels of enthusiasm, hostility or sheer puzzlement are recorded, so that by the time we come to the third discourse (with its emphasis on the division which results from Jesus' ministry), Matthew has prepared the ground well.

11:1–19 John the Baptist and Jesus (see Lk. 7:18–35). The last reference to John the Baptist was to his imprisonment (4:12). It seems that from prison he followed the progress of the one for whom he had prepared the way. In this section we see not only John's verdict on Jesus' ministry (2–6), but also Jesus' verdict on John (7–15) and his comments on how both of them had been received by people at large (16–19).

John's question (3) suggests that he was surprised by Jesus' style of ministry. The fierce judgment he himself had preached (3:11–12) was not yet obvious, and Jesus' concern for the helpless and unimportant resulted in a far more 'low-key' image than John may have hoped for. In reply, Jesus wove together OT texts (mainly Is. 35:5–6 and 61:1–2), which found clear and visible fulfilment in his deeds recorded in chs. 8 – 9. Unexpected as they may have been to John, these acts of mercy were indeed the 'deeds of the Messiah' (the literal meaning of the phrase *what Christ was doing*; v 2). Those who do not recognize them as such have always found Jesus hard to take (6; *fall away on account of* is lit. 'be scandalized by').

Despite this implied rebuke, however, Jesus went on to commend John as a true prophet, and more. In his rugged, unconventional preaching the people had themselves recognized the authentic voice of God's spokesman. But, great as he was, John was still only the forerunner (10, quoting Mal. 3:1), the last and greatest of the prophets, the returning *Elijah* who was to inaugurate the last days (Mal. 4:5–6). God's decisive new initiative, *the kingdom of heaven*, had begun with Jesus, and John stood only on its threshold (as indeed his ambivalent response to Jesus indicated). Note in v 13 the strong sense of the whole OT revelation, *law*, no less than *prophets*, as pointing forward to Jesus and finding their fulfilment in him (*cf.* 5:17).

But, different as John and Jesus were in their style and their message, there was no pleasing some folk, as the playful little parable of vs 16–19 points out. John's ascetic life-style was branded as fanatical, and Jesus' convivial approach was thought scandalous. But God's *wisdom* is wiser than human prejudice and is *justified* (vindicated) by the very *actions* which *this generation* despised.

Notes. 7 The *reed swayed by the wind* may refer simply to desert scenery, but it is more likely an image for the sort of pliable person which John emphatically was not! **12** The NIV offers an interpretation of this difficult verse which attempts to liken it to Lk. 16:16. But the wording is very different and more naturally means, 'the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent men attack it'.

The reference in that case is to the violent opposition which the true work of God has always aroused, seen already in the imprisonment of John and soon to be seen in the official rejection and execution of Jesus as well.

11:20–24 Those who reject Jesus' mission (see Lk. 10:12–15). The hostile response hinted at in vs 16–19 is now specified. The three towns mentioned were close together at the northern end of the Lake of Galilee, the area where Jesus' mission had so far been focused. Even the notoriously wicked pagan cities whose judgment figures in the OT (*Tyre, Sidon* and *Sodom*) would have been more receptive to what was so obviously the work of God. Notice that Jesus expected his *miracles* alone to cause people to *repent*. How much more his preaching of the good news, which these towns had enjoyed!

11:25–30 Those who accept Jesus' mission (see Lk. 10:21–22). It was not the important but the *little children* and the *weary and burdened* who responded to Jesus. The reason lay in Jesus' special relationship with God, as Son with Father. It is an exclusive relationship, and yet one to which we may be admitted, not by cleverness but by *revelation*. The initiative remains with the Father, who *reveals* the meaning of Jesus' ministry (25–26), and with the Son, who *reveals* the Father (27).

A *yoke* was intended to ease the discomfort in carrying a heavy load. But it also symbolized obedience and the acceptance of responsibility. The rabbis often spoke of taking on 'the yoke of the Law', and under their direction that burden could become heavy. Jesus' yoke, by contrast, is *easy*, not because his call to discipleship is less demanding (as we have seen in ch. 5) but because it makes us pupils of one who is *gentle and humble in heart*. The key lies in the personal invitation, *Come to me*.

12:1–14 The Pharisees and the Sabbath (see Mk 2:23 – 3:6; Lk. 6:1–11). These two stories make clearer why some of Jesus' contemporaries found his mission unacceptable. As they saw it, he was a dangerous radical, undermining the obedience to the law which was at the heart of their religion. As such, he would be better eliminated (14).

Both stories focus on Sabbath law. The simple OT command to 'keep the seventh day holy' had been hedged about with a mass of subsidiary legislation to determine just what was and was not permissible on the Sabbath. Forbidden acts included reaping and healing where there was no immediate threat to life. The stories focus on Jesus' failure to observe these specific regulations; there is no suggestion that he was opposed to the Sabbath principle as such. The issue was how it should be interpreted and who had the right to interpret it.

In vs 3–8 Jesus makes this an issue of his personal authority and claims the right to dispense with regulations as David had done (1 Sa. 21:1–6) and as the temple priests were obliged to do in fulfilling their duties. In putting himself in the same company, Jesus in effect claims to be at least equal with David and *greater than the temple*; the same argument will be carried further in vs 41–42. If that is his status, then surely he is *Lord of the Sabbath* too. And his authoritative dismissal of Pharisaic tradition is in line with Hosea's principle that God is concerned with love before ritual (7; see also 9:13).

The healing of the *shrivelled hand* could have waited until a weekday. Jesus, however, exposed the double standard of those who were prepared to make exceptions to alleviate animal suffering (or to avoid economic loss?) but not for human relief. His sweeping statement, '*It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath*', was in striking contrast with the Pharisees' tendency to multiply regulations. No wonder they had to oppose a man who so openly flouted both their authority and the principles they stood for.

Notes. 5 The reference may be to the priests' 'work' in making the Sabbath sacrifices or, more relevantly, to their reaping of the offering of the first sheaves, which the Pharisees (but not the Sadducees) allowed on the Sabbath. **6** *One greater* is 'something greater' (similarly in 12:41–42) and is a reference perhaps to Jesus' whole ministry (and his disciple-community?) as replacing the temple as the focus of God's presence among his people.

12:15–21 Jesus' response to opposition. Jesus' response to the threat of violence was to *withdraw* for the time being from the public arena and to attempt to curb publicity. In this Matthew sees Jesus as fulfilling the portrait of God's servant described in Is. 42:1–4, gentle and non-violent, yet ultimately victorious. This is the first of the so-called 'Servant Songs' which recur through Is. 40 – 55, and from the last of which Matthew has already illustrated another aspect of Jesus' total ministry in 8:17.

12:22–37 Jesus accused of collusion with Satan (see Mk. 3:22–30; Lk. 11:14–23; 12:10; 6:43–45). Now the opposition becomes more 'theological'. Recognizing Jesus' supernatural power, his opponents attributed it not to God but to Satan. Jesus' response was first to show how inconsistent the charge was, and then to underline its seriousness, as *blasphemy against the Spirit*. This leads on to some comments on how significant, and how damning, *words* can be.

The encounter arose out of an exorcism similar to that in 9:32–34, where Matthew has already recorded the same charge that Jesus was drawing on demonic power. The obvious power

of Jesus led more neutral onlookers to the suggestion that he was the *Son of David*, the Messiah working by the power of God. Since *the Pharisees* had already decided against that explanation (12:14), they had to find another which equally explained his more than human authority, and they found it in his alleged collusion with Satan.

Jesus' first reply (25–26) merely pointed out what a silly idea this was: Satan would not attack his own troops! Secondly (27), he reminded them that he was not the only person who was exorcizing; were they all in league with Satan? Thirdly, and more positively (28–29), he showed that, on the contrary, his attack on spiritual evil was a mark of the inbreaking of *the kingdom of God* and the defeat of Satan, the *strong man*. It is thus a sign not of demonic power but of *the Spirit of God* at work. There was, therefore, a radical division between those who recognized God at work, and therefore were *with me* (30), and those who by attributing God's work to his arch-enemy proved themselves to be *against me*. By this *blasphemy against the Spirit* they were deliberately lining up on the opposing side and putting themselves outside the scope of forgiveness.

It is important to read the terrible vs 31–32 in their context. Insensitive application of these words to situations which bear no resemblance to the Pharisees' deliberate perversion of the truth has caused distress to many vulnerable people. Jesus was speaking not of a temporary lapse but of a settled decision to oppose the work of God.

Vs 32–37 go on to warn us, however, in a series of striking pictures, against shrugging off 'mere words'. Our words reveal what we are really like, and thus even a *careless word* may be a proper basis for judgment.

Notes. 24 *Beelzebul*, 'Lord of flies', was originally the name of a Canaanite God (2 Ki. 1:2). By Jesus' time it had come to be used, in the form Beelzebub, as a name for the chief of demons, or Satan. **27** For other Jewish exorcists *cf.* Mk. 9:38; Acts 19:13 Jewish sources mention several such. **28** This is one of the clearest statements that in Jesus' ministry the *kingdom of God* was not only imminent but already present and visibly active. **29** This is a parable: in order to plunder a ruffian you must first overpower him. Jesus' exorcisms therefore proved that he had already overpowered Satan. **30** Compare Mk. 9:40, 'Whoever is not against us is for us'; both versions rule out any middle, 'neutral' ground. **32** This surprising contrast perhaps reflects the fact that even Jesus' own disciples took time to recognize him as *the Son of Man*, in his earthly incognito.

12:38–45 A warning to 'this generation' (see Lk. 11:16, 24–26, 29–32). The demand for *a sign* recurs in 16:1–4. Here it follows naturally from the preceding debate; if Jesus claims that his power is from God, he must prove it. The scepticism which underlies this demand is the mark of *this generation* (*cf.* 11:16–19), and the recurrence of this phrase in vs 39, 41, 42, 45 holds this little passage together.

Jesus' refusal of any special *sign* produced to order is based on a broader concept of his authority as *one greater* than Jonah or Solomon (*cf.* v 6 for the same argument in relation to the temple and its priests). If even pagans could recognize God's presence in those great men of the OT, why could not *this* (Jewish) *generation* accept the authority of the one in whom all those strands of authority (prophet, priest, king, wise man) found their fulfilment? To reject the call of such a spokesman could lead only to *judgment*.

The humorous parable of the homeless *evil spirit* (43–45) conveys a serious warning against a half-hearted response. Even if Jesus' warnings of judgment bring about 'repentance', unless this leads on to a positive reorientation to follow him, there will be merely a void which the devil can exploit.

Notes. 39–40 Jonah's miraculous escape authenticated his preaching; the resurrection of Jesus will do the same. *Three days and three nights* was a Jewish idiom for a period covering parts of three 24-hour 'days-and-nights' (*cf.* 1 Sa. 30:12–13; Est. 4:16 – 5:1).

12:46–50 Jesus' family (see Mk. 3:31–35; Lk. 8:19–21). Matthew does not tell us how Jesus' *mother and brothers* responded to his teaching, but by portraying them as *outside* the disciple circle he suggests that they were at least uncommitted. By contrasting natural family ties with the greater 'family' of those who *do the will of my Father in heaven*, Jesus emphasized the radical demand of his call to discipleship, but also its reward. The wide range of responses to Jesus set out in chs. 11 – 12 thus closes with a heartening glimpse of the new 'family' which was now established around him.

13:1–52 Third discourse: Jesus' teaching in parables

Chs. 11 – 12 have shown us a deep division among those who heard Jesus' teaching and a wide variety of responses. The parables which make up the bulk of ch. 13 will now explain why the preaching of the word of God meets with such a mixed response, and will underline the radical nature of the choice it presents.

The discourse is carefully structured. First, there is the introductory parable of the sower (3–9). This is followed by an interlude focusing

on the purpose of parables (10–17) and an explanation of the parable of the sower (18–23). Then there are three parables of growth: the weeds (24–30); the mustard seed (31–32); and the yeast in the dough (33). This is followed by another interlude, which deals with the purpose of parables (34–35) and an explanation of the parable of the weeds (36–43), and then three further parables: the treasure (44); the pearl (45–46); and the net (47–50). Finally, there is the concluding parable of the householder (51–52).

The section combines eight actual parables with explanations both of the purpose of parables in general and of two key parables in particular.

We tend to think of *parables* as illustrative stories, but the Greek word *parabole* is broader: it conveys also the sense of mysterious sayings which do not carry their meaning on the surface. A parable needs to be interpreted. Like a cartoon, it is in itself just a story or picture; the challenge is to penetrate through to its meaning. That is why the same parable, without explanation, can enlighten some and leave others unmoved. It is this theme which is explored especially in the crucial vs 10–17, where the enlightenment of the disciples and the blindness of the unresponsive crowds are contrasted.

Each of the parables is explicitly about *the kingdom of heaven*. They set out the demands and paradoxes of the new order Jesus had come to establish, and in relation to which people were reacting so differently.

13:1–9, 18–23 The parable of the sower (and its explanation) (see Mk. 4: 1–9, 13–20; Lk. 8:4–8, 11–15). Jesus' disciples must have found it hard to understand how his proclamation of the kingdom of God, to which they had responded so enthusiastically, was not welcomed in the same way by all who heard it. This parable, with its four 'scenes', indicates that the response depends not only on the message (the same seed is sown in each case) but also on the readiness of the hearers to receive it. The three unproductive areas (*the path*, the *rocky places* and the *thorns*) are interpreted in vs 19–22 as representing different types of hearers: those who simply will not listen, those whose response is superficial and those who are preoccupied with other concerns. All three are familiar to any preacher of the gospel, then and now. The disciples should not therefore be surprised at the divided response to Jesus' preaching.

The fault is in the hearers, not in the message. When the *seed* falls in *good soil*, it will be productive. In this way, Jesus assured his disciples that, despite the areas of hostility and inadequate response, there would be a harvest. Even in the good soil, however, there is room for some variation in the degree of productivity, *a hundred, sixty or thirty times*. In other words, disciples do not come in only one size or type, and there is room in the kingdom of God for the ordinary as well as for the spectacular.

As in 7:24–27 it is not mere hearing of the word which matters but *understanding* (19, 23). In this way the parable of the sower prepares for vs 10–17, where a sharp distinction is drawn between hearers who do not understand the parables and those who are in possession of the 'secret' which unlocks them. It is thus, in a sense, a parable about parables. It is appropriate, therefore, that it concludes in v 9 with an appeal to us all to take notice; how we *hear* will determine whether or not our discipleship is fruitful.

Notes. 1 The contrast between the privacy of *the house* (*cf.* v 36) and the large audience by the lake symbolizes the distinction, which is carefully drawn throughout this chapter, between the crowds whom Jesus taught only in parables and the disciples to whom he gave explanations privately.

13:10–17 How parables work (*cf.* Mk. 4:10–12, 25; Lk. 8:9–10, 18; 10:23–24). As v 12 indicates, what you get out of anything depends on what you can put into it. So it is with parables; the same message, as the parable of the sower has indicated, will meet with different response depending on the receptivity of the hearer. By explaining his parables to his disciples Jesus opened up the *secrets* of the *kingdom of heaven*. It has a logic all its own, which human reason cannot penetrate; its truth must be revealed. To be a disciple is to be in the school of revelation.

Those who do not have this gift will, as Is. 6:9–10 had so vividly predicted, never get beyond a superficial hearing of God's message, and it will do them no good. But to belong to the group of Jesus' disciples is a privilege greater than that enjoyed by the greatest of God's people in the past (*prophets and righteous men*), who had a preliminary inkling of the kingdom of heaven, but did not yet know its reality.

Jesus is not here saying that parables are designed to conceal truth, and thus to keep people out of the kingdom of heaven, but that as a matter of fact not everyone has the ability to penetrate their meaning. That ability is *given* to disciples, rather than being the result of human cleverness. But this passage does not address the question of how a person becomes a disciple. Presumably, the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking were themselves once unenlightened; if they could receive the *secrets* through Jesus' ministry, so could others. But as long as the division exists and there are different soils for

the seed to fall in, parables will continue to reveal that division.

13:24–30, 36–43 The parable of the weeds (and its explanation). The division between true disciples and others is often difficult to discern, as 7:15–27 has already made clear. This parable warns us that the ultimate test is not in present appearances but in the final judgment. Until then, the disciples must be patient and not expect to be able to put everyone into neat compartments The church on earth will always be a mixed community.

In the explanation in vs 36–43 the focus is particularly on the division at the final judgment and on the contrasting fates of the wicked and the righteous. Whatever the ambiguities on earth, there will be no uncertainty at *the end of the age*.

Notes. 25 The *weeds* are probably darnel, which looks very like wheat in the early stages of growth and after that is so closely entangled with it that it cannot be removed without damaging the wheat. 41 In referring to 'the kingdom of heaven' as the *kingdom of the Son of Man*, Jesus was making, by implication, a remarkable claim for his own authority (*cf.* 16:28; 19:28; 25:31–46).

13:31–35 More parables of growth (see Mk. 4:30–34; Lk. 13:18–21). Both the mustard seed and the yeast are parables of small beginnings. *Mustard seed* was proverbial for something minute (*cf.* 17:20), yet the full-grown plant could grow to 3m. A handful of *yeast* eventually permeates *a large amount of flour* (lit. 'three measures', enough to make bread for 100 people!). So God's work, the *kingdom of heaven*, may appear unimpressive at first, but appearances can be deceptive, and no-one will be able to ignore it in the end. In the meantime the disciples must be patient. Human valuation misses the point; little becomes great when God is at work.

V 34 reinforces the teaching of vs 10–17 about Jesus' use of parables, and in v 35 Matthew offers another formula-quotation, drawn this time from a Psalm (78:2), to show how in this method of teaching too Jesus was fulfilling a pattern laid down in the OT.

13:44–52 Further parables. The parables of the *treasure* and of the *pearl* belong closely together, and illustrate the wholehearted response which the *kingdom of heaven* requires; no sacrifice is too great, and no other concern must stand in the way of it. But the note is not of a negative 'giving up' but of *joy* and fulfilment. There is something about the kingdom of heaven which makes extravagant action the only proper response.

The parable of the *net* is closely related to that of the weeds, and is explained in similar words (compare vs 49–50 with vs 40–42).

V 51 shows that, as Jesus had promised (11), the disciples *understood* what the parables were about (*cf.* vs 13, 14, 15, 19, 23 for the importance of 'understanding'). In that case, they were for the *kingdom of heaven* what the scribes (*teachers of the law*) were for Israel – able to teach others the way of God. The parable of the house-owner thus challenged them to fulfil this responsibility. The truths they were to teach included both the *new treasures* of Jesus' teaching and the *old* truths which Jewish scribes could offer; for Jesus' 'new' teaching itself goes back to 'the foundation of the world' (35), bringing God's eternal truths to light.

13:53 – 16:20 Further responses to Jesus' public ministry

This part of Matthew's story comes to its climax in Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Leading up to that point are a series of loosely connected stories which continue to illustrate the variety of ways in which people responded to Jesus' ministry. They include both the growth of opposition on the part of scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, and also a continuing display of Jesus' miraculous power, which leads at least some to anticipate Peter's great confession (14:33).

13:53–58 Disbelief at Nazareth (see Mk. 6:1–6; *cf.* Lk. 4:16–30). Since 4:13 Jesus had been based in Capernaum and around the lake and had become famous. His return to *his home town*, the remote hill village of Nazareth, provoked a predictable reaction to 'the local boy made good'. Like his own family (12:46–50), his fellow-villagers could not take him seriously. V 57 picks up a common theme of proverbs: 'Familiarity breeds contempt'.

Notes. 55–56 The *carpenter* was a general local building contractor, and his eldest son had shared his trade. The *brothers* and *sisters* (children of Joseph and Mary after Jesus was born) are largely unknown beyond their names, though *James* later became a leader in the church. 58 For the connection between miracles and *faith cf.* 8:10–13; 9:2, 22, 28–29.

14:1–12 The reaction of Herod Antipas (see Mk. 6:14–29; Lk. 9:7–9; 3:19–20). *Herod the tetrarch* is Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee and the son of the Herod who was king when Jesus was born (ch. 2). Reports of Jesus' miracles, combined with Herod's tender conscience over his reluctant execution of John the Baptist, led to the bizarre idea that Jesus was John *risen from the dead.*

We last heard of John in prison (4:12; 11:2) and Matthew now explains what has happened. Not only was marriage to a [half-]*brother's wife* against Jewish law (Lv. 18:16), but Herod and

Herodias had both divorced their former partners in order to marry. It was not only a politically imprudent marriage but religiously scandalous, and John's outspoken condemnation would have been damaging to Herod's reputation among his Jewish subjects. John was therefore not only an embarrassment to Herod but also (as Josephus' history confirms) a threat to his political security.

In reporting John's death to Jesus, *John's disciples* showed that they recognized Jesus as his true 'successor' as 11:7–19 has already indicated and as Jesus will further affirm in 21:23–32. Jesus' subsequent withdrawal (13) suggests that he was aware of the danger of this association in Herod's eyes.

14:13–21 Miraculous feeding of a large crowd (see Mk. 6:32–44; Lk. 9:10–17). Luke tells us that the *solitary place* was near Bethsaida, across the northern end of the lake and outside the territory of Herod Antipas. That a *large crowd* was anxious to follow Jesus there may suggest, as Jn. 6:14–15 makes clear, that this was no chance gathering but a deliberate popular movement to force Jesus into political action (see on v 21 below).

Matthew, however, does not draw attention to this. For him, the story was a vivid expression of the *compassion* and the miraculous power of Jesus. Jewish readers could hardly have failed to note the parallel to two feeding miracles in the OT, the provision of manna in the desert (Ex. 16) and Elisha's similar multiplication of loaves (2 Ki. 4:42–44). Jesus is again seen as the 'one greater' (*cf.* 12:6, 41, 42) than the ancient prophets.

To eat together was a symbol of unity. Jesus acted as host to a large family gathering, and thus welcomed the crowd into a new community. While the menu was not out of the ordinary, perhaps we should see this meal as a deliberate foretaste of the Messianic banquet (for which see 8:11–12); *sit down* (19) is a relatively formal word for reclining at a banquet. It is also hardly accidental that the verbs in v 19 ('take', 'give thanks', 'break', 'give') are those used in the NT accounts of the Last Supper. The meal did, of course, satisfy hunger (20), but Matthew apparently sees it also as a symbolic act of communion in the newly established kingdom of heaven.

By his challenge in v 16, Jesus deliberately drew *the disciples* into the action, and he used the provisions which they could supply. Through their involvement, (and perhaps particularly through the remarkable experience of clearing up far more than they had brought in the first place!) they would remember and learn from the occasion; that learning was to be tested later (16:5–12).

Notes. 19 *Loaves* and *fish* were the basic Galilean peasant diet. **20** The *twelve baskets* are more memorable than deliberately symbolic; each of the twelve used one basket, presumably. **21** *Besides women and children* could be translated 'excluding women and children', *i.e.* only men were present, indicating a 'military' flavour to the gathering. But more likely it echoes Ex. 12:37, where the same phrase accompanies the roll-call of the old people of God.

14:22–33 Walking on water (see Mk. 6:45–52). The public miracle of the loaves was followed by one witnessed only by the disciples, which also showed Jesus' authority over material things. The combined effect was to lead them to a new appreciation of Jesus' more than human power (33).

In rough weather on the lake in the hours before dawn (the *fourth watch* is 3–6 a.m.) it is hardly surprising that the disciples' reaction to the sudden appearance of Jesus beside them was terror and the cry, '*It's a ghost*'. What is much more remarkable is Peter's extraordinary proposal to join Jesus in walking on the water.

Peter sometimes appears in the gospels as an impulsive character, prone to ill-considered reactions. It may be that we are intended to see here an example not of great faith but of foolhardiness, presumptuously wishing to share Jesus' power over nature. But the fact that Jesus encouraged the attempt, and that it was initially successful, suggests that Matthew sees it is a genuine act of faith, even though it was not sufficient to survive the crisis.

At any rate, by the end of the story Peter had become an example of *little faith* and of *doubt*, an object-lesson for disciples who are tempted to take their eyes off Jesus and to take more notice of the threatening circumstances around them.

Notes. 22 The sense of urgency may be due to the danger that both *disciples* and *crowd* might try to force Jesus into political action (Jn. 6:14–15). **33** This instinctive reaction to a numinous experience prepares the way for Peter's more deliberately theological statement in 16:16.

14:34–36 Jesus the healer (see Mk. 6:53–56). Back in Herod's territory, Jesus was again the centre of attention. His popular appeal is seen as focused in his healing ministry, and Matthew's general summary indicates that this was far more extensive than the individual healings so far recorded might suggest. The desire to *touch the edge of his cloak* sounds almost mechanical, but see 9:20–22 for a healing by this means which was in fact a very personal encounter.

15:1–20 Cleanliness and godliness (see Mk. 7:1–23; *cf.*Lk. 11:37–41; 6:39). The opposition was never far away. Here again (as in

9:3, 11, 34; 12:2, 14, 24, 38) the trouble arose from *Pharisees and teachers of the law*, but now there is a sinister addition: they had come *from Jerusalem*. This was perhaps an official delegation sent to investigate this controversial teacher who did not belong to the rabbinic establishment. It will be increasingly clear from now on that it is *from Jerusalem* that Jesus must expect trouble (16:21; 20:18 *etc.*).

To *wash their hands before they eat* was not simply a question of hygiene but of religious duty. The OT law made no such rule, except for priests going about their cultic duty (Ex. 30:17–21). The Pharisaic tradition, however, had extended the principle to daily life, and Jesus, as a religious teacher, was expected to enforce ritual purity among his *disciples*.

Jesus' response to the charge comes in vs 10–11. He first launched a counter-attack on their whole attitude to religious authority. By insisting on their *tradition* they were in effect setting aside *the command of God*. Jesus thus drew a sharp distinction between the OT law (*the word of God*; v 6) and all human rules and regulations, and his quotation from Is. 29:13 indicates that a religion based on the latter is empty and not pleasing to God.

To illustrate this point he referred to the way the OT principle of respect for parents (Ex. 20:12; 21:17) was being undermined by the rabbinic legislation which allowed a man to keep his property out of his parents' reach by nominally dedicating it to God (while in practice retaining the use of it for himself). By this pious fraud, the OT provision for vows was cynically twisted to a purpose which infringed one of the most basic commandments of the law. (Note that the fifth commandment is introduced as what *God said*, not just as the law of Moses!)

Jesus then went beyond merely defending the OT law. In returning to the specific question of clean and unclean in v 11, he laid down a radical principle which would ultimately lead his followers to abandon the food laws of the Old Testament altogether. He stated that 'uncleanness' is not contracted by what you eat but comes from inside. This was the lesson which Peter found so hard to learn (Acts 10:9–15), but until it was learned, the food laws of Israel would hinder the church from welcoming non-Jewish members on equal terms. Matthew does not here spell out these implications (though Mark does; Mk. 7:19), but the principle is clear enough, and vs 17–20 explain it yet more clearly.

This went right against the Pharisaic sense of priorities in religion. Jesus, however, made no apology for this, and indeed made matters worse by writing the Pharisees off as *plants* not planted by God, to be removed like weeds, and as *blind guides* whose misdirected zeal would bring only disaster to themselves and to any who depended on them. This strong language reflects not so much personal animosity as a total repudiation of the approach to religion which emphasizes externals and ignores what a person is really like.

There is an undeniable inconsistency in a passage which begins by accusing Jesus' opponents of undermining God's law and then goes on to repudiate the principle of 'uncleanness' on which part of that law was based. But here, as in ch. 5, Jesus was less concerned with the surface level of the law than with its essential principle: if external purity matters, how much more does internal. In the end, this focus would leave those particular laws without practical value in the new community of the people of God drawn from Gentiles as well as Jews. For the time being, however, the principle was applied only to the matter of hand-washing, which was not part of the OT law (20).

Notes. **15** Here *parable* is used in its broader sense of a 'dark saying', needing interpretation. **16** *Dull* is lit. 'not understanding'; *cf.* the emphasis on the need to understand parables in 13:13, 14, 15, 19, 23. Here again, the disciples were given a private explanation of a saying which was left uninterpreted for the crowd.

15:21–28 A Gentile woman's faith (see Mk. 7:24–30). The issue of defilement now recurs in a more practical form. Jesus, the Jewish teacher, had moved into Gentile territory and was confronted by a Gentile woman with a demon-possessed daughter. The dialogue which resulted focused on the question of how far a Gentile might expect any benefit from the Jewish Messiah (*Son of David*).

The story is closely similar to that of the centurion's servant (8:5–13), not only in that faith was rewarded by a healing word spoken from a distance, but also in the racial tension which put that faith to the test. By describing the woman as a *Canaanite*, Matthew sharpens the issue. The Canaanites were the traditional enemies of Israel in the OT.

Jesus' discouraging silence (23) was followed by an even more daunting statement of the Jewish focus of his mission (24; *cf.* 10:5–6). His words seem to have left no room for hope, but the woman persisted with a simple appeal for help, only to be confronted by a yet more wounding saying, comparing Gentiles with *dogs* (which for the Jews were unclean animals).

The language seems incredibly harsh, especially when spoken by the same Jesus who had earlier welcomed the faith of the Gentile centurion as a pointer to Gentiles sharing in future in the blessings of Israel. Perhaps cold print conceals an element of irony, even

playfulness, in Jesus' tone. At any rate, he was confronting her with the sort of language a Gentile could expect to hear from a Jew, and her faith rose to the test. Her reply in v 27 recognized the priority of his mission to Israel but, nonetheless, claimed an extension of that mission to Gentiles. She had thus perceived the plan to which God had been working ever since the call of Abraham (Gn. 12:1–3), and which would in due time extend the church outside the bounds of Israel. For this *faith* she was appropriately rewarded.

15:29–31 Gentile response to Jesus (*cf.* Mk. 7:31–37). Just as Jesus had healed large numbers of Jews (14:34–36), so now he did the same in Gentile territory. Mark tells us that this was in the Decapolis, the Gentile south-east side of the *Sea of Galilee*, and it follows appropriately from Jesus' acceptance of the claim of Gentiles on his healing power in vs 21–28. The acclamation of *the God of Israel* confirms that the crowds were not themselves Jewish.

15:32–39 Second feeding of a crowd (see Mk. 8:1–10). Following so closely on 14:13–21 this may seem like an unnecessary repetition. The numbers involved indicate, however, that this is a separate incident. Its significance may lie in the context in which it occurred, as part of Jesus' extension of his ministry into Gentile territory (15:21; not until v 39 does he return to the Jewish side of the lake). Thus we have here a deliberate repetition of the Jewish feeding miracle, but this time for the Gentile crowd who had just *praised the God of Israel*. If the feeding of the 5,000 was a foretaste of the Messianic banquet, then this story indicates (as 8:11–12 has already predicted) that Gentiles too are to share in Israel's ultimate blessing.

The details of the story are different, but its essential character is the same (see on 14:13–21).

Notes. 37 An incidental mark of the non-Jewish context is the word for *baskets*, which is here a general one, whereas that in 14:20 denoted a specifically Jewish type of basket.

16:1–12 Pharisees and Sadducees (see Mk. 8:11–21; *cf.* Lk. 11:16; 12:54–56; 12:1). On a brief return to Jewish territory, Jesus again ran into official opposition. For the request for a *sign from heaven* and the refusal of any except *the sign of Jonah* see above on 12:38–42. The contrast between this Jewish scepticism and the enthusiastic response of the Gentile crowds is remarkable.

The questioners were a strange combination of *Pharisees* and *Sadducees*. The theological views and policies of these groups were markedly different from each other, but they had to co-operate as members of the Jewish supreme court, the Sanhedrin. This combination of parties in opposition to Jesus was to become clearer later (see on 16:21), but already it was sufficiently marked for Jesus to comment on the two groups as a united opposition in vs 5–12.

While Jesus had earlier used *yeast* as a symbol for the growth of God's kingdom (13:33), it was also sometimes a metaphor for the power of evil to extend its influence (1 Cor. 5:6–8; Gal. 5:9). Here the demand for a sign indicated an insidious resistance to Jesus' mission, and Jesus did not want his disciples to be infected with his opponents' scepticism.

The disciples' minds were, however, on more material concerns, and they thought he was talking about real bread! To be concerned about that was a sign of *little faith* (*cf.* 6:25–34), especially as their own eyes had twice witnessed how Jesus could meet physical need.

Notes. 2–3 The passage about weather signs does not occur in many early texts, and it may be a later addition based on Lk. 12:54–56.

16:13–20 Peter's confession (see Mk. 8:27–30; Lk. 9:18–21). Here we reach the climax of the first part of the gospel, in which we have seen very varied reactions to the authoritative ministry of Jesus. Other people's views are summarized in v14, where Jesus is placed in the category of the prophets. Peter makes the definitive statement for which the whole story has been preparing: Jesus is the Messiah, the *Son of God*.

Jesus' surprising response in all three synoptic gospels was to tell his disciples to keep his identity secret. The reason will become clear in vs 22ff. But Matthew (alone) includes in vs 17–19 a more positive response, which makes it clear that what Peter had said was true, however open it might be to misunderstanding. Indeed it was a revelation from God, and the fact that it was Peter who had received it indicated the important role he was to play in the development of the Messiah's mission.

The name *Peter* means 'Rock', and Jesus played on this meaning to designate Peter as the foundation of the new people of God. His leadership would involve the authority of the steward, whose *keys* symbolized his responsibility to regulate the affairs of the household. Peter would exercise his leadership by his authority to declare what is and is not permissible in the *kingdom of heaven* (to *bind* and to *loose* have this meaning in rabbinic writings). The story of the early years of the church in Acts shows how Peter fulfilled this role. But the same authority was shared with the other disciples in 18:18 (where *you* is plural; here it is singular). He was thus a representative leader rather than an overlord.

The *church* would be built by Jesus, not by

Peter. To refer to it as *my church* was to make a remarkable claim, since the Gk *ekklēsia* ('church') is the OT word for the people of *God*! *The gates of Hades* is a poetic expression for death; this new community of those who follow Jesus will never die.

Notes. 16 This is the first time anyone in Matthew's narrative has given Jesus the title *Christ* ('the Messiah'), though Matthew himself has used it in 1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4; 11:2. **18** It is sometimes suggested that because the word for 'rock' (*petra*) differs from the name *Petros*, the 'rock' referred to is not Peter himself but the confession he has just made of Jesus as Messiah. In Aramaic, however, the same term *kefa* would appear in both places; the change in Greek is due to the fact that *petra*, the normal word for rock, is feminine in gender, and therefore not suitable as a name for Simon! The echo of Peter's name remains obvious, even in Greek; he is the rock, in the sense outlined above. The text does not of course say anything about the church in Rome, or about any succession beyond the unique founding role of Peter himself. **19** The future perfect verbs ('will have been bound', 'will have been loosed'; see the NIV mg.) suggest that the heavenly decision preceded Peter's declaration of it on earth.

16:21 – 18:35 Private ministry in Galilee; preparing the disciples

While Jesus remains in the north, the focus of the story now shifts towards Jerusalem, as Jesus warns his disciples of what was to come and prepared them to be followers not of a triumphant Messiah but of one whose mission was to be completed through suffering and death. This would demand a radical reorientation in their thinking, and so from now on until he arrived in Jerusalem (ch. 21), Jesus' attention was focused on teaching the disciples rather than on further public ministry.

16:21 – 17:27 Teaching on Jesus' mission

16:21–28 Death and glory (see Mk. 8:31 – 9:1; Lk. 9:22–27). While the scene remains near Caesarea Philippi and the story is continuous from vs 13–20, the formula *From that time on Jesus began* (*cf.* 4:17) marks the beginning of a decisive new phase of Jesus' mission. Its geographical focus was to be *Jerusalem*, and its character was dominated by the cross. V 21 is the first of three formal announcements of what is to come (*cf.* 17:22–23; 20:17–19); from now on the mission became a march to death, and the disciples had to learn to live with this new perspective.

This was, however, too much for Peter, whose triumphant declaration in v 16 no doubt carried the hope of sharing in the Messiah's glory. Like other Jews at the time, he probably understood the Messiah's work in primarily earthly and political terms; defeat and death (and still worse rejection by Israel's official leadership) was not on his agenda. In this, he expressed *the things of men*, and as long as Jesus' disciples shared this purely human perspective, Jesus' mission (*the things of God*) could never make sense to them. That is why Jesus had been anxious to damp down popular enthusiasm in v 20. Hence his remarkably fierce reaction in v 23. Already the foundation rock (18) had become a stumbling-block!

Any idea of sharing the Messiah's glory had to give way to sharing his humiliation and rejection. To *take up the cross* is to set off for public execution, not to suffer patiently some irritation (*cf.* 27:32). For the disciple, as for the Master, it may lead to literal death. But by a powerful play on words in vs 25–26 (the same Greek word means both *life* and *soul*) Jesus posed the question of what real *life* is anyway; there are more important considerations then merely physical survival.

For death, for the *Son of Man*, was the way to *glory*. It was he who would have the last word, and those who had been faithful to him would be rewarded. Jesus must die indeed, but before some of his earthly companions also *taste death* (in martyrdom?) they would see that he had conquered and was now reigning as king. How they would *see* it is not specified. Perhaps it would become apparent, in a preliminary sense, in the events of the next week (see on 17:1) and, more fully, in Jesus' resurrection, ascension and heavenly reign. The inauguration of this reign Matthew signals in 28:18. As the kingdom of God grows, and the church becomes increasingly a force to be reckoned with, the kingship of the Son of Man will be established for all to see.

Notes. 21 *The elders, chief priests and teachers of the law* were the three groups which made up the membership of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jews. This was to be, therefore, a full-scale official repudiation of Israel's Messiah by Israel's highest court. **28** See above on 10:23 for the significance of language about *the Son of Man coming*, drawing on the imagery of Dn. 7:13–14. It is enthronement language and has no necessary reference to the 'second coming' as such.

17:1–13 A vision of Jesus' glory (see Mk. 9:2–13; Lk. 9:28–36). The unusually precise note of time (*After six days*) may be intended to link this episode closely with Jesus' words in 16:28: here for a few moments some of those who were with Jesus then 'saw' Jesus' kingly glory. The whole story is told from the disciples' point of view as primarily a revelation to them of

who Jesus really is. As such, it forms an important counter-balance to the depressing announcements of 16:21ff. Beyond death lies glory and already the three disciples are privileged to see the curtain temporarily drawn aside. Three elements add up to an extraordinary affirmation of Jesus as more than a merely human Messiah.

First, his changed appearance (*transfigured*), in bright light (2) and a *bright cloud* (5), shows that he is not just God's spokesman, but different in himself from other prophets.

Secondly, he is linked with *Moses and Elijah*, two of the greatest of those through whom God saved and spoke to his people in the past (even though both of them, like Jesus, suffered rejection by God's people). Both were popularly expected to return to inaugurate the Messianic age, so that their appearance here proclaims Jesus as the Messiah.

Thirdly, as at Jesus' baptism (3:17), God himself affirms Jesus as his *Son*. If that is so, his disciples must *listen to him*, however daunting they may have found his words in 16:21ff.

It was all too much to take in. Peter's inappropriate proposal to build *shelters* for Jesus and his august visitors there on the mountain was tactfully ignored! The three disciples were suitably *terrified* and were again sworn to secrecy (9; *cf.* 16:20). It is easy to imagine the unfortunate consequences which might have flowed from ill-considered reports of this spectacular incident.

In vs 10–13 the disciples were still trying to sort out what it all meant: was this fleeting vision the promised return of Elijah (Mal. 4:5–6)? Jesus pointed out that the real fulfilment of that prophecy had already taken place in the preaching, and the suffering, of *John the Baptist*. So the theme of necessary suffering, which they may have hoped had now been cancelled out by the vision of glory, is reasserted, for Jesus as well as for John.

Notes. 1 The *high mountain* is not identified. Mt Hermon, the highest in the area, is close to Caesarea Philippi (16:13); but other locations have been suggested. **4** Peter's proposal may have been simply a spontaneous desire to offer what hospitality he could; but it may also suggest that he wanted to tie down the vision in a more solid way.

17:14–20 The power of faith (see Mk. 9:14–29; Lk. 9:37–43). After the glory on the mountain, Jesus returned to a scene of suffering and unbelief. The suffering looks like a case of epilepsy (*has seizures* translates a rare word meaning lit. 'is affected by the moon', but the symptoms sound like epilepsy), but Jesus clearly treated it as demon-possession. The unbelief was that of the whole *generation*, but was focused in the disciples' failure to help the sufferer, through their *little faith*. Indeed, v 20 implies that on this occasion they had no faith at all, since there is nothing smaller than *a mustard seed*! The 'amount' of faith is not important; even the smallest is enough. What matters is the God in whom that faith is placed, who can achieve the proverbially impossible (moving mountains).

17:22–23 Second prediction of Jesus' death (see Mk. 9:30–32; Lk. 9:43–45). The content is similar to 16:21, though now the ominous note of being *betrayed* was added. As before, and as in 17:9, Jesus spoke of resurrection as well as death, but *the disciples'* reaction suggests that their minds did not focus on that part of the prediction.

17:24–27 The temple tax. While most Jews resented Roman taxation, the annual payment of the Jewish *two-drachma tax* for the upkeep of the temple and its services was a matter of national pride. The *collectors'* question suggests that Jesus now had a reputation for not conforming to social expectations. And Jesus here asserted his independence, in principle: as God's *son* he was exempt (*cf.* 12:5–6: 'one greater than the temple is here'), but he was willing to pay the tax in order to avoid giving offence. Jesus was quite capable of giving offence when the cause warranted it (see 15:12–14 and especially ch. 23!), but this was not such an issue.

We are not told whether Peter went fishing, or whether he succeeded. The point of the story is not in the proposed miracle but in Jesus' attitude to social conventions.

18:1–35 Fourth discourse: relationships among the disciples

Already by this stage in his ministry Jesus had formed a distinct group of followers and had spoken of building 'his church' (16:18). In such a group there was great potential for good, in mutual care and concern, but also for evil, if relationships broke down. The sayings collected in this discourse focus on this theme. They are as relevant to local church life today as they were among Jesus' Galilean companions.

18:1–5 True greatness (see Mk. 9:33–37; Lk. 9:46–48). Any human society is concerned to establish a proper 'pecking order', and the gospels record several disputes among the disciples on this subject. Over against all conventional ideas of status and importance Jesus offered the model of the *little child* (*cf.* 19:14). The point was not any supposedly childish qualities of innocence or unselfishness but the status of the child at the bottom of the pecking order, subject to grown-up authority, dependent and powerless. To accept this lowest

rank (*humble himself*) is to be great, and to treat the least prominent as the most important is to echo the attitude of Jesus (5). Such an attitude is not natural; it involves a radical *change* (lit. 'turn round', conversion).

18:6–9 Stumbling-blocks (*cf.* Mk. 9:42–48; Lk. 17:1–2) These verses are bound together by the Greek word *skandalon* ('stumbling-block') and its related verb *skandalizo* ('to trip up'). The NIV uses 'cause to sin' to translate these words, but they are less specific. Anything that gets in the way of effective discipleship is a *skandalon*, an unkind word or a cold shoulder no less than a 'cause of sin'.

Such stumbling-blocks may come from others (6–7) or from ourselves (8–9). Both are equally serious. We are responsible for our own spiritual health (hence the vivid imagery of vs 8–9 for drastic remedial measures; *cf.* 5:29–30); but also for that of our fellow-disciples, and a quick drowning would be more merciful than the fate deserved by one who hinders *one of these little ones*. This last phrase refers not primarily to children but to disciples in general, who have just been likened to little children. To recognize one another as *little ones*, and therefore as vulnerable, is to accept our pastoral responsibility for each other, as vs 10–20 will explain.

18:10–14 Pastoral concern (*cf.* Lk. 15:3–7). The parable of the wandering sheep shows the pastoral concern of *your Father in heaven* for his *little ones* (14). But v 10 shows that it was told as a model for the concern we should also have for each other as *little ones*. The temptation to *look down on* less confident or 'successful' fellow-disciples, and therefore to ignore their pastoral needs, shows an attitude out of tune with God's concern.

In Luke's parable the sheep was already 'lost'; the focus there is on reaching out to outsiders rather than, as here, on pastoral care for disciples in danger.

Notes. 10 The idea that each individual has an *angel* to represent them *in heaven* is found only here in the Bible, though angels elsewhere represent nations (Dn. 10; 12:1) and churches (Rev. 1:20).

18:15–20 'If your brother sins'. These verses explain how the principle of vs 10–14 should work out in practice. They are addressed to *you* (singular), the individual disciple who is aware of his fellow-disciple's sin and accepts (as vs 10–14 demand) that it is his responsibility to do something about it. The words *against you* (15) were probably not part of the original text and unhelpfully restrict the scope. Response to personal injury will come into focus in vs 21–35 here it is the *brother*'s danger, not any effect of his sin on me personally, which is at issue.

The aim must be to *win your brother over*, restoration, not punishment. To that end, the minimum of publicity must be used. The erring brother must be approached alone or at most with *one or two others*. Only if that fails is it necessary to involve *the church* (the local congregation); it is to be expected that the offender will *listen* to the united conviction of his fellow-disciples. If he does not, the only course open remains a severing of fellowship, though presumably still with the hope that this will jolt him into repentance and restoration.

The congregation's right, and responsibility, to make such a serious decision rests on the same principle of delegation which was applied to Peter in 16:19, but now the whole congregation shares this authority (*you* in 18:18 is plural). See the comments on 16:19. The idea that the church *on earth* may bring the authority of *heaven* to bear on their situation is continued in vs 19–20, where the continued presence of Jesus among his people ensures that their united prayer will be effective. In the context this refers primarily to prayer for the 'brother who sins', but the principle may also be applied more widely. It is not, of course, an automatic guarantee that any petition will be granted, but only such as are compatible with gathering *in my name*.

Notes. 17 *Treat him as you would a pagan* (lit. 'Gentile') *or a tax collector* is surprising language from the Jesus who was known as the friend of tax-collectors and whose sympathy for Gentiles has already been demonstrated. It was, presumably, a traditional Jewish expression for ostracism. **20** Cf. 28:20. Such language implies an extraordinary claim for Jesus as more than an historic individual.

18:21–35 On forgiving others (*cf.* Lk. 17:4). Here the focus moves on to how disciples should respond to a fellow-disciple's wrongdoing when they themselves are personally affected. It is assumed that the answer lies in forgiveness; the only question is whether there is any limit. Peter's offer of *seven times* sounds generous (a later rabbinic discussion suggests three times as reasonable!), but Jesus dismissed any such calculation. Our willingness to forgive should be as limitless as the extravagant vengeance of which Lamech once boasted (Gn. 4:24 is being deliberately echoed in the figures *seven* and *seventy-seven*).

This demand is explained and made memorable in the parable which follows in vs 23–34. We forgive because we have been forgiven by God, and no offence against us can remotely compare with the incalculable amount we ourselves have been forgiven. *Ten thousand talents* combines the largest Greek numeral with the largest unit of currency. Even one talent was a small fortune; ten thousand was beyond the

wildest dreams of ordinary people. *A hundred denarii* is not a negligible amount (a hundred days' wages), but is a mere six-hundred-thousandth of the first sum! Thus, in the light of God's incalculable grace to us, it is ludicrous, as well as *wicked*, for us to refuse to forgive others. The implied threat of v 34 is made explicit in v 35; God will not treat an unforgiving spirit lightly. This was the message of 6:14–15, and the parable reminds us of the way sins were described as 'debts' in the Lord's Prayer.

Notes. 22 *Seventy-seven times* is a more natural rendering of the Greek than 'seventy times seven' (490) and is the clear meaning of the Hebrew in Gn. 4:24.

19:1 – 25:46 Ministry in Judea

19:1 – 20:34 On the way to Jerusalem

The fateful journey to Jerusalem, and therefore to death, now began. Jesus would not return to Galilee until after his resurrection (28:16). The shadow of the cross grew deeper as the group moved south, and Jesus' teaching continued to re-educate the disciples to prepare them for what was to come.

19:1–12 Teaching on marriage and divorce (see Mk. 10:1–12; *cf.* Lk. 16:18). In Jewish law a man had the right to *divorce his wife* (but not the wife her husband) by a simple declaration; there was no trial and no appeal. This was assumed to be the intention of Dt. 24:1–4 (on which see above on 5:31–32), but the 'something indecent' which that passage gave as the grounds for divorce left room for debate. Some teachers restricted this to adultery or other gross sexual misbehaviour, but in common practice, supported by some rabbis, it was virtually a matter of the husband's whim, *for any and every reason.*

Rather than enter this debate, Jesus again (as in 5:32) declared that divorce, for whatever reason, was incompatible with God's purpose for marriage. In so doing, he set the original intention of the Creator, expressed in Gn. 1:27; 2:24, above the provision of Dt. 24, which was given only *because your hearts were hard.* The divorce regulations were a concession to deal with the result of sin, not an expression of the way God intended things to be. Divorce might be necessary, but it could never be good. The principle that *the two become one flesh* can be fulfilled only by unbroken marriage.

This uncompromising position is, however, modified by Matthew, here and in 5:32, by the clause *except for marital unfaithfulness.* Neither Mark nor Luke includes this much debated clause, and it is sometimes thought to be an attempt by Matthew to soften a total prohibition of divorce which soon proved unworkable in real life. It is more likely, however, that Matthew is simply spelling out what any Jewish reader would have taken for granted, that *marital unfaithfulness* (which would include not only adultery but also premarital promiscuity) automatically annulled a marriage by creating another 'one-flesh' union. In the OT the penalty for adultery was death, but by NT times a formal annulment of the marriage was the accepted response (*cf.* Joseph's dilemma in 1:18–19). This was not a voluntary 'divorce' but the necessary recognition that the marriage was already finished.

Jesus' demand for marital faithfulness without an 'escape route' dismayed the disciples. Who could live up to such a demand? *Not everyone*, Jesus agreed. Some do not have the 'gift' of marriage and are called to celibacy, either by their physical condition (whether congenital or man-made) or by their own choice in the light of the role to which they are called in *the kingdom of heaven.* In Jewish society it was very unusual to be unmarried (as Jesus was himself), so that this affirmation of voluntary celibacy is important. But marriage, with all its demands, remains the divine intention for those *to whom it has been given.*

Notes. 11 *This word* refers here to Jesus' pronouncements in vs 6 and 8, not to the disciples' wry comment in v 10. **12** *Renounced marriage* is the NIV's paraphrase for 'made themselves eunuchs'; it rightly assumes that Jesus did not mean the phrase to be taken literally.

19:13–15 Little children (see Mk. 10:13–16; Lk. 18:15–17). The disciples may have been simply insensitive and snobbish, or perhaps they were trying to protect Jesus from too much attention. At any rate, they had not yet absorbed his revolutionary scale of values, in which the 'little ones' were the greatest. To say that *the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these* was not to declare the automatic salvation of all children, but rather (as in 18:1–5) to set up their lowly status as a model for discipleship.

19:16–26 A rich young man (see Mk. 10:17–27; Lk. 18:18–27). Here was another shock for the disciples' scale of values. The man was rich, moral and eager for *eternal life*, the ideal recruit to the disciple band. To see him sent away by Jesus *astonished* them. If such a man could not *be saved*, who could be (25)?

The man's question assumed that *eternal life* could be achieved by *doing* some *good thing* (a conspicuous act of charity?). By emphasizing the goodness of God (17) Jesus questioned the man's idea of goodness; it is found in relation to God, not by 'good deeds' of our own devising. To keep God's commandments is to reflect his goodness, and this the young man had tried to

do. But he was himself still conscious that something was missing, and he was looking for some additional thing to do. Jesus' response in v 21 was indeed something to do, but something so radical that it would undermine his whole way of life and leave everything at God's disposal.

Yet Jesus did not require all his followers to be destitute. His demands varied for different individuals and situations. But we should beware of using this truth as a convenient escape route. 'That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* issue that command' (R. H. Gundry).

Vs 23–26 make matters worse. The humorous picture of a *camel* trying to get through *the eye of a needle* means, as the disciples rightly discerned, that it is not simply *hard* but *impossible* for a rich person to be saved. The answer lies in recognizing that the humanly *impossible* is *possible* for God. Salvation is not earned, either by wealth or by poverty; *the kingdom of God* overturns all human valuations and possibilities.

Notes. 16–17 In Mark the man called Jesus 'good', and Jesus replied 'Why do you call me good?' In eliminating this part of the dialogue Matthew is guarding against the false deduction that, therefore, Jesus is not good and is not God. **24** The romantic idea that *the eye of the needle* was the name of a narrow gate in the city wall has no historical foundation. The picture is deliberately grotesque.

19:27–30 The rewards of discipleship (see Mk. 10:28–31; Lk. 18:28–30; *cf.* 22: 28–30). These verses spell out the 'treasure in heaven' which Jesus promised in v 21 to those whose discipleship involves them in economic loss. They will share his kingly glory and authority, when he fulfils the vision of Dn. 7:13–14 (28). They will also be compensated *a hundred times* both in this life (as they share the family and material resources of the disciple community) and in *eternal life* (29). Yet even so, they should beware of assuming that their 'sacrifice' has earned them a place of special honour (30); the kingdom of heaven is full of surprises, as the following parable shows.

Notes. 28 *The renewal of all things* suggests the 'new heavens and new earth' of the Messianic age. *Judging* is probably to be understood in the OT sense of 'ruling'. The idea of the church as the true Israel of the Messianic age is clear here (*cf.* 16:18).

20:1–16 The parable of unexpected wages. Following a discussion about rewards, and framed by two declarations that *the last will be first and the first last* (19:30; 20:16), this parable underlines the paradoxical values of *the kingdom of heaven*. In a society with no welfare provision or trade unions, where unemployment meant starvation, the action of the *landowner* in employing extra workers whom he did not really need so late in the day was an act of generosity. But even more extraordinary was the rate of pay, which made no economic sense, and understandably provoked grumbling among those who felt unfairly treated. It was not *unfair*, of course. No-one was underpaid; it was just that some were treated with 'unreasonable' generosity. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. God's grace is not limited by our ideas of fairness; his gifts are far beyond what we can deserve. But, like the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son, we find it hard to abandon our human scale of values (especially when comparing ourselves with others!) and to accept the large-heartedness of God towards those we regard as undeserving. Thus the disciples' re-education went one stage further, to embrace the divine principle of the first being last and the last first.

20:17–19 Third prediction of Jesus' death (see Mk. 10:32–34; Lk. 18:31–34). The repeated mention of *Jerusalem* underlines what lay ahead, and this time the prediction is more detailed, including being *condemned* to death (*i.e.* an official execution), *turned over to the Gentiles, mocked, flogged and crucified*. This is the first time crucifixion has been explicitly mentioned (though 16:24 implied it). The whole catalogue of humiliation and suffering leaves no room for visions of earthly glory for *the Son of Man*.

20:20–28 Greatness in service (see Mk. 10:35–45; *cf.* Lk. 22:24–27). In the light of the preceding paragraph, the request of *the mother of Zebedee's sons* (James and John) is extraordinary. Was she still thinking of an earthly kingdom, or was she looking forward to the future glory predicted in 19:28 (and conveniently forgetting what must precede that glory)? At any rate, Jesus left them in no doubt that suffering must come first (22–23).

The point of the request was the desire to gain precedence among the Twelve (and particularly to supplant Peter, the other member of the inner group of three who witnessed the transfiguration?). This was what made the others *indignant* and caused Jesus to give another lesson to them all on the world's ideas of greatness. *Not so with you* well sums up the theme of this whole section of the gospel; the kingdom of heaven creates an alternative society which challenges conventional values.

Jesus is himself the supreme example. His status as *Son of Man* gave him the right *to be served* (*cf.* Dn. 7:14), but he came *to serve*. In this unselfishness he is our model, even though his

specific service took a form which could never be repeated, *to give his life as a ransom for many*. In these words, with their clear echo of Is. 53:10–12, is one of the simplest summaries in the NT of the redemptive purpose of Jesus' death.

Notes. 22 To *drink the cup* is a metaphor for suffering; *cf.* 26:39, 42; also *e.g.* Is. 51:17; Ezk. 23:31ff.

20:29–34 Two blind men (see Mk. 10:46–52; Lk. 18:35–43). *Jericho* was the last town before Jerusalem on the route from Galilee. As Jesus approached his goal with a crowd of enthusiastic followers, he found an opportunity to stop and 'serve' (28) two needy men whom the crowd thought beneath his notice. He thus exemplified again the unconventional values of the kingdom of heaven. In Mark and Luke this is the story of one man, whom Mark calls Bartimaeus. Perhaps, as in 8:28, Matthew mentioned *two* men in order to give weight to the testimony that Jesus really is *Son of David*. *Cf.* 9:27–31 for another story of two blind men similar to this one. The use of an unusual poetic word for *eyes* in v 34 and the statement that they *followed him* may be intended to suggest that the story symbolizes the curing of spiritual blindness which leads to discipleship.

21:1–22 Arrival in Jerusalem

This is Jesus' first, and last, visit to Jerusalem in Matthew's story. Ever since 16:21 this has been the goal in view, and now the story reaches its climax, as the Galilean prophet approaches the capital city of Israel, whose temple was the focus of the earthly worship of the one true God. His arrival was marked by three symbolic actions in vs 1–22 which set the scene for the conflicts to follow.

21:1–11 The coming of the King (see Mk. 11:1–11; Lk. 19:28–38). Among the crowds of Galilean pilgrims arriving on foot in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, Jesus chose to make a conspicuous entry on *a donkey*. Since we have no other record of Jesus riding, this must have been a deliberate act, meant to be noticed. The instructions in vs 1–3 suggest that it had been carefully prepared. It was, as Matthew makes clear, an acted allusion to Zechariah's prophecy (Zc. 9:9–10) of the coming of the Messianic King.

The disciples and the Galilean crowd recognized the allusion, and turned the arrival into a triumphal procession. Their shouts in v 9 made no secret of their belief that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, now coming to set up his reign in Israel's capital.

The people of *Jerusalem* were, however, taken aback, and *the whole city was stirred*, not with enthusiasm but with concern: '*Who is this?*' Jesus was to them an unknown countryman, little better than a foreigner, from the remote northern province. But the Galilean *crowds* responded by asserting the claim of 'their' prophet, *from Nazareth in Galilee*. So we see set up the polarization of attitudes to Jesus which during the next week would have some supporting Jesus (21:46) while others shouted for his crucifixion (27:20ff.).

Notes. 2 Only Matthew mentions the *colt* as well as the *donkey*. While the poetic language of v 5 does not refer to separate animals, Matthew sees in the presence of the colt a suggestive echo of its wording. 7 The second *them* does not, of course, mean that Jesus rode both animals, but refers to the *cloaks*.

21:12–17 Demonstration in the temple (see Mk. 11:11, 15–17; Lk. 19:45–46). The provocative nature of Jesus' arrival in the city was matched by his arrival in *the temple area*. This was a huge open space of some 33 acres (13.5 hectares), within which stood the temple itself and associated buildings. In the porticos surrounding this area (not in the temple building) were the stalls of those who changed money for the temple offerings and sold sacrificial animals (including *doves*). They were there with the permission of the priestly authorities and performed a useful, even necessary, function for pilgrims coming from a distance. But the whole thing had got out of proportion, and worship and *prayer* were being squeezed out by commercialism. Jesus' violent onslaught on all concerned (buyers as well as sellers) expressed his conviction that the temple was no longer fulfilling the purpose for which it had been built.

Onlookers who knew their Scriptures would have been reminded of Mal. 3:1–4, and perhaps also of Zc. 14:21 (where 'Canaanite' means 'trader'). The Messiah was purifying the people's worship in readiness for the great day of the Lord. This, together with his healing of *the blind and the lame*, was enough to provoke not only popular acclamation but also official resentment. But Jesus offered no apology and made matters worse by justifying the cries of the children who hailed him as *Son of David* by quoting Ps. 8:2, which is about the praise of *God*!

21:18–22 The withered fig-tree (see Mk. 11:12–14, 20–24). This apparently pointless act of power is generally understood from its context (and from the way Mark interweaves it with the story of the temple incident) to have a symbolic purpose. The *fig-tree* which produces *leaves* and therefore promises *fruit* but offers nothing to eat is a picture of the empty worship of the temple (*cf.* Mi. 7:1; Je. 8:13). The *withering* of the tree is then a visible pointer to

the fate of the temple which Jesus predicts in 23:38; 24:2.

It was the sheer power of Jesus' word that impressed *the disciples*, and Jesus used the incident as a model for the power available to *faith*, as in 17:20.

21:23 – 23:39 Controversies with the Jewish leaders

21:23–27 'By what authority?' (see Mk. 11:27–33; Lk. 20:1–8). After Jesus' provocative actions an official response was inevitable. It came from *the chief priests and the elders*, the officials responsible for the temple, who constituted the major part of the Sanhedrin. Jesus was implicitly claiming an authority which threatened their supremacy and must justify it if he could (*cf.* the earlier demands for a 'sign'). But again he refused to be drawn. His counter-question about *John the Baptist* effectively put them in a corner. But it was not just a clever evasion, for it implied a continuity between John's mission and that of Jesus (as has already been indicated in 11:7–19; 17:11–13). If John really was God's messenger, which they dared not deny, then Jesus was no less. Jesus went on (31–32) to point out the results of their failure to respond to John's mission and, therefore, also to his own.

21:28 – 22:14 Three pointed parables. It is important to take these three parables together and to read them in this context as Jesus' response to the hostility of the Jewish authorities. Each of the parables speaks of one group of people losing their privileged position and being replaced by those whom they would have despised. The theme which runs through them is, therefore, the question of who are the true people of God, and they all suggest that a fundamental change is taking place.

(a) 21:28–32 *The two sons.* The simple story illustrates the difference between saying and doing and indicates that God is more impressed by our performance than by our promises (*cf.* the repeated message of 7:15–27). Jesus applied it directly to *you* (the chief priests and elders, v 23) and contrasted their response to God's messenger John with that of those they most despised, *the tax collectors and prostitutes.* Because these 'no-hopers' had believed John, they would go first into *the kingdom of God.* Whether the unbelieving authorities would follow them in is not spelled out, but the next parable gives a clearer answer.

(b) 21:33–46 *The tenants of the vineyard* (see Mk. 12:1–12; Lk. 20:9–19). Here the theme of replacement is explicit. The story is of an absentee landowner and the tenant farmers who are obliged to pay him a fixed proportion of the produce as their rent. Their failure to do so is in itself sufficient reason for them to be replaced; the murder of *his son* makes matters far more serious.

The point of the story was obvious to *the chief priests and the Pharisees* (45) and would have been so to anyone who knew the book of Isaiah, where the memorable parable of the vineyard (Is. 5:1–7) symbolized Israel's failure to live up to God's expectations. But the focus here was not on Israel as a whole but on its leadership, whose execution of God's *son* was about to bring to a head the repeated rejection of his prophets in the past. They could now expect only a *wretched end*, while others took their place.

Vs 42–44 work out the implications of the story. V 42 (quoting Ps. 118:22) illustrates the divine reversal which was soon to happen, when the one rejected by Israel's leaders was to be proved to be the one chosen for the place of highest honour. V 44 takes up the same metaphor with allusions to the destructive stones of Is. 8:14–15 and Dn. 2:34–35,44–45. V 43 is more direct: the *kingdom* symbolized by the vineyard belongs to *God* not to them, and he will entrust it to someone more responsible. *A people* suggests not just a change of leadership but that the very composition of the people of God was to change (along the lines suggested in 8:11–12). It was not, however, a simple matter of Jews being replaced by Gentiles (that would have needed a reference to 'peoples' in the plural, the normal Greek term for Gentiles); rather a new community of God's people was being created (*cf.* on 16:18), in which both Jews and Gentiles would find their place. What would characterize them was not their nationality, but that they would *produce fruit* (*cf.* 3:8, 10; 7:15–20; 12:33–37; 13:8, 26; and especially 21:18–20).

(c) 22:1–14 *The wedding feast* (*cf.* Lk. 14:16–24). The theme of replacement is even stronger here. *Those who had been invited*, but who refused repeated calls and even murdered the messengers, correspond to the first tenants in the previous parable, and the substitute guests to the 'new people' of 21:43. And as in 21:31, the newcomers are a pretty unlikely group, from *the street corners*, including *both good and bad.* It is another parable of the turning of the tables, of the first being last and the last first.

The story becomes quite bizarre, with the murder of the messengers and a military campaign taking place while the dinner gets cold! To *burn their city* is a very extreme reaction to a refused dinner invitation. But parables are imaginary stories, and do not need to mirror real life, and the symbolism is clear enough. Israel's refusal (in its leaders) to respond to God's call through Jesus would lead to the destruction of *their city*, Jerusalem, to which Jesus had come in

order to be rejected and killed (16:21). The point is spelled out in 23:38; 24:2.

Vs 11–14 introduce a new note: even among the 'new people' there is no automatic guarantee of salvation; they include *both good and bad* (*cf.* the theme of 7:15–27). Even someone from the streets should have put on the clean white clothes which were appropriate for a wedding; to fail to do so is to insult the host. So while the kingdom of heaven is open to anyone, it does make a demand on them (*cf.* the need to 'produce fruit' in 21:43). There is no place for those who will not take their privilege seriously. V 14 then summarizes the situation not only for the originally invited guests but even for the newcomers as well.

Notes. 3–4 It was customary to send out both an advance invitation (which they had accepted) and a messenger to say the meal was ready. 11 There is no historical foundation for Augustine's suggestion that *wedding clothes* were provided by the host.

22:15–22 Roman taxation (see Mk. 12:13–17; Lk. 20:20–26). The next three confrontations were initiated by Jesus' opponents, in order *to trap him* into damaging statements which could be used against him. The first concerns the Roman poll-tax, which was fiercely resented by patriotic Jews as a symbol of their political subjection. Some twenty-five years earlier a major revolt against this tax had been sparked off by a Galilean popular leader, Judas (Acts 5:37), from whom the Zealot group took its inspiration. It was thus a loaded question: to support the tax was to be unpatriotic, while to oppose it was politically dangerous (especially for a Galilean popular leader).

In getting them to show him a *denarius*, however, Jesus exposed them as *hypocrites*, since no patriotic Jew should have been carrying this coin, with its 'idolatrous' *portrait* of the emperor and its *inscription* giving him the title 'Son of God'. If they were using *Caesar's* money, let them pay his poll-tax! Jesus thus distanced himself decisively from the Zealot position, and implied that loyalty to a pagan government was not incompatible with loyalty to God. He did not say what should be done when the two loyalties conflict..

22:23–33 The resurrection (see Mk. 12:18–27; Lk. 20:27–40). Unlike the Pharisees, who initiated the last 'test', the *Sadducees* held no belief in life after death, since it was not taught in the five books of Moses, the only Scriptures they accepted as authoritative. They felt this was an area where Jesus' teaching could be made to look ridiculous. Their 'question', based on the levirate law of Dt. 25:5–6, was not a serious enquiry but an attempt to poke fun at this new-fangled theological idea of *resurrection*. It does, however, raise a real pastoral issue for those who have been married more than once.

Jesus' reply was two-fold. On the specific issue raised, he pointed out (30) that resurrection life is not a mere continuation of life on earth. His words are sometimes read as offering a heavenly life which is less happy than married life on earth. On the contrary, it is a richer life. The exclusiveness of marriage is appropriate to mortal life, within which there is the need to procreate children. But those who are raised to immortal life, *like the angels*, can continue to enjoy loving relationships without the restriction and jealousy which the earthly marriage bond rightly involves.

On the more fundamental question of resurrection itself, Jesus found a basis for this belief even in the Sadducees' own Scriptures, the books of Moses (31–32). For God to describe himself in relation to the patriarchs who died long before (Ex. 3:6) implies that there is a continuing relationship; God's covenant with his people is not frustrated by death.

22:34–40 The greatest commandment (see Mk. 12:28–31; *cf.* Lk. 10:25–27). The *Pharisees'* second question was an important one and received an important answer. But it was still a 'test', since a less careful answer could have left Jesus open to the charge of trying to 'abolish [parts of] the law' (5:17). Both Dt. 6:5 and Lv. 19:18 were often quoted in rabbinic ethical discussion, but to bring them together like this as a summary of *all the law and the prophets* (*cf.* 7:12 for an alternative summary) was a brilliantly creative idea. In focusing on the two halves of the Ten Commandments (duty to God and duty to our neighbour) it offers a foundation for all our living; and by summing up that duty as *love*, it goes beyond the specific requirements of the law to the God-like attitude which must underlie them.

22:41–46 'Son of David?' (see Mk. 12:35–37; Lk. 20:41–44). Now Jesus again takes the initiative against the Pharisees. His question sounds like academic theology: is *Son of David* a proper title for the Messiah? But he has himself been repeatedly hailed by this title, most recently and publicly in 21:9,15–16, where he clearly accepted, even provoked, this response. So it was his own status which was at issue.

Son of David was a traditional Messianic title, and one which not only occurs frequently in Matthew's narrative but formed the basis of the presentation of Jesus as Messiah in ch. 1. It is not likely then that these verses are meant to undermine that whole argument. Rather the point is that the Messiah is more than merely a son of David, as is shown by David's words in Ps. 110:1. The same text is used again in 26:64 to claim for Jesus a superhuman authority.

Here again, Jesus was warning people against judging his mission in traditional terms. Far from being enthroned in Jerusalem as a king like David, he would soon be rejected by his people. But even then, on the cross, he would be recognized at last not as a son of David (the title does not occur again), but as 'Son of God' (27:54).

Notes. 43 The argument depends on the belief that David was the author of Ps. 110 and that he was speaking about the future Messiah. Both points are disputed by most OT scholars today, but would have been taken for granted in Jesus' time.

23:1–12 A warning against scribes and Pharisees (*cf.* Mk. 12:38–39; Lk. 20:45–46). Jesus now goes on the offensive, and 'offensive' is not too strong a word for much of the language he uses in ch. 23. Only Matthew includes this concentrated attack on the Jewish religious authorities at this point. It shows Jesus as a fierce controversialist, quite willing to make enemies when the cause demanded it. And the cause was important, for what was at issue was the contrast between the values of the kingdom of heaven and the superficial approach to religion which has already been unmasked especially in 5:17–48 and 15:1–20.

The target was the scribes (*teachers of the law*, a class of professional interpreters of Scriptures and of rabbinic tradition), and *the Pharisees*, a religious 'party' to which most scribes belonged, and which was devoted to scrupulous observance of the full range of rabbinic legislation. They were, generally speaking, earnest, moral people, and Jesus' attack here seems to many harsh and unfair. But his concern was not so much with their performance as individuals, but with the system of religious observance which they upheld. In insisting on a huge and growing corpus of rules and regulations, they were in danger of ignoring inner attitudes and motives and of putting adherence to the system before the will of God. It was this, rather than conscious deceit (though v 3 does charge them with this too), which made them, in one of Matthew's favourite words, *hypocrites*.

In vs 2–7, however, the focus is on their desire to make a good impression (*cf.* 6:1–6, 16–18) by flaunting their status and authority. They were unconcerned with the problems their teaching was creating for ordinary people who tried to follow it (the *heavy loads* of v 4 refer to the practical demands which scribal legislation made on daily living; *cf.* 11:28–30). In contrast with this (8–12), disciples must not look for status but be happy to take the lowest place and serve others. This last section picks up the theme of 20:25–28, but whereas there the contrast was with 'the rulers of the Gentiles', here it is with the supposed leaders of the people of God. A desire for pretentious titles and positions of influence can still today be a signal that disciples are straying from the values of the kingdom of heaven.

Notes. 2 *Moses' seat* represents the teaching authority of those responsible for interpreting the laws of Moses. **3** After 15:1–20 it would be surprising if Jesus really meant that *everything* in scribal teaching must be obeyed. The balance of the sentence falls rather on the second half: 'Do what they *say*, if you like, but don't do what they *do*.' **5** *Phylacteries* (scroll-containers bound on the forehead and arm when praying) and *tassels* are not condemned as such (Jesus wore the latter; see 9:20, where the same Greek word is used); but they offered great scope for showing off and gaining a reputation for piety!

23:13–36 The scribes and Pharisees denounced (*cf.* Lk. 11:39–52). The previous verses were addressed to the crowd and disciples. Jesus went on to address the scribes and Pharisees direct, in the form of seven 'woes', which build up to a powerful climax of repudiation of their leadership. The scene is thus set for the prediction of disaster for Jerusalem with which the chapter ends.

The first woe (13) describes their approach to religion as a hindrance to those who really wanted to please God. Yet the second (15) recognizes that they were keen to *win converts* (to Judaism). The problem was that their religious system made people worse rather than better (*son of hell* means one who belongs there; *cf.* 'sons of the kingdom', 8:12). The rest of the woes then give examples of how perverted their religious values were.

Oaths (16–22) offered plenty of scope for legalistic distinctions and were the subject of much rabbinic discussion. Jesus had already shown that they should not be needed at all (5:33–37). Here he added that attempts to distinguish between more and less 'serious' oaths were futile, since all ultimately go back to God as the one whose name is invoked.

The fourth woe (23–24) does not condemn their tithing practice as such (NB *without neglecting the former*), but points out the absurd lack of proportion involved (*strain out a gnat but swallow a camel*!) when they went into meticulous detail over tithing garden herbs but forgot about *justice, mercy and faithfulness*. The prophets had often protested similarly against a religion which focused on ritual and forgot the things that really matter (*cf.* Mi. 6:6–8).

The fifth and sixth woes (25–26, 27–28) similarly deal with the priority of inward purity over outward cleansing. This is the issue which Jesus had already raised in 15:11, 17–20 in connection with ritual hand-washing. The

reference in v 27 may be to ossuaries, the small chests into which human bones were collected, and which were often given a lime plaster covering to make them *beautiful*.

The seventh woe (29–31) leads into a devastating paragraph declaring that Israel's rebellion against God has now reached its culmination, in *this generation* (*cf.* on 12:38–45), so that the judgment, which had for long been brewing, must now at last fall on them. It was easy, with the passage of time, for the people to distance themselves from the way their *forefathers* had treated *the prophets* and *the righteous* and to build monuments in their honour, but in fact nothing had changed. They were still *descendants* of those forefathers, in attitude as well as in genealogy, as their treatment of God's messengers in their own day showed (34). So as they *fill up the measure* of the sins of Israel, the climax had come, and *the righteous blood* of all God's spokesmen in the past would *come upon* their generation. (*cf.* 27:25 for this way of expressing responsibility for death and liability to punishment.)

Notes. 34 *Prophets, wise men and teachers* (scribes) were God's spokesmen in OT times. Jesus described his own disciples in similar terms; they could expect no better fate than their Master. **35** *Abel* and *Zechariah* were the first and last martyrs mentioned in the OT (since 2 Chronicles is the last book of the Hebrew canon), and in both stories the call for the death to be avenged is explicit (Gn. 4:10; 2 Ch. 24:22). The Zechariah in 2 Ch. 24 is described as son of Jehoiada, while *Berechiah* was the father of a different Zechariah (Zc. 1:1). In neither case do we have enough information on the family to give a confident explanation of the confusion (which occurs elsewhere in Jewish writings).

23:37–39 The fate of Jerusalem (see Lk. 13:34–35). The seventh woe widened the scope from the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees to the total guilt of Israel in its rejection of God's messengers. Now the inevitable conclusion is drawn. *Jerusalem* had rejected the appeal of God's last and greatest messenger, and now the judgment must fall. In particular, *your house* (the temple) would be left *desolate*, not only destroyed (see 24:2) but abandoned by God, as had happened many years before when Jeremiah's appeal was refused (v 38 echoes Je. 12:7).

Jesus pronounced this 'sentence' not with vindictive glee but with sorrowful regret (37). He had hoped for a better response, *Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*, and indeed that was how he had in fact been brought into the city by his Galilean followers (21:9). Only when Jerusalem was ready to echo that welcome could they hope to *see me again*. He did not say when this would be, if at all, and the Greek for *until* is deliberately indefinite ('if and when').

24:1 – 25:46 Fifth discourse: judgment

The subject of this last great collection of Jesus' teaching follows naturally from the preceding chapter, with its climax in the prediction that judgment was about to fall on Jerusalem. It is from that point that it begins, with the more explicit prediction of the total destruction of the temple in v 2. The discourse that follows was in response to the disciples' question, '*When will this happen?*' But their question in Matthew's version (not in Mark's or Luke's) links the destruction of the temple (which in fact occurred in AD 70, when the Romans suppressed the Jewish revolt) with a second event, *your coming* (Gk. *parousia*) *and the end of the age*.

The chief problem in the interpretation of ch. 24 is to know which of these two events is in view at each point (by ch. 25 it is generally agreed that the focus has moved from the temple to Jesus' *parousia*). The following commentary is based on the view that up to v 35 Jesus was speaking (often in highly symbolic language) about the destruction of the temple, which was to happen (as indeed it did) before *this generation* had *passed away* (34). The unknown *day or hour* which is introduced in v 36 is then the beginning of his answer to the second question about his *parousia* (the word is used again in vs 37 and 39). Most interpreters think that the *parousia* theme begins earlier, including at least vs 29–31. Space does not allow a full argument for the view here presented (for a fuller discussion see R.T. France, *Matthew* (*TNTC*, IVP, 1985).

24:1–2 The temple to be destroyed (see Mk. 13:1–2; Lk. 21:5–6). When Matthew mentions that *Jesus left the temple*, and went on to the Mount of Olives opposite (3), he may have in mind not only Jesus' withdrawal from Jewish public life but also Ezekiel's vision of the glory of God abandoning the doomed temple and resting on the Mount of Olives (Ezk. 10:18–19; 11:22–23).

The temple *buildings*, recently rebuilt by Herod, were one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world. But Jesus' prophecy of *not one stone left on another* was to be literally fulfilled; all that survived the Roman assault was part of the platform on which they were built (including the 'Wailing Wall').

24:3–14 Beware of premature expectation (*cf.* Mk. 13:3–13; Lk. 21:7–19). While many readers search this chapter eagerly for 'signs of the end', the theme of much of it, especially this section, is the danger of jumping too quickly to conclusions that 'the end' (in whatever sense) is imminent.

Before AD 70, many nationalist rebels set themselves up as leaders of God's people (4–5), thus usurping Jesus' place as Messiah (*in my name*). Similarly (6–8), there were *wars* and natural disasters during that period, as there have been at all periods of history. While these were *the beginning of birth-pains*, they were not to be interpreted as specific signs that *the end* had arrived.

During this interim period the disciples must expect *to be persecuted*, as Jesus had already spelled out in 10:17–23; but whereas in ch. 10 the focus was on Jewish persecution, there is now a wider focus, including *all nations*. Vs 10–14 paint a disturbing picture of crisis among God's people as well as chaos outside. They call not for calculation of dates but for faithfulness. True disciples will not allow the adverse conditions to affect their *love* (12), their endurance (13) and their faithful preaching of *this gospel of the kingdom* (14).

V 14 does not specify which of the two aspects of the disciples' question *the end* is meant to refer to. In the period before AD 70 the gospel was in fact preached around much of the Mediterranean area (which is what most Greek-speakers would have understood by *the whole world* at that time). (*Cf.* Rom. 15:19, written in the mid-fifties, after which Paul's mission continued to spread, not to mention that of the other apostles.) Before the temple was destroyed the Christian church had already become a truly international community. Since then, of course, the gospel has been preached much more widely, as the known world has increased, though it is questionable how far the *testimony* is available literally to *all nations* even today.

Notes. 3 *Parousia* ('coming') is used mainly for formal visits by those in authority. In the NT it usually (but not always) refers to Jesus' predicted 'second coming'. For *the end of the age* *cf.* 13:39, 40, 49.

24:15–28 The coming crisis in Judea (see Mk. 13:14–23; *cf.* Lk. 17:23–24, 37; 21:20–24). Vs 4–14 have warned against too easily identifying 'signs of the end'; now the question of v 3 begins to be more directly answered. Vs 15–22 speak of the coming siege of Jerusalem, which would precede the temple's destruction; while vs 23–28 again warn against assuming that even that terrible period was the time of Jesus' *parousia* and the end of the age.

The abomination that causes desolation is an expression in Dn. 11:31; 12:11 (*cf.* 9:27) for the pagan statue which Antiochus Epiphanes set up in the Jerusalem temple when he deliberately desecrated it in 167 BC. (See the appropriate sections in the article on Daniel.) Jesus predicted some similar act of sacrilege as the precursor to the temple's destruction and the signal for God's people to escape while they could. What form it would take is left deliberately unclear (*let the reader understand*). Suggestions made with hindsight include a desecration of the temple by the Zealots in the winter of 67/8, of which Josephus speaks, or the arrival of the (idolatrous) Roman standards in the temple in 70. Lk. 21:20 speaks instead of 'Jerusalem being surrounded by armies'. The Roman siege marked the beginning of the desecration of *the holy place*.

In the light of Josephus' gruesome account of the horrors of the siege in AD 66–70, the words of v 21 (echoing Dn. 12.1) are not much of an exaggeration. But even so, God was not absent, but would *cut short those days for the sake of the elect*, *i.e.* to enable his people to survive.

A time of chaos would offer a renewed opportunity for the sort of impostors already predicted in v 5. The fact that they could support their claim with *great signs and miracles* is a useful warning against drawing too hasty conclusions from alleged signs and wonders today (*cf.* 7:22–23).

Similarly, Jesus' followers should beware of claims that he himself had returned secretly, in *the desert* or *the inner rooms*. His *parousia*, when it comes, will be no secret affair but as obvious as a flash of *lightning*. It is clear, therefore, that in this part of the discourse Jesus was not talking about the *parousia*, as some interpretations suggest; v 27 is saying precisely that this period is *not* that of the *parousia*. As the presence of *vultures* indicates clearly where *there is a carcass*, so there will be nothing secret about the *parousia* of the Son of Man.

Notes. 20 *In winter* the roads would be impassable, and *on the Sabbath* gates would be shut and provisions unobtainable.

24:29–35 The climax of the coming crisis (see Mk. 13:24–31; Lk. 21:25–33). These verses are often understood as referring to the *parousia*, and thus as moving to the second part of the disciples' question. But *immediately after* does not leave room for a long delay, nor does the explicit time-scale given in v 34. The word *parousia* does not occur in this section but is prominently reintroduced in the new paragraph which begins at v 36, where its unknown time is contrasted with the clear statement that the events of this paragraph will take place within *this generation*. This section is therefore in direct continuity with what has gone before, the account of the siege of Jerusalem. Here we reach its climax.

The words of vs 29–31 are almost entirely woven together from OT prophetic texts. V 29 is drawn from Is. 13:10 and 34:4, where the language of cosmic upheaval symbolized the

political fall of pagan nations. The language about the *Son of Man coming on the clouds* is drawn from Dn. 7:13–14, which, as we have already seen (on 10:23; 16:28; 19:28) points to the vindication and enthronement of Jesus (rather than to his *parousia*). V 31 is based on passages which refer to the promised return of Israelites from exile.

In this context, therefore, this poetic language appropriately refers to the great changes which were about to take place in the world, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. It speaks of the *Son of Man* entering into his kingship, and *his angels* gathering in his new people from all the earth. The fall of the temple is thus presented, in highly allusive language, as the end of the old order, to be replaced by the new régime of Jesus, the Son of Man, and the international growth of his church, the new people of God.

All this would happen very soon, once the preliminary signs of vs 15–21 have occurred, just as *summer* inevitably follows quickly once the *leaves* appear on the *fig-tree*. Within *this generation* it would all be over; we have Jesus' word for it!

Notes. 30 *Sign* translates a Greek word which elsewhere means *banner*; this, like the trumpet of v 31, is military imagery for the triumph of the *Son of Man. All the nations of the earth* is better translated 'all the tribes of the land' (of Palestine). The words are drawn from Zc. 12:10, where the picture is of *Israel* mourning, tribe by tribe, over 'the one they have pierced'. **31** The OT passages drawn on are mainly Is. 27:13; Dt. 30:4; and Zc. 2:6. **34** The NIV mg. offers 'race' as an alternative to *generation*. This suggestion is prompted more by embarrassment on the part of those who think v 30 refers to the *parousia* rather than by any natural sense of the word *genea*!

24:36–51 The unexpected coming of the Son of Man (*cf.* Mk. 13:32–37; Lk. 17:26–27, 34–35; 12:42–46). All talk of signs and times now disappears, as we turn from the events of *this generation* to the *parousia*. The only thing which may be said with conviction about the time of the *parousia* is that it will come when it is not expected!

V 36 is remarkable not only as the only admission of ignorance by Jesus, but also, paradoxically, because it at the same time places him above *the angels* and second only to *the Father*. This view of the status of *the Son* is equalled in this gospel only in 11:27 and 28:19.

If the time is unknown, people will be caught unprepared, as *in the days of Noah*. There will be only two groups, the prepared (who are saved) and the unprepared (who are lost). Vs 40–41 illustrate with vivid pictures from everyday life how this basic division will separate those whose situation is otherwise identical. The way to *be ready* is not to try to calculate the date, for that is impossible (just as a *thief* does not announce his time of arrival), but to be always *keeping watch*.

It is, however, impossible to live life on constant alert. So vs 45–51 explain in a parable what 'being ready' means. When *the master* leaves a *servant* in charge during his absence, he does not expect to find him waiting at the door when he returns, but rather getting on with the job entrusted to him. Neither of the two servants portrayed has advance knowledge of the master's return; the difference is in the way he finds them behaving. Our 'readiness' for the coming of Jesus is not in excited speculation but in faithful stewardship.

Notes. 47 The themes of reward and punishment constantly recur in Matthew's gospel. The reward for faithful service is greater responsibility (*cf.* 25:21, 23).

25:1–13 The parable of the bridesmaids. This parable continues the theme of readiness, and it concludes in v 13 with words which directly echo 24:42. It further underlines the division between the ready and the unready.

The scene is a village wedding, with the *virgins* (perhaps bridesmaids in our sense, or friends or servants of the bridegroom) waiting to escort *the bridegroom* in a torch-light procession at the end of the ceremony, as he brings his bride home. The *lamps* are probably torches made of oil-soaked rags wrapped on a stick, which would burn for several minutes before being dipped in oil again. Without a further supply of oil they would go out as soon as they were lit (8).

An important part of the story is the delay: the church must be prepared to wait for the *parousia*. All ten virgins *fell asleep* during the wait, so the point (as with the two servants in 24:45–51) is not that we should be on constant alert but that we must have the necessary provision for when the time comes. This parable does not spell out what that provision is, but the next one offers a hint.

At the end of the parable the story takes on the colour of its application, the possibility of ultimate exclusion from *the kingdom of heaven*; v 12 ominously echoes the words of 7:23.

25:14–30 The parable of the talents (*cf.* Lk. 19:11–27). Like the parable of the two servants in 24:45–51, this one envisages a *master* going away and leaving his *servants* with responsibilities to fulfil. Again there is *a long time* (19) to wait, and the issue is who will be ready for the master's return. This parable, however, unlike the last, suggests what that readiness must be. It is not to be in passive waiting but in getting on

with the job and making the most of the opportunities entrusted to us.

Talent is simply the name of a (very large) sum of money, in modern terms equivalent to several thousand pounds. It is this parable which has given the word a metaphorical meaning in English, as it has been applied to the God-given gifts and abilities which we are responsible for using. This is probably a valid application of the story, but we should not imagine that the Greek word in itself conveys anything more than its literal monetary meaning.

Different amounts (though all very large) were given to each servant, *according to his ability*, and the return expected was in proportion to the sum entrusted. God recognizes that we are all different and expects of us only what is appropriate. It is significant that the two successful servants receive identical commendations from the master (21, 23), even though the scale of their original responsibility, and therefore of their achievement, is different. But to have a lesser 'gift' does not excuse us from appropriate effort. The fault of the third servant was that he did not recognize his master's intention, and opted for safety instead of service. Hoping to avoid doing anything wrong, he finished up by not doing anything right.

While the third servant's description of the master as a grasping capitalist (24) is not meant to be an allegorical description of God, God does expect, and reward, creative use of the opportunities for service which are open to us. If we mistakenly view God as a hard taskmaster it will be hard for us to respond to him in a loving and open way. We are to use his gifts responsibly, but also adventurously. That is the way to be ready for the *parousia*.

25:31–46 The last judgment. As judgment has been the theme throughout this discourse, it ends appropriately with this terrific description of the *Son of Man* enthroned in glory, judging *all the nations*. Though often described as a parable, it is not an illustrative story, but a vision of the future. The only 'parable' element in it is the simile *as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats* in vs 32–33.

The language about the *Son of Man coming, glory, angels, throne* and judging all derives from Dn. 7:9–14. This is the ultimate outworking of the kingship and authority which that prophecy envisaged for the Son of Man, and which Jesus has already referred to in several connections (10:23; 16:28; 19:28; 24:30). The *gathering of all the nations* for judgment recalls the vision in Joel 3:2; but there the judge is God himself. The whole passage calmly attributes to Jesus the authority and kingship which in the OT belong to God alone.

This passage is often understood to teach that ultimate salvation is based on acts of kindness alone, so that there is nothing specifically Christian about the criteria of judgment. But that is to ignore the important description of the recipients of this kindness as *the least of these brothers of mine* (40; *cf.* v 45). This phrase suggests that it is not just anyone that the *righteous* have helped and the others have ignored: it is disciples in need. The phrase *the least* reminds us of the 'little ones' of 10:42; 18:6, 10, 14, and we have seen above that this is a term for Jesus' disciples. When Jesus says that in helping them *you did* it *for me*, this moving identification of Jesus with his 'brothers' recalls the principle of 10:40–42, where to receive the disciples is to receive Jesus, and it is a cup of water given to 'one of these little ones because he is my disciple' which will be rewarded. In that case, the criterion of judgment is not mere philanthropy (good as that is), but people's response to the kingdom of heaven as they have met it in the person of Jesus' 'brothers'.

Notes. 34 The *kingdom prepared for you* may refer simply to entering Jesus' kingdom, but the language of *inheritance* suggests rather that they themselves share that kingship (as in 19:28), just as a share of the master's authority was given to the successful servants in vs 21, 23. **41, 46** *Eternal* can mean 'everlasting', but more generally it means 'of the age to come'; it is a statement of quality rather than duration. These verses, therefore, do not settle the dispute between those who understand hell as endless conscious torment and those who see it as annihilation or loss of existence.

26:1 – 28:20 The death and resurrection of Jesus

The scene has now been set for the climax of the drama. Jesus had thrown down the gauntlet by his dramatic arrival in Jerusalem, and in the confrontation which inevitably followed he repudiated Israel's official leadership and declared God's judgment on 'this generation'. The response came quickly, and the events foretold in 16:21 and 20:18–19 now follow. At their centre was the cross, but that would not be the end of the story. Jesus would be violently suppressed, and yet Matthew does not allow us to see him as the helpless victim of circumstances. Rather he stresses that Jesus' fate was the fulfilment of God's purpose set out in Scripture; and the book ends with a dramatic reversal of the position, as the Son of Man enters into his kingship and launches the church's mission to all nations.

26:1–46 Preparation for the passion

26:1–5 Setting the scene (*cf.* Mk. 14:1–2; Lk. 22:1–2). *The Passover* festival commemorated God's rescue of his people from

slavery in Egypt and in particular the sacrifice of the Passover lamb to protect them from death (Ex. 12:1–30). There is an obvious symbolism in the fact that Jesus would *be crucified* at this festival, as vs 17–29 make more explicit.

Jesus' presence in Jerusalem (for the first time in Matthew's story) gave *the chief priests and elders* the opportunity to *kill him*, as indeed the Pharisees had proposed earlier in Galilee (12:14). But Jesus had plenty of supporters (see 21:9, 15, 46), and *a riot among the people* was a serious possibility if he was publicly arrested. There was to be an unexpected solution to this dilemma (14–16).

26:6–13 Anointing at Bethany (see Mk. 14:3–9; *cf.* Lk. 7:36–50). Anointing suggests Jesus' role as Messiah (which means 'anointed one') but at the same time foreshadows his death (12). The *woman's* extravagant act thus symbolizes Jesus' approaching Messianic suffering. It was an act of love and devotion, *a beautiful thing*, despite its grim message. But *the disciples* could see only *waste*. Jesus' reply was not intended to belittle care for *the poor*, and v 11 implies that this would be a continuing concern for his followers. But even this proper concern could get out of proportion, if it ruled out the spontaneous extravagance of love in the special circumstances of their Master's approaching sacrifice. Individual acts of charity may soon be forgotten, but *what she has done* would remain a model of devotion *wherever this gospel is preached* (*cf.* 24:14).

Notes. 6 *Bethany* was the home of Martha and Mary, and Jn. 12:3 names the *woman* as Mary. This *Simon* is otherwise unknown; perhaps Jesus had cured him of his earlier leprosy. 7 The *perfume* was spikenard, an oil imported from India, which was sometimes used for anointing the dead (hence v 12) but was also valued as a luxury cosmetic.

26:14–16 The treachery of Judas (see Mk. 14:10–11; Lk. 22:3–6). Judas' inside knowledge of the movements of Jesus and his group during their stay in Jerusalem enabled him to show the authorities when and where Jesus could be arrested secretly (see v 5). *Thirty silver coins* was the sum due as compensation to an owner for the loss of a slave (Ex. 21:32), and the phrase is used for the 'wages' of the rejected shepherd (Messiah) in Zc. 11:12, which Matthew refers to in 27:9–10. This was a substantial sum (some four months' wages), but few have believed that money alone caused Judas to change sides. More likely he was already thinking of leaving Jesus, and decided to cash in on his opportunity. No-one knows why he changed sides. He was probably the only non-Galilean among the Twelve and so may have felt increasingly out of place, especially when the Galilean group came south to Jerusalem. Perhaps he had become disillusioned by the style of Jesus' ministry, especially if he, like Peter, had harboured nationalistic hopes. Maybe he had even concluded that Jesus was a false Messiah, so that it was his religious duty to stop him.

26:17–30 The Last Supper (see Mk. 14:12–26; Lk. 22:7–23). This was a *Passover* meal, with all the historical and theological symbolism that involved. It was now to be given a new meaning through the death of Jesus, which would make this meal thereafter the model for the central act of Christian worship.

The venue had apparently been prearranged; Jesus did have some supporters even in Jerusalem.

This is the first time Jesus presented the shocking idea that *one of you will betray me*. Their alarm (*very sad* is an unnecessarily weak translation) was such that none of them dared trust themselves. Jesus' reply in v 23 was not a specific identification of the traitor, since all of them would be sharing the same common *bowl*, and his exchange with Judas in v 25 was presumably private. But even though he did not identify the traitor openly, he knew who it would be, and Judas' disingenuous '*Surely not I?* was answered clearly enough. Jesus could thus easily have revealed his betrayer's identity, and the disciples could have ensured that Judas did not get away to fulfil his bargain. Jesus had, however, already accepted that he had to undergo what *is written about him* (24), and he did not hinder it.

Jesus went on to use the bread and wine of the Passover meal as visual aids to explain the meaning of his coming death. If the *broken bread* represented his *body*, the reality of his coming death was put beyond doubt. But in telling them to *eat* that bread he indicated that in some sense they were involved in his death. The words over the *cup* made the point clearer, since his *blood* was to be *poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*. These words echo phrases from Is. 53:10–12, and the idea of a death which brings forgiveness of sin is firmly based on that chapter. In eating and drinking, Jesus' followers were to be identified with his death, and thus to experience the forgiveness he would die to achieve. In this way the new *covenant* prophesied by Je. 31:31–34 (in which forgiveness of sin is an essential element) would be established through Jesus' blood. As the first Passover had led to a covenant which marked Israel out as the people of God, so now a new people of God was being formed. V 29 then looks forward, beyond Jesus' imminent death, to what it will achieve, the Messianic banquet which he and his disciples (and the *Father*) will share.

Notes. 17 John's gospel indicates that Jesus'

'Passover' was held on the evening before the official Passover (presumably because he knew that he would be dead by then). This would explain why the gospels make no mention of a lamb, normally the central feature of the Passover meal, since it could not be ritually killed before the official date. The synoptic gospels are generally supposed to disagree with John's dating, but this is not necessarily so. Since the Jewish day began at sunset, an evening meal held *on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread* would be on the evening on which that day began; the following evening, the official Passover meal, would be the next 'day' in Jewish terms. **24** Note that what is done according to God's revealed will is, nonetheless, also the responsibility of the one who does it.

26:31–35 Peter's denial predicted (see Mk. 14:27–31; *cf.* Lk. 22:31–34). Not only Jesus' fate, but that of the disciples too, *is written*. But v 32 restores hope, both with yet another clear prediction of Jesus' resurrection and also with a pointer away from the doomed city of Jerusalem to *Galilee*, where the risen Messiah will re-establish his reign (see 28:7,16–20). But before that *Peter* would conspicuously fail, despite his self-confidence. Note, however, that while Peter's failure was specifically predicted and recorded (69–75), he was not alone in it: *the other disciples* shared both his confidence (35) and his failure (31).

Notes. 31 Zc. 13:7 is one of a series of mysterious passages which relate to a rejected and suffering Messiah; *cf.* Zc. 12:10 quoted in Mt. 24:30, and Zc. 11:12–13 in Mt. 27:9–10 (also Zc. 9:9 in Mt. 21:4–5).

26:36–46 The garden of Gethsemane (see Mk. 14:32–42; *cf.* Lk. 22:39–46). This is holy ground. We have here a privileged glimpse into Jesus' intimate relation with his Father and a sobering insight into the cost of his mission.

The olive orchard called *Gethsemane*, just outside the city boundary, was the group's regular 'camp-site' during this week in Jerusalem. (Most Passover pilgrims had to sleep out, as the city was extremely overcrowded during the festival.) By going somewhere else that night they could have foiled Judas' plan, but again Jesus chose not to evade the fate he had predicted. These verses show that he accepted it not as a regrettable necessity but as his Father's will.

This was not, however, a calm, untroubled resignation. *Sorrowful and troubled* is a weak translation; better 'in anguish and distress'. The prospect of his coming suffering (see on 20:22 for the meaning of *cup*) repelled him, and he pleaded for some other way, if God's purpose could allow it. It is touching to note that in his distress he craved human companionship (38), though even that was denied him by the disciples' sleepiness. The whole passage is a powerful testimony to the reality of Jesus' human nature (as Heb. 5:7–9 makes clear). This makes it all the more impressive that there was in the end no question that the Father's will had to take priority, whatever the cost.

The failure of *his disciples* to give the support Jesus needed was not yet caused by cowardice (that will follow), but by sheer physical weariness (41). They would soon have to face the more serious *temptation* to deny Jesus, of which he had already warned them, and their failure to share now in Jesus' preparation for the coming ordeal would leave them defenceless when the test came.

Notes. 37 *Peter and the two sons of Zebedee* had been Jesus' companions on the mountain (17:1), and all three had declared their readiness to suffer with him (20:22; 26:35); yet they fell at the first hurdle. **46** The verb translated *Let us go* suggests not retreat but rather advance to meet the coming 'enemy'.

26:47 – 27:26 The arrest and trial of Jesus

26:47–56 The arrest (see Mk. 14:43–50; Lk. 22:47–53). The *large crowd* Judas brought to Gethsemane were a detachment of the 'police' deployed by the Sanhedrin. The unprepared disciples were outnumbered and offered little more than token resistance (51). But in any case Jesus would allow no resistance (52; *cf.* 5:39); again he let events take their predicted course. It was not that he was powerless to prevent them (53), but that he chose not do so, so that Scripture might be fulfilled (54, 56). Hence his non-violent style, in contrast with Zealot leaders (55). Thus, while the initiative appeared to be with Judas and his armed men, it was in fact Jesus who was in charge of the situation and the purpose of God which was being worked out.

Notes. 52 The proberbial saying, *all who draw the sword will die by the sword* (based on Is. 50:11?) repudiates violence in this specific situation. It is doubtful whether in itself it provides sufficient grounds for total pacifism. **54** A *legion* was made up of 6,000 soldiers.

26:57–68 The Jewish trial (see Mk. 14:53–65; *cf.* Lk. 22:54–55, 63–71). The death penalty could be pronounced only by the Roman governor (Jn. 18:31), so that another, Roman, trial would be necessary (27:11–26). But this hearing before the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court, was the climax of the confrontation which had been building up since ch. 21. During the hearing Jesus openly declared his own authority (64) and the members of the Sanhedrin contemptuously

repudiated it (65–68), thus fulfilling Jesus' prediction in 16:21.

Luke's account suggests that the verdict was reached in the morning (*cf.* 27:1–2). Probably this brief paragraph simplifies a complex and rather chaotic session which went on most of the night, rather than a well-prepared formal trial. The normal procedure of witnesses and cross-examination was observed, but Matthew indicates that the atmosphere was far from impartial (59).

We are not told what the *false witnesses* (59–60) charged Jesus with. But Jesus' alleged claim, *I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days* is not said to be false and was offered by *two* witnesses, which made it serious (Dt. 17:6). While Jesus had not, in Matthew's account, threatened to destroy the temple himself, statements like 23:38; 24:2 (and 12:6), together with his violent action in 21:12–13, gave it credibility, and Jn. 2:19 records words quite close to these. A threat to the temple was a threat to all that was most precious in Israel's life and worship.

The Messiah was expected to restore, even rebuild, the temple, so that Caiaphas' question in v 63 followed logically from the charge in v 61 but in more explicit terms. Jesus at last breaks his silence with a defiant declaration of who he really is. He is indeed *the Christ, the Son of God*, his guarded reply (lit. 'You have said') suggests, however, that he repudiates the construction Caiaphas would put on those titles. He preferred to use his own chosen title, *the Son of Man*, and by combining words from Ps. 110:1 and Dn. 7:13 he showed the true nature of the authority of the Son of Man. It was to be found not in any earthly reign, but through his enthronement at God's right hand in heaven. They would see the truth of this when the prisoner they were about to condemn was vindicated by God through resurrection and the triumph of his gospel in the world.

If this outrageous claim was not true, it was *blasphemy*. The violent actions of the members of the Sanhedrin (65, 67–68) expressed their total repudiation of this impostor.

Notes. 62–63 Jesus' *silence* in the face of unjust condemnation recalls Is. 53:7–8. **63** Some Jews spoke of the Messiah as *Son of God* (on the basis of 2 Sa. 7:14; Ps. 2:7). The question was prompted by Jesus' implied claim in 21:37–39 (and his private teaching, passed on by Judas?). **64** The NIV *in the future* represents a Greek phrase which really means 'from now on'. See above on 10:23; 16:28; 24:30 for the meaning of language (drawn from Dn. 7:13) about *the Son of Man coming on the clouds*. It is enthronement language, rather than referring to a coming to earth. **68** It was thought that the Messiah would be able to recognize people when blindfolded.

26:69–75 Peter's failure (see Mk. 14:66–72; Lk. 22:55–62). In vs 31–35 Jesus foretold this pathetic failure, and v 58 set the scene. By interweaving the stories of Jesus and Peter in Caiaphas' house, Matthew invites us to compare the two men under pressure. While Jesus stood firm, Peter responded to increasing pressure with increasingly violent denial. In this hostile southern company, he repudiated *Jesus of Galilee* (69), *Jesus of Nazareth* (71), even though his Galilean accent could not be hidden (73). The story ends with Peter's remorse, but not his restoration. Matthew does not mention him again by name, though there is a broad hint in the 'eleven disciples' of 28:16.

Notes. 74 The words *on himself* are not in the Greek, and the verb used normally indicates cursing someone else. Peter was apparently prepared even to curse Jesus (as later Christians were forced to do in order to escape execution).

27:1–2 Jesus is transferred to the Roman governor (see Mk. 15:1; Lk. 23:1). The verdict already reached (26:65–66) was confirmed in full session, but it could be implemented only by authority of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilatus. He already had a bad record of insensitive rule and would later be removed from office for unnecessary and brutal provocation of his subjects. In order to convince such a man, the Jewish leaders would need some more substantial charge than a theological dispute over 'blasphemy'. No doubt this early morning consultation was devoted to preparing their case.

27:3–10 The death of Judas. Meanwhile, Matthew offers us another story of betrayal, but one which contrasts with that of Peter. That story of temporary failure under stress ended with Peter's tears of repentance, and his restoration is later implied. But Judas, by contrast, had taken a clear decision against Jesus, and his *remorse* when he realized his mistake led not to true repentance but to despair and suicide.

The theme of *blood money* picks up the idea of guilt for the blood of the prophets in 23:29–36, which reaches its climax in 27:24–25. Judas, unable to offload his guilt by returning the money, *hanged himself*, but the *chief priests*, by using that same *blood money* to buy *the potter's field*, were also implicated. The *Field of Blood* (Akeldama) is traditionally located in the valley of Hinnom (from which *potter's* clay was dug). These and other hints in Matthew's wording suggest that he understood the whole story in the light of Je. 19:1–13, where the valley of Hinnom is linked with burials and 'innocent blood' and with a potter. Other passages in Jeremiah

may also be in mind (the potter's house in Je. 18; buying a field in Je 32).

So it is appropriate that the story reaches its climax (9–10) in a formula-quotation, allegedly from Jeremiah, about using blood money to buy a potter's field. The words quoted are in fact most closely based on Zc. 11:12–13, with its mention of 'thirty silver coins' (see on 26:15) which are mysteriously thrown down in the house of the Lord 'to the potter'. The money in the Zechariah passage is the insulting price at which the God-given shepherd (Messiah) is paid off by his rebellious flock (see on 26:31 for other allusions to this strange prophecy). This is not, however, a simple quotation of a single passage but a subtle weaving together of themes from Jeremiah and Zechariah in the light of the events just recorded. The 'fulfilment' Matthew here traces is something much richer than the simple occurrence of a predicted event.

Note. 5 The account of Judas' death in Acts 1:18–19 is different but again links it with Akeldama.

27:11–26 The Roman trial (see Mk. 15:2–15; *cf.* Lk. 23:2–5,18–25.) The trial took place in public, outside the governor's residence. Pilate had sole authority to decide such cases, yet the trial shows him manipulated by others and in the end renouncing his responsibility in favour of the Jewish leaders. It was they who called the tune and accepted the ultimate responsibility.

King of the Jews was presumably the title the Jewish leaders had accused Jesus of assuming. It was a more politically loaded title than 'Messiah', and therefore one the governor could not ignore; it made a man a potential leader of rebellion. It was on this charge that Jesus was eventually executed (37). Jesus' reply (11), as in 26:64, was positive but guarded; he was aware of the misleading connotations of the title as a pagan governor would hear it. Thereafter, Jesus said nothing until he was on the cross.

Pilate's attempt to use the customary amnesty to escape the responsibility of condemning an innocent man on a trumped-up charge was ill-judged. *Barabbas* was probably no ordinary ruffian but a popular nationalist leader, who would have a greater following in Jerusalem than the Galilean prophet. While *the crowd* were incited in their choice by the *chief priests and elders*, they probably took little persuading. There is no need to assume that these were the same people as the Galilean pilgrims who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem in 21:8–9; rather these were people of the city (see on 21:10–11).

The final scene in vs 24–25 is about responsibility. While Pilate had to give the formal verdict, by *washing his hands* he disclaimed responsibility for Jesus' death and transferred it to *the crowd*; and in the terrible words of v 25 *all the people* accepted it. In using that phrase, Matthew indicates that while the *chief priests and elders* had taken the initiative, the people as a whole carried a corporate responsibility for the death of Jesus. There is, of course, no basis for extending this principle to a condemnation of all Jews for all time (after all, the Matthew who wrote these words was a Jew, and so were all the foundation members of Jesus' church). It was, as Jesus had already indicated in 23:37–39, that generation in Jerusalem who carried the responsibility, and in AD 70 it found its terrible outworking in the destruction of the city and its temple.

Notes. 16 *Notorious* translates a Greek word which can equally mean 'famous', 'popular'. **16–17** Early manuscripts give the name here as *Jesus Barabbas*, and this is probably what Matthew wrote. Jesus was a common name. V 17 thus poignantly offers a choice between two 'Jesuses'. **19** Nothing else is known of *Pilate's wife*. This Gentile woman's conviction of Jesus' innocence is in contrast to the prejudice of the Jewish crowd. **22** Most Jews detested *crucifixion* as a barbaric Roman method of execution. But it was the inevitable consequence of asking for Jesus to be officially executed as a supposed rebel. **25** The Greek reads simply, 'His blood on us and on our children'. It is not so much a wish as an acceptance of responsibility; *cf.* Jos. 2:19.

27:27–56 The crucifixion of Jesus

27:27–31 Mockery by the Roman soldiers (see Mk. 15:16–20). While there is physical brutality here, the main focus is on mockery. The Gentile soldiers had at their mercy a Jewish 'king', and they staged a mock enthronement, using whatever materials came to hand: a soldier's red cape as an imperial robe, a stick as a royal sceptre and a crown made of twigs. Thus the 'king of the Jews', already ill-treated by his own people (26:67–68), was dishonoured by Gentiles as well.

27:32–44 The crucifixion (see Mk 15:22–32; *cf.* Lk. 23:33–39). Matthew tells us little of the physical horror of crucifixion; the emphasis in this section falls again on rejection and mockery, this time by Jesus' own people. But even in this unlikely context some of the greatest Messianic titles come into play, even if in jest. Thus through the superficial jibes we are able to glimpse something of the real meaning of Jesus' death. And frequent echoes of the words of Ps. 22 and 69 remind us that in the suffering and death of Jesus Scripture was being fulfilled (Ps. 22:18, 7, 8 are echoed in vs 35, 39, 43, and v 46 quotes Ps. 22:1; Ps. 69:21 is echoed in vs 34, 48).

Golgotha was a regular place of execution,

prominently located just outside the city (probably where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands). The soldiers are an important part of the scene, since their *watch* results in a crucial confession in v 54. They are portrayed not as sadistic (the *wine mixed with gall* was probably a narcotic, designed to ease the suffering) but as neutral observers. The *written charge* recorded the official reason for Jesus' death and was a warning to other would-be nationalist leaders.

The mockery came from Jews, of various classes. The *two robbers* (38, 44) were probably political insurgents (part of Barabbas' gang?), so that Jesus died, ironically, in the very Zealot company he had been so careful to avoid. *Those who passed by* were ordinary Jews, who knew about Jesus' alleged claims concerning the temple and had heard of his claim to be *Son of God*. The invitation to exploit his supposed status as 'Son of God' echoes the temptations in 4:3, 6; but the temptation had already been faced in Gethsemane, and it was precisely because he was God's Son that he could not *come down*. Finally, *the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders* (note the full listing of Sanhedrin members, as in 16:21) repeated similar taunts, but added also in mockery the precious title *King of Israel*. The total rejection of Jesus by his people could hardly be made more obvious.

Notes. 32 *Simon* was just a random victim; but the fact that his name was remembered suggests that the experience may have brought him into the disciples' group. **38** The word translated *robber* is used by Josephus for Jewish freedom fighters. It is used in 26:55 (NIV 'leading a rebellion') and for Barabbas in Jn. 18:40.

27:45–56 The death of Jesus (see Mk. 15:33–41; *cf.* Lk. 23:44–49). So far Jesus had been silent, the butt of mockery. Now Matthew turns the focus on to Jesus himself, and as we read of him dying, we are allowed to see something of the significance of what was happening.

Jesus remained alive on the cross from noon until about 3 p.m. *Darkness* at this time (not an eclipse, since the moon is full at Passover) was a sign of God's displeasure (Am. 8:9). Jesus' extraordinary cry in the darkness (using Ps. 22:1) shows the depth of his suffering as he gave his life as a ransom for many (20:28). This is the only time Jesus does not address God as 'Father', an indication that for a time even the intimate relationship of Father and Son (11:27) had been broken.

The supposed appeal to *Elijah* rests on the sound of the word *Eli*, 'my God'. Some Jews believed Elijah could be summoned from heaven to give help in need. The *wine vinegar* (the ordinary soldier's cheap drink) was an act of kindness, mentioned because of the echo of Ps. 69:21.

Crucified men normally lapsed gradually into unconsciousness after many hours, even days, of agony. Jesus' death, however, is described as if he was himself in full control: *gave up his spirit* is an unusual expression, suggesting an act of will.

Vs 51–53 (together with the darkness of v 45) indicate that this was no ordinary death. The huge *curtain of the temple* separated off the sacred interior, so that its destruction was not just an act of divine power (*from top to bottom*) foreshadowing the greater destruction to come, but also a symbol of the opening of access to God through the death of Jesus. The earthquake too signified God's power and judgment (Jdg. 5:4; Joel 3:16; Na. 1:5–6). The resultant *raising* of *holy people who had died* (in OT times?) suggests that the resurrection of the last days (Is. 26:19; Dn. 12:2) found its beginning in *Jesus' resurrection*. Now was the time for all the hopes of God's people to be fulfilled.

It is not surprising that these supernatural events *terrified* the Gentile soldiers, but the title *the Son of God* sounds oddly Jewish; perhaps they were simply picking up the Jewish jibes of vs 40, 43. At any rate, however little the soldiers understood what they said, Matthew intends his readers to recognize that here was the true response to what had happened. Once again it took a Gentile to see what Jews could not see (*cf.* 2:1–12; 8:8–12; 12:41–42; 27:19).

Notes. 52–53 There is no other record of this remarkable occurrence, and Matthew does not give enough detail for us to know exactly what he thought happened. For instance, why the delay between the raising of the bodies and their appearance in Jerusalem; and what happened to them afterwards? The symbolism is fairly clear, but we do not have the resources to determine the status of the story as sober history. **55–56** The same women witnessed Jesus' death, burial (61) and resurrection (28:1); there is therefore no room for mistake over either the reality of Jesus' death or the identification of his tomb.

27:57 – 28:20 The burial, resurrection and commission of Jesus

This last section of the gospel is constructed on a 'mirror-image' pattern, which vividly shows the effect of Jesus' resurrection. The pivot point is the account of the empty tomb and the risen Lord (28:1–10). On either side of this, the setting of the guard (27:62–66) is balanced by the report of the guard (28:11–15), and Jesus dead and buried (27:57–61) is balanced by Jesus alive and sovereign (28:16–20).

27:57–61 Jesus dead and buried (see Mk. 15:42–47; Lk. 23:50–55). Crucified

bodies were normally given, at best, a dishonourable burial in a public plot. In burying Jesus in *his own new tomb*, Joseph showed his devotion as *a disciple*. Many family tombs of this period can still be seen around Jerusalem, cut into the rock, with a small entrance (covered by a *big stone*) and inside spaces for several bodies (*new* in this case, therefore, probably indicates that no other bodies were yet in it). Only *a rich man* could afford such a tomb, so close to the capital.

27:62–66 The setting of the guard. Only Matthew mentions the *guard*. He needed to do so in order to contradict a false report which was in circulation (28:15). The guards' presence also increases our awareness of the magnitude of the miracle of Jesus' resurrection.

The day after Preparation Day means the Sabbath. In visiting Pilate and sealing the tomb the *chief priests and Pharisees* (note the two rival groups still united in suppressing the Jesus movement) were breaking their own Sabbath laws in their desire to make sure that Jesus was properly disposed of. Probably Judas had warned them of Jesus' repeated prediction that he would *rise again after three days*. A *guard* of Roman soldiers offered maximum security.

Note. 64 The *first deception* refers to Jesus' Messianic claim, the *last* to a faked 'resurrection' to support it.

28:1–10 The empty tomb and the risen Lord (*cf.* Mk. 16:1–8; Lk. 24:1–11.) This is not an account of how Jesus rose from the dead but of how his resurrection was discovered. The miraculous removal of the stone was not in order to let Jesus out but to let the women in to see the empty tomb. Each of the gospels presents a different story of how the fact was discovered, but none of them describes the event itself.

Unlike the Jewish leaders, the women had properly rested on the Sabbath. Now they could return *to look at the tomb;* Matthew mentions no intention to go in. But the appearance of *an angel of the Lord* (described in language appropriate to God himself; Dn. 7:9; 10:6) changed that. He had come to show them that Jesus had already *risen*, and to that end he removed the stone and showed them inside the empty chamber *where he lay*. The women should not have been surprised, since this was *just as he said*, and the angel went on to remind them (7) of a more specific promise of Jesus, to meet the disciples again in *Galilee* (26:32). The women's reaction, *afraid yet filled with joy*, is surely a very natural response. The angel himself was terrifying (4), and the absence of the body unnerving. But, however little they yet understood it, here was hope in place of despair and the promise of seeing Jesus again.

His disciples would have to wait until Galilee to meet Jesus, but not so *the women*. Only Matthew mentions their meeting with the risen Jesus in vs 9–10 (though their *clasping his feet*, and the message to *my brothers* remind us of Mary Magdalene in Jn. 20:17). In a society in which women were second-class citizens, their prominence in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection is striking. Jesus repeated what the angel had said, but with the lovely addition of the phrase *my brothers*: after the disciples' failure in 26:56, this would have conveyed a vital message of reassurance.

28:11–15 Report of the guard. While our sights are now set on Galilee and the triumph of the risen Lord, we have here one last glimpse of *the city*, Jerusalem, with its authorities in disarray, arranging a desperate cover-up. We are thus prepared for the final scene, where the contrast between Galilee and Jerusalem which has run through the whole gospel reaches its climax.

It would take a *large sum of money* to persuade the soldiers to spread the cover-up story, as sleeping on guard duty was a capital offence. But Pilate's reputation was well known; if the story reached his ears, he could be *satisfied* with a further bribe. Justin mentions that such stories were still being circulated in the second century to discredit the fact of the empty tomb.

28:16–20 Jesus alive and sovereign. It is a relief to return to *Galilee*. Here the Christian mission has its proper starting-point, in a meeting with the risen Jesus, now enthroned as king of all. The wording of v 18 echoes Dn. 7:14 yet again, but whereas earlier references looked forward to a future fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy of the universal authority of the Son of Man, now that fulfilment had already been achieved.

On the basis of that authority, Jesus now sent his disciples out to spread his rule over *all nations* by *making* more *disciples*. The nature of that discipleship is spelled out in two further participles, *baptising* and *teaching*. The disciples were to call not for a superficial response but for total commitment to the new community (symbolized in baptism), and to a life governed by *everything I have commanded you*. In this mission, they may be assured of the continued presence of the one who had earlier spoken of being 'where two or three come together in my name' (18:20). The words *with you* powerfully echo the name Emmanuel. 'God with us' (1:23); that is who Jesus really is.

Notes. 16 *The eleven disciples* pointedly excludes Judas, but equally pointedly includes Peter, despite his dismal failure at the trial. **17** *Doubted* is the same word as in 14:31; it denotes not intellectual unbelief but the hesitation

natural to those confronted by a unique and 'impossible' occurrence. **18** Note the contrast with 4:8–9; all Satan could offer was the *earth*! **19** *In the name of* denotes the one to whom allegiance is pledged in baptism. The trinitarian 'formula' is striking; nothing like it occurs elsewhere in the NT, though the close association of *the Son* with *the Father* has been seen in 11:27; 24:36. Note how all three persons were involved in Jesus' own baptism (3:16–17).

R. T. France

MARK

Introduction

Basic views

When we approach a gospel like that of Mark, we tend to have some basic views about the book and its writer which will influence the way in which we interpret it. Some of these views we may see as certain; some are only probable; all are at least possible. Some will be taken directly from what the early church said about the book, while others will be drawn from the material found in the book itself. If the evidence of the early church and the evidence of the book agree, then we can be fairly certain that the ideas are right.

The suggestions made below seem to make the greatest sense, and make it easier to apply Mark's message to our own circumstances today. That is why we read his gospel. We are not merely interested to find out when or where or to whom or by whom it was written. We want to find out what God is saying to us today through the gospel. If we can understand Mark's situation and find that in any way it was like our own, then it is easier to apply the message to ourselves.

The article 'Reading the gospels' earlier in this book covers many general points and the reasons for believing them, so there is no need for detailed repetition here. It is worth, however, going over some of these general principles briefly, as they will help us to understand the gospel better.

The first gospel

Mark was probably the first of the four gospels, and it may have been the first true gospel ever to be written. Mark may then have invented the form of book that we call a gospel; there does not seem to have been anything quite like it before in the ancient world. It seems likely, however, that all the other gospel writers knew of Mark, and Matthew and Luke are generally thought to have used his gospel when writing theirs (of course, they also added material from other sources). The 'good news' had certainly been preached by word of mouth long before it was written down. There were, therefore, probably many short collections of the sayings and doings of Jesus which had been made before Mark was written. Maybe, for instance, there was a written account of the last week of Jesus' life, including the story of the cross, since that was so important. Mark's gospel was probably the first time that so many of these stories about Jesus had been brought together, and this may explain why the gospel seems a little 'rough and ready' to some. Others, however, discern a skilful arrangement of material by the author and explain the apparent 'roughness' by saying that Mark reproduced much early material without making many changes.

Date

Mark's gospel was probably written quite early, perhaps between AD 60 and 70, *i.e.* only about thirty years after the death of Christ. That would put it around the time of the deaths of Paul and Peter, which we think took place about AD 64, and just before the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70. Although it would not matter if it was written later, this pre-70 date would fit better with what early Christians said about the gospel and also with what the gospel itself says. For example, in Mk. 13 Jesus prophesies the fall of Jerusalem, but there is no hint in the text that the prophecy has been fulfilled by Mark's time.

Author

The book was probably written by the John Mark of whom we read several times in the NT (*e.g.* Acts 12:12). We have to say 'probably' because, as in so many other cases, we cannot be certain. Although the gospel itself nowhere says that it was written by Mark (the heading at the beginning is not part of the gospel but only its 'title page'), the early Christians had no doubts about it. John Mark was not a famous figure like Paul or Peter, so there does not seem to have been any good reason for his name being given as author unless it was so. He was a younger co-worker at different times with Paul, Barnabas (his relative; Col. 4:10) and Peter. This last link may be important. John Mark probably lived in Jerusalem, where he would have known many of Jesus' followers, (though he was too young at the time to have been a follower himself). If the church in Jerusalem met in his mother's house (see Acts 12:12), it is possible that the Last Supper was held there. However, even without this, John Mark would have been a very valuable early witness to what Jesus said and did, especially during his last week.

The influence of Peter

The early church believed that Mark got many of his facts from Peter, for they knew that Mark himself had not been a disciple of Jesus during his lifetime. We cannot prove this point, but we do know that both Mark and Peter were together in Rome in later years (1 Pet. 5:13). We also know that Peter was intending before his death to make a permanent record of his memories of Christ (2 Pet. 1:15). Most of the early church fathers believed that Mark's gospel was this record. Certainly there are many details in the gospel that are best explained as personal memories of Peter, *e.g.* descriptions of incidents at which only Peter, James and John were present. Another possible clue is that the gospel is very uncomplimentary to Peter, pointing out all his faults and failings. As Peter later became such an important man at Rome, it is hard to see how these could have got into the gospel unless Peter himself had insisted on it.

Place of origin

If Peter was the source for the gospel, it is very likely that it was produced in Rome, where Peter was almost certainly martyred in AD 64. Most of the early records suggest Rome, or at least Italy, as the place of origin, though some suggest Alexandria. Rome was a sprawling city with a population of several millions. It had all our familiar problems of slums, pollution and communications. Mark's background was very close to ours: that makes his book even more relevant today.

Purpose of the gospel

It would seem that Mark had more than one purpose in mind when he wrote his gospel.

1. To make the good news accessible to Gentiles. Rome was a Gentile city, though naturally there were many Jews there as well, drawn by trade and business. To judge from Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, the church there contained both Gentiles and Jews, and feelings probably ran high between them at times. A gospel produced in and for such a 'mixed' church would have to explain carefully Jewish words and customs, so that the non-Jewish readers could understand. That is exactly what Mark's gospel does and in that sense it is a gospel for the non-Jew, the Gentile, the outsider. This also explains why Mark does not quote nearly as much from the OT as Matthew does. Mark's Gentile Christians would not have known the OT as well as Jewish Christians, nor indeed would they have had the same interest in it.

Mark seems to have been written with a missionary purpose, to spread the good news to the outsiders, the non-Jewish world. Naturally it had a teaching purpose as well (all the gospels were written partly to tell Christians who already believed in Jesus more about him; see Lk. 1:4). However, if we bear in mind this missionary thrust of Mark's gospel, it will help to explain a lot. For instance, it gives yet another reason why Mark avoids using 'insider' language. It also explains why he leaves out much that is true and valuable in order to concentrate on what he considers to be vital for his readers. In all these things we can learn much from Mark today. This making himself one with the people that he was trying to reach is all the more remarkable when we remember that he was just as much a Jew as Matthew was. Had he learned as a 'junior missionary' with Paul how to become like an 'outsider' in order to win 'outsiders' for Christ? (1 Cor. 9:20). This is a lesson that Christians today need to learn too: 'insider' language only confuses the 'outsider'.

2. To encourage those facing persecution. Rome, being the imperial capital and therefore directly under the eye of central government, was the very place where persecution was most likely to occur. We know both from the NT (Acts 18:2) and from Roman history that Jews had suffered persecution at Rome even before Christians had. We also know from Roman writers of the great persecution of Christians at Rome under Nero about AD 64. Many Christians, probably including Paul and Peter, died for their faith at this time. Mark's gospel, with its probable background in Rome, seems to have been aimed at preparing Christians, whether at Rome or elsewhere, for future persecution. It does this by telling of Christ's suffering and of how he had foretold similar suffering for his followers. In other words, it was written to encourage a minority church in a hostile environment, and because of this it speaks to and encourages many today.

3. To defend the faith. Mark could be described as an apologist for the Christian faith. Like Luke in Acts he wanted to show that Christians were good citizens of the Roman Empire, not revolutionaries, and that any fair-minded Roman official would see this at once, as would ordinary people, not blinded by prejudice. Mark makes clear that in the case of Jesus, the charges that he was a rebel against Rome were trumped up and completely false. Marks wants to explain the true nature of Christianity and remove false ideas about it that might hinder evangelism. This too is an important task before the church today, both in countries where other great organized religions co-exist (and Christians are sometimes at risk from jealous 'fundamentalist' religious leaders) and in so-called 'Christian' lands, where there is pagan ignorance and indifference.

4. To explain the significance of the cross. Mark is anxious to avoid not only political but also religious misunderstanding, which was a far more serious hindrance when preaching the gospel, his great task. He makes it clear that the death of Jesus was not a tragic accident but part of God's plan from the start, and that Jesus not only knew this but also told his disciples of it. True, Mark shows the disciples as being blind to this until after Jesus' death and resurrection, but that is another matter. Mark, unlike Paul, does not explain in detail, except for one or two places, why Jesus had to die. He is, however, clear that the cross was God's age-old plan of salvation, even if he does not quote as much from the OT as the other gospel writers do, to prove the point. That God's way for the establishment of his rule on earth should involve the death of the Messiah, his chosen one, was a hidden and mysterious plan, and none but Jesus saw it at first. That seems to be the meaning of the phrase 'the mystery of the kingdom of God' in Mk. 4:11. Even people who admired Jesus as a miracle-worker or even saw him as a prophet could not see this. That God should choose to bring in his kingdom through the shameful death of his chosen servant was a great stumbling-block to many, both Jews and Gentiles, who listened to the preaching of the early church. Today it is still a problem for some. For example, Muslims find it a great stumbling-block that God should have allowed such a good man, and indeed such a prophet, to die such a terrible death.

Mark points out in his gospel that Jesus was not merely a good man or even a prophet: he was the Son of God. He proves this, not by telling the story of the virgin birth (which he must have known) but by showing how God himself proclaimed Jesus as his Son at his baptism and later at the transfiguration.

Jesus never told anyone directly that he was God's Son or the Messiah; he did not even admit it publicly until his trial before the high priest. This silence of Jesus is what we mean by the 'Messianic Secret': he waited until God revealed it to others. For example, Peter came to realize that Jesus was the Messiah and acknowledged him as such, but the idea of a suffering Messiah was still very far from his mind (Mk. 8:29). Jesus accepted the title when it was given to him, but not if the witness was given by demons.

Part of the reason for Jesus' reluctance to reveal his true identity was that he did not wish to be known as a mere wonder-worker. Perhaps this is a word of warning for us today, in the midst of times of spiritual renewal in which we all rejoice, for such times bring their own danger. Jesus saw his task rather as that of bringing the good news about God and his rule, and that is why he warned healed people not to tell of their healing. It also explains why he escaped from the crowds when there was a danger of his mission becoming a mere 'healing campaign' and no more.

The secret became plain at the cross. The words of the Roman officer (15:39) were, for Mark, a clear confession that Jesus was the Son of God, whatever the centurion himself may have meant at the time. The second proof was the empty tomb and the message of the angel on the resurrection morning: the Son of God had conquered death and his identity need no longer be a secret.

The gospel's abrupt ending

One of the puzzling features of Mark's gospel is the way that it ends so suddenly, without a full account of all the times that Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection. The other gospels give a much fuller picture of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. The longer ending of Mark's gospel (which is separated from the rest in the NIV) is not in the earliest manuscripts, and was almost certainly not written by Mark himself, but added by the early Christians to 'round off' the book. Some say that Mark's original ending was lost. Others suggest that perhaps Mark was martyred before he could finish his book, but this is not likely. It is more likely that Mark meant his gospel to end in this way. It was not, as some have suggested, that he wanted to leave the question of the resurrection open, but that, in his day, evidence for the resurrection would be given by word of mouth by the living witnesses. That would be much more real and exciting; it would be like an actor appearing in person at the end of a play.

The apostles were first and foremost witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 10:41). The other gospels were probably written after the deaths of the apostles and so had to contain a full account in writing of the resurrection appearances. This probably also explains why Mark does not have as full an account of the teaching of Jesus as the other gospels do. He expected it to be given by word of mouth, as it still is in many parts of the world today.

The structure of the gospel

Mark's gospel is not just a collection of sayings and doings of Jesus with no particular plan or connection. If you read Mark through at one sitting, you will see this. It has a definite plan and outline, and the commentary shows how the different parts fit together. In the first part Jesus has a wide ministry in which he does many miracles. In the second section, he deliberately restricts himself to his own followers and

teaches them. The last part (a third of the book) deals with the final week in Jerusalem, including Jesus' trial, death and resurrection.

Much of Jesus' teaching centred on the kingdom of God. There is also a strong element of kingship in Jesus' teaching about himself as it emerges gradually until we find him tacitly accepting the title 'King of the Jews' from Pontius Pilate. In the commentary on Mark, therefore, hindsight has sometimes been used to present Jesus as king, inaugurating his Father's kingdom in a royal manner. This is one way of interpreting the unfolding story.

The last week of Jesus' life was obviously of great importance to Mark. In a sense, all that goes before it can be seen as preparation. This tells us that Mark's theology is a theology of the cross. Mark lived and wrote after Pentecost, and of course he knew of and had experienced the Holy Spirit, but in his gospel he speaks little of the Spirit, and when he does it is always in connection with Jesus. This is because he was writing of a period before Pentecost, when the disciples had experienced the Spirit only in the person of Jesus. He knew well that Jesus was to give the Spirit to all believers, and that is why he put the words of the Baptist at the beginning of his book (1:8). Mark, however, never makes the mistake of putting Pentecost rather than Calvary at the centre of his faith, and he never isolates the Spirit from Jesus. This is a danger which we may face today in our glad rediscovery of the person and gifts of the Spirit. We need to remember that it is the task of the Spirit to bear witness to Christ.

If we bear in mind what has been said above, we shall see as we go along how all the parts of the gospel fit in, though of course we must not try to tie everything down too tightly to a pattern. Indeed, if the gospel was intended both as a missionary gospel and as a teaching guide for new Gentile Christians, then Mark may have worked it out gradually over a period. There may even have been several earlier versions before the final one that we have before us today. That is what scholars mean by a 'fluid situation'. Also, we must not think in terms of Mark being published in the modern sense of the word. There was probably only one copy of the gospel at first, or maybe one copy of each of the earlier versions of it. Then other copies would have been made by hand and sent to churches which asked for them. In this way the gospel would gradually circulate. That is, we think, how Matthew and Luke (and possibly even John) would have been able to see Mark and use it in writing their own gospels later. Only rich Christians would have been able to make a copy for their own use, although in recent years the Christians in China have shown us how even ordinary folk can copy out the scriptures for themselves in times of need or shortage.

We shall divide the gospel into the three main sections mentioned above *i.e.* roughly chs. 1–8, chs. 9–10 and chs. 11–16. We should remember, however, that Mark did not use chapters or verses, he just wrote straight on, and sometimes it is helpful to read the gospel in this way.

Further reading

D. English, *The Message of Mark*, BST (IVP, 1992).
R. A. Cole, *Mark*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1989).
W. L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1974).
M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to St Mark*, BNTC (A. and C. Black, 1991).

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Commentary

1:1 – 8:26 Preaching the kingdom of God

This long section shows Jesus preaching and healing widely all throughout Palestine. Great crowds flocked to him, but it was not merely a 'happy Galilean springtime' as is sometimes said. Not only did the crowds fail to understand Jesus, but bitter opposition from the religious leaders began almost at once and followed him to the cross. Throughout this period, Jesus kept the 'Messianic secret'; he did not tell people openly that he was the Messiah.

1:1–20 Foundations of the kingdom of God

1:1–8 Proclaiming the king (see Mt. 3:1–12; Lk. 3:1–18). We have seen that Mark was an evangelist and like most evangelists, blunt and 'to the point'. For example, he does not begin his gospel with an elaborate preface but by telling us that his subject is the 'good news' about Jesus the Christ (or Messiah), God's chosen agent who is also the Son of God. Both of these points emerge gradually in the book. Jesus did not claim them for himself. Indeed, it is only as God opens our eyes that we can see the truth in what Jesus taught and from what he did. Mark's gospel is the confident proclamation of the Messiah by one whose spiritual eyes had been opened; that is why healing the blind is a picture in Mark of what Jesus must do for all of us.

The 'good news' had been planned by God long before. Mark quotes the prophets Malachi and Isaiah to prove it, though he only mentions Isaiah by name. Mark shows that the 'messenger' prophesied was John the Baptist, while the *Lord* of v 3 is Jesus. So Mark is already equating Jesus with God, for 'Lord' usually means 'God' in the OT. These were the very claims for which the priests and elders would crucify Jesus. It is impossible to be neutral when faced with Christ: was he the Messiah and God's Son, or not? Which side do we stand on?

John the Baptist preached the need for repentance which would lead to *forgiveness of sins* by God. This was the familiar message of the prophets of Israel; even John's clothing was like that worn by them. The total change of heart signified by *repentance* was to be shown by accepting baptism. Again, this was not new. Jews had always had ritual washings, especially for those entering Judaism from outside. What was new was that John said that it was as necessary for Jews as for Gentiles. What was also new was that he announced that someone far greater than himself was coming after him. John could only baptize with water (an outward and symbolic washing), but the one coming after him would cleanse and renew hearts by the Spirit. That is what made the work of Jesus completely different from the work of John.

So, although Mark does not quote from the OT as much as other evangelists do, he believed just as firmly as they that the roots of the gospel were to be found in the Jewish Scriptures. Also, though he does not speak as much of the Spirit as other gospels do, he believed just as firmly that Jesus was the giver of the Spirit to every believer, and that the Spirit is the birthright of all, not just restricted to a few, as it had been in the OT. Just as every Jewish penitent who came to him received John's baptism, so every believer in Jesus will be baptized by Jesus with the Spirit. This is the inner reality of which water-baptism like that of John is the outward picture.

Note on Mark's prologue. There is a long-standing debate on the function and extent of Mark's prologue. It would appear that its purpose (like the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke and the prologue in John) is to introduce the reader to Jesus' true significance as Messiah and Son of God before the story about him begins. But where does the prologue end and the gospel 'proper' start? Is it just the first verse that is introductory or vs 1–8? If the introduction includes vs 2–11 then the place of John the Baptist is shown to be very important, not only as the promised herald or forerunner of the Messiah but also as setting the pattern for his life, rejection and death.

1:9–13 Testing the king (see Mt. 3:13 – 4:11; Lk. 3:21 – 4:13). Kings and judges in OT Israel were chosen by God and anointed. Times of testing would show that they were indeed God's choice for the task. So it was with Jesus. He came to be baptized by John. This caused problems to some early theologians who asked why was Jesus baptized if he had no sin and needed no repentance? Mark had no problem with this; he simply records what happened, without comment. Because baptism was often a sign of judgment, perhaps Mark saw it as a willing acceptance by Jesus of the path of suffering that he must endure as Messiah (see 10:38).

In v 10, it is most natural to take the *he* as referring to Jesus, although Jn 1:33 seems to indicate that the Baptist saw the vision as well.

The opening of the skies is part of the OT picture of God descending, but here it is the Spirit which comes down, like a dove, the symbol of gentleness and peace. It is also reminiscent of the creation story in Gn. 1:2. Some early heretics said that Jesus was only a man on whom the Spirit came down, but Mark has already proclaimed him to be the Son of God (1:1) and here God's voice declares the same at his baptism.

Some manuscripts omit the words 'Son of God' in 1:1, but there is no doubt about their presence here. The voice from heaven declared Jesus as God's dear Son (sometimes the Greek word here is used to mean 'only son') with whom God is *well pleased*. God's voice was proclaiming God's word. The words are a combination of Ps. 2:7 and Is. 42:1. Taken together, they show that although Jesus was God's son, as God's servant he had to suffer and die to carry out God's work, and perhaps this reflects Mark's understanding of the meaning of Jesus' baptism, as the willing acceptance of this task. We shall see that his followers were unwilling to accept this path for Jesus, and even more unwilling to accept it for themselves. Yet, as Paul tells us in Rom. 6:3, we were all baptized into Christ's death, and this was literally true for many Roman martyrs. There is no other path in Christianity except death to self, for Jesus, our forerunner, deliberately took it.

Jesus passed his first test, by accepting his calling with all its cost, but would he pass his second test? The same Spirit that he had seen in the vision at his baptism led him into a lonely place, where he faced all the attacks of 'the enemy' or 'the adversary' (which is what the name Satan means). The other gospels give details of the ways in which the enemy tested Jesus: it is enough for Mark to show that the enemy did not defeat him. In a sense, this first victory over the enemy is what Jesus shows all through his ministry, by driving out demons, healing the sick and, most of all, by rescuing the prisoners of the enemy through preaching the good news. In that sense, the evangelism of Jesus is truly 'power evangelism', but the power is always that of the cross and the good news.

Son of God though he was, Jesus did not fight alone; all the powers of heaven were on his side, as they are on ours, even if unseen. We know what it is to come under fierce spiritual attack after some great spiritual experience. Jesus fully understands this, for he went through it himself. This is expressed theologically in Heb. 5:7; Mark simply describes it factually. There is no direct mention of any later testings of Jesus, but we can see from Jesus' reaction to Peter's suggestion that he should avoid the cross (8:33) and his prayer in Gethsemane (14:33–36) that he faced a constant temptation to turn aside from God's path for him (as indeed all of us do). Perhaps this is Mark's quiet way of showing the nature of Jesus' testing in the wilderness. For a fuller account of the temptations see Mt. 4:1–11 and Lk. 4:1–13.

1:14–20 Calling the king's followers (*cf.* Mt. 4:12–22, *cf.* Lk. 5:1–11). As soon as Saul or David were crowned king in the OT they began to collect a little band of faithful followers around them, who would face danger or death for their sake. Jesus did the same, and the reality of the danger he faced is shown by v 14.

After John had been thrown into prison (where he would be facing death soon), Jesus returned resolutely to Galilee, far from the scene of his earlier spiritual experiences of baptism and temptation. His purpose was to proclaim *the good news of God, i.e.* the good news that God had sent and also the good news about God – that he is willing to receive and forgive us. Because this was made possible by what Jesus did on the cross and because Jesus alone shows us perfectly what God is like, Jesus himself *is* the good news, and to preach the good news is to preach Jesus. To do this is the whole aim of Mark's gospel: God's great 'countdown' in history was over, and the time for 'blast off' had come. The rule of God was about to begin on earth. Of course, in one sense, it had always been present, but this is at a deeper level. The kingdom of God was shown first in the life of Jesus and then in the lives of his followers.

One of the things that Mark is anxious to explain is that this coming of God's kingdom was a silent one, unnoticed by most people, for the world was not changed dramatically overnight. This fact, and also the way that God chose to introduce his kingdom by the suffering of his Messiah, are two things that Mark wants to show us through his gospel. This is the 'mystery of the kingdom' which we cannot see until God reveals it to us. This too is the reason why Jesus could not declare his Messiahship openly – until they realized that the Messiah had to suffer, the people would expect him to act like a king of this world.

John had called people to repent and be baptized; Jesus called them to '*Repent and believe the good news*'. We know, however, from John's gospel that Jesus' disciples also practised baptism (Jn. 3:22). To *believe the good news* is to believe in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to follow him, so he called his first disciples, as he still calls us today. Simon and Andrew, James and John were all ordinary people at their ordinary tasks when Jesus called them to make them *fishers of men*. As usual, Mark gives only the bare bones of the story. John's gospel shows us that these fishermen had had some contact with

John the Baptist before they became Jesus' disciples. However much we are prepared in advance, there comes a time for each of us when the call of Jesus comes to us personally, and we must make a decision whether to follow him or not. Mark concentrates here on that one moment. These men had to decide to leave all that they had, whether little or much, and follow Jesus. In return, Jesus promised to make them *fishers* or 'catchers' for the kingdom of God, winning others for him as he had won them at that moment. This drawing of people into the kingdom of God was the whole purpose of Jesus' earthly ministry, and that is why preaching the good news, not healing or driving out demons, lay at the heart of his ministry. Miracles of healing and exorcism are only signs of the kingdom; they are proofs of God's power as well as of his love.

Note. At this point we might have expected a list of the Twelve, but this is delayed until 3:13–19. The reader might find it helpful to turn to that passage now.

1:21 – 3:35 Signs of the kingdom of God

In the OT, once a judge or a king had been anointed, proclaimed and given God's Spirit for the task, he had to go out and prove his calling. This is the purpose of these chapters. Mark has said that Jesus was the Messiah and God's Son, now he shows it. Jesus had already conquered the enemy in the wilderness; now he conquers him in the ordinary everyday life of Galilee.

1:21–28 Jesus drives out an evil spirit (see Lk. 4:31–37; *cf.* Mt. 7:28–29). In a synagogue at Capernaum, people were amazed at the confidence with which Jesus spoke; he was so different from their usual teachers and his words had the sound of *authority*. Mark often notes that people were amazed at what Jesus said or did, but he also notes, as here, that it did not necessarily lead to faith in him. We might say that it remained in their heads and did not reach their hearts. It was not only the worshippers in the synagogue who realized the authority of Jesus; so did a man who was under the power of an *evil spirit*. This man was completely under the power of the enemy.

It has been well said that there are two equally great dangers when thinking about the enemy. The first is to ignore him, or to try and explain him away scientifically. The second is to concentrate on him in an unhealthy way, instead of concentrating on Christ, and to concentrate on evil spirits, rather than on the Holy Spirit. People in the west have tended towards the first of these dangers, but it may be that experience of world wars and the breakdown of society is forcing psychologists to look more deeply for the causes of evil. Concentration on evil spirits has traditionally been the danger of the Third World. Neither extreme is biblical, and we must try to keep a balance between the two.

We may try to explain away the references in the Bible to those under the power of the enemy by saying that that was how people in an unscientific age spoke and thought of illnesses, bodily or mental. Those who work in non-Christian or post-Christian lands, however, know well that there is such a thing as demon-possession. In the NT a clear distinction is made between demon-possession and ordinary sickness, or even madness. Usually the Bible restricts 'demon-possession' to cases where there is some inner resistance to God through whom healing could come. We must be very careful not to use the term too widely or lightly, but equally we must be careful not to reject it altogether.

Here at the beginning of Mark's gospel Jesus is shown to be engaged in a conflict with the enemy which will continue throughout his ministry. The Bible makes it clear that until Christ sets us free we are all under the power of the enemy to a greater or lesser degree just as all Christians are to a greater or lesser degree under the control of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes there are those (as third-world Christians at least will well know) who are so totally given over to the enemy that they can be described as 'possessed'. The other side of this is being 'filled' with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). The man in the synagogue at Capernaum was completely controlled by an evil spirit, who recognized at once the claim to authority in Jesus' teaching and so reacted violently. Notice that in the Bible, driving out evil spirits is not a magical rite, needing the use of spells and names (as in other religions) but the bringing of the good news of Jesus to the person concerned. That is what is meant by driving out demons 'in the name of Jesus', not merely a mechanical repetition of the name itself. That is why 'exorcism' is not a good word to use as it brings up the idea of a 'spell'. The only sort of 'exorcism' that is lasting is the replacement of the enemy by Jesus as the centre of our lives. Anything less will only lead to worse troubles (Mt. 12:45).

The outburst of the man in v 24 was in response to the preaching of the good news by Jesus in the synagogue that day. The enemy within him recognized Jesus at once as *the Holy One of God* (which was at least a Messianic title, if not a divine one). Such unwilling forced witness Jesus would not accept; it was not the witness of the Holy Spirit. So he rebuked and expelled the spirit (25). Even this exhibition of power only produced amazement among those who saw it, not followers. Perhaps the man himself became a disciple of Jesus after his healing.

The witness of evil spirits such as this one to Jesus is in sharp contrast to Peter's confession (8:29), which in many ways forms the turning-point of the whole gospel.

1:29–34 Healing the sick (see Mt. 8:14–17; Lk. 4:38–41). Mark has shown Jesus expelling demons as a sign of the kingdom of God, now he shows him healing the sick. Simon Peter's mother-in-law was healed of a *fever* that very Sabbath evening, in her own home (are these details that we owe to Peter?). Next, *after sunset* (*i.e.* it was no longer the Sabbath and 'work' like healing the sick was allowed) it seemed as if all Capernaum *gathered at the door*, bringing both *sick and demon-possessed*. Mark makes a distinction between the two groups, but Jesus healed them both. When Mark says *many* were healed, he does not mean that some were left unhealed but is simply referring to the numbers involved. Again, Jesus refused to accept the witness of demons, though he drove them out.

One vivid detail in the story is the way in which the healed woman showed her love and gratitude to Jesus at once in practical ways by feeding both him and a dozen hungry disciples. Not all can preach, but all can love and serve in some way.

1:35–39 Jesus at prayer (see Lk. 4:42–44). Jesus, now a famous healer and expeller of demons, might have been expected to have taken advantage of this. We face the same pressures to choose the way of this world in our 'healing campaigns' or 'miracle rallies' today.

Here we see Jesus slipping away quietly to a lonely place to pray (35). Simon and the others seemed to think that he was making a mistake and losing the great opportunity the recent publicity had brought. This was not the last time that Simon's thoughts would be human thoughts, not God's (8:33). Jesus refused to be sought out as a mere miracle-worker; he wanted to be recognized as a saviour. The way to achieve this was to *preach* the good news, and Jesus committed himself to doing that in the *nearby villages*. He therefore took the disciples on a tour of the *synagogues* of thickly-populated Galilee, preaching the word, *driving out demons* and healing the sick. The driving out of demons is fundamental for it affects the soul, whereas bodily healing can only prolong earthly life for a while.

1:40–45 Healing a leper (see Mt. 8:1–4; Lk. 5:12–16). The word used here for *leprosy* covered many kinds of skin diseases as well as leprosy itself. They all cut off the sufferer from any contact with other people, since lepers were considered ceremonially unclean. In fact, the attitude to leprosy then was almost exactly that to AIDS today, a mixture of fear and disgust. Leprosy was often seen as God's punishment for sin, so although this man did not doubt Jesus' power to heal, he doubted his willingness. He need not have doubted because (as often stated in Mark) Jesus was *filled with compassion* for him and touched and healed him. The effect on the man of Jesus touching him must have been tremendous. Not only did Jesus risk infection, he deliberately became religiously 'unclean' so that the man might become *clean*. Did Mark intend this to be a picture of what Jesus would do for all of us on the cross?

Here was another wonderful chance for more publicity, which Jesus refused to take. Jesus warned the man in the strongest terms to do two things. The first was to go and get a 'health certificate' from the priests, without which he could not re-enter society and join in worship of God. The second was to tell nobody about his healing. Like many of us, the man thought that he knew better than Jesus, so he told everybody about his healing. Did he perhaps enjoy the publicity for himself? The results of his disobedience was that *Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places*.

Because of the attitude of Jesus, it is no wonder that the Christian church pioneered a work of love and mercy and healing to lepers, when all others rejected them. But what of sufferers from AIDS today? Will Christians show the same love and compassion to them? What would Jesus do?

2:1–12 Healing a paralysed man (see Mt. 9:1–8; Lk. 5:17–26). This next story shows us the result of the actions of the healed leper. When Jesus ventured back into Capernaum, the house was mobbed, presumably by people wanting healing. But Jesus continued to preach the good news to them, for that was his purpose. It must, therefore, have been a great temptation for him to be irritated when four men, anxious to get their sick friend healed, lowered him through the broken roof right in front of Jesus as he taught. But Jesus saw only faith. He never seems to have healed without faith, either on the part of the patient or of others. Perhaps the four friends thought that their action would bring Jesus back from 'useless' preaching to 'practical' healing. Jesus, instead of healing at once, publicly forgave the man his sins. Imagine their disappointment. Jesus saw that this was what the man both desired and needed most. Jesus never said that all disease was directly related to sin, as most Jews believed, and some Christians still believe today. Most doctors today would agree, however, that many sicknesses are indirectly related to our mental states and that a sense of guilt underlies some illnesses. Perhaps it was so in this case.

The story might have ended here (for in the joy of sins forgiven the man might not have cared whether he was healed physically or not) if it had not been for some *teachers of the law* who were there. They, quite correctly, observed to themselves that only God can forgive sins and so Jesus was committing blasphemy by assuming this right for himself. It never entered their heads to ask whether Jesus was more than mere man. The gospels make no secret of the insight of Jesus, and he, knowing their unspoken thoughts, asked a very obvious question: Was it easier to grant forgiveness or to grant healing? The unspoken answer was that there was no way to test the reality of forgiveness but a very easy way to test the reality of healing. To prove that he had the power to forgive, and as a sign of the kingdom, Jesus healed the paralysed man. There could be no argument about that. Again, amazement followed but not, apparently, faith in Jesus.

Jesus referred to himself indirectly as *the Son of Man*, which seems deliberately vague. In Mark this is the usual way Jesus describes himself. The title could be used in several ways *e.g.* either referring to 'mortal man' (a sort of representative of humanity) or echoing the heavenly figure of Dn. 7:13, coming down from God to exercise his rule.

This is the start of another theme in Mark, the opposition of the religious leaders to Jesus. As they had rejected John, so they would reject Jesus. Ordinary people, not blinded by prejudice, listened to both and received the good news.

2:13–17 The call of Levi (see Mt. 9:9–13; Lk. 5:27–32). Here is another sign of the kingdom: Jesus has driven out demons and healed sick bodies, now he shows that he can heal sick souls as well. The story begins with Jesus teaching. Mark never gives as full an account of the content of this teaching as Luke or Matthew do; for him the good news of the kingdom of God was the heart of it. The affect of Jesus on Levi was not a matter of hypnotic power or magnetic personality, as possessed by some leaders of false cults today. It is just that Mark has reduced the story to the bare minimum, keeping only the essential points.

We miss the wonder of Levi's call if we do not remember all that 'tax collector' meant in those days. It meant all that 'loan-shark' means to us today, with the added idea of collaborator, for it usually involved working for the hated imperial power or the equally hated local dictator, Herod. Tax collectors were usually greedy, dishonest and immoral. Worse still, to a Jew, they were ceremonially unclean through mixing continually with non-Jewish people. Who but Jesus would call a man like this to be his follower? If Levi is same as Matthew (although Mark does not say this), then who but Jesus would choose such a man to be an apostle? Jesus went to *dinner* at Levi's house; and this scandalized the teachers of the law who saw it as going too far. This was because the house was full of *tax collectors and 'sinners'*, with not a 'righteous' person among them. 'Sinners' may simply be a bitter reference to the same tax collectors, or it may refer to the other people from the margins of society who also flocked to Jesus for forgiveness and a new life.

The teachers of the law asked Jesus' disciples why he behaved in this way. Jesus overheard them and answered by saying that just as it was only to be expected that a doctor should associate with sick people, so it was natural that he should mix with *sinners*. The whole purpose of Jesus' coming was to call such sinners to a change of heart and life (17). To those who were self-righteous and self-satisfied, he had nothing to offer, for the only way to enter the kingdom of God is as a self-confessed sinner. Do 'loan-sharks', cheats and prostitutes flock to our churches today? And would we welcome them if they came in penitence and faith? Or would we react in the same way as the teachers of the law? Would we be embarrassed and turn away?

2:18–22 The old and the new (see Mt. 9:14–17; Lk. 5:33–39). Jesus' unorthodox behaviour did not only provoke the criticism of the religious authorities, it also puzzled ordinary people. They wanted to know why Jesus' followers were different from those of the Pharisees and John the Baptist and did not seem to worry about some of the rituals of Judaism like, for instance, the weekly fastdays. Such practices, though not in the Law of Moses, had come to be just as important in Jewish eyes. Jesus gave a quick answer: nobody fasts at a wedding-feast. Fasting shows sorrow, and if there is any sorrow, it would be after the feast, when the bridegroom had left the party. This may have been a popular proverb (like the saying about doctors and sick people above) but Jesus clearly meant himself when he spoke of the bridegroom. The words *taken from them* imply violence (if not death), so Jesus may have been speaking about the cross, bringing sorrow to all.

There is an issue here that goes deeper than fasting alone. If Jesus had brought fresh spiritual life, could it be contained within the old rigid forms of Judaism or would it need fresh forms? That is the problem facing the church in many parts of the world today where there is charismatic renewal or a revival movement. Some accommodation and adjustment must be made or there will be splits and divisions, as sadly there have been already, with great loss to both sides. Jesus never condemned

fasting; he fasted himself. But formal and compulsory Jewish fasting would not fit with the freedom and spontaneity of the new life which he brought. Are we stifling new life by old forms, however beloved they may be to us? Some forms we must have but have we worked out new forms and are they suitable?

2:23–28 Lord of the Sabbath (see Mt. 12:1–8; Lk. 6:1–5). It almost seems from the continual criticism of Jesus, that one of the signs of the kingdom of God is the opposition of those who are blind to it. In this passage, the opposition was because the disciples of Jesus, who were hungry, picked corn on the Sabbath and so broke the complicated series of Sabbath laws. Jesus replied to the Pharisees by quoting a scriptural example which they could not deny. The great king David had committed a far greater breach of Sabbath laws when he was in need, and he was not blamed for it. The irony of saying '*Have you never read?*' to people who claimed to be experts in scripture is obvious and Jesus often used this in argument. The high priest at the time of David's action was Ahimelech, the father of Abiathar, but the name is not the point of the story.

Some rabbis really believed and taught that humans were created in order to keep Sabbath. Jesus showed how absurd this was, teaching that the Sabbath was God's loving provision to us for rest and worship. Jesus again used the enigmatic title *the Son of Man*, who he said was the *Lord* (or master) of the Sabbath. This could be interpreted as meaning that all humans have the right to decide how Sabbath is to be used. It is more likely that Jesus was referring to himself as the one who had the right to decide. If so, then he was clearly claiming to be equal with God, who had instituted the Sabbath. Once again Mark raises the question of who the Son of Man is and, indeed, of who Jesus is. This question becomes more urgent all the time.

Did those who opposed Jesus deliberately shut their eyes to the truth? If someone does not accept Christ and his claims, then they may come to oppose him more and more bitterly as the Pharisees and teachers of the law did. This is the negative side of the law of spiritual response to which Jesus often referred. The more we respond to truth, the more we will be able to grasp it. The less we respond to truth (by ignoring it or closing our eyes to it), the less we will be able to grasp it. This is a fundamental truth found in the parables of Jesus.

3:1–6 The maimed man (see Mt. 12:9–14; Lk. 6:6–11). Jesus' opponents found another chance to accuse him of disregarding the Sabbath when he healed a crippled man, for whom they do not seem to have felt any pity. Healing on Sabbath was only allowed by the rabbis in cases of life and death, and this was clearly not one of them. Jesus made no attempt to avoid the trap, as he could have done. Instead, he called the man to stand before them all and asked a question which went right to the heart of the issue. Clearly to leave such a man unhealed, when Jesus had the power to heal him, was *to do evil*. To *do good* on the Sabbath by healing the man was obviously the right course of action, and surely the Sabbath law did not forbid it? (The second half of Jesus' question, '*to save life or to kill*' is only a stronger way of saying the same thing.) The Pharisees could not reply without condemning themselves, so they remained silent. Mark records that Jesus was angry as well as grieved at their stubbornness of heart. As this is one of the very few occasions when Mark records Jesus' anger, it is important to see what caused it.

The healing of this man on Sabbath was the moment when two most unlikely allies, the Pharisees and Herodians, decided to get rid of Jesus and *began to plot how they might kill* him. If we do not believe in Jesus, then we must finally crucify him. Mark warns us of this choice right from the start of his gospel. The Pharisees were the 'religious fundamentalists' of their day, while the Herodians, unknown outside Mark, seem to have been a secular party, supporting the Herodian dynasty. This was a combination of cynicism and political opportunism, one that is often seen in the world where there is opposition to the gospel. The enemy will use any tools that he can.

3:7–12 The crowds come (*cf.* Mt. 12:15–21; Lk. 6:17–19). Although the religious teachers may have rejected him, the crowds did not; sometimes ordinary people can see what the theologians are blind to. The crowds continued to flock to Jesus, probably mostly for healing. On this occasion there were so many that Jesus had to sit in a boat in order to teach the people who were on the shore around. He also healed sick people and drove out demons, though he would not allow them to speak. The evil spirits recognized Jesus as the *Son of God*. God had called Jesus his 'Son' at his baptism (1:11), and the Roman officer would give the title to him at the cross (15:39). Jesus himself accepted it before the high priest at his trial, when there was no longer any need to hide it and the Messianic secret was soon to be open for all to see (14:62).

3:13–19 Appointing the Twelve (see Mt. 10:1–4; Lk. 6:12–16). We know from the other gospels that the reason Jesus went up the mountain was to pray before making such an important choice. Even the Son of God needed to find a place where he could be alone with God, and there was no quiet anywhere else.

Jesus taught us to seek privacy for prayer if at all possible (Mt. 6:6).

When Jesus calls us to respond to him, his love compels us to follow. These twelve were Jesus' 'team' (as we might speak of a football 'eleven' today) appointed to work together with him and with one another. He refers to them in terms of his wider family in vs 31–35. Mark does not elsewhere call them *apostles*, though this is the name that they were known by later. For this reason some manuscripts leave out the word here. But, whether we use the name or not, they were all Jesus' missionaries, and Mark the missionary knew that very well. We can see what 'apostle' means from v 14. Jesus chose these men so that he could send them out to preach the good news, just as he was doing himself. However, before they would be ready to preach the good news they had to spend time with Jesus and learn to pattern their lives on him. If we do not follow their example, our preaching will be like loudspeakers blaring meaningless propaganda.

They also had to show the power of Jesus and the Spirit by conquering the enemy, as Jesus had done. So Jesus committed to them his power to *drive out demons* (Matthew adds the power of healing sicknesses in his name). These were both signs of the coming of the kingdom of God. It is important to notice that Jesus shared his power with very imperfect humans, like us. Indeed, Mark seems throughout the whole of his gospel to go out of his way to emphasize the imperfections of the Twelve and especially of Peter, who in many ways was the leader. In doing this, Mark was simply describing the facts; he was not trying to belittle the apostles, as some have suggested. It makes God's grace all the more wonderful (as Paul saw; 2 Cor. 4:7) that there are no supermen or superwomen in the NT, only sinners saved by grace. The other gospel writers softened down some of the stories, but Mark wants to show us that the apostles were people just like us, with all our weaknesses. NT 'saints' do not have bright haloes around their heads; that was an invention of the later church!

Another point that also emphasizes the apostles' 'ordinariness' is that they mostly had nicknames, some given by Jesus himself. In most parts of the world, people are known by nicknames describing their character rather than by their real names. These disciples were real-life people.

So there was Simon, whom Jesus nicknamed 'Peter' or 'The Rock', and James and John, whom he nicknamed *Sons of Thunder* (or 'Thunder and Lightning' as we might say today). Thomas was called 'the Twin', and another Simon was called 'the Zealot' which may have been a reference to his 'zeal' for the nationalist cause in Israel. Judas's nickname, 'Iscariot', may also suggest connections with this movement. When we remember boastful Simon, who denied Jesus, Thomas, who doubted him, James and John, who were ambitious for themselves and all the disciples, who ran away terrified when Jesus was arrested, we are not glorifying their weaknesses but glorifying the God who can use people as weak as they were, and we are (2 Cor. 12:9).

3:20–30 Blasphemy against the Spirit (see Mt. 12:22–37; Lk. 11:14–23). Even the family of Jesus thought that he must be *out of his mind.* Many of God's most faithful servants, from Paul down to John Sung, the great evangelist of south-east Asia, have faced this same charge. But the *teachers of the law* who must have come *down from Jerusalem* on a special commission of enquiry, went further in their spite. They said that Jesus was not mad, but demon-possessed. Beelzebub seems to be another name for Satan here. For more on the spelling of the name and its exact meaning, see the larger commentaries. The Bible teaches us that we have only one spiritual enemy, even if he has many servants; and he is a defeated enemy already.

It is hard to believe that even the teachers of the law thought this accusation was true; that is why Jesus' rebuke was so severe. First, he showed how stupid the suggestion of a 'civil war' within *Satan* himself is. Then he pointed out that his expulsion of demons meant a victory over the enemy, not a siding with him. Lastly, he gave a grave warning about the only unforgivable sin in the Bible, the sin against the Holy Spirit. This seems to mean the deliberate closing of the heart and mind to the witness of the Spirit to Jesus, something of which the teachers had just shown themselves to be guilty. Such a wilful and deliberate twisting of truth makes repentance and salvation impossible, for it has shut the one gate to salvation that God has opened. It is not that God is unwilling to forgive, but that the person concerned is unwilling to receive his forgiveness. If we still fear that we might be guilty, it is a clear sign that we have not committed this ultimate sin and are in no danger of committing it. Indeed, as has often been said, the real emphasis is on the other side: the wonderful truth is that all other sins can be forgiven. To hold fast to these truths will save sensitive souls much agony, especially those who have been forced to blaspheme Christ in times of persecution. We may think of Saul of Tarsus, who tried to force early Jewish Christians to blaspheme (Acts 26:11), or dictatorships and Communist governments in our own day. Peter cursed and swore that he did not

know Jesus, and if he could repent and be forgiven, so can we.

It is most important, especially in a world where he seems so powerful, that we realize that the enemy has already been defeated. Every time in Mark's gospel that Jesus drives out Satan from the life of a person and frees him or her from his power, we have another proof of that. Satan's defeat is equally true whether he shows his power in non-Christian religions (third-world Christians will know that while there may be some truth in them, there is also often something of the demonic), or 'magic' and 'spells', or the revival of satanism and the occult in the West today. The *strong man* has been already conquered and tied up: the battle has been fought and won, and now there are only 'mopping-up' operations. The reference to possessions being carried off indicates that those whom the enemy possessed before can now go free.

3:31–35 The family of Christ (see Mt. 12:46–50; Lk. 8:19–21). The misunderstanding of God's kingdom and its demands continues. In v 21, even his own family had thought Jesus out of his mind and had wanted to take him home. Here, his *mother and brothers* came looking for him – was it for the same reason? Both they and the crowd would have assumed that Jesus would stop his teaching at once and come out to see them, as respect for parents was one of the Ten Commandments. Instead, Jesus pointed to a loyalty and a commandment far more basic, a claim of God that went far deeper than the claims of any earthly family. The priorities of God's kingdom are different, and this is bound to be a stumbling-block in the eyes of this world. Jesus said that *whoever does God's will* (note the usual contrast between merely 'hearing' and actually 'doing') is closer to him than any of his blood-relatives. Remember that, as yet, his brothers did not believe in him, and even Mary cannot have completely understood him, or she would not have come on this trip. This word will bring great comfort to some of us who were rejected by home and family when we became Christians, but who found in this 'family of Christ' love and support. This does not mean that Jesus ceased to love and care for his mother, or that Christians have no responsibility for their own family members who do not turn to Christ. It is only that Jesus must always come first, no matter how much pain that may cause to us or others. Only those who love Christ more than their nearest and dearest can be his disciples.

However, this is totally different from the teaching of the various cults who insist on total physical separation from family members who do not join the sect. Some extreme Christian groups also hold this wrong view.

4:1–34 Parables of the kingdom of God

This section is an example of what Jesus' teaching was like. Jesus used many parables, vivid illustrations of spiritual truth, drawn from everyday life. Those who preach the gospel in the open air, specially in the Third World, will know well the value of this method. It captures and holds the interest of ordinary listeners, and if they are thoughtful, will lead them to see the spiritual truth. Otherwise, they will just enjoy the story, laugh and forget it, as often happened in Jesus' day.

4:1–20 Sowing the seed (see Mt. 13:1–23; Lk. 8:1–15). Once again, Jesus took refuge from the crowds on board a boat, anchored just off the shore. This was not the first time that Jesus had used parables, for 2:17, 19 and 21 were all mini-parables of the same sort. This is, however, the first parable told at length and explained in detail. This parable of a farmer sowing seed is a vivid picture of the preaching of the gospel. It explains that the difference in the results all depends on the nature of the human heart that receives the gospel. We must always remember that a parable is not the same as an allegory (very rarely used in the Bible, if at all). In an allegory, every detail has some spiritual significance, while in a parable much of the detail may not be important; it is the story as a whole which conveys the message.

There may or may not have been a Galilean farmer actually sowing on the hillside above at the time: if there was, then it would have made the illustration even more vivid. But the real point is that, as he was speaking, Jesus was actually sowing the word, and the hearers were responding in the different ways that he described; they were all part of the parable themselves.

Only one of the four types of ground described proved fruitful, but it is unfair to blame the farmer for this, as some over-zealous commentators have done ('he should have prepared the ground better', 'he should only have sown in the good soil'). The farmer must have known that some parts of his land were better than others, but he was giving them all an equal chance; it was probably the only land that he had. Only the results at harvest would show which was the good soil, and that would produce an amazing crop. We are told that even a tenfold return was good in Palestine; here the good soil yielded a hundredfold. So we can see that the final emphasis of the illustration is positive, not negative, a promise to encourage us, not just a warning to sober us.

It may seem strange to us today that the Twelve totally failed to understand the parable

(remember how often Mark shows them in this light) but then we have always known the explanation, which they received only later. Jesus often explained things afterwards in private to his disciples. It would have been of no use explaining the parable's meaning to those who had not even taken the first step of thinking over the illustration. The Twelve showed that they were ready for the explanation by asking for it. That is why Jesus warned his listeners to listen thoughtfully (9).

In a sense, this parable is the key to all the other parables, because in all of them Jesus preaches or 'sows' the word. The quotation from Isaiah in v 12 does not mean that God deliberately hides his truth from us; if that were so, what would be the point of any parables? What is expressed as the *purpose* of parables is in fact an observation of how they actually work in practice. In spite of all their looking and listening, some people will not really see or understand; if they did, they would turn to God for forgiveness. Isaiah was describing a hard-hearted people who had turned their back on God and stubbornly refused to listen to him. This is what many of Jesus' hearers are like, even today.

But, even in the case of those ready to listen, shallow response is a danger. Careless or superficial listeners, who *have no root*, or those whose lives are too full of worries or pleasures (sometimes equal dangers) will bear no fruit. Only those who listen, accept and act will be fruitful. Sometimes this parable is thought to teach spiritual persistence; but it is also a promise of spiritual reward. If we obey the laws of spiritual growth, as surely as there is a seed-time, harvest will come.

4:21–25 Lamps and lampstands (see Lk. 8:16–18; *cf.* Mk. 5:14–16). This section addresses the issue of whether the kingdom of God will always be a secret, hidden from the many and revealed only to the few. (Perhaps it still seems this way to some of us today?) Jesus said that one day God's kingdom will be plain to all. Lamps are meant to give light, not to hide it. In the same way, the final purpose of parables is to reveal truth, not conceal it. However, there is a time when parables are the best way to reveal truth, for they 'filter' or 'strain' the listeners, as we might filter a liquid through a fine cloth to purify it. The disciples must first absorb the truth that Jesus taught through parables, so that they would be able to absorb more truth later. Like any good teacher, Jesus teaches only as we are able to understand and willing to respond. There is no such thing as standing still in the spiritual life; if we cease to grow, then we shrink. This is either a promise or a warning, depending on our spiritual attitude.

4:26–34 Parables of growth (see Mt. 13:31–35; Lk. 13:18–19). Here are two more vivid parables of spiritual growth. The first reminds us of the quiet and continuous (we might almost say 'inevitable') growth of God's kingdom in our hearts. We do not need to be anxious and struggle: the seed will bear fruit of its own accord. We cannot understand the process of spiritual growth, any more than we can understand the process of natural growth, but we do not need to understand in order to share in it. The seed needs only the right conditions for growth. Harvest is a promise, but it may bring a hint of God's judgment as well, as it often does in the Bible.

The second parable again describes silent, almost unnoticed, growth, with amazing results. Mustard seed is tiny, but it grows in time, into a bush that is one of the biggest plants in the Near East. So the kingdom will grow from insignificant beginnings to final triumph. This is a great encouragement to those who live in lands where Christians are a tiny, despised and perhaps persecuted minority. We work with confidence, waiting for God to fulfil his promise. The earthly ministry of Jesus was like that too; it seemed insignificant, yet from it grew a mighty world-wide Christian church, which is still growing. The closing verses show that these are only samples of the *many* illustrations that Jesus used, and they show his graded method of instruction and explanation (*as much as they could understand*) to those who would listen. If the others had been ready to listen, then they too would have understood, and so would have received more teaching, as the disciples did. There is no unfair favouritism in the kingdom of God; we all have the same opportunities of spiritual growth, if only we will take them.

4:35 – 8:26 Powers of the kingdom of God

This is the start of a long section full of stories of miracles, all illustrating power in different areas. The NT is clear that Jesus performed miracles; even his enemies admitted it, although some of them said that he worked through the powers of evil not through the power of God. As we have seen, Jesus easily disproved this charge. How Jesus performed miracles we do not know or need to know. Of course, as Son of God he was not restricted in the same way that we are. The greatest miracle of all, however, was that he summoned imperfect human disciples to join him in his task. Once again, we must remember that miracles are not meaningless magic, but designed to show us who Jesus was. That is why, although Mark's gospel contains a great collection of miracle stories, they are all in the opening chapters. Once Peter recognized that Jesus

was the Messiah, there was a change. From teaching the crowds, Jesus turned to teaching his own disciples, and there was no longer any need for more miracles to show them who he was.

Are such miracles still needed today, in preaching the gospel? Opinions have been divided on this question throughout church history, and it has come to the fore during times of charismatic renewal and revival. Some have felt firmly that all miracles ceased once the NT had been written; others have felt that 'power evangelism' demands continual miracles to support preaching; others have felt that God may perform or withhold miracles at his sovereign will. Whichever we believe, it is important that we do not see miracles as a suspension of the natural order, but as God working in all things and in all ways, whether usual or unusual to us.

4:35–41 Power over nature (see Mt. 8:23–27; Lk. 8:22–25). The first of the group of miracles is a 'nature' miracle. Jesus, who had already shown himself Lord over demons and sicknesses, now showed himself Lord over nature. The story is full of vivid eyewitness details (*e.g.* the cushion of v 38). We can almost see the storm on the lake and the terrified disciples (was this meant as a picture of the persecuted church at Rome, or in our lands today?). The frightened disciples rebuked Jesus by implication (38), and then he actually rebuked the wind and storm, and they obeyed his word of command (39). None but the Creator himself could have done this. In the OT God alone is the one who causes storms and calms them. The disciples only half grasped the truth and were too terrified to express it (41). The chief lesson for us is Jesus' rebuke to his disciples for their lack of trust in him. We must learn to trust completely, even if our obedience to him leads us into storms, whether persecution or anything else. (It was Jesus, not the disciples who had suggested crossing the lake; they were not out of his will.) Sometimes we assume that storms show disobedience, but this is not always so.

Some will say that this is 'spiritualizing' a miracle which dealt with the calming of an actual storm on the lake. They feel that we should trust Jesus to calm actual storms and save us when we are travelling. Of course, God can do whatever he wills, but he did not calm the storm for Paul (Acts 27), although Paul was a man of great faith. The disciples on this occasion had little faith, so the calming (or not) of a storm does not seem to depend on faith, but on God's will. God strengthened Paul to endure the storm in quiet faith. Sometimes God saves us from trouble; sometimes he saves us in trouble; sometimes he saves us from death; and sometimes he uses our death to glorify his name. Should we expect to be able to rebuke wind and waves, as Jesus did? According to the gospels, only Jesus did 'nature' miracles (for only Jesus is God), and there is no hint that he ever gave this power to his disciples. Only God can do God's work.

5:1–20 Power over demons (see Mt. 8:28–34; Lk. 8:26–39). Once again, the powers of God's kingdom are shown by the driving out of demons from a man. This exorcism is different from the others. First, the man was probably not Jewish; he certainly lived in a Gentile area. Secondly, the witness of the enemy was more specific, although it was not accepted by Jesus and was not expressed in Jewish terms. The exact place where the incident took place is uncertain, but it was *across the lake*, *i.e.* on the eastern, Gentile side. This man was not someone sitting quietly in a synagogue until aroused by Jesus' preaching; his state was desperate, and no human beings could help or even restrain him. (Some of us will know well the almost superhuman strength shown by the demonized.) This man was in agony, torturing himself and under the influence of evil powers. That seems to be the significance of the name *Legion* ('Army') that he gave himself. There is no hint in Scripture that we need to know the name of an evil force before expelling it, nor does the Bible suggest that multitudes of demons have different names and personalities. These are ideas taken over from other religions, which we should reject like the idea that there is one demon of lust, another of greed and so on. One enemy is enough for us to beware of. (In this account the evil spirit is described in the singular in vs 2 and 8 and in the plural in vs 9,10,12 and 13.)

Unlovable though the man was, Jesus loved and pitied him. His command to the spirit to depart came before the man's outburst, which was therefore in a sense his response to the good news, which was before him in person in Jesus. *Most High God* was a typical Gentile name for the God of Israel.

We may guess that the entry of the demons into the pigs was necessary, especially in a Gentile area, so that both the man and everybody else might see that the forces of evil had truly left the man. It was an outward aid to faith, though one which prompts modern readers to wonder about the loss of animal life, let alone the economic loss to the owners of the pigs. It was also another clear outward sign of the powers of God's kingdom. This story too is full of eyewitness touches, like the number of the pigs. It is true that pigs panic easily, but to say that does not explain why these pigs should. The true miracle was not what happened to the

pigs but what happened to the man, who was completely changed (15).

This display of God's power brought only fear to the unbelieving, not faith, and this often happens in the Third World even today. Instead of begging Jesus to stay, the local people begged him to leave, and so he went. What a disaster for them! The healed man begged to *go with* Jesus, but Jesus did not allow him. This was probably because his witness to Jesus in that non-Jewish area was supremely valuable. Perhaps that was also why in this case Jesus asked the man to witness to the *mercy* that God had shown him. God may lead different Christians to do different things for his own purposes.

5:21–43 Power over death (see Mt. 9:18–26; Lk. 8:40–56). This story concerns an area where the powers of God's kingdom had not yet been shown by Jesus: the conquest of death, the last great enemy. The healing of Jairus's daughter shows Jesus as Lord of life and death, but in typically Marcan style it is 'sandwiched' around the story of another healing, that of a woman with persistent bleeding.

Jairus was humble and believing and ready to confess his need. He admitted that his daughter was dying, but believed that a touch from Jesus would heal her. The woman showed even greater faith; she had faith that if she could only touch Jesus' clothes, she would be healed. This was not superstition or sheer magic, it was faith. She knew in her heart that any contact with Jesus, however slight, would bring healing to her (28), and so it did. It is important to notice that Jesus did not say 'Your touch has saved you' but '*Your faith has healed you*', and we have no mandate to place any reliance on the power of touch by sending handkerchiefs that have been blessed to lay on sick people in hope of healing. V 30 reads as if healing was costly to Jesus (just as all true preaching is costly to the preacher), but it may simply be an instance of his supernatural insight. The disciples found Jesus' question absurd and told him so (31). The terrified woman knew that in touching Jesus' clothing she had ceremonially defiled him and that contact with her had probably defiled every other member of the crowd as well. Menstruation made women ceremonially unclean and cut them off from any fellowship with God's people for a part of every month. This woman's sickness had meant that in her case the exclusion had been for twelve long years. Mark records that she had tried in vain all medical help, getting worse rather than better. Luke the doctor softened the language a little (Lk. 8:43). What she must have found hard to understand was that here was one who would willingly 'defile' himself for her sake, so that she might become 'clean'. Jesus previously did this for the leper. Here is the true power of God's kingdom, for here is the power of the cross and the power of love.

Jesus' conversation with the sick woman meant that he was delayed in reaching Jairus's house, and news came that his daughter had died (35). Jairus could already believe the difficult; could he now believe the impossible? That is what Jesus asked him to do, in spite of all the worldly-wisdom of the hired mourners who filled the house. Their scornful laughter shows the absurdity of the view that the girl was only unconscious; they knew death well. When Jesus said *asleep*, he was referring to the fact that he would raise her up, as well as the new view of death that he would bring by his resurrection.

This unbelief shut the mourners out from seeing the miracle. Only the 'inner three' (Peter, James and John) were allowed to witness it, along with the parents. (The eyewitness touches must have come from one of them.) These three may have been more responsive to Jesus than the others and so were closer to him. Jesus used a loving phrase in Aramaic (the native tongue of both Jesus and the girl) which is translated by Mark for his non-Jewish readers. The word translated *little girl* has the same affectionate tone to it as calling a child a 'lamb' in English.

Having brought the child back to life and seen her walk about, Jesus told her parents *to give her something to eat*. This last practical touch put the *astonished* family firmly back in everyday life.

It is probably better to call this incident a 'reviving' rather than a 'resurrection', for the girl would still have to die one day. When Jesus himself rose from the dead his body was changed, and when we rise because of him, our bodies will be changed and we shall never have to pass through death again (1 Cor. 15). Apart from this story, Luke records Jesus as bringing back to life only the widow's son from Nain, and John adds the raising of Lazarus. We should not, therefore, assume that Jesus often did this sort of miracle: it was not necessary that he should, once he had shown his power. Both Peter (Acts 9:41) and Paul (Acts 20:10) raised dead persons, but they only did it on one occasion, so it must have had some special value. It is not a spiritual gift promised by Jesus to his disciples, and so we should not claim it for ourselves.

6:1–6 Limits of power (see Mt. 13:53–58; *cf.* Lk. 4:16–30). These powers of the kingdom seem to have had very little effect on some of those who saw them or heard of them, to judge from this next story. This shows that signs in themselves will never produce faith, for faith is a personal commitment and choice. Perhaps that is why Jesus gave signs so sparingly, and only in answer to faith. He was

not trying to convince the unbelieving, for that would be impossible.

When Jesus came to his home town (probably meaning Nazareth, though he had actually moved to Capernaum, beside the lake, before this) those who heard him were amazed at his teaching and miracles, but this did not lead to faith in him. They repeated in puzzlement the names of his family members: had he not even worked there himself as a carpenter once? How could such a familiar figure do and say such things? The trouble was that they were too busy arguing about him to listen to his words. So even the Son of God could do no *miracles* there, apart from healing a few sick folk, humble enough and needy enough to believe in him. That does not mean that God's power is absolutely limited, but that God has chosen to act only in response to faith. Usually, Mark says that people were amazed at Jesus; here, he says that Jesus was *amazed* at them. The people of Nazareth were so familiar with Jesus that they enjoyed no blessing: a danger perhaps facing some of our churches today? Familiarity, the proverb says, breeds contempt.

6:7–13 Sharing of power (see Mt. 9:35 – 10:15; Lk. 9:1–6). In spite of unbelief, the work of spreading the good news had to go on, and so Jesus sent out the Twelve on a mission. The gospels differ slightly in describing what the apostles were to wear and to take with them, but that is not important. All agree that they were to 'travel light'. Those engaged in the work of evangelism must not be fussy about food or accommodation; they must realize that their mission is one of life and death for their hearers. Jews often shook off the dust of heathen places when they had left them, but on this occasion the disciples were to do it as a solemn legal witness to the rejection of the gospel.

Jesus committed to the Twelve his power to expel demons, but we can see from v 12 that their main task was preaching the gospel that leads to the expulsion of demons and healing of the sick. Anointing with oil is symbolic here, not medical, as it seems to be in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10). There is no record of Jesus ever having used oil, and there are plenty of examples in the NT of healing without it. Jas. 5:14 is therefore not a universal rule, but an outward aid to faith; there is nothing magical in the oil itself.

6:14–29 The death of John the Baptist (see Mt. 14:1–12; Lk. 9:7–9, 19–20). John's imprisonment was the sign for Jesus' ministry to begin, so John's death was the sign of how that ministry would end. It is striking to see here the different ways of understanding Jesus' ministry there were. Some saw him as Elijah returned (his coming was expected before the coming of the Messiah). Others saw him as at least a prophet. Herod's guilty conscience led him to think that Jesus was John, risen from the dead to confront and rebuke him again.

The details of the sordid story need not detain us: a fearless prophet, a vicious king, a vindictive woman, a shameless girl (none else would dance in public to entertain party guests) and a lonely death. Where were the powers of God's kingdom here in this situation? Even John himself had been tempted to ask that question while in prison (Mt. 11:3). We can answer only in the light of Calvary, when Jesus himself walked the same path of undeserved suffering for us; for the cross, in spite of its apparent weakness, is God's power leading to salvation (Rom. 1:16). If Jesus took this path, then all his followers must be prepared to take it too.

6:30–44 Feeding the five thousand (see Mt. 14:15–21; Lk. 9:12–17). Mark follows this story of the apparent weakness of God's kingdom in the eyes of this world with some stories that show its power. In them Jesus demonstrates the power of the Creator God, still in control of the universe that he had created.

The first story begins in a typically matter-of-fact way. The disciples have returned from their evangelistic mission triumphant but exhausted, so Jesus understandingly led them to a quiet place to rest. They were followed by an expectant crowd, who disturbed their planned time of refreshment and relaxation. Jesus *had compassion* on these people and *began teaching them many things*. It does not seem as though he asked the disciples to do anything. At the end of the day they came to Jesus and asked him to send the crowd away to get something to eat. They were taken aback when he suggested that they feed the people themselves. The only food that they could find was five of the flat local loaves and two dried fish. To obey Jesus and get the eager hungry crowds sat down in orderly groups must have tested their faith that he could do something about the situation. The vivid description of the scene, with details such as the *green grass*, must have come from an eyewitness. In multiplying the loaves and fish God did in one moment of time what he does every day with the corn in the fields and the fish in the sea. To us, it is a miracle; to him, it is natural.

Mark rescues the miracle from appearing magical by giving it a matter-of-fact ending: the tired disciples bending double as they collected all the left-over bread and scraps of fish into baskets (possibly for the next day's meal). We should not expect to live a life entirely made up of spiritual thrills; that would be spiritually unhealthy and not help us to mature in Christ. It

is strange that the disciples did not seem to have learned anything from this miracle; Jesus had to repeat the lesson later. This was not because they were particularly stupid and unresponsive; it was because they were just like us.

6:45–56 Lord of nature (see Mt. 14:22–33). When everyone had gone and Jesus had packed the disciples on to a boat to return to Bethsaida he climbed the hill for a time of prayer alone. He had fed the crowds as Moses had fed Israel in the wilderness with manna. Would they now be in danger of following him purely in hope of food, as before they had done purely in hope of healing? (see Jn. 6:26). Jesus' prayer was interrupted by his concern for his disciples. From the hill he could see the boat far below on the lake, making no headway because of the wind. So, at dead of night, he went to them, walking on the lake. It is impossible to think of this as meaning that he walked along the shore or along a sandbank, as some have interpreted it. The disciples, being fishermen knew their lake well, and they would not have been *terrified* by that. There are no difficulties with Jesus walking on the water if we remember that he was Son of God. In the OT God controlled the raging waters, and here his Son was doing the same.

We do not know why Jesus was *about to pass by them*. Perhaps he wanted them to recognize him and call for help, or to show their faith in some other way. If so, he was disappointed, for when they did cry out it was only in terror. But even this cry of fear was enough to bring Jesus on to the boat, from where he calmed the wind. They had forgotten the miracle of multiplying the loaves; they had forgotten that he had calmed one storm already. Their reaction was to be completely amazed because they did not understand, even though the powers of the kingdom of God had been clearly shown.

On landing the boat, Jesus was met by a crowd of people bringing the sick to him for healing. Their faith was like that of the woman suffering from bleeding; they only asked to touch *the edge of his cloak*, for they knew and believed that he could heal them. Sometimes the simplest of Christians can see at once spiritual truths to which theologians are blind.

7:1–23 The source of sin (see Mt. 15:1–20). We have seen that even the nature miracles had not convinced the disciples that Jesus was the Son of God; their hearts were hardened, or as we would say, their minds were closed. The ordinary people accepted his healings gladly, but still did not know who he was. The Pharisees and law-teachers continued with their endless criticisms; they were determined not to believe. This time, they complained that Jesus' followers did not wash their hands after any accidental contact with Gentiles in the street; it was not a matter of hygiene but religious scruples. Mark explains to his non-Jewish readers that this was only part of a complicated series of ritual washings used by the Jews. It all came from tradition, not from Moses, but was held just as fiercely, just as 'traditions' are in Islam today. Is this sometimes true of Christianity too?

Jesus did not deny that his disciples broke the traditions, but justified it by saying that these traditions were merely *of men*, and that in the case of the Pharisees, observing them often went along with a rejection of God's plain command. If tradition contradicts Scripture, it must go, no matter how much loved. A stinging quotation from Isaiah proved the point, and then Jesus illustrated it with an example of a Pharisaic way of denying a Mosaic commandment by a typically rabbinic trick. If a man vowed to the temple the money that he would normally have spent on caring for aged parents, he was freed from the obligation of providing for them. As usual, Mark explains the technical word *Corban*, used to describe this sort of offering-vow. This legalistic trick, done in the name of religion, was sheer hypocrisy, as Jesus showed. Worse still, it was only one example out of many.

The laws about 'purity' were another example, so Jesus took the opportunity to explain to the crowds that the true nature of 'contamination' is not ritual but moral, and it springs from within not from without, as the Pharisees taught. This seems so obvious to us today that we cannot see why the disciples could not understand it (17). They, like most Jews of their time, thought of sin as a sort of germ, an infection caught by contact with others outside. (This is roughly the Confucian view, shared by most non-Christian religions.) Jesus taught that sin was like a cancer, growing within us, Jew and non-Jew alike. That is far harder to deal with, for we cannot avoid it by avoiding 'infection' from others; it needs radical spiritual surgery that will change our inner nature. That is what John meant by saying that the one coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we associate 'baptism with the Spirit' solely with spiritual gifts; the Bible associates it more often with a changed nature.

Jesus drove home the absurdity of the views of the Pharisees by a commonsense illustration, called a parable here. What goes into the stomach is not going to affect our spiritual lives, but only our digestion, and our digestive processes will deal with it in due course. The view of the Pharisees about defilement was crude and over-literal, like those who think that either the Holy Spirit or demons live somewhere inside

our physical bodies and, therefore, look for vomiting as a sign of the expulsion of demons. Jesus showed that the *heart* (we would say today, the mind) is the source of defilement and gave a sobering list of the awful things that can flow from it.

Mark gives the correct deduction that if this is so, all food is *clean* (*'halal'* as a Muslim would say) and permitted to be eaten (19). This would have been a great relief to hearers in a church like Rome, to Jew and non-Jew alike, for it would have made fellowship at the Lord's table easier (Gal. 2:12).

7:24–30 Faith of a foreigner (see Mt. 15:21–28). Mark continues the theme of 'impurity' with the story of a Gentile (therefore 'impure') person. In a sense it is a missionary story. It seems as if Jesus was seeking a place of quiet in a Gentile region, but he could not escape notice. This time, it was not a crowd, but a Greek-speaking local woman who came, begging that he would drive out an evil spirit from her daughter. In his answer (27) Jesus was probably quoting a popular proverb, and was therefore not being as harsh as it sounds. In any case, the emphasis is on the first part of the sentence. While Jesus was on earth, his mission was in the first place to Israel (Mt. 15:24). After the cross, the turn of the Gentiles would come, in the universal mission so dear to Mark. But the woman's faith was great and so was her persistence, for her need was great. She accepted good-humouredly that she had no right at this stage to claim God's grace but simply threw herself on his mercy, turning Jesus' parable back in his direction. Was Jesus only testing her, to see if her faith was great enough? Such faith was rewarded. It is a miracle of grace that Gentiles share in all the promises of God made to Israel (Rom. 11:18). It is easy for us to presume on our position.

7:31–37 The deaf and dumb man. This story of a physical healing is an illustration of that fact that even if people are deaf to God (as the Pharisees were) Jesus can heal them. The actions used by Jesus were intended to make the man understand that this was not healing by magic but healing by God in answer to prayer. Jesus wanted to create faith in the man before he would heal. So, deafness was imitated by stopping the man's ears, and healing of dumbness imitated by touching his tongue and spitting out. Looking up to heaven and sighing were visible pictures of prayer that a deaf and dumb man could understand. The word of command was spoken in the man's own native Aramaic, which Mark interprets for his non-Palestinian church.

As usual, Jesus commanded silence, and as usual, he was disobeyed. The excited people said, *'He has done everything well'*, and were amazed, but did they believe? In a short while, Peter would make the leap of faith from this amazement to recognizing the true nature of Jesus: deaf Peter will hear, and dumb Peter will speak.

8:1–13 Feeding the four thousand (see Mt. 15:32–39). A few more exhibitions of the powers of the kingdom of God were given before Jesus decided that his disciples were ready for their final 'test'. Had they learned yet who he was? Had they learned the lesson of the feeding of the five thousand? Here was an opportunity for them to show if they had, and they failed miserably. Once again, there was a hungry crowd intent on Jesus' teaching. Once again, Jesus showed his compassion; and once again, the disciples showed their helplessness (4). Their thinking was still the thinking of this world; they had left Jesus out of their calculations. Once again Jesus patiently asked them how much bread they had, and they reported a pitifully tiny amount. Once again, he gave thanks to God and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to give to the crowd. Once again, God's provision for their needs was more than enough.

Perhaps it is not surprising that some critics have thought that this story is just a mistaken repetition of the feeding of the five thousand, but that is to miss the whole point. Mark is deliberately showing the slowness and dullness of the disciples, even when a second similar miracle was performed (see vs 17–20). In any case, the number of the loaves and of the baskets of fragments (as well as the number of people fed) is not the same as before. The eyewitness was reporting faithfully again.

8:14–21 The yeast of the Pharisees and Herod (see Mt. 16:5–12). Mark seems to have told this story to underline the total failure of the Twelve to understand, and perhaps to give the reason: they were still too much influenced by the thinking of this world. Perhaps they were busy blaming each other for forgetting to bring bread with them on the trip when Jesus gave them the warning (really a little parable). They had failed to see the spiritual meaning and, worse still, had forgotten that Jesus could and would meet any bodily needs of those seeking God's kingdom; he had shown that in the feeding miracles already. This time, Jesus rebuked them bluntly (21). They should have seen that the *yeast* of the Pharisees was their whole attitude to life, which would affect the disciples unless they took care. We too need to be constantly on our guard against the 'spirit of the age' or the thinking and teaching of the other religions that surround us. Christ's way is totally different from the way of the world,

which we read about in papers, hear on radio, or see on television.

8:22–26 Healing a blind man. This last example of the powers of the kingdom of God may be a picture of the spiritually blind disciples, so soon to receive their sight. Friends brought a blind man to Jesus; their faith as well as his, would be rewarded. They led the blind man out of the shouting and confusion of the village so that he could listen to Jesus without distraction. To spit on the man's eyes and to lay hands on him are things that a blind man can feel. There is nothing magical about spittle, even if it is the spittle of Jesus; it is only an outward aid to faith and understanding.

Why did this healing take two stages? Was it perhaps because of the man's imperfect faith? Mark does not say. It is enough that Jesus did not leave the man half-healed but persisted until he saw everything clearly. Is this a picture of the way that even Peter would only half-see the truth about Jesus at first? The man was warned to go straight *home* without going back to the village, where people who saw him might be tempted to follow Jesus only as a healer, not as a saviour. There is always a danger where healing miracles take place in the preaching of the gospel that people will come to Christ for the wrong reasons.

8:27 – 10:52 The cost of the kingdom of God

We are now at the central turning-point of Mark's gospel and the beginning of the second section, which is marked by Peter's great spiritual discovery of who Jesus was. The blind disciples saw at last, but even Peter still had only partial sight (like the blind man just healed by Jesus). He saw that Jesus was the Messiah but not that he was a Messiah who must suffer. This was to be the cost of the kingdom, not only for Jesus but also for them.

From this point on, Jesus concentrated on teaching the small group of disciples, not the crowds outside. He performed few miracles, though he did not refuse to heal if sick people came to him. This was because there was no further need for miracles once the lesson had been learnt. The 'good news' was, however, still at the centre. From now on the story moves very quickly to the last week in Jerusalem, which takes up a third of the gospel. That is why Mark's gospel has sometimes been called a story of the cross with a long introduction.

8:27 – 9:13 The cost to Jesus

8:27–30 Peter's discovery (see Mt. 16:13–20; Lk. 9:18–21). Perhaps Jesus led his disciples to this place because it was quiet. Being on the very edge of Jewish territory, he could still preach in villages without being mobbed by folk seeking healing. This is an area which is green and cool and is certainly one of the most beautiful parts of Palestine. Like any good teacher, Jesus asked his class a leading question: *'Who do people say I am?'* There is after all only one basic question in life: Who is Jesus? On our answer to that depends our eternal future. The disciples' reply indicated that the various opinions about Jesus had not changed since the early stages of his ministry – John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. To say, as Peter did, that Jesus was the Messiah was to go beyond these earthly ascriptions. If, with Peter, we say to Jesus 'You are the Christ', then we must follow him, and our lives will be totally changed.

Why did Jesus forbid his disciples to tell anybody that he was the Messiah? First, because people must find this out for themselves, though it is really a revelation from God. Secondly, because they must understand what sort of a Messiah Jesus was. He was not to be a spectacular and outwardly successful hero, driving out the hated Roman rulers and setting up a Jewish state, as many hoped. Instead, he was to be a humble, patient, loving, peaceful Messiah, God's suffering servant, as pictured in Is. 53.

It is remarkable, if Mark's gospel was produced in Rome, where Peter was such an important figure, that he does not mention here the great promises made to Peter by Jesus at this time (Mt. 16:18). Could it have been that Peter did not want them included? Certainly Mark did not see Peter as the first great founding bishop of the Roman church, in the way that later centuries did.

8:31 – 9:1 The cost of Messiahship (see Mt. 16:21–28; Lk. 9:22–27). Jesus taught his disciples that he would *suffer many things* – rejection by the religious leaders (who, as we have seen, were his enemies), a violent death and a rising on the third day.

Peter *rebuked* Jesus (32). We are staggered at his impudence; but have there not been times when we too have questioned God's way of working and suggested to him another pattern, closer to our way of thinking? We cannot afford to criticize Peter. Jesus, usually so gentle and patient with his disciples, was very outspoken on this occasion. Words like Simon Peter's, trying to turn Jesus aside from the cross, show Satan's thoughts, not God's. This was the temptation that Jesus had faced and conquered in the wilderness and would conquer again at Gethsemane. He would not yield to it, and neither must his followers. This is the reason for the stern warning of v 34. 'No cross, no crown' is as true of Christians as it is of Christ.

Did Peter object to Jesus taking this path

because he was afraid of the path for himself? To *take up* the cross was a sign of accepting a shameful slave's death, in the eyes of the non-Christian world, and was a real possibility in the case of members of the Roman church in persecution. The image is of a condemned man on his way to the place of execution, shouldering the cross-bar of his own cross and walking through the mocking crowds, just as Jesus did on the way to Calvary. To *deny* self means refusing to follow any natural inclination, however innocent, that runs contrary to Christ's path for us. (It is something far deeper than going without sugar in Lent, as some Christians do.) Yet this is the only path to true spiritual life; to do anything else is to lose ourselves eternally. In this sense, loss is gain and gain is loss.

There is, however, a great promise linked with these stern words: those who walk this path will see, even in this life, the power of the kingdom of God realized (9:1). In the immediate future, this would be on the mountain of transfiguration (described in this next chapter); in the more distant future, it refers to the resurrection and ascension of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost; and finally, no doubt it refers to the wonder of Christ's second coming. Like most prophecies it has several different 'layers' of fulfilment.

9:2–13 The Transfiguration (see Mt. 17:1–13; Lk. 9:28–36). Now that Peter, at least, had realized who Jesus was, Jesus appeared to Peter, James and John as he had been, and as he would be again in glory. The *dazzling white* of his clothing is typical in the Bible of angels and heavenly beings. Elijah and Moses clearly represent the OT hopes of God's kingdom. Moses was a prophet as well as the law-giver of Israel; Elijah was expected as the forerunner of the Messiah. Peter, like many of us, babbled senselessly when he was scared; we need not look for deep theology in his foolish remarks. Jesus was still only 'rabbi' or 'teacher' to him, in spite of his earlier discovery. Yet, by his use of the word *shelters*, Peter may have been remembering how God came down on Mt. Sinai long before and showed his glory in a 'shelter' ('tabernacle' is the old English word). But God's words, not Peter's, are the centre of the passage. Once again, as at the baptism in Jordan, God bore witness to his beloved son, and called all to listen to him (not to Peter or any other human voice). As at Sinai, the cloud is a symbol of God's presence. Suddenly Moses and Elijah faded away and only Jesus was left with the three disciples.

They were warned not to speak of what they had seen until after Jesus *had risen from the dead*. They could not understand what he meant by *rising from the dead*, although it seems so simple to us. They must have known that by *Son of Man* Jesus was referring to himself and, like all orthodox Jews, they believed in a general resurrection at the last day (Jn. 11:24), but what did this mean? Was it a coming back to life, like that of Jairus's daughter? Jesus identified Elijah with John, in the sense that John had fulfilled Elijah's task; and just as John had been rejected and killed, so would Jesus be (12–13).

9:14 – 10:52 The cost to others

9:14–32 The demonized boy (see Mt. 17:14–23; Lk. 9:37–45). The opposition of the teachers of the law and the unbelief of disciples and crowd grieved Jesus (19). His disciples had proved powerless, and the father's faith was limited (21). Healing depends, however, on the power of God, not on the extent of our faith, so Jesus was able to expel the demon and heal the boy.

In answer to the disciples' questions, Jesus explained that part of the cost of the kingdom is prayer (to which some manuscripts add 'fasting', which often accompanied earnest prayer in OT and NT alike). This is a warning that the victory over the enemy, of which this healing is an example, is not to be won cheaply. So it leads quite naturally to a further foretelling by Jesus of his coming death. The disciples still failed to *understand what he meant* (32).

It is interesting that, although the boy's symptoms appear to be those of epilepsy, all three parallel gospels describe his state as due to forces of evil. While we cannot simply dismiss this as language of the time, we must not make the even more serious mistake of attributing all epileptic-type attacks to forces of evil. There are many physical and chemical factors involved in epilepsy, and a doctor, not an exorcist, is the appropriate person to deal with them.

9:33–50 True greatness (*cf.* Mt. 18:1–5; Lk. 9:46–48). The Twelve still had to learn that part of the cost of the kingdom of God was ceasing to seek high places for themselves. Servanthood and humility are the only paths to true Christian greatness, which is why Jesus took a child as an example here (36). The subject of *little ones* recurs in v 42: in between Mark has 'sandwiched' another lesson in humility, which is part of the cost of God's kingdom. John seems to have been proud of the fact that the disciples had forbidden any outside their own circle to drive out demons. As the man was *driving out demons* in Jesus' name he must have been a believer in Jesus, even if not a follower. No-one has a monopoly of the work of the kingdom. We must accept the success of others humbly and rejoice in it, as Paul did (Phil. 1:18). No work done for Christ will go unrewarded, whoever does it.

The kingdom of God is a serious matter; that is why to put a spiritual stumbling-block in someone's way will be punished so severely (42). Indeed, the value of the kingdom of God is so great that no sacrifice is too great to make for it. Hand, foot, and eye stand for the most precious of human possessions, yet better lose them than the kingdom of God. Of course, this is meant metaphorically not literally, as some early fathers took it and and as some fundamentalist non-Christian religions still understand it.

Jesus spoke strongly about *hell* (48). It is the opposite of the kingdom of God, and there does not seem to be any 'third option'. Yet Jesus spoke of hell to believers in warning, not to sinners in condemnation. Is. 66:24, which Jesus quoted, describes Gehenna, the smouldering rubbish dump of Jerusalem, which was used as a picture of God's judgment on sin. Salt is another metaphor; it purifies, as fire does. If we purify ourselves now (there is no thought of some 'purgatory' after death), we will not come under God's judgment later. This is a very different concept from the hell of popular Buddhism or other faiths If we are 'salted' like this with the values of the kingdom, we will not argue who is greatest but will live *at peace* with one another.

10:1–16 Marriage and the kingdom of God (see Mt. 19:1–15; *cf.* Lk. 16:18; 18:15–17). The cost of the kingdom is great, even in the area of the closest of human relationships. Moses may have allowed divorce because of human hardness of heart (failure to understand God's purpose in marriage), but Jesus made it plain that the kingdom of God demands lifelong faithfulness to one partner and he saw this as involved in God's plan of creation. This is so costly that, according to Matthew, the disciples said that it would be better to remain unmarried than face it. But both here and in Matthew, Jesus called remarriage after divorce (whether by husband or wife) plain adultery from the point of view of God's kingdom (11–12). We can imagine how radical a saying like this would have sounded in the lax moral atmosphere of Rome, as indeed it sounds in the lax moral atmosphere of our day when old moral conventions are breaking down. It is true that in Matthew there seems to be an exception in the case of unfaithfulness, but Mark gives the saying in its starkest form. Perhaps that was what was needed in Gentile Rome.

By contrast to this severity, Mark adds here a tender story of Jesus' loving concern for little children. This is the other side of his stern words about the sanctity of marriage. Children, after all, are the greatest sufferers from divorce. But there is also another truth about God's kingdom: only those who receive it with the simplicity and trust of children can enter it. This is one of the very few occasions where Mark records that Jesus was *indignant*, and it is interesting to see the cause. We might have thought that other matters were more important than the spiritual welfare of children, but Jesus valued them and often uses children as examples for us. Perhaps that is why the word 'children' is sometimes used to mean 'simple believers' in the gospels.

10:17–34 The man who had everything (see Mt. 19:16–30; 20:17–19; Lk. 18:18–34). Nowhere is the cost of God's kingdom brought out more clearly than in the story of this rich man. He had absolutely everything except eternal life. He wanted it but was unwilling to give up everything else to gain it (like the monkey in the well-known story that could not get out of the trap because it was unwilling to let go of what was in its hand). There is, however, no other way to enter the kingdom; even Peter and the other disciples had learned that (28). The man was clearly lovable (21) and eager and doubtless moral, but he could not face the cost. Yet Jesus would rather lose a possible follower than lower the standard for him; indeed, there was no other possible standard. So the man *went away sad* from Jesus and we hear no more of him; he had made his choice.

Jesus said (23) it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, indeed impossible without God's help (27). We are all tempted to trust our 'riches', whatever they are, not God. Jesus used a comical proverb to illustrate how difficult it is; clearly a camel cannot get through the eye of a needle.

Jesus taught that the result of giving money to the poor, or of any sacrifice we might make for the kingdom of God, will be treasure not on earth but in heaven; the more we give, the more we gain. This does not mean that if we give money to God's work, we get more back, as some 'prosperity cults' teach. It does mean that the spiritual rewards will far outweigh any sacrifices that we may have made for Christ, even if persecution comes along with them (30).

The passage ends with yet another foretelling of the suffering of Jesus, this time in even more detail, and this is another illustration of the truth about sacrifice. Something in Jesus' behaviour, as well as his words, made the disciples *astonished* and the crowd that followed *afraid*. Somehow they felt that a crisis was near.

10:35–45 A selfish request (see Mt. 20:20–28). If it had not been recorded we could have hardly believed that, after all this, James and John could have come with their ambitious and selfish request. We know only too well, however, what we are like ourselves, and so we can understand. If they had realized the

true cost of high place in the kingdom of God, they would not have dared to ask, in spite of their brave words. *Cup* and *baptism* (or 'flood') are OT pictures of judgment and suffering. Jesus warned them that suffering would indeed come, but it would not necessarily lead to high place in the kingdom of God, for all must endure it. High place was for God alone to give.

The ten other disciples showed up just as badly as James and John when they were angry with them because of their request. No doubt they had wanted these places for themselves. So Jesus patiently explained to them once more the totally different pattern of God's kingdom, where true greatness is humble service. He himself is the great example of this. He came to be the suffering servant of God prophesied in Is. 53 and to give his life as a ransom for many (45). The use of the word 'many' does not mean that Jesus died only for some people, not for all; it stresses rather the great number of those ransomed by his death. This is one of the very few places in Mark where the way in which Jesus' death saves us is explained. Mark is far more interested in the plain fact that it does save us rather than the way in which it does. *Ransom* is one of the many pictures by which salvation is explained in the NT. It means the buying-back of people from slavery or prison or death by paying a price. We are all too familiar with it today from the demands of kidnappers and hijackers. In this case the price was to be the death of Jesus.

10:46–52 The healing of Bartimaeus (see Mt. 20:29–34; Lk. 18:35–43). This last recorded healing took place on the very road to suffering and death at Jerusalem. It is a picture of one in need with persistent faith being healed and, as a result, following Jesus. No doubt this was the story of many who followed Jesus, even during the terrible last week. Mark's eyewitness remembered the man's name, and Mark, as usual, translates it. Like many in the Third World, the man was simply known by his father's name, but he may have been well known to the early church later.

11:1 – 16:20 Bringing in the kingdom of God

Now we come to the last great section of the gospel, to which all the rest has been leading up. Mark introduces the 'Passion Narrative', the story of Jesus' betrayal, trials, suffering and death in Jerusalem. There are, however, many happenings also described here, all of which find their place in Mark's pattern.

11:1 – 13:37 Warnings of the kingdom of God

When the Messiah came he was rejected, but that rejection would in turn bring judgment. That is why there is a sadder note running through these chapters, for they are more than an exhibition of God's love. God's hour of decision had come for Israel, as it comes for all of us when we are confronted with Jesus and the cross. Israel's whole future would depend on the reception given to the promised Messiah.

11:1–11 Jesus enters Jerusalem (see Mt. 21:1–9; Lk. 19:28–38). 'Foal' would be a better word to use than *colt* here, for the other gospels make clear that Jesus rode on a young donkey, not a horse. Perhaps Mark did not know which it was, or perhaps his Roman audience would not care. They would not know the words of the OT prophet, telling of the meek and humble king, riding on a donkey (Zc. 9:9). V 2 may refer to an arrangement already made with the owner by Jesus, or it may be an example of his supernatural insight. If the NIV is right in translating v 2 as *The Lord needs it*, then it might be a rare use by Mark of the later title for Jesus. Usually in Mark the disciples simply call Jesus 'master'; after the resurrection they all called him 'Lord'. But the verse could equally mean 'The owner needs it', and then the second half would mean 'he [the bystander] will send it here at once'.

So Jesus rode into Jerusalem, as David or Solomon might have entered the capital, with branches and clothes spread on the road before him (like a red carpet at an airport today, or palm and banana leaves at a village festival in the Third World). We are used to the cheering crowds on these occasions, but these were not summoned by government decree; they were coming of their own free will. Their chanted slogans were taken from the Psalms and hailed a coming king of the family of David who would restore the kingdom of Israel to its old glory. They were expecting a political and nationalist leader, perhaps a violent social reformer, as many do today. Was this not exactly what Jesus had feared from the start, that all would misunderstand if he claimed to be God's Messiah? Nevertheless, on this day Jesus rode on in triumph into the capital that he would soon weep over (Lk. 19:41) to inspect the temple.

11:12–26 Jesus is challenged in the temple (*cf.* Mt. 21:12–22; Lk. 19:45–48). When Jesus confronted the merchants in the temple court, it was not that he, in irritation, was striking dead a healthy tree; he was giving a sad assessment of the tree's true condition. God's judgment on Israel would be the same. That is why the story of the clearing of the temple is 'sandwiched' by Mark between the two halves of the story of the fig-tree, to make the solemn warning to Israel plain.

When Jesus entered the temple, he probably came into the Court of the Gentiles, the only place in the whole complex where non-Jews were allowed to enter and worship. But worship had become impossible; the court had been turned into a typical bazaar area, with buyers and sellers and stalls everywhere. Birds and animals for sacrifice were sold there, and foreign money could be changed into the only currency accepted in the temple, one without the hated figures of Roman emperors and heathen gods. In one sense, all this was a service to the worshippers, but the noise and bustle made worship impossible. To make matters worse, this court was used as a short-cut by merchants bringing goods from the Mount of Olives to the city itself.

We know from other sources that the worshippers in the Jewish temple were exploited by the merchants, who charged high prices for the sacrificial animals, and the money-changers, who offered unfair exchange rates. We also know that this trade was controlled by the priestly aristocracy who profited greatly at the expense of ordinary pilgrims.

Jesus justified his action of driving out the stall-holders and their customers by showing that God's plan was for his temple to be a centre of worship for all nations, not just the Jews (17). That must have brought great encouragement to Mark's non-Jewish readers.

Jesus' disruption of the temple trade must have increased the chief priests' hatred for him, and they *began looking for a way to kill him* (18). They, above all others, should have recognized their king by what he did. All good kings of Judah had purified the temple, as Mal. 3:1–4 says that the coming one would do. If Jesus acted like this to the old earthly temple, how will he act towards the new temple that is his body, the Christian church?

Peter used the word *cursed* of the fig-tree (21); it is important to realize that in the Bible 'blessing' and 'cursing' do not have the same meaning as today. They are God's solemn judgments, his pronouncements of the results of either pleasing or displeasing him; he does not act without reason. The Bible knows nothing of magical curses; and we do not need to fear them, for they cannot harm the Christian. Likewise, blessing is not something that others can give us magically; it will come to us, if we remain in Christ (Jn. 15:4).

Jesus and his disciples seem to have spent the nights during their time in Jerusalem in their 'safe house' at Bethany. That is why Peter pointed out the withered fig-tree on the way back to the city next morning. Mark does not stress the application of this acted parable to Israel; the structure of his gospel has made that plain enough already. Instead, he shows how Jesus used the withering of the fig-tree as an example of the results of believing prayer (23). But it also shows that we cannot pray in faith for anything that we like. In this matter, Jesus was 'thinking God's thoughts after him' and willing his father's will. That sort of prayer, if asked in faith, will always be answered, for it is praying that God's will may be done (as Jesus prayed in Gethsemane). We can only move the mountains that God wants removed, not those that we want moved. 'Moving mountains' was a phrase used by the rabbis to describe overcoming seemingly impossible difficulties; we must not of course take it in the literal sense. If we pray in this way, we can give thanks for the result before we see it, for the answer is sure in the will and purpose of God.

There is one other condition for effectual prayer: we must freely forgive others, as God forgives us (25). If we do not, how could we pray 'in Jesus' name', that is, in the way in which he would and did? This verse may indicate that Mark knew the Lord's Prayer, though he does not record it in his gospel.

11:27–33 'By what authority?' (see Mt. 21:23–27; Lk. 20:1–8). The opposition to Jesus continued, as the angry priests asked what right he had to act in this way. Jesus, the gentle controversialist, said that he had the same right to do it as John had to baptize, and asked them where John's authority had come from. They dared not answer as they would have liked to do, and so they dropped that question (but others would soon come up). Did they know in their hearts that they were fighting the truth, both in the case of John and of Jesus? If so, it only made them more bitter, as it did Saul of Tarsus (Acts 26:14).

12:1–12 The bad tenants (see Mt. 21:33–46; Lk. 20:9–19). Jesus exposed this wilful, stubborn opposition in a parable so plain that even the priests could see the meaning (12). Everybody would have recognized the vineyard as a picture of Israel; even the details of the owner's loving care were drawn from the OT. The prophets were often seen as the servants of God, and everybody knew that they had been rejected and mistreated by Israel. But who was this much-loved son? Those who remembered the father's witness at the baptism or transfiguration would know. Probably even the priests realized that it was a claim by Jesus to be the Son of God, because they brought the claim up at his trial and crucifixion. This is one of only two places where Jesus himself indirectly claimed to be the Son of God before his trial, though others (whether disciples or even demons) might have previously recognized him as such.

In this story the son was killed; that is the cost

of God's kingdom. But the warning is the main point of the parable (9). Those who rejected the king would themselves be rejected, and their specially privileged position would be taken away and given to others. Mark's readers would have recognized the fulfilment of Jesus' words in the church, where Gentile shared with Jew on equal terms at last. The neglected and despised stone left lying on the ground by the builders would become the keystone of the whole new temple that was the Christian church (10). There is irony in Jesus' suggestion that the priests did not know the very Scriptures of which they boasted. No wonder that they wanted to arrest him, but no wonder they feared to do so.

12:13–17 Taxes to Caesar (see Mt. 22:15–22; Lk. 20:20–26). This question was asked by those who had already rejected Jesus and wanted only to trap him. If Jesus agreed with paying taxes to Caesar, the patriots would reject him; if he opposed it, the Romans would arrest him. This issue would have been important for those in the early church who were being persecuted, whether at Rome or elsewhere, but who were still trying to show that they were ideal citizens. Jesus' answer meant that if we enjoy the benefits of a state, we must pay the price, in the form of taxation and so on. But the sting of his answer lay in the tail, as far as the Pharisees and Herodians were concerned. If we must give Caesar what is his, then we must give God what is his too, and that is something which they were not doing.

For a persecuted church in the Roman Empire, it would have an even deeper meaning although Mark does not raise it. If Caesar asks for what belongs to God, not to Caesar, they could not give it, for conscience sake. So Christians died for refusing to give a pinch of incense to Caesar's statue. In the same way, Christians suffer in our day for refusing to bow before pictures of emperors and dictators and presidents. We cannot worship person, party or state, but only God himself.

12:18–27 Marriage at the resurrection (see Mt. 22:23–33; Lk. 20:27–40). Having silenced the Pharisees, Jesus was approached by the Sadducees, the wealthy nobles who controlled both temple and Sanhedrin, the great religious council of Israel. They simply came to mock his belief in resurrection by giving an obviously ridiculous illustration of a much-married wife, probably not drawn from real life. The Pharisees had already ruled that such a wife would belong to her first husband at the resurrection (which they interpreted in a very material way, rather as popular Islam does today). The Sadducees approved, of course, of the Mosaic custom mentioned here, which was designed to keep property in the widow's family, but they rejected any idea of resurrection altogether. To them, this life was all that there was; no wonder that they were hard, materialistic and often rich. We all know of people like that. First, Jesus undercut the whole argument by rejecting crudely materialistic ideas of the resurrection, in which he, like the Pharisees, believed. As Paul says, our resurrection body will be of a different kind (1 Cor. 15:44). Jesus compares it here to that of angels. Questions like sex and bodily relationships do not arise. So too we must reject crudely materialistic ideas of the meaning both of resurrection and of 'Son of God', as though it meant simple physical fatherhood. These things are stumbling-blocks in the way of receiving the good news.

From the books of Moses, which the Sadducees accepted, Jesus showed them that the idea of resurrection could be proved from the patriarchs' relationship with the living God. They 'caught' eternal life from God, as we do from Christ today, but it is a new sort of life, demonstrating the power of God.

12:28–34 The greatest commandment (see Mt. 22:34–40; Lk. 10:25–28). This teacher of the law came to Jesus with what may have been a real question, to judge from Jesus' answer. In a sense, Jesus' reply to him contained nothing new; it was drawn from the Scriptures which would have been familiar to the teacher. Jesus placed love for God at the heart of the law; love for our neighbour should and will spring naturally from this as a consequence. If we try to put love of neighbour first or, worse still, leave out the love for God altogether, we shall make shipwreck of our lives and fail even to love our neighbour as we should. On the other hand, if we say that we love God, and do not love our neighbour, we are hypocrites (1 Jn. 4:20).

Although the teacher agreed that all this was true, and therefore was very near the kingdom of God, he was not yet a member of it as he had not yet acknowledged Jesus as king. Did he ever do so?

12:35–37 Is the Messiah divine or human? (see Mt. 22:41–46; Lk. 20:41–44). Now it was Jesus' turn to ask a question. Israel was looking for a Messiah, a king of David's line, to restore an earthly kingdom. As we have seen, it was probably because of this false hope that Jesus did not claim openly to be Messiah. It was also because of this that, as soon as Peter had recognized him as Messiah, he explained that God's Messiah must suffer and die. How was he to show that the Jewish earthly expectation was wrong?

All Jesus' audience would have agreed that Ps. 110 was written by David; they would also

have agreed that 'my Lord' in the Psalm must refer to God's anointed, the Messiah. How then could David, the honoured ancestor, possibly call his descendant, the Messiah, 'my Lord', so giving him a superior position? Any one from a culture which reveres ancestors will see the point at once here. It would be unthinkable, unless this Messiah was more than human and thus far superior to his ancestor. Whether or not this particular Psalm was written by David, and whether or not this was the original meaning, is quite beside the point; Jesus was speaking in a way his contemporaries would have understood.

12:38–44 Teachers and widows (see Lk. 20:45 – 21:4; *cf.* Mt. 23:1–36). Here we have two contrasting pictures of those who reject and those who accept the values of God's kingdom. Those who reject are the teachers of the law who loved power and position and wealth. They made an outward show of religion, but 'gobbled up' the property of helpless folk like widows, perhaps by continually demanding religious contributions from them. On the other hand, there was a poor widow, who willingly and gladly gave to God all the money she had, on which her life depended (44). We all know the amazing generosity of the poor in our Christian congregations. This is the sort of giving that Jesus would show at Calvary, and so this is the sort of giving that he asks from us. In 14:3, we shall see another woman who gave like this, when she smashed an alabaster jar of perfume for Jesus' sake.

13:1–37 Signs of the end (see Mt. 24; Lk. 21:5–37). Jesus has given warnings in plenty to those outside God's kingdom; now, there are words of warning for those inside. They are given in terms of the coming judgment, which will only be a time of testing for the disciples, but yet will be a very real test. The whole subject is introduced by the prophecy of judgment on the temple (2). The 'inner ring' (Andrew is included this time) must have believed that the destruction of the temple would introduce the end times, and they were anxious to know the signs. Perhaps this was the same sort of curiosity that leads Christians today to try to work out the date of Christ's second coming. But Jesus turned it directly into a challenge to Christians living in every age, which is the function of all such prophecy in the Bible.

The chief need is to be watchful (5), especially of plausible deceivers, and not to be alarmed by terrible circumstances. Both of these would have been relevant at Rome, home of several early heresies, and disturbed around the time of the writing of Mark's gospel by the 'year of the four emperors' (AD 68), with several contenders fighting for the crown. Persecution will be unavoidable, but it is to be seen as an opportunity for witness with words that will be given at the time by the Holy Spirit. (This is one of the few direct references to the Spirit in Mark.) The prediction that *the gospel must first be proclaimed to all the nations* (10) is almost Mark's version of the 'great commission' at the end of Matthew (28:19). Had Mark seen some of this in the labour of Paul and the other apostles?

There is also the warning that even the closest of natural ties will break down under such stress (12), the opposite truth to that taught in the saying about the true 'family of Jesus' (3:34–35). Many of us will know how family members have betrayed each other in times of persecution, and the agony of seeming to be universally hated without reason, just because we are Christians (13). Yet there is a promise attached: faithful endurance to the end will bring eternal life, even if not safety in this world.

The four disciples had asked 'When?' In carefully veiled language, Jesus hinted that it would be when the idolatrous Roman army standards would be planted triumphantly in the temple at Jerusalem. Mark dare not report this openly (in Rome of all places) especially as, from the language, it does not yet seem to have taken place at the date of the writing of the gospel. But the little addition in v 14 shows that he expects his readers to understand. Jesus used language taken from the book of Daniel, telling in the first place of the desecration of the temple by the persecutor Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC. The abomination in that case was an idol, set up in the temple itself, thus defiling it. The following verses seem to describe the terrible suffering in the first Jewish wars, when Roman armies invaded Palestine. This took place only a generation after the death of Christ, and the Jewish Christian church would have shared in the general suffering. Tradition says that the Christians fled to Pella in Transjordan, taking Jesus' warning to heart (14).

An even more urgent warning, in our case, is that against false Messiahs and false prophets (22). These abounded in the time after Christ, and they still abound today, in false sects at the 'lunatic fringe' of the Christian church. Most important to remember in our rediscovery of 'signs and wonders' is that even these may be false and signs of false prophets; we must be on our guard (23). Perhaps this is why Jesus used signs so sparingly in his ministry.

Up to this point, everything Jesus predicted can be fitted into the time around AD 70, with Roman armies ravaging Palestine and emperors fighting for the throne. Mark's readers would have recognized the references, even if some are

not clear to us now. From v 24 onwards it seems as though it is the end times that are being described (but for a different view see on Mt. 24). In these last days the greatest earthly powers symbolized as in the OT by sun, moon and stars, will fall, and the Son of Man will come in glory to gather his chosen ones (26–27). The *ends of the earth* is drawn from the imagery of Dn. 7, but the phrase may contain a hint of the Gentile mission. It cannot simply be a reference to the gathering in of faithful Jews from all over the world.

This time is apparently long after the period of the Jewish wars of AD 70, although they are a picture of the wider judgment to follow at the end times, as surely as summer follows spring in Palestine. It is most unlikely that the sprouting of the fig-tree here refers to the Jews' return to Palestine and the setting up again of the state of Israel. It is more likely to be another popular proverb of the sort still used widely in the Third World, though no longer common in the west.

As often in OT prophecy, Jesus passed directly from a time close at hand to the very distant future; it is as though we saw two great mountain peaks, but not the great valley between them. That is why he could say that *this generation* would not pass away until the first set of signs was fulfilled. Many of his listeners would still be alive in AD 70. It is most unlikely that *this generation* refers to the survival of the Jewish people as a whole, but those who understand the phrase to refer to both the immediate and distant future understand it in this way.

Just as the book of Revelation is often called 'the Apocalypse' (which means 'unveiling of the future'), so this chapter is often called 'the little Apocalypse', as in it Jesus also unveils the future. Three things should be borne in mind when reading this chapter. First, that open language is impossible in times of political danger. Secondly, that symbolic language is used to reveal things to us, not to mystify us; there is nothing 'mysterious' about it. Thirdly, all is designed to make us more faithful Christians here and now, not to enable us to make prophecies or speculations about the distant future (37). This is shown by the fact that not even *the Son* (this is another place where Jesus claims a unique relationship to God) knows the date of these things (32). But we have a promise, that in the shaking of all else, the words of Jesus will remain (31), a saying which is used of the words of God himself in the OT.

14:1–52 Dawning of the kingdom of God

This will take us right up to the trial of Jesus.

14:1–11 The king is anointed (see Mt. 26:6–13). Jesus and the disciples were still staying at Bethany, partly no doubt for safety's sake and partly because the city itself would be already crowded with Passover pilgrims. Jesus had a last quiet meal in the home of Simon the Leper, possibly their host. Simon (perhaps a leper healed by Jesus) is unknown to us, but was obviously known to Mark's eyewitness as well as to Mark. Only John tells us that it was Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus (Jn. 12:3), so possibly Simon was the father of the family. Several rather similar stories of anointing are found in the gospels, but it is unlikely that they describe the same event or the same woman.

All that we know of this woman is the immense cost of the gift and the very different reactions of the eleven disciples, Jesus and Judas. The eleven were indignant at the waste. All that money could have been used to feed and clothe the poor, which was of course perfectly true. Jesus, however, though he fully recognized the claims of the poor (7), saw a greater priority even than the poor at this moment. Every king in Judah was anointed before his coronation, and this was to be his anointing, not by a prophet but by a woman. But it was more, for it was a symbolic preparation of his body for burial. This woman knew that her king must die; she had understood the gospel. That was why, wherever the gospel was preached in the whole world (another point to delight Mark), her loving sacrifice would be remembered (9).

But all this was senseless rubbish to Judas. He went at once to the chief priests to find out how much money he could make out of betraying Jesus before it was too late. In the Bible, Judas has no high or patriotic motives; sheer love of money was his downfall, as it has been of many church leaders since, whether in rich or poor countries. That is why Jesus warns so often against the love of money. If Judas could not understand the woman's action, then he would not understand the cross either. We cannot serve God and Money at the same time (Mt. 6:24).

14:12–31 The Last Supper (see Mt. 26:17–35; Lk. 22:7–34). Early on the next day, it seems, Jesus sent two disciples ahead into the city to prepare for the Passover evening meal. This by Jewish law had to be eaten within the city limits, so could not be kept at Bethany. It appears that, as in the case of the donkey, Jesus had already arranged with a friend or follower to lend the room that would be needed. There was nothing supernatural here, any more than there was in Peter's boat or Joseph's tomb, both borrowed by Jesus. But the knowledge that the man with the water-jug would meet them may have been supernatural insight of the kind often shown by prophets in the OT, unless it too was a sign that Jesus had arranged. This sort of insight is nowhere promised to Christians

generally in the NT, though men like Peter and Paul show it at times. We should, therefore, neither seek nor expect it and be careful of those who claim it.

Mark seems to say that this meal was the Passover, while John seems to say that the actual Passover was on the next day (and that, therefore, Jesus died when the Passover lambs were being killed). If John is correct then this meal of Jesus would have been a preparatory meal. This would account for the fact that no lamb is mentioned, but only bread and wine, for Jesus himself was the lamb. There are several possible explanations of the difficulty. Some have suggested that there were two different religious calendars being used in Jerusalem at the time, with different dates for the Passover. Others have suggested that Mark was using the Roman reckoning of 'days' from morning to morning, while John used the Hebrew way of reckoning, from evening to evening. Whichever day it was, this was the evening when Jesus held the first 'Lord's Supper' celebrating his death.

The account of the meal is set between two more warnings of our human weakness. Jesus warned his disciples that one of them would betray him (18). They had no idea who it was but they still had such self-confidence that each refused to believe it could be he. Peter did not stand alone in his self-confidence, though he is usually the chief example. True, even this tragic betrayal finds its place in the plan of God, but that does not make the betrayer less guilty (21). Judas was not a helpless victim, predestined to betray Jesus (this view is the danger of some 'fatalistic' religions like Islam) but chose his own path deliberately, though all was known by God beforehand.

The description of the actual meal is very simple. Mark's hearers would not be familiar with, or interested in, Jewish customs. As usual, the head of the household gave thanks to God for the loaf (not 'blessed' it), just as we would before a meal today, broke the loaf, and gave the pieces to the others. This was exactly what he had done at the two miracles of feeding the crowds (were they a picture of the Lord's Supper too?). What was quite new was that Jesus told them, as he gave it, that this bread stood for and represented his body, so soon to be given and broken on the cross for them. In Aramaic, Jesus' own language, there is no word for 'is'. What Jesus would have said was 'This-my body'. We should not, therefore make any crude, literal interpretation of his words. That in turn will save us from superstitious uses of the bread, like taking fragments home to give to sick children in hope of recovery. The Lord's Supper is mystery but not magic. Perhaps Jesus meant too that, as our bodily life depends on bread or rice, so our spiritual life must be nourished by complete dependence on him in faith.

If bread was the common Jewish food, wine (usually diluted with water) was the common drink; life depended on both. As at all Jewish meals, God was thanked for the fruit of the vine. What was new was that Jesus told his disciples that the red wine in the cup stood for his blood, the blood that would seal a *covenant* by being *poured out for many*. Whether or not we read the word 'new' before *covenant* in v 24 makes little difference. Jesus was referring to the new covenant of which Je. 31:31 speaks, by which our whole natures would be changed, and God's law written on our hearts. When Jesus said that his blood would be *poured out for many* he was going even further, for this was a reference to God's Suffering Servant in Is. 53:12 who was to bear the sin of many. So we can see that the death of Jesus was to be a ransom-price, a covenant sacrifice and a sin-offering; all three are significant whenever we come to the Lord's table. But, if the wine-cup with its bitter dregs at the bottom of the cup, is a picture of suffering, it is also a picture of joy (25). This supper, before the crucifixion, is a picture of the triumphant 'Messianic banquet' in heaven, in which we all will share, with Christ in glory.

So the king, like all kings of Judah, had held his royal banquet. A second warning of the weakness of the disciples followed. It was made easier to bear by news that it had all been foreseen by God (who never expects us to be stronger than we are) and that it would be followed by a joyful reunion in familiar Galilee (28). Mark speaks much of Galilee and Jesus' ministry there, partly because that was where Jesus began his ministry and partly, perhaps, because Galilee, with its half-Gentile population, spoke of the coming mission to the Gentiles. Galilee was later a great centre of early Christianity, as archaeology has shown. Jesus' promise here links with the promise of the angel (16:7) that the disciples would meet the risen Christ in Galilee. For the fulfilment see Mt. 28:16, though Mark himself does not record it.

Not only was Peter's denial foretold but even when it would happen (30), in spite of Peter's self-confident rejection. (The reference to the cock crowing may be to the actual bird or to the blast of the Roman trumpets that marked that time of the night.) Peter is often singled out as the one who denied Christ, but we must remember that all the disciples insisted that they would never *disown* Jesus and they too failed to keep their promise.

14:32–42 The Garden of Gethsemane (see Mt. 26:36–46; Lk. 22:40–46). Many pilgrims camped close to Jerusalem at Passover

time, and it may be that Jesus intended to spend the night in Gethsemane (which means 'oil press') instead of returning to Bethany. But there was to be no sleep for him there. With his 'inner ring' of three disciples, he prayed, under tremendous spiritual stress. We must never think that Calvary was easy for him; this prayer shows how hard it was (see Lk. 12:50). The sleepy disciples, perhaps especially Peter, must have heard and remembered his words (36) and told Mark, for nobody else was present. They even remembered that Jesus used the intimate Aramaic word 'Abba' (which Mark translates) to address God his father (this was later used by the early church; Rom. 8:15). 'Abba' is the name which every Jewish child still uses within the home to address his or her father.

Jesus' prayer was very simple; he did not want to face the cross, but if it was God's path, he would face it. In this way he conquered the enemy. But while he prayed, his disciples slept, in spite of his warnings. No wonder that they yielded to temptation later, when they had already yielded to temptation here. No fall is really unexpected or sudden, as Peter found.

14:43–52 The King is arrested (see Mt. 26:47–56; Lk. 22:47–53). Without the help of Judas, the priests would never have been able to find Jesus among the many groups camped around Jerusalem that night. Those who have seen the crowds of pilgrims camped around temples at a Hindu festival will understand. Even if they had found the place, they would never have been able to find Jesus himself in the darkness, and Judas knew well that his fellow-Galileans might fight. That is why the well-armed temple police were there (not a city mob, as is sometimes suggested). Night arrests of suspects are not unusual; the suspects are off guard, and there is less danger of a rescue by friends or neighbours. As it was, Peter (not named here; see Jn. 18:10) drew his sword in vain, for Jesus refused such help.

We may be used to police spies and paid informers, but the treachery of Judas still staggers us. The kiss on the cheek was the salute demanded by local culture, and the greeting was that of a disciple to his master, but both were only signs arranged in advance. What amazed all was the calm response of Jesus. There was, he said, no need for all this drama. They could have arrested him any day in the temple, if they had not been afraid of the people's reaction. Then the secret of his quiet acceptance came out: he knew that all of this had its place in the plan and purpose of God (49).

There has been much discussion as to who the young man in this story was. Some have suggested that it was John Mark himself, in whose home the Last Supper may have taken place (the church later met in his mother's house; Acts 12:12). If the priests could have arrested Jesus' followers as well as Jesus, no doubt they would have, but they all ran away (50). Probably, that was why Peter feared being recognized in the high priest's house later. It may, on the other hand, be only an irrelevant memory of Mark's eyewitness, which Mark alone preserves faithfully. Whoever it was, he too had left Jesus, like all the rest, and run away.

14:53 – 15:47 The coronation of the King.

The early church liked to think of Jesus as 'Christ the King'. They spoke of his royal robe of purple, his crown of thorns, his sceptre of cane, the acclamation by the soldiers, the placard on the cross and the words of Pilate. All this must have been in Mark's mind too, from the way that he arranges his material. Was he thinking of the crowning of a Caesar in imperial Rome as he described a king who was greater still?

14:53–65 The King on trial (see Mt. 26:57–68; Lk. 22:63–71). These verses, describing Jesus before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish supreme court), led up to his acceptance of the title of Messiah or Christ (62). This meant that he claimed to be the expected king, descendant of David. This claim would not in itself have been thought of as blasphemy, but when it was joined to the claim to be the Son of God, and the heavenly Son of Man in the book of Daniel, it certainly would have been blasphemy if untrue. The trouble was that Jesus' accusers never asked themselves if perhaps it was indeed true, before they rejected it and him.

V 54 prepares us for the story of Peter's denial, but then the focus moves to the search for any and every evidence, false or true, sufficient to condemn Jesus to death. False witnesses are still easy to buy today, in many parts of the world. In some places they wait outside the courts, along with the 'petition-writers', who help, for a fee, those who cannot read and write themselves. The officials had already decided on the verdict in advance (an abuse of justice not unknown today), but lies are harder to prove than the truth (56), as even the Sanhedrin saw. This meeting was acting as a preliminary 'court of enquiry'. According to the Jewish laws drawn up over a century later, and perhaps already in force, the full Sanhedrin was not legally allowed to meet till daybreak (15:1), nor could it meet in the high priest's house, nor could it try and condemn within the same day. If the trial before Pilate was unjust, the trial before the Sanhedrin was irregular. This would have heartened persecuted Christians of Roman

times, who knew that their trial and condemnation were equally unjust. If Christ endured, so could they.

Even after all of this, the priests could only find Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the temple and his saying (not recorded in Mark) that he would rebuild it in three days (see Jn. 2:19) to use against him. Jesus' words about the temple were a reference to his coming resurrection and the new spiritual temple (his body, the Christian church) that he was about to build. Understood literally, however, they constituted a verbal threat to God's temple, which was a very serious offence indeed.

To all of this, Jesus made no reply, until the high priest asked him directly who he was (61). At once he accepted the titles of Son of God and Messiah, adding that of heavenly Son of Man. It is as though he was saying, 'Why did you not ask me directly at once instead of bothering with these foolish charges?' To the high priest, this was an amazing stroke of luck. He could not have believed that Jesus would admit in court what he had hidden all through his ministry. God's time had now come, and there was no need for concealment.

Ceremonially, the high priest tore his robes, which was the sign of hearing blasphemy. Death was the unavoidable sentence (as it is in some fundamentalist religious countries today), though the sentence could not be pronounced till the morning by the full court. Cruel and cowardly mockery followed (65). We know that this still goes on in countries where condemned people, or even prisoners, have no rights; the world has not changed. The court's mockery, though bitter, was different from that of Pilate's soldiers later. The Roman mockery was political; this was worse, because it was from religious motives. So Israel rejected her king.

14:66–72 The King denied (see Mt. 26:69–75; Lk. 22:55–62). We do not know why Peter had come to the courtyard; perhaps he had some mad idea of rescuing Jesus by the violence that Jesus had already rejected in the garden. He was soon recognized in the firelight, and a double denial did not help, for his broad Galilean accent gave him away (70). Finally, as a last resort, he began to use curses, probably equivalent to 'I'll be damned if I know the fellow' (71). Then the cock crowed, and Peter remembered, and, strong man though he thought he was, he broke down and burst into tears (the Greek could also mean 'hiding his face in his cloak for shame'). If the words *second time* and *twice* (only found in some manuscripts) are correct, they would refer to 'second cockcrow', just before dawn.

15:1–15 The King and the governor (see Mt. 27:1–26; Lk. 23:1–25). Here the power of heaven faced the power of Rome; this would have had a special significance for a Roman audience. The Sanhedrin had legalized their sentence of the night before, but they had no power to carry it out. Jesus had to be condemned by a Roman court, if he was to be put to death. Pilate was not interested in purely religious charges (*cf.* Acts 18:15) and so he asked Jesus the only question of interest to him as the representative of Rome (2). The NIV is probably right in translating Jesus' reply as '*Yes*', although other versions make it more vague. Jesus did not deny his kingship; he only showed that it was totally different from this world's ideas of kingship. As he had accepted the other charges before the high priest, so he accepted this one before the governor. Other accusations the high priests would bring, but Jesus would pay no attention to them (4), to Pilate's amazement. Again, amazement is not belief. Pilate could not have believed that Jesus' kingship was any threat to Rome or he would have acted on it at once. Was this meant by Mark to reassure other Roman authorities that the early church did not represent a political threat?

It seems as if half the crowd before Pilate had no special interest in Jesus at all; they were simply there in the hope of getting the governor to release a well-known freedom-fighter named Barabbas. The chief priests had no interest in Barabbas. They belonged to the upper class and had too much to lose by any rebellion against the imperial power. They intended to use Barabbas as part of their scheme to secure Jesus' condemnation. As in many modern states, an amnesty for prisoners might be proclaimed on national or religious occasions. Pilate saw this as a way of escaping from an awkward situation; the crowd saw it as a chance of getting their hero back; the chief priests saw it as a chance of getting a death sentence for Jesus. The crowds and the chief priests got their way; Pilate was trapped.

When Pilate asked his deliberately insulting questions in vs 9 and 12, he must have known that it made Jesus' death certain. To ask the chief priests to acknowledge Jesus as king and to expect them to beg for his release was absurd. He must have been trying to taunt them for the difficulty that they had put him in. It had the obvious result: Barabbas was to be freed and Jesus crucified (the death that Barabbas would have faced, if Jesus had not undergone instead). Crucifixion was a cruel and lingering death reserved for slaves and rebels and it had already been used freely in Palestine. The more the crowd was asked for reasons, the more they shouted and refused to give any. Pilate, the moral coward, gave way to avoid the riot that seemed on the point of starting (15; *cf.* Mt. 27:24). But Mark has made his point: only an

unjust Roman official would put to death a harmless religious teacher, and even Pilate would have known that the charges were false. Politics, not religion, was to be the deciding factor, as often today in time of persecution.

15:16–20 The mock coronation (see Mt. 27:27–31). The cruel mockery of the high priest's court was repeated by Pilate's soldiers. A scarlet cavalry cloak and a rough crown made from the thorn bushes that grow everywhere in Palestine were enough to show a mock king. The soldiers' '*Hail*' was what they might have given to a king like Herod, or even to Caesar himself, but all was mockery. The Roman force of occupation was feared by the ordinary people of Palestine for its cruelty and oppression. Abuse, if not actual torture, was common, as we can see from John's words to the repentant soldiers in Lk. 3:14. So we should not be surprised at the beating and spitting, or even at the cruel flogging that left prisoners half dead before execution. Yet one soldier at least was so moved by what he saw and heard at the cross that he confessed that Jesus was the Son of God (15:39). (In Acts 10 we read of a Roman soldier who was baptized by Peter.)

15:21–47 The crucifixion (see Mt. 27:32–61; Lk. 23:26–56). Now we are at the heart of the coronation of the king, for now we come to the 'way of the cross', the walk from the governor's house to the place of execution. This last journey of Jesus' is still commemorated by Christians each week in Jerusalem to this day.

It looks as if Simon was not known to the Christian group in Mark's day but that his sons were. If Rom. 16:13 is a reference to the same Rufus, then he at least was known to the Roman church. It may have been that carrying his cross won Simon to Jesus. Usually, the condemned man carried the crossbar of his own cross to the place of execution, but Jesus must have been too weak after his flogging. People sometimes died as a result of the flogging (there was no limit to the number of strokes) that always preceded crucifixion. Those in whose lands flogging has been re-introduced as a legal punishment will understand how damaging it can be.

Golgotha ('Calvary' or 'Skull Hill') got its name from its shape. The site is covered over today by church buildings, but a nearby hill, sometimes called 'Gordon's Calvary', gives some idea of what it must have looked like. The *wine mixed with myrrh* would have had a bitter taste but was actually a narcotic, given by pious women of Jerusalem to deaden the pain of crucifixion (23). Jesus refused it to keep his mind clear for his last great fight. As usual at all such executions, the criminal's clothes were the reward of the executioners, and the soldiers threw dice to see who got which piece of clothing, for they would be of unequal value.

Mark does not play on our emotions when he describes the crucifixion, as modern accounts might do. He simply records the facts, for that is enough to move us. Perhaps because of his Roman background, Mark seems to count hours differently from the Greek way (*cf.* Jn. 19:14), so that we are not sure at what exact time Jesus was crucified. Asia and Africa also have, or have had, different ways of counting time too. All that matters is that Jesus died for us there.

Now Jesus' kingship was plain for all to see, on the placard nailed to the cross as Pilate's last taunt to the priests. The crowds mockingly called him the Messiah, the king of Israel; only a Gentile would speak of a king of the Jews. The jeers of the priests and people at the crucifixion are the strongest possible proof that Jesus did indeed claim to be king and Messiah and saviour. Otherwise, the bitter mockery would have had no point. The sign that they demanded (32) was an impossible one. If Jesus was to save us, as suffering Messiah, then he could not save himself from the cross. When he did give them a far greater sign, the sign of the resurrection, they still would not believe. That is why earlier in his ministry Jesus gave the answer that he did to the Pharisees (8:12). Faith would see a sign in everything that he did; unbelief would never be convinced by any sign.

Darkness at noon (by Mark's timing) was a symbol of God's judgment (Am. 8:9). What sort of darkness it was, we do not know. It might have been one of the blinding sandstorms of the area. It could not have been an eclipse of the sun, as Passover occurred at full moon. The darkness seems to have pictured God's wrath not just directed at those who had rejected his Son but also at the sin which Jesus was bearing at that moment for us, as our sin-offering. Why else would Jesus have cried aloud, in the words of Ps 22, that God had deserted him? (34). We cannot conceive what this separation meant to one who from before all eternity had known no separation from his loving Father; yet it shows, as nothing else, how terrible is sin. Jesus' cry came from his heart and Mark translates the Aramaic as usual. Half-understanding, or deliberately misunderstanding, the bystanders saw it as a call to Elijah, who according to Jewish legend would return to save Jews in great danger.

Perhaps, along with the soldiers' mockery there was some sympathy, for one soldier gave Jesus a drink from his rations of *wine vinegar*, egg and water. Jesus had refused the wine mixed with myrrh, perhaps he accepted this second drink (Jn. 19:30) to gain the strength to make his last great cry of triumph ring out. After this Jesus gave *a loud cry* and died. According to

John, Jesus' final words were 'It is finished' (Jn. 19:30). The Roman officer in charge of the execution squad heard and realized that the one who cried out like that, and died as he died, must be *the Son of God* (39). (The Greek could mean 'a son' but it makes little difference; he was a soldier, not a theologian.) The early church saw in these words the confession by a Gentile that Israel had failed to make, and if our suggestions about Mark are correct, this would have been very important to him and his church. In a sense the gospel of Mark is built around the confession of Christ by Peter at Caesarea Philippi, and the confession by this centurion at the cross. Alternatively, we can see it as the contrast between the denial by Peter and the confession by the centurion. This centurion may possibly have become a Christian later, though Mark does not say so. The later story that he went to Britain carrying the gospel is probably a pious fiction.

Mark does not record the earthquake mentioned in Matthew nor the earthquake that introduced Jesus' resurrection; but he does mention one of its results. The great woven *curtain of the temple*, shutting off the holiest place from the gaze of worshippers, was torn in two. Access to God was now open to all, Gentile as well as Jew, lay person as well as priest.

A group of faithful women had watched the crucifixion from a distance, those who had supported Jesus and the Twelve with money and food and loving care (41). If it is said, intended as criticism, that the church today is largely made up of women, the answer is that they have never been lacking, even in the time of Jesus. If Jesus had his band of men as apostles, he also had his faithful band of women followers, of whom we have some names here. Two of them witnessed the hurried temporary burial of Jesus before the Sabbath began. No pious Jew would leave the body of an executed man exposed after sundown, particularly if the next day was a Sabbath.

God had, as he always has, the right man for the moment. He was Joseph, influential enough to ask for the body (normally, the property of the Roman government in such cases), and rich enough to own a rock-cut tomb to use for the temporary burial (46). As customary, a great stone was slidden down a groove in the rock to protect the body from animals or tomb-robbers. The fact that the two Marys saw where Jesus was buried meant that there could have been no mistake when they returned when the Sabbath was over. Two 'witnesses' had seen the place, and they were women. For those who live in countries where a woman's witness is not accepted in court as being of equal value to that of a man, this is a liberating thought.

16:1–20 Vindication of the King

Mark's account of the resurrection breaks off rather suddenly at v 8. For the possible reason for this sudden ending (if it was not indeed an accident), see the Introduction. Vs 9–19 may be a later attempt to write a fuller ending to the gospel. They are not found in the best manuscripts, which is why the NIV prints them separately.

16:1–8 The resurrection of the King. These eight verses show that Jesus' last cry from the cross, 'Finished!' (which Mark records without giving the words) meant 'Mission accomplished!' This is what the Chinese characters on the cross on the hills high above Kowloon proclaim and what the triumphant figure of the Christ of the Andes in South America shows.

Sabbath ended at nightfall on Saturday. The shops would have been open then, so the women could have bought the spices needed for burial. To embalm the body of Jesus they had to wait until it was daylight on Sunday morning (known ever since to Christians as 'the Lord's day'). These preparations are the strongest proof that even Jesus' closest disciples were not expecting the resurrection and so would not have made the story up. Why did they buy spices or come to embalm him, if they believed that he was going to rise? Why worry about moving the stone from the door? (3). If Jesus had not risen, this stone would have been a real problem. The women knew well which tomb Jesus had been laid in (15:47); there was no chance of any mistake. They must have known how heavy the stone was and that three women would have been unable to move it. (Preparations for burial were usually done by women).

When they arrived they found that the stone had already been rolled away, the tomb was empty and a *young man dressed in white* was sitting inside. He told them the joyful news that Jesus had risen and sent them to tell his disciples. Although Mark does not say that the young man was an angel, shining white clothes are usually associated with heavenly beings (as we see from the story of the transfiguration; 9:3). It is nonsense to think of him as a mere disciple. Poor fallen Peter was specially included in the word of hope. Did Mark perhaps see this as a special word of comfort for Christians who had broken under persecution, at Rome or elsewhere? Best of all, the disciples would see Jesus again in the ordinary everyday world of Galilee, as he had promised (14:28).

We might have expected Mark to tell that the women triumphantly brought the news back to the disciples, but instead he just says that they ran away (like the men had done before). This

was because they were full of both awe and joy (the NIV's *trembling and bewildered* does not quite convey the full meaning here), and so *they said nothing to anyone*. We know from the other gospels that it took a personal meeting with the risen Christ to change a private emotion to a living faith that would witness (Jn. 20:18). Perhaps Peter himself was able to confess to this in person to Mark's church (7).

16:9–20 The supplement. As mentioned in the Introduction, the early church was faced with the same question as we are about why Mark broke off so abruptly, especially since the other gospels give such full accounts of appearances of Jesus after the resurrection. It seems that 16:9–20 is made up of two attempts to complete the story (vs 9–18 and 19–20). These are largely made up of details taken from the other gospels or Acts, with a few additions from early church traditions as well. They cannot be said to be part of the Scriptures (like the rest of the gospel), but they are an honest attempt to 'complete' the story of Jesus.

Vs 9–18, largely taken from John's gospel, explain how Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Jesus. Vs 12–13 are a reference to the appearance of Jesus to the two disciples at Emmaus (Lk. 24:13–32), and v 14 has parallels in the other gospels, though the exact occasion is not clear.

Vs 15–18 are the equivalent of the 'great commission' of Mt. 28:18 which Mark had expressed in brief in 13:10. Baptism was to be the sign of commitment to Christ; unbelief was to be itself a condemnation. Most of the *signs* mentioned here are to be found either in the gospels or Acts (except that of drinking poison unharmed although it is mentioned in early tradition). It is important to realize that even this early church writer does not suggest that these signs happen always and for everybody. We must not presume upon them and put God to the test, like one Christian sect that handles poisonous snakes. They are signs of the kingdom of God. We should accept them gratefully if they occur, but our minds should be set on God's kingdom, not on its signs.

Vs 19–20 may be a further addition. They are a brief triumphal account of the ascension of Jesus and the apostolic mission of evangelism, and the way in which the preached word of the Lord was vindicated by the results produced.

These verses, as said above, are not part of Scripture, and so we should not use them for establishing any doctrine, but they are still a valuable summary of the beliefs of the early church, and in so far as they agree with Scripture we may accept them.

Alan Cole

LUKE

Introduction

The theology of Luke

Luke's gospel differs from the other three in that while they are each independent, self-contained writings about the life of Jesus, Luke is part of a two-volume work which deals with the beginnings of Christianity. In the opening verses (1:1–4) Luke explains that he wanted to give an orderly narrative for the benefit of people who already knew something about Christianity. He believed that the Christian faith was rooted in historical events which were to be seen as acts of God, and he wished to show that what his readers had heard about Jesus and the early church had a firm historical foundation. Each evangelist has his own perspective on the life of Jesus; he selects and emphasizes those parts of the story which were thought to be of special importance. Luke's writing has four main characteristics:

1. He had fine *literary* gifts, and he used them to tell his story well.

2. He was more conscious of being a *historian* than the other evangelists.

3. He wanted to show the *theological significance* of what had happened.

4. He had a *pastoral concern* for the needs of his readers.

We can sum up his main theological points as follows:

1. Luke tells the story of Jesus as *a piece of history*. His gospel is more like a biography than the other gospels. Like the others, however, he has mainly recorded what was significant for the Christian faith, and has not told us about the appearance, character, *etc.* of Jesus. He is concerned to show the continuity between the story of Jesus and God's past dealings with his people in OT times and also between the story of Jesus and the rise of the early church. The story of Jesus is part of the ongoing history of God's activity in the world, but it is the most important part. By doing this, Luke has shown that the earthly life of Jesus is an essential part of the gospel.

2. The main theme in his account is the gospel of *salvation*. Two of Luke's favourite words are 'preach the gospel' and 'salvation'. The first of these sums up what Jesus did: his teaching, healing and acts of compassion were all part of the proclamation of the good news that God was coming to the world. The second indicates the content of this good news. It is summed up in 19:10: 'the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost'. By contrast, in Mark the message of Jesus was that the kingdom of God had drawn near (Mk. 1:14–15). Luke brings out more emphatically the fact that the coming of the kingdom meant that God was present in and through Jesus to save people. When Luke calls Jesus 'the Lord' (the name for God in the OT), this may help people to see that God was at work in Jesus.

3. If salvation is for 'the lost', it is *for all people*, since all are lost. Jesus brought salvation to the people who were under-privileged in Judea – to the poor, to women, to children and to notorious sinners. Although for the most part he confined his work to the Jews, he indicated plainly enough that his message was also for the Gentiles and in particular for the Samaritans, the hated enemies of the Jews, and that it had social consequences for the oppressed – and their oppressors.

4. It is a curious feature of Luke's gospel that he has little about the significance of *the cross* as the means of salvation. Rather, he shows that suffering and death were the path appointed by God for Jesus before he could enter his heavenly glory. The relation of the death of Jesus to sinners and sin emerges only in 22:19–20 and Acts 20:28.

5. No writer has emphasized more clearly than Luke the 'wideness in God's mercy'; equally nobody has expressed more stringently *the claims of Jesus*. Intending disciples are warned that they must count the cost, deny themselves and follow Jesus daily. God's grace is not 'cheap grace'; sinners must be prepared to repent and renounce their sin.

6. Luke has a second volume about the story of *the church*. But already in the gospel he shows what the period of the church will be like. It is the time after which Jesus has ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God. Meanwhile his servants must continue his work of evangelism among all nations. They are enabled to do this by the power of the same Holy Spirit who equipped Jesus for his work, and they seek God's help in prayer just as Jesus did. Only when the task of mission is complete will Jesus return as the judge of humankind and set up his heavenly kingdom.

The sources of the gospel

Luke mentions that other people had written about Jesus before him, and he refers to the early eyewitnesses and Christian preachers who handed down the story (1:1–4). The most commonly accepted theory is that Luke and Matthew both had access to copies of the earlier Gospel of Mark as well as to a further collection of sayings of Jesus (generally known as 'Q') which has not survived. But in addition to what he got from these sources, Luke had a considerable amount of further information of his own (sometimes referred to by the symbol 'L'). In view of their origins among people with personal knowledge of Jesus and the early years of the church Luke rightly regarded these sources as reliable for his purpose.

By comparing Luke with Mark we can see that he rewrote Mark's material and made many small changes in the narrative, but at the same time he was faithfully recording the story. His general accuracy and care in giving the political and geographical background to events and, above all, his fidelity to the actual words of Jesus show that he was using his sources responsibly. The accusation that Luke was not concerned for historical accuracy flies in the face of his own expressed intentions.

This is not to deny that there are places where the differences between the gospels in recording the same events are puzzling. Equally, it must be recognized that the gospel writers told the story in such a way as to make clear its continuing relevance for their readers, and therefore they were not bound to reproduce what Jesus said absolutely word-for-word. It was the faithful reproduction of the meaning, not necessarily of the actual words, that mattered. If, like John, Luke has given us an artist's portrait of Jesus rather than a photograph, he has given us a true portrait. (For further discussion of the relationships between the gospels see 'Reading the gospels'.)

The authorship and date of the gospel

From the second half of the second century AD onwards there is a clear and consistent belief that the writer of this gospel (and Acts) was Luke, the doctor and companion of Paul (Col. 4:14). It has sometimes been argued that this belief is nothing more than an intelligent deduction from the NT evidence that Luke-Acts was written by the companion of Paul who was present during the episodes described in Acts in the first person plural form (Acts 16:10–17, *etc*). Among Paul's possible companions Luke is a plausible choice. It can then be argued that the belief has no independent value as a testimony to the earliest tradition, but is simply one of several possible 'guesses'. However, we may note that the tradition is quite unequivocal in naming Luke and not any other companion of Paul. Moreover this tradition is fairly early (possibly *c.* AD 120), and there is not the faintest hint of any alternative view in the early church. Marcion, an early Christian heretic, who held faithfully to Paul alone as his apostolic authority, selected Luke's gospel as his one gospel; presumably he accepted the tradition that it was written by Paul's companion.

Against the tradition it has been argued:

1. The picture of Paul in Acts is so distorted that it can hardly have been written by a companion and contemporary of Paul.

2. The gospel has the atmosphere of a time, after the apostles, when the church had given up hope of the imminent return of Jesus and had settled down into the form of rather conventional, institutional life sometimes known as 'early catholicism'.

Neither of these arguments is strong enough to overcome the tradition.

1. On the picture of Paul, see the commentary on Acts in this volume.

2. The second argument depends partly on the assumption that at first the early Christians expected the return of Jesus at any moment and that only somewhat later did the continued delay in his coming lead them to think that they must have been mistaken and the return was postponed to the indefinite future. But, on the one hand, the evidence is decisively against the view that the early Christians expected the return of Jesus almost directly after the resurrection; and, on the other hand, it is not the case that the return has lost all significance in Luke (see 12:35–40; 17:20–37; 18:8; 21:5–36). As for the suggestion that the church has been institutionalized, this is obviously false. It is sufficient to compare Luke with the Apostolic Fathers to see that the outlook in the gospel is very different.

In short, the arguments against Luke's authorship of the gospel fail to carry weight.

The date of composition of the gospel is not known. There are two serious possibilities. The first is that the gospel was written in the early sixties of the first century; the second is that it belongs to the later decades, possibly around AD 80. The key factors are whether the gospel shows knowledge that Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem had actually been fulfilled, and whether Acts shows knowledge of the death of Paul. Most scholars would answer both questions affirmatively, but in fact we simply do not know.

The place of composition is also uncertain. Early traditions suggest that Luke wrote in

Achaia (Greece), but the relation to Mark's gospel could suggest a connection with Rome. Again we just do not know.

Further reading

M. Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, BST (IVP, 1979).
L. Morris, *Luke*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1988).
D. Gooding, *According to Luke* (IVP/UK, 1987).
C. A. Evans, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIBC (Hendrickson, 1990).
I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Paternoster/Zondervan, 1988).

Outline of contents

The structure of Luke is similar to that of Mark and Matthew. In Mark the story of Jesus is divided into a Galilean period and a Judean period. Luke has inserted the story of the birth of Jesus at the beginning (like Matthew), and he has developed at greater length the account of the final journey of Jesus to Jerusalem.

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Commentary

1:1–4 Preface

Unlike Matthew, Mark and John, Luke began his gospel with a brief preface written in excellent Greek, such as one would find in the works of historians and other learned writers of his time. He was addressing the world at large and setting Christianity on the stage of world history, and so he adopted the contemporary literary style.

The things that have been fulfilled among us include all that is related in Luke-Acts. Part of the reason why Luke felt the need for a fresh treatment of the basis of Christianity was his conviction that the story of Jesus should be supplemented by an account of what followed.

Luke defends his work as an evangelist by mentioning that others had already written gospels, and then by pointing out his own qualifications to do so: having done careful research he could write a broadly chronological and lucid narrative. Like his predecessors he depended for his information on the apostles and their associates whom he regarded as reliable eye witnesses of what had happened.

His purpose was to give a historical account which would show *Theophilus* that what he had already learned about Christianity was soundly based. Theophilus is otherwise unknown; *most excellent* may simply be a piece of courtesy or may reflect his holding of an official position. *You have been taught* may indicate that he had received instruction as a new believer rather than that he had simply heard rather casually about Christianity.

1:5 – 2:52 The birth and childhood of Jesus

Luke begins the story of the ministry of Jesus with a prologue telling about his birth and showing how he was born as the Messiah and Son of God (1:35). Matthew's narrative tends to focus on Joseph; Luke is more interested in Mary.

Closely linked with this story is the parallel story of the birth of John the Baptist whose task was to prepare people for the coming of the Lord (1:16–17, 76–77). The careful structuring and interweaving of the stories indicates that John was a significant person whose birth was part of God's plan and that Jesus was an even greater person than his predecessor. The story contains many echoes of the OT which show that God's new acts were in harmony with his earlier mighty acts for his people and also in fulfilment of prophecy. The various supernatural occurrences recorded also mark out the two infants as God's servant and Son respectively.

We do not know how Luke learned the stories; presumably they were handed down in family circles but not made generally public. They have a poetic and dramatic quality about them, although the main facts are historical and are corroborated in Matthew's independent account.

1:5–25 The prophecy of John's birth

Luke introduces the story of John in words that are almost as majestic as those reserved for Jesus, since John was the greatest person of his generation (7:28). His parents were devout adherents of the Jewish religion of the time (the description of them echoes Gn. 17:1; 1 Ki. 9:4). It was while John's father, Zechariah, who was a priest, was engaged in his duties in the temple that he had a vision of an angel who told him that his prayer had been heard and that he would be granted a son. The boy's name was to be 'John', which means 'God is gracious', and he was to prepare the way for the final coming of God to his people which was the hope of the Jews. He would be specially dedicated to God's service, like Samuel (1 Sa. 1:11), and he would be empowered by the Holy Spirit for his task. His coming would bring joy to the people, for he would fulfil the role of Elijah who was to come back and prepare the way for the coming of God (Mal. 4:5).

Like Abraham (Gn. 15:8), Zechariah could not believe what God had said and asked for confirmation. The angel replied by giving his

credentials – his name and his commission from God – and added that Zechariah would become dumb (and deaf) and remain so until the child's birth. When Zechariah emerged from the building, the people outside were surprised at his inability to speak and thought that he must have seen a vision from God which had shocked him. In due course God's promise was fulfilled, and the child was conceived.

Notes. 5 *Herod* the 'Great' ruled over Judea until 4 BC (see on 2:1). **6–7** If a Jewish wife remained childless, this was considered a great disgrace to her (1:25; *cf* Gn. 30:23), and was sometimes thought to be due to her sinfulness. Clearly this was not the case with Elizabeth (1:6). The birth of a child to somebody who was previously barren could be a sign that great blessing would come to the people through the child (*e.g.* Isaac, Gideon and Samuel). **8–12** The tribe of Levi supplied the priests who served in the temple. Because so many priests were available, the tribe was divided into twenty-four *divisions*, that of Abijah (5) being the eighth in order (1 Ch. 24:10). Each division did duty for two weeks in the year, and many priests spent the remainder of their time away from Jerusalem in secular occupations (*cf.* v 23). The *incense* offering was made twice daily, and the choice of the individual to make the actual offering in the holy place was fixed by casting lots. No priest was allowed the honour more than once in his lifetime, and many were never fortunate enough to be chosen at all. The priest went in by himself and made the offering, while the people waited outside in an attitude of prayer until he reappeared and dismissed them with a benediction. **13** Giving a child a *name* was the father's duty. For God to take over the task was a sign that he was making the child his responsibility. **24** Elizabeth *remained in seclusion* during the period when her pregnancy would not be especially obvious and she would still be liable to reproach for childlessness. The news was broken first to Mary, and the miraculous character of what had happened remained a secret from the people at large.

1:26–38 The prophecy of Jesus' birth

The announcement of the birth of Jesus is told in a way that is very similar to the preceding story so that readers may see the parallels. This time, however, interest centres on the mother (rather than the father) of the child. Mary was engaged to Joseph, but their marriage had not yet taken place. *In the sixth month* of Elizabeth's pregnancy (*cf.* v 36) she had an angelic vision. Like Zechariah she was very naturally filled with fear and perplexed by being addressed as *highly favoured*. This expression meant that she had been graciously chosen by God to bear a son (*cf.* Is. 7:14) whose name would be *Jesus*, which is the equivalent of Heb. 'Joshua' and means 'Saviour'. He would be a king in the line of David and be called the *Son of God*, like Solomon, and he would rule over David's realm – but for ever. These expressions indicated that the child was to be the Messiah, although the actual word is not used.

Mary's question to the angel (34) is puzzling. If she was engaged to be married to a descendant of David, as Joseph is explicitly described (27), why should she ask how this was going to happen and say *I am a virgin* (lit. 'I do not know a man' in the sense of having sexual relations with him)? Would not the child be the natural result of her impending marriage? Some have argued that Mary had taken a vow of virginity, but this would have been impossible for a Jewish girl engaged to be married. She may have taken the angel to be referring to an immediate conception which would have been out of the question before marriage. Whatever the explanation, the question enabled the angel to explain more fully that Mary's son would not be a merely human being, adopted by God as his Son (like David's son in 2 Sa. 7:12–14), but really and truly God's own Son whose birth would be brought about by the power of God's Spirit. The description is reminiscent of the glory of God coming to rest on the tabernacle (Ex. 40:35). *Overshadow* is not a euphemism for 'beget': the language does not indicate any kind of sexual intercourse between God and Mary.

Mary's child would be *holy*. Since the basic meaning of this word is 'separated to God' rather than 'morally upright', it can simply mean 'divine', 'sharing in the nature of God' (*cf.* Ps 89:5,7).

To confirm the message, the angel spoke of the miracles already experienced by Elizabeth, and Mary quietly accepted the promise without any hint of the doubts that had worried Zechariah.

The story emphasizes not so much the virginity of Mary but rather the positive fact that this child would be conceived by God's power and not by human sexual intercourse. He would nevertheless be a descendant of David through being accepted as the legal son of Mary's husband.

Note. The historicity of the virgin birth. The birth of Jesus is presented as a miraculous or supernatural occurrence. Those who reject the possibility of supernatural events in principle will obviously not be able to accept it; their doubts spring from a world-view which cannot be discussed here. But there are other reasons why even people who accept the possibility of supernatural events may doubt the historicity of this particular story and look for another explanation of how Jesus was born.

a. *The silence of most of the NT writers.* The fact that the story is scarcely alluded to elsewhere in the NT (other than in Mt.) is not necessarily an objection to its historicity. If true, the story would have been known originally only in the family of Jesus, and it is not likely that it would have been told publicly. Slanders were made about Jesus' parenthood which would suggest that people knew or suspected that it had not been normal.

b. *Pagan parallels.* Ancient stories exist about great heroes who were the offspring of gods or of mortal women being visited by divine beings and having intercourse with them. It could be argued that the present story is due to the influence of such stories. But there is a world of difference between the atmosphere of the pagan stories and that of Lk. 1 – 2; and an adequate parallel to the Christian story can be gained only by some very speculative and complex reconstructions of ancient sources. Parallels are not necessarily sources!

c. *Details in the narrative.* Some parts of the story, especially the date of the census of Quirinius, raise historical difficulties (see below), but they hardly affect the question of the historicity of the central matter at issue.

d. *Doctrinal difficulties.* It is argued that, if Jesus was not conceived naturally, he was not in all respects a proper human being. But, on any orthodox view of his nature, Jesus was 'human-plus', and his unusual conception does not make him 'human-minus'. The crucial question is whether Jesus was simply a human being with special spiritual endowments (differing from us in degree rather than in kind) or whether he was the Son of God who became a human being. (See further D. F. Wright (ed.), *Chosen by God* [Marshall Pickering, 1989].)

1:39–56 Mary's visit to Elizabeth

Mary responded to the angelic message by going to stay with Elizabeth until just before the birth of her child. Mary's visit provided further confirmation of the message in that she was greeted by Elizabeth apparently spontaneously with a blessing. She realized that Mary was to be the mother of the Messiah, and she was overjoyed that she should visit her. She praised Mary for accepting the angel's word. Even the movements of the foetus in her womb were seen as a response to Mary's arrival.

Mary's poetic reply is known as the 'Magnificat' (the Latin verb for 'glorifies'). It uses the form and language of a Jewish psalm and is saturated with echoes of OT praise to God. Inspiration for the words came from 1 Sa. 2:1–10, the song of Hannah after God had given her a child.

The shape of the song is that a shout of exultation to God is followed by a series of clauses indicating why he is to be praised. After the briefest reference to Mary's own reason for thanksgiving, the song tells of what God does for his people, speaking quite concretely of his judgments on the mighty and his blessings for the humble – all in fulfilment of his promises to his people long ago. The past tenses in vs 51–54 most probably express what God is going to do in the future through the Messiah – actions that have already begun to take place in that the Messiah has already been conceived, and actions that are of the same kind as what God has done in the past history of Israel. This is thus a metaphorical description of the work of Jesus.

Notes. 41 Nothing is said about the two unborn children subsequently having contact with each other. In later life John apparently did not know Jesus very closely (Jn. 1:31; Lk. 7:19) and there is no hint in the subsequent narrative that they were related. **46** Some MSS have 'Elizabeth' instead of *Mary* as the author of the song, and it has been argued that the sentiments expressed fit her better. But the overwhelming evidence is for Mary as the singer, and after Elizabeth's words in vs 42–45 a reaction by Mary is a fitting and necessary conclusion to the scene (*cf.* v 38). **48** The *humble state* is Mary's feeling of unworthiness for God's honour and places her alongside the godly people in Israel. *Humble* and *hungry* (53) are terms that could refer simply to the pious people in Israel but more probably a reference to economic poverty and political oppression is included. The Messiah acted on their behalf by bringing in the kingdom of God with its associated blessings and by pronouncing God's judgment on the *proud* (51) and *rich* (53), who would have been understood as owing their position to injustice. **49** God shows that he is *holy* by his saving actions for his people (as in Ps 111:9).

1:57–80 The birth of John

Elizabeth's neighbours would have rejoiced simply because she had had a child despite previous childlessness. The *eighth day* was the appointed day for the Jewish ceremony of circumcision (Lv. 12:3). The association of the naming with this date was unusual, since names were customarily given at birth, but the link gave occasion for the public ceremony at which the people present were surprised that the child was not to be called after his father but given the name of *John*. Surprise upon surprise followed as the dumb father confirmed the choice. (It is unlikely that this was a miraculous agreement; more likely he had previously communicated with Elizabeth by signs or writing.) Then he regained his speech and praised God.

Zechariah's prophetic song, known as the

'Benedictus' (the Latin word for 'Praise be') is similar to Mary's in its general sentiments and Jewish character. Like hers it uses Jewish language based on the OT to express how God is worthy of praise because he has now acted in accordance with his promises to deliver his people through the coming of a descendant of David. Zechariah is thus represented as knowing about the impending birth of the Messiah. He refers back to the promises made to Abraham (Gn. 22:16–18; 26:3). Ps. 105:9–11 is understood to mean that God will make it possible for his people to serve him by living holy and righteous lives.

Then in vs 76–79 the song changes its form and becomes an address to the newly born child; he will act as a prophet and prepare the way of the Lord (*cf.* Is 40:3; Mal. 3:1) by assuring the people of forgiveness of sins (77). The *Lord* is ambiguous; it may refer to God himself (as in 1:46, 68) or to Jesus (as in 1:43). *Because of the tender mercy of our God* (78) goes with *the knowledge of salvation* in v 77. The salvation is spiritual, although vs 71 and 74 indicate that ultimately God's salvation will include the overthrow of the enemies of his people.

The *rising sun* (78) is an allusion to Mal. 4:2 (*cf.* Nu. 24:17), but the phrase (Gk. *anatolē*) might be a translation of the Hebrew word for 'shoot' or 'branch' (which is a title for the Messiah in Zc. 3:8; 6:12). Either way, the reference is to the Messiah and not to John. It is not clear whether v 79 should be linked to v 77 (indicating what John will do) or to v 78 (indicating what the Messiah will do).

The story of John's birth is completed with a brief note of his upbringing (*cf.* 2:40, 52) and his period in the desert. He remains offstage until the account of the birth of Jesus is complete. There are some interesting similarities between John's way of life and teaching and those of the Jewish sect in the desert at or near Qumran. They lived an ascetic life, bathed themselves regularly as a religious ritual, and looked forward to the coming salvation of God.

2:1–20 The birth of Jesus

During the reign of *Augustus* (31 BC – AD 14) the Romans reorganized their administration in several parts of the empire and carried out fresh censuses for the purpose of taxation. The execution of such an imperial decree in Syria (with which the area of Judea was associated) brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, long ago prophesied as the Messiah's place of birth. The fact that Mary travelled with Joseph indicates that they were now married, but the description of her as *pledged to be married* shows that they had not yet consummated the marriage (*cf.* Mt. 1:25). Although an early Christian tradition suggests that the child was born in a cave, Luke appears to mean a part of an inn (or of a house) where animals were kept. The traditional picture of a surly innkeeper refusing admission to the needy couple is somewhat dubious.

An angelic vision announced the birth and its significance to an unexpected and even despised group of people – shepherds. *All the people* refers to the Jews, the people of Israel. Not until v 32 do we get the world-wide significance of the birth of Jesus. The old wording of the announcement 'good will toward men' rests on inferior MSS, and the traditional translation 'men of good will' is mistaken. The point is rather that through the birth of the Messiah God extends his favour to people who have done nothing to deserve it; and he graciously grants them peace. *Peace* expresses the nature of salvation as the restoration of good relations between God and sinful people and the consequent reception of his blessings. The *cloths* were the normal covering of a newly born child, and might indicate (at least to some of Luke's readers) that it was a royal child.

Note 2. The *census* of Augustus creates historical problems. Despite assertions to the contrary, it does seem possible that a listing of the people for taxation, such as was carried out in areas directly ruled by Rome, could have taken place in the kingdom of a subject king like Herod. The census was based on where one resided or held property. The major problem is that *Quirinius* did not become governor of Syria until AD 6, at which time he certainly imposed a tax which caused a sharp rebellion (Acts 5:37). Jesus, however, was born before the death of Herod in 4 BC.

Suggested solutions to the problem are: a. 'Quirinius is a textual error in the MSS for 'Saturninus' (who was governor of Syria 9–6 BC). b. Quirinius held an earlier appointment in the area, probably not the governorship of Syria but some kind of 'roving commission' in the eastern empire. *c.* Associated with this hypothesis is the view that, since a census and the imposition of taxes would take a lengthy period, Luke may be referring to a process begun under Herod and completed under Quirinius. d. A possible alternative translation is that the census 'took place *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria'. No firm decision between these possibilities is possible at present.

2:21–40 The presentation of Jesus in the temple

Again in parallel with the story of John we read how Jesus was circumcised and given a significant name (see 1:31). Prophecies about John's future had been made at his circumcision; in the case of Jesus these took place when he was at the

temple. But first three significant facts are mentioned:

a. Jewish law required that after the birth of a male child his mother was regarded as 'unclean' for seven days and had to remain at home for a further thirty-three, after which on the fortieth day a purification sacrifice had to be offered (Lv. 12:1–8). This could be done only at Jerusalem and necessitated a journey there (24). Although Luke says *their* purification, it was only Mary and not her child who needed to be purified. Luke has run together the purification of the mother and the 'redemption' of her child (see below). The sacrifice offered was the less expensive one, permitted to poor people – a deliberate reference to the 'humble' status of Joseph and Mary (*cf.* 1:46–55).

b. The law required that a firstborn child had to be 'redeemed'. All firstborn creatures were regarded as consecrated to God. This was expressed by sacrificing the firstborn of animals and by making a payment of five shekels in lieu of children when they were a month old. (Ex. 13:13; Nu. 18:15–16). The law did not require the presence of the child at the temple for this purpose.

c. Jesus was present because Mary seems also to have made a special offering of her child to God for his service, just as Hannah had given Samuel to God at the tabernacle. (1 Sa. 1:11, 21–28).

In these ways all possible requirements of the law were fulfilled (See Gal. 4:4).

The narrative then focuses on the response of Simeon and Anna on seeing the child. *Simeon* was a godly Israelite who looked forward to God's *consolation* (*i.e.* deliverance; Is 40:1; 61:2) of his people and had received a divine promise that he would not die before the coming of the Messiah. Under divine inspiration that the moment had come he went into the temple, embraced the child and expressed both his gratitude to God and his readiness to die – a sign or testimony that the promise had been fulfilled. Simeon saw the child's coming as that of a Saviour for *all people* and not merely for the Jews; here is the first mention of the universal redemption promised in the OT (*e.g.* Ps. 98; Is. 49:6). But, said Simeon, the child's coming would lead to judgment as well as salvation, for people would be revealed as they really were in their hearts, and Mary herself would suffer anguish at the consequent treatment of Jesus.

Simeon's words were confirmed by the arrival of *Anna*, who prophesied that God would bring deliverance through Jesus to the Jewish people. Thereafter the family returned to Nazareth (but *cf.* Mt. 2 for a period spent in Egypt to which Luke makes no reference). There he grew up with the evident blessing of God upon him, and began to show the *wisdom* which is demonstrated in the next story.

Notes. **27** Luke refers to Joseph and Mary as the *parents* of Jesus because Joseph took Jesus as his own son and was thus regarded as his father. **33** It may seem odd that Mary and Joseph *marvelled* at what Simeon said about the child when they had already heard about the child's destiny. But this is to be somewhat pedantic. The surprise of the parents is psychologically probable: how was it that Simeon, a stranger to them, knew about Jesus? **34** It is not clear whether Simeon was referring to the *falling* of some people and the *rising* of others or to the penitence and restoration of the same people. **36** *Asher* was one of the tribes of northern Israel. **37** Anna was *eighty-four* years old, unless the meaning is that she had been a widow for that period (NIV mg.). The statement that she *never left the temple* is not to be taken too literally (*cf.* 24:53). **38** *Jerusalem* means the same as 'Israel' (*cf.* v 25). It was to be the place where God's deliverance of his people would start (Acts 1:8).

2:41–52 The Passover visit of Jesus to the temple

The age of *twelve* was normal for instructing a boy for entry to the religious community of Judaism, and therefore for a meaningful visit to Jerusalem. Jewish men were required by the law to keep the three annual festivals in Jerusalem, but only the Passover was strictly observed. Whole families would go up to Jerusalem, with an estimated 60,000 – 100,000 visitors packing themselves into a town whose normal population may have been no more than 25,000. People travelled in large groups for companionship and security on the way, and it is not surprising that Mary and Joseph did not worry unduly about Jesus on the first day's journey home. After a day spent in returning to Jerusalem they found him in the temple, which was a set of courtyards and buildings used not only for offering sacrifices but also for religious teaching and discussions (*cf.* Acts 5:25). His intelligent discussion with the teachers was an indication of the wisdom that he would show later. The story does not mean that Jesus was trying to instruct them, but rather that they were impressed by his unusual promise as a pupil.

Jesus' reply to his parents was in effect: 'You ought to have known where to find me, namely in my Father's house.' (The translation 'about my Father's business' is less apt.) It shows that from an early age Jesus was aware of an intimate relationship to God as his Father in a way which went beyond the normal religious consciousness of a devout Jew (*cf.* 10:21–22), and that he was putting this relationship first in his life –

although he was careful to continue to obey his parents. But the incident showed them that their son had a character and role that went beyond their understanding. His perfect growth as a boy continued right through his adolescence and young manhood (like Samuel, 1 Sa. 2:26, and John, Lk. 1:80).

3:1 – 4:13 John the Baptist and Jesus

3:1–20 The preaching of John (see Mt. 3:1–12; Mk. 1:1–8)

Like the first Christian preachers Luke saw the real beginning of the events that formed the basis of the gospel in the appearance of John the Baptist (Acts 10:37). His witness to Jesus marked the end of the old age of the law and promise and the beginning of the new age of fulfilment (*cf.* 16:16). It is, therefore, this important event which he places in the context of world history and accurately dates by giving a brief description of the political situation at the time. *Tiberius* was Roman emperor during AD 14–37, and his *fifteenth year* was either AD 27–28 or AD 28–29. (Different methods of calculating dates inclusively in Roman times cause the slight uncertainty.) *Pilate* was governor of Judea AD 26–36; an inscription from Caesarea gives him the official title of 'prefect' (rather than 'procurator'). The rulers of the other parts of Herod's former kingdom are listed, including *Abilene* in the north-east corner. Although only one high priest held office at a time, two are named, *Caiaphas* (who held office AD 18–37) and his father-in-law *Annas* (who had held office AD 6–15 and continued to exercise influence).

John was both the fulfiller of prophecy and also the last of the pre-Christian prophets. He is therefore described in the same way as an OT prophet (*cf.* vs 1–2 with Je. 1:1–2). His coming fulfilled Is. 40:3–5, and his special task was to proclaim a religious ceremony of washing which pledged the forgiveness of sins.

John's proclamation is expanded in three brief sections. In the first (7–9) he warned people that it was no use being baptized without a true willingness to turn from sin that was expressed in actions. Even for Jews repentance was necessary; their descent from Abraham was no defence against imminent judgment. They were no better than *vipers*, evil and destructive in character. Had somebody told them that they could escape judgment simply by being baptized (*i.e.* without repenting)? In fact the axe was already poised, ready to chop down unfruitful trees – but there was still a chance of repenting before it was too late.

A second paragraph (10–14), peculiar to Luke, indicates specifically how particular groups of people were to live. The *crowds* of ordinary people (poor people are obviously in mind) must show generosity to one another in their needs – a so-called 'work of love' that went beyond the minimal requirements of the law. *Tax collectors* and *soldiers* (who policed the country) were to act honestly and justly. John did not advocate a radical social upheaval, but insisted on moral principles that would lead to the transformation of society from within rather than by violent revolution.

A third paragraph (15–17; *cf.* Jn. 1:19–34) brings the vital point. Many people asked during John's lifetime and later whether he was the Messiah. Whatever his followers thought, John knew his own position. *One more powerful* would come after him. This is unlikely to be God himself and is John's way of referring rather cryptically to the Messiah. John could only cleanse people with the sign of baptism by water, but the Coming One would purify people's hearts with *fire*. This could be a symbol for final judgment (*cf.* v 17) or for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). John could then mean that the coming of the Messiah might be experienced as judgment or as purification and power. The Messiah would carry through a sharp separation among the people, like a harvester who preserves the wheat but destroys the chaff. Repentance, therefore, was urgently needed!

This message is summed up positively as *good news* (18). It was closely associated with the coming of Jesus, who was the more powerful one. But before he appears on the scene, John's story is rounded off with his arrest for his outspoken preaching (*cf.* Mk. 6:17–29) – a deliberate hint of what would also happen to Jesus.

Notes. 8 *Stones* and *children* could have been a deliberate pun in Aramaic. 11 A person might wear *two tunics* to keep warm on a journey or in the open at night. Or the reference may be simply to the possession of two tunics.

3:21–22 The baptism of Jesus (see Mt. 3:13–17; Mk. 1:9–11; cf, Jn. 1:32–33)

Luke mentions the baptism of Jesus almost in passing. He wants his readers to note that Jesus was praying at the time and above all that he received a divine revelation with two elements.

First, the *Holy Spirit* came upon him in order to equip him for his work as a prophet (*cf.* Is. 61:1, quoted in Lk. 4:18) and as the Messiah (Is. 11:1–5) and Servant of the Lord (Is. 42:1).

Secondly, a heavenly *voice* confirmed the divine approval of him in his role as the Son of God (*cf.* Gn. 22:2 and Ps. 2:7 for the wording) and as his servant (*cf.* Is. 42:1). The essential point of the story is the empowering of Jesus for what lay before him. We should jump straight to 4:1 to see the immediate result.

3:23–38 The family tree of Jesus (see Mt. 1:1–17)

But first we have a passage which might well have been placed in a footnote in a modern book. Jesus' family tree is meant to establish that he was *legally* a descendant of David (*cf.* 1:27, 32, 69) through his relationship to Joseph, and also to demonstrate that he was a member of the human race. It is not meant to show that Jesus was the *Son of God* by descent from Adam, since that would be true of all descendants of Adam. The fact that the family tree is traced through Joseph is not an argument against the virgin birth (*cf.* 2.27 note).

The family tree differs from that in Matthew. It is in reverse order, and it goes back beyond Abraham to Adam, and thus places Jesus in a wider context than does Matthew. But above all it contains a quite different and longer set of names between David and Jesus, only two names (*Zerubbabel* and *Shealtiel*) being common to both lists. Both lists give the descent of Jesus through his supposed father Joseph (*so it was thought*; 23). The theory that Luke really gives us the family tree of Mary rather than of Joseph is improbable. The theory with least difficulties is that Matthew gives the descendants of David down the royal line (*i.e.* who was heir to the throne at any given time), but Luke gives the particular line to which Joseph belonged. Even so there are still problems, and in the absence of fuller information the problems of explanation and harmonization with Matthew remain insoluble.

Notes. **23** *The son of* need not imply a strict father-son relationship with no gaps in between any more than Matthew's 'was the father of'; both family trees may contain jumps over the generations. For *Heli* Matthew has 'Jacob'. **24** It is uncertain whether *Matthat* is to be identified with Matthan (Mt. 1:15). **27** *Zerubbabel* was the leader of the Jewish community after the return from Babylonian exile. For *Shealtiel* see Hg. 1:1; but in 1 Ch. 3:19 (Heb. text, not the LXX) Zerubbabel's father is Pedaiah. According to 1 Ch. 3:17 Shealtiel was the son of Jehoiachin (graecized as Jeconiah, Mt. 1:12) and not of *Neri*; perhaps an adoption took place. **31** This *Nathan* is not the well-known prophet but a son of David (2 Sa. 5:14). **32** From this verse onwards the names agree with those in the Gk. version of the OT except for minor spelling differences. See Gn. 5:1–32; 11:10–26; Ru. 4:18–22; 1 Ch. 1:1–34; 2:1–15; 3:5–19. **36** *Cainan* occurs in the LXX, but not in the Hebrew OT.

4:1–13 The temptation of Jesus (see Mt. 4:1–11; Mk. 1:12–13)

The immediate result of Jesus' reception of the Spirit was that he was sent into the desert to face on his own the attacks of the devil. The temptations were attempts to deceive Jesus into doing wrong. He recognized and resisted them thanks to the power of the Spirit and emerged unscathed.

The first temptation (3–4) urged Jesus to use his newly-confirmed status (3:22) to perform an act of power to satisfy his hunger. The temptation was really directed against Jesus' obedience to the Father and suggested to him that the satisfaction of his bodily needs was more important than the spiritual experience which leads to a strong character (Rom. 5:3). Jesus responded by quoting the scriptural principle that a person's real life does not depend upon the satisfaction of physical hunger. The point of the quotation is that the devil made an attractive suggestion to Jesus, but Jesus refused it because it went against Scripture.

Then (5–8) Jesus was taken to a high point from which the entire world could be seen. As its apparent ruler (Jn. 12:31), the devil offered to surrender dominion over it to Jesus if he would acknowledge his higher authority. The temptation was less subtle this time. Ultimately, however, the world does not belong to the devil; his promises are not to be trusted; and to bow to him is incompatible with serving God alone (Dt. 6:13).

Finally (9–12), the devil, defeated by Scripture, tried to quote it in his own interests. He suggested that Ps. 91:11–12 justified Jesus in leaping down from the high colonnade of the temple into the Kidron Valley below. The devil made out this act to be a demonstration of Jesus' trust as a Son in his Father. It would in fact have been an act of unbelief; people don't test somebody in whom they have complete trust, especially when that person is God (Dt. 6:16). To have yielded to the suggestion would have been in effect to doubt that he was really God's Son and that his Father was trustworthy. Thus the devil was repulsed each time and withdrew from the conflict for the time being. Although he does not reappear in the story by name until 22:3, he was active in the period in between (*e.g.* 13:16; 22:31).

The temptations were all directed against Jesus as the Son of God. They were not specifically directed against his work as Messiah, encouraging him to win over people by spectacular miracles, but against his inner relationship to God on which his status as Messiah rests. Where Israel in the desert distrusted and disobeyed God (Dt. 6 – 8), its Messiah was trusting and obedient.

4:14 – 9:50 The work of Jesus in Galilee

4:14 – 5:11 The good news of the kingdom

4:14–15 Introductory summary (*cf.* Mt. 4:12–17; Mk. 1:14–15). Luke begins his account of Jesus' work among the people with a brief summary which shows that Jesus acted as a teacher, that he made a strong impression on the people far and wide, and that their immediate reaction was favourable.

4:16–30 Jesus teaches at Nazareth (*cf.* Mt. 13:53–58; Mk. 6:1–6). Luke has probably brought forward this incident ahead of its historical position (see Mk. 6:1–6) because it provided an ideal opening summary of the message of Jesus. The synagogue service consisted of prayers, readings from the law and prophets and a sermon. The leader of the service stood to pray and read, but sat to teach. Any competent person present could be invited to take part (*cf.* Acts 13:15). There was at this time a set list of readings for the 'first lesson' from the law, but there was probably freedom of choice in the 'second lesson' from the prophets. Jesus read from Is. 61:1–2 and gave a discourse (which is obviously much abbreviated here) concerning the fulfilment of this prophecy. He stressed the note of *present* fulfilment: what the prophet had foretold centuries before was now coming true. He taught that the prophecy had a *personal* fulfilment: the one anointed with the Spirit was Jesus himself. He also indicated that it was a *gracious* fulfilment: the era of God's salvation had now arrived. It may be significant that Jesus did not go on to complete the quotation with its reference to 'the day of vengeance of our God'. The text included a phrase from Is. 58:6, probably included by the author because of its obvious fitness to describe the ministry of Jesus. The various acts ascribed to the speaker in the prophecy are to be interpreted primarily spiritually rather than literally (*cf.* Lk. 1:46–55). The *year of the Lord's favour* is the time graciously chosen by him to show favour to his people; it reflects the description of the 'year of jubilee' when debts are forgiven.

Initial amazement turned to hostility, as the audience took exception to one of their own number (known locally as *Joseph's son*; but see Mk. 6:3) making such impressive claims for himself. They wanted some visible proof of the validity of his claims before their own eyes, like the mighty works which he was rumoured to have done at Capernaum. In any event, they failed to recognize Jesus as a prophet, and he could only tell them that when the prophets of Israel had been faced with similar disbelief they had performed their mighty works outside Israel (1 Ki. 17:8–16; 2 Ki. 5:1–14). So it was a word of judgment that Jesus in effect spoke against them. There was also the suggestion that the gospel would ultimately go to the Gentiles (although Jesus himself continued to work among the Jews). In their anger the people tried to lynch him.

Notes. 22 Although the swift change by the people from praise to disbelief is hard to understand, it is unnecessary to assume that accounts of two or more incidents (16–22, 23–24; 25–30) have been clumsily run together. It may be that *spoke well* (lit. 'bore witness') really means 'bore witness *against* him', and *were amazed* may indicate annoyance rather than acceptance. *Gracious words* are words speaking about God's grace. 25 *Three and a half years*: see Jas. 5:17. 30 A miraculous disappearance is probably not meant.

4:31–44 Jesus at Capernaum (see Mt. 8:14–17; Mk. 1:21–39). From the hill country Jesus went down to Capernaum on the lakeside. One of his main activities was teaching in the synagogues when the congregations met on the Sabbath. A person possessed by a demon would be regarded today as suffering from some kind of mental illness or handicap. This, however, is not a full diagnosis of the people described in the gospels, some of whom possessed an uncanny knowledge of things unknown to ordinary people. The presence of evil, supernatural powers cannot be rationalized away, and, just as theologians recognize that the Holy Spirit works through people's lives for their good, so too we may perhaps recognize a similar activity by evil spirits. This man had supernatural insight into the nature of Jesus and the purpose of his work. *The Holy One of God* means much the same as *Son of God* or *Christ* (41) and brings out especially the opposition of Jesus, perhaps as the bearer of the Holy Spirit, to all that was unholy. Perhaps the demoniac hoped that he could overpower Jesus by using his name – this was a common ancient superstition (*cf.* the fairy story of Rumpelstiltskin) – but Jesus commanded the demon to leave the man. The healing confirmed the impression of tremendous authority which Jesus' teaching had already made.

Illness too was seen to be subject to his power. A *high fever* may be a technical medical term. Jesus *rebuked* it almost as if it were a person. The point may be that he attacked the power of evil which expresses itself in human illness.

Once the new Jewish day had begun at sunset, the restrictions on work and on movement during the Sabbath were lifted, and the sick could be carried to Jesus. He silenced the cries of the demoniacs because he wanted people to learn for themselves who he was.

In the morning he deliberately left the crowds. Luke does not mention that Jesus was at prayer at this time (as Mk. 1:35 does; but see 5:16). His divine commission was to proclaim the good news of God's rule (see Mk. 1:15) far and wide, and he could not stay in one place and become the idol of an admiring throng. So he travelled around *Judea*, which here must mean Palestine as a whole, including Galilee, as Jesus did not go south into Judea proper for continuous work until later.

5:1–11 The call of the disciples (*cf.* Mt. 4:18–22; Mk. 1:16–20). Mark's briefer account of the call of Jesus' first disciples concentrates on the basic fact that the right response to the message of the kingdom of God is instant obedience to the summons to follow Jesus. Luke's longer account suggests that the call took place only after Jesus had won the friendship of Simon and shown his power to him. Simon, as an experienced fisherman, knew that there was little likelihood of a catch, since the best fishing was done by night in the deep water. (During the daytime they fished in the shallow water.) Nevertheless, he was already sufficiently impressed by Jesus to obey his command. When the full revelation of Jesus' power came to him, he was overcome by a deep sense of fear and unworthiness in the presence of somebody who demonstrated heavenly power and was thus shown to be a holy person. Simon was not necessarily especially sinful, but he felt the sense of fear which anybody ought to have in the presence of the divine (*cf.* Jdg. 13:21–22). Jesus, however, told him not to be afraid (*cf.* 1:13, 30) and gave him a call to discipleship in words that were suggested by Simon's present occupation. All the attention is focused on Simon as the leader of the Twelve: we are left to infer Andrew's presence from v 6.

Notes. 1 *Gennesaret* (Chinnereth in the OT) is another name for Galilee, and refers specifically to the area just south of Capernaum (*cf.* 6:53). 3 For Jesus, teaching by the sea and using a boat as a kind of pulpit see Mk. 4:1–2. 11 Theories that the great catch of fish was intended to provide provision for the dependants of the disciples or that it symbolizes the catch of people whom they would take (*cf.* Jn. 21:1–14) are speculative.

5:12 – 6:11 The beginning of controversy with the Pharisees

Luke relates five incidents in all, of which (apart from the first) various actions by Jesus and his disciples led to criticism from the Pharisees and showed how the new way of the kingdom of God contrasted with the Pharisaic emphasis on strict keeping of the law.

5:12–16 The healing of a leper (see Mt. 8:1–4; Mk. 1:40–45). The first story stands in contrast with the following narratives, for it illustrates how Jesus normally stood by the OT law. The word *leprosy* covered a variety of skin diseases, not all of them infectious. If people who had previously been certified as lepers claimed to be cured, they had to go through the proper form of discharge from the priests before being allowed to move freely again in society (Lv. 14:1–32), and so Jesus instructed this man to obey the law. The story illustrates how Jesus performed cures in response to faith – the idea is clearly present, though the word is not used – and it shows how his reputation was growing, both as a teacher and as a healer.

5:17–26 Jesus' authority to forgive sins (see Mt. 9:1–8; Mk. 2:1–12). The presence of Pharisees and teachers of the law at the beginning of the story prepares the reader to expect a hostile reaction to Jesus. The *Pharisees* were a religious party who placed great stress on strict observance of the law and the minute detailed regulations which had subsequently been added to it and were taught especially by the *teachers of the law*. These were a professional class of lawyers and teachers who generally belonged to the Pharisaic party. Luke describes the flat roof of the house as being covered with *tiles* (a form of construction familiar to his Greek readers), whereas Mark implies that it was made of hardened mud and sticks. Jesus did not heal the paralysed man immediately but said that his sins were (there and then) forgiven. This may possibly imply that the man thought that his illness was a punishment for some particular sin; it certainly does not mean that illness or disaster is always a punishment for sin (see 13:1–5). A prophet or priest could forgive sins in the name of God. The question was whether Jesus had the prophetic authority to do so; if not, he was falsely claiming to act on behalf of God. In fact Jesus claimed the higher authority of the Son of Man who is associated with God's final judgment on mankind (*cf.* Dn. 7:9–22; Lk. 9:26; 12:8–9). His response was to give indirect proof of this authority by showing that he also possessed divine authority to heal (17). Performance of the visible act should have convinced his watchers that he also possessed authority for the invisible, and therefore unprovable, act.

5:27–32 Jesus' attitude to sinners (see Mt. 9:9–13; Mk. 2:13–17). Unlike 5:1–11 this story tells only incidentally what is implied in discipleship. Its main purpose is to show the kind of people Jesus called and to justify his action. He was glad to bring the good news to Levi and his former companions, and his justification for his action was beyond criticism. No more than a doctor could he be expected to avoid

people who are ill. His duty lay with the needy whom he invited to repent; those who thought themselves to be righteous were not his primary concern. The *tax collectors* were regarded by the Pharisees as religiously 'unclean' because they worked for the Romans and hated because they fleeced their fellow-Jews and filled their own pockets very successfully. The *sinners* who are here associated with them included prostitutes, criminals and other people with an unsavoury reputation.

5:33–39 Jesus' attitude to fasting (see Mt. 9:14–17; Mk. 2:18–22). The OT required people to *fast* only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. The Pharisees required fasting twice a week, but Jesus disregarded this innovation. He held that it would be as fitting for his disciples to fast as for the friends of the bridegroom to fast at a wedding instead of joining in the festivities. The new era of salvation had arrived, and the mournful rites of the past were incompatible with it. Only during the sad days between the death of Jesus and his resurrection would mourning be appropriate.

Further, it would be futile to try to combine the new religion with man-made legalism. The new religion would be spoiled, and in any case the two ways could not be combined, just as an unshrunk piece of cloth will pull away from an old garment or fermenting wine will burst old skin containers that have lost their elasticity. V 39 is probably an ironic comment on Jews who rejected the new wine of the gospel and held that the old ways were better.

6:1–11 Jesus' attitude to the Sabbath (see Mt. 12:1–14; Mk. 2:23 – 3:6). The first incident deals with the rigid attitude to the Sabbath which set out in elaborate detail what people must not do on it, even down to rubbing *ears of corn* in their hands. When the Pharisees heard, doubtless from some tell-tale, that Jesus was breaking their man-made law, they criticized him. He referred them to the example of King David who had been allowed by the priest to give the consecrated bread in the tabernacle to his men, although it was normally reserved for only the priests to eat (1 Sa. 21:1–6). David was not in fact breaking any law, and Jesus was not citing his action as a precedent for doing so but rather showing that the OT itself does not teach the kind of strict legalism which the Pharisees had developed. The Sabbath was made for people, and consequently the Son of Man is its Lord. Since, however, the Sabbath is the Lord's (God's) own day, this statement of Jesus probably concealed a claim to equality with God.

In the second incident the opponents of Jesus may have 'planted' the sick man in the synagogue to see what Jesus would do. He accepted the unspoken challenge and posed his searching question: If his action in healing a man on the Sabbath was to be considered sinful, how much more sinful was their plotting of his death? The penalty for transgressing the Sabbath law was death, and Mark tells us that from this time the Pharisees began to plot the death of Jesus.

6:12–49 The teaching of Jesus to his disciples

After his sketch of the general character of the work of Jesus and the opposition of some of the Jewish religious leaders, Luke now tells us about Jesus' choice of his close followers and the teaching which he gave to all who wished to follow him.

6:12–16 The call of the Twelve (see Mt. 10:1–4; Mk. 3:13–19). Only Luke draws attention to the way in which Jesus *prayed* all night before making the momentous choice of the Twelve. Out of the larger company of those who responded to his teaching he chose twelve *apostles*. This word reminds us of the group of people who held leading positions in the church after the resurrection of Jesus, but here it expresses the way in which Jesus spoke of sending out (Gk. *apostellō*) his companions on mission. Luke does not tell us when *Simon* received his new name of 'rock' (*cf.* Mt. 16:18; Jn. 1:42). *Bartholomew* is probably the same as Nathaniel (Jn. 1:45–51). *Matthew* and Levi (5:27) are the same person – it was not uncommon for Jews to have two names. A *Zealot* was an extreme Jewish nationalist. *Judas* (*cf.* Jn. 14:22) is the 'Thaddaeus' of Mark's list. *Iscariot* may mean 'man of Kerioth' or 'assassin' or 'false one' (probably the first of these).

6:17–19 The assembling of the people (*cf.* Mt. 4:23–25; 12:15–21; Mk. 3:7–12). From the hills Jesus returned to a *level place* where the people could more easily reach him as they swarmed together from all over the area surrounding Galilee. They may have been especially attracted by his healing power, but Jesus took the opportunity to teach them.

By telling the story in this order (contrast Mark, where the call of the Twelve follows this paragraph), Luke shows that there was a substantial crowd present to hear the following sermon (*cf.* 7:1) and that it was not delivered only to the Twelve.

6:20–26 Two kinds of people (see Mt. 5:1–12). The 'Sermon on the Plain' is Luke's version of the much longer 'Sermon on the Mount' in Mt. 5 – 7. It is generally agreed that Matthew has enlarged a version of the sermon found in Luke by adding to it other sayings of Jesus on the same or related topics.

The sermon begins by contrasting two kinds

of people. The first group are by all outward appearance to be pitied, but in the eyes of Jesus they are *blessed* or happy because of what is promised to them. They are poor and needy, hungry and sad. Although some take these expressions purely as references to their literal condition, they should probably be understood basically (but by no means exclusively) in a spiritual sense (*cf.* Mt. 5: 3, 6) of people who feel dissatisfied with the present world and their lot in it and who long for what God has to give them. They are promised that he will hear them and fulfil their longings in the coming kingdom which was the theme of Jesus' message. People may hate and insult them for putting their trust in God's representative, the Son of Man, but, like the prophets, they will receive their reward from God. This fourth 'beatitude' shows that the persons whom Jesus has in mind right through are his disciples, and what he is speaking of are the privileges and the implications of being disciples.

The other group of people have what the present time can offer – satisfaction of their desire for material goods, happiness and a good reputation in the world – and want nothing more. No need for them to cry out to God in prayer, for they think that they have enough! But the time will come, says Jesus, when they will have nothing (*cf.* 2:34).

6:27–38 Love and mercy (see Mt. 5:39–48; 7:12, 1–2). The first part of the sermon dealt with the relationship of the disciples to God; this second part is about their relationship to other people. It plunges straight into the duty to love one's enemies. The basic principle is laid down in vs 27–28, where it is made clear that the *enemies* in mind are especially those who persecute the disciples (*cf.* v 22). Two brief examples of such love are given: submission to violence (rather than retaliation) when struck by somebody and readiness to give a mugger who robs you more than he asks for. The disciples must be prepared to give away their possessions freely, and their conduct is summed up in v 31 (the 'golden rule').

Jesus admits that even sinful people are quite ready to do good to those who have helped them or from whom they can expect some benefit in return. But disciples ought to go further and not stick simply to doing good for what they can get in return for it or as a way of thanking somebody who has done them good. There may well be no earthly *credit* for people who behave like this, but there will be a heavenly reward: God will regard them as his true sons who imitate their Father's merciful nature to those who are undeserving.

What this reward will be is indicated in vs 37–38. The person who loves like this will receive the same love – and more – *from God.* The person who does not judge other people will not be judged *by God*, and the person who gives freely will receive an ample return – like a container so full of corn that it spills over.

Notice again that all this is said to the disciples. Jesus is *not* saying that all that people have to do to inherit a heavenly reward is to love other people.

This sort of behaviour is revolutionary. It is a good question whether Jesus meant it absolutely literally or was using striking examples to make people think. Obviously Jesus was not promoting the kind of thoughtless generosity to any lazy scroungers which would simply confirm them in their ways. Things are here stated in absolute terms, and other Christian principles must also be taken into consideration.

Note. 32 *Sinners* is here a general term for the people of the world who are not bound by the principles of the kingdom of God.

6:39–49 Pictures of discipleship (see Mt. 15:14; 10:24f.; 7:3–5; 16–18; 12:33–35; 7:24–27; *cf.* Jn. 13:16; 15:20). The sermon ends with a series of short 'parabolic' sayings that bring out the kind of character that disciples should show.

39–42 The first group of sayings is about spiritual sight. Disciples must learn before they can become teachers of others. For a person who is taught will be no better than the teacher, and if the teachers themselves fall, so too will their pupils. Disciples must be able to see themselves clearly before they can point out the faults of others. Jesus makes his points using humour and exaggeration to drive them home.

43–45 Good conduct can come only out of a good heart. It is as foolish to expect good fruit to be produced by bad trees as to expect good deeds from a bad person. Only the person whose heart is richly stored with good will bring forth good teaching.

46–49 Finally, what matters most of all is actually obeying these (and other) words of Jesus. The person who hears them and then does not obey them is utterly foolish. The person who hears and obeys will be as secure on the day of judgment as the person who takes care to build a house with strong foundations on rock.

7:1–50 The compassion of the Messiah

Luke next brings out something more of the character of Jesus as the Messiah and particularly stresses that this was shown in acts of mercy which demonstrated the compassion of God. The coming of the kingdom means that God displays his compassion in powerful ways through Jesus.

7:1–10 The healing of a centurion's servant (see Mt. 8:5–13; Jn. 4:46–53). The

central figure in this story is a Gentile, possibly employed by Herod Antipas who had a Roman-type army (*cf.* 3:14). He had sufficient money to make a donation towards building a synagogue in Capernaum. (Even an honest man could readily make money in the security forces.) He is presented as a person of the highest character, demonstrated in his concern for his slave, his attitude to the Jews and his consciousness of unworthiness in the presence of Jesus. What shines out above all is the quality of his faith. As one who himself had been given authority from his superior officer to enforce the obedience of the soldiers under him, he recognized that Jesus had a higher authority, that of God, to quell disease, and he was prepared to trust Jesus to heal even by a simple word of command. Jesus commended such faith, and commented that a Gentile had surpassed the Jews in showing it.

Luke's story differs in some ways from Matthew's version. Here the centurion sends two groups of messengers to Jesus. The first consists of Jewish elders; these were the leading people in a small community and were closely linked with the synagogue. The second group consists of friends who repeat his message word-for-word as if he himself were present (*cf.* 2 Ki. 19:20–34). It may be that through abbreviation Matthew has given a different impression (*cf.* how Mt. 9:18–26 abbreviates the story in Mk. 5:22–43). Luke's treatment stresses more the humility and faith of the centurion.

There is a very similar story in Jn. 4:46–53 about an official in Capernaum whose son was ill. The similarity is even greater if the word *pais* (used in Lk. 7:7 and Mt. 8:6) is translated as 'boy' ('son') rather than as 'boy' ('servant'), and if it is assumed that Luke's use of *doulos* ('slave') in vs 2 and 10 is mistaken. But nothing in Luke or Matthew suggests that a son is meant, and the details of the story in John are very different.

7:11–17 The healing of a widow's son. The story of the healing of a person at the point of death (7:2) is followed by that of the raising of a dead man at Nain, a village south of Nazareth. Jesus was especially sympathetic because the mother was a widow with only her son to support her. The dead man was carried in an open coffin. Ignoring the fact that touching a dead body would make him religiously unclean, Jesus stopped the funeral procession and commanded the young man to get up. This simple word of command was sufficient to bring him back to life, and the people were filled with mingled terror and joy in the presence of the supernatural. They remembered that Elijah and Elisha had worked similar wonders (1 Ki. 17:17–24; 2 Ki. 4:18–37), and they saw God's hand at work (*cf.* 1:68).

Notes. 13 Luke alone of the evangelists makes frequent use of the term *the Lord* to refer to Jesus. This was not a term that people used in referring to Jesus during his lifetime (except Mk. 11:3). When people addressed Jesus directly as 'Lord' (*e.g.* 5:8; 7:6), it generally meant no more than 'Sir' as a common title of respect.

7:18–35 Jesus and John the Baptist (see Mt. 11:2–19). By now John had been in prison for some time and was puzzled by the news that came to him from his followers. Jesus did not seem to be making the dramatic impact that John anticipated – and perhaps John was wondering why he had not been released from prison. Some have thought that John was disturbed by the omission of judgment from the teaching of Jesus (though it was there: see 11:13–14, 37–53). Was Jesus the promised one or not?

Jesus drew attention to the works of mercy which he was performing and sent messengers back to John with words that echoed Is. 26:19; 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 61:1. The fulfilment of these prophecies should demonstrate to John that the signs of the promised age of salvation were present. They showed that Jesus was not merely a prophet, announcing the coming of the new era, but rather the person who actually brought it into being. John, then, should not miss the point and lose faith in Jesus.

Whether the message did confirm John's faith is not said but there may be a hint in the fact that Jesus went on to praise John. He was not an easy-going person or a time-server (as easily bent as a *reed*) living in comfort and condoning the easy-going ways of his hearers. He was the greatest of the prophets, indeed the greatest man ever born, because he was the forerunner of the Messiah. (This description is based on Ex. 3:20 and Mal. 3:1; *cf.* Mk. 1:2.) The praise is lavish, but then comes a surprise: even the most insignificant person in the kingdom of God is greater than John, for John lived just on the edge of the era of salvation and did not experience its blessings for himself.

Vs. 29–30 tell us, in an aside, that John's supporters in the crowd praised God because their prophet had been upheld by Jesus, but that the Pharisees and the lawyers linked John and Jesus together and rejected them both.

This attitude shown by the religious leaders explains why Jesus said that they were like *children* playing games. When one group of children suggests playing at weddings and plays merry music, the other group refuses to dance. Yet when the first group suggests playing at funerals instead and sings a dirge, the others still refuse to join in. So the Jewish leaders did not like John with his ascetic way of life, and they bitterly criticized Jesus because he associated with people who did not take religion

seriously. Doubtless the pictures of John and Jesus are both exaggerated here. But despite them all, said Jesus, God's wisdom is shown to be right by her children, *i.e.* by those who responded to John and himself.

Notes. 19 *The one who was to come* is probably a reference to the Messiah rather than to a prophet (as Jn. 6:14; 11:27 might suggest). See Heb. 10:37. **34** *The Son of Man* here refers to Jesus in the humble character of his earthly life as a person rejected by the people of his day. Some scholars think that here the phrase in the original Aramaic could be simply a roundabout way of saying 'I', and not necessarily recognizable as a title based on Dn. 7:13. See further on 9:22. **35** Instead of *children* Mt. 11:19 has 'actions'. *Wisdom* in effect means 'God in his wisdom'.

7:36–50 The woman who was a sinner (*cf.* Mt. 26:6–13; Mk. 14:3–9; Jn. 12:1–8). This story illustrates the accusation made in v 34. Jesus had been invited to the home of a Pharisee, called Simon, probably for a meal after a synagogue service. It was not uncommon for uninvited guests to be found at a banquet, and among them was a woman well known as a prostitute. Since people reclined on couches instead of sitting on chairs to eat formal meals, she was easily able to reach Jesus. She proceeded to anoint Jesus with perfume, very possibly bought with her immoral earnings, but she could not finish her task for tears. Her actions were no doubt unseemly, but she was under too great emotional stress to care what people thought. The Pharisee was disturbed by the way in which Jesus accepted this respect given by such an undesirable person in so embarrassing a manner. His feeling that Jesus might be a prophet was being contradicted by Jesus' being seemingly unaware that the person touching him was a sinner – and therefore 'unclean'. But Jesus knew what was happening and made his point to Simon with a parable whose message was quite clear: love is the proof that a person has received forgiveness, and the more people are forgiven, the more they will love.

There is no need to blacken Simon's character by suggesting that his reply was haughty or indifferent (43). Nor was his treatment of his guest discourteous. He had performed the necessary duties of hospitality, but he had not gone out of his way to give Jesus a special welcome. By contrast the sinful woman had lavished her devotion upon Jesus. This proved that she had been forgiven for many sins. Jesus then underlined the fact that she was forgiven and asserted that it was her faith that had brought her salvation.

Some commentators have argued that the woman's love for Jesus was the *cause* of her forgiveness rather than its result. They would interpret v 47 to mean: 'the reason her sins are forgiven is that she loved much' and then see v 48 as the first declaration of forgiveness to her. This view would make nonsense of the parable (41–42) which clearly teaches that love *follows* forgiveness, and it ignores the stress on faith in v 50. The error is due to not recognizing that 'to love' is the Heb. phrase for 'to show gratitude'. We must assume that the woman had previously heard and accepted the gospel message.

Notes. 41 A *denarius* was roughly a farm worker's daily wage (*cf.* the NIV mg.). **46** Olive *oil* was vastly cheaper than *perfume*.

A somewhat similar story is told in the other gospels, but it probably describes a different incident.

8:1–21 Jesus teaches in parables

8:1–3 Travelling arrangements. Luke mentions a number of women who took part in Jesus' work and helped to provide for the needs of himself and his male companions (*cf.* Mk. 15:40–41). There is nothing to show conclusively that Mary of Magdala (a village on the Sea of Galilee) was the sinful woman in 7:36–50 – demon-possession and sin are not the same thing!

Notes. 2 *Seven* is a round number, indicating the worst possible state of corruption (*cf.* 11:26). **3** For *Joanna* see 24:10 and 9:9 note.

8:4–8 The parable of the sower (see Mt. 13:1–9; Mk. 4:1–9). In 6:20 – 8:3 Luke gives his readers stories and sayings of Jesus that have no direct parallels in Mark. He now returns to the general framework in Mark and follows it to 9:50. He omits mention of the lakeside scene in which Mark sets the parables (Mk. 4:1).

The word *parable* was used in the OT to describe any kind of saying that was not to be taken literally; it included oracles, similes, fables, stories and riddles. Other Jewish teachers also used stories, but in general their quality was lower than those of Jesus. The parables of Jesus included brief metaphors and similes (*e.g.* 5:36–39), proverbs (*e.g.* 4:23), stories of typical happenings (as here) and stories of particular events (*e.g.* 10:30–37). Jesus used them to illustrate the nature of God's acts (*e.g.* 13:18–21) and the kind of response that people ought to make to them (*e.g.* 16:1–9).

The story here is a simple description of the varying fortunes of seed scattered over a field containing different kinds of soil, fertile and infertile. But nothing is said within the story itself about its meaning: the hearers were meant to ask themselves, 'What is all this about?'.

8:9–15 The meaning of the parable

(see Mt. 13:10–23; Mk. 4:10–20). When his disciples asked Jesus later what the parable was about, he began by making a general statement about his use of parables. He said that those who responded to his teaching had been given a knowledge of God's purposes. *Secrets* means the plans of God concerning his kingdom which had long been hidden but were now being made known to the people whom he chose. Other people refused to accept God's message, and so it was now being presented in a veiled form, so that, if they did not make the effort to understand and accept it, they would be none the wiser. In this way they would fulfil the prophecy in Is. 6:9–10 about people who did not understand the meaning of what they heard.

The wording of the explanation of the parable differs in some details from that in Mark because Luke has stressed the elements that he considered important for his readers. God's word must be met by faith and perseverance if the hearers are to be the kind of ground which produces good fruit. In some people's hearts the seed may never get a chance to germinate, in others its growth is arrested because they fail to endure.

8:16–18 The parable of the lamp (see Mk. 4:21–25). At this point Jesus is presumably addressing the crowds again. The point of lighting a lamp is that its light may be seen. Similarly, the disciples must reveal to others the light they have received. In this way the teaching of Jesus, which was known and understood only by a few people, would one day be expressed more clearly.

V 18 brings out the point of v 10: people who accept what Jesus says gain fuller understanding, but people who refuse to listen find that they lose even the little that they know already.

8:19–21 Jesus' true relatives (see Mt. 12:46–50; Mk. 3:31–35). Although this story comes before the parables in Mark, Luke has placed it after them in order to illustrate how people should respond to the teaching of Jesus. Those who receive it obediently are put on a level with his physical relatives. This does not mean that Jesus was in any way rejecting his family; rather their presence provided him with a good illustration of what he was trying to say. The *brothers* were Mary's later children by Joseph (*cf.* 2:7; Mt. 1:25). He is never mentioned in the gospels after the birth story, and we may fairly conclude that he had died.

8:22–56 A group of mighty works

8:22–25 The master of the storm (see Mt. 8:23–27; Mk. 4:35–41). The Lake of Galilee is surrounded by steep mountains with narrow valleys in between them; these form channels down which the wind can rush in sudden, strong gusts and disturb the water. Jesus' answer to the disciples suggested that they should have realized that, even if he was asleep, no harm could come to them. Nevertheless, he arose and addressed the wind and sea as though he was their master. This 'parable in action' led the disciples to ask the right question: *Who is this?* The answer is that it is God who rules the sea, and his power was at work in Jesus (Pss. 89:8–9; 93:3–4; 106:8–9; 107:23–32; Is. 51:9–10). The disciples, however, were only beginning to realize this.

8:26–39 The Gerasene demoniac (see Mt. 8:28–34; Mk. 5:1–20). When they came to the east side of the lake, Jesus was met by a man who showed the signs of being possessed by demons, since he had a supernatural insight into who Jesus was. His condition otherwise was similar to what would now be described as manic-depressive psychosis. The medical care of the time knew no other treatment for the mentally ill than to keep them under the strictest restraint, but this man had overcome all attempts to control him. He felt that he was driven by a mass of conflicting impulses and that he was possessed by as many demons as there were soldiers in a Roman legion (some 5,000 of them).

Jesus had sympathy for him and freed him from the demons. The man could see that they had gone, because a nearby herd of pigs promptly showed the signs of being possessed by them.

The people around were alarmed and frightened by what had happened, and they urged Jesus to depart. They could not recognize the gracious act of God in delivering the man from his plight. This was surely why Jesus urged the man to stay at home. If the people were frightened of Jesus, they might listen to a man whom they knew and who could tell them about God's goodness shown through Jesus.

Critics have deplored the destruction of the pigs, a large herd on which people's livelihood depended, but it can be replied that one (healthy) person is worth many pigs. Others have suggested that the story is to be explained rationally: the pigs were so frightened by the rampaging of the demoniac that they stampeded into the lake. But if the possibility of demon-possession is allowed (see on 4:33), it would be unwise to reject the explanation given by the evangelists.

Notes. 26 The name of the place is uncertain. 'Gerasa' (so also Mk.) was a city some 30 miles (48km) south-east of the lake whose territories could hardly have stretched so far. Possibly a phrase meaning 'land of the strangers [*i.e.* Gentiles]' has been taken as the name of a place. Some manuscripts give Gadara (the chief

city of the region, 6 miles (10km) from the lake; so also Matthew) or Gergesa (modern Khersa) on the lakeside, which was probably the actual site. The *tombs* in which the man lived were caves. 31 The *Abyss* is the abode or prison of demons (Rev. 9:1–11). 32 The rearing of *pigs* shows that the incident happened in Gentile territory.

8:40–56 Jairus's daughter and the woman with a haemorrhage (see Mt. 9:18–26; Mk. 5:21–43). Back on the western, Jewish side of the lake Jesus found a ruler of the synagogue seeking help for his sick daughter. Jesus' journey to his house was interrupted by an incident which should have helped Jairus to believe, but perhaps simply made him worried and anxious at the delay. The woman's haemorrhage made her religiously unclean, and so she was afraid to approach Jesus openly. But she had sufficient faith to hope that mere physical contact with him would heal her. We may be tempted to dismiss her belief as superstitious, but Jesus did not do so. His healing power did not flow from him automatically at her touch, but it was under his control. He responded to the faith which he felt to be present. Then he called the woman into the open so that he could complete her cure by restoring her self-respect and establishing a personal relationship. She could no longer regard him superstitiously as a magical healer.

The delay seemed to be fatal, for messengers now came with news that in the interval Jairus's daughter had died. But Jesus assured him that this was not the end. At the house he went in quietly to the dead girl, and a simple word from him awoke her to life. The fact of her recovery could hardly be kept secret, but Jesus wanted what had happened to be kept as private as possible: nobody needed to know just what had happened in the sick room and whether the girl had really been dead. Jesus faced the danger that people might develop a superstitious awe of him as a wonder-worker instead of believing in him as the Saviour who revealed the love of God in powerful actions.

Notes. 41 The *ruler of the synagogue* arranged the synagogue services and its other affairs; the actual work was done by the attendant (4:20). 42 Attempts to deny that the girl was really dead go against the whole thrust of the story (*cf.* v 49). 43 Luke omits the details (reported by Mark) that the woman had consulted many doctors, but in vain, possibly because he is abbreviating the story, but also because he wanted to remove a possible criticism of doctors. 52 Funeral rites took place as soon as possible in the ancient east (*cf.* Acts 5:5–7), and the hired mourners would have started immediately the girl died. 55 The command to feed the girl may be simply to demonstrate that she really was alive and well, but it may also show the human compassion of Jesus.

9:1–50 Jesus and the Twelve

9:1–9 The mission of the Twelve (see Mt. 10:5–15; 14:1–12; Mk. 6:7–29). The spread of Jesus' ministry gave him both the need and the opportunity to instruct the Twelve in the work of mission. He shared with them his authority from God to preach and to heal the sick. They were to live as simply as possible, perhaps so as to avoid any criticism for making money out of their work, and also to avoid being mistaken for other travelling people who made money unscrupulously. (Mark's version allows the disciples to carry a *staff*: it is meant for later followers of Jesus facing more difficult conditions than those in Galilee.) They were not to go round looking for (better) hospitality. If a town did not receive them, they were to do what Jews did when leaving a Gentile town – shake the dust off their feet. This was a symbol that the townspeople had cut themselves off from the true Israel.

Between the departure of the missionaries and their return Luke notes the opinions which people were holding about Jesus, and thus he prepares the way for the question in v 18. The hope of *Elijah* returning was based on Mal. 4:5–6. (*cf.* Lk. 1:17).

Herod Antipas had a guilty conscience because he had put John to death. This made him fear that John had come back from the dead to plague him. His longing to see Jesus for himself was not from the best of motives (*cf.* 23:8). Herod does not go so far as to identify John and Jesus, by contrast with Mk. 6:16. Luke seems to have had some more detailed knowledge about Herod, possibly from Joanna (8:3).

9:10–17 The feeding of the five thousand (see Mt. 14:13–21; Mk. 6:30–44; Jn. 6:1–14). Jesus apparently intended to take the Twelve away by themselves for a rest after their tour, but the crowds prevented this, and Jesus seized the opportunity to teach them. At the end of the day the disciples were anxious about the people. They themselves had little food and certainly not the money to provide for everyone's needs. The story of how Jesus used what was available is told simply as an indication of his power. Mark and John both bring out more clearly the fact that it revealed Jesus as the supplier of human needs, the giver of bread from heaven.

Notes. 10 *Bethsaida* was at the head of the lake and was the destination of the disciples after the feeding (so Mk. 6:45). The feeding,

therefore, must have taken place nearby. 12 Only Luke mentions the people's needs for *lodging*; they would normally camp out or go to neighbouring villages. 16 Jesus may have used the Jewish grace 'Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the world, who brings forth bread from the earth'.

9:18–27 The person and destiny of Jesus (see Mt. 16:13–28; Mk. 8:27 – 9:1). Luke leaves out the stories which Matthew and Mark record about Jesus between the feeding of the five thousand people and Peter's confession. He may have felt that the readers know enough to appreciate why Peter, speaking on behalf of the other disciples, now confessed that Jesus was the Christ (or Messiah), and not simply a prophet, even one who had come back to life. When Jesus told them not to tell this to anybody, it means that he accepted Peter's confession as true. He wanted it kept as a secret, because there was a danger that the word 'Messiah' might make people think that he was to be a political leader.

Now, however, a decisive new fact had to be learned. As the Messiah he must endure suffering and death and then be brought back to life. The disciples, like other Jews at that time, did not think that anything like that could happen to the Messiah. Jesus was probably comparing himself with the many righteous people who had suffered because of their obedience to God and identifying himself as the Suffering Servant prophesied in Is. 53. If the disciples did not understand this, it is not surprising that they also took a long time to realize that the disciples of the Messiah must also be prepared to suffer. Jesus taught that if people try to save their (earthly) lives, they will lose the life that really matters, but if they are prepared to lay down their lives for Jesus, they will know real life. For on the day of judgment those who loved their earthly lives so much that they despised Jesus will find themselves rejected.

Notes. 22 Jesus often referred to himself as the *Son of Man* (*cf.* 5:24; 6:5, 22; 7:34). The Jewish idea of the Messiah was of a human figure, but in Dn. 7:9–22 the Son of Man is a heavenly figure, and this better expresses the role of Jesus. Jesus' idea of his work was also so different from popular Jewish ideas of the Messiah that it was better to avoid open use of the title.

'Son of Man' seems to have been an ambiguous phrase. In Aramaic it could sometimes be a roundabout way of referring to oneself as a typical human being, and some scholars think this is all that Jesus meant. But the phrase could also allude to the passage in Daniel where the Son of Man is a figure of authority. In the gospels this authoritative figure appears in humility and his authority is not recognized or is rejected. Jesus appears to have linked together the roles of the Suffering Servant and the sovereign Son of Man. 27 It is unlikely that Jesus equated seeing *the kingdom of God* with experiencing the end of the world. More probably he meant that some of his followers would not die until after they had seen the coming of God's kingdom in his own mission or in the life of the church. The transfiguration was possibly seen as *one* fulfilment of the saying.

9:28–36 The transfiguration of Jesus (see Mt. 17:1–8; Mk. 9:2–8). Luke alone records how Jesus was praying, and thus in contact with the heavenly world. Perhaps the story is meant to show how the disciples' eyes were opened to see what was happening when Jesus communed with his Father (*cf.* 2 Ki. 6:17). His appearance and his garments took on a heavenly light, and he was joined by two men, long dead. Moses and Elijah, who represented the law and the prophets, had both had unusual departures from this world, and were both expected to reappear at the end of time. They spoke with Jesus about his *departure* (Gk. *exodos*), *i.e.* his death and resurrection, and in this way they confirmed what Jesus had prophesied in v 22. Peter felt that they should make three shelters for Jesus and the visitors, either to honour them or to provide somewhere for them to stay. But the story-teller insists that Peter had misunderstood the occasion. The real significance was to be found in the *cloud* (a symbol of God's presence) and the heavenly voice which repeated what had been said at the baptism of Jesus (3:22) but this time addressed it to the disciples. The Jesus whom Peter had confessed to be the Messiah was indeed the Son of God – not in spite of his imminent sufferings and death but because of them. Therefore, the disciples were to obey him – and him only. Luke omits the conversation which the disciples had on the way down from the mountain.

9:37–50 Experiences in the valley (see Mt. 17:14–23; 18:1–5; Mk. 9:14–41). In this final section on the work of Jesus in Galilee a number of incidents all show the need of the disciples for power and instruction.

37–43a In the first story a boy suffering from epilepsy and demonic possession was brought to the disciples who had not been up the mountain with Jesus, but they could not cure him despite their healing powers (9:1). Jesus expressed his disappointment at the faithlessness and perversity of people who required his personal presence before the power of God could operate. The act of healing was seen by the people as a revelation of the greatness of God's power.

43–45 A swift contrast to this revelation was

given by the words of Jesus in which he again told his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer rather than make his way through the world in triumph. Like Mark, Luke stresses the obtuseness of the disciples who found this teaching beyond their grasp, but he attributed their blindness to the purpose of God.

46–48 Two further incidents stress this lack of comprehension. The first shows the disciples quarrelling about rank and position among themselves. Jesus was able to penetrate to the deep motives that struggled for mastery in their hearts. Setting a child – the most unimportant member of society in Jewish eyes – before them, he said that a person who was humble enough to receive a child would receive himself and his Father. When people have that kind of attitude, questions of precedence will not arise.

49–50 In this connection John remembered how they had treated a man who was casting out demons in the power of the name of Jesus and yet was not commissioned to do so as one of the Twelve. He was not to be despised, said Jesus, for a person who is not against you is on your side. See 11:23 for another side to this truth.

9:51 – 19:10 The journey to Jerusalem

Luke passes over the incidents recorded in Mk. 9:42 – 10:12. He does not return to the outline of events in Mark until 18:15. The intervening section gives us a lot of material which is not paralleled in Mark. We get the impression of a journey to Jerusalem which lasts throughout this section (*cf.* much more briefly Mk.10), but it is unlikely that all that is recorded here took place on one trip. Some of the incidents and sayings here may have belonged to Galilee or Jerusalem (10:38). Probably Luke has gathered together material from various periods in the work of Jesus and grouped it here because it fitted around various themes. (We may compare how Matthew did something similar with his 'great discourses' of Jesus.) We know from John that Jesus paid several visits to Jerusalem, and it could be that Luke reflects details of several journeys.

The 'journey' theme suggests a parallel with the journey of the people of Israel through the desert with Moses when they received much instruction about their way of life. It may also suggest a parallel between Jesus journeying to the cross and the disciples walking a similar path in life. The general themes of this section are discipleship and opposition, and we are not allowed to forget that the disciples are accompanying Jesus on his way to the cross.

9:51 – 10:24 The duties and privileges of discipleship

9:51–56 The Samaritan village. Jews and Samaritans deeply hated each other, but Jesus refused to meet human opposition to him as a Jew with judgment (*cf.* 2Ki. 1:10–11). The additional words recorded in the NIV mg. in vs 55–56 are not a true part of Luke's text, but express aptly the mind of Jesus: he suffered opposition without retaliation because he had come to save (*cf.* 19:10)

9:57–62 Readiness for discipleship (see Mt. 8:19–22). Many people are willing to follow Jesus until they find out just what is involved. Jesus spoke of the homelessness of the Son of Man and hence also of his followers. Since many friends provided for the material needs of Jesus, the saying refers primarily to his being generally rejected by the people. No excuses for delay in following Jesus are allowed. Burial duties were regarded as prior to all other obligations. *Let the dead bury their own dead* means either 'Let that duty look after itself' or 'Leave that task to the spiritually dead'. There can be no turning back in the service of Jesus, any more than a backward looking ploughman can expect to plough a straight furrow. Jesus' reply is more rigorous than that in 1 Ki. 19:19–21. All three sayings express the idea of absolute commitment to him.

10:1–16 The mission of the seventy-two (*cf.* Mt. 9:37–38; 10:7–16; 11:21–23). Luke alone records that in addition to the Twelve Jesus sent out a further group of disciples to do mission work. The number here and in v 17 varies in the MSS between *seventy-two* and seventy; either way it is symbolic and reminds us of the number of nations in Gn. 10 or the number of elders who helped Moses in Ex. 24:1. It probably symbolizes the Gentile nations to whom the message of Jesus would later be brought by the disciples, although the actual mission here was confined to the Jews.

The instructions to this group are very similar to those addressed to the Twelve in 9:1–6. The disciples were to go out in simplicity among a ravenous horde of wolves who would frustrate their task. They were to travel lightly, like the Twelve, and not waste time in long oriental salutations. They were to accept the hospitality given to them as fair recompense for their work but were not to seek for better conditions by going round from one house to another. Later the early church carried out this principle by providing for its teachers and evangelists so that they would not be dependent on those whom they evangelized (3 Jn. 7–8). Paul sought to impose no burden at all on his churches although he was fully entitled to do so and v 7

was quoted in connection with the rights of elders (see 1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Tim. 5:18).

Their message was to be that the kingdom of God had arrived: the signs of its presence were the mighty works which they would perform. When the gospel is proclaimed, the blessings of God's rule are *near* or within the grasp of all who will accept them (*cf.* Mk. 1:15). If the message was not received, a warning of divine judgment was to be given. The messengers were to disclaim further responsibility after they had clearly presented the message.

In passing, Jesus commented on the fate, at the day of judgment, of the towns which had refused his message. The Jews regarded the heathen towns of old as absolutely godless. To say that they would have given a warmer response to the gospel than these Jewish towns is a way of saying just how blind the Jews were to the gospel; their pride would experience a swift downfall. Finally Jesus emphasized that the disciples were to be his personal representatives and consequently God's representatives (*cf.* 9:48; Jn. 15:23).

Notes. 6 A *man of peace* is a peace-loving person, somebody worthy of the Messianic gift of peace. The greeting expressing *peace* is regarded as having an effect on the receiver. **13** *Korazin* was a town north of Capernaum.

10:17–24 The return of the seventy-two (see Mt. 11:25–27; 13:16–17). Jesus saw in the casting out of the demons a sign that Satan's throne was toppling. He appears to have been speaking metaphorically. He had a vision of the spiritual defeat of Satan which took place at the cross; and the exorcisms, the defeat of Satan's minions, confirmed his certainty of the coming victory over their master. (See Rev. 12:7–10.)

Yet it would be wrong to rejoice too much over this; people may cast out demons and yet be excluded from the kingdom (*cf.* Mt. 7:22–23). Far better to rejoice that one's own name is recorded in God's book (*cf.* Phil. 4:3).

Then Jesus thanked God that his revelation is given to ordinary people and he does not take account of human wisdom. His prayer closed with a confession that all such knowledge had been given to him by his Father. There is an exclusive, mutual bond of personal knowledge between the Father and the Son, so that only the Son can make the Father known to people. The disciples had received this knowledge from the Son. The people of the past would gladly have seen the coming of the kingdom, but only the disciples have been granted to see and hear the Son of God.

Notes. 19 *Snakes and scorpions* are symbols of spiritual wickedness (Dt. 8:15; Ps. 91:13). **22** The authenticity of this saying has been much attacked, but the language is thoroughly Jewish and quite possible on the lips of Jesus. *All things* means 'all revelation' rather than 'all power'. The word *know* was used in Hebrew to express personal knowledge (as in Gn. 4:1 of the marriage relationship [RSV]) or choice of a person (as in Am. 3:2 [RSV]). The double use of the verb expresses the mutual communion between Jesus and his Father which was reflected in his prayers (*cf.* Mk. 14:36). Hence Jesus alone was qualified to reveal the Father to other people. The saying is thoroughly in keeping with Jesus' teaching in Jn. (*e.g.* Jn. 10:15) and is a 'bridge' between the first three gospels and the fourth.

10:25 – 11:13 The characteristics of disciples

10:25–37 The good Samaritan. The introduction to the parable is not to be confused with the somewhat similar story in Mk. 12:28–31. Here Jesus is asked about how a person may qualify for eternal life (*cf.* 18:18), and in good Jewish fashion he replies by referring his questioner to the law. How does one summarize the essence and intention of the law? The lawyer gives the same reply as that given by Jesus in Mk. 12:29–31. This should not surprise us, since the link between Dt. 6:5 and Lv. 19:18 was already recognized before the time of Jesus. In view of Gal. 3:12 Jesus' answer may sound legalistic, but it is not so when considered in relation to the total content of his teaching.

The lawyer had 'lost face' by being given this answer, and he tried to regain the initiative by asking for a more precise definition of the word 'neighbour'. The parable given in reply is most remarkable. We might have expected a parable telling how a *Jew* should show love to anybody, even to a Samaritan, but in fact Jesus shows how even a Samaritan may be nearer to the kingdom than a pious, but uncharitable, Jew. For, although the lawyer asked, '*Who* is my neighbour (*i.e.* the person whom I should help)?' Jesus suggests that the real question is rather 'Do *I* behave as a neighbour (*i.e.* a person who helps others)?' Jesus does not supply information as to whom one should help; failure to keep the commandment springs not from lack of information but from lack of love. It was not fresh knowledge that the lawyer needed, but a new heart – in plain English, conversion.

Notes. 30 A steep road, 17 miles (27km) long, descended the 3,300 ft. from Jerusalem to Jericho, which was a country dwelling of priests when not on temple duty (*cf.* 1:23). **31–32** The priest and the Levite (a temple worker) may have feared defilement through touching a dead body, but no motive for their conduct is in fact given. **33** The story 'works' on the fact that the audience probably expected that the third

character would now be a Jewish layman, thus giving it an anti-clerical point. 37 The lawyer perhaps could not bring himself to answer the question by saying 'the Samaritan'!

10:38–42 Serving Jesus. When Martha rudely complained to the guest about her lazy sister, Jesus replied gently but firmly. He may have been implying that Martha was busy trying to provide an elaborate supper, when a simple meal would have sufficed. Mary had chosen to listen to Jesus, and that was more important than preparing a large supper. The story is not meant to teach the value of a contemplative life compared with a life of action, but to show that service to Jesus must not fill people's lives to such an extent that they have no time to learn from him. One honours him more by listening to him than by providing excessively for his needs (*cf.* Jn. 6:27).

Notes. 38 Since the *village* was Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem (Jn. 11:1), the incident took place before Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem or is recorded out of chronological order. 41 Jesus' actual words are uncertain (*cf.* the NIV mg.); it is not clear whether he is contrasting *many* courses for the meal with only *one* or simply concern over *many* things with the *one* activity that matters.

11:1–13 How to pray (see Mt. 6:9–13; 7:7–11). Christian prayer goes back to the example and command of Jesus himself. The Lord's Prayer appears here in a different, shorter form from the more familiar one found in Matthew. It is generally thought that the early church adapted Jesus' words in different ways to meet its needs. Luke's form contains an address and two sets of petitions.

Father translates the Aramaic *Abba* used by Jesus (*cf.* 10:21; Mk. 14:36). Here, therefore, Jesus invited his followers to use the same intimate term to address God which he himself used.

Hallowed be your name is the first of two petitions concerned with God himself. May his name, *i.e.* his person, be honoured in the world at large. Such hallowing forms the basis for the second petition: *Your kingdom come.* May God's rule in peace and righteousness swiftly come into effect. This is a prayer for God to act by hastening the coming of the day of the Lord. Only after these petitions are the needs of the petitioner mentioned.

First, there is a prayer for the supply of *daily bread.* This may be a petition not just for ordinary food but also for the bread of life, the gift of God without which we cannot live. *Daily* (Gk. *epiousios*) is a word of uncertain meaning: 'for tomorrow' or 'necessary' are possible renderings. The former brings out the way in which the prayer asks for a foretaste of the blessings of the kingdom now.

Secondly, there is a prayer for daily forgiveness, which is granted only to those who forgive others.

Finally, the petitioner asks to be preserved from tribulation and testing which would weaken faith and lead to exclusion from God's kingdom.

The following parables give encouragement to people to pray.

5–10 Although the friend who has *bread* (*cf.* v 3!) in his one-roomed house (where everybody slept close together) is unwilling to get out of bed, yet because of the unblushing persistence of the caller, he will supply bread. The parable works by contrast: if even a human friend will respond to persistence, how much more will God respond *without* persistence, even if he seems to delay (*cf.* 18:1–8).

11–13 Similarly, as earthly fathers do not deceive their children with their gifts, God will give his good gift of the Spirit to all who ask. Jesus is speaking in broad terms of the spiritual blessings which the Father gives his children; he is not saying that people who ask, say, for specific charismatic gifts will necessarily receive them. With these assurances confident prayer can be a reality. *Fish* and *snakes*, and *eggs* and *scorpions* resemble one another in appearance.

11:14–54 Controversy with the Pharisees

11:14–28 In league with the devil? (see Mt. 12:22–30, 43–45; Mk. 3:22–27). 14–23 The Pharisees thought that they could explain away the casting out of demons by saying that Jesus was empowered by the devil (15). Others thought the matter could be settled if Jesus could provide some clearer sign that he had God's backing (16).

Jesus replied to the charge in v 15 by saying that a kingdom or household divided against itself soon comes to nothing: how, then could Satan, alias *Beelzebub*, promote civil war in his own kingdom? Moreover, the argument could equally well be turned against Jesus' opponents themselves, for their own followers also cast out demons. In fact the casting out of demons was an act of divine power and a sure token that God's era of salvation had come. One stronger than Satan was at work. In this situation to refuse support to Jesus was not to take up a position of being neutral but to join the opposition.

24–26 Opinions differ whether this story is meant to be taken simply on the literal level or as a parable of spiritual deterioration. Its point is not to satisfy curiosity about demons but to warn against the danger of a repentance that is purely negative. A relapse can lead to dreadful danger. What is needed is what Thomas Chalmers called 'the expulsive power of a new affection'.

27–28 Mark tells a different story about Jesus' relatives at this point (Mk. 3:31–35). Luke has already used it (8:19–21) and now gives a different incident with the same basic point. The woman's rather sentimental benediction on Jesus' mother simply meant, 'If only I too had had a son like this man.' But something else matters much more, namely, to hear and obey the message from God which Jesus proclaimed (*cf.* 6:46–49).

Jesus, then, is saying that people should have realized that he was speaking God's word without needing wonderful signs to confirm it; acceptance of it would prevent the kind of relapse described in v 26.

Notes. 14 *Cf.* Mt. 9:32–34. **20** The *finger of God* reflects Ex. 8:19 (*cf.* Ps. 8:3) and means the same as the 'Spirit of God' (Mt. 12:28). **24** *Arid places* were regarded as the normal abode of demons, but they were thought to prefer to live in human beings.

11:29–32 The sign of Jonah (see Mt. 12:38–42). This section is in effect a reply to the demand in v 16. The people wanted some miraculous demonstration to attest the message of Jesus, but he did not want to perform powerful deeds that would overawe people. He wished, rather, to do things that would reveal the character of God his Father as judge and saviour. He therefore refused to give any sign at all (*cf.* Mk. 8:11–12) except for the *sign of Jonah*. Only in the way in which Jonah was a sign to Nineveh would he be a sign to the Jews.

In the parallel saying about the *Queen of the South* (*cf.* 1 Ki. 10:1–10, where she came from Sheba in south-west Arabia), she would be a witness against the Jews of Jesus' time, for she made great efforts to hear Solomon, whilst the Jews were not impressed by the wisdom of one greater than Solomon. Similarly, the people of Nineveh responded to the preaching of Jonah, and yet the Jews failed to respond to the teaching of Jesus. The 'sign of Jonah' is thus the teaching of Jesus. But there is a deeper meaning. The use of the future tense in v 30 and the way in which Matthew 12:39–40 mentions the resurrection of Jesus as a parallel to the resuscitation of Jonah suggests that the sign is the preaching of the risen Jesus or possibly a reference to the second coming.

11:33–36 Light and darkness (see Mt. 5:15; 6:22–23). V 33 (which repeats 8:16) may urge hearers not to hide the light which they have received (Mt. 5:15) or it may refer to Israel which had hidden the light given to her by God (*cf.* v 52), or (most probably) it may be a reference to the light shining from Jesus which the people were unwilling to receive. In v 34 the *eye* is the means by which light reaches a person's inward mind; a healthy eye lets light in, but an unhealthy eye leaves a person in darkness. The hearers of Jesus must be sure that what they accept as light really is light and not darkness (35). Then v 36 may mean that the person who is full of true light will illuminate others. The paragraph as a whole is a warning against spiritual blindness and hardness of heart.

11:37–54 The hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes (see Mt. 23:4–7, 13, 23–26; *cf.* Lk. 20:46). Jesus visited the home of a Pharisee (*cf.* 7:36; 14:1) for one of the two daily Jewish meals. The Pharisees washed before eating, not primarily to keep the body clean but to remove the supposed defilement of sin caused by contact with Gentiles and other sinners (Mk. 7:1–5). Jesus strongly criticized them and what they stood for. In washing their bodies (39) they resembled a person cleaning only the outside of a vessel full of filth. If God made both the inside and the outside of people, surely the inside demanded cleansing too. If the Pharisees were to give to charity instead of being greedy and wicked, this would make them truly clean in their hearts – and nothing further would be required. (Jesus thus rejected the idea of ritual defilement; *cf.* Mk. 7:15, 19).

In a series of three woes (42–44) the failings of the Pharisees were exposed. They so concentrated on the tiny details of religion that they had forgotten the great moral principles. They had grown to love the respect of people for their religiosity. They were as a result hypocrites who misled people, just like hidden graves which people might unknowingly tread on and be contaminated.

The lawyers (5:17) were already condemned by what Jesus had said, but now he made further charges against them. They had created the trivial regulations of the law, and they either did nothing to relieve the burden for other people or failed to shoulder it themselves. Although they built elaborate tombs for the prophets, they were really at one with their ancestors who had killed the prophets, by making sure that they stayed dead in that their message was disregarded! God in his wisdom had foreseen what they would do. The lawyers' attitude to the prophets and apostles of the church would be simply the last and worst event in a long history of attacking God's messengers, and judgment would follow. Finally, they stood condemned for obscuring God's relevation and keeping people out of his kingdom.

Notes. 41 *Give to the poor* may be Luke's paraphrase of what Jesus meant when he said 'clean' (Mt. 23:26). **42** These tithes went beyond the law's requirements.

43 This saying must refer to Pharisees who were 'teachers of the law' (*cf.* 20:46). **48**

Building tombs is scarcely sympathy with murder: the saying is metaphorical and ironical. **51** For *Zechariah* see 2 Ch. 24:20–21, and on Mt. 23:35.

12:1 – 13:9 Readiness for the coming crisis

In this and some later sections (17:20 – 18:8; 21:5–38) Luke has gathered together teaching in which Jesus spoke of the crisis that was coming upon people as a result of his mission. The gospel of salvation had its dark side for those who refused the message. Jesus warned the Jews of the frightful consequences of rejecting him, in terms of both political destruction and rejection by God on the day of judgment. At the same time he warned his disciples to stand firm in the impending days of trial and be ready for the coming of their master. In the event, destruction came upon Judea in the war with Rome (AD 66–70), but the return of the Lord is still awaited. Some of the problems in understanding are due to the fact that Jesus saw both these events as part of one great act of judgment, and that he himself did not know the precise times settled by the Father (Mk. 13:32).

12:1–12 Fearless confession (see Mt. 10:26–33; 12:31–32; 10:19–20; *cf.* Mk. 3:28–29). V 1 links with the previous section on the Pharisees; their teaching penetrated society, like yeast in dough, and it had a corrupting influence because of their hypocrisy. Everybody, however, must beware of hypocrisy, for one day their hidden thoughts will all be revealed (*cf.* 8:17).

Disciples, however, might be tempted to a different kind of pretence, that of hiding their allegiance to Jesus out of fear. It is one thing to suffer at human hands, but it is far worse to be hypocritical and then have to face the judgment of God, who can throw people into hell. There is indeed no reason to fear human beings, for not even the worst that persecutors can devise can take place without God's knowledge and care for his people. But, depending on whether people confess or deny Jesus, the Son of Man will be a witness for or against them at the judgment seat of God (8–9).

In v 10, however, it is said that denying the Son of Man is excusable. It may be that v 9 was addressed to the disciples who had no excuse for ignorance about the signficance of Jesus, but v 10 is addressed to the crowds for whom 'Son of Man' was a phrase that did not necessarily disclose who Jesus was. If, however, people refused to accept the clear evidence of the working of God's Spirit in Jesus (*e.g.* by attributing his power to Satan), then they were liable to judgment. But if people do confess Jesus, then the Holy Spirit will sustain them when they are on trial before judges whom they would otherwise fear.

Notes. 1 *First* indicates that what follows is especially for disciples. **6** Mt. 10:29 has 'two sparrows sold for a penny'; the point remains the same. **8–9** Jesus here appears to make a distinction between the *Son of Man* and himself. Since he wanted to include an allusion to Dn. 7, he had to switch to the third-person form.

12:13–34 Material possessions (see Mt. 6:25–33, 19–21). Jesus was commonly regarded as a *teacher*, and thus a member of a class which dealt with both religious and civil matters. It is not surprising, then, that his opinion was sought in a legal dispute over property. Possibly a younger brother was claiming that he was being defrauded of his share in an inheritance. Jesus, however, refused to settle the matter. He was not an ordained rabbi, and he preferred to go to the root of the matter by giving a stern warning against greed or, as some of the older Bible versions have it, covetousness. (Did he have personal knowledge of the details of the situation?) Covetousness is the desire to have more than one actually has (not necessarily out of envy for other people's wealth). It not only leads to strife; it also expresses a fundamentally wrong attitude to life, according to which possessions are all that really matter. It only needs God to take away a person's life, and at once it becomes apparent how useless possessions can be. Money cannot buy everything. The rich man had failed to gain the true riches of a right relationship to God – one step towards which would certainly be through giving to the poor (33). Thus he was a fool; a godless and therefore a senseless person.

How then should possessions be regarded? The disciples should not worry about food and clothing (the two essential requirements for the body) as if they were the most important things. The person is more important. If God feeds even carefree birds and clothes the flowers, surely he will all the more provide what is necessary for his children. In any case, worry cannot make a person live any longer. In a world in which people are set on a rat-race for better living conditions, let the disciples first seek out God's will and his salvation; then they will find that their bodily needs are taken care of. Let them sell their possessions and give to the needy, and set their desire on a heavenly treasure that will not pass away.

Such teaching may seem to encourage laziness and lack of concern about the practicalities of everyday living – 'God will provide; therefore I do not need to do anything!' Jesus, however, is not talking to lazy people but to worried people, and to those who are tempted to

join in the rat-race. They should trust in God and get their priorities right.

Notes. 25 The Greek phrase is lit. 'a cubit' (a measure of length that could be used metaphorically for a period of time) to his 'height' (a word that could also be used for 'span of life'). **31** To seek God's kingdom is to set one's aim in life on God himself and the accomplishment of his purpose of bringing all life under his rule.

12:35–48 The coming of the Son of Man (see Mt. 24:43–51). From the way in which people should set their minds on the kingdom of God, Jesus turns to their attitudes to the future. Ahead lies the coming of the Son of Man (40) at an unexpected and unknown hour. It brings with it both judgment (8–9) and the completion of God's rule. The disciples, therefore, must make themselves ready for it by being diligently employed in God's service like servants who are always prepared for the master's return. The imagery of night-time stresses the need for vigilance and wakefulness. A second, very brief parable speaks of the situation of the householder who is surprised by the invasion of a burglar. This shows the other side of the expectation and expresses the serious effects of the coming of the Son of Man for those who are not ready.

But for whom was this teaching meant? Did it refer to all of the master's servants or just to the leaders among them? Jesus appears to have had the latter principally in mind. A servant who is set over a household and does his duty properly will be rewarded with full responsibility. But if the servant left in charge takes advantage of his master's absence to behave irresponsibly, he will get a shock when his master comes unexpectedly and find that his lot is with the unbelievers. His punishment will depend upon his knowledge and consequent measure of responsibility. The implication is that the heavenly judgment is not a simple matter of guilty or not guilty; there are varying degrees of judgment and reward.

The future tenses in vs 42–48 must refer to the situation in the church after the departure of Jesus. In fact all the parables in this section refer in their present setting to disciples in the period after the resurrection of Jesus and before his second coming (note the change of audience in v 54).

12:49–59 The crisis for Israel (*cf.* Mt. 10:34–36;16:2–3; 5:25–26). Here and now, however, is the crucial time when people must decide whether or not to confess Jesus as their Lord. His coming brings division to the world. It is meant to set the world on fire, and he longs that the fire might be kindled and burst into full flame. This will lead to suffering for Jesus himself, and he longs that it might soon be over. He did not come to bring peace and ease; his work would inevitably arouse opposition to the progress of the gospel even within families.

In this situation people tragically fail to realize how serious things are. They can tell a change in the weather from the direction of the wind, but they cannot read the signs of the times and act accordingly. They fail to realize that they are like a person being hauled off to court by an accuser. A wise person will try to get a settlement long before arriving in court and being sent off to a term in prison. Now is the time to respond to Jesus; soon it will be too late.

Notes. 49 The *fire* stands for the spread of the message or the power of God, and Jesus longs that it might spread more quickly. **50** Being plunged into water is a metaphor for distress and suffering (*cf.* Ps. 69:1–3). Here, therefore, *baptism* (lit. being plunged into water or being deluged with it) is a picture for the sufferings of Jesus (*cf.* Mk. 10:38–39). For *distressed* see 2 Cor. 5:14; Phil. 1:23. **56** *Hypocrites* here has the Heb. sense of 'godless' rather than 'acting a part'. **59** The parable cannot be pressed to teach a doctrine of purgatory.

13:1–9 The need for repentance. Two brief pieces of teaching stress the need for response to the crisis brought about by the coming of Jesus. Some pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover had been butchered by Roman troops in the temple while they were slaying their sacrifices. The report is thoroughly in keeping with Pilate's character, although this particular incident was too unimportant to excite the comment of Josephus in his history of this period. Jesus' response to the story was to contradict the orthodox Jewish belief that the greatness of the calamity suffered by these people indicated that they were unusually wicked sinners. It would be equally foolish to say that people accidentally crushed to death by falling masonry were exceptionally sinful. (This incident, too, was not important enough to get into a history book.) Rather, the Jewish nation as a whole was sinful in God's sight, and its members would all suffer the fate of sinners if they did not repent.

The situation of the nation was like that of a tree that produced no fruit. It was fit only for destruction, and the ground which it occupied could then be used for a healthy tree. But just as the owner was prepared to feed it and give it another chance, so God was prepared to allow Israel an opportunity for repentance. If the people failed to respond, their fate would be their own responsibility. The servant in the parable may represent Jesus as an advocate to God for undeserving Israel.

Notes. 6 Fruit trees of all kinds were

planted in vineyards. The fig-tree is used metaphorically for Israel in Ho. 9:10. **7** Fruit could not be taken from a tree during the first three years (Lv. 19:23); hence this tree was presumably six years old.

13:10–35 The saving effects of God's rule

13:10–17 The crippled woman. In the previous section the ministry of Jesus appeared as a period of crisis; the accent now falls again on the coming of salvation. A woman suffering from a spinal deformity was *set free* on a Sabbath by Jesus in the synagogue. The synagogue leader argued that where life was not at stake the healing could well have waited until a weekday. Jesus replied that if cattle could be loosed on the Sabbath to be watered (as the Jews on the whole allowed), how much more could a woman be loosed from her illness. Note how the disability is said to have been caused by a *spirit* (11) and to be a state of being bound by *Satan* (16). Human suffering is thus due to the same cosmic disorder as human sin. The final note brings out how the people rejoiced at the salvation revealed in Jesus while his opponents had nothing to say.

13:18–21 Two parables of the rule of God (see Mt. 13:31–33; Mk. 4:30–32). These two parables are here connected with the coming of God's saving rule in Jesus. They contain the promise that God's work would come to a glorious fulfilment, no matter how small its beginnings seemed to be. Just as a mustard seed grows to tree-like proportions and a small amount of yeast permeates a large amount of dough and makes it expand, so what begins as a small influence will increase and spread widely. Attempts to find separate meanings in the two parables are dubious, and the view that *yeast* here represents evil (rather than the kingdom) is certainly wrong.

13:22–30 Entry to the kingdom (*cf.* Mt. 7:13–14, 22–23; 8:11–12). The mention of Jerusalem – where Jesus was to be crucified – gives an abrupt reminder of the context of Jesus' teaching. Would many people be *saved*, *i.e.* enter the kingdom of God? The orthodox answer was that all Jews, except for notorious sinners and heretics, would find entry. But some Jewish groups limited the number to those who were truly religious according to their own rules. Jesus refused to speculate. It is much more important, he said, to ensure that one gets in personally. The kingdom is like a house with a *narrow door* offering limited admission. It is shut when the feast begins (Mt. 25:10), and then it will be too late to get in. It will be no use claiming to know Jesus if there has been no previous response to his message. There will be no question of automatic admission for anybody. Some Jews will be excluded, and in their place will be found Gentiles from all over the world alongside the saintly people of OT times. Those who thought that they ought to be first will find themselves placed last. Once again the lesson of the need for repentance (chs. 12 and 13) is emphasized: salvation and judgment cannot be separated from one another.

13:31–35 Lament over Jerusalem (see Mt. 23:37–39). Some Pharisees warned Jesus to flee from Herod's dominions (*i.e.* Galilee and Perea). Whether they were friends warning Jesus of possible danger or enemies acting in collusion with Herod to frighten Jesus into silence is not clear. In any case Jesus had nothing but contempt for the murderer of John the Baptist and his threats. *Fox* typified cunning or possibly insignificance. Herod could not harm Jesus, for the divinely appointed path for him led to Jerusalem, and there at God's appointed time he would suffer. For the present he would continue his work, and then finish his course as a prophet in Jerusalem. The thought made him break out in sorrow over the city which had so persistently rejected the messengers of God and which would in the end find itself locked out of the kingdom. Even in the face of the love and compassion of Jesus Jerusalem remained adamant. Therefore its temple would be empty of God's presence, and it would not see Jesus until it was prepared to welcome him as the Messiah or was visited by him as its judge.

Notes. **32** The idiom in *today and tomorrow* is to be understood from Ex. 19:10–11 or Ho. 6:2 where 'two days' represents a short period of time before a crisis (*the third day*). Jesus expresses his determination to carry on his work until either it is complete or the time of his martyrdom comes (*cf.* 2 Tim. 4:7). **33** The point is repeated, but here a different time-idiom is used. **34** *How often* implies that Jesus had visited Jerusalem more than once. **35** *Blessed* . . . is echoed in 19:38, but the reference here is to the second coming.

14:1–24 Jesus at table

14:1–6 The man with dropsy. A meal after the synagogue service on the Sabbath provided an opportunity for teaching in which Jesus made use of the imagery of a banquet. First, however, he healed a man suffering from *dropsy* (a swelling of parts of the body due to fluid collecting in the tissues). The miracle aroused the anger of a suspicious and hostile audience because it was performed on the Sabbath. Jesus claimed that his action was no different in principle from rescuing an animal which had fallen into a pit. The story makes a similar point to that recorded earlier in 13:11–17, and it is possible that the

two stories were originally told as a pair (like the two parables in 13:18–20). Here, however, the main point may be the way in which Jesus showed compassion to an uninvited guest (*cf.* vs 13, 21).

In v 5 the best MSS have 'son', but others have 'donkey' which fits the context better. What Jesus here regards as permissible by orthodox Jewish law was forbidden in the more austere rules of the Qumran community: 'Let no beast be helped to give birth on the Sabbath day; and if it fall into a cistern or a pit, let it not be lifted out on the Sabbath' (Damascus Rule 11:13–14). Probably Jesus meant that, if people were willing to help an animal, they would all the more help a son.

14:7–11 Places of honour. Jesus' teaching here to guests is not simply good advice on a social level as in Pr. 25:6–7. As a *parable* it has a spiritual significance. A *wedding feast* was a recognized symbol for the kingdom of God and heavenly bliss (15). The parable is based on the practice of seating guests at table by rank and distinction. The more important guests would arrive last, and an unwary early arrival might have to be moved to a lower place so as to accommodate them. Far better to adopt a position of modesty and wait to be invited to a better seat. For God exalts the humble and debases the proud. (The passive verbs *will be humbled/exalted* in v 11 are used when God is the active subject.) Jesus is not, of course, commending the hypocritical attitude which deliberately takes a lower place in order to be publicly exalted later.

14:12–14 The choice of guests. This piece of plain advice is in line with what Jesus says elsewhere about deeds which receive their full reward in this life (Mt. 6:1–2, 5, 16). People ought rather to do those deeds which God will reward. But this can be misunderstood.

On the one hand, Jesus is not condemning outright the holding of a party for one's family or friends – he himself went to such parties (Jn. 2:1–11). The 'do not do one thing, but do the other' form of words was sometimes used (as here) with the force: 'Do not (merely) do one thing, but (rather and also) the other.' Jesus is condemning the attitude which does good mainly for the sake of a tangible, earthly reward.

On the other hand, he is not saying that we should do good purely to get a better and longer-lasting heavenly reward. That would also be a self-seeking attitude! We should do good to those who cannot give us anything in return, and leave the whole question of recognition and reward to God.

A *resurrection of the righteous* does not exclude a resurrection of the unrighteous for judgment (Acts 24:15). It is, however, only for the righteous that the resurrection has a positive character.

14:15–24 The heavenly banquet (*cf.* Mt. 22:1–10). The mention of the resurrection led one of the guests to comment on the happy situation of the people who would share in the heavenly banquet. In reply Jesus raised the question of what kind of people would be invited to be present. The double invitation to the guests (16–17) was characteristic of ancient practice. The excuses for not coming would have sounded extremely lame to the audience, who might well have enjoyed the humour of the story until they realized that this was how, in Jesus' eyes, they were treating God's invitation to them. It is, therefore, all very well to express the kind of pious sentiment uttered in v 15: the vital point is whether one has accepted the heavenly invitation. But the story moves on to show how God invites the people who have no standing in society. Jesus is already defending himself for taking the gospel to the 'tax collectors and sinners' (see 15:1–32).

The rather similar story in Mt. 22:1–10 raises the question whether Jesus originally told one parable which his disciples have developed into two different forms or told two similar, but distinct parables. Either way, we should ask what the particular point of each version of the story is.

Notes. A Jewish story, which goes back at least to the fifth century BC, and could be based on earlier tradition, tells of an ambitious tax collector who tried to gain social standing with the traditional aristocrats by inviting them to dinner but was harshly rebuffed by them. So that the meal might not be wasted he invited the poor instead. If the story was known in the time of Jesus, it throws an interesting light on his parable. **16, 17, 23** There may be allegorical allusions to the invitations from God in the OT, then through Jesus to the Jews, and finally to the Gentiles.

14:25–35 The cost of discipleship (cf. Mt. 10:37–38; 5:13; Mk. 9:50)

Before taking up directly the theme of 'the gospel for the outcasts', foreshadowed in vs 21–24, Jesus indicates the stringent demands which accompany his invitation to God's banquet. Discipleship means a person's readiness to place his or her claims above those of both family and self. Disciples must be prepared to deny themselves completely – whether *carry his cross* means literally to be ready for martyrdom or metaphorically to 'die' to all personal desires. People should count the cost involved in saying 'No' to self before starting on a course which they may not be able to follow to the end. How foolish is the builder who leaves a building

unfinished because his funds run out before he anticipated. How foolish, too, is the army commander who does not reckon up on the strength of his army before engaging a stronger foe in battle. A disciple who gives up in midstream because the going is too tough is like salt which has lost its taste and is unfit for seasoning food or even for use on the ground; it cannot be made useful again.

Notes. **26** To *hate* means to 'love less'. **27** Crucifixion was a sufficiently common event in Judea for people to understand readily what Jesus meant (*cf.* 9:23). **34** The impure mixture used as *salt* could lose its salt content and become useless. Since salt makes land infertile, it is puzzling what Jesus meant; possibly use for killing weeds or slowing down the fermentation of dung is in mind.

15:1–32 The gospel for the outcasts

15:1–10 The lost sheep and the lost coin (*cf.* Mt. 18:12–14). Jesus' association with the members of society commonly regarded as sinful and unrepentant by the Pharisees led to continual criticism. 'Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the Law' is a later rabbinic saying which sums up their attitude. Jesus had already defended himself by speaking of the needs of these people (5:31–32). In the parable of the heavenly banquet he had further declared that he would convey God's invitation to such people rather than to religious people who spurned it. The issue receives fuller treatment in a set of three parables which offer the highest reason of all. God rejoices over the recovery of a lost sinner, and therefore it is Jesus' supreme desire to seek and save the lost (19:10). This divine attitude is illustrated by the willingness of a shepherd to go out over the hills searching, so that not even one sheep may be missing from his flock. There may well be shepherds who do in fact ask: 'What does one lost sheep matter compared with ninety-nine safe in the fold?' and ignore the value of the individual. Not so with God. He rejoices even more (if that is possible) over the return of the lost than over the safety of those at home. So too a housewife summons her friends to share in her rejoicing when she finds her lost coin. In just the same way, it is implied, the Pharisees should share in God's rejoicing over the salvation of the outcasts.

Notes. **3–7** In Mt. 18:12–14 the parable of the lost sheep is an object lesson to the disciples to care for the weaker members of God's flock. **7, 10** *Rejoicing in heaven* and *in the presence of the angels* are ways of saying that God himself rejoices, but they also indicate that God's people share in his rejoicing. **8** The description of the woman lighting a lamp and sweeping her house confirms that she was a comparatively poor person living in a peasant's small house with a low doorway and no windows.

15:11–32 The lost son. The third parable makes the same point at greater length. Its main character is really the father who in effect illustrates the character of God (even though God himself appears in the story; *cf.* v18).

The narrative situation is that property could be disposed of either by a will or by a gift during one's lifetime. The younger son demanded immediately the full rights of possession over his portion (about one third) of his father's estate which he could expect to inherit when the father died. The elder son remained at home and the father retained his rights over the produce of his portion of the estate. The younger son, however, turned his share into cash and departed to enjoy the proceeds away from home and parental control. Extravagance and dissolute living reduced him to utter poverty, and the friends who had helped to spend the money disappeared. He could find only the most lowly and unpleasant employment possible, especially for a Jew to whom pigs were unclean animals. He would gladly have supplemented his miserable wages by sharing the carob pods which the pigs ate, but (it is implied) he was too disgusted to do so. His desperate state brought him to repentance. He realized not only that he had made a mess of his life but also that he was unworthy to be called his father's son; he was fit only to be a servant, and he was prepared to humble himself and seek reentry to the home at that level.

Before he reached home, however, his father was already looking for his arrival, and before he could blurt out the whole of his intended confession, his father had welcomed him back into the family circle, treated him with great honour, and given orders to celebrate the return of one who had been as good as dead.

One person, the older brother, refused to join in the celebration and grumbled at the lavish welcome. He accused his father of failing to treat him in the same free and joyous manner, only to be reminded that all the resources of the home were his. One can be lost even at home.

The vital question remains unanswered: Did the elder brother eventually join in the welcome to his brother? The absence of the answer to the question is surely deliberate. For the elder brother represents the Pharisees and all like them, and the parable is an appeal to them to change their mind about the outcasts.

Although the parable comes to a climax with this unspoken question, the centre of attention remains the pardoning love of God which should have shamed the Pharisees into a positive response. The story says nothing about

his seeking the lost (as in 15:3–10) or about the need for atonement for sin, but that is because the story is a parable, not a detailed allegory, and other aspects of the seeking, sacrificial love of God are taught clearly enough elsewhere.

Notes. **18** *Heaven* here means 'God'. The son's repentance was not in any way insincere, even though it took utter desperation to bring him to the point. **21** The NIV mg., 'Make me like one of your hired men', is an addition by pedantic scribes who failed to see that the father interrupted the son's statement before he could finish it. **22** The gifts were signs of honour and authority. *Shoes* were the prerogative of free men, not of slaves. **29–30** The elder brother's complaints are expressed in extravagant language. He could not bring himself to say 'my brother' and spoke contemptuously of *this son of yours.*

16:1–31 Warnings about wealth

After showing his concern for the poor and the outcasts, Jesus gives some warnings against avarice and wealth (14, 19) which are directed to people who were in danger of failing to respond to the gospel before it was too late. They should in any case have listened to the teaching of the OT Scriptures about the moral law of God, which remains permanently valid. Sayings on these and related topics have been gathered together, so that the chapter also has something to say about the disciples' attitude to wealth.

16:1–9 The shrewd manager. The manager employed by a rich man to look after his estate and keep his accounts was suspected of mismanaging his affairs and possibly of actual dishonesty. When he saw that he was in danger of being dismissed, he called together his master's debtors and allowed them to put lower figures on the statements which showed how much they had promised to pay. This would make them feel a sense of gratitude to him and perhaps help him when he was out of a job. He had acted with considerable astuteness in providing for his own interests.

The message of the parable is disputed. It may simply be meant to urge people to prepare for the crisis brought about by the preaching of Jesus with the same zeal and prudence as the manager. On the other hand, Jesus' added comment that more astuteness is shown by worldly people than by those who belong to the people of God may indicate that the parable was directed at the disciples (8), or the Pharisees whose greed was excluding them from God's friendship (14; *cf.* 11:39–41). The point would then be that people should learn from the manager and use their wealth to make God their friend, so that, when money is no longer of any help to them, God will receive them into his presence (9). A third possibility is that the manager in the story was not in fact acting dishonestly. Instead he may have been releasing the debtors from the very high interest charges which had been imposed on them (quite illegally) when the loans were made. If this is so then the message of the parable is that keeping the law and showing generosity are ways by which wealthy people can make God their friend.

None of these interpretations can be excluded. In fact the parable may have a number of points, and vs 8b–13 bring these out.

Notes. **6–7** Since *oil* was cheaper than *wheat*, the reductions in the debts were about the same. **8–9** The *master* may be the manager's master (so the NIV) or Jesus himself (in which case the Greek word *kyrios* means 'the Lord'). The manager was commended for his astuteness and not necessarily for his morality. *Dishonesty* and *worldly* typify the people and the money (lit. 'mammon') of this present, evil age.

16:10–13 Faithful stewardship (see Mt. 6:24). Various general principles of stewardship, *i.e.* the care of what somebody has entrusted to you for safe keeping, now follow.

First, how people look after a little is an indicator as to how they will look after a larger sum (10). If people are poor stewards of money, they will hardly be entrusted with spiritual riches which are more valuable and important (11).

Secondly, if people cannot exercise proper care over something given to them in trust, and for which they can be brought to account, they will not be given wealth of their own to use as they please (12).

Thirdly, God's claims are quite exclusive over against wealth (13). The ancient idea of slavery did not envisage the sort of labour or devotion which could be practised by a person who works for one employer in the mornings and another in the afternoons.

16:14–18 The Pharisees and the law (*cf.* Mt. 11:12–13; 5:18, 32). People who try to combine gaining wealth and being pious do not like such teaching. Jesus had to warn them that, while they may have succeeded in persuading men that they were pious, in fact their secret greed was plain to God – and abominable in his sight.

Vs 16–18 answer the objection that the message of Jesus and his followers made the law in the OT and its moral demands out of date. Jesus denied the charge; God's will was still expressed in the OT (29). Certainly the era of the law and the prophets had ended, and now the new age of the kingdom had come. But this did not mean that the law had ceased to be valid. A specific example is given: divorce, followed by remarriage, is adultery. This particular example

in fact made the law's demands more intense. The Jews thought of adultery as a sin by a woman against her husband or by one man against another; Jesus taught that a man may commit adultery against a woman and so sin against her.

Note. 16 Luke's verson of this saying is probably his attempt to clarify the difficult phrase preserved in Mt. 11:12 which the NIV translates: 'the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing'. *Everyone is forcing his way into it* probably refers to ordinary people eager to enter the kingdom rather than to demons or people opposing the kingdom violently or to Zealots attempting to force God to act more quickly.

16:19–31 The rich man and Lazarus. The parable implies that the rich man did scarcely anything to alleviate the beggar's utter misery and degradation. Street *dogs* were unclean animals and therefore especially unpleasant. We are to infer that *Lazarus* ('he whom God helps') was a pious person.

The beggar found a place of honour beside Abraham, the father of the Jewish race and the friend of God. The rich man found himself in Hades (the NIV's *hell* is misleading) in torment and agony. He called upon Abraham as 'father' for mercy, but, although Abraham addressed him as 'son', he offered him no hope.

So far the story follows traditional lines, but now there is a fresh element. Could the rich man's brothers, who were probably also rich and careless, be warned before they reached Hades? The reply given was that the teaching they possessed in the OT should be enough. Not even somebody returning from the dead could influence those who had shut their ears to God's voice in Scripture. Failure to practise the love and the mercy commanded in the OT leads to loss in the next life.

The story is a parable, and therefore does not necessarily give literal information about conditions in the next life. 'Hades' was the abode of the dead in popular Jewish belief, and it is not clear whether Jesus was referring to the time before or after the final judgment. Yet the clear implication is that the fate of the rich man was finally fixed. Although the language is manifestly symbolic when it talks of the poor man being beside Abraham, it speaks of real destinies for people.

17:1–19 Teaching for disciples

17:1–4 Stumbling blocks (*cf.* Mt. 18:6–7, 15, 21–22; Mk. 9:42). The first of a collection of teachings for disciples, this section is about things that cause people to sin (older versions have 'stumbling blocks'). Although these are inevitable in this present world, nevertheless Jesus warns his disciples sternly about being the cause of other people sinning, *e.g.* by tempting them or by setting a bad example. It would be better for such people to drown before they can do their evil work rather than suffer the fate reserved for tempters. On the contrary, the disciples should help any member of their group who falls into sin both by showing that they have gone wrong and by being ready to forgive, no matter how often this may be necessary.

17:5–6 The power of faith (*cf.* Mt. 17:20; Mk 11:22–23). Jesus commended the desire for the faith necessary to enable disciples to obey his commands; even a tiny 'amount' of faith can do great wonders. *Increase our faith* may simply mean 'give us faith'. The saying about the *mulberry tree* was never meant to be taken literally.

17:7–10 Duty. Servants who have completed their duty have no right to expect anything more than the agreed wage and remain *unworthy* in the sense that they have nothing of which to boast. Elsewhere Jesus taught and demonstrated a different attitude by himself serving his disciples (Jn. 13:1–16; *cf.* the teaching in Lk. 12:35–38; 22:27). This shows that here he is not teaching that God's dealings with us are on a basis of law and duty rather than of grace and faith. Rather, he is giving a necessary lesson to all who are tempted to feel proud of their faith or their good works for God.

Jesus' use of an illustration from slavery does not prove that he would have commended slavery as an institution any more than he would have commended dishonesty (16:8).

17:11–19 The grateful Samaritan. When some lepers sought healing from Jesus, he simply commanded them to go and show themselves to a priest (5:14) The implication is that their faith would be demonstrated by their obedience and would lead to their cure. All showed faith and were cured, but only one stopped to praise God and to thank Jesus for his cure. Jesus commented on the ungratefulness of the others (all presumably Jews) and confirmed that the Samaritan's faith had made him well both in body and soul. The story is both an illustration of wonder-working faith (*cf.* v 6) and a lesson on the need for gratitude as part of faith.

Note. 11 The location of the incident on the border explains the mixed racial character of the group. The geography, however, is not clear. It is possible that *Galilee* here includes Perea, the area east of the Jordan also ruled by Herod.

17:20 – 18:8 The coming of the Son of Man

17:20–37 The kingdom and the Son of Man (*cf.* Mt. 24:23–28, 37–41). Jesus had already spoken of the coming of the kingdom and of the Son of Man (9:26; 10:9, 11; 12:40). It

was natural to ask when these events would happen. Would there be any indications as to when the end was near so that people could prepare themselves for it or take hope from the thought that it was not too far distant.

Jesus replied that the coming of the kingdom would not be accompanied by observable signs. People would not be able to say in advance: 'Here it is.' The second part of his statement is not easy. The NIV and some other translations say that *the kingdom of God is within you.* This translation is improbable not simply because the kingdom was not within the Pharisees who asked the question but rather because Jesus nowhere else spoke of the kingdom as an inward, spiritual experience. 'Among you' (NIV mg.) is a better translation; the phrase might then mean 'within your grasp'. Although Jesus says *is* (present tense) some have suggested that he was really speaking about the future. This is also unlikely, since elsewhere Jesus spoke about the kingdom as being present (11:20) as well as future. The kingdom of God was already at work in the midst of Jesus' hearers; it was there for them to grasp.

Jesus then looks to the future, and talks about the way in which God will suddenly intervene in history – again without any warning signs. People will long to see the time of the coming of the Son of Man and the new era, no doubt partly because of the distress that they undergo in this world. In this situation they could be misled by false signs. When the Son of Man does come, his glorious arrival will be sufficiently clear for everybody to recognize what is happening – in marked contrast to the suffering and humiliation which he must first undergo as a necessary stage on the path to his glorious triumph. This will come as a surprise – and an unpleasant one – to the world at large, and therefore people ought to prepare themselves for it. Just as flood once overtook the world and fire devoured Sodom by surprise, despite the witness of Noah and Lot (2 Pet. 2:5–8), so will it be when the Son of Man comes in judgment. It will be too late to escape then; people must therefore beware of attachment to earthly things, remembering the terrible experience of Lot's wife. Only people who have given up living for themselves will escape. There will be separation even between members of the same family and within groups of fellow-workers. When Jesus is asked where it will happen, he makes no concessions to those who want a map as well as a timetable; when the time comes, it will be quite obvious where the Son of Man is, just as the location of a corpse in the desert is evident from the flock of circling vultures above it.

Notes. 20 Jesus' warning against looking for signs has often been thought to be out of harmony with 21:5–36.This, however, rests on a misunderstanding of the latter passage (and of its parallels in Mt. 24 and Mk. 13). Jesus consistently taught that there are no certain signs and people must be continually watchful. **22** *The days of the Son of Man* probably refers to the period immediately before his coming. **36** This verse is omitted in the best MSS; it was added by scribes who were familiar with Mt. 24:40.

18:1–8 The unjust judge. This parable is really the closing part of the teaching about the future in 17:20–37. Like the very similar parable in 11:5–8, it makes its point not by comparing God to the unjust judge but by drawing the contrast. Probably the woman was bringing a financial case to the judge and he refused to listen because he was waiting for a bribe; she was too poor to pay, and persistence was her only weapon. If even a judge who does not honour the laws of God and man can be induced to act by the incessant appeals of a widow, how much more will God act to uphold his people when they cry to him.

In v 7 God's *chosen ones* are the people who have heard his call and have responded to it. Here they are in a situation of persecution and long for God to show that they are in the right. They pray: 'May your kingdom come.' *Will he keep putting them off?* suggests that God may appear to be intractable and not answering their prayers, but in fact he will certainly answer their prayers without the need to be pressed. He will uphold his people quickly. The really vital question is not whether God will respond to prayer, but whether there will be faithful people who have persisted in prayer and not lost hope when the Son of Man comes. The parable is essentially an encouragement to continue in prayer without losing heart right through the difficult times of waiting before the Son of Man comes. For an interesting parallel see Ecclus. 35:14–19.

18:9 –19:10 The scope of salvation

The common theme in this section of the gospel is the offer of salvation to people who would normally be regarded as excluded from it.

18:9–14 The Pharisee and the tax collector. Like the preceding parable this one too is about prayer, but it really deals with a wider topic. The two prayers reflect two types of character. The Pharisee was a pious man, living an honest and upright life. He did more than the law required. He fasted twice a week – on Mondays and Thursdays – although the law required people to fast only once a year on the Day of Atonement. He gave tithes of all his income and not just of the required parts. But he *stood up* in a prominent place to pray, he commended himself for his piety (his prayer is all about 'I'), he despised his neighbours and he

suggested to God that there was nothing he needed. By contrast, the tax collector stood far away from the holy place in the temple. He did not dare lift up his eyes, still less his hands, to God in prayer, but simply poured out a confession of his sinfulness and appealed for God's mercy. Jesus' verdict was that he went home *justified, i.e.* accepted by God, but the Pharisee was not accepted at all. *Rather than the other* (14) is too weak: 'and not the other' is correct. The parable is thus another demonstration of concern for the 'outcasts'. God is always ready to receive the unrighteous when they call to him, but he closes his ears to those whose pride in their religious practices and good works makes them feel self-sufficient.

There were undoubtedly many good, well-meaning Pharisees, and therefore it is wrong to lump them all together and condemn them. But it is also true that there were people like the Pharisee pictured here, and prayers very similar to this one have been handed down in Jewish sources.

18:15–17 Jesus and children (see Mt. 19:13–15; Mk. 10:13–16). Luke alone refers to the children as *babies*. *Touch* implies that Jesus would place his hands on them and pray to God to bless them. In Mark the main point of the story is that the kingdom of God belongs to such as them, and this is emphasized by Jesus taking the children in his arms. Luke omitted this feature, not because he felt that it was an improper thing to record, but more probably because he wanted to concentrate attention on the lesson that the kingdom of God is only for those who are prepared to receive it *like a little child* in a humble and receptive frame of mind (*cf.* 18:14).

Notes. 15 After a long section (9:51 – 18:14) which had no parallels in Mark, Luke again keeps in step with the earlier gospel. **16** The kingdom is both for children and for the childlike.

18:18–34 The rich ruler (see Mt. 19:16–30; 20:17–19; Mk. 10:17–34). The same theme of the attitudes that God accepts continues. To *inherit, i.e.* gain, *eternal life* is the same as to enter the kingdom of God (24) or to be saved (26). Jesus asked if the man really knew what he meant by addressing him as *good*. This word should be reserved for God only. Jesus was not denying his own position as the Son of God, which would not have been obvious to the man; he was trying to avoid empty flattery. He answered the man's question in the traditional Jewish way by talking about the need to keep the commandments, especially those in the second part of the Ten Commandments which could be tested (more or less) by a person's outward behaviour. When the man claimed to have kept them, Jesus began to probe more deeply. Let the young man turn his assets into cash, give to the poor and become a disciple. The man's refusal to do so showed that he did not truly love his neighbour as himself, and that he put himself and his wealth, rather than God, at the centre of his affections (*cf.* 10:27). Although he kept the law outwardly, his heart was not right with God. Here was clear proof that it is extremely hard for people whose hearts are set on riches to enter the kingdom. In fact, it is about as easy for a camel to go literally through the eye of a needle! Indeed, it is impossible for any people to save themselves.

But although people cannot overcome their own sinful hearts by themselves, God can intervene to save those who will respond to his call. Peter then suggested that the Twelve had made this response and given up everything for Jesus. Jesus promised that those who were prepared for the sacrifices involved in being disciples would receive far greater blessings both now, in the fellowship of God's people, and in the world to come.

Persecution (see Mk. 10:30) is not mentioned here but is surely implied in the prophecy that Jesus goes on to cite about the shameful treatment which he, as the Son of Man, would receive from the Gentiles. But the Twelve could not take this in (*cf.* 9:45).

Notes. 20 The commandments are listed in a peculiar order which is also found in the Greek translation of the OT. The command against covetousness is omitted – either because this sin is not so obvious outwardly as the others or because this commandment was in fact the one that the young man could not say that he had kept. **25** A similar Jewish proverb spoke of an elephant. **31** See Is. 49:7; 50:5–6; 52:13 – 53:12; and also Pss. 22; 69. Some of these passages may be not so much direct prophecies as rather statements about what happens to righteous people in general who trust in God and suffer for so doing.

18:35–43 The healing of a blind man (see Mt. 20:29–34; Mk. 10:46–52). The final two stories in this section are about people who responded to the call of God given by Jesus. *Son of David* was a designation for the Messiah (see Is. 11:1–10; Je. 23:5–6; Ezk. 34:23–24; Lk. 20:41–44). The blind man showed persistence (*cf.* 18:1) in calling out for help despite the people who tried to silence him, and Jesus responded to his faith.

19:1–10 Zacchaeus the tax collector. Not all rich people departed sadly from Jesus. Zacchaeus is an example of what is possible with God (18:27). The Romans sold the task of collecting the taxes in any particular area to the highest bidder. The person appointed did not

receive any salary for his work; he simply collected as much money as he could, and he kept for himself what was left over after he had paid the agreed sum to the Romans. Zacchaeus's attempt to see Jesus, who was popularly known as the friend of tax collectors (7:34) shows his interest in him and the lengths to which he was prepared to go. Whether or not Zacchaeus hoped to be hidden from view, Jesus called to him with a request for lodging. Zacchaeus showed both repentance and joy as he welcomed Jesus. Jesus justified his choice of company: he had brought salvation to a man who was as much entitled to hear the gospel as any other Jew. Here the purpose of the coming of Jesus is fully and finally summed up: as a shepherd goes and looks for lost sheep to rescue from danger (*cf.* 15:3–7; Ezk. 34:16 – applied to God himself and his servant, the Messiah), so Jesus as the Son of Man seeks and saves lost people.

Notes. 8 By inserting *here and now* the NIV shows that it interprets the verbs *I give* and *I will repay* (both present tense in Greek) as referring to what Zacchaeus resolved to do immediately, not as references to his past practice. The resolve corresponds to the penitence of the tax collector in 18:13. 9 The saying does not imply that Jesus was not concerned about the Gentiles, but stresses simply that one Jew is no more and no less valuable than any other in God's sight.

19:11 – 21:38 The teaching of Jesus in Jerusalem

19:11–27 The parable of the ten minas

As the work of Jesus came to what the disciples hoped would be a climax in Jerusalem, they thought that a successful worldly type of revolution was about to take place and lead to the establishment of the kingdom of God. They bickered about the places which they would occupy in the new order (22:24–30; Mk. 10:35–45). The present parable was intended to correct this attitude by warning that the Messiah was going to be rejected and that there would be a period during which he would be 'absent' and his followers must engage in faithful service until his return.

As an 'earthly' story the parable sounds like the stories of various members of the Herodian family who went to Rome to petition for, or to seek confirmation of, royal power over their realms. Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great, went to Rome in 4 BC to have his father's will confirmed, by which he was to be his successor. But an embassy of Jews followed close on his heels with a protest to the emperor: 'We don't want this man to be our king'; as a result Augustus severely limited his powers. Jesus was probably using this incident as a basis for the parable. The fate of the disobedient subjects simply reflects ancient despotic ways. There is no record that Archelaus himself actually behaved like this, and there is no indication that Jesus himself approved of such cruelty.

The centre of interest in the parable, however, is not the rebellious subjects but the ten servants (probably a round number) each of whom was given a *mina* with which to trade and make a profit. The first two servants, having successfully managed their money, received the privilege of high office. A third, however, had not managed his money well, not even to the extent of loaning it out at interest. He even criticized his master for being a harsh man who unjustly took the proceeds of other people's work. Perhaps he was afaid of making a loss and getting into trouble. (*cf.* the stockbroker's warning: 'the value of your investment can go down as well as up!') The prospect of reward and loss is put before the disciples.

Notes. This parable has similarities to the parable of the talents in Mt. 25: 14–30. It also contains some curious points. In v 20 *another servant* is actually 'the other servant', as if there were originally only three servants, as in Matthew. It is curious that an extra *mina* is given as an additional reward to a person who has just received ten cities and that this should lead to a protest. Finally, the part of the story about the ruler and his rebellious subjects is not in the parable of the talents and is perhaps slightly odd in a story about trade and commerce. Many scholars think, therefore, that two separate stories told by Jesus have been joined together into one, and that some of the details have been slightly changed in the telling of the stories. Something similar may have happened in the story in Mt. 22:1–14 which also looks like a combination of two parables (but see note there). Naturally these points do not affect the basic truths taught in the stories. 13 Offering modern equivalents for ancient coins, especially in a period of inflation, is almost impossible. The NIV suggests that the *mina* was equivalent to about three months' wages for a farm labourer. This gives a rough idea of its purchasing value. 21 The description of the master as *harsh* and the story of his conduct in v 27 are not meant to be taken as a picture of what God is like, although the fact of divine judgment is certainly something to be taken seriously.

19:28–40 Jesus approaches Jerusalem (see Mt. 21:1–9; Mk. 11:1–10; Jn. 12:12–19)

The disciples had by now been warned against wrong expectations of what would happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, he prepared to enter the city in an unusual way. He mounted

a colt and rode from *Bethphage and Bethany*, which were two villages east of the Mount of Olives, down the slope of the hill and towards the city. Spreading clothes on the road was a sign of greeting to a ruler (*cf.* 2 Ki. 9:13). The people who had come with him from Galilee burst into praise to God for the mighty works which they had already seen and hailed Jesus as the coming king who would have God's authority to rule. Luke alone tells how some of the Pharisees, who were possibly friendly towards Jesus and fearful for the consequences, warned him to quieten his enthusiastic followers. But Jesus was not prepared to do so. In a deeper sense than the people who were shouting realized their words were true: the king had come. The crowds, therefore, could not help welcoming him.

Notes. 31 It is not clear whether *the Lord* refers to Jesus himself or to the colt's owner. In the latter case, the owners in v 33 would be the owner's servants, and Jesus would have made a previous arrangement for the loan with the owner. In the former case, Jesus very unusually refers to himself as 'the Lord'. **38** In Mk. 11:9–10 it is the kingdom rather than the king which is welcomed, but the difference is not important. Luke's wording assumes that people realized that the setting up of a kingdom involved the installation of a king, and the important thing is that they were prepared to recognize a human being, Jesus, as the king. The crowds may have been expecting some kind of coup by Jesus, despite all that he had said to the contrary to his followers. *Peace in heaven* . . . is Luke's paraphrase of 'Hosanna . . .' in Mark for Gentile readers. Perhaps it suggests that peace is not possible on earth for Jerusalem (*cf.* 2:14; 19:42).

19:41–48 The fate of Jerusalem (see Mt. 21:12–13; Mk. 11:15–18)

There is a sudden change of mood as Jesus utters a sorrowful prophecy over the city spread before him. He longed that it might repent and seek what would be for its own good. How little did the city of peace (Heb. 7:2) live up to its name. The time would come when it would be besieged in the typical manner of ancient warfare: a barricade would be built round it to prevent anybody coming or going in order to starve the inhabitants into submission. Then the enemy would force their way in and capture it with tremendous cruelty and loss of life. All this would happen because the people had failed to recognize that God was coming to it and longing to save it.

Then Jesus entered the temple and made a demonstration of driving out the people who carried on their trades within it. They provided for the needs of worshippers and pilgrims, like a modern souvenir shop selling picture postcards of a cathedral. But the trade seems to have been less than honest and had grown to vast proportions. The area of the temple appointed for the Gentiles to worship God had become a *den of thieves* rather than a place where prayer was possible. Jesus then put the temple to its proper use, teaching daily amid increasing opposition from the authorities and strong sympathy from the crowds.

The passage implies that this was not Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem (13:34); otherwise it is difficult to understand why he seems to condemn the city almost before he has given it any chance to respond to his message.

20:1 – 21:4 Teaching in the temple

The story of Jesus' last visit to Jerusalem is filled with a series of incidents in which the points of difference between him and the Jewish leaders become ever more clear, and they were stirred to take action against him.

20:1–8 The authority of Jesus (see Mt. 21:23–27; Mk. 11:27–33). The Sanhedrin, which was in effect the Jewish 'parliament', was composed of representatives from each of the three groups named here, the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders, totalling seventy-one members under the chairmanship of the high priest. The *chief priests* were members of the leading high-priestly families and holders of various offices (*e.g.* the ruler of the temple, the leaders of the weekly and daily groups of priests, the captains and the treasurers); the *elders* were the lay representatives of the people.

They wanted to know what authority Jesus claimed for setting himself up as a teacher. Did he claim to be a prophet with divine authority? Jesus replied with a counter-question. Let them first tell him whether John the Baptist had received his authority from heaven, *i.e.* from God (15:18), or from men. If the group had replied 'From heaven' Jesus could have asked them why they did not accept him (Mt. 21:32); it would also have implied that he himself also had divine authority. But if they denied the authority of John, they would have landed themselves in trouble with the people who had certainly regarded John as a prophet. Their answer, *We don't know*, was pitifully weak, and Jesus in effect won the argument. Yet the story is not about Jesus outwitting people in argument. Rather it shows how the questioners were unwilling to admit divine authority when they saw it and could not make up their minds what to do in the situation.

20:9–19 The parable of the wicked tenants (see Mt. 21:33–46; Mk. 12:1–12). Jesus now moved into the attack with a transparent parable. Jews who knew their

Scriptures would be reminded of the opening words of Is. 5:1–7, where a vineyard represented Israel. In the owner's absence, the tenants decided first to withhold the fruits from him and then to ensure that they would take over the vineyard. In certain conditions the property of a Gentile or a proselyte who died without making a will would pass to the first person who gained possession of it. The tenants may have been relying on some such custom, or simply hoping that the landlord would not follow up on their action. So they killed the heir and sat tight on the property. The story reflects the situation of the time when large estates in Galilee were owned by distant landlords. It also portrays allegorically the history of Israel and its leaders who had continually rejected the messengers of God. For Christians the owner's son clearly represents Jesus, but whether the first hearers would have recognized this is not certain. They might have seen in the word *son* a way of referring to the Messiah, or they might have known that on occasion Jesus claimed that God was his Father in a special way. But, although Jesus himself was aware of his own identity and fate, he did not speak openly about them to the crowds or his opponents.

It was obvious what a landlord would do with such tenants, and everybody would have accepted that he was in the right to do so. Yet the hearers said *May this never be.* This shows that they must have recognized that Jesus was applying the story to 'the vineyard of the Lord', and they were appalled at the thought of others taking possession of it. Jesus, however, claimed scriptural support for what he said. What else, he asked, could be the meaning of the metaphor of the stone rejected by the builders but given the chief place in the building? Did it not mean that the person whose authority they had refused (20:1–7) was the person of God's choice? Anybody who rejected him, therefore, would suffer judgment (see Is. 8:14–15; Dn. 2:34–5).

20:20–26 Tribute to Caesar (see Mt. 22:15–22; Mk. 12:13–17). The authorities would have arrested Jesus on the spot, but the time was not ripe in view of his immense popularity. So they contented themselves with collecting further evidence against him. In order to make him lose favour with the people or incur the suspicion of the Romans they raised a question about the poll-tax imposed on the Jews by the Romans. It had been introduced amid fierce resentment and opposition (see on 2:2), and it continued to be unpopular. Would Jesus oppose it – and perhaps be arrested as a rebel? Or would he uphold it – and perhaps lose the support of the people? Jesus asked his questioners for a coin, not because he did not possess one, but so as to demonstrate that they themselves used Caesar's money. The silver *denarius*, which bore Caesar's head on one side and on the other the goddess of peace, was inscribed: 'Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus, chief priest.' If the people used Caesar's coinage, they were under obligation to pay back what was owing to him. But then Jesus went beyond the original question. People also have a parallel debt to God. Perhaps there is the thought that people are God's coinage, for they bear God's image.

The respective spheres of authority of God and Caesar are not defined here. Jesus' point was simply that people who benefit from Caesar must pay him for it.

20:27–40 The problem of the resurrection (see Mt. 22:23–33; Mk. 12:18–27). The *Sadducees* were a Jewish group, chiefly drawn from the priesthood and the wealthy aristocracy, who were perfectly happy with the existing situation under Roman rule. They had a traditional, conservative type of religion which was based on the five books of Moses, but it was empty and formal. Unlike the Pharisees, they accepted only the material world and denied the resurrection, angels and spirits (Acts 23:8). Their story was designed to show the absurdity of the resurrection in the light of 'levirate marriage'. This was based on the principle that if a husband died, his brother should marry the widow in order to raise up a male heir for him (see Gn. 38:8; Dt. 25:5–6). Theoretically a woman might have several husbands in turn; so did not this make the idea of resurrection a nonsense?

First, Jesus stated that conditions in the resurrection are not like those on earth. Since there is no death and hence no need to replenish the race, there is no need for procreation. This could be taken to mean that earthly relationships like marriage will come to an end in heaven. More probably all human relationships are lifted up to such a high level in heaven that the exclusiveness of marriage will not be a factor in heaven as it is on earth. The continuation of earthly relationships is implied in 1 Thes. 4:17–18.

Secondly, Jesus gave an argument for the resurrection based on the law of Moses. At the burning bush God had said: 'I – the God of Abraham' (Ex. 3:6). In a Hebrew sentence of this kind, there was no verb expressed, and Jesus was implying that the present form of the verb 'I am' must be supplied (as in the Greek translation of the OT), showing that God still said that he was the God of Abraham centuries after his death – with the implication that Abraham was still alive and able to worship him. The God who was Abraham's God during his lifetime would not let death interrupt the relationship but would resurrect him.

Note. 35 On the resurrection see 14:14 note.

20:41–44 The person of the Messiah (see Mt. 22:41–46; 23:6; Mk. 12:35–40). Finally, Jesus took the initiative in criticizing inadequate views of the Christ or Messiah. The Jews awaited the coming of an earthly deliverer who would be a king descended from David (see on 18:38). But in Ps. 110 David was reported as saying 'The Lord [*i.e.* God] said to my Lord [*i.e.* The Messiah] . . .'. If however, the Messiah was David's son, how could David refer to his own son as his Lord? (For a father is superior to his son.) The implication could be either that the Messiah is not a descendant from David or that in some way the Messiah is more than an earthly descendant of David. Jesus, however, was recognized as descended from David, so the first option is ruled out. The second option is the right one, but the proof that Jesus was superior to David did not emerge until the resurrection. For the moment Jesus left his hearers with a riddle.

Note. 42 Although the two words translated 'lord' are the same in Greek, they are different in the Hebrew version of the Psalm.

20:46–47 The hypocrisy of the teachers of the law. Then Jesus turned to expose the inadequacies of the religion of the teachers of the law. Some of them had become proud of their robes and they loved the respect of the people. They were hypocrites who cheated the poor and made an empty show of their religion. Of all people they should have known God's will most clearly; for that reason they were doubly guilty. Yet there were individual exceptions to this strong verdict: see Mk. 12:28–34.

21:1–4 The widow's offering (see Mk. 12:41–44). In sharpest contrast to the false religion of the scribes is placed this story of a poor widow who gave two of the tiniest coins in circulation as her offering to the temple alongside the gifts of the rich. In God's sight her offering was the greatest because God measures not so much the size of the gift as of what remains to the owner after it has been given. She had in effect given all her income.

21:5–38 The destruction of the temple and the last things

21:5–7 The fate of the temple (see Mt. 24:1–3; Mk. 13:1–4). Jesus did not share the enthusiasm of the disciples for the magnificent architecture of Herod's new temple, and he proceeded to prophesy that it would be completely destroyed. The disciples asked when this would happen, and whether there would be any warning signs to show that it was about to happen. The way they put their question, and certainly the way in which Jesus answered it, shows that they thought that the destruction of the temple would be one of the events associated with the end of the age.

Jesus' lengthy answer is also recorded in Mk. 13 with some differences in wording. Scholars debate whether Luke reworded the discourse, as he read it in Mark, in order to make some of its lessons clearer for his readers, or whether he had access to some different traditions of what Jesus said. There may well be truth in both theories. Like the Sermon on the Mount, this chapter doubtless contains things that Jesus said on more than one occasion.

21:8–11 Signs of the end (see Mt. 24:4–7; Mk. 13:5–8). The first words of Jesus give the general thrust of the discourse as a whole. The disciples are not to expect the end immediately, and they are not to think that the coming of the end can be predicted. Even the destruction of the temple does not mean that the end is at hand. So the disciples should not be misled by people who falsely claim to be the Messiah and imitate the teaching of Jesus that the time is near (*cf.* Mk. 1:15). Nor were they to be tempted to despair amid the terrible human conflict and cosmic disasters which would precede the end.

21:12–19 Persecution of the disciples (*cf.* Mt. 10:17–22; 24:9–14; Mk. 13:9–13). The lack of chronological order in Jesus' statements helps to discourage any attempts to work out in advance a timetable of events. Even before the events in vs 10–11 the disciples would be persecuted by both the Jews and the Romans. But this apparent disaster would give them an opportunity for witness. They would not need to be worried about preparing speeches beforehand; in the hour of crisis Jesus himself will inspire them for bold and incontrovertible witness. This saying plainly applies to Christians being suddenly arrested and brought to court, and doesn't apply to preachers going peacefully to their pulpits with plenty of time to prepare their messages. Here Jesus promises his own aid to his witnesses. If elsewhere the Spirit is said to be the teacher of the disciples (12:11–12), it must be remembered that the Spirit is sent by Jesus (Jn. 16:7). Persecution will come even from family and friends and lead to martyrdom and universal hatred. But, whatever happens, the disciples are under the hand of God, and those who endure faithfully will gain eternal life. Vs. 18–19 cannot mean that the disciples will avoid physical harm and martyrdom (16); rather there is a promise of God's control over what happens to them and therefore a call to remain faithful.

21:20–24 The fall of Jerusalem (*cf.* Mt. 24:15–22; Mk. 13:14–20). Two distinct stages in the coming of the end are now described. The

first is that Jerusalem will be besieged, depopulated and handed over to Gentile rule for a fixed period. People who value their lives will flee before it is too late, for it will be the time of God's judgment upon the city. At the thought of the inevitable suffering, especially for women, Jesus again broke out in sorrow (13:34–35; 19:41–44; 23:27–31).

Although the language describes a siege much more clearly than the corresponding section in Mark, this does not necessarily mean that Luke was writing after the event. The wording he uses is familiar from OT prophecy, especially from passages foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. But whether Jesus spoke word-for-word as in Mark's version or Luke's (or both), or Luke has brought out the meaning of his words more clearly, as their fulfilment became clearer, is hard to determine.

The times of the Gentiles is the period of Gentile domination of Jerusalem. It is not clear whether this is the period of conversion of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:25). Jesus says nothing about what would happen to Jerusalem at the end of the period.

21:25–28 The coming of the Son of Man (see Mt. 24:29–31; Mk. 13:24–27). The second stage in the coming of the end is the cosmic disorder (*cf.* v 11) prophesied in the OT. Some scholars hold that this is a metaphorical description of the overthrow of the Gentile powers. Then the Son of Man will come, fulfilling the prophecy in Dn. 7:13–14, where his coming is associated with the day of judgment and the final, visible establishment of God's rule. Because the disasters ahead are the prelude to this divine act of release, the disciples should be filled with hope, in contrast to the fear which will characterize everybody else.

21:29–33 The certainty of the end (see Mt. 24:32–35; Mk. 13:28–31). In Palestine the *fig-tree* is the first to show its leaves and indicate that summer is approaching; in other countries *all the trees* join it in announcing that summer is at hand. So the dreadful events prophesied by Jesus are in reality a sign of hope that the coming of the kingdom is near.

All these things which would happen during this generation signifies 'all the warning signs' including the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 rather than including the coming of the Son of Man (*cf.* v 36 for this distinction). The fulfilment of these signs will be a sign that his coming is near. But how can this be true after so many centuries have gone by? It must be remembered that Jesus confessed his own ignorance of when the Son of Man would come (Mk. 13:32; *cf.* Acts 1:7). The first coming of Jesus and the judgment upon Jerusalem have brought the coming of the kingdom nearer than before. There is also a sense in which the end is always near (just as a person walking along the edge of the cliff may fall over it at any point, as distinct from somebody who is approaching the edge of a cliff from a distance). Further God's prophecies are conditional in their fulfilment, and the church's fulfilment (or lack of fulfilment) of the command to evangelize the whole world may have some connection with it.

21:34–36 Preparation for the end. In any case, the vital thing is not to indulge in speculation or to give way to despair. Since the judgment day will mean disaster for people who have yielded to temptation and sin, the disciples must pray for strength to remain faithful to the end.

21:37–38 Summary of Jesus' activity in Jerusalem. Jesus had to lodge outside Jerusalem, like many other visitors to Jerusalem at Passover time who found that the city was overcrowded. The Passover meal, however, could be celebrated only within Jerusalem itself.

22:1 –24:53 The death and resurrection of Jesus

22:1–38 The Last Supper

22:1–6 The treachery of Judas (see Mt. 26:1–5, 14–16; Mk. 14:1–2, 10–11; *cf.* Jn. 11:45–53). Once the Jewish leaders had decided to do away with Jesus (see 23:2 for their pretexts), their main problem was to do so without creating an uprising by his supporters. Jesus had many supporters among the common people (*cf.* chs.19–20), and it was feared that many of them would be ready to fight on his behalf. What Judas did was to provide an opportunity for Jesus to be arrested quietly. Since there could be around 100,000 people in and around Jerusalem at the Passover season, the chances of tracking down an individual who wished to remain hidden were slight without inside information.

The Feasts of Unleavened Bread and the Passover were originally separate festivals, but were regarded as one in practice. The Passover was celebrated on the 14th and 15th of the month Nisan (roughly March-April). During the afternoon of the 14th, the Passover lambs were slaughtered at the temple. Since the new Jewish day began at sunset, the evening of that same day (by our reckoning) was the beginning of the 15th, and the actual meal was held then. The days of Unleavened Bread lasted from the 15th to the 21st of the month. In 22:7 the 14th is described as the day of Unleavened Bread possibly because the feasts were closely linked, or possibly for readers who used a calendar with the day starting at midnight.

Luke agrees with Mark that Jesus held the

Passover at the appointed time. For the chronology in John, which appears to put everything one day earlier, see on Mt. 26:17 and Jn. 13:1.

22:7–13 Preparation for the supper (see Mt. 26:17–19; Mk. 14:12–16). To prepare for the Passover meal the disciples needed to secure a suitably furnished room within the city itself, and also the food – a lamb, bread, bitter herbs and wine being the essential requirements. The instructions suggest that Jesus had already made a secret arrangement with a friend in Jerusalem whereby he could avoid being disturbed. The room may have been that mentioned in Acts 1:13, possibly in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). The sight of a man carrying a jar of water would have been rather unusual; it looks like a pre-arranged means of identification.

22:14–23 The significance of the meal (see Mt. 26:20, 26–29, 23–24; Mk. 14:17, 22–25, 20–21; *cf.* Jn. 13:21–30). The normal procedure at the Passover meal was to have an opening prayer which was followed by the first of four cups of wine and a dish of herbs and sauce. Then the story of the institution of the Passover was recited, Ps. 113 was sung and the second cup of wine was drunk. After a grace the main course of roast lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs was eaten, and after a further prayer the third cup of wine was drunk. Pss. 114–118 were then sung, and the fourth cup of wine was drunk.

Jesus began the meal by saying that he would shortly suffer and desired to eat this last meal undisturbed. It would be the last supper, for the next occasion for him would be the fulfilment of the meal in the kingdom of God. The reference is probably to the Messianic banquet rather than to the church's observance of the Lord's Supper.

Then Jesus took a cup of wine (the first or the second in the series) and reaffirmed that this would be the last occasion on which he would drink before the coming of the kingdom; in this way he clearly linked his death to the coming of the kingdom. *This is my body* manifestly means 'This represents my body'. Jesus indicated that his body was about to be given for his disciples in a death on their behalf, and he bade them to repeat the ceremony in remembrance of him. The third cup of wine symbolized his blood by which the new covenant was inaugurated with a sacrifice (Ex. 24:8; Je. 31:31–34). Finally he spoke of his imminent betrayal, bringing together in one difficult saying the facts of the divinely ordained course which he had to follow and the free responsibility and consequent guilt of the person who betrayed him.

Notes. 15–18 Luke has put the prophecy of betrayal, which Mark records before the meal, after it; he has brought forward Jesus' vow. He apparently had access to other traditions of the meal beside the story in Mark. The words of Jesus seem to imply that he did not take part in the meal or at least in the fourth cup of wine. **19–20** The second half of v 19 and v 20 are omitted by one Greek MS (Codex Bezae [D]) and a number of Latin and Syriac MSS, followed by some modern versions. If the omission is correct, Luke has given us an account of a meal in which the cup preceded the bread, and which had no sacrificial significance. But there is no evidence that such a sequence ever existed in the church, and the textual evidence for the omission (one erratic Greek MS out of 3,000) is weak. The longer text, translated in the NIV, is to be preferred; it has links to the tradition known to Paul (1 Cor. 11:23–26). The shorter text may be due to misunderstanding, possibly to a desire to 'correct' an account which referred to *two* cups rather than one.

22:24–38 Sayings of Jesus at table (*cf.* Mt. 26:31–35; Mk. 14:27–31; Jn. 13: 36–38). Luke gives a fuller set of sayings by Jesus after the supper than we have in Matthew and Mark.

24–27 First, disputes concerning status should not arise in the kingdom of God, no matter what may happen in the world. In human society, the person who is served at the table is generally reckoned the greater, but the example of Jesus, who served his disciples (*cf.* Jn. 13) shows that this is not so in the kingdom. (*Cf.* Mk. 10:35–45, which Luke omits.)

28–30 The second saying of Jesus does allow some honour to the Twelve. They were supporting Jesus in his trials and therefore they would share in the Messianic feast and act as judges over the tribes of Israel in the kingdom of Jesus. It is curious that this saying takes no account of the fact that Judas had cut himself off from a place in the Twelve, that it says nothing about the Gentiles and that it allots places of honour just after Jesus had rebuked self-seeking (*cf.* Mk. 10:28–31). What is probably another version of the same saying occurs in Mt. 19: 28, and this may be in the original context. It probably is a way of expressing that the disciples will share in the rule of Jesus in his kingdom whereas the unbelieving people of Israel will be excluded from it.

31–34 In the third section Jesus tells how Satan had sought to have the disciples (*you* in v 31 is in the plural form) in order to sift them (*cf.* Jb. 1 – 2; Dn. 10:13) and lead them to fall away from Jesus. Jesus had allowed this to happen, but he had also prayed for Peter so that he would not fail in his faith and thus be able to strengthen the others. Although Peter himself

would deny his master, nevertheless, he would not fall away completely.

35–38 Finally, Jesus spoke of the new situation. V 36 is heavily ironical. Jesus knew that from now on he and his followers would face opposition and even death. The disciples misunderstood him and produced weapons. *That is enough*, said Jesus, to end a conversation which they had failed to understand. The way of Jesus, as they should have known, was not the way of the sword but the way of love.

22:39–53 The prayer and the arrest of Jesus (see Mt. 26:36–56; Mk. 14:32–50; Jn. 18:1–11)

The garden of Gethsemane was at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Conscious of the temptations surrounding them all, Jesus urged his disciples to pray. Then he withdrew by himself and prayed that, if possible, the cup of suffering and wrath (*cf.* Is. 51:22; Mk.10:38) which lay ahead of him might be averted. Nevertheless, as an obedient Son, he put himself freely at his Father's disposal. After intense strain he rose to find his disciples asleep, and again he urged them to pray. Only the one who had prayed remained strong during the next few hours. As he was speaking the betrayer – contemptuously designated as *the man who was called Judas* – arrived with the officials appointed to keep peace in the temple and gave his traitorous greeting. The disciples realized what was about to happen; one of the two swords (38) was promptly produced and used. Jesus, however, restrained his disciples and then turned to the mob: Was this the way to arrest a peacable teacher? Truly the hour of evil's sway had come!

Notes. 40 Since the place was one that Jesus was visiting *as usual* (39), Judas would know where to find him. **43–44** These verses are omitted by some of the best MSS, which would normally be ample reason for thinking that they were an addition to the text; but their language is Lucan, and they may well be genuine. Jesus' sweat was like blood in the size of the drops rather than in colour.

22:54–71 The Jewish trial (see Mt. 26:57–75; Mk. 14:53–72; cf. Jn. 18:12–27)

Jesus was taken first to the high priest's residence which was used for official business. There would be rooms grouped round a central courtyard, as in other wealthy homes in the Roman world. The fact that Peter came from Galilee, as his accent showed (Mt. 26:73), was taken as evidence of his being an associate of Jesus. In justifiable fear for his life Peter yielded to temptation. Luke alone records how Jesus gave him a searching glance, and Peter, full of remorse, broke down completely.

Meanwhile, Jesus had his own load to bear. He was reputed to be a prophet, and prophets were popularly supposed to have second sight and similar powers. Very well then, let him prove it in a grim game of blind man's buff for the amusement of the guards.

At daybreak the Sanhedrin was hastily brought together and Jesus was led before it. The preliminary questioning was passed over, and Luke comes straight to the decisive question: Did Jesus claim to be the Messiah? At first he hesitated to reply, for his hearers would not have believed what he himself said, and they would not answer if he was to ask them what they thought. Yet he did declare that from now onwards the Son of Man would be seated at God's right hand. This made them ask whether he was in effect claiming to be the Son of God. 'That is your way of putting it', said Jesus. This was taken as his assent, and it was judged to be blasphemy.

Mark describes a lengthy trial by night in the high priest's house. At this substantially the same dialogue as is recorded in Luke took place, and it was then followed by a brief meeting of the Sanhedrin in the morning. Luke says nothing about the trial at night but sticks to what happened in the morning. Two things are clear – that there was an unofficial session at night in the high priest's house (which Luke omits altogether), and that an official meeting of the Sanhedrin (which Mark passes over hurriedly) took place in the morning, at which the earlier decisions were confirmed. It is not certain whether the reported dialogue actually took place only at night, or was repeated briefly in the morning. (Since both evangelists are telescoping the narrative, they recorded the conversation in the most convenient place.) This explains why Peter's denial and the mockery by the servants are recorded before the morning trial in Luke and after the night trial in Mark.

Notes. 60 A literal cock-crowing is meant, not the Roman bugle call at 3 a.m. (which was known as *gallicinium*, 'cock-crowing'). **69–70** Mark has one question to Jesus and one answer; Luke has two of each, thus separating the titles of Christ, Son of Man and Son of God. In Mark Jesus says that his judges will see the Son of Man sitting at God's right hand and coming as the judge, but in Luke he speaks of the present enthronement of the Son of Man. The two accounts are, however, complementary. The sitting of the Son of Man at God's right hand as judge implies that he has been previously exalted to that position, which is stressed more by Luke. Note how Jesus substitutes 'Son of Man' for the title of 'Christ' (9:20–22). **71** The charge

made against Jesus was thus that he claimed to be the Messiah or the Son of God. Probably the latter was regarded as a title for the Messiah, or else something that Jesus had said privately to his disciples about being God's Son had leaked out (via Judas?). To claim to sit at God's right hand was blasphemy (Mk. 14:64).

23:1–25 The Roman trial

23:1–5 Jesus before Pilate (see Mt. 27: 1–2, 11–14; Mk. 15:1–5; *cf.* Jn. 18:28–38). Since the Jews had in general no power to carry out a death sentence (Jn. 18:31), it was necessary to take the case before the Roman authorities. A Roman governor would not listen to 'questions about words and names and your own [Jewish] law' (Acts 18:14–15), and therefore the charge against Jesus had to be rephrased as one of sedition against Rome. Of the two specific charges made, the first was false (*cf.* 20:25), but the second was true, although not in the sense in which the Jews meant it (*cf.* Jn. 18:36–37). So, when Pilate asked Jesus if he claimed to be a king, he answered in a non-committal way. Pilate would have questioned Jesus more closely before reaching his verdict that there were no grounds for a political charge against him.

Notes. Although Pilate normally resided in the administrative capital of Caesarea (*cf.* Acts 23:33; not to be confused with Caesarea Philippi, Mk. 8:27), he visited Jerusalem at the Passover season – as also did Herod. 2 *King* explains the meaning of *Christ* for Romans.

23:6–12 Jesus before Herod. Pilate was trying to avoid settling a difficult case. The mention of Galilee (5) gave him his opportunity. He knew well enough that Jesus had committed no crime, and he seems to have deliberately played with the Jews as he tried to frustrate their intention. But when the situation showed signs of getting out of control, he was prepared to sacrifice an innocent person in order to keep the peace. For the moment, however, he could buy time, and possibly support, by sending Jesus across to the ruler of Galilee, Herod Antipas. Herod is presented as a frivolous person, hoping to see some amusing tricks performed by one whom he probably regarded as some kind of magician. To such a person Jesus had nothing to say.

Notes. 6–7 Pilate was not necessarily trying to get the case officially transferred to Herod. He may simply have been seeking backing for his own opinion. Some scholars hold that the incident has been fabricated from Acts. 4:25–26, but this is unlikely. See also on 9:9. 10 Some of the Jewish leaders must have gone across to Herod's residence to ensure that he heard their side of the case. 11 The mockery is similar to that carried out by Pilate's soldiers (Mk. 15:16–20), but one set of troops could easily have copied the other's example. Similar stories are related of mockery of other prisoners in the ancient world.

23:13–25 The sentence of death (see Mt. 27:15–26; Mk. 15:6–15; Jn. 18:38 – 19:16). Pilate perhaps hoped that the people (13) would side with him in resisting the Jewish leaders when he delivered his verdict. No doubt the prisoner had been something of a public nuisance, but a scourging would be a sufficient punishment for this. The crowd, however, had been swayed by the priests, and they shouted for Barabbas, a well-known revolutionary, to be released instead of Jesus. Pilate was naturally not willing to release a dangerous man (as well as to condemn an innocent one). But he thought it wiser to yield to the intensity of the demonstration. A later Jewish ruler is said to have characterized Pilate as 'inflexible, merciless and obstinate'. This is borne out by his behaviour here; for the common view that he showed vacillation and weakness is an understatement. At the end of the day Pilate showed no mercy, let alone justice, to an innocent man.

Notes. 16 *Punish* means 'scourge'. Scourging was a penalty in itself or the preliminary to crucifixion (Mk. 15:15). 18 Luke does not explain what led the people to ask for Barabbas. The other gospels explain the custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover, and this explanation has been added here by later scribes in v 17 (which the NIV rightly omits from the text).

23:26–49 The crucifixion of Jesus (see Mt. 27:32–56; Mk. 15:21–41; Jn. 19:17–30)

Usually the condemned man himself carried the crossbar of the gallows to the place of execution (*cf.* Jn. 19:17). *Behind Jesus* (26) may be a deliberate echo of 9:23; 14:27. A crowd always attended executions out of curiosity or compassion. The women among them raised a death-wail for Jesus, but he raised, as it were, a death-wail in pity for Jerusalem and its people. Let them mourn rather for themselves, for a day would come when they would regret having borne children who were to endure terrible suffering, and they would long for some catastrophe in nature to put an end to their sufferings (*cf.* Ho. 10:8; Rev. 6:16). For if this was how the Romans treated an innocent person, Jesus, how much worse would be the fate of guilty Jerusalem.

After being crucified between two criminals (*cf.* Is. 53:9, 12), Jesus' first recorded words in this gospel were a prayer for forgiveness for his executioners. The division of the dead man's clothes among the executioners was a recognized custom; it may have been specially recorded

because Christians saw a correspondence to Ps. 22:18. Meanwhile the rulers sneered at Jesus with unconscious irony; the Christian reader knows that it was in fact his death which decisively showed that Jesus was the Christ and the Saviour. The soldiers also joined in the mockery, making use of the words in the *titulus* or charge-sheet, nailed on the cross. Even one of the criminals repeated the same taunt. Only Luke tells how the other criminal, perhaps after taunting Jesus at first, uttered a confession of his own sin and of Jesus' innocence. His last-minute faith was accepted and he was promised a place in Paradise with the justified instead of in Sheol with the condemned.

From noon (the sixth hour, v 44, by Roman and Jewish reckoning) there was darkness for three hours. The Greek word used need not mean an eclipse of the sun, and cannot in fact mean one here, since it was the Passover season and therefore full moon (eclipses occur only at new moon). The cause of the darkness was perhaps a dust-laden wind (known as a sirocco), which might have been strong enough to split the curtain of the temple. This seems to have had a symbolic meaning, but the evangelists do not state what it was. It may have been seen as a prophecy of the forthcoming destruction of the temple or as an indication that the way into God's presence was now open for all people (Heb. 9:8–14; 10:19–20).

At the ninth hour (3 p.m.) Jesus committed himself into God's hands with the words of Ps. 31:5. The way in which he died led the centurion to praise God. His words reflected his belief that Jesus was innocent, and possibly suggested that Jesus was enduring the frequent fate of righteous people – undeserved suffering (*cf.* Wisdom 2:12–20). But why did he praise God? Was it because God had sustained Jesus to die nobly after living nobly? The final comment emphasizes that Jesus' friends saw him really die.

Notes. 33 *The place called the Skull* (Aramaic Golgotha) was probably near the present Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the north of the city. The skull-shaped hill known as Gordon's Calvary has no real evidence in its favour. **34a** This verse is omitted by a significant number of early MSS, but it should be retained either as a genuine part of what Luke wrote (*cf.* Acts 7:60) or as a reliable piece of tradition that found its way into some MSS. It would have been omitted by scribes who felt that the prayer was unseemly or was not answered. **36** This action seems to be distinct from the kind act in Mk. 15:36. Wine vinegar was a cheap drink used by soldiers. **39–40** Here, as elsewhere, Luke had access to traditions not recorded in Mark. It is unnecessary to suppose that the criminal's words were sarcastic, still less that the whole incident is legendary. **42** *When you come in your kingdom* means 'when you return as king'. **43** *Paradise* is the resting place of the redeemed before the final judgment, and is opened to those who trust in Jesus. **47** For *a righteous man* Mark has 'the Son of God'. Luke's paraphrase may be due to a wish to avoid giving the impression that the centurion thought of Jesus in pagan terms as some kind of demi-god.

23:50–56 The burial of Jesus (see Mt. 27:57–61; Mk. 15:42–47; Jn. 19:38–42)

The bodies of the crucified criminals were usually left hanging and then cast into a common grave, but an archaeological find in 1957 showed the remains of a person who had been crucified and then buried in a private grave. Joseph wrapped the body, according to Jewish custom, in a shroud and placed it in a new grave. Jewish graves were caves, natural or man-made, in the sides of hills, large enough for a person to enter to tend the dead bodies, and closed by a sliding stone across the entrance. Joseph, however, did not embalm the body, and the women from Galilee decided to repair this omission as soon as possible after the Sabbath which they observed in the normal manner.

Notes. 51 *Arimathea* was about 20 miles (32km) north-west of Jerusalem on the border between Judea and Samaria. **51** Since all Jews were *waiting for the kingdom of God*, the phrase here must mean that Joseph held the particular form of expectation taught by Jesus and lived in accordance with it. **52** Death by crucifixion was normally slow and drawn-out; Luke does not mention Pilate's surprise at the rapid death of Jesus. **54** *Preparation Day* for the weekly Sabbath extended from sunset on Thursday to sunset on Friday. *Was about to begin* (lit. 'was dawning') usually refers to sunrise, but here seems to refer to sunset or the time when the lamps were lit.

24:1–53 The resurrection of Jesus

24:1–12 The empty tomb (*cf.* Mt. 28:1–10; Mk. 16:1–8; Jn. 20:1–10). The two *men*, clothed in the shining garments associated with heavenly beings (*cf.* 9:29), gently criticized the women for expecting to find in the tomb one who had prophesied his resurrection from the dead (9:22; 18:33). The naming of the women (10) is perhaps meant to identify them as credible witnesses.

Not surprisingly the historicity of the story has often been questioned. It has been suggested, for example, that in fact the women went to the wrong tomb, but it is incredible that both they and the later visitors could have been mistaken on this point. Or it is argued that,

although the stories of 'resurrection appearances' may be broadly historical, the story of the empty tomb developed later and is legendary. But the tradition of the empty tomb is probably implied in so early an account as 1 Cor. 15:3–7, and the NT understanding of the resurrection is of a bodily resurrection. To hold that the bones of Jesus remain buried in Palestine is to hold a different understanding of the resurrection from that in the NT and rests on sheer supposition.

Yet, even if the basic story of the empty tomb and the appearances is accepted, it is still difficult to harmonize the various accounts with one another, just as would be the case with some modern, shattering, event which had been seen by different witnesses. This absolves the witnesses from any charge of collusion with one another, but it does leave some loose ends untied. (For an attempt to deal with the problem, see J. Wenham, *Easter Enigma* [Paternoster Press, 1984].)

Notes. **1** The mention of several *women* stands in contrast to the visit of Mary Magdalene by herself to the tomb in Jn. 20:1–10. Two or more separate stories may have been telescoped in Luke's account. **3** Here and in a number of places in this chapter (5, 12, 36, 40, 51, 52) a number of phrases are omitted by some MSS and hence in some English versions. The NIV rightly includes them, as the evidence for omission is slender. **4** Mark mentions only one young man, and his words are rather different. In particular, Luke does not have the command to the disciples to go to Galilee (Mk. 16:7; *cf.* Mk. 14:28). He has probably omitted it because he does not describe any appearances in Galilee. **9** The statement in Mk. 16:8 that the women said nothing to anybody out of fear does not contradict what is said here. Mark probably meant that they said nothing immediately to anybody except the Eleven. **12** See Jn. 20:1–10.

24:13–35 The walk to Emmaus (*cf.* Mk. 16:12–13). V16 means that God prevented the two disciples from recognizing Jesus, not that he had a different form (though see Mk. 16:12). By pretending to be ignorant he learned what had saddened them and that his tomb was rumoured to be empty. They were sure that Jesus had been a prophet (the most that Jesus can be to those who do not believe in his resurrection). They had expected him to be the redeemer of Israel, but they could not understand how he had been rejected by the rulers. They remembered that there had been a prophecy of his resurrection on the third day, but they had not heard of anybody seeing him. Jesus replied that suffering was a necessary prelude to the Messiah's entry into kingly glory, and he pointed them to the scriptures which prophesied this (see on 18:31). The language used to describe how he took the bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and shared it with them is inescapably reminiscent – at least to Luke's readers – of that describing the actions of Jesus at the feeding miracles and the Last Supper (9:16; 22:19; Mk. 8:6). Whether or not the two disciples were reminded of these events (were they present at any of them?), it was as though a veil fell from their eyes and they recognized Jesus. They realized that even earlier, while Jesus was speaking to them on the road, they had felt a strange elation. Immediately they rose to go all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the others. The brief summary in Mk. 16:12f. (which is not a genuine part of the text of the gospel) says that the disciples did not believe them, but this refers to their incredulity and disbelief later in the story (vs 37, 41).

Notes. **13** *Emmaus* is often identified with el-Qubeibeh, some 7 miles (11km) north-west of Jerusalem, but Amwas (modern Nicopolis), some 18 miles (31km) north-west is perhaps more likely. (If so, we should follow those MSS of Luke which give the distance as 160 stadia.) **18** *Cleopas* may be the Clopas of Jn. 19:25. His unnamed companion could have been his wife, but we have no means of telling. **21** The disciples knew that Jesus had spoken about something important happening on the third day, and that his tomb was supposed to be empty. But this was not adequate evidence for his resurrection: that could be provided only by the appearance of the Lord himself. **27** The Jewish Scriptures consisted of three parts: the Law of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy); the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel-2 Kings, and the prophets [except for Daniel]); and the Writings (all the other books in the OT). The omission of the third group here (contrast v 44) is not significant; the OT writings are here being described in terms of their prophetic content rather than listed. **34** For the appearance to *Simon* see 1 Cor. 15:5.

24:36–53 Jesus appears again to the disciples (*cf.* Mt. 28:16–20; Mk. 16:14–20; Jn. 20:19–23). The disciples needed to be convinced that they were seeing a real person and that it really was Jesus, and to have their fears at this supernatural manifestation calmed. Jesus therefore showed them his physical body of flesh and bones, and his hands and feet with the nail-prints in them. To give further proof of the reality of his presence he ate some food while he was with them.

There is a repetition of the instruction given to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, so as to enable all the disciples to understand the OT prophecies of the coming of Jesus. Two new

factors are introduced. The command to preach *repentance and forgiveness* to all the nations was issued – and shown to be based on OT prophecy. Those who had been witnesses of his resurrection appearances (a larger group than the Eleven) were promised that God's power would enable them to testify to Jesus.

Finally, Jesus led them out of Jerusalem to Bethany where he gave them a parting blessing and was then carried away from them into heaven. They returned to Jerusalem and waited there in joyful expectation of the fulfilment of his promise.

Notes. 36–53 The story bears resemblances not only to that in Jn. 20:19–23 but also to that in Mt. 28:16–20 where Jesus appears to the disciples in Galilee and gives them his last instructions. There is no great problem about Jesus appearing to his disciples both in Jerusalem (as in Luke, Acts and Jn 20) and in Galilee (as in Mt. and Jn. 21). The final appearance in Mt. 28 is not the ascension, and it is possible that Jesus repeated his commands more than once to the disciples.

The narrative could be taken to imply that the resurrection and ascension both happened on the same day, Easter Sunday. But this would contradict Luke's further account in Acts 1. It follows that what is here described briefly and compactly must have taken place over a longer period. **43** The description of the risen Jesus in strongly physical terms embarrasses some readers, but if the incarnation involved the Son of God taking on real flesh and bones, it is hard to see why his resurrection body should not incorporate this quality. **47** For prophecy of the preaching to the Gentiles see Is. 2:3; 42:6; 49:6; 51:4–5; Rom. 15:9–12. **50** *Bethany* lay at the foot of the Mount of Olives (*cf.* Acts 1:12). **53** *Continually* should not be taken too literally (*cf.* 2:37), as Acts 1:13–14 shows.

I. Howard Marshall

JOHN

Introduction

Authorship

There has been much discussion about who wrote this gospel. There is space here for only a brief outline of the main issues.

a. There is a very strong tradition, supported by early evidence from patristic sources, that the author was the apostle John. There are no specific references to the identity of the author in the gospel itself. So how dependable is the tradition? At least as early as Irenaeus (*c.* AD 130–200) there was belief in the apostolic authorship. Irenaeus may have had access to authentic tradition through his earlier acquaintance with Polycarp (*c.* mid-second century), who knew the apostle. The fact that Polycarp did not refer to the fourth gospel when writing his letter to the Philippians need not lead to the conclusion that he was ignorant of it. The sole opposition to the apostolic authorship came from a group known as the Alogoi, who appear to have been a small splinter group in Rome. Their view was opposed by Hyppolytus who wrote a defence of the gospel. The history of the book before Irenaeus is not easy to determine, but it must have been regarded as authoritative for some considerable time to have been placed indisputably on a level with the other three as part of the fourfold gospel.

b. Some internal considerations point to the reliability of the tradition (*e.g.* 1:14; 19:35; 21:24). Although all of these references have been otherwise understood by some scholars, it is most natural to see them as evidence of the author's own claim to have been an eyewitness.

John, the son of Zebedee, is nowhere mentioned by name in the gospel, while John the Baptist is named simply as John without further description. This would certainly be more intelligible if the author were himself the other John.

A further consideration is the anonymous mention of the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', which may well be a reference to John the apostle. Some have disputed that John would have described himself in this way and have concluded from this that John the apostle was not the author. It is impossible to be sure who 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' was, but his close association with Peter would support the view that he was John. His very close association with Jesus in the upper room points to the same conclusion.

c. The author appears to possess detailed knowledge of Palestine and of Jewish customs. This would be most intelligible if he were a Palestinian Jew.

d. Many incidental details also suggest that an eyewitness account lies behind the gospel, *e.g.* the number of waterjars at Cana and the number of the fish caught in the Sea of Galilee. Such details are not essential to the narrative but add a certain vividness to the account.

e. The Hellenistic (Greek) aspects of this gospel are, nevertheless, said to militate against the correctness of the early tradition, since John the apostle was not a Hellenistic Jew. Moreover, parallels with the non-Christian philosophical tractates known as the *Hermetica* are said to support this contention. There are certainly parallels in terminology with both Philo of Alexandria and Hermes, but this factor does not conclusively show that the author was a Hellenist. Some similar parallels in thought are found also in the Jewish literature at Qumran, and this evidence has tended to lessen the strength of the Hellenistic argument.

f. The close acquaintance of the author with rabbinical methods of argument is another reason why some have rejected apostolic authorship, since John was a Galilean fisherman. But due allowance must be made for the fact that the rabbinical arguments are found in the teaching of Jesus, not in the author's own comments. It is admittedly difficult, however, in this gospel, always to differentiate between the author's style and the words of Jesus.

g. The evangelist appears to adopt an almost hostile attitude towards some of Jesus' contemporaries, as if they were a race apart from himself, referring to them as 'the Jews'. This may be evidence of the deep feeling of a Jewish Christian over the bitter hostility of his own people towards Jesus.

h. Alternative theories regarding authorship generally attempt to retain some connection of John the apostle with the gospel by regarding him as the witness, while proposing someone else as author. The most widely held theory is that the author was another John, known as John the elder. If there were two Johns so closely associated in the production of the gospel, it is not impossible that confusion may have arisen between them in the early tradition. But the

existence of John the elder depends on a somewhat ambiguous statement of Papias, who makes no mention in any case of a gospel being written by him.

i. Some deny all connection of John the apostle with the gospel and suppose that it was attributed to him to gain authority for the work.

In face of all these various opinions it is difficult to be dogmatic, but it is reasonable to suppose that the internal and external evidence points to John the apostle as author.

Purpose

We cannot do better than examine the author's own statement of purpose in 20:31, which was specifically evangelistic. The gospel was aimed to produce faith in Jesus as Christ and Son of God. The record of the various signs was intended to produce this result, and with this in mind the many references throughout the gospel to believing and non-believing become significant. Both the historical narratives and the teaching discourses were chosen because of their power to focus attention on the specific claims of Jesus. John has no thought, therefore, of producing a biographical or psychological study. An evangelistic purpose does not, of course, weaken the historical truth. To be effective the theological motive needs an authentic historical basis. John may have regarded some of his material as possessing symbolic significance, but again, this does not mean that it is unhistorical or untrue.

There may have been some subsidiary aims, such as the presentation of the true relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, or a refutation of Docetic views about Christ (*i.e.* theories which drew a distinction between the heavenly Christ and the human Jesus).

Many believe the gospel to be a presentation of Christianity in a Hellenised form. The prologue (1:1–18) may seem to lend support to this theory. But the crucial factor is the extent to which the prologue determines the purpose of the gospel as a whole. It is better to suppose that the body of the gospel supplies the key to the understanding of the prologue, rather than vice versa. The teaching of Jesus was sufficiently comprehensive to be understood by Greek as well as Jew.

The relation to the synoptic gospels

A comparison with the other gospels shows a marked difference in John in the substance and in the method of presentation. A large amount of material included in the others is lacking in John, whereas a considerable amount of the Johannine material is absent from the synoptics. In fact, there is little material common to all four gospels, apart from the passion narrative. A major difference is that whereas the synoptics concentrate on the Galilean ministry, John fixes his attention on the Jerusalem ministry. This could perhaps account for the differences in the style in Jesus' teaching, the emphasis on parables in the synoptics giving way to the dialogue and discourse style of John. Certain historical differences have also been noted, such as the setting of the cleansing of the temple, the events which led to the arrest of Jesus, the duration of the ministry and the date of the Last Supper. So some have concluded that John aims to correct and supersede the synoptics. This is difficult to maintain, for on many occasions he assumes knowledge of the synoptic traditions as a basis for his own. It is better to regard John as complementary to the synoptics. The most difficult difference between them then is the chronology of the passion events. The solution may lie in the use of different calendars by John and the synoptics, but we do not know enough to arrive at a completely satisfying answer.

It may at first seem that John's presentation of Jesus differs so completely from that of the synoptics that both portraits cannot be of the same person. But this would be a wrong inference. When we consider the different purposes of the gospels, and the different types of people to whom Jesus spoke, the contrast is more intelligible. It is likely that John was himself drawn to the more reflective style of the discourses.

Date and place of writing

It is not clear whether traces of John's gospel can be found in writers before the time of Irenaeus (*c.* AD 130–200). But there is good ground for supposing that Justin (*c.* AD 150) knew and used the gospel and a possibility that Ignatius (*c.* AD 115) also knew it. Apart from references in the early fathers there are two early second-century papyrus MSS which show the existence and circulation of this gospel. One contains a scrap of John's gospel and the other echoes the language of this and the other gospels. It is impossible, therefore, to date John beyond the end of the first century. If the apostle was the author, a date a few years before the end of the century would almost certainly be required as the latest possible date. Since this gospel must have come after the synoptic gospels, a date fairly late in the first century is generally preferred (*c.* AD 90), although some have suggested an earlier date. It is impossible to be anything more than tentative.

As for the place of origin, tradition has it that John lived in Ephesus, and there seems to be no real grounds for disputing this. Some suggest not only that this Ephesus tradition is unreliable, but also that John did not live to old

age. The evidence which is claimed to support this view consists of scanty and none-too-reliable clues that John died a martyr's death much earlier than the gospel could have been written. But the tradition of his long life and of his writing the gospel is much stronger.

Theology

The most significant feature of John's theology is his presentation of Christ. It has already been pointed out that his major purpose was theological, and indeed Christological. The focus of attention is on Jesus' Messiahship and Sonship. The Messianic status of Jesus more than once formed the topic of discussion among the Jews (7:26–27; 10:24). Moreover, three times in this gospel there are recorded confessions of the Messiahship of Jesus (1:41; 4:29; 11:27). To the author Jesus was the fulfilment of all the Messianic hopes of the Jewish people. In full harmony with this is the frequent appeal to the OT testimony.

Jesus as Son of God is far more characteristic of this gospel. Many times does Jesus bring out his own filial relationship with the Father. Whereas this aspect is not absent from the synoptics, it is specially noteworthy in John because of the frequent occurrence of the term 'Son' without further description. The plan of salvation was effected by the Father through the Son. It was through love for the world that God sent his Son (3:16). The Son is the agent through whom the Father reveals himself (1:18). The claim of Jesus to be the Son of God was the basis of the charge before Pilate that according to Jewish law he ought to die (19:7).

The most characteristic feature of the synoptic gospels is Jesus as Son of Man. Although this is not quite so prominent in John, it is still basic to his presentation. It is the Son of Man who not only reveals the Father but who will be lifted up (3:13–14). This process of lifting up will result in the glorification of the Son of Man (12:23). Moreover, there are many indications of the perfect humanity of Jesus in this gospel. He experienced human emotion, hunger, thirst and tiredness. The exalted Christology is never allowed to detract from the perfect humanity of Jesus.

In the prologue the pre-existence and deity of Christ are explicitly expressed. The Word (Gk. *logos*) was not only with God in the beginning, but was God (1:1), and it was this Word who became flesh and is identified with Christ. Whatever the origins of the idea of the Word for the author, his own Christology is clear. His subject is not a mere man but the pre-existent Son who shared with the Father the creation of the world (1:3).

A further feature of the Johannine Christology is the number of statements of Jesus introduced by the significant 'I am'. In this manner he described himself as 'the Way', 'the Truth', 'the Life', 'the Resurrection', 'the Bread', 'the Shepherd', 'the Door', 'the Vine'. All of these titles explain different aspects of what Jesus came to be and to do for humankind.

There are many figures of speech used to describe the nature of the work of Christ. The sacrificial lamb (1:29), the temple of his body (2:21), the serpent in the wilderness (3:14), the shepherd giving his life for his sheep (10:11), the grain of wheat (12:24). The death of Jesus was even recognized as expedient by the high priest, but John sees a deeper meaning in it than Caiaphas (11:51). There is throughout the gospel a sense of the inevitable as Jesus' 'hour' draws gradually nearer.

A further important factor in Johannine theology is the frequent mention of the Holy Spirit. His work in regeneration (3:5–8), his promised outpouring following the glorification of Jesus (7:37–39), and the five sayings about him in the farewell discourses (chs. 14–16) are all found only in John's gospel. He is described as Counsellor, as dwelling in the believer, as the teacher, as a witness to Christ, as convictor of the world and as guide into all truth for Christ's people. Of all the gospels John shows most clearly that the continuation of the ministry of Jesus would be through the agency of the Spirit.

In addition, we may note several other features which occur in John's thought. There is a strong OT background. There is no specific reference to the Lord's Supper, but there is teaching which bears upon it (ch. 6). There is also a mixture of stress on God's action in choosing and human responsibility in responding. This a gospel which richly contributes to the theology of the NT as a whole. Although its language is often simple, its thought is profound. In its use of powerful symbolism and in its reflectiveness, John's gospel appeals to many modern Christians.

See also the article Reading the gospels.

Further reading

B. Milne, *The Message of John*, BST (IVP, 1993).
F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Pickering and Inglis/Eerdmans, 1983).
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- 14:1–31 Assurances and commands to the disciples
- 15:1–17 The vine allegory
- 15:18 – 16:33 Further teaching for the disciples
- 17:1–26 The prayer of Jesus

18:1 – 21:25 Passion and resurrection narratives
- 18:1–11 The betrayal
- 18:12 – 19:16 The trial
- 19:17–37 The crucifixion
- 19:38–42 The burial
- 20:1–29 The resurrection
- 20:30 – 21:25 The epilogue

Commentary

1:1–18 The prologue

This gospel, unlike the others, does not begin with the historical Jesus. Instead, the reader is introduced at once to *the Word* (Gk. *logos*), who is not identified with Jesus until the end of the prologue. It is of great importance to consider the meaning of *the Word* as a key to an understanding of the whole gospel. The term was widely used in Greek literature, and many scholars have supposed that its significance for John can be understood only against such a background. It was used among the Stoics to describe the principle of divine reason which caused the natural creation to grow. This idea was much more fully developed in the writings of Philo of Alexandria, who used it of the instrument through which the world was created. Although there may appear to be some parallels with John's use of the term, there are crucial differences. Philo never thought of the Word as a person, nor did he maintain its pre-existence to the world. But the most striking and significant difference between Philo and John is that the former denied the incarnation of the Word, whereas John specifically maintained that the Word became flesh. Some scholars have found parallels between John's use and the syncretistic philosophical literature current in the early centuries of the Christian era known as the *Hermetica*, but the essential thought is quite different. Greek thought may have supplied some of the terminology that John uses, but for the basic ideas we must look elsewhere.

There is much more to be said for the similarity of thought between John's use and that of certain ideas in the OT. Jewish thought contributed a major dimension to the Word idea. In the Wisdom Literature we find an emphasis on the creative activity of God through his Word of Wisdom (*cf.* Pr. 8). Closely linked to this is the rabbinic practice of attributing to the Torah (Law) some agency in creation. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls led to a more sympathetic appreciation of the contribution of Jewish thought for an understanding of John's gospel.

The prologue, nevertheless, must be considered on its own merits. It is essentially Christian, designed to prepare the way for the record of the activities of a unique person. The gospel itself must furnish the key for the understanding of the Prologue, not vice versa. A careful analysis of the gospel will show how integral the prologue is with the recurrent themes of the gospel.

1:1–5 The pre-existent Word

The opening words of this gospel bear a striking parallel with the opening words of Genesis. John's own particular contribution is to show that the Word existed before creation. This is implicit in the opening words *In the beginning was the Word.* Although the verb is used in the past tense, the idea is of continuity. The Word that now is was in existence before the world began. This at once introduces a profound theme, made more profound by the subsequent two statements. The Greek preposition translated *with* suggests the idea of communion. The thought is lit. 'towards God', which requires some distinctiveness between God and the Word. But the next phrase adds a further aspect, since it affirms that *the Word was God.* This cannot be understood in an adjectival sense (the Word was divine), which would weaken the statement. Since the Greek has no article before *God*, the term must be taken setting out a characteristic of the Word. Since *God* is a noun, John must be affirming the Godhead of the Word. It involves not only divinity but deity.

John at once proceeds to declare the creative activity of the Word. The Greek focuses attention on the agency of the Word. This idea is further underlined by excluding all possibility of creation apart from the Word. The close association between God and the Word in v 1 is also seen in their part in creation. The part taken by Christ in creation is a theme which recurs many times in the NT. Such an emphasis would exclude gnostic ideas of intermediaries within creation which were designed to protect God from contamination with an essentially evil

world. John's further assertion that the Word was *life* is a logical sequence from his creative activity. This idea is basic to this gospel and is highlighted in the statement of purpose in 20:31, that the readers might have life in him.

The close connection between *life* and *light* is not unexpected. In the physical world life is dependent on light, and this idea is here transferred to the spiritual world. The statement in v 5 must be interpreted by the mention of light in v 4. There it is an illumination which comes to everyone generally and would seem to refer to the light of conscience and reason. In v 5, however, the focus falls on the environment which is described as *darkness*. The light, which is closely linked with the Word, must be regarded as personal. It must mean the spiritual enlightenment which humankind has received exclusively through the coming of the Word. The following statement, *but the darkness has not understood it*, could be translated as 'has not overcome it'. Both interpretations express a truth, and both are illustrated in the body of the gospel. But the former fits the context better, especially in the light of vs 10–11.

1:6–8 The witness of John the Baptist

The thought now moves nearer to the historical events which surrounded the coming of the light by mentioning the ministry of John the Baptist. We are at once assured that this ministry was divinely appointed (6). The verb *sent* is characteristic of this gospel in describing the ministry of Jesus. It is fitting that it should also be applied to the herald. It may be that some of the original readers of this gospel were putting too much emphasis on the importance of John the Baptist (*cf.* Acts 19:3–4) and that John was aiming to rectify any misunderstandings at the outset (*cf.* also vs 15, 26–27). Not only is it expressly denied that John himself was the light, but his function as witness to the light is twice affirmed (7–8). The purpose, *so that through him all men might believe*, expresses the function of all true Christian witness, from that day to this.

1:9–13 The light coming to the world

The author switches from the witness to the subject of the witness as being the most important. The *true light* (9) is the Word, which has not yet been identified as Jesus. The *coming* refers to the incarnation. This is more intelligible than the alternative rendering, which connects the coming to every person (as the NIV mg.), which would give the impression that everyone receives this light at the time of birth. Before Christ's coming light certainly existed but this was derived light. Christ is the central source of light as he himself claimed (*cf.* 8:12).

It should be noted that when John uses the word *world* he is meaning more than the created world. The term is widely used of people as created beings who are opposed to God. In fact in this gospel there is a distinction between those who believe and the world that does not believe. The statement that the world did not *recognise* him (10) shows that in John's mind there is no question of dualism here. The moral responsibility rests with those who reject the light.

The translation of v 11 has led to various ideas. One is that the Word came into what rightly belonged to him. Another is that the Word came to his own home, *i.e.* his own people, Israel. Both are true, but in view of the fact that the words are masculine it is most probable that the second translation is to be preferred. For the author believing and receiving are identical.

Vs 12–13 are to be seen as modifying the previous verses. There were some who received the Word, and John now focuses on these. Believers receive the power to become children of God in the sense of God's covenant people. John is not talking of natural descent (13). There is here an allusion to the new birth, which recurs more explicitly in ch. 3. Since spiritual birth is different from physical birth, John excludes sexual means (human decision, a husband's will).

1:14–18 The incarnation of the Word

This concluding part of the prologue leads into the account of the historical life of Jesus, hence the Word is said to have become *flesh*. The most significant thing about this statement is the emphasis on the word *flesh*, which is used as a symbol of humanity. The statement, however, is more striking than if John had written 'the Word took on the form of humanity'. *Flesh* draws attention to the entry of the Word into the full flow of human affairs. The divine Word had become the human Jesus. The phrase *made his dwelling among us* uses a word which means 'tabernacled' and carries with it reminiscences of God dwelling among his people in the tabernacle in the wilderness. The *dwelling* is clearly seen as temporary. But John is anxious to make clear that the stupendous coming of the Word into human life was fully witnessed. John had been an eyewitness of the *glory* of the earthly life of Jesus (14b). This is more likely than to suppose that the *we* refers to Christians generally, and that *the glory* is the glory of Jesus after the resurrection. The context requires that there were some who actually saw the glory of the incarnated Word. An allusion to the transfiguration may be intended, but it is more likely that the *glory* refers to the whole ministry of Jesus.

The distinctiveness of the glory is seen in the description of the *the One and Only*, who received the kind of glory which could be bestowed only by a loving Father on a beloved Son. The uniqueness of Jesus is thus seen at the outset of the gospel. But it is not merely his coming *from the Father* but the fact that he is the source of *grace and truth* which is most significant. John intends us to see in the ministry of Jesus an expression of God's grace and a revelation of his truth.

Although v 16 follows naturally after v 14, the intervening verse is clearly to be regarded as an intentional parenthesis. The words about John the Baptist add greater strength to his witness to Jesus. There is an indirect allusion here to the pre-existence of Jesus, which has already been affirmed in v 1. V 16 shows clearly the relevance of the *grace* which Christians (*we . . . all*) have received. Again the thought of firsthand experience is stressed. The NIV has aptly brought out the meaning of the cryptic phrase 'grace upon grace' with the rendering *one blessing after another*. The *fulness* does not come to us all at once but in a progression of gracious experiences. There may be a contrast between Moses and Jesus Christ in the different method of approach to God, in that legal observances are inferior to the acceptance of a gracious gift. But the text does not require a contrast. It is better to see a comparison between God's sending the law through Moses and grace through Jesus.

The culmination of this prologue in v 18 is intended to remind the reader of v 1. There was no other possibility of our knowing God except through Jesus Christ, the Word. The statement *No-one has ever seen God* is a reflection from the OT. Even Moses was not allowed to see him. In this, therefore, the revelation of Jesus is infinitely superior since he is the one who has made God known. The NIV follows what is certainly the more strongly attested reading in translating *God the One and Only*, an affirmation of the deity of Jesus. Yet in view of the subsequent words *who is at the Father's side*, the alternative 'but the only Son' fits in better with the context.

1:19 – 2:11 Introductory events

1:19–34 The witness of John the Baptist to Jesus

The references to John the Baptist in the prologue are intended to lead into the historical record of John's relation to Jesus. The subject is introduced by an enquiry from the Jews of Jerusalem. The term 'the Jews' occurs frequently in this gospel but not always in the same way. Sometimes it is used of the inhabitants of Judea as distinguished from Galilee; sometimes it refers to Jews as unbelievers in Jesus; most often it denotes the Jewish leaders in their opposition to Jesus. Here these leaders are represented by the *priests and Levites*. The main point of this passage is to distinguish the herald from the person announced. The writer records the questions about the identity of John the Baptist because this clearly has a bearing on the validity of his testimony. The question about Elijah is an allusion to Mal. 4:5. Some see here a correction of the synoptic tradition in which Jesus identified the expected Elijah with John the Baptist (*cf.* Mt. 11:14; 17:12). But John himself did not make this claim. The question about *the Prophet refers back to Dt. 18:15–18, which was generally supposed to allude to an end-time figure. This general title does not appear to have been Messianic (cf.* 7:40–41). John's own claim was to be *the voice* referred to in Is. 40:3 (23). In the synoptics these words are applied to John the Baptist but are not claimed by him. He was content to be the voice which heralded the Christ.

In view of John the Baptist's denials, the question of the reason for his baptisms naturally arose (24–28), and this gave him a further opportunity to distinguish between his own ministry and that of Christ. The form of the question suggests that the rite was being understood in the sense of an official sign of authority. John did not answer the question but pointed to Christ in a way which will be illustrated in the following passage. John's water baptism is contrasted with Christ's Spirit baptism in v 33, which shows the superiority of the latter. But here John's humility in relation to Jesus is in sharp focus. The location of John's baptism is carefully distinguished from another Bethany mentioned in 11:1.

Note that in v 29 the author introduces a sequence of six days, which may be compared with the conclusion of the ministry of Jesus, where another six days is recorded. John the Baptist's first introduction of Jesus as *the Lamb of God* is startling. To the original hearers the idea of a lamb must at once have suggested the sacrificial lamb. The offering of the temple sacrifices was so familiar to Jewish minds that it would be difficult to think of the concept *Lamb of God* apart from this. But the real difficulty occurs in the transference of the lamb imagery to a person. It is doubtful whether the hearers would have connected the idea with Is. 53, but it is not impossible that John the Baptist himself may have done so. On the other hand, he may not have understood the further statement *who takes away the sin of the world* in a context of sacrifice, but in the context of judgment. There is no reason why Jesus should not have understood it in the sense of Ex. 29:38–46 and Is. 53:4–12, even if John the Baptist did not grasp its full

significance. Certainly, the evangelist would have understood the statement in a fuller sacrificial sense. There is some debate about the significance of the verb translated *takes away*. If we are to interpret this in the light of Is. 53, the idea of vicarious suffering is inescapable. It has been objected that the notion of bearing away sin cannot here be present because the Passover lamb was not sacrificed as a sin offering. Yet John's statement need not be rigidly interpreted in Passover terms. As far as the author is concerned Jesus as the lamb forms an important key to his ministry, since in this gospel that ministry begins at this point. The baptism of Jesus, which John does not record, had already taken place (*cf.* v 32). John the Baptist's words convey something of the universal scope of Jesus' ministry.

Some scholars have found difficulty in believing that John the Baptist spoke the words in v 29, particularly because at a later stage he expressed doubts about the Messiahship of Jesus. It is suggested that the view of Jesus as the Lamb of God is the opinion of the writer of the gospel which has been read back into the life of Jesus. But there is much in this gospel which points to the work of Christ on behalf of others. As to John the Baptist's later hesitation over the identity of Jesus, there is no need to suppose that John's grasp at this early stage was clear. The lamb imagery does not demand this.

V 30 is a repetition of v 15 and ties this section into the prologue and re-emphasizes the superiority of Jesus over the Baptist. When John said he did not know Jesus he must have meant that he did not know him as 'the coming one'. In this gospel there is a distinction between the use of 'Jews' and the use of *Israel*, the latter never being used in an adverse sense. In the Greek the verb translated *saw* (32) carries the idea of a settled conviction. The reference to the descent of the Spirit on Jesus in this gospel differs from the account in the synoptics. Here John himself saw the bodily form of a dove, whereas in the synoptics it was Jesus who saw it. The dove may symbolize gentleness of character or be used as an emblem of flight to show the reality of the Spirit's descent. The contrast between this and the visible display at Pentecost is striking (*cf.* Acts 2:2–3). Clearly, both descents were intended to be exceptional witnesses to the mission of Jesus. John received some special revelation (33) which enabled him to identify Jesus as the one who would *baptise with the Holy Spirit*. Spirit-baptism is vividly contrasted with water-baptism and is superior to it. We have another echo from the prologue in the statement that Jesus is *the Son of God*, and this also ties up with the purpose of the gospel stated in 20:31.

1:35–51 The calling of the first disciples

The repeated *Lamb of God* statement (35) is intended to imply that the two disciples who followed Jesus had caught something of the significance of the one to whom John had pointed. There is nothing in the narrative to suggest that John the Baptist expected any of his disciples to desert him; rather the implication is that he saw this as part of his own mission in heralding Jesus. The name of only one of the disciples is given, and the other may have been the author John. The idea of *following* in v 37 is no doubt neutral and only later became a fuller commitment to discipleship. Their response to the question of Jesus and their addressing him as *Rabbi* shows their serious intentions in following him. The title 'Rabbi' was one of respect and did not refer (as it came to do later) to one who had been trained in the rabbinical schools. It may be wondered why in v 39 *the tenth hour* is mentioned. If John was using the normal Jewish method of reckoning, the hour would have been late afternoon and a stay until the end of the day is implied.

The way Andrew is said to have found his brother Simon Peter as *the first thing* he did suggests that he had grasped at once the great significance of the encounter with Jesus. John gives two other flashes of insight into the character of Andrew in this gospel (*cf.* 6:8; 12:22). The term *Messiah* (40) is translated by John for the benefit of his non-Jewish readers. Both the Hebrew *Messiah* and the Greek *Christ* are derived from a root meaning 'Anointed One'. Although in the OT the idea of anointing was mainly in the setting apart of kings, in the NT the concept is applied to Jesus in a widened sense to include the idea of an anointed prophet, priest and king. A contradiction has been supposed between this announcement and the synoptic records, which suggest that Jesus was not recognized as Messiah until Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi. But there is no need to suppose that here the disciples had anything but a very general idea of what Messiahship really meant. In v 42 there is a marked emphasis on personal relationships involving Andrew, Simon and Jesus. Again there is a difference between John and the synoptics in the time at which the name Peter was given to Simon. Here it is given at the beginning of the ministry, whereas in Mt. 16:18 it is confirmed after Peter's confession. It is worth noting that Jesus here uses the future tense which would point to the Mt. 16:18 occasion. Both Peter and Cephas mean 'rock', suggesting that Jesus was thinking of the rocklike character which he proposed to make of Simon.

So far at least three disciples are said to have

followed Jesus. But John mentions two others before commencing his account of the ministry of Jesus in ch. 2. In the case of Philip Jesus took the initiative in telling him to follow. Philip is mentioned again several times in this gospel (6:5; 12:21; 14:8). He appears to have been a man with a practical frame of mind. Although Philip, Andrew and Peter are said to be from Bethsaida they had come to live in Capernaum (Mk. 1:21,29). A further piece of personal witness which led another to Jesus is mentioned here when Philip contacted Nathanael. Since the theme of witness is so important in the gospel, the method by which Peter and Nathanael were brought to Jesus is significant. Personal testimony has always been one of the most fruitful means of leading people to become disciples of Jesus. There is a difference in the way Philip introduced Jesus compared with Andrew for he did not point to 'the Messiah', but to *the one whom Moses* and *the prophets* wrote about. It is the same thing. The reference to Jesus of Nazareth sparked off a sceptical remark by Nathanael (46). Evidently Nazareth had something of an unsavoury reputation, and the way it rejected Jesus (Lk. 4:14–30) is in line with that reputation.

The encounter between Jesus and Nathanael is most instructive. First, we note the high opinion that Jesus expressed of him (47). The thought of *an Israelite in whom there is nothing false* may have been prompted by the story of Jacob, who is clearly in mind in v 51. Secondly, we note his inquiring mind – *How do you know me?* There is here an element of surprise which suggests that Nathanael had not previously met Jesus. Thirdly, we note the foreknowledge of Jesus, which must have greatly impressed Nathanael. There is no certain way of knowing what Nathanael was doing under the fig-tree, but the main point here is the more than ordinary insight of Jesus, which was clearly recognized by Nathanael. His response was far-reaching. Not only did he recognize Jesus as *Rabbi*, but also as *Son of God* and *King of Israel*. Again, even at this early stage, there was an understanding of Jesus as Son of God, however rudimentary. John has brought out the initial references to the divine Sonship of Jesus in the prologue to the very core of the emerging ministry of Jesus. The *greater things* of v 50 are explained by v 51, which speaks of the development of spiritual vision. The idea of seeing angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man seems to be an echo from the story of Jacob (Gn. 28:12). The meaning of the statement is that heaven is now opened for continuous communication with people, the representative of whom is Christ himself under the title *Son of Man*. It is remarkable that this title is substituted for Nathanael's *Son of God*, for this shows that the human aspect of Jesus is as important as the divine.

2:1–11 Revelation through a sign

In this gospel there are a number of signs, and the turning of water into wine is the first. Most of the signs mentioned by John lead into a discourse on a related theme. These signs are clearly an integral part of the structure of the gospel. As a result of the first, John specially mentions that the glory of Christ was seen, and this points the way for an understanding of the rest. It is worth noting that both this sign and the next (4:54) were performed in *Cana in Galilee*. This was about three days' journey from where John was baptizing. The reference in v 1 to *the third day* is significant because in conjunction with the other references to days in ch. 1 it is possible to see the miracle at Cana as happening at the conclusion of a seven day period. John is perhaps thinking of the events in the first week of Jesus' ministry.

In the discussion between Jesus and his mother (3–4) it must be remembered that Mary saw the running out of the wine supply as an acute embarrassment to the hosts, whereas Jesus concentrated on his main mission, indicated here by the word *time* (Gk. 'hour'). The theme of Jesus' 'hour' runs through the whole gospel, culminating in the passion story (*cf.* 7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 17:1). The way in which Jesus spoke to his mother (softened somewhat in the NIV) may seem strange, but his intention clearly was to correct any misunderstanding that he might take orders from anyone other than the Father (*cf.* 5:30; 8:29). The connection between Mary's remark and Jesus' comment is probably to be found in the view that Jesus was looking beyond the present wedding to the coming Messianic feast. Jesus also distinguished between the human view of time and God's. The words suggest an awareness of impending crisis and climax. It is intended that the readers should, at an early stage, get a glimpse of this, although they must wait until later to realize the full significance.

The description of the *six stone jars* in v 6 as used for *ceremonial washing* suggests that some symbolic meaning is intended. Some see the whole account as symbolic rather than factual to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, in which case the water represents the Torah and the wine the gospel. But it is better to see the incident as a domestic wedding theme with overtones of symbolic meaning. There may be some allusion to the fact that Jesus will provide lavishly in the Messianic feast, whereas he did not fail to meet the immediate needs of the bridegroom. The capacity of the jars was

more than 100 gallons (450 litres). It is not stated whether all the water was changed into wine, or only the water which had been drawn off for the feast. *The master of the banquet* may have been one of the guests who was appointed to act as master of ceremonies, but it would have been the responsibility of the bridegroom to provide the wine and food. This may explain why he did not know the source of the supply of wine (9). It was the usual custom to serve the best wine first. The text suggests that this custom was because some of the guests would have become somewhat inebriated and would not have recognized the inferior wine. But in this narrative the main point seems to be the superiority of the wine which Jesus provided, a precursor of his provision for the Messianic feast. The incident is brought to a close by stressing the fact that this was the *first* of the *miraculous signs* (11). Note that John uses the word *signs*, whereas the synoptic gospels prefer to speak of wonders and mighty works. A sign always points to some deeper truth beyond itself. The comment that through this sign Jesus revealed *his glory* suggests that the followers of Jesus saw more in the signs than the general onlookers, and Christians have not been slow to see the contrast between the insipid water of the old life and the richness of new life in Christ. It needed faith to discern the glory.

2:12 – 4:54 Early encounters in Jerusalem, Samaria and Galilee

2:12–25 The cleansing of the temple

2:12–17 Jesus drives out the temple traders. V 12 is a connecting link between this incident and the last. Capernaum was where Jesus chose to live during his Galilean ministry. The fact that he stayed there only a few days shows how near the Passover was. Some see in the mention of *the Jewish Passover* (13) a distinction from the Christian feast. But it is more likely that the expression is used to indicate where the Passover was held, *i.e.* in Judea, for the benefit of readers who did not know why Jesus went up to Jerusalem. The driving out of the animals from the temple area (the outer court) serves as a symbolic act. The implication is that the animals should not have been in the temple at all, and it is in this sense that the denunciation of the market atmosphere must be understood. The whip (15) was necessary to control the animals rather than to inflict any punishment upon them. The money changers were there to exchange over currencies into the Tyrian coinage required for the temple tax which all Jews were obliged to pay. The practice was not wrong in itself but was abused when exorbitant exchange rates were charged.

There has been much debate about whether there were one or two cleansings, since the synoptic gospels place the event at the end of Jesus' ministry. It is generally supposed that John has brought it forward for symbolic purposes. But it is not impossible that there may have been another cleansing after some two or three years. The specific time references here would be in support of that. But John seems more concerned with deeper meanings in the events of Jesus' ministry and arranges his material to highlight them; in this case Jesus' mission to cleanse out the abuses of Judaism. V 17 shows that only later did the disciples see the relevance of the OT text of Ps. 69:9 to this incident.

2:18–22 A new kind of temple. The *sign* requested (18) is a different kind from the one mentioned in v 11. The Jews were wanting some spectacular miracle. It is not surprising that they misunderstood the statement in v 19, since v 22 suggests that only later did the disciples themselves understand. Clearly Jesus was speaking of himself as the *temple*, a new kind of temple. Although the present temple had already been *forty-six years* in building, it was not completed until thirty-six years later. The contrast between that period and *three days* should have alerted the Jews to the fact that Jesus' words were not intended to be taken literally.

The reference to Jesus' *body* is an allusion to his resurrection, if *body* is here understood as the physical body. This would make sense in that Jesus was raised three days after his death. Some interpreters see the *body* as the church, but this makes it more difficult to see the significance of the three days, and in any case the church was not destroyed before being raised. A distortion of this statement was used at the trial of Jesus (*cf.* Mk. 14:58). John admits (22) that it was only later that the disciples *recalled* what Jesus had said and then *believed*. It is significant that here the word of Jesus is placed on a level with Scripture. No specific passage seems to be in mind, but rather several allusions.

2:23–25 The insight of Jesus. In the concluding section of this chapter the emphasis falls on the close connection between signs and faith. In his statement of purpose in 20:30–31, John links the signs with faith. Here the faith was inadequate. Jesus saw through it and would not trust it. V 25 draws attention to Jesus' supernatural knowledge. John inserts this comment here as a prelude to the Nicodemus incident, which illustrates it.

3:1–21 The new birth

The importance of the interview between Jesus and Nicodemus is increased because the latter was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. Such a man would have been well acquainted with

Jewish teaching and would have understood the allusions that Jesus made. Although John often mentions Pharisees slightingly, here he concentrates on a Pharisee with a serious purpose in seeking Jesus. It is not certain why he came to Jesus *at night*. It may have been to avoid publicity. On the other hand, the comment may be an incidental note of time without further significance or it may be symbolical, relating to Nicodemus's spiritual state. The first is the simplest explanation. Nicodemus's opening words in v 2 connect with the comment in 2:23–25. Here was a man who had seen the signs and was ready to ask further questions. However it is clear that Nicodemus's view of Jesus did not go further than seeing him as a teacher with the stamp of God upon him. At least that was a start, but far short of a full understanding. Jesus' comment in v 3 goes beyond Nicodemus's implied question. The necessity of the new birth challenged Nicodemus's right to make an assessment of Jesus on a purely human level. The words *unless he is born again* could be understood in the sense of being born from above, or of drawing attention to the birth's spiritual character. Nicodemus clearly understood them in the first sense and rejected the possibility of a second birth. But Jesus meant them in the second sense, *i.e.* a totally different kind of birth. Many of the early fathers understood the statement to refer to baptism in the light of v 5, but the most natural understanding is of spiritual regeneration.

The kingdom of God is an expression found more in the synoptics than in John. It relates primarily to the sovereignty which God exercises. Here 'seeing the kingdom' seems to be equivalent to the more familiar expression in John of eternal life. It is called 'entering the kingdom' in v 5. Nicodemus's question in v 4 is surprising since it took Jesus' words so literally. Nicodemus's rejection of the idea of entering the womb a second time reflects his confusion. He could not grasp that the kingdom required an act of regeneration. There was an element of incredulity about his comment. The repetition of the need for rebirth in v 5 is strengthened by the contrast between *water* birth and *Spirit* birth. There has been much discussion over the meaning of this verse. Some take the reference to water to point to baptism and think Nicodemus would have understood it as an allusion to the baptism of repentance practised by John the Baptist. But there is no hint of this in the passage. Others have supposed a reference to Christian baptism, in which case there was no possibility of Nicodemus understanding it and John must have imposed the idea on the story for his own contemporaries when writing. If, however, the words of Jesus made any sense to Nicodemus we must take water and spirit together and relate this to one birth as in v 3. OT usage would infuse water and spirit with the meaning that God would act for the cleansing of his people (see *e.g.* Ezk. 36:25–27). In this case, Nicodemus was being told that some spiritual experience of regeneration was needed for a proper appreciation of the kingdom of God. There is dispute over whether spirit should have a capital 'S' (as in the NIV) or whether it should primarily be understood to point to a spiritual experience as contrasted with ritual cleansing. As far as Nicodemus was concerned the latter is most probable, but in the light of further references to the Spirit in this gospel John possibly intended his readers to understand the Holy Spirit. Indeed in v 6 the contrast between *flesh* and *Spirit* makes better sense if the Holy Spirit is in mind. *Flesh* is here pointing to human nature, which can reproduce only humankind not the children of God. Being born of the spirit requires a radical change, a new beginning. The gist of Jesus' statement is that the character of those born is determined by the source that gives them birth.

It is a pity that 'born-again' has been debased in common speech; as a scornful description of an extreme sect or even referring to old ideas renewed or new versions of motor cars! It would be very unfortunate to allow ridicule to deprive us of a concept so vital and central to the Christian faith.

V 7 stresses the imperative character of the new birth. There is nothing optional about it. The illustration of the *wind* (8) becomes more intelligible when it is realized that in Greek the same word can be translated wind or spirit. What Jesus was saying here was that although there is lack of knowledge about the origins of both wind and Spirit, the effects of both are observable. Our knowledge of wind movements has vastly increased in modern times, but in those times the wind was unpredictable. What comes over is the sovereign operation of the Spirit of God. It ties up with the statement in 1:13.

Clearly, Jesus expected a man like Nicodemus to understand his illustration, and he was rebuked for not doing so. His question was tinged with incredulity, and this was recognized by Jesus (as v 11 shows). Nicodemus had still failed to grasp the significance of what Jesus was saying. The *we* (11) in Jesus' answer has been variously interpreted. Was Jesus including the disciples? At this stage they knew very little. Was he including the Father and the Spirit? This is possible, although it is doubtful whether Nicodemus would have recognized this. Or was he echoing the *we* used by

Nicodemus in v 2? It is clear that the *we* is contrasted with *you people*, which seems to refer to the Jews generally who failed to believe in the message of Jesus.

The *earthly things* in v 12 must refer to what had already been said and, therefore, must include the new birth. This takes place on earth, whereas the *heavenly things* relates to revelations of the future when the kingdom would reach its fulfilment. V 13 probably refers to the state from which Jesus descended and to which he returned at the ascension. Because heaven was his home he was in a position to speak authoritatively of heavenly things. At first there does not appear to be any clear connection between v 14 and the previous verse. Moses lifting up *the snake in the desert* was a well-known symbol of God's provision of life for his people, but a more profound connection is the symbolism of the lifting up on the cross, the focus of the work of the Son of Man on earth. The words *must be lifted up* show the unavoidable nature of the cross if eternal life is to be shared with believers, a point strongly brought out in v 15.

Generally in this gospel the author distinguishes between Jesus' words and his own, but in this case he has omitted to do so. Vs 31–36 are apparently a comment of John. The statement in v 16 concisely expresses three truths – the universal character of God's love, its sacrificial nature and its eternal purpose. It is no wonder it has been described as 'the gospel in a nutshell'. Since the verb used (*have*) is in the present tense this shows that eternal life is intended to be a present possession. This statement would have been challenging for Jewish hearers who were used to thinking of God as loving only Israel, but it is in line with the idea of universal love found elsewhere in the NT. The word *world* is used with the usual meaning in this gospel of a place in need of God's saving grace. This explains why Jesus came to save, not to condemn (17). The fact is that the world was already in a state of condemnation, although this became accentuated by the lack of faith in God's Son. V 18 makes clear that Jesus as God's Son is the ultimate touchstone which divides the world into two groups, believers and unbelievers. The reference here to faith in God's Son links up with the statement of the author's purpose in writing the gospel in 20:30–31.

Vs 19–21 contain an echo from the prologue (1:5) in the contrast between *light* and *darkness*. Those in darkness are there *because their deeds were evil*. This implies a deliberate decision to do acts which in God's sight were evil. This explains why such people hate the light, because it means that the true nature of their deeds will be seen (20). There is a strong contrast with those who live by the light, described here as living *by the truth*. Their purpose is entirely different, for they want their actions to be plainly seen so that God's work in them may be evident. V 21 can be understood in two ways: either as expressing the content of what is seen; or the reason why anyone comes to the light. The former is better in the context. The purpose of this section is to encourage faith in Jesus.

3:22 – 4:3 Jesus and John the Baptist

This section may be divided into three parts. The testimony of John the Baptist to Jesus (3:22–30); the author's comment on the ministry of Jesus (3:31–36); and the report about the Pharisees' and Jesus' decision to leave Judea (4:1–3).

John here switches to the historical connection between John the Baptist's ministry and that of Jesus. He gives no precise mention of the interval separating this section from the last, but there is a note about the location. Although Jesus was already in Judea, he went from Jerusalem into the surrounding country. The significant circumstance was that both Jesus and John the Baptist were baptizing in the same district (23). The dispute between John the Baptist's disciples and *a certain Jew* provided the occasion for a dialogue between John and his disciples. The unnamed Jew was concerned about ritual matters, and this called for a distinction between John's baptism and Jewish ceremonial rites (25–26). The essential factor in John's baptism was the prior requirement of repentance, and the synoptics show that Jesus continued the same theme. Both were, therefore, apart from Jewish ceremonial. But what confused John's disciples? It would seem that they were envious at the greater success of the ministry of Jesus.

This brings out John's reply in vs 27–30. He first stated a principle – that people can only receive, not manufacture the truth. He then applied the principle to himself by appealing to his former denial that he himself was the Christ. That was not the role that heaven (*i.e.* God) had assigned to him. He was content with a lesser role. The bridegroom illustration underlines this (29). The *friend* corresponds to the best man, who organized the details of a Judean wedding. The bridal imagery is found in Jesus' own teaching (*cf.* Mt. 22:1–14; 25:1–13). It was used later in apostolic teaching (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22–24; Rev. 21:2,9; 22:17). John the Baptist repeated the superiority of Jesus, as he had already done in ch. 1. It was not only John who must decrease, but the old order which he represented. This last section of ch. 3 provides a summary of what is meant by Jesus becoming *greater*. There are many pointers to his superiority:

a. He is from *above* and *above all* (31). He is to be distinguished from those whose origin is earthly. He cannot be assessed by earthly methods. He is therefore different from John the Baptist.

b. He spoke from personal experience (32).

c. Although his testimony was rejected by some, when accepted it witnessed that God is *truthful* (33).

d. The validity of the divine messenger is possession of *the Spirit* (34). Whereas this is a general principle it applies pre-eminently to the Son, particularly as the words *without limit* show. The OT prophets received the Spirit according to the measure of their assignment, but in Jesus' case there was no limit.

e. The hallmark of Jesus' mission was that *the Father loves* him and has complete trust in him (35). As evidence of what the Father has entrusted to the Son *cf.* 5:22,27; 12:49; 17:2,24. In v 36 John sums up the teaching of the whole chapter. The crucial test is faith, which is here contrasted with rejection. *God's wrath* is not to be regarded as impersonal but as an active principle of God's holiness. The only means of avoiding that wrath is by the path of faith. The idea of 'seeing life' is an idiom for experiencing life. The result of God's wrath is a lack of true life.

The opening verses (1–3) of ch. 4 form a link passage with the following discourse. The previous reference to John the Baptist leads the author to note the Pharisees' reactions to the parallel baptizing work of John and Jesus. They had tolerated John's baptism, but if Jesus was baptizing more people, they were presumably getting alarmed. Jesus' decision to move on was the occasion for the transferring of his ministry from Judea to Galilee. The parenthesis that Jesus himself did not baptize is added to correct the report that the Pharisees had heard.

4:4–42 Jesus in Samaria

4:4–26 Jesus and the Samaritan woman. There were two possible routes from Judea to Galilee. The longer was through Gentile country on the east side of the Jordan; the shorter was through Samaria and was most used in spite of the animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans. V 4 suggests this latter route was chosen of necessity. Perhaps John is implying that there was divine reason as far as Jesus was concerned. It is generally supposed that *Sychar* is the modern Askar, near to the ancient Shechem. There still exists a deep well, which according to tradition is the original well. That Jacob was of special significance to the Samaritans is seen from v 12. Jesus was tired (6); this seems an intentional note to stress the true humanity of Jesus and also provides a setting for the opening of the conversation. The *sixth hour* would be noon, the hottest part of the day.

It was unusual for a woman to visit the well alone. She may have been considered something of a social outcast. John adds a note that the disciples were absent (8) to highlight the dialogue between the woman and Jesus. Jesus' action overcame two Jewish prejudices – conversation with a Samaritan and conversation with a woman. The racial prejudice is heightened by the woman's remark (9). Jesus must have anticipated her perplexity for he used it to deepen the conversation. The idea of *drink* for physical needs led naturally into the comment about *the gift of God* (10), which turned it into a spiritual issue. The woman was thinking of Jesus as a typical Jew, but Jesus took her up on this. If she had known his identity she would have asked for *living water*. This expression had a double meaning, either running water, *i.e.* spring water, or spiritual water, *i.e.* connected with the Spirit. The Rabbis thought of the Torah as living water, which shows its metaphorical use. It is, however, not surprising that as yet the woman thought only on the human level, as v 11 shows. It seemed foolish to her to think of water from a deep well without any means of drawing it. Her vision stretched no further than a bucket. Comparison with Jacob, who dug the well, suggests to her that Jesus was inferior. On two counts, therefore, she made an erroneous judgment. She could not conceive that anyone could be greater than the venerated Jacob (*cf.* the similar inability of the Jews to conceive anyone greater than Abraham; 8:53). The real superiority of Jesus was in the *living* quality of the water provided. Jacob's well could only temporarily quench the thirst (13). There are many OT passages which link God's promises with the water illustration (*cf.* Is 12:3; Ezk. 36:25–27). The connection between water and the Spirit is also an OT idea (*cf.* Is 44:3). The reference to *eternal life* (14) is clearly connected with the activity of the Spirit, as is seen from 6:63.

There are similarities between this narrative and the Nicodemus incident, in that in both accounts misunderstandings lead to further explanations. The woman in v 15 was still thinking on literal lines. She imagined a constant water supply would eliminate her visits to the well. She had not yet grasped the spiritual dimension. There is more significance than seems apparent in Jesus' answer to the woman (16). There was, in fact, a moral blockage. She had not grasped the nature of her own need. The woman was forced to face reality in admitting she had *no husband*, although she hid the fact that she was living with a man. Jesus was displaying that

greater insight which John had noted in 2:25, and which the woman herself began to recognize (19). Jewish teaching disapproved of a woman having had more than three husbands, and the idea of a common-law husband had no religious support. The woman was therefore in great moral and spiritual need. We note the gentle way in which Jesus both commended her and yet criticized her (17–18).

When she acknowledged that Jesus was *a prophet* (19), she probably thought of an inspired person. This is at least some advance on her earlier view of him. Although the woman's introduction of the issue of the place of worship may seem a diversion to avoid an unpleasant subject, it is more likely that her realizing that Jesus was some kind of Jewish prophet prompted her to show her acquaintance with Jewish-Samaritan differences over the main place of worship (20). Worship was closely linked to a sacred place. In the past there had been a temple built on Mt Gerizim to rival the temple at Jerusalem. Even after the Gerizim temple was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, the Samaritans continued worshipping on the mountain. It is not clear how concerned the woman was about these differences, but she seized on it as a matter worthy of discussion. Jesus used her reply to make a profound statement that transcended the argument about location. Jesus first turned the discussion away from the place to the object of worship (22). Although neither Jerusalem nor Mt Gerizim were relevant in this matter, the Jews were nevertheless superior in their understanding of God Since the Samaritans were restricted to the Pentateuch, they lacked the theological richness of the revelation of God in the rest of the OT. When Jesus says *salvation is from the Jews* (22) he is not saying all Jews will be saved, but that through the Jews came the knowledge of that salvation in the Scriptures. Since the neuter *what* is used in both cases, this draws attention more to the essence of worship than to the person worshipped. The reference to *a time is coming* (23), modified by *has now come*, shows clearly that it is the ministry of Jesus which would radically transform worship. The mode of worship is now to be *in spirit and truth*, which transcends all racial and local considerations.

The main emphasis here is on spirit as v 24 shows. *God is spirit* may be compared to 'God is light' and 'God is love'. These are ways in which he can be known. The spirituality of God was not an idea alien to the Jews, but they had not recognized the need for any correspondence between the one worshipped and the worshippers. Jesus taught that the worshippers must share something of the nature of the person worshipped. The linking of *spirit* and *truth* here points to the necessity of genuine worship. God desires worshippers who are in tune with him (23). All this probably left the woman somewhat out of her depth. She sensed some Messianic connections, although it is not clear what she meant by *Messiah* (25). The Samaritans did not use the word, as far as we know. The woman may have used it because she was talking to a Jew. Certainly the Samaritans were looking for the Prophet (Dt. 18:15–19) who would reveal the truth, and this throws light on the woman's words. It gave Jesus the cue to declare himself as the expected Messiah. He was prepared to do this to a Samaritan but not to the Jews whose Messianic hopes did not fit in with Jesus' mission.

4:27–38 The disciples rejoin Jesus. As a result of the disciples' return from their errand to buy food, the woman departed to the town (28). John comments on the disciples' surprise that Jesus was talking with a woman, which reflects the general Jewish prejudice (27). Jewish rabbis were not permitted to speak to women in the street and considered any conversation with women to be a hindrance to the study of the Torah. The reluctance of the disciples to ask questions show how embarrassed they were over Jesus' actions. The woman, on the other hand, seems to have lost her inhibitions in her haste to tell others about Jesus. Her grasp was limited and tentative. *Could this be the Christ?* (29) suggests she had not fully accepted Jesus' declaration in v 26, for it could be understood in the sense 'Surely this cannot be the Christ?' Yet she did arouse considerable interest, particularly because of Jesus' penetrating insight into her past.

Vs 31–34 preserve a classic case of misunderstanding of spiritual truth by those who can think only in literal terms. The disciples were concerned with material food, but Jesus turned the conversation to spiritual account. Their conclusion was that someone else must have provided food if Jesus was not interested in eating (33). The gist of Jesus' reply in v 34 is that doing God's will takes precedence over physical food. But these words cannot mean that Jesus was advocating a neglect of physical food. Rather Jesus was here, as so often in John's gospel, concentrating on this main task, *i.e.* finishing the work the Father had sent him to do. The harvest illustration is intended to link immediately with the fulfilment of the mission (34–35). But what is the point of the reference to *four months*? It is possible that in alluding to the natural harvest, still four months away, Jesus intended a contrast with the spiritual harvest which was immediate. When he urged the disciples to *look*, he may have been thinking of the citizens making their way

towards him as a result of the seed sown in the mind of the woman. The spiritual harvest is concerned with *eternal life*, a favourite theme in John's gospel (36). Although no gap is implied in v 35, in vs 36–37 a distinction is introduced between sowing and reaping. In the spiritual harvest the gap between the sowing and reaping is indeterminate (*cf.* the metaphor used in Am. 9:13). The principle involved is summed up in v 38. What the disciples had already reaped was due to the work of others before them. No single individual can claim credit for the success of any spiritual mission. The harvest belongs to the sower as much as to the reaper. It is possible that the *others* refer to the long line of prophets who had prepared the way, of whom John the Baptist was the last.

The conclusion to Jesus' mission in Samaria is seen in a specific example of spiritual harvesting. This took place in two stages. Many believed because of what the woman had said, but more believed through the testimony of Jesus himself. We must assume that the faith of the former was necessarily limited by the experience of the woman. Her testimony concerned the remarkable insight of Jesus, but personal contact with Jesus himself must have deepened their faith, hence the force of v 42. The fact that the Samaritans wanted Jesus to stay with them was extraordinary since he was a Jew, but showed their awakening conviction that he was a *Saviour*, not simply of the Jews but of *the world*. It is impossible to know what content to put to this concept. It would have fallen short of later Christian reflection on salvation, but Jesus had presumably shared with them something of the saving purposes of his mission. The full title used here occurs again in the NT only in 1 Jn. 4:14. It was, however, used in the contemporary world of various gods including Zeus and even of the Roman emperor Hadrian. But John understood the term here in its inter-racial sense.

4:43–54 A second miracle in Galilee

Most of John's record centres on Jerusalem, but the few narratives he includes that are located in Galilee are significant. The first two signs happened in Galilee, as did the multiplication of the loaves in ch. 6. But most of John's signs happened in Judea. John notes that Jesus had himself recognized that a prophet was without honour in his own country (44). There is dispute over what *own country* here means. In the synoptics the saying refers to Nazareth; but here it is most likely that John understands it of the Jewish homeland as distinct from Samaria. There is particular point here in comparing the ready reception the Samaritans gave to Jesus for who he was and the welcome of the Galileans for the miracles he did. On the other hand, the homeland may be considered to refer to Jerusalem, where in this gospel Jesus was not well received. In this case, the reception in Galilee would be by way of contrast.

The former suggestion is the more likely. The Galileans were clearly greatly impressed by the reports of signs performed in Jerusalem at the Passover (*cf.* 2:23).

Yet the second significant sign that Jesus did was performed in *Galilee*, in Cana, the same place that saw the first sign. The *official* mentioned in v 46 was no doubt an officer in Herod Antipas' service. Herod had the title Tetrarch, and although he was never actually a king, he was popularly regarded as such. There are similarities here with the account of the healing of the centurion's servant (Mt. 8:5–10; Lk. 7:2–10), but there are sufficient differences to make any identification of the two incidents difficult. The most significant of the differences are the different status of the father and the different rank of the person healed (son instead of servant). V 47 shows the extent of despair in the father's mind over his son. But Jesus' response is unexpected. The words of v 48 were addressed to the Galileans as a whole. Their welcome to Jesus was on the basis of signs, but did not point to faith. It was probably not until Jesus assured him that his son would live (50) that the man believed. Up till then it was perhaps no more than a kind of magical belief. When faith came it acted rapidly. The conclusion to this narrative is significant because John mentions the precise timing of the healing as the time of Jesus' pronouncement (52). This led to a deeper faith, not only for the man but also for his household. A comparison may be made with the mention in Acts of similar household conversions (*cf.* Acts 10:2; 11:14; 16:15,31; 18:8). The *seventh hour* mentioned in v 52 would have been 1 p.m.

5:1–47 Healing and discourse in Jerusalem

5:1–18 The healing of a lame man

The *feast of the Jews* in v 1 is unnamed. If it was the Passover, this could indicate that the total period of the ministry exceeded three years. It seems that the reason why a feast is mentioned is to account for Jesus' presence in Jerusalem, although John stresses several feasts in the ministry of Jesus. There have been excavations of a double pool in the north-east quarter of the city which is thought to be the pool described here as being *near the Sheep Gate*. There are variations of the name, but *Bethesda* is the best attested. The most important detail is the number of the *five colonnades*, whose existence archaeology has confirmed. These areas would

hold a great number of people waiting to take advantage of the medicinal waters. The additional text which appeared in vs 3–4 is not well attested and is rightly omitted from the NIV (see mg.). Nevertheless, v 7 confirms that there was some movement of the waters, possibly due to springs. The fact that John mentions that the lame man had been there for *thirty-eight years* suggests that this was common knowledge. He was probably notorious for the time he had been begging there. The word *learned* (6) implies that Jesus had been informed by the bystanders. The question *Do you want to get well?* may have been intended to jolt the man out of his apathy, but the answer does not reveal any faith on the man's part. Clearly he thought in rather magical terms, as v 7 shows, for he believed the commonly held view that only the first to get into the water had any chance of healing. He seems to have thought Jesus' question not worth the answering. It must be conceded, however, that his immediate response to Jesus' command to walk was surprisingly prompt.

The problem for the Jews at first was not the healing, but the fact that it had happened on the *Sabbath*. The carrying of the mat was considered an act of work. According to the Mishnah, a couch could be carried only if it had a man on it. At this point it was the man who was held to be at fault, but in vs 16–18 it was Jesus. The discussion between the healed man and the Jews sheds light on the ignorance of the man, who had no idea of the identity of his healer (13), and the obstinacy of the authorities, whose chief concern was the ignoring of their rules. There is an implied contrast here between the compassion of Jesus for the poor man and the lack of interest in the man on the part of the Jews. Jesus' withdrawal (13) followed his consistent policy in this gospel of avoiding popular acclaim.

Do the words of Jesus (14) suggest that the man's illness was the result of a specific sin? Even if the answer is 'Yes', this would not imply that all physical illness has a specific moral cause. However, it may be that Jesus was warning about a moral lameness which would be worse than the physical lameness from which the man had just been delivered. The imperative is in the present tense with the sense, 'Do not continue to sin'. Why did the man at once go and inform the Jews, knowing their hostility? It showed little appreciation of the benefit Jesus had brought him but reflects rather a slavish sense of duty.

The incident led into a statement by Jesus of his relationship to the Father. The Jews' attitude sharpened into persecution (16). But Jesus used the circumstances to testify to the Father's work. The connection of thought seems to be that the healing was a divine act and was not, therefore, subject to human rules. In this gospel there is the closest relationship between the works of Jesus and the works of God. V 17 concisely sums up the mission of Jesus. To the Jewish mind the idea of anyone making himself *equal with God* would have been a more serious offence than *breaking the Sabbath law* (18), for it would have challenged the basic belief in monotheism.

Popular debate today tends to focus on the evidence, or otherwise, for physical healing, rather than on its source. Thus the Jews of Jesus' time and the media of today avoid the central question by being taken up with details of secondary importance.

5:19–47 Revelations of the Father and the Son

V 19–23 give Jesus' answer to the Jewish claim that he was making himself equal with God. The words *I tell you the truth* point to the special importance of the following words (as also in v 24). The way in which Jesus used the title *Son* follows from his custom of calling God his Father. It shows a particularly intimate relationship. Jesus gives four reasons in support of his claim: the Son acts precisely like the Father (19); the Father shows the Son his plans (20); the Son, like the Father, has power to give life (21); the Son has been given authority for judgment by the Father (23). This sequence of supporting reasons for the Son's position have two main purposes. First, that the hearers may be astonished (20) and secondly, that they might honour the Son as they honour the Father. The first on its own would lead only to honouring a wonder-worker, but the second corrects this and points to the true status of the Son. Of the four reasons given above, that which focuses on the Father's love for the Son (20) is most significant. It gives the basis for the Father's revealing everything through the Son.

The conviction that *the Father raises the dead* (21) is supported by both OT and rabbinical literature. While the primary reference may be to the final physical resurrection, there must also be the idea of spiritual resurrection. V 25 suggests that the *dead* who hear the Son of God are those who respond spiritually today, although vs 28–29 refer to the end time. The real point here is that the Son has the power to give life in the same way as the Father has. There is no clash between v 22 and 3:17. The words in 3:17 exclude judgment as the main reason for Jesus' mission, whereas the statement here points to the Son's authority to judge when that is appropriate.

The second important statement contained in vs 24–29 is introduced by a comment that links

hearing and believing. The linking is essential for the receiving of *eternal life*. There is also a close connection between what Jesus taught and what God had sent him to do. *Eternal life* is here defined as a transfer from death to life. The idea of life here is in a different sphere from that in which death operates. It is just possible that v 25 may include those raised physically from death to life in the ministry of Jesus, but the words *and has now come* seem to be against that interpretation. It is worth noting that when speaking of resurrection (25), Jesus used the title *Son of God*, but when speaking of judgment (27) he spoke as *the Son of Man*. The second title, unlike the first, has no article in the Greek and must be interpreted generally of his character as true man. Judgment will be delivered by one who really knows humankind. The *time* mentioned in v 28 is different from that mentioned in v 25, for here the final resurrection is in mind. The contrast between the rising of the *good* and the rising of the *evil* means that although believers have been judged already they can look forward to the completeness of physical resurrection; whereas those who have done evil (and presumably are unbelievers) have nothing but condemnation to look forward to. In v 30 Jesus affirmed the justice of his judgment on the grounds that it was in harmony with the one who sent him. Although judgment is given to the Son, it is wholly in line with the Father's will. The next section (31–47) is concerned with witnesses to Jesus.

Jesus had no need to witness to himself since his will was identical with that of the Father (31–32). In his case self-witness would be false witness because it would imply that he needed to distinguish between himself and the Father. This does not conflict with 8:14, where Jesus was not considering the impossible hypothesis of his witness conflicting with the Father's. Here the *another who testifies* is the Father whose testimony is always true.

John the Baptist's witness was valuable but inadequate (33–35). John's witness certainly led some to Christ, but it was unthinkable that Jesus should need to rely on that witness. John's own witness is compared to a lamp, but he himself was not the light, although he pointed to the light. The purpose of all witness is said to be that people might be saved, which is possible only through faith in Jesus (24).

Jesus next appeals to the testimony of his works (the word is plural). These are of a special nature because the Father had commissioned them. It is for this reason that the witness of Jesus' works is greater than the witness of John's words. Yet the testimony had fallen on unproductive soil. Although the Father had witnessed to Jesus, the hearers had not heard his voice or recognized his presence (37). The plain fact was that through unbelief God's *word* (primarily the Scriptures) did not dwell in them, and this consideration leads into the next section.

Those who did not believe in Jesus did not neglect the Scriptures. Indeed v 39 points to the well-known diligence among the Jews in the study of the Torah. The trouble was in their belief that this in itself sufficed for salvation. But they gave the game away when they declined to accept the witness of Scripture to Jesus, which is its main purpose. V 40 expresses the matter strongly – it was a deliberate rejection of Jesus who is the source of life. This was tantamount to saying that they were spiritually dead. Jesus accepted neither human witness nor human praise (41). He did not have official sanction for his mission. The Jewish hearers entirely missed the sanction of God himself in the mission of Jesus (43).

The reference in v 42 to *the love of God* could mean people's love for God or God's love for people, or perhaps both. It is most likely that their lack of love for God is in mind in view of the context. They were more concerned with human praise than with the praise of God (44). They were in contrast to the true Jews to whom Paul refers in Rom. 2:29. When Jesus appealed to Moses he was touching a sore point with these Torah-loving Jews. At the last great judgment Moses himself would condemn them. Although there are few specific references in the Torah to the Messiah, the general drift of it was to prepare the way for the coming deliverer (46). In all their study of Scripture they had missed this essential point. Jesus was direct in telling them (47) that they did not believe what Moses wrote. With all their devotion to the study of Scripture they did not really believe what it said. It would have been difficult for devout Jews to grasp this distinction, but without it they stood no chance of believing the truth of what Jesus was saying.

6:1–71 Further signs and discourses in Galilee

6:1–15 The feeding of the crowds

This miracle is the only one which is recorded in all four gospels. For this reason only the special features of John's account will be mentioned here. John refers here to the *Sea of Tiberias* (1), a name which was probably not used to describe the Sea of Galilee as early as the time of Jesus but was familiar at the time of writing. The crowds responded to the evidence of the *signs*, here specified as healings (2). John calls them signs because they led people to seek for Jesus. Since Jesus had crossed to the east side of the

lake, the mountainside mentioned (3) would have been what is now called the Golan Heights. John notes that the *Passover* was near because he linked the following discussion about the heavenly bread with this feast (*cf.* v 51, which becomes more intelligible against a Passover background). A comparison with the synoptic accounts shows that whereas they portray the disciples taking the initiative, John shifts the initiative to Jesus himself (5). John also names *Philip* and *Andrew*, compared with the more general 'disciples' of the synoptists. In v 6 John adds a comment which is designed to remove any doubt in the readers' minds that Jesus did not know what he would do. Philip's response to Jesus' request shows a natural but purely human sense of the occasion. He was intensely practical in his calculations (7). Andrew was little better in informing Jesus of the hopelessly inadequate supplies available. He also took a literalistic approach. But none of the disciples was to know what was in the mind of Jesus.

All the records relate that Jesus gave thanks before distributing the food (11). The verb John uses here is the same as the synoptics use in the narrative of the Lord's Supper. This is noteworthy in view of the fact that John does not include the Last Supper in his gospel. John stresses that the people were all satisfied (12), which means it was a full meal and not a merely symbolic act. It is doubtful whether the *twelve baskets* of fragments were intended in a symbolic way to refer to God's provision for the tribes of Israel. It is more in harmony with the context to see it as a proof of God's unstinting bounty. John describes the miracle as a *sign* (14) and links it with the people's reference to *the Prophet*, an allusion to the prediction of Dt. 18:15. This passage was sometimes interpreted Messianically. In the light of v 15 it would seem that the people in this incident so interpreted it. It is only in this gospel that the plan to make Jesus king is mentioned. This would explain why in Matthew and Mark Jesus urged his disciples to get into the boat. It is likely that the crowd's main purpose was to secure through Jesus a constant supply of free food, rather than any careful summing up of his Messianic potential.

6:16–24 Jesus walks on the water

John does not describe this miracle as a sign. We may wonder why he includes the incident here since he does not comment on its effects. Since in both Mark and Matthew it is linked with the feeding of the crowds, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that it was so linked in Christian tradition. But John may have intended to use it to demonstrate the disciples' dependence on Jesus The discussion which followed the miracle of the bread is set in Capernaum (24), which explains the boat journey of the disciples from the east to the west bank. The mention of the distance in v 19 suggests an eyewitness report. There can be no doubt that John intends his readers to understand a miracle when Jesus walked on the water. The suggestion that the disciples actually saw Jesus walking on the shore and thought he was on the water must be rejected, because it would give no reason for them to be terrified. The words *It is I. Don't be afraid* (20) are not to be invested with the aura which other great 'I am' sayings in John convey. The message here is that fear was banished in the presence of Jesus. The most reasonable explanation of v 21 is that the boat was much nearer the shore than the disciples imagined. Vs 23–24 explain how many of those who witnessed the feeding of the crowds were present at Capernaum to hear the discussions. John intends his readers to connect these discussions with the miracle of the feeding.

6:25–59 Discussions about the bread of life

The people were baffled how Jesus had reached the other side of the lake (25), and their question shows the purely human level on which they were thinking. Jesus' answer to their question goes deeper. He pointed out their failure to realize the significance of the *signs*; they saw only food, not the real meaning of Jesus' act. They were convinced of their ability to meet what was required, but Jesus had to remind them that *eternal life* is a gift. The *seal* is God's mark of authentication. Whoever holds the seal acts on God's behalf. Hence the importance of Jesus as God's agent, who is here called the *Son of Man*, a title which draws attention to his humanity. The statement in v 27 must have seemed strange, for the people were seeking to avoid labour, but in these words Jesus was graciously declining their quest for merely physical food. Clearly v 28 implies that they thought in terms of working to earn merit, but Jesus at once reminded them of the need for faith, not works.

The question in v 30 reveals the shallowness of their thought, for what further sign did they expect than the feeding of a multitude from negligible supplies? The reference to the *manna in the desert* (31) provides the clue to the working of their minds. They were probably thinking this provision was superior to that which Jesus had provided because of the sheer quantity of it. Their concept of *sign* seems to have been limited to a reproduction of the desert experience of the Israelites. This was tantamount to expecting that the Messiah must outdo Moses to impress them. The reference to *bread from heaven* is

most likely a quote from Ps. 78:24, although there are other parallels. Jesus took up the theme (32), first denying that Moses provided the heavenly bread and then identifying the bread with himself. As compared with the manna, which was limited to the Israelites and for a prescribed time, Jesus as the bread continually gives *life to the world* (33). But v 34 shows that the hearers could not rise above the level of material provision. In the next section Jesus affirmed his claim to be the true bread.

V 35 records the first of the great 'I am' sayings of Jesus, and the following verses (35–51) are an expanded commentary on it. It is a direct response to the people's demand for bread, for it was necessary for them to understand that Jesus was speaking of spiritual not physical food. The meaning of the phrase *bread of life* is bread which gives life, but such bread is available only to those who believe in Jesus, a condition which the hearers had not fulfilled (36). If Jesus' mission depended on the faith of the people, does this suggest a failure? V 37 gives the answer. The final result is in the Father's hands. *Whoever comes* shows an emphasis on the individual response. The emphatic negative statement *I will never drive away* is to be understood as an assurance that Jesus will preserve them. There is no possibility of any disagreement between the Father and the Son, as vs 38–39 show. What the Father gives the Son will receive – *I shall lose none*. Note that the *all* in v 39 is neuter (as in v 37) and sums up everything given by the Father to the Son. The two references to the *last day* (40) show that Jesus was thinking ahead to the end of the age, when all will be consummated.

At this point in the discussion Jewish objections came to the fore. The sticking point was *the bread that came down from heaven* (41). They could not reconcile this with their knowledge of Jesus' humble origins (42). Jesus rebuked their grumbling rather than answered their objection (43), although when he pointed out the necessity for the Father to take the initiative, he was virtually telling them that they were out of step with the Father (44). They needed a spiritual revelation to understand Jesus' words. This was further underlined by an appeal to the prophets (45). The passage quoted is Is. 54:13, which describes the triumph of the Servant in his kingdom. It endorses the view that the initiative is with God. Yet God's revelation comes only through Jesus, since he alone has seen God (46). The need for faith is again stressed. V 47 echoes the language of 3:15.

The theme of the *bread* is again introduced, and Jesus' own claim is repeated (48). The superiority of the heavenly bread over the manna is that the former leads to life whereas the latter could not prevent death (49–50). In the important statement of Jesus in v 51, he claimed to be the *living bread*, which although synonymous with *bread of life* brings out more vividly the contrast with the manna. But there is a further extension of thought in the identifying of the bread with the *flesh*. There is also a difference from the earlier statement in that it is now Jesus himself who gives, whereas before it was the Father. The word *flesh* refers to the human life of Jesus. It was totally misunderstood by the Jews (52). It differs from the word used at the Lord's Supper ('body' instead of 'flesh'), which shows that this statement is not to be read in the light of the Supper but vice-versa. The word *world* in v 51 should be understood as the world of people.

It was because the Jews put a literal interpretation on the words of Jesus that he gave a further explanation in vs 53–58. It is difficult to believe that the Jews could not see through to some metaphorical meaning. Their objection appears to be little more than ridicule. It is not so surprising that the Jews did not penetrate to the spiritual meaning of Jesus' words, for understanding was possible only through faith, which it has already been noted they did not possess. The eating and drinking of the *flesh* and *blood* of Jesus is clearly an act of faith (53). The metaphorical language can be understood only in the light of the coming sacrifice of Jesus. Dependence on what Jesus has done is, therefore, vividly described in terms of eating and drinking. The result of such dependence is seen in vs 56–57, in a mutual indwelling. Jesus' dwelling in believers means that he identifies himself with them, but their dwelling in him means that they continue to depend on him. This whole discussion closes with another comparison between the manna and the heavenly bread. V 58 is in fact an echo of v 49. John leaves until the end of the discussion any reference to where it took place. Since the discussion arose out of the miracle of the feeding, it is not possible to say what part of it preceded the entry into the *synagogue*. John does not consider it relevant to explain, but it is not impossible that the whole discourse took place inside. Some synagogue services would have allowed for this.

6:60–71 The disciples' reactions to Jesus' teaching and work

The grumbling of many of the *disciples* (60–61) shows that the word 'disciple' is used here in a loose sense for those fringe followers of Jesus. They were not true believers for they found it *hard* to accept his teaching (60). They could not even imagine anyone accepting it. Jesus knew their real position and proceeded to advise. He knew that the *flesh* saying had baffled them. The

statement in v 62 about the *Son of Man* ascending implied that there would be a greater cause for stumbling in the manner in which the Son of Man would ascend to heaven, because it would be preceded by his suffering and death. The further statement that the *flesh counts for nothing* aims to draw their thoughts away from the physical to the spiritual. The statement here is relative. John has already declared that the Word was made flesh (1:14). Jesus was not underestimating the importance of his earthly life but was pointing out the need to catch at the spiritual meaning of his teaching. V 64 is another example in John where Jesus displayed his knowledge of people's thoughts. He knew that faith was missing in some of them. And once again the initiative of the Father is stressed in v 65.

The contrast between the reaction of the Twelve and of those who turned away is brought out in vs 66–71. The former, with Simon Peter as their spokesman, affirmed a deepening faith. The frequent mention of *eternal life* in the teaching of Jesus had led them to describe his teaching in this way (68). Their belief was centred in a conviction that Jesus was someone special, here described as *the Holy One of God.* There are some alternative textual readings, but the one followed here is to be preferred because of its unusual character. In Mk. 1:24 and Lk. 4:34 the phrase is used by demons in addressing Jesus. This confession of Peter does not go so far as his confession in Mt. 16:16. It is clear that the 'we' of Peter's confession needed qualifying in view of the reference to the betrayer in v 64. Nothing is said of the disturbing effect of this news that one of their number was a *devil* (70). John in writing of it later merely identifies him as *Judas.*

7:1 – 8:59 Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles

7:1–9 Jesus moves from Galilee to Jerusalem

This section is an explanation of Jesus' relationships with his family and with the Jews in general at this point in the ministry. Jesus was aware of hostility and plotting against him (1), and John mentions this to account for his delay in going to the feast. The *Feast of Tabernacles* was a popular feast and anyone wanting to contact as many people as possible could not do better than show himself in Jerusalem at this time. Such was the reasoning of Jesus' brothers (3). It may be that they had heard that many of Jesus' disciples had recently deserted him (6:66). But v 4 shows that they had failed to grasp the character of Jesus' mission. His purpose was not to be in the public eye. For him there was no likelihood of the *world* believing in him, any more than his brothers. The answer Jesus gave in v 6 shows his awareness that his movements were governed by a timetable which others found hard to understand. For his brothers *any time is right.* The word for *time* here stands for opportune time and must be distinguished from, although closely linked to, the 'hour' already mentioned in 2:4. Jesus appears to have been commenting on his brothers' use of the word *world* (7), for they had not grasped that it was antagonistic to Jesus (in the sense in which it is used in this gospel). It is here specifically used with a moral meaning (*what it does is evil*). Some texts in v 8 have 'not', others have *not yet.* The second reading may have been an attempt to avoid a difficulty since Jesus did go up to Jerusalem. However, the former is the more likely reading. In that case, Jesus was not denying that he was going to the Feast, but was denying that he was acting on the public demonstration proposal of the brothers. This is supported by the statement in v 10.

7:10–52 The teaching of Jesus at the Feast

7:10–25 The authority behind Jesus' teaching. When Jesus decided to go to the Feast, he went in an atmosphere of Jewish speculation (10–11). This led to some debate among the people as to his whereabouts (11) and character (12). Goodness and deception are mutually exclusive, which shows the arbitrary nature of popular assessment. At this stage neither Jesus nor the general populace could be open (10, 13) although their reasons were very different. Jesus was following his Father's plan, but the people were acting out of fear. This explains why Jesus did not hesitate to go to the temple *halfway through the Feast* (14). He clearly went with a specific purpose. What baffled the Jews was the authoritative nature of Jesus' teaching without formal training (15). In answer Jesus pointed out the true nature of his teaching. It is not his own, but God's (16); it could be verified by anyone who desired to do God's will (17); it was not based on self-seeking (18); it was based on seeking God's honour and was therefore true (18). The conclusion to Jesus' answer is abrupt. He appealed to Moses and the law (19). When he said that none of them kept the law, the meaning must be that they did not grasp the true purpose of the law, for they certainly did not neglect the law. It was central to their current religious thought. Jesus clearly saw beyond their profession to honour the law and challenged them on the grounds of their plotting to kill him, whereas the law condemns murder (Ex. 20:13). In self-defence the Jews charged Jesus with demon-possession

(20). They had not recognized their own murderous intentions towards Jesus. In answer Jesus pointed out their inconsistency in interpreting the law by allowing circumcision on the Sabbath but not healing (21–23). The connection of thought in v 23 is that Jewish interpretation allowed circumcising on the Sabbath, in spite of the law against work, because it perfected the child, and Jesus claimed that to make a person whole had the same aim. In v 24 Jesus criticized the criteria being used. True faith had no part in their assessment.

7:25–36 The identity of Jesus. The discussion about the Christ which followed arose directly out of the previous comments. Some of the people were perplexed because the authorities were taking no action. Consequently they queried whether the authorities were concluding that Jesus was *the Christ* (26). But this raised another difficulty, for it was commonly supposed that the Messiah's coming would be secret. Jesus's answer was to cry out in the temple in the most public way. He challenged their assumption that they knew his true origin. What they knew about him was only partial. The most important part – that he had been *sent* – had totally escaped them. Jesus asserted that they did not know the one who sent him (28). They had not connected the mission of Jesus with God. John impresses on his narrative the impotence of any agency to thwart the timing of God's purposes; he notes the *time* had not yet come. Vs 30–31 bring out the division between those who were antagonistic and those who believed. The question asked in v 31 need not suppose that those who believed had necessarily grasped the deeper significance of the *miraculous signs*. Although signs were not generally associated with the expected Messiah, popular opinion seems here to have thought so.

The action of the Pharisees and chief priests gives a more official stamp on the desire to arrest Jesus than that seen in v 30. John's comment in v 32 suggests that an informal meeting of the Sanhedrin had been held. But he delays until v 45 to tell us the outcome of attempts by the temple guards to arrest Jesus. He concentrates rather on the enigmatic response of Jesus to this situation (33–34). Jesus' mind was on the cross and his divine mission. He looked beyond this to his glory, an experience through which his hearers could not pursue him. As so often in this gospel, the words of Jesus were misunderstood through being taken too literally. The perplexity of the Jews is understandable (35–36), but shows their incapacity to think in spiritual terms. Their minds went to the dispersion, that is Jews *scattered among the Greeks*. The irony of the situation is that John records later (12:20–22) that some Greeks sought out Jesus, and his readers would have known how the gospel had spread through the Gentile world.

7:37–44 The promise of the Spirit. On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles there was a water ritual, and this clearly formed the background to the saying of Jesus about the Spirit. The ritual was connected with the need for rain during the following year. When Jesus said *If anyone is thirsty* (37), he may have been thinking of Is. 55:1, but it is more likely he was offering a better alternative to the water ritual. The idea of thirst is given a spiritual sense, as so often in his teaching. V 38 makes clear that this spiritual water is available only to believers. There is a problem in the reference to Scripture here since no specific passage fits the context, although it could be a general reference to such passages as Is. 58:11, Ezk. 47:1; Zc. 14:8.

The words *from within him* are lit. 'from within his belly', and the question arises whether this is a reference to either Christ or the believer. Since the *living water* is identified with the Spirit, in what sense can it be said that a believer communicates the Spirit? This can hardly be the meaning, and it is best to understand it to mean that Christ communicates the Spirit, a thought underlined by the latter part of v 39. A parallel to the idea of water flowing from a person may be found in the metaphorical rock (*i.e.* Christ) in 1 Cor. 10:4. V 39 links the coming of the Spirit to the period subsequent to the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus (described by John as a glorification). Whatever the water sacrifice would have conveyed to the discerning mind, there was no way the hearers could know the significance of Jesus' words until the Spirit brought his own enlightenment.

The immediate result of these sayings of Jesus was further discussion about his identity. There were three views – a prophet, the Christ, not the Christ. The latter view was claimed to be supported by Scripture, but the Jews appear to have been ignorant of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem (*cf.* Mi. 5:2). For the third time there is recorded in this chapter a desire to arrest Jesus which ended in failure.

7:45–52 The Jewish leaders' unbelief. At this point John records the return of the temple guards. The *finally* in v 45 does not capture the real force of the Greek, which merely points to a sequence to the preceding verse. A search warrant was already in existence. The guards were trained Levites and this would explain their reaction to Jesus' teaching. They were clearly thoughtful men. The guards' words in v 46 may have been a cover-up to their fear that an arrest would have led to a popular uprising. On the other hand it is not impossible that it was the teaching itself which created so deep an impression. Vs 47–49 reveal the Pharisees'

contempt, not only for the crowds but also for their own temple guards. Nicodemus's protest shows that the earlier interview (ch. 3) had not been in vain (50–51). He ventured to point out the inconsistency of his colleagues' approach to the law. Their attitude was out of harmony with the true spirit of the law. The gibe about Galilee flung at Nicodemus reveals the contempt of the Jerusalem authorities for the provincials (52).

7:53 – 8:11 The woman caught in adultery

Most scholars agree that this section does not belong at this point in John. Most early MSS either omit it or mark it with asterisks to indicate doubt. A few MSS place it at the end of the gospel, and a few others after Lk. 21:38. At the same time it has ancient attestation, and there is no reason to suppose that it does not represent genuine tradition.

The incident took place as Jesus was teaching in the temple (2). The teachers of the law and Pharisees sought out Jesus at a time when he was surrounded by a crowd of people. Their intention was to set a trap for him which would cause him to fall foul of the authorities (6). The real crux was Jesus' attitude towards the Mosaic law. The religious leaders lost no time in drawing attention to the command of Moses in the case of a flagrant case of adultery. Would Jesus condemn the woman and uphold the Mosaic law? If he did, the teachers of the law and Pharisees knew that the civil authorities would not permit the sentence to be executed. Or would he evade the issue and by doing so condone the woman's sin? He did neither (7) but turned the challenge towards his accusers. In inviting those without sin to cast the first stone, Jesus left the matter to their own consciences. He transformed a legal quibble into a moral issue. The withdrawal of the accusers (9) from the eldest downwards heightens the point of the story. There is no need to debate what Jesus wrote with his finger on the ground. His presence was sufficient to make all his accusers uneasy, until at length only Jesus and the woman were left.

The final words of Jesus to the woman (11) show his compassion linked with a strong command. It is clear from Jesus' attitude to the woman that he was not condoning adultery. This combination of thoroughgoing justice and deep compassion is not easy to achieve, but is a fine example of how the church ought to deal with people.

8:12–59 Jesus as the light of the world

8:12–30 Challenges to the testimony of Jesus. This section is a continuation of ch. 7; hence v 12 follows on directly from 7:52, and the light metaphor must be seen as derived from the Feast of Tabernacles imagery. Note that *light* is here linked with *life* as in the prologue (*cf.* 1:4–5, 9–10). Here is one of the well-known 'I am' sayings, which points out the personal character of the true light. The immediate occasion was possibly the lighting of the candelabra in the Court of the women to signify the pillar of fire. The imagery is reinforced by reference to a dark path along which people are walking with the help of a bright light. Anyone wandering from the light finds himself in darkness. This figurative use of walking is particularly characteristic of John's writings.

The Pharisees objected to the tone of authority in the words of Jesus (13), but Jesus pointed out that self-testimony is not necessarily untrue. Jesus had previously affirmed the validity of his witness (*cf.* ch. 5) and he now reiterated the same theme. All testimony must be judged according to its basis, and here Jesus claimed a knowledge of his mission of which his hearers were ignorant (14). The implication is that their judgment was superficial (15). When Jesus says, *I pass judgment on no-one*, this may mean that the purpose of his mission was not judgment, or that he did not judge in the manner of his critics. The latter fits this context better, as v 16 shows. The judgment of Jesus is not isolated judgment, but a process within his whole life purpose and is therefore valid. The law recognized the greater strength of two witnesses over one (17). When Jesus referred to *your law* he was not distancing himself from his Jewish opponents in relation to the law. Rather he was appealing to a principle which his critics would accept. Jesus' appeal to the supporting witness of the Father shows again the close connection between the one sent and the sender. The question in v 19 clearly introduces a misunderstanding by confusing Jesus' reference to divine fatherhood with natural fatherhood. They had no perception of the divine mission of Jesus, and it is not surprising, therefore, that they were unconvinced by Jesus' claim that his witness was corroborated by the Father. In their eyes an absent witness would have been invalid.

The form of their question is *Where?* rather than 'Who?' but it was the latter which Jesus answered. In that answer the words *If you knew me* show that the critics had totally failed to understand Jesus. They also lacked a true understanding of God himself. In no clearer way could Jesus have shown that he himself was the means for attaining a true knowledge of God.

V 20 explains the setting for this part of the dialogue. The *place where the offerings were put* (the treasury) was probably in the Court of the Women, a place of public assembly. But John's

main interest is the theological reason why Jesus was not arrested – *his time had not yet come.* Many times John points out that human forces were thwarted in their attempts to stop the ministry of Jesus because their plans did not conform to the divine programme for him (*cf.* 7:44). Jesus had already spoken of going away (7:34), and once again he mystified his hearers. The words *you will die in your sin* (21) may seem to have little connection with the previous statement, but if we give full weight to the singular *sin*, this would refer to the sin of rejecting the Messiah. Because of this they would not benefit from his redeeming work. If this is the right understanding of the passage, the seeking must be understood in a spiritual sense. Hence Jesus' statement that they could not go where he was going. There is a similar saying in 13:33, but in that case with a different meaning because it was addressed to the disciples. Here all the Jewish hearers could think of was suicide (22). The chasm between them and Jesus is highlighted in vs 23–24. It was a difference between an earthly and heavenly view of things.

The words *if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be* show the importance of faith in the full revelation of Jesus. The Greek text has simply 'I am', a form similar to the great 'I am' assertions of the OT (*cf.* Ex. 3:14). This implies the self-existence of the Messiah, and shows Jesus' demand for a comprehensive view of his person (it becomes even more clear in v 58). It is not surprising that the 'I am' saying was beyond the grasp of the hearers, as is seen by their further question *Who are you?* An understanding of the person of Christ is a crucial component of Christian faith. Jesus' answer to their question is enigmatic (25). The NIV has rendered the Greek *Just what I have been claiming all along*, whereas the RSV has 'from the beginning'. Another interpretation is to understand the words to mean 'Why do I talk to you at all?' (RSV mg.), but this is inconsistent with the context. Yet a further possibility is to take the words to mean, 'Primarily I am what I am telling you', which fits the context and adds emphasis to the 'I am' saying.

Jesus left their question unanswered to return to the theme of judgment (26). He had twice reminded them that they would die in their sins, he has yet more to say. He again asserted the truth of his testimony on the grounds that he who sent him was true. Whatever he declared to the world was what he had heard from the Father. V 27 again gives an example of pathetic misunderstanding. Jesus' answer to their perplexity is surprising. *When you have lifted up the Son of Man* (28) would appear to refer to the cross, but how does this relate to the context? In all probability Jesus had in mind the revelation of the Father which would come through the cross, which in this gospel is seen as a process of glorification (*cf.* 12:23). As a result, those who had eyes to see would recognize that the mission of Jesus was stamped with the Father's authority. Knowledge of the person of Jesus comes as a result of the resurrection, which although not mentioned here, must be understood. Once again Jesus brought out the close relationship between the Father and the Son. The present statement may be contrasted with the cry of abandonment (Mk. 27:46; Mk 15:34). It does not conflict, for here the emphasis is on an abiding relationship, but there on a temporary experience. In saying that he always pleased the Father (29), Jesus was again showing the measure of oneness between himself and the Father. In noting the faith of many in response to the teaching of Jesus, John is giving an illustration of what he hopes will be the outcome of his gospel (*cf.* 20:31).

8:31–41 The nature of freedom. Those who had believed needed to advance to a full commitment to the teaching of Jesus in order to arrive at the truth (31–32). It is likely that the 'believers' had reached the stage of professing faith, but the following discourse shows they had not yet developed into full believers. The connection between truth and freedom here is important. Truth never leads to bondage. The whole idea was perplexing to the Pharisees because they were not convinced of their need of freedom (33). Others were burdened through their teaching, but they themselves never recognized that submission to their complex system of regulations led to bondage. In appealing to their descent from Abraham (33) these people showed that their idea of being Abraham's children lacked moral content. In his answer Jesus made an important statement (*I tell you the truth*), in which he pointed out the true nature of moral slavery in order to stress the true nature of freedom (34). Since no-one is exempt from sinning, everyone must be a slave to sin. This applies to those of Abrahamic descent. There is an obvious contrast between a slave and a son in the rights that each possesses (35), and this serves to underline the chasm between bondage and freedom. The words *you will be free indeed* (36) show that true freedom can come only through the Son. Jesus then went back to the Abraham claim and pointed out the strangeness that those claiming to be Abraham's descendants should seek to kill the one who spoke the word of God (37). The thrust of this passage is that physical descent, which meant so much to the Jews, is no guide to true moral and spiritual affinity. The saying *you have no room for my word* shows that the minds of his hearers were closed. The implication is that the true

descendants of Abraham would receive the word of Jesus. The contrast between *the Father* and *your father* becomes clearer in the light of v 44.

The Jews could not get away from the importance of calling Abraham their father (39). It reflects the widespread belief that the great merits of Abraham were available for his descendants. Jesus' reply corrected the basis for this belief. True descent was on moral grounds, not on grounds of racial descent. Abraham's true sons must act in harmony with what Abraham did, which would exclude the Jews' desire to kill Jesus (40). The second reference to *your own father* (41) was intended to challenge them further and draw out from them an indignant protest. Because their descent from Abraham had been called in question, they resorted to claiming God himself as their father. Some have thought that the words *We are not illegitimate children* may have been an indirect reference to slanders about the birth of Jesus. But the more probable implication is that they were objecting to Jesus' refusal to allow their claim to be Abraham's descendants, which would make them spiritual bastards.

8:42–47 The children of the devil. Jesus next pointed to a further result from true spiritual descent from Abraham – *you would love me* (42). True children of God could not fail to love the Son of God. Jesus again asserted that his mission was from God. He would not allow his hearers to forget this. Their minds were so prejudiced they were unable to hear (43). This idea of moral impossibility is further underlined in the charge that the devil was their father. The implications of this were far-reaching. There are three stages in the thought here: the devil is a murderer; you are seeking to kill me; therefore you are his children. The devil's most characteristic feature stressed here is his hatred of the truth. Note the expressions *not holding to the truth, no truth in him, he is a liar and the father of lies* (44). The latter expression could mean 'he is the father of a liar', thus making it more personal. The sequence in v 45 suggests that the hearers' rejection of the truth showed their leaning towards falsehood. Jesus made their attitude towards him the crucial test – *why don't you believe me?* Since he spoke the truth, everything contrary to him must be false. His opponents' attitude of unbelief implied not only that he did not speak the truth but was guilty of sin (46). The sequence of thought in v 47 is as follows: whoever hears God's words is of God; you do not hear the words of God; therefore you are not of God. It is the second step in this argument which the hearers challenged, for Jesus' estimate of their spiritual condition was different from their own.

8:48–59 Jesus' claims about himself. The last paragraph in this chapter focuses on Jesus' claims about himself and the strength of opposition to those claims. The double charge in v 48 that Jesus was both a Samaritan and demon-possessed revealed strong contempt on the part of his accusers. The former charge was probably expressing their hatred of Jesus in the same way as they regarded the Samaritans. The latter charge was more serious and arose from Jesus' words in v 44. In answer Jesus pointed out the absurdity of a demon-possessed person doing anything in the Father's honour, and he further pointed out that it was God who was the judge of the matter (50). This removed the discussion from the sphere of their opinion against that of Jesus. Jesus' view was backed up by God.

The words in v 51, *he will never see death*, should be understood in the sense of not experiencing the terrors of death. This links it with the promise of Jesus to give believers eternal life. Once again, the opponents of Jesus misunderstood his words, taking the reference to death literally (52). The fact that Abraham and the prophets died made nonsense of Jesus' statement in their view. It is significant that they changed Jesus' word *see* to *taste*, which shows they understood Jesus to mean physical death. The direct question, *Are you greater than our father Abraham?* (53), implies that the Jews regarded this as impossible. They were willing to give greater honour to the prophets than to Jesus. The following question – *Who do you think you are?* is more literally 'Whom do you make yourself to be?' The answer to this is that Jesus did not glorify himself (54); it was the work of the Father. Once again Jesus claimed a special relationship to, and knowledge of, the Father (55) in contrast with his hearers.

In v 56 we have the remarkable statement *Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day*, which raises the question when this could have taken place. Some sort of vision must be in mind. A Jewish tradition held that Abraham saw the secrets of the age to come. Some see the reference to Abraham rejoicing over the birth of Isaac (Gn. 17:17). This is possible, particularly if the birth of Isaac is seen as the promise of blessing to all nations (*cf.* Paul's interpretation of the promise in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3). This was supremely fulfilled in Christ. *He saw it and was glad* seems to point to Abraham's foresight, which resulted from his faith, although some have linked it to the binding of Isaac. The Jews distorted the words of Jesus by asking *You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham!* (57), but Jesus made an emphatic declaration in response. The words *before Abraham was born, I am* must point to

pre-existence. The *I am* here must be understood as a divine claim and was taken in this way by the Jews (59). In no more dramatic way could Jesus have claimed superiority over Abraham. The Jews could think of no other treatment but stoning for anyone so indisputably claiming pre-existence to Abraham. The fact that *Jesus hid himself* (John does not tell us how) goes to underline the constant theme in this gospel that his times were in God's hands.

9:1 – 10:42 Further healing and teaching

9:1–41 Jesus heals a man born blind

9:1–12 The encounter with the blind man. There is a clear connection between this chapter and ch. 8, because both in 8:12 and 9:5 Jesus declared himself to be the light of the world. John now gives a specific instance in which Jesus was seen as light, giving sight to a blind man. The other gospels record instances of Jesus healing blind people, but in John what is characteristic is the discussion the healing provoked which centred on the person of Jesus himself.

It is not clear from the text when this incident happened, but it was some time between the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication (*cf.* 10:22). The man had never seen (1). The fact that he was born in this condition heightened the theological discussion which followed. There is less difficulty in seeing some connection between sin and suffering as a general principle than in applying it to particular cases (2). The disciples' assumption that either the man himself or his parents must have been at fault was in line with contemporary theories. Some of the rabbis taught that it was possible to sin before birth. But Jesus refused to answer the question, *who sinned?* and chose rather to focus attention on God's glory. That suffering could be used for God's glory was a concept difficult to believe, although it is inherent in the Christian approach to the problem. It can show the illuminating power of Christ, not only in the physical but also in the spiritual sphere. In v 4 Jesus was including his disciples in the working out of his own mission, although they were not involved in the immediate miracle of healing. The contrast between *day* and *night* appears to be symbolic, if the reference is to the mission of Jesus, in which case the *night* would represent the close of that mission. The increasing hostility and unbelief of the Jews might be represented by the darkness of night, but the former view seems preferable.

Jesus' remark in v 5 shows that he was thinking of his earthly life. The use of *saliva* in curing blindness finds some parallels in Mk. 7:33; 8:23, although in these cases the saliva was applied direct, whereas here it is mixed with soil. There was a current belief that saliva was beneficial for diseased eye. But whereas Jesus used currently understood means, he did not attach any superstitious value to them. In fact the healing happened only when the man washed in *the pool of Siloam* as instructed by Jesus. It is not clear why John gives the interpretation of the name Siloam as *Sent*, but perhaps he sees some connection with Jesus as the sent one. It may, of course, be no more than a help for Greek readers, as in other instances with Hebrew names (*cf.* 1:42). V 7 implies some delay in the healing, perhaps to test the man's faith. The subsequent account of the conversation between the man and his neighbours is told with exceptional vividness (8–12). The argument about the man's identity, the vagueness of his own knowledge of Jesus and the certainty of the cure are all clearly brought out.

9:13–34 The Pharisees' view of the healing. It is not clear in v 13 who brought the man to the Pharisees. It may have been the neighbours of v 8 or others who were hostile to Jesus. John's comment about it being the *Sabbath* on which the healing took place supplies the clue to the action. The objectors were obviously those who were sticklers for the Jewish law. The making of clay on the Sabbath would have been enough to raise their hackles, in spite of its being done in an act of mercy. The Pharisees' interest in the method of healing (15) was no doubt because they saw some opportunity to criticize Jesus over it. But in fact the Pharisees show a similar division of opinion as the neighbours (16). The dispute in their case was between the strict legalists, whose main concern was the Sabbath regulations, and others, who were so impressed with the signs that they could not imagine a sinner performing them and therefore were concluding that the legalists were judging wrongly. The blind man's statement that Jesus was a *prophet* (17) was an advance on v 11 when he referred to *the man they call Jesus.*

The next section (18–23) demonstrates the sheer obstinacy of unbelief. The Jews disbelieved the man's own words and would not accept that he had been born blind. The demand that the man's parents should be required to substantiate his testimony does not appear to have been made from an impartial desire to sift the evidence. Their prejudice against the idea that a man born blind could receive his sight is apparent. Only the parents could confirm that the man had been born blind, but they themselves were hardly in a position to supply an explanation of the miracle. The narrative brings out that their response was inhibited by

their fear of the Pharisees. Threat of excommunication was a powerful weapon. At the same time it was justifiable for the parents to pass the question back to the son. There is some debate over v 22 since some scholars think it improbable that during the lifetime of Jesus the synagogue would have introduced a ban about Jesus being called the Christ. But it would have been quite natural for reports to circulate claiming that Jesus was the looked-for Messiah, although it was much later that the full truth of this dawned on the Christians.

The words of v 24, *Give glory to God*, cannot mean that Jesus' opponents were urging the man to praise God for the healing. It was a common Jewish oath which called on the man to speak the truth. The Jews were convinced that Jesus was a sinner because he broke the Sabbath. The man's own knowledge of Jesus was based on personal experience (25). He had no comment to make on the technical matter, but was very firm in acknowledging his restored sight. The opponents were baffled by the fact of the healing and switched to the method used (26). Facts can be stubborn, but technical matters can be more malleable. There was both irritation and irony in the man's response (27). He suggested their eagerness to hear a repetition of the evidence could derive only from a desire to become disciples of Jesus. In answer to his irony, the opponents resorted to scorn. His mention of discipleship prompted them to claim to be *disciples of Moses*. This was apparently a rarely used description, but it highlights the superior place given to Moses in their thoughts than they gave to Jesus. The contrast sums up the long-running conflict between Judaism and Christianity. There is a refusal here to consider the true origin of Jesus. Not only so, they were refusing to give credence to the testimony of anyone whose origins they did not know (29). For them no personal experience, however remarkable, was of any consequence.

There is obviously food for thought here concerning all debates about supernatural healing. The Pharisees of Jesus' time used arguments strikingly similar to those employed by some medical authorities today.

It is no wonder that the man became more and more cutting in his remarks (30–33). The debate over the origins of Jesus found no place in his matter-of-fact approach to experience. Nevertheless, the man argued the matter in a series of steps: his sight had been restored; he suggested that God hears only those who do his will, not sinners; hence, since he was convinced the healing was from God, the healer could not be a sinner; there was no precedent for a mere man opening the eyes of a man blind from birth; therefore, the healer must have been from God. The theologically minded Jews at last saw that they could make no headway with a man who could argue in such a manner; so they ejected him (34), possibly by excommunication, but not before a parting snipe at him. They charged him with being born in sin, a tacit admission of his blindness from birth which they had earlier questioned. They were more concerned to show contempt for his former condition than pleasure for his present restoration.

9:35–41 Jesus' comments on spiritual blindness. This concluding section of the narrative depicts the man's discussion with Jesus and reaches its climax with his declaration of faith. Jesus took the initiative in seeking out the man. He at once issued a challenge to faith, a connection with miracles as signs found elsewhere in John's gospel. But the most significant thing about the question is the use of the title *Son of Man*. Elsewhere in this gospel the idea of faith in the Son of Man occurs (3:14–15). Whatever John meant by the title, the man's lack of understanding is clear. His question (36) was probably because he had not seen Jesus before. As soon as Jesus explained that he was the Son of Man the healed man at once believed, which suggested he had already had the seeds of faith in him. In fact, the whole narrative shows a progressive development of understanding leading to faith. The words, *Lord, I believe*, may not reach as far as a full recognition of the lordship of Christ. The word *Lord* could be simply a polite form of address, but when linked with faith more probably points to a deepening appreciation of the character of Jesus. This is especially evident in his act of worship. At first sight v 39 stands in contradiction with 3:17. Yet since 3:18 speaks of judgment, it must be understood rather as the inevitable effect of the coming of Jesus, but not its main purpose. The mission of Jesus brought people to the point of crisis. The healed man's crisis had been faced in his excommunication, which was further sealed by his act of worship of Jesus.

The antitheses – non-seeing and seeing, seeing and becoming blind – are one of the characteristic features of John's gospel. The notion of sight is used in different ways. The blind man had received both physical and spiritual sight. The Pharisees possessed natural sight and thought they possessed spiritual sight, but their reaction to Jesus showed they were really blind. It was in this sense that his coming had brought judgment. John notes the total lack of understanding among the Pharisees (40–41). The question *Are we also blind?* underlined their incredulity. Jesus' reply, *If you were blind*, can be understood in two ways. It could mean, 'If you were really conscious of your blindness', *i.e.* in a spiritual sense, for if they were, they would

desire illumination which they clearly did not. In this sense the following words, *you would not be guilty of sin*, would mean they would then have been open to the redemptive mission of Jesus. This is more likely than to suppose that Jesus meant 'If you were really blind you would be guiltless because you would be unable to see'. Jesus was claiming that wilful blindness carried with it guilt; in this case the guilt of rejection of God's messenger. John sees this as an important challenge applicable to his readers, including, of course, ourselves.

10:1–18 Jesus as the shepherd

The illustration of the shepherd in this section is in the form of an allegory in which various aspects are applied in a spiritual manner. It is akin to the synoptic parables but in a more developed form. It is important not to press the details.

1–6 The main point of this section is the means by which true and false shepherds are to be distinguished. The imagery of the *shepherd* is a familiar one in the OT (*cf.* Je. 23; Ezk. 34; Zc. 9). In this section the thought is most strongly influenced by Ezk. 34, where the shepherds of Israel are criticized. There is probably intended a close connection between the theme of ch. 9 and the shepherd illustration, and this is stressed by the words *I tell you the truth* (the double 'truly') of v 1. The contrast is between the bad shepherding of the Pharisees (as seen in their attitude towards the blind man) and the good shepherd. Eastern sheepfolds had only one door, which was either guarded by the shepherd himself when only one flock was there, or by a gatekeeper when several flocks were enclosed. In the latter case the gatekeeper would know the shepherds. Thieves would be forced to enter by other means. It is probable that no difference is intended between a thief and a robber. There is no need to attach any particular interpretation to the gatekeeper (*watchman*; 3). He is merely a detail of the illustration to ensure entry for the shepherd. What is important is the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. The characteristic of a true shepherd is that he not only recognizes his sheep but calls them by name and leads them out to pasture (4). Clearly no such personal relationship could exist between strangers and the sheep (5). The hearers were unable to understand the truth behind the figure of speech.

7–10 The imagery now changes, with Jesus himself seen as the gate. He claimed exclusive right to grant entry. V 8 has presented difficulties if it is supposed that none who came before Jesus were anything other than thieves and robbers, which clearly would make nonsense of the OT. Some MSS omit the words *before me*, but it most likely that they are original. The most probable meaning is that any who came before Jesus and claimed to be the only way in were false; a reference to the many false Messiahs with whom the history of the period abounded. Indeed the previous chapter shows how disastrous were the claims of the Pharisees. In v 9 Jesus' own claim is repeated in a more extended form. He now promises both salvation and sustenance.

These two benefits are then summed up as fulness of life (10). The contrast between the false and the true is here particularly striking. Jesus brings life; the false shepherds bring death. The abundance of the life which Jesus gives is a characteristic theme of John.

11–18 Another contrast is now introduced between the good shepherd and the hired hand. The first quality of the shepherd is willingness to sacrifice himself for the sheep. Having just promised abundant life to others, Jesus spoke of the giving up of his own. On the face of it this would seem to put the sheep immediately at risk, but Jesus went beyond the metaphor to point to a deep spiritual truth. He drew attention to a voluntary act of sacrifice which would benefit the sheep (11). The death of the shepherd is seen as an act on behalf of others. The contrast between this and the act of the hired shepherd who runs away (12) brings out vividly the nature of the sacrifice of Jesus. The lack of care is particularly noted (13). Vs 14–18 form a kind of commentary on the statement of v 11. It begins with an emphasis on the mutual knowledge of the shepherd and the sheep, a knowledge like the mutual knowledge of the Father and the Son (14–15). There can be no closer intimacy than this. It puts the hired hand entirely out of the picture. Such intimacy between the shepherd and the sheep has already been hinted at in vs 3–5.

V 16 introduces another line of thought, this time based on the idea of different folds (*sheep pen*). The other sheep to which Jesus here refers must be Gentiles. But although there are different folds there is only one flock, as there is only one shepherd. This statement witnesses to the variety within the community of God's people, yet its essential unity in Christ himself. *The reason* (17) could refer to the preceding verse with the meaning, 'The Father loves me because I am the good shepherd', or with the following verse (as in the NIV) in which case the Father's love is based on the Son's sacrifice. But it cannot be supposed that the Father's love was dependent on the Son's action, but rather that it was demonstrated through it. The concluding clause in v 17 shows that the sacrifice was not regarded as an end in itself. The resurrection was in mind as the triumphant outcome. The

totally voluntary character of the self-offering and the authority vested in Jesus is stressed.

10:19–21 The effects of this teaching

It is most likely that the word *Jews* here is general, including both the crowds and the leaders. Examples of similar divided reactions are to be found in 7:43 and 9:16. Again we find a demon-possession charge, similar to those in 7:20 and 8:48. It was assumed that there was a close connection between demon-possession and madness. For some the healing of the blind man in ch. 9, as well as the wisdom of Jesus' teaching, ruled out such a theory.

10:22–42 Dialogue at the Feast of Dedication

John links events with feasts where appropriate. This feast was first instituted by Judas Maccabeus to mark the rededication of the temple after its defilement by Antiochus Epiphanes in 164 BC. The mention in v 22 that it was *winter* accounts for the fact that Jesus was walking in *Solomon's Colonnade*. The question in v 24, translated *How long will you keep us in suspense?*, suggests that the Jews here were not entirely hostile, although they were clearly perplexed. Jesus said he had already told them the answer in the sense of the general witness of his words and deeds. It was their lack of belief even in his miracles that he particularly criticized here. Jesus referred again to the shepherd imagery to remind the Jews that they would have heard his voice had they been his true sheep. He then threw special light on his relationship to those sheep (28). The force of the words show that they have already entered into eternal life (the present tense is used). Jesus also made an unmistakable promise concerning their security. Those familiar with the various enemies of an eastern flock of sheep would appreciate the absolute character of that security. It is reinforced by the action of the Father (29). This leads into the important statement in v 30, *I and the Father are one*. So closely are the Father and Son identified in the mission of Jesus that some idea of unity of essence is involved, although with separateness of identity. Such an understanding of these words is in complete agreement with the statement in 1:1.

The opponents decided to avoid further words with a more tangible approach (*i.e.* stoning; 31). Jesus, however, continued with further questions about their motives (32–33) and they replied with charges of blasphemy. But their definition of blasphemy was based on the assumption that Jesus was *a mere man*. But his actions showed that he was more than *a mere man* and the fallacy of their charge is apparent. A similar charge was made by Jesus' opponents in 5:18. The levitical law (Lv. 24:16) prescribed death by stoning as the punishment for blasphemy. When Jesus appealed to the law in v 34 he was using the term to include all three parts of the Jewish Scriptures, since the quotation is from Ps. 82:6. There are various views about whom God is addressing in this psalm: Israel's judges who had failed in their duties; angels who abused their authority over the nations; or Israel as a whole at the giving of the law. Whichever is the right interpretation, the implication here is that those called 'gods' are inferior to the one the Father has sent, the Son of God. How could Jesus the Son be charged with blasphemy? When Jesus declared that the Scripture cannot be broken (35), the word is in the singular and refers primarily to the particular passage being cited, but the principle holds for Scripture as a whole. The words *set apart* in v 36 are frequently used in the OT for the setting apart of a person for a special office (*cf.* a similar use in Jn. 17:19).

The discussion concludes with a statement about works and faith (37–38). The doings of Jesus were so closely linked with the works of the Father that he could invite faith on this account. The works of Jesus are the means by which people may come to understand the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Faith based on works is inferior to faith based on what Jesus has said. The works (or signs) are for a theological purpose – to bring understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Any who have come to understand this intimate relationship will not stumble over the statement of v 30, as Jesus' hearers clearly did. Jesus was affirming that it is impossible to differentiate between the Son and the Father in the performance of the works.

The return of Jesus to the scene of John's baptism may be symbolic. His public ministry was nearing its end. Vs 41–42 repeat the witness of John to Jesus and the superiority of the latter's ministry. A strong contrast is seen between the lack of response in Jerusalem and the many who believed beyond the Jordan.

11:1–57 The death and raising of Lazarus

11:1–44 Jesus the overcomer of death

This account of the raising of Lazarus has been objected to on two grounds: its extraordinary character and the silence of the other gospels. Its extraordinary character is an objection only if it is supposed that miracles do not happen. Moreover, in face of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ it cannot be said that the resurrection of Lazarus is incredible. Although the synoptic gospels do not record this miracle,

Luke contains the story of the raising of the widow's son (Lk. 11:25). Some have suggested that this account is a development from Luke's story of the rich man and Lazarus, but there are few parallels apart from the similar name. There is no sound reason to dispute the historical character of this account.

John makes clear the identity of Lazarus and especially his relation to Mary who anointed Jesus, although he does not relate this incident until later in the gospel (ch. 12). John either assumes that the readers will be familiar with it, or else that they will read the gospel more than once. When John records the sisters' request he uses the word *phileō* for love, but in v 5 the rather stronger word *agapaō* is used. Some scholars have deduced from this and similar evidence that Lazarus was the 'beloved disciple' who wrote the gospel. This would imply that Lazarus was in the upper room with the apostles, but this is highly unlikely. Jesus' words *This sickness will not end in death* (4) mean that the purpose of the sickness was not death but in the glorification of the Son of God. This may be compared with other signs in this gospel (*cf.* 2:11; 9:3). The glory of God is more significant than the sickness.

The report sent to Jesus and the consequent discussion between Jesus and his disciples raises an important theological problem. V 6 states that Jesus delayed for two days. Why? In the context there is a definite connection between that delay and Jesus' love for the Bethany family. The delay cannot, therefore, be considered as a lack of care. The sequel provides the answer, for Jesus intended that the experience of Lazarus should be glorifying to God (4) and a means for leading the disciples to faith (15). The disciples are seen first as fearful for the safety of Jesus if he returned to Judea (7–8). V 8 links with 10:31, showing the close connection between chs 10 and 11. In the light of 10:39 the disciples' apprehensions are understandable. The district where they were at that time was less hostile than Judea. No doubt the disciples were relieved when Jesus delayed his journey and were hoping that he would abandon it altogether. Jesus' reference to the twelve hours of the day does not at first sight seem to answer the objection of v 8. But the connection of thought is that the hours of the day are not affected by external circumstances. They are there to be used. Jesus' hour had not yet come (*i.e.* the twelfth hour) and until God willed that it should come, the only course to adopt was to go about one's mission.

Both the Jews and the Romans divided the hours of daylight into twelve. These hours were, therefore, not all sixty minutes long but varied in length according to the time of the year. The metaphors of light and darkness and the ideas of walking and stumbling were intended to contrast the unerring progress of Jesus with the fumbling efforts of the Jews to stop it (9–10).

At v 11 we meet another instance, so familiar in this gospel, of misunderstanding through taking a metaphorical statement too literally. The idea of death as sleep (12–13) is paralleled in Hellenistic sources and in the OT. That the disciples took the words of Jesus literally is not surprising in view of the fact that the message about Lazarus concerned his illness, not his death. Sleep would have been a hopeful sign in any illness. When Jesus announced he would recover there would not have seemed any necessity in their minds for a raising from death. Following John's explanation how the confusion had arisen (13), Jesus made the clear statement that Lazarus was dead, and the tense of the verb underlines the apparent finality of it. At first sight the statement that Jesus was glad he was not there (14) must have mystified the disciples. But Jesus had a reason to be glad other than the restoration of Lazarus. In line with the purpose of the gospel, John points to the possibility of the development of faith in the disciples. It is almost as if Jesus was concentrating more specifically on the training of the Twelve than on the needs of the two sisters of Lazarus. His mission was bound up with the bringing of the disciples to faith. It must be supposed that Jesus was intending belief of a much fuller kind than the disciples had as yet shown. Although later on attention is drawn to Thomas's doubt, his reaction here did not arise from doubt, but resignation (16).

Vs 17–27 focus on a conversation between Jesus and Martha and are the most theological of the whole narrative. Evidently Jesus was met on the outskirts of Bethany (*cf.* v 30) and was informed that Lazarus had died four days previously (17). The statement here does not contradict the fact that Jesus already knew of Lazarus's death (as v 14 shows). The nearness of Bethany to Jerusalem is mentioned here to account for the presence of so many Jews who had come to comfort the sisters (18–19). Martha's action in going out to meet Jesus agrees with the portrait of her as a person of action in Lk. 10:38–42. Mary sitting at home is the same reflective rather inactive person found in Luke's account. Martha's words in v 21 are identical with those of Mary in v 32, which suggests that the sisters had arrived at this conclusion after discussing the possibilities. There was clearly a strong faith in the power of Jesus to heal. But Martha's faith went further than that as v 22 shows. Martha appears to have been reaching out for a ray of hope in affirming her belief that God would answer any request of Jesus. *Your*

brother will rise again (23) has a double meaning. Martha took it as a conventional assurance of the resurrection at the last day, but Jesus had a further intention. It is hardly surprising that Martha missed the implication of an immediate rising from the dead.

The highlight of the narrative is the 'I am' saying in v 25. Jesus identified himself with both *resurrection* and *life*, which are complementary aspects of the same thing. Nevertheless, it was the purpose of the mission of the resurrected Christ to bring life in the fullest sense. Resurrection comes before life because new life is the product of resurrection. The way to that life is by means of faith, and Jesus challenged Martha on this ground. Jesus was not asking for a confession of faith in himself but in his statement; the emphasis here falls on the content of faith. Martha's response (27) bears a striking similarity to John's statement of purpose (20:31), as if her confession forms the pattern which the whole gospel is intended to support. It is impossible to say how much Martha understood of the Messiahship or Sonship of Jesus. But there is no doubt that to John the content of her statement was of utmost importance. Faith that fell short of so exalted a concept of Christ was inadequate.

Vs 28–37 portray first the reaction of Mary and then that of the Jews who had come to mourn with the sisters. Mary's part in the story can be summarized as follows: Jesus sent Martha for her (28); she immediately responded (29); she fell down at Jesus' feet and repeated the same statement that Martha had made; her tears brought distress to Jesus, who also wept (33–35). Mary is seen here as more emotional than Martha. Even the Jewish mourners add pathos to the scene. They are shown as consoling Mary and following her to the tomb (31); as being touched by the sight of Jesus' tears (36); and as speculating on why Jesus had not prevented this sad happening. The climax is reached in the words *he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled* (33). The meaning of the word translated *deeply moved* implies anger and indignation, even outrage. A problem arises over the cause of this outburst. Some have suggested moral indignation at sin which causes death and at the sorrow which follows from it. But such indignation must have continually been in the mind of Jesus, whereas here there seems to be a specific occasion for such expression. Was this caused by the sympathy of Jesus for the sisters? The force of the verb seems to be too strong for that. Was it because of the unreality of the Jewish expression of grief? This is at least a possibility since any show of hypocrisy may well have aroused his anger. It may well be that something of the pathos of human suffering was bearing on Jesus as he knew that his own cup of suffering was so close. The troubling of his spirit proceeded from within. Perhaps it was his knowledge of the strength of unbelief of some of them, who would oppose him even after witnessing the raising of Lazarus. The question in v 37 links this present sign with that of the blind man in ch. 9. They granted the possibility of keeping a man from dying, but they could not conceive of a raising from the dead.

The account of the miracle is relatively brief and is marked by reserve, but all the details have about them the ring of truth. The words *Did I not tell you?* (40) relate to what Jesus had told the disciples, not Martha. But his words to Martha implied the same intention. Or else the words may be taken as addressing the disciples rather than as a response to Martha. The prayer of Jesus (41–42) is significant because of its emphasis on faith in his mission. The reserve in the account is particularly seen in the simple description of Lazarus coming out of the tomb.

11:45–57 The results of the miracle

John brings out several different reactions to the sign. Some believed (45); some reported the incident to the authorities (46); the Pharisees discussed the matter in the Sanhedrin and decided to plot Jesus' death (47–53); while Jesus himself withdrew towards the wilderness. Even a sign as remarkable as this will not convince those who are determined not to believe. The Sanhedrin's discussion centred on the miraculous signs. They were not questioning that Jesus was performing signs; their fear was that *everyone* (*i.e.* except themselves) would believe in Jesus. The question *What are we accomplishing?* (47) was a rhetorical question to which the answer was 'nothing'. But the deeper fear was of the Romans (48). Their concept of people believing in Jesus was dominated by political considerations. The *place* was either the temple or the city, and the *nation* was added to refer to the administration, some of which was still in Jewish hands. John attaches great importance to the fact that Caiaphas was high priest that year since he mentions it twice (49,51). This was because of the significance of the statement he made in v 50. That it was better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish may seem a counsel of prudence, but John sees it as establishing a principle that one man might substitute for the people, so fundamental to the NT doctrine of atonement. It is all the more noteworthy because it was uttered by the religious representative who helped to put it into effect. John's comment (51) shows that he understands the statement as having implications far beyond Caiaphas's limited understanding, for the principle was to have universal

consequences. John sees the unifying purpose of the death of Christ in gathering together the children of God, a term here used for all who would come to believe in Jesus (52).

The setting for the plotting of the Jews was the pre-Passover activity, which consisted of purification rites. Reports had been passed round about Jesus' signs and the Pharisees' plot. Inevitably speculation followed about Jesus' movements. John mentions the official plot to kill Jesus to set the scene for the anointing and for the entry into Jerusalem.

12:1–50 Close of the public ministry in Jerusalem

12:1–8 The devotion of Mary

The incident of the anointing at Bethany is important because of its connection with the miracle of the raising of Lazarus. The specific time reference (*six days before the Passover*; 1) is significant for John and may be compared with the six days recorded at the commencement of the ministry. The *pint of pure nard* would have been a very expensive amount of ointment, as is clear from Judas's estimate that it amounted to a year's wages. It is probable the ointment was a liquid perfume. Although it was the normal procedure to anoint the head (as recorded in Mt 26:7; Mk. 14:3) it may be significant that John records the anointing of the feet, in view of the feet-washing incident narrated in the next chapter. In the parallel case of anointing in Lk. 7:38, it was also the feet that were anointed. However, in spite of some similarities between the two narratives, there are sufficient differences to make it unlikely that the two incidents are the same. In Luke's record the woman is described as a sinful woman who is deeply penitent, whereas Mary of Bethany is seen as a woman deeply devoted to Jesus, and John's picture of her agrees completely with Luke's portrait of the same person. In both instances the woman wiped the feet of Jesus with her *hair*. It would have been against Jewish convention for a woman to appear in the presence of men with her hair untied, but in Mary's case love was stronger than convention. John's mention of the odour filling the house is a vivid eyewitness detail.

The complaint of Judas against this expensive waste (5) is fully in character with the synoptic account of him. He was stricken not only with the deadly sins of greed and covetousness, but also with dishonesty. John gives here an advance hint of the betrayal to back up his point. The expression *a year's wages* (5) is lit. 300 denarii (days' pay). Jesus' answer, *Leave her alone, it was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial* (7) does not mean that Mary had some of the perfume left, but that what she had done was regarded by Jesus as for his burial. Judas was concerned, not about the perfume remaining but the perfume used. The claim that *you will not always have me* (8) could have been made only by a person who was unique without sounding arrogant.

12:9–11 Reactions to Jesus' presence at Bethany

The curiosity shown by the crowd was in marked contrast to the hostility of the official party. To the former, Lazarus was a draw; to the latter he was a threat. It was the turning of many to faith, the content of which is not mentioned, that determined the chief priests to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus (11).

12:12–19 The entry into Jerusalem

At this period Passover crowds could be immense. The desire of the crowd to greet Jesus was again in marked contrast to the official line. The use of *palm branches* originated at the Feast of Tabernacles, but it had become associated with other feasts by this time (13). The waving of them was a sign of honour for a victorious person. The chant of *Hosanna* comes from Ps. 118:25–26 which was one of the psalms chanted at the ascent towards Jerusalem. The title *King of Israel* shows clearly the Messianic significance of the chant. In vs 14–15 John cites Zc. 9:9 in support of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a young donkey rather than on a war horse. Once again John mentions a case of lack of understanding on the part of the disciples. It was only after the resurrection, here referred to as the glorification of Jesus, that any of them understood.

There appear to be two different crowds mentioned in vs 17–18. One group had seen the miracle of Lazarus's restoration, and the other group had only heard of it. The events caused despair on the part of the Pharisees because they would not so easily be able to carry out their plan. There is despairing exaggeration on their part in claiming *the whole world has gone after him* (see vs 42–43). For a parallel instance of exaggeration *cf.* 11:48.

12:20–26 The quest of the Greeks

These *Greeks* may have been Greek proselytes; if so they would have been able to join the Jews in the temple worship. But it is not certain that they were so committed. At least they were religious seekers since they had come to *worship*. Many Gentiles were attracted to Judaism's ideas because of its higher moral emphasis compared with paganism. These men had probably come from the Decapolis and may even have known Philip who came from nearby Bethsaida.

It may be assumed that their quest to see Jesus was prompted by a desire to learn from him rather than mere curiosity. Maybe John sees them as examples of the 'world' going after Jesus.

It is difficult to imagine how they would have understood the opening words of Jesus. They would hardly have been so well informed as John's readers about the significance of the *hour* (23). The Greeks may have thought in terms of the triumphal entry. But from the context it can be seen that for Jesus his 'hour' was his approaching passion. This is clear from the glorification theme and from the *grain of wheat* illustration. The formula *I tell you the truth* (24) points out the importance of the announcement. The principle in nature that death is essential for further life was applied by Jesus to himself by inference. Wheat reproduces its own kind, and Jesus regarded his passion in the same light. His death would produce life for many. The contrast between loving and hating (25) brings out in sharp relief the choice and consequence involved in personal reaction to Jesus. Loving and hating are here relative terms, standing in opposition to each other.

12:27–36 Attestation and withdrawal

It is at this point that John records Jesus' awareness of the arrival of the *hour* to which his gospel has been leading. There is a clear connection between the soul-trouble of Jesus here (27) and the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as recorded in the synoptic gospels (Mt. 26:38; Mk. 14:34). In answer to the question *What shall I say?* two possibilities are given – a prayer to be saved from the hour, which is natural but unthinkable in the light of the total mission of Jesus, or a prayer that the Father's name would be glorified. The emphasis on the latter is wholly in line with John's use of the glorification theme to describe the triumphant outcome of the mission of Jesus on the cross. So crucial is this that it is underlined by a heavenly voice. The content of the divine message is both past and present – glorification is set out as the essence of the divine programme for Jesus (28) There were three reactions to the heavenly voice. Some merely heard a noise like thunder (29). These were in no position to receive any kind of revelation. Others distinguished some kind of supernatural communication but got no higher than an angelic voice. It was Jesus alone who recognized that the voice was for the sake of others. But because they had not heard the message, Jesus explained for their benefit the meaning of it (31–32).

The *now* in v 31 points more precisely to the commencement of the 'hour'. It is immediately identified as a *time for judgment*. It would seem that the judgment in mind was a general condemnation of the present world order through the cross. For those who come to faith through the cross, judgment has already taken place at the cross through which they will gain deliverance. The double result is seen clearly in the driving out of *the prince of this world* and in the magnetic power of Jesus to draw people to himself. The instrument by which Satan designed the defeat of Jesus became the means for the overthrow of his own power. Note that the word *But* (32) tends to distinguish the uplifting from the driving out, although the two results follow from the same action. We need to ask in what sense the 'drawing' is here intended? The same word occurs in 6:44 of the drawing by the Father of people to Christ. But here it is the Christ to be crucified who acts as a magnet. The statement leaves open the result of the drawing. Some implication of drawing to judgment may be in mind but the predominant feature is a drawing to Christ himself in the more intimate sense of faith.

The reaction of the crowd (34) showed that what they understood by the uplifting was incompatible with the eternal character of the Messiah. The question *Who is this 'Son of Man'?* exercised the minds not only of the hearers in Jesus' day, but of the readers in John's day and has been a matter of debate ever since. Jesus in answer used the same imagery as was used of him in the prologue, *i.e.* that he was the *light* (35,36). Once again, we have the characteristic contrast between *light* and *darkness*. The darkness represents the world without God. Walking in the light means following the light. Jesus spoke of his followers becoming *sons of light*, but this comes only through trust. Such trust will be necessary after the cross as well as before it. That *Jesus left and hid himself from them* (36) suggests that he was light not so much in his presence as in his teaching.

12:37–50 Continuing unbelief

The next paragraph gives John's summary of the effects of the ministry of Jesus upon the people. The signs which he had performed had not led generally to faith, and an OT prophecy from Is. 53:1 is cited in support. Jesus was experiencing the same kind of rejection as Isaiah predicted. The emphasis is on the divine initiative, although in the LXX text the statement has the form 'they closed their own eyes'. John understands the words of Isaiah in the sense that neither the message of God nor the acts of God (*the arm of the Lord*) resulted in faith on the part of the people. Following this quotation from Is. 53, John refers to Is. 6:10, when Isaiah saw the vision of glory in the temple. The perplexing result of unbelief in the prophet's message (40)

becomes most vivid in the fulfilment of that prophecy in the ministry of Jesus, although the words of Isaiah are not here specifically applied to Jesus.

John's comment in v 41 raises difficulties. In what sense did he mean that Isaiah saw Jesus' glory, or God's glory? In view of the *because* in this verse it would seem that John saw a direct connection between Isaiah's message and the mission of Christ. John probably has in mind the Suffering Servant of Isaiah as pointing to Christ himself. What he saw was the glory of the one who was to come. If, on the other hand, Isaiah actually foresaw the glory of God in Jesus, it would presuppose that Jesus had an active role in the messages of the OT prophets. But the former explanation is to be preferred.

John sets over against the statement of v 37 about Jewish unbelief some instances of faith, even among the leaders. Yet he admits that motives of self-interest were an inhibiting factor in their faith. All too often faith has been cramped by fear of people's reaction to it. Being *put out of the synagogue* (42) meant excommunication. In John's day there may have been those who were attempting to follow Jesus in a secret way. These words would rebuke them.

Vs 44–50 contain a statement by Jesus of the importance of personal response to his mission. It is as if Jesus, having withdrawn (36), returned to make one last public announcement before devoting himself specifically to his disciples (chs. 13–17). Alternatively, it is possible to regard the words *Jesus cried out* (44) as containing a general summary of his teaching at the conclusion of his ministry. There are familiar themes here. The need for faith, the close connection between Jesus and the one who sent him (repeated three times here), the idea of Jesus as *light*, and the contrast between light and *darkness* (44–46). The second main theme is judgment (47–48). Although judgment is determined by the word of Jesus, yet his mission was not primarily for this purpose. Its objective was salvation; judgment was but the consequence. The agent of judgment is said to be *that very word which I spoke* (48), which ties up with John's opening identification of Jesus as the Word (1:1). Clearly the basis of authority is of great importance in the matter of judgment, and here that is vested in the perfect agreement of both Father and Son. The theme of *eternal life* mentioned in v 50 repeats what has already been said earlier in the gospel. John concludes the public ministry of Jesus with a statement which stresses the importance of his teaching. This serves as a link with the next section, which concentrates on teaching to the disciples.

13:1 – 17:26 Jesus with his disciples

13:1–38 Jesus' symbolic action of feet-washing and its sequel

The opening words do not necessarily mean that the incident recorded took place on the day before the Passover Feast, although this is generally supposed to be the case. There is much discussion about the relationship between John's account and that of the synoptics with regard to the date of the Last Supper. It would seem that John dates the Passover meal a day earlier than the synoptics. This difference might be due to the use of two different calendars, but this proposal contains many difficulties. It is best to suppose that the Passover took place on Nisan 15 and to maintain that John's account can be interpreted in line with this.

The opening section prepares the way for the understanding of the true significance of the feet-washing. Note the deep awareness on Jesus' part of the arrival of the *hour* (1); the extent of his love for his own people; the activity of the devil against him through Judas (2) and Jesus' certainty of the divine origin and destiny of his work. This is a concise summary of the thrust of the mission. Throughout the ministry there had been antagonism between Jesus and the devil, and it was about to reach its climax. There is here a strong contrast between the Father's love and the devil's evil designs. John comments (3) that Jesus knew that the hour of sorrow was in his Father's hands, in harmony with Jesus' recurrent claim that he was doing the Father's will. The washing that followed was prompted by this realization (4–5). It was clearly intended to be a symbolic act, symbolic both of cleansing and of humble service. The meaning of the totally unexpected act of humility is given in vs 12–17. The removal of the outer garment and the wrapping of a towel round the waist was the dress of menial service and would have been despised by both Jew and Greek alike.

There is no need to suppose that Jesus started with Simon Peter (6). Peter's reactions here are fully in accord with our knowledge of him from other NT accounts. His question, his emphatic refusal and his impetuous and extravagant reversal of attitude are all characteristic of him. Running through the narrative is the disciples' bewilderment which was dispelled only *later* (7). This is all of a piece with earlier instances of misunderstandings. Jesus' answer in v 8 makes no sense unless the act was symbolic. Unless Jesus cleanses people they have no possibility of cleansing. At least Peter grasped this (9).

The words of v 10 suggest that the feet-washing was more than an example. It was a

means by which the disciples could participate in the Lord's humiliation. The first application of the foot-washing to spiritual cleansing is now linked to an example of humble service. The act of atoning was not an act which would need repeating. V 11 shows that although Jesus had included Judas in the ceremonial washing, the latter's betrayal of Jesus would leave him unclean.

In the next paragraph (12–17) Jesus challenged the disciples on the basis of what he had just done. He knew the limitations of their understanding. In answering his own question, Jesus appealed first to his own relationship to them (*Teacher, Lord*) and then to his example (*you also should wash one another's feet*). The authoritative nature of his approach is unmistakable, but the command becomes all the more striking when it is remembered that humility was despised in the ancient world as a sign of weakness. Jesus' command was therefore revolutionary in the sphere of human relationships. Some Christians have performed feet-washing as a ritual act, but it is more likely that Jesus' command was specifically conditioned by the context. If feet washing need not be repeated, there is no let out for the accompanying humility. Jesus regarded lowly service to others as an honourable act. The word *servant* in v 16 translates the Greek word for slave, who had no rights in his master's house. Since the word *messenger* is the Greek word for 'apostle', it is a reminder of the obligations resting on those apostles whom Jesus chose to proclaim his message. These words, with their context of the need for humility, must later have removed any thought of privilege from the office of apostle.

Knowing without doing (17) finds no sanction anywhere in the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus returned to the theme of the betrayal (*cf.* v 11). Judas seems to have been quoted as an example of one who did not do what he knew to be true. Although the betrayal has yet to be narrated, John shows that Jesus was fully aware that the betrayer's heel would be raised against him; it was predicted in Scripture (Ps. 41:9). If the disciples could grasp this they would come to faith in the person of Jesus. The *I am he* of v 19 could well be an allusion to the great name for God in Ex. 3:14. The saying with which this section closes also occurs in Mt. 10:40 at the sending out of the Twelve. It implies here that too much should not be made of the action of one man who did not receive him. Rather the need is emphasized for a positive attitude towards Jesus by the rest of the disciples.

21–30 Yet again the strain of the betrayal comes to the fore. The fact that Jesus was *troubled in spirit* (21) echoed his reaction in 11:33; 12:27, where the same expression of strong distress is mentioned. These reflect the mounting tension at the approach of the passion. The reference to the betrayal in v 21 is more specific than in the earlier hints (*one of you is going to betray me*). The effect on the disciples was more dramatic. It is told even more vividly in the synoptics (*cf.* Mt. 26:22; Mk. 14:19; Lk. 22:23). The various details – the disciples looking at one another, the beloved disciple lying close to Jesus, the beckoning action of Peter, the whispered conversation and Jesus' deliberate and symbolic response – are so vividly told that the account must come first-hand from an eyewitness.

Who was the *disciple whom Jesus loved* (23)? Because of the vivid details, it is likely that the author is here referring to himself. He was deeply conscious of the love which Jesus showed to his disciples. There is no need to think that he is implying that Jesus loved him more than anyone else. It has been thought more likely by some that the writer must be distinguished from John, or that on the basis of 11:3,5 the expression describes Lazarus. But this seems unlikely.

The dipping of the piece of bread and the offering of it to Judas (26), a gesture of honour, must be regarded as a final appeal to the betrayer. John's comment that as soon as Judas took the bread *Satan entered into him* (27) must have been the result of considerable subsequent reflection. Anyone who could act like Judas must have been under satanic influence. Once again John relates an occasion when the disciples' understanding failed them. They could think only in terms of buying food or almsgiving, as an explanation of Jesus' words to Judas (29), for he was the treasurer. John sees a symbolic significance in the fact that *it was night* when Judas departed. There was spiritual darkness in the man's soul.

Vs 31–38 are the prelude to what has become known as the farewell discourses (chs. 14–16). It contains two themes – Jesus' relationship to the disciples and his specific prediction about Peter. Once again Jesus speaks of his coming glorification (31–32). It is as if the glory is seen against the darkness surrounding Judas's departure. These verses show the triumphal way in which Jesus faced the passion. He had no doubt that the hand of God was in it. There is a backward look about v 33. It recalls the words of Jesus to the Jews in 7:33. Jesus clarified his words for the benefit of the disciples. Glorification would involve separation. The new commandment in v 34 is repeated in the teaching of 15:12. Commands to love were already known in the sense of the highest devotion to God, but Jesus' command that the disciples should love one another was new both in its scope and its motivation, which sprang from the love Jesus had for them.

14:1–31 Assurances and commands to the disciples

The words of Jesus in v 1 were uttered against the background of foreboding which had gripped the disciples following the revelation of the betrayal. The comforting words had a particular value in this context, but they have nevertheless provided comfort in many quite different situations. There is some question about how the verbs in the second half of the verse should be understood: 'Trust in God, trust also in me' (both imperative); 'You trust in God' (indicative), 'trust also in me' (imperative); 'You trust in God; you trust also in me' (both indicative). The first fits best into the present context. The reference to *many rooms* in the Father's house (2) is clearly intended to bring encouragement. This is a vivid way of saying there is ample provision in heaven for the disciples of Jesus.

The preparing of the place is through the passion and resurrection of Jesus. *I will come back* (3) seems to be a clear reference to the second coming, although some have interpreted it of Pentecost or even of the visitation of Jesus at the believer's death. Although the disciples' subsequent questionings would not give the impression of much spiritual understanding, nevertheless Jesus' words in v 4 show that they ought to have known the way to the Father. Thomas was too literal in his questioning (5). He did not expect the *way* to be identified with Jesus. Jesus is the way because he is also the *truth* and the *life*. That is to say the second and third words throw light on the first. The way, as personalized in Jesus, was a way of suffering and of triumph through humiliation.

The NIV's *If you really knew me* (7) suggests that the disciples did not know Jesus. It is better to take the words to mean 'You know me; you will know my Father also'. There is profound truth here – knowledge of Jesus leads to knowledge of the Father. Philip's lack of understanding is easy to imagine. He wanted a direct revelation of God as the only satisfactory way (8), but this earned a rebuke from Jesus. None of the disciples had grasped the profound truth that God had made himself known in Jesus. There are two grounds on which Jesus appealed to Philip; on the basis of what he said and on the basis of what he did. At least the disciples should have realized that *the miracles* of Jesus showed that they could only be the works of God (10–11).

The statement of Jesus in v 12 is surprising. The believer would do *greater things than these*. Jesus had made clear that the believer would continue what he had been doing. But greater than that can be understood only in the light of the post-resurrection period during which the gospel would be proclaimed. It is clear that the greater things can be done only because Jesus is going to the Father. The book of Acts is evidence of the fulfilment of this prediction, and the worldwide spread of Christianity today a further sign of these 'greater things'. The close link between the promise and the attitude of prayer needed for its fulfilment is seen in vs 13–14.

The connection between love and obedience is twice stressed in this section (15,21). The obedience is, therefore, no slavish attitude but a willing conformity. It is in fact a revolutionary advance over the Jewish approach to the Mosaic law. Jesus knew that they would need help to fulfil their task, and the promise of the *Counsellor* must be seen in this context. The word in the Greek is *paraklete* which literally means one called alongside to help, and was used of a legal advocate. The title contains the idea of strong encouragement. The fact that *another* Counsellor is promised suggests that the Spirit would do what Jesus himself had done during his ministry, by bringing the words of Jesus to their minds (*cf.* v 26).

The identification of the Paraclete as *the Spirit of Truth* follows from Jesus' own declaration to be the truth (6). The contrast between the world and the disciples is summarized in v 17 and further developed in the next paragraph. The disciples were assured of Jesus' presence even when the world could no longer see him (18–19). The word *orphans* suggests those with no caring support. Again, as in v 3, there is some ambiguity about the coming (*I will come to you*). Although it is possible to see this as a reference to Pentecost (the Spirit is mentioned), it is more natural to understand the coming as the coming of the resurrected Lord. Since the Spirit was given when Jesus was glorified, it is clear that there is a close relation between the two interpretations. This is supported by the reference to life in v 19. A further consequence is the mutual indwelling mentioned in v 20, which can come about only through the work of the Spirit. For the connection between love and obedience, *cf.* v 15. The revelation of the Father is channelled through Christ's love for us (21).

At this point Judas (not Iscariot) saw a problem. Why was Jesus' love not extended to the world? In answer Jesus again drew attention to the love motive (23–24), as if declining to be deflected by Judas's question. But it was nevertheless a true answer, for wherever there are believers, the Father and Son dwell with them, whereas this does not happen with those who refuse to obey the teaching (24). The next statement about the Holy Spirit (26) explains how the disciples would later recall that teaching.

They had heard the teaching while Jesus had been with them; they would be aided in remembering that teaching when Jesus had departed from them. This saying is important for the preservation of the tradition of the teaching of Jesus. Any view of gospel origins which does not take into account the promised aid of the Holy Spirit in preserving and bringing to the mind of the writer what he, the Spirit, willed to be recorded must be considered unsatisfactory. The promise of peace (27) is in line with the opening verse of Jn. 14, but must here be considered as a farewell greeting which would acquire new meaning subsequent to the resurrection (*cf.* Jn 20:19,21,26). There is a strong possessive aspect in this context – Jesus spoke of 'the peace that is mine' (27). It is a peace which has been put to the test. It is fundamentally different from the peace offered by the world. Paul echoes this concept when he refers to 'the peace of God which transcends all understanding' (Phil. 4:7).

The concluding paragraph (28–31) contains a mild rebuke. If the disciples really loved Jesus they would rejoice that his mission was on the point of being accomplished. The words *because I go to my Father* supply the key. Had they realized this they would not have been troubled, for the return to the Father meant the completion of the mission. But why in this context did Jesus say the *Father is greater than I*? It must not be isolated from its context, but seen in the light of Jesus' return to the Father. His present position on earth was less than the Father's glorified position in heaven. It was part of the mission of Jesus to accept an inferior position. But the words must also be understood in the light of the repeated assertions by Jesus that he did the Father's will. This verse should be compared with 10:30. V 29 is closely paralleled in 13:19, where once again the end in view was to encourage the disciples to faith.

The *prince of the world* (30) is seen as the active agent in the coming passion (although *cf.* 12:31 for his predicted defeat). Jesus was deeply conscious of the powerful forces arrayed against him. Yet he knew the devil had *no hold* on him; he could not alter the Father's plans. Part of the aim of the mission of Jesus was to teach the world of his love for the Father (31). It was difficult for the disciples to grasp that this could be accomplished through the cross. The concluding verse (31) is somewhat enigmatic, for it seems to be the end of the discourse in the upper room. It is possible to regard the remainder of the discourse as taking place in the open air, although in 18:1 Jesus is said to have 'left' with his disciples, and it would be necessary to suppose that chs. 15–17 were uttered on the way to the Kidron Valley. Some have supposed that ch. 14 should follow ch. 17, but there is no evidence for such rearrangement. The only other alternative is to suppose that 14:31 implied an intention which was fulfilled some time later. On the whole the first suggestion is fraught with the least difficulties.

15:1–17 The vine allegory

It is not clear from the narrative where Jesus was when he gave this teaching. If 14:31 marks the point of departure from the upper room, it is possible that Jesus and his disciples were passing by a vine which was then used as a spiritual illustration. *I am the vine* (1) is the last of the great 'I am' sayings in John's gospel. Its significance can be appreciated against the background of the OT idea of Israel as a vine or vineyard (Ps. 80:8–16; Is. 5:1–7; Ezk. 15:1–6; 19:10–14). Jesus was the *true vine* in the sense of being genuine as compared with Israel which had not acted in harmony with its calling. Jesus was the reality of which Israel was but the type. The *gardener*, identified as the Father, would be responsible for the caring for the vine. The figure shows how close is the relationship between Jesus and the Father. Since the purpose of the vine is to produce fruit, the focus of attention falls on the branches and what needs to be done to ensure a good crop (2). Pruning is the most important operation for maintaining the fruitfulness of the vine. A completely fruitless branch is not worthy of its place in the vine and has to be removed, whereas weak branches can be strengthened by being pruned. Among the disciples Judas was removed while the others had to undergo 'pruning' experiences before producing fruit after Pentecost. Since Jesus spoke of his word as the means of pruning, he could speak as if the disciples were already pruned (3), although the process was clearly far from complete.

Since branches unattached to the vine have no chance of bearing fruit, it is imperative for the disciples to *remain in me* (4). The main purpose of the vine allegory is to stress the importance of their dependence on him. V 5 underlines the disciples' helplessness apart from Jesus. The 'casting out' of v 6 is the complement of the pruning action in v 2. There is no need here to regard the *fire* as anything more than a vivid detail of the parable. These branches which need to be lopped are destined for the bonfire. But the application of the illustration is found in v 7, where remaining in the vine is closely linked with prayer. Those close enough to the vine will not wish to ask anything not in line with the vine himself. This paragraph ends (8) with a further emphasis on the need for fruitfulness; it is not an end in itself but is meant to bring glory to the Father.

The second paragraph of this section develops some of the themes of the first, especially the close relationship between Jesus and his disciples. First, the Father's love for the Son is the pattern for the Son's love for his disciples (9). Secondly, the Son's obedience to the Father is the pattern for the disciples' obedience to the Son (10). Thirdly, the need to *remain in my love* is repeated three times in vs 9–10. Fourthly, the Son's joy is the basis for the disciples' joy (11). There is a particular poignancy here in view of the approaching passion (but *cf.* Heb. 12:2).

Jesus next focused on the power of love. This must be mutual (12) – again the pattern is Jesus' love for his disciples. That Jesus himself was thinking of his coming passion is seen from the *greater love* saying of vs 13–14, for he was about to lay down his life for his friends, an act of sacrifice which they were not yet capable of appreciating. The change of relationship from servants to friends is significant. The difference does not lie in a change of attitude – both are expected to obey (14) – but in communication. Whereas servants blindly obey, friends are taken into confidence (15). Although the statement *everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you* appears as a completed act, the revelation was not fully understood until after the death and resurrection of Jesus (*cf.* 16:12). The Spirit was to be the interpreter. Lest the disciples should think they had earned special favour, Jesus reminded them that he chose them, not vice versa. But the purpose of the choosing was fruit-bearing, possibly in this context the bringing of others to Christ. The *then* (16) is misleading. The promise that the Father will answer prayer is a result of the choosing and not the consequence of the fruit-bearing. V 17 underlines v 12. It may seem strange to think of love as a command, but this idea is prominent in this passage.

15:18 – 16:33 Further teaching for the disciples

15:18 – 16:3 The hostility of the world. In the previous section Jesus spoke of the power of love. Then he turned his thought to the power of hate, warning his disciples about coming opposition from the world. The *world* is here, as throughout this gospel, the moral order apart from God. There is a deep chasm between the world's love of its own and its hatred of all that Jesus stood for (18–19). The principle at work here is that like attracts like and repels opposites. Jesus pointed out a spiritual reason for the world's hate. Because he had chosen his disciples, they had become suspect in the eyes of the world. In v 20 Jesus reminded the disciples of a statement he had made earlier (*cf.* 13:16). Servants cannot expect better treatment than their master. Previously it related to the need for humility; here it concerns the way the world will treat them. The second 'if' clause (*if they obeyed my teaching*) introduces an unfulfilled condition; therefore the disciples cannot expect the world to obey their teaching. Yet if the meaning is that as some obeyed the teaching of Jesus, so some would respond to the disciples, it would avoid the conclusion that it is impossible for any in the world to respond.

Persecution springs from ignorance (21), a failure to recognize that Jesus was doing the work of the Father. Yet there was *no excuse* (22). The coming of Jesus had thrown on his hearers a moral responsibility. Of course, sin existed before Jesus came, but the sin of failing to recognize the Father's purpose in the Son's mission resulted in guilt. People refused to recognize the fullest revelation of God. V 24 returns to the hate theme and then points out the sin of ignoring the uniqueness of the *miracles* of Jesus. In fact Jesus strongly expressed their rejection in terms of hate (24). Scripture (*cf.* Pss. 25:19; 69:4) is cited in support of this interpretation.

There is a close connection between the further reference to the Holy Spirit and the previous context. Jesus wished to reassure the disciples that the Spirit would testify to them as they would testify to Jesus (26–27). The most important aspect of this statement is that the Spirit *goes out from the Father*. This must be understood in the context of the mission of Jesus rather than as an external 'procession' as understood by the Greek fathers. In the light of v 27 it is clear that this promised function of the Spirit was first and foremost for the disciples. They had been with Jesus and had the responsibility of being eyewitnesses to the historic events. But the promise has a wider application wherever Christian witness is spread.

The coming persecution (16:1–4) is here referred to more specifically. The warning was given in order to prepare the disciples for the coming events. The verb translated *go astray* (1) literally means 'faced with an obstacle', *i.e.* Jewish opposition. Putting out of the synagogue (2) refers to excommunication, something that every devout Jew would dread because it meant being cut off from the cherished heritage. This was a threat that all the early Jewish Christians had to come to terms with. The conviction that persecution of Christians would be regarded as *service to God* is vividly illustrated in the case of Paul (Acts 9:1–2; 26:9–11). The inconsistency of such an attitude is basically ignorance of both the Father and the Son (3). There was in fact a serious flaw in their thinking; they were deluding themselves. The distinction in v 4

between the earlier and later revelation of Jesus about approaching persecution was tied up with the coming of the Spirit. That was the *time* mentioned here.

16:5–15 The work of the Holy Spirit. There appears to be a contradiction between v 5 and 13:36; 14:5, since in the latter cases Peter and Thomas did ask where Jesus was going. But consider the different contexts. Here Jesus was concerned with the completion of his whole mission. The disciples had insufficient insight to enquire about this. Neither Peter nor Thomas had earlier grasped the full significance of their question. The disciples were now plunged into even more perplexity by Jesus' further revelations. Jesus commented that they *were filled with grief* (6). In order to alleviate that grief Jesus assured them that his going away would be beneficial to them. Once again the answer lies in the promised coming of the Spirit: this is the fourth Paraclete saying. There is a close relationship here between Jesus and the Spirit (7). The allusion is primarily to the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost which was subsequent to the passion and resurrection of Jesus. The action of the Spirit will be to *convict*. Since the Greek word is followed by a preposition, meaning 'in regard to' followed by three different subjects, the act of convicting relates to all three (8). The first, *sin*, is less difficult than the other two. The meaning must be that the Spirit convicts the world of its sin, righteousness and judgment. The world has no true understanding of the nature of sin, but the Spirit will show people that they are sinners because of their unbelief in Christ (9). The Spirit also convicts of righteousness (10), an unexpected idea until it is recognized that the world's idea of righteousness is very different from God's. Only when the world is convicted of the hollowness of its own righteousness will it appreciate the righteousness of Christ, which has been vindicated by his exaltation. The third activity of the Spirit is to convict of judgment (11). Again, the world's judgment is wrong, based on the principles of *the prince of this world*, but since the latter is condemned this exposes the world's method of judging. The world is equally condemned with its prince.

The fifth Paraclete saying, which directly follows the fourth, focuses on the Spirit's work in revelation. The *all truth* of v 13 is the total revelation which comes through Jesus Christ. The Spirit guides only in harmony with his own nature, *i.e.* truth. The masculine pronoun is here used which points to the personality of the Spirit as guide. Moreover he speaks not on his own authority but only what he hears, a clear allusion to the close relation between the Spirit and the one who sends him. What are the things that are *yet to come*? It is unlikely that distant future events are in mind. It is preferable to see here an allusion to the fuller revelation which would follow the outpouring of the Spirit. The Spirit's work is to glorify Christ (14), an important understanding of his work which excludes any glorification of the Spirit. This is underlined in v 15 and is abundantly illustrated in this gospel.

16:16–24 Grief transformed to joy. The statement in v 16 carries further the hint already given in 13:33 that there is *a little while* which will have a radical outcome. Since there is a double *little while* here, it is best to think in terms of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The perplexity of the disciples in vs 17–18 is understandable, although it is not clear why no direct question was put to Jesus. When Jesus answered their unspoken confusion (19) he again repeated the *little while*. John's comment about the disciples' lack of understanding reflects close knowledge of their thoughts at this time. In his reply to their perplexity Jesus reminded them again of coming sorrow (20), but this was in order to add the promise of the joy that was to follow. There is a vivid contrast between the world's joy and the disciples' joy. The transformation of grief into joy is illustrated by the metaphor of childbirth. It is a universal law that labour pains are forgotten once the joy of new birth is realized (21). The same principle of sorrow being turned into joy was applied to the disciples (22). The main characteristic of that joy would be its security. The joy would be so lasting that no amount of opposition would be able to destroy it. *In that day* (23) refers to the time when the full implications of the resurrection have dawned upon them, in which case questions such as the meaning of Jesus' enigmatic statements regarding his departure would be unnecessary. There would also be a change in procedure – they would be put to the Father (23). The importance of this reference to prayer is seen by the use of the formula *I tell you the truth*. Prayer becomes more vital after the departure of Jesus. It is seen as the means of ensuring a constant fullness of joy (24). The suggestion is that until now the disciples had not addressed the Father in Jesus' name as they would learn to do after the resurrection.

16:25–33 Confusion transformed to faith. The word translated *speaking figuratively* in v 25 has already been used in 10:6 to describe the illustration of the sheepfold. There is a parallel rather than contradiction between Jesus' speaking in parables to the Galilean crowds and in plain language to the disciples (Mk. 4:33–34) and his using obscure language before the passion and resurrection and the

clearer revelation which would follow. Language has to be tempered according to the capacity of the hearers. The *time* coming refers to Pentecost, after which the Spirit would speak plainly to the disciples. The words in vs 26–27 suggest that Jesus wanted the disciples to know that prayer in his name would be responded to because of the Father's love for them. With such love they would have direct access to the Father. It is remarkable that the disciples' love for Jesus is said to be the basis of the Father's love. The fact is their love for Christ and their faith in him is a striking evidence of God's love for them. The statement here complements the passage in 15:9–16. The mission of Jesus and its consummation is concisely expressed in v 28.

The concluding section in this chapter reveals a further case of inadequate understanding on the part of the disciples. They thought they understood (29), but Jesus again made them aware of their coming failure to support him. Their faith was based on the fact that they thought Jesus was speaking plainly and needed no-one to ask him questions. The basis was quite inadequate, but they reached a right conclusion, *i.e.* that Jesus came from God (30). The words of Jesus in v 31 *You believe at last*! would be better understood as 'now you believe' but a testing time is coming. V 32 must have been a shock after their confident assertion of faith: they were going to desert Jesus. Yet the Father would not desert him. In this way Jesus gently challenged their confession of faith. Yet he looked beyond their desertion to their restoration, to a time when they would gain peace in a hostile world through Christ's victory over it (33).

17:1–26 The prayer of Jesus

17:1–5 Jesus' prayer for himself. The opening words of v 1 make clear that there is a close connection between the prayer and the preceding discourse. The main theme of this part of the prayer is *glory*. The *time* is the time of the passion and resurrection, which is the pathway to glory. The process of glorification is assumed and not stated. Many times in this gospel the cross is linked with glory. But here the chief thrust is the mutual glorification of Father and Son. Earlier in the gospel the authority vested in the Son by the Father is mentioned, and it is repeated here (2). The purpose is said to be the bestowing of eternal life to those given to him. There is a sense here that the outcome of the mission cannot fail because it is in the Father's hands. The implication of eternal life is that God and Christ may be known (3). The title *the only true God* is not found elsewhere in John and is here intended to contrast with the many contemporary false gods. This is the only occasion when Jesus is recorded to have used the title *Jesus Christ*. Vs 4–5 resume the *glory* theme. When Jesus said *I have brought you glory* the question arises whether in his mind he was including the glory which would come through the cross, even though this had not yet happened. Since the appropriate time was very much in his mind, all that that involved must have been included in the present statement. The work was completed only after the passion had occurred. The words *the glory which I had with you before the world began* (5) must point to the pre-existence of the Son and to the reality of the incarnation. Jesus was returning to the Father where he belonged.

17:6–19 Jesus' prayer for his disciples. The first theme of this part of the prayer is Jesus' revelation to the disciples. The words *I have revealed* sum up the whole of Jesus' ministry. The subject of the revelation in the Greek is 'your name', which has been summarized by the NIV as *you*. In view of the repetition of the 'name' in v 12, it is better to retain the notion of name, although recognizing that the name involves the nature. It is most probable that here the name in mind is that of the Father. V 6 suggests that the disciples already belonged to the Father before Jesus chose them. Note the stress on obedience here as a characteristic of those chosen. V 7 is strangely worded (*everything you have given me comes from you*), but it underlines the sovereign purpose of God. A further development is found in v 8, where knowledge leads to faith. Of course, that faith was as yet in its infancy but Jesus looked ahead to its development. When Jesus stated *I am not praying for the world* (9), he based this on the fact that the Father had not given the world to him. This antithesis between his own people and the world is a dominant theme in this gospel. The idea of gift and possession is further stressed in v 10, as is the glory theme carried forward from the opening section of the prayer. It must be admitted that Jesus had received very little glory from the disciples as yet, but again he seems to have been projecting his thought into the future.

Next follows a specific prayer for the protection of the disciples (11–12). Jesus' address to God as *Holy Father* is unique to this context. The prayer for protection *by the power of your name* is an attempt to express the force of the Greek which reads 'in [*en*] your name'. Although the rendering is legitimate, the more natural understanding of *en* here is 'in', in the sense of the disciples being 'in you', *i.e.* in accordance with the character of God.

The prayer for unity sets a high standard, no less than the unity between God and Jesus. It is important to note that true unity is possible only in the name, *i.e.* in alignment with the purpose

of God in Christ. Having prayed to the Father to protect the disciples, Jesus declared that he had protected them (12). It is as if he was handing back the task to God. The exception was Judas, here called *the one doomed to destruction* (lit. 'the son of perdition'). The expression occurs again in 2 Thes. 2:3 of the 'man of lawlessness'. In the Greek there is a play on words between 'lost' (*apōleto*) and 'perdition' (*apōleias*), bringing out the contrast between Judas and the other disciples. The reference to Scripture in v 12 is possibly an allusion to Ps. 41:9.

In the expression *the full measure of my joy*, the possessive 'my' is emphatic. No greater prospect could be conceived. In these verses (13–18) there is another strong contrast between the disciples and the world. There is a further contrast between being *not of the world* (14, 16) and the words *out of the world* (15). The burden of the prayer is for protection from *the evil one*. Twice Jesus mentions *your word* (14, 17) as a powerful agency. First, as the means of stirring up the hatred of the world; secondly, as the means of sanctification. The *word* here sums up the whole message of God in the teaching of Jesus, which the disciples were to proclaim to the world. V 19 speaks of Jesus' dedication to his task in order to attain the sanctification of the disciples. They would derive strength through his example.

17:20–26 Jesus' prayer for the church. So far Jesus had concentrated on those whom he had taught, but he then switched to those who would believe through the disciples' testimony (20). He made no distinction between those who had heard him personally and those who had heard through others. For both the prayer is for unity. Again the pattern for unity is the relationship between the Father and the Son (21), the basis is abiding in the Father and the Son, and the purpose is evangelistic (21, 23). The cycle here is faith leading to unity which leads others to faith. Another aspect of the unity theme is *glory*, a theme which is echoed from the opening words of this prayer. The suggestion is that the glory of Christ engenders unity. Not only must the unity be complete, but it must be shown to the world. If we pause to reflect on the church's record of disunity, we can easily see how far we have fallen short of Jesus' requirements.

Jesus developed the *glory* theme (24), linking it with the Father's love towards him *before the creation of the world*, an echo of the pre-existence theme already met with in v 5. The concluding verses (24–26) follow on from v 24 but also form a fitting climax to the whole prayer. The address to God as *Righteous Father* emphasizes the justness of his view of the world. Again we meet with the strong contrast between the *world* and the disciples. That the *love you have for me may be in them* means that they may reflect the Father's love by their love for Jesus and for others. The prayer thus ends with the request for the indwelling Christ in believers.

18:1 – 21:25 Passion and resurrection narratives

18:1–11 The betrayal

Although there are certain points of contact between John's account and the synoptics, this record of the betrayal is mainly peculiar to John. John alone mentions the name of the valley where the garden was situated, whereas the synoptics tell us the garden was called Gethsemane. Although John does not mention the agony in the garden, he knew about it (*cf.* v 11). His comment that Judas knew the garden because the disciples had often met Jesus there, looks like an eyewitness observation. The aim of the detachment of soldiers (3) would have been to maintain order, to augment the temple police. Jesus did not wait for Judas to single him out, but stepped forward and addressed the soldiers and police (4). The 'I am' in v 5 does not appear to carry the same implications as the earlier sayings, although the fact that the questioners fell back (6) suggests that they were overawed by more than a mere assent of identity. Their staggering was, however, only temporary. There was no ongoing recognition of the extraordinary character of Jesus. The request of Jesus that the disciples should be allowed to go (8) is found only in John. V 9 is seen as a fulfilment of the statement of Jesus in 17:12. It is surprising that Peter was carrying a sword (10). It is possible that it was some kind of dagger. The act of striking the servant's ear was clearly one of desperation, courageous but pointless. John alone mentions the servant's name. The reference to the *cup* (11) seems to be a clear allusion to the experience in Gethsemane recorded by the synoptics (*cf.* Mt. 26:39–40). Peter had not grasped Jesus' determination to follow through his mission.

18:12 – 19:16 The trial

18:12–27 The Jewish trial. The chief interest in this account of the arrest lies in the reference to Caiaphas as *high priest that year* (13) and John's reminder of the earlier incident involving Caiaphas (11:49–51). *Annas*, Caiaphas's father-in-law, had previously held the office of high priest and still exercised considerable influence. The reaction of only two of the disciples is mentioned, *i.e. Simon Peter and another disciple* (15). The latter may well have been John, although his acquaintance with the

high priest is difficult to explain. It was through this disciple that Peter gained access to the courtyard. In John's account the threefold denial of Peter is punctuated by the high priest's questioning of Jesus (19–24). Besides the reference here to the *fire*, it is mentioned elsewhere only in Luke (Lk. 22:56). Only John notes the *cold* (18).

The reply of Jesus (20) to the questioning suggests that the high priest was probing for some secret teaching which Jesus had given to his disciples. V 20 would be in emphatic contrast to such a suggestion. If the high priest wanted evidence, there was ample opportunity for him to seek it from witnesses. This would have been the normal procedure at a properly conducted trial. Indeed, the defence witnesses should have been called first. It may be that Annas did not consider his examination official and thus not bound by legal rules. The blow from the officer's hand was another irregularity. Jesus' comment in v 23 was calmly demanding a fair hearing. But already the intrigues of his opponents were working against that. Some see a difficulty in the reference to the *high priest* (Annas) in v 22 and the further reference in v 24 (Caiaphas). It is likely that Annas retained the title although not the office.

The third person to challenge Peter (25–27) was a relative of the man whose ear he had cut off. The synoptics do not mention this. On the other hand, John omits the oaths and cursings, followed by the bitter tears.

18:28–40 The trial before Pilate . John's account of Jesus before Pilate is more detailed than the account in the synoptic gospels. He brings out the irony of the contrast between the scrupulousness of the Jews over Sabbath keeping and their lack of scrupulousness in manipulating the system to achieve their own purposes. The first episode took place outside the praetorium (the governor's residence). Pilate examined both the accused and the accusers. By remaining outside in the colonnade the Jews avoided ritual uncleanness (28). But they were already defiled in their hearts through their plot to kill Jesus. Pilate's request to know the charges was perfectly reasonable (29), but the accusers' answer was not only evasive but insolent (30). Although the Sanhedrin had power to condemn a man to death, they were required to obtain the governor's sanction (31). John's comment in v 32 implies that since Jesus had predicted death by crucifixion, events were overruled in the fulfilment.

The second incident in this trial, a conversation between Pilate and Jesus, took place inside *the palace* (praetorium). Pilate's question in v 33 should be understood to mean, 'Do you claim to be the king of the Jews?' The notion of kingship was probably in the Sanhedrin's charge in order to implicate the governor. But Jesus made clear that his concept of kingship differed from Pilate's. If his *kingdom* were really a threat to the empire, surely Jesus would have organized a revolt. The words translated *from another place* (36) mean lit. 'not from here'. The sense is clear; Jesus' kingship was of a different order from this world's kingdoms. A spiritual kingdom does not need to be supported by physical force.

There was an element of scorn in Pilate's question (37), but he was not prepared for Jesus' answer, introducing the concept of *truth*. Here is the only direct reference to the birth of Jesus in this gospel. Since the royalty of this world is not generally linked to the idea of truth, Pilate's question *What is truth?* is understandable, although it is clear that he did not ask out of any real desire to know the answer. Nevertheless, he recognized no basis for the serious charge brought against Jesus by his accusers. Pilate's weakness of character is seen from the conflict between his judgment about the innocence of Jesus and his proposition to the Jews in v 39. In the question *Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?*, Pilate purposely used the title *king*, no doubt to show his contempt for the Jews. The word used to describe Barabbas is lit. 'robber', but it had come to include political terrorists, hence the NIV's reference to *rebellion*. A violent man was preferred to the king of truth.

19:1–16 Pilate sentences Jesus. Pilate gave in to the accusers and permitted the flogging and the mockery (1–3). Although he may have thought that the scourging of Jesus would shame the accusers to desist from further demands, the action was totally unjustified. But since he again affirmed the innocence of Jesus after the scourging (4), it would seem that he regarded this as an alternative to crucifixion. The imperfect tense of the verbs in v 3 suggests a succession of mock acts of homage. The belated attempt of Pilate to appeal to the people's pity (5) is another pathetic evidence of his inconsistency and weakness. There is no knowing what significance he himself attached to his statement *'Here is the man!'* (5), but the words were more meaningful than he knew, for in his humiliation Jesus was the representative man, standing in the place of other people. In all the records the cry *'Crucify'* (6) follows Pilate's proposal to release Jesus. His words offering Jesus for them to crucify were ironical, for he knew the Jews had no power to do this. The accusers then introduced a religious charge based on an appeal to their law. Pilate was worried by the reference to *law*, for the Romans' policy was to maintain local customs and laws. Nonetheless, the mysterious claim to be *the Son of God* must have further unsettled him and led him to ask

Where do you come from? (9), a question which Jesus met with silence. The question was irrelevant to the charge. But Jesus' refusal to answer stung Pilate into reminding him of his authority (10). Jesus, however, corrected Pilate's idea of authority. Pilate may have possessed imperial authority, but this did not reach to ultimate destinies (11). Jesus knew that the whole work of redemption did not rest on the despotic action of the Roman governor. The greater guilt lay with Caiaphas.

Pilate's further attempt to release Jesus and his capitulation under the threat of being disloyal to Caesar bring the account of the trial to an end. The reference to *Caesar* concluded the matter for Pilate. His record was such that he could not afford to risk any report of this kind reaching the emperor (*cf.* Lk.13:1). He was more concerned for his own position than he was for justice. *The Stone Pavement* (13) was a paved area in front of the praetorium. That Jesus' condemnation was official is seen from the reference to the *judge's seat.* John mentions in v 14 *the day of Preparation of Passover Week* and the time (*the sixth hour*), since for him the relation of the death of Jesus to the Jewish Passover was significant. Jesus was later seen to be the true Passover lamb. Pilate's question, *Shall I crucify your king?* (15), was intentionally provocative. It drew from the chief priests a confession of loyalty to Caesar which Pilate could not ignore. There is deep irony here – they were claiming more loyalty than the governor himself. But their claim represented the final surrender to Rome of the official representatives of Israel, which acknowledged no overlord but God himself.

19:17–37 The crucifixion

The fact that Jesus was made to bear his own cross shows that he was crucified as a common criminal (17). John does not mention Simon's help in bearing the cross (*cf.* Mt. 27:32; Mk. 15:21; Lk. 23:26), but the transfer must have happened on the way to Golgotha. Although John mentions two others crucified with Jesus (19), he gives no details of the charges against them. On the other hand, John alone relates that it was Pilate who was responsible for the *notice* affixed to the cross. There are slight variations in the different records of the wording on the notice, but all agree that the inscription contained the words *THE KING OF THE JEWS.* This statement caused resentful protests among the chief priests, which brought out the obstinacy of Pilate (21–22). When John refers to the *chief priests of the Jews*, the form of words contrasts strongly with the title used for Jesus.

The garments of the condemned men belonged to the soldiers on duty, hence the action in v 23. John sees a fulfilment of Ps. 22:18, but the synoptic gospels do not mention this. There is some question whether there were three or four women near the cross (25). It seems most reasonable to suppose that there were four and that *his mother's sister* was Salome. A comparison with Mk.15:40 suggests that the mother of James and Joses mentioned there was the wife of Cleopas mentioned here. Jesus' address to his mother and his committing of her to the beloved disciple (26–27) shows his tender consideration for her at the hour of his greatest trial.

The concluding moments of Jesus' earthly life were marked by two further cries, one relating to his own human need (*I am thirsty*; 28), the other to the completing of his task (*It is finished*; 30). Again John notes here a fulfilment of Scripture, possibly an allusion to Ps. 69:21. There has been discussion on the improbability of a *hyssop* stalk being capable of holding a sponge soaked in vinegar (29). One suggestion is that the original word may have been *hysso* ('javelin'), but this is unlikely; there is no textual evidence and the soldiers around the cross would have been unlikely to have had javelins. Mk. 15:36 refers to a 'reed' which would have been more capable of supporting the sponge. The vinegar would have given some strength for the concluding cry.

The desire of the Jews to fulfil their ritual requirements (31) was doubly important to them because it was a Sabbath which fell within the Passover festival. The brutal procedure of the leg-breaking was not part of the punishment of crucifixion but was used to hasten death (32–33). Without it death could be delayed for some time, even days. The piercing of Jesus' side and the flowing out of blood and water (34) had great significance for John (35). Various explanations have been offered regarding the *blood and water*, but John's intention here is to affirm the physical reality of Jesus' death, in contrast to the views held by the Docetists, who claimed that he had only appeared to die. The words *the man who saw it* (35) have been interpreted either as a reference to the author himself or to a third party. It would not be unnatural for an author, who had carefully concealed his identity, to use the third person pronoun when referring to his personal knowledge of the event. His desire to stress the truth of the matter was to lead others to faith. The adjective used here for *true* is the same as is used of the vine in 15:1. The two passages which John cites here to demonstrate the fulfilment of Scripture are most likely from Ex. 12:46 and Zc. 12:10, although some have found traces of Nu. 9:12 and Ps. 34:20 in reference to the first passage.

19:38–42 The burial

John's account of the burial is important mainly for its mention of the part played by Nicodemus. Both he and Joseph of Arimathea were most probably members of the Sanhedrin. As such, Joseph was able to use his rank to gain access to the governor. John notes that Joseph was a secret disciple, but what he did was anything but secret. He became bold enough to request from Pilate the body of Jesus. Normally those condemned for sedition would have been cast into a common grave, but since Pilate granted the request this may suggest that he did not really accept the sedition charge. John, in mentioning Nicodemus (39) for the second time, recalls the earlier interview between this man and Jesus (3:1–15; *cf.* 7:50). In this reference John notes that it was *at night*, as if to draw attention to the fact that Nicodemus had now emerged from the 'night' in his relationship to Jesus. The amount of spices brought was very considerable and speaks highly of Nicodemus's devotion to Jesus. The mention not only of the *new tomb* but also of the *garden* reflects the wealth of Joseph. The significance of the statement, *in which no-one had ever been laid*, is to demonstrate that the body of Jesus did not come into contact with corruption (in possible fulfilment of Ps. 16:10?).

20:1–29 The resurrection

20:1–10 The empty tomb. John is clearly selective over the resurrection incidents he relates. He intends to illustrate some of the spiritual lessons to be learnt from the event. It is not easy to combine the various happenings related by the four evangelists, for John relates that Mary Magdalene was at the tomb alone (1), whereas Matthew and Mark include others. All are however agreed that Mary Magdalene was there. It may be that the others had left Mary at the tomb. What John is concerned with is her encounter with Peter and the beloved disciple and their conclusions over the empty tomb. This then prepares the way for the appearance of Jesus to Mary. By using the plural (2), Mary was including the other women who had gone with her. They had all come to the same conclusion: that someone had stolen the body. Alternatively, she may have been voicing what she assumed would be the opinion of Peter and John. The writer gives a vivid touch to the story as he recalls how *the other disciple* outran Peter but did not enter the tomb (3–5). If that disciple was John, we have here an eyewitness detail. Presumably John outran Peter because he was younger. Both disciples 'saw' *the strips of linen*, but different verbs are used in the Greek in each case. The stronger verb, implying intentness of gaze, is attributed to Peter; although only in the case of John is faith said to have followed (8).

John specially notes the precise position of the clothes in the tomb. The isolated burial cloth used for the head suggests that Jesus left the clothes without disturbing them. John may have had in mind the contrast with the emerging of Lazarus with the grave clothes still wrapped round him. The statement that the other disciple saw and believed (8) must be interpreted against the background of the greater faith that followed the appearance of Jesus to his disciples. It was the dawning of a faith that was to grow. The comment in v 9 is characteristic of this gospel. The reference may be to the whole OT or to a particular passage (Ps. 16:10 or Hos. 6:2 have been suggested). It was only later that the early Christians appreciated the importance of the fulfilment of Scripture in the mission of Jesus.

20:11–18 Jesus appears to Mary. For Mary, faith had not as yet even begun to dawn. She was still convinced that the body had been stolen (13). The *angels* offered her no words of comfort, only of gentle reproof. She should not have been weeping faced with the empty tomb, but she had not advanced beyond the grave-robber theory. In her mind she first thought of the gardener as the culprit (15). It is easy to see how she mistook Jesus for the gardener in view of her tears. When Jesus posed the same question as the angels she blurted out her quest for the body of Jesus. At this point she was looking away from Jesus, but turned towards him immediately she recognized his voice. The use of her name by Jesus shows a tender touch. The word *Rabboni* (16), which John translates for his Gentile readers, is not the highest confession, but it demonstrates a restored relationship.

It is most likely that the verb translated *hold* (17) is to be understood in the sense 'do not continue to grasp hold of me'. This would not be in contradiction with the invitation to Thomas in v 27. Jesus implied that a different relationship would follow the ascension, but was not implying that after that event touching would be permitted, for clearly that would not be intelligible. The fact is that 'touching' is not the basis of ongoing faith. In Thomas's case he was doubting the reality of the resurrection reports. Jesus told Mary to announce 'I am ascending' (rather than *returning*) in the sense of a continuing process which had not yet reached its climax. The distinction between *my* and *your* in this verse is significant because it sets the sonship of Jesus on a different level from the sonship of the disciples. When Mary announced her experience (18) she was more concerned with her meeting with the Lord than with the message about the ascension.

20:19–31 Jesus appears to the disciples. In this section there is a rapid switch of emotion from fear (19) to joy (20). The reason was the declaration of peace from the risen Lord. The words *Peace be with you* are in the form of an ordinary greeting, but on the lips of Jesus they convey the bestowal of his own peace to his disciples as previously promised (14:27; 16:33). There is significance in the showing of the hands and side to the disciples because there could then have been no doubt about the identity of Jesus. Even his risen body carried such proofs. The repetition of the gift of peace gives added emphasis to its importance, especially as it is linked with a specific commission (21). The implication of these words is that the sending was to fulfil nothing less than the commission which Jesus had received from the Father.

What is the relationship between v 22 and the later descent of the Spirit at Pentecost? Some see two distinct givings of the Spirit. But that is unlikely. It is best to regard the present statement as an anticipation of Pentecost, although some preliminary bestowal is implied in the context (the verb used is the ordinary word for 'breathed'). Clearly the disciples did not at this point receive the full endowment, for they were still lacking in the power which came at Pentecost. The giving of the Spirit here was linked with the forgiving of sins (23). The promise was given here to the whole group of disciples (the verb is plural). Although it is not in human power to forgive sins, the preaching of the gospel proclaims such forgiveness. The verbs are in the passive which suggests that it is God who is acting. Those who do not respond to the preaching of the gospel are left in their sins (Gk. 'are retained', which the NIV translates as *not forgiven*). With this promise *cf.* Mt.16:18–19; 18:18–19.

20:24–29 Jesus appears to Thomas. John here mentions both the Aramaic and Greek names of Thomas, although he has referred to this disciple previously. This incident marks the climax, for it records Thomas's unbelief and coming to faith in a way that illuminates the main purpose of the gospel (see vs 30–31). No reason is given for Thomas's absence (24). His emphatic disbelief of the testimony of the other disciples intensified his subsequent perception of the true nature of Jesus (25). He wanted physical evidence which would convince him that the risen Christ was the very Jesus he had known. *A week later* (26) represents the Greek for eight days which brings the chronology to the Sunday after Easter. The locked doors show the disciples' continued fear and Jesus' second assurance of *Peace* is again seen as an antidote.

The precise repetition of Thomas's words must have made a deep impression on the man. The risen Lord was showing sympathy with Thomas's misgivings, but there is no indication that Thomas actually touched the wounds (27). The confession *My Lord and my God* (28) is remarkable for its theological grasp. Whether or not Thomas fully understood his own words, this unmistakably high conception of the divine nature provides a fitting conclusion to John's record of the path of faith. Nevertheless, the weakness of Thomas's confession was that it depended on sight. Jesus needed to make a correction here by mentioning the greater blessedness of those who believe without sight, which applies to all Christian believers ever since the time of Jesus. We depend upon secure evidence (Scripture, the witness of the church through the ages, our own experiences) but not on actually seeing Jesus.

20:30 – 21:25 The epilogue

20:30–31 A statement of purpose. It is clear that the record in the gospel is selective and will lead to a specific kind of faith in Jesus. The combination of Messiahship and divine sonship sums up the view of Jesus presented in this gospel. The linking of faith with life is a succinct summary of the application of the gospel.

21:1–14 Jesus appears to his disciples by the sea . Some scholars have supposed that this chapter is by another author, but there is no MS evidence of the circulation of the gospel without it. Although it appears to be something in the nature of an afterthought, it may have been intended to correspond to the prologue. It is unlikely that another author wrote this section since there are several points of contact in it with the style and language of the previous chapters.

The disciples had left Jerusalem and arrived in Galilee. Only in John is the lake called *the Sea of Tiberias.* We need not look for any symbolic significance in the fact that seven disciples are mentioned in v 2. It is noticeable that the sons of Zebedee are not named, which accords with the belief that one of them, John, was the writer. There are some interesting parallels between this fishing episode and that of Lk. 5:1–11. Here John's observation that they had spent a fruitless night may have some symbolic suggestion (it was still night in a spiritual sense), but it is more likely this is another eyewitness reminiscence. There is, however, a spiritual principle in evidence, for the situation was transformed by the presence of Jesus.

The failure of the disciples to recognize Jesus until after obeying his command to cast the net on the right side of the boat is surprising (4–6). If they had no knowledge of his identity, why did they respond to his command? They were

probably desperate after a fruitless night and were willing to try anything. But the haul was considerable. It was the beloved disciple who first recognized Jesus but did nothing other than tell Peter, who as usual impulsively acted in rushing towards Jesus.

There are vivid eyewitness touches in this account, especially the largeness of the haul of fish, the distance from the shore (8), the charcoal fire with its fish and the command of Jesus to bring more fish (9–10). The precise number of fish (11) is best accounted for by the same reason, that someone was there when they were counted. Nevertheless, many scholars have looked for a subtler reason for the insertion. A mathematical suggestion has been made since 153 = 1+2+3..17, or some symbolic meaning has been found connecting the incident with the feeding of the 5,000 (five loaves plus twelve baskets totals seventeen). But such solutions are far less convincing than the simple acceptance of a precise number of fish. That the meal was an ordinary meal is supported by the call of Jesus to the disciples to join him at breakfast (12). The *third time* (14) relates to the collective appearance to a group of disciples, the other times being related in ch.20.

21:15–25 Jesus communicates with Peter and John. The threefold challenge to Peter looks as if it were designed to parallel his threefold denial (15–19). There are differences in the wording of the three questions. In the third question the verb used for *love* (*phileō*) is the same as that used in all Peter's answers, but it differs from the word used in the first two questions (*agapaō*). However, in the NT these two verbs are often used interchangeably, and it seems, therefore, that no special significance can be attached to the different words used. There are also differences in the three charges to Peter. The first and third use the word *feed*, whereas the second uses the word for tend (*take care*), which involves all the responsibilities of shepherding the sheep. The first is directed towards the *lambs*, whereas the second and third are directed towards the *sheep*. These differences carry no theological significance. Peter's third response (17) was stronger than the first two, no doubt called out by his grief in being asked three times.

The fact that Peter was clearly forgiven by Jesus and given new responsibilities, amounting to apostleship, despite his total denial of his Lord, can given genuine hope to Christians today who feel that they have denied Jesus and that this is unforgiveable. He calls only for our repentance and our love.

The prediction of v 18 was claimed in tradition to have been fulfilled by Peter being crucified upside down. But the tradition itself is not strongly attested and may be an inference from this passage. In saying Peter would glorify God in his death, John sees him as following the example of Jesus (19). Some think that Peter followed Jesus along the shore, but the 'following' implies something more radical than this, nothing short of commitment to his service. Peter's concern for John and the answer of Jesus, virtually telling him to mind his own business, seems to be related to correct a misunderstanding which was circulating at the time of the publication of the gospel. If John, after a long life, was still alive when the gospel was written (on the assumption of his being the author), it was necessary for the rumour that he was not going to die (23) to be rectified.

The additional note in v 24 should be taken as a continuation of the previous verses. It is most natural to take this verse as implying that John was the writer. In this case, the words *We know that his testimony is true* point to the fact that others were prepared to vouch for the identity of the beloved disciple. The concluding verse is intended to emphasize the selective character of the whole gospel, but also to point out that Jesus is much greater than all that has been said of him in his book.

Donald Guthrie

ACTS

Introduction

The book of Acts is in the style of the gospels, a book that primarily narrates events, although teaching is recorded in it as well. On the other hand, the subject is the life and growth of the earliest church, which links it more closely with the letters rather than the gospels. Its location in modern bibles between the gospels and letters is therefore appropriate.

Acts is the next instalment

The first few verses of the book of Acts make reference to the author's 'former book', which is the gospel of Luke. Ancient works were divided into 'books' as well as into 'chapters', and in all likelihood, the two parts were meant to comprise a single work in two parts. We cannot look at general questions about the book of Acts without also considering the gospel of Luke and especially the first four verses of that book, which are probably meant as a 'Preface' for the whole two-volume work.

Concerning the authorship of the work, see the Introduction to Luke's gospel. As indicated there, Paul's travelling companion, Luke (Col. 4:14), seems to the author. In the later chapters of Acts, the story is occasionally related in the first person plural: 'Finding the disciples there, *we* stayed with them seven days' (21:4; see 16:10–17; 20:5 – 21:18; 27:1 – 28:16). The most natural explanation of this is that the book was written by someone who took part in some of the events himself. Objections have been raised to this theory, but they primarily concern questions about the author's historical accuracy. If the author can be shown to present a false picture of Paul, for instance, it may be judged less likely that he actually was a travelling companion of that apostle. In fact, these objections will not stand up to scrutiny.

The date of writing is more difficult to place. Again, as indicated in the Introduction to Luke, there are two major theories: that it was written in the 60s, while Paul was in prison in Rome, or in the 80s, after Paul's death. Several features in the final chapters of Acts suggest the earlier date. For one thing, the book ends with Paul (and the readers) left waiting for the result of the trial in Rome. After the lengthy description of the appeal to Caesar and the journey to that trial, it seems odd that the writer should leave off there, unless he was in fact bringing the reader 'up to date'. There is also a 'vividness' or 'immediacy' in the final chapters of the book which suggests that the author was relying on fresh memories. While these details *suggest* the earlier date, they can easily be explained in other ways as well, and we are forced to conclude that either date is possible.

The description of the book as 'history', and the author therefore as an 'historian', seemed self-evident for centuries until modern students of the Bible recognized that in many senses Acts and all four gospels can just as correctly be classified as 'theology'. Rather than being primarily concerned with an unbiased and simple statement of the facts and events, the authors clearly had a purpose that involved sharing the good news and convincing or teaching their readers. Recently, increased attention has been paid to the skill these authors display in the way that they 'tell the story', and students of the NT have been trying to focus on Acts as a well crafted piece of literature rather than as 'objective and dry history' on the one hand or 'theology' on the other. All these approaches should be affirmed, but in such a way that they support each other rather than cancel each other out. In Luke-Acts, and in the other books that make up the Bible, the theology is based upon the historical truth.

Acts is history

The historical accuracy of the book of Acts has frequently been questioned in modern times, largely on the basis of misinterpretations of the book. At one point in the twentieth century it was commonly believed among scholars that Acts was written much later in the history of the church and that it was a propaganda-like attempt to cover up and smooth over the divisions that had existed between the Petrine Jewish church and the Pauline pro-Gentile church. This, it was argued, was an unpleasant memory that had to be whitewashed over. While there were some problems caused by the inclusion of Gentiles in what began as a movement within Judaism, it is now recognized that Acts deals with these problems in a more straightforward way and that the author was not shy about reporting divisions and difficulties in the church (see *e.g.* 15:36–41).

Another misreading concerns the portrait of Paul found in Acts. We cannot expect the book of Acts to reproduce every aspect of Paul's

thinking as we find it in the letters; an incomplete picture of Paul is only to be expected. But is the picture Luke presents different from the real Paul? The speech in Athens (ch. 17) is commonly used in an attempt to demonstrate how different Luke's picture is from 'reality'. Paul, who in 1 Corinthians writes about his lack of eloquence, is, it is claimed, portrayed as a splendid orator and philosopher in Athens, the city of culture and learning. Furthermore, it is claimed, the speech excuses and almost endorses pagan idol worship, something which the real Paul would never have done. Neither of these points stands up under closer scrutiny. Far from being an ideal and convincing speaker, Paul was ridiculed by the Athenians who heard his message, and Luke records that only a handful of people were convinced – hardly the way to compose a story intended to impress the readers of Acts. In another passage, Paul is pictured as having spoken at such length that even a listener who was in agreement with him fell asleep (20:7–12)! As for the 'sympathetic' attitude towards idol worship in Athens, this aspect of the speech is actually a veiled attack on all idol worship, rather than true agreement. It is consistent with Paul's attitude on arriving in the city (see 17:16 and the commentary on 17:16–34) as well as his attitude as expressed in the letters.

What we might call the 'broad strokes' of Luke's work tend to confirm rather than deny the belief that Acts contains genuine history. So, too, do the fine points. There are many historical details in the book, unnecessary to the main thrusts of the work, the inclusion of which strongly suggests a reliable source of information. For example, geographical details and the use of the appropriate personal names and titles in Acts have come increasingly to light as archaeologists and historians discover and publish more of the ancient evidence. An extensive listing may be found in C. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Mohr, 1989), chs. 4 and 5. Acts is not totally without historical puzzles (see the commentary below on 5:33–39 and the difficulties surrounding ch. 15 and Galatians), but on the whole it comes to us as a reliable source for the times and events it covers.

Acts is theology

Luke may not, however, be an historian in the modern sense of the term. He clearly had strong feelings about his subject, and although this is not unexpected in the ancient idea of what writing history entailed, Luke may properly be called a theologian as well as an historian. His theology is seen through the sweep of the whole of his two volumes. Theological themes that seem especially important in a study of Acts are the work of the church and the universal spread of the offer of salvation. The Holy Spirit plays a particularly important role in Acts, and the author was at pains to show that the church's expansion to the Samaritans and to the Gentiles did not happen at the initiative of the Christians themselves, but was initiated, and then dramatically authorized and approved, by the Holy Spirit.

It is important, however, to recognize that Luke was *not* writing a book *about* the Holy Spirit. He was writing a book about the spread of the gospel, and he describes the Holy Spirit's central role in that work. So, for example, he might have told us a great deal more about what actually happened to the disciples at Pentecost. We would dearly love to have had some statement about the Holy Spirit's indwelling, whether it was permanent, what changes it makes in the lives of believers and so on. But he makes no such statements because this was not the kind of book he was writing. His focus was not primarily upon how the Holy Spirit's coming affects believers but on how the Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem for the festival were reached that day.

Luke knew and expressed theological truths about the Holy Spirit, the role of Jesus, the fulfilment of OT prophecies and the acceptability of the Gentile believers apart from the law. But although he was a theologian, we must not assume that his book is a systematic theology, and we must try to temper our disappointment if he leaves our twentieth-century curiosity unsatisfied. The presence of theological ideas and interests does not mean we cannot trust the history that is present. (For a further discussion of this see I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* [Paternoster Press, 1988].)

Acts is a literary work

The literary nature of Luke-Acts can be seen from its form. While it would be difficult to find two commentators who agree completely about the outline of the book of Acts, all will agree it is effectively, even artistically, structured. Throughout both volumes, the city of Jerusalem functions as a 'touchstone' to which the narrative keeps returning. There is also a clear movement of the whole narrative from the backwaters of the Roman Empire in Galilee to Judea and the provincial capital Caesarea, and from there through Samaria and step by step through the rest of the Roman world until, at the end of Acts, the word has spread all the way to the imperial capital itself, Rome. The progression is an historical one, but Luke has chosen stories, even shifted focus from one set

of characters to another, in order to emphasize this movement.

Luke portrays Paul as having preached to Jews and to Gentiles as well as having encouraged many Christian communities. There is recorded, however, only one major speech in a synagogue (13:14–43), one before a Gentile assembly (17:16–35; the one in 14:14–17, which while similar, does not really compare in scale) and one before a gathering of Christians (20:17–38). There is thus in the book a representative speech before each type of audience.

Such deliberate selection and arrangement forces us to ask the question: what was the author's purpose in writing? Given the shape and complexity of the book, it is unlikely to be as simple as 'he wanted to record what happened'. Luke and Acts are not mere chronological accounts and certainly not complete ones. Too much is left out for such to be Luke's purpose.

Instead, Acts may be seen to be answering a complex question about Christianity. What is Christianity? If it is a Jewish sect, then why are all the Jews apparently against it and so many Gentiles in it? If Christianity is a religious rather than a political matter, why is Jesus called a 'king' and his movement a 'kingdom' – and why does it seem to cause riots and trouble?

Perhaps these questions came about as a direct result of Paul's trial in Rome, which features so prominently in the last third of Acts. The book is probably too long and too much of it only tangentially related for it to be considered as part of the defence's case, but it may have been written to answer questions that arose because of the trial.

This kind of purpose for Luke-Acts makes sense of many features of Acts: the sweep from the church's Jerusalem beginnings to the mission in Rome, the focus on various apostles and the spread of the word as well as the opposition it encountered. It also makes sense of the statement by Luke in the first chapter of the gospel – that he was writing in order to clarify and explain the things that Theophilus had already heard concerning Jesus Christ and the movement that he had caused to come into being.

Acts is for today

Luke was writing with a particular contemporary purpose and that might make us pessimistic about finding *anything* in Acts that is relevant for our own modern situations. A moderate amount of caution is a good thing. Acts is no more a blueprint for how to do missions or how to set up a church than it is for how to act when you are threatened with shipwreck. Acts is relevant for people in all situations and cultures insofar as it provides godly examples and the assurance that however things look, God is at work behind the scenes, as he has been with his people in the past. We may learn a great deal from Acts about how to live our own lives in a Christian way, but we should do so by taking the book and its author's intentions seriously – and learning to appreciate the story it tells for its own sake in the first instance.

Acts does not mean to teach us that every Christian should expect to do the things that the heroes of the book do. Even Paul, whose power to heal within the scope of Acts seems so great and unstoppable (see 19:11–12), had to learn that such 'power' was not something that he 'had' or could direct or control at all (see 2 Cor. 12:1–10). But Acts does tell us not to despise such power. God can use and has used believers to accomplish amazing things.

Acts also shows us not to think that because we are Christians we can escape such human limitations as disagreements within our fellowship (see *e.g.* 15:2 and the conference that followed, or the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark in 15:37–41). Nor are we completely immune from outright sin and hypocrisy (see Ananias and Sapphira; Acts 5:1–11) and the very real threat of judgment.

Acts teaches us about ourselves and our situations by examples of other people in other situations. It is not a book that only focuses on the ideal lives and communities; it is very 'realistic' in that sense. But the type of realism that it encourages us to is a reality in which so-called supernatural events are, while not everyday events, not at all unlikely either, especially where God's people are on the frontiers of the work to which they are called.

Further reading

J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (IVP, 1990).

D. Gooding, *True to the Faith, A Fresh Approach to the Acts of the Apostles* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1990).

I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1980).

F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1988).

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Commentary

1:1–11 Introduction

The book we know as the Acts of the Apostles is actually the second volume of a larger work which we might call 'Luke-Acts'. In this preface to the second scroll, the author briefly re-tells the stories of the ascension and the events leading up to it as found in the former book, including some fresh details in this retelling.

1:1–3 Prologue

1 By *my former book* the author undoubtedly means the gospel of Luke. For details about *Theophilus* see the commentary on Lk. 1:3. If volume 1 is about *all that Jesus began to do and teach*, the implication is that in this book we will learn about what he continued to do and teach, through the work of his church and the Holy Spirit.

2 Luke almost always reserves the term *apostles* for the Twelve, and that is probably the use here, perhaps reflected in the speech of the angels to what appears to be the same group of people in 1:11. 3 Although the verse speaks only about a period *after his suffering*, it is clear later in the sentence, which speaks about proof *that he was alive*, that the author means suffering and death. The *period of forty days* is not specifically mentioned in the account in Luke, but it is certainly consistent with the events portrayed there. Jesus spoke about the *kingdom of God*, even though his disciples still seemed to be thinking in terms of the kingdom of Israel (v 6; *cf.* Lk. 24:21).

1:4–5 The gift of the Holy Spirit

4 One of the 'convincing proofs' mentioned in v 3 may have been the very fact that Jesus *was eating*. Even in Luke's time, there appear to have been some who denied that Jesus physically rose from the dead (in some 'spiritual sense' he 'lived on'). Eyewitnesses could answer the

dispute: hallucinations, visions and even disembodied spirits do not eat (*cf.* Lk. 24:42–43; Acts 10:41). The stress in this particular passage is, however, on the closeness of fellowship, *eating with them*, more than on the physical process of eating.

The gift my Father promised is, as the following verse makes clear, the Holy Spirit. The disciples would have heard Jesus speak of the Spirit throughout his ministry, but the teaching recorded in Jn. 15:26 – 16:16 was especially relevant to their situation. The command is recorded with different words in Lk. 24:49.

5 The comparison with John's water baptism is not meant to indicate two separate events in the lives of believers: water-baptism then spirit-baptism. The disciples were told to wait (a few days) because the Holy Spirit was to come only after Jesus went away. Their need to wait is no more binding on later Christians than the command to receive the Spirit in Jerusalem. Rather, the reason for this contrast is to compare a 'sign' with 'power'. John's baptism with water was only a sign (as John himself understood; Lk. 3:16) of 'power', the baptism with the Holy Spirit, which was to come. Exactly how this 'power' should be used is the subject of the disciples' misunderstanding in the next incident Luke records.

1:6–11 The ascension and the work to be done on earth

6 The disciples expected Jesus to *restore the kingdom to Israel* because prophecy predicted it. Some Christians today are still expecting such an event. 7 Jesus' reply, that *it is not for you to know the times or dates* might imply that such an expectation is correct, even if the timing is not for us to know. Discipleship is not about knowing the times and dates, but it is about being ready. In Acts, this means receiving the Holy Spirit's *power* and being *witnesses* (8). To some extent, the phrase *in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth* well represents the events chronicled in the rest of the book.

9 Just as the phrase *ends of the earth* is picture-language (since the globe does not really have 'ends'), so the description of Jesus moving in an upward direction is merely an attempt to fit into earthly words a type of motion that is outside the limits of human experience and language. He was leaving the earth and the only way to leave the earth is upwards! After all, we do not really imagine that heaven is 'up', just outside the atmosphere, as if we could get there in a spaceship. We should not imagine that the *cloud* that *hid him from their sight* was an ordinary cloud in the sky either. This is the same sort of cloud that we find at the transfiguration (Lk. 9:34–35; *cf.* Ex. 16:10; Ps. 104:3), the cloud that is the revelation of the divine glory.

Acts tells us there was a visible event, however, and looking up was a natural reaction to this event since *they were looking intently up into the sky as he was going* (10). Presumably, if Jesus had simply vanished, the disciples would have been left 'looking around' rather than up. The *two men dressed in white* are without a doubt angels (see the similar description in Lk. 24:4, 23). 11 Their message is in line with that of Jesus in vs 7–8: discipleship is not about *looking . . . into the sky*. The return of Jesus, just like the restoration of the kingdom, is certain, as the repeated *same* is probably meant to emphasize. The return was not theirs to worry about. They had other things to do, as Jesus had already outlined. John Stott writes: 'There was something fundamentally anomalous about their gazing up into the sky when they had been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth . . . Their calling was to be witnesses not stargazers' (*The Message of Acts* [IVP, 1990], p. 51).

1:12 – 8:3 Jerusalem and temple

1:12–26 Completion of the Twelve in Jerusalem

12 The phrase *a Sabbath day's walk* is an expression of distance rather than specifying the day on which the event took place. Jews, of course, wanted to be careful not to do any work on the Sabbath, and walking a long distance was work. The expression thus means 'a short distance on foot' and probably amounted to less than a mile.

13 The list of disciples is identical to the one in Lk. 6:13–16, with the obvious omission of Judas Iscariot. 14 The presence of *the women* and the Lord's family are important to Luke. The Eleven and the women had been followers in the gospel accounts, but Jesus' family had been less enthusiastic (Mk. 3:21–35; Lk. 8:1–21; see also Lk. 23:49; 24:10). Jesus' *brothers* included James, who, according to Paul, had seen the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7) and who would become an important figure in the church during the period covered by Acts.

15 The number *a hundred and twenty* here is more than just a round number. This is the smallest number in Jewish tradition for a population that could have its own 'council'. There was a tradition that each judge should rule or represent at least ten members. It may be, therefore, that Luke is suggesting the young church was already a community in its own right and that a twelfth 'leader' was required.

18–19 The NIV, along with many other translations, puts these verses in brackets to indicate that they should probably not be thought of as part of Peter's speech but rather as an

explanatory comment by Luke. The story given agrees in the main with the only gospel record of the matter (Mt. 27:3–5). The details that seem at variance can be reconciled if we read the two accounts together thus: after refusing the money the priests bought the field in Judas' name and on his behalf, and it was there that he hanged himself. His body was no longer hanging by the time it was discovered, but had fallen from its suspended position to the ground where it had split open.

20–22 The speech itself continues with two quotations from Ps. 69:25 and 109:8. The use of the Scriptures, however, was only one of the reasons for replacing Judas. Even apart from the speculation about v 15 above, the reason for having Twelve in the first place almost certainly was because there were twelve tribes of Israel (see for instance Lk. 22:30), and the *witness* to all Israel is a very important theme in these early chapters of Acts.

The qualification here given of accompanying the disciples *the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us* makes sense if the task was that of being a witness. Paul himself regarded his own witness as being in some respects inferior because he had joined the movement relatively late (1 Cor. 15:5–8). It is interesting that Peter here reckons *the whole time* as beginning with *John's baptism* since it wasn't until after that time that Jesus began to call the disciples to himself (on John the Baptist see also Acts 10:37; 13:16–25; 18:24 – 19:10).

26 The use of 'chance' to make such a major decision strikes us as odd, but there are two important things to be kept in mind. First, this is before the giving of the Holy Spirit, and for these Jewish people Pr. 16:33 would seem to endorse such a way of prayerfully submitting the decision-making process to God's will. Secondly, the casting of lots came only after the disciples had done their best to specify the qualifications and identify the most suitable candidates. In other words, the lot was not used to decide between the 120 but between two 'short-listed' candidates with equal qualifications. The church also made some very important decisions by calling together the parties concerned and having a meeting (see ch. 15). Matthias is never heard of again.

2:1–47 The Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem

1 The *day of Pentecost* was a major festival in the Jewish religion, also known as the Feast of Weeks. The holiday celebrated the wheat harvest, and in some Jewish tradition was also associated with the giving of the law and the renewal of the covenant. Jerusalem was crowded with Jewish visitors from abroad (see 2:5). Some of these were about to celebrate a new kind of harvest and covenant renewal!

2 The words for *wind* and 'spirit' are the same in Greek (as they are in Hebrew), the two concepts are so closely identified (*cf.* Jn. 3:8). **3** On Mt Sinai (Ex. 19:18), the fire on the mountain represented the presence of God there, perhaps the *tongues of fire* here are similarly representing that presence for the disciples *were filled with the Holy Spirit.*

4–13 The *other tongues* in which the disciples spoke *as the Spirit enabled them* were probably human languages as the natural reading of vs 6, 8 and 11 suggests. It is amazing how in a crowded room buzzing with conversation in foreign languages one can pick out and lock in on someone speaking in one's own language. Although 1 Corinthians seems to deal primarily with a church whose members spoke in non-human language (chs. 12 and 14), Paul knew both kinds (1 Cor. 13:1). Even when the gift is expressed in human languages, what is said is praise rather than evangelism (*declaring the wonders of God*; 11). Peter switched to ordinary speech for his evangelistic message. 14:8–20 relates a story in which the evangelists had to overcome a barrier of human language without divine intervention.

It is frequently said that this passage is a reversal of the story of Babel, but it is even more remarkable than that. Judaism already constituted a reversal of Babel. The fact that God-fearing people from every corner of the earth were gathered together in one place to worship during the festival was already a reversal of that scattering and confusion. What was new, however, about the Christian reversal was that people did not need to come back to some centre, but rather the word would go out to every corner of the earth. Even more significant than the languages, of course, is the gift of the Holy Spirit. At its core, Pentecost, like the incarnation itself, is about God coming to us in our fallen condition more than it is about us finally getting to God. Babel and Eden are not 'undone' as much as they are redeemed and their negative effects nullified.

14 This is the first of many great speeches in Acts. These are unlikely to be word-for-word records of what was said at the time, however. They are clearly too short for the occasions, and, as far as we can tell, the words used and the patterns of writing are usually those of the author himself. Rather, these should be regarded as Luke's own summaries of what was said. In this regard, Luke's practice may not have been too different from the secular historians of his era, for whom speeches formed an important part of their work. Their aim seems to have been to provide a summary that preserved the

characteristics of the occasion and of the speaker. Luke seems to have followed this pattern in this speech, which arguably preserves features of what Peter said on just such an occasion, and in the other speeches that he records. (For further discussion see I. H. Marshall, *Acts* [IVP, 1980], pp. 39–42).

15–21 Even though the languages spoken in the Spirit were understood by the crowd, Peter did not regard this as an evangelistic tool, but rather as a sign that needed to be explained (*cf.* 1 Cor. 14:22–23). Peter's citation of *the prophet Joel* is from Joel 2:28–32. The period described is of *the last days* (plural), beginning with the pouring out of the Spirit (*i.e.* at Pentecost) and stretching for an indeterminate length of time until *the day of the Lord* (singular), which we might call judgment day. Vs 17 and 18 are a unit, as is shown by the 'bookend' phrases *I will pour out my Spirit*, the menion of *last/those days* and the phrase *will prophesy*. The *wonders in the heavens above and signs in the earth below* thus belong, in this speech, to the *day of the Lord* still to come. Peter lived, as we should also live, as if that *day* and judgment were just about to happen.

22–24 Peter then turned to the recent past, to the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. By the term *God*, Peter and his audience meant the person whom we call 'the Father'. Although the disciples knew Jesus was to be worshipped, and applied OT words for the deity to Jesus (as probably in v 21 above; *cf.* 2:36, 38–39), the doctrine of the Trinity had not yet been put into words. Thus when Peter said that *Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God* he did not mean to deny that he was more than a mere mortal. Rather Peter was showing an understanding of his audience, intending to show them that Jesus was rather more than an ordinary human being. He began, however, with facts that his audience would have been unable to deny: the *miracles, wonders and signs* which *you yourselves know* were credited not to Jesus' own power, but to God *through him.*

The objection to this interpretation of Jesus' actions is obvious: 'Jesus could not have been God's agent, because he failed and God's plans cannot fail.' Peter's answer was that it was God's plan to put Jesus at the people's disposal. God's verdict is not seen in the cross, but in the resurrection. Vs 23–24 have the form, 'you killed, but God raised'; God's verdict was to vindicate Jesus.

The phrase *you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death* would seem to imply that the ordinary Jews of Jerusalem were involved but not wicked the way that some others were. It is not clear whether *wicked men* refers to the Jewish leaders or the Romans, but the Jewish audience would have probably understood it to mean the Romans.

Peter did not mean that Jesus didn't feel pain during the crucifixion by saying that God freed him *from the agony of death.* Instead, Jews commonly thought that the state of being dead, separation into a ghost and a corpse, was itself an agony. We see a reflection of this in 2 Corinthians, where Paul argues against the interpretation of death as being 'unclothed' (2 Cor. 5:1–8).

25–31 Peter illustrated his understanding of Jesus' resurrection with an argument based on a passage from Ps. 16:8–11. The crucial part of the quotation is v 27, *you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.* The question that Peter asked was, 'Who is this Holy One?' The audience's answer was likely to be, 'David himself', to which Peter's objection is without answer: *David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.* Rather, Peter argued, David, who *was a prophet*, was speaking about the Messiah who would not remain in a tomb but would be resurrected.

32–35 In this section of the speech, Peter returned to the present phenomenon which had drawn the crowd in the first place. It was not a crowd of drunks, but a crowd of witnesses to the fact that God had *raised this Jesus to life.* Jesus, therefore, was the Messiah predicted by David. A further quotation from the Psalms (110:1) clarifies the current exalted and ascended state of the Messiah.

36 The speech so far is summarized with this verse. The emphasis in the passage is probably that despite appearances or despite their actions, God's view of the matter was very different. To them, Jesus was a criminal, but he was the same person whom God had made *Lord and Christ*, just as the angels had announced in Lk. 2:11.

37–40 The final part of the speech responding to the reaction of the crowd, spelt out how the audience was meant to apply what they had heard. V 38 deliberately echoes v 21: everyone who calls upon/the name of the Lord/will be saved. The 'name of the Lord', however, is now *the name of Jesus Christ.* The 'call upon' has been expanded into two parts: *repent* and *be baptised*, and similarly 'will be saved' now becomes *for the forgiveness of sins* and *receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

41–43 The result of the preaching was truly amazing. The church grew from 120 to over 3,000. The apostles continued their *teaching* and also did *many wonders and miraculous signs.* The new converts didn't merely add Christianity to their already busy lives, but *devoted themselves* to their Christian experience. V 42 is a compact description of Christian discipleship.

44–47 These verses describe the Christian community in the days after the Pentecost speech. The believers displayed a generous attitude toward possessions (see also on 4:32 – 5:11 below). But there was no blind rush to 'rid themselves of all their possessions', as if personal property was in itself evil, instead *they gave* as there was the *need.* The believers' financial problems were not automatically and miraculously solved by virtue of becoming Christians. Even in this 'golden age' of the church, there were needy people (although because of the sharing they didn't generally remain needy; 4:34; 6:1).

The believers continued *every day* to *meet together in the temple courts*, as well as in *their homes*, where they shared table fellowship. This was a short-lived period of peace, when they could apparently meet in the temple without fear and even enjoyed *the favour of all the people.* This was about to change for ever. In the next three chapters, Luke presents both outside opposition and internal disharmony.

3:1 – 4:31 The incident at the temple gate

The church began to find itself opposed by the leaders of Jerusalem, just as their Lord had been. In this unusually long narrative, one thing seems inevitably to lead to another. A happy and innocent beginning of a healing understandably attracted a crowd to whom Peter felt obliged to explain the event, and he did so evangelistically. This teaching happened in the temple and went against the views of the temple leaders, not only on the subject of Jesus but on matters such as resurrection. So the authorities took a dim view of the proceedings and had Peter and John brought before some very intimidating judges, who found themselves, for the time being, uncertain how to act. Even though the apostles were released, it is clear from the prayer for courage that closes the episode that the whole church took this opposition most seriously.

1 The Christians continued to go to the temple and one day Peter and John came across a cripple at his regular begging-station at *the temple gate called Beautiful.* This was a clever place to beg, since people on their way to worship were less likely to ignore him. Even so, in such a busy place, the request for money must have become something of an empty repetition. **4–5** This is perhaps why the narrator records that Peter and John *looked straight at him.* There was a real meeting that took place. Marshall writes: 'What could have been simply the occasion of mechanical charity is turned into a personal encounter' (*Acts* [IVP, 1980], p.88). As a result the expectations of the crippled man were raised, but not high enough.

6 Having just read (2:44–47) about how the Christians sold their possessions to support any among them who had need, the readers' expectations, too, are raised. But instead of illustrating how generous the Christians were with their money, here Luke shows us the reason why material goods were regarded so casually. The Christians had something even better to share. What Peter had (and gave) was the wholeness that comes through faith *in the name*, or authority, *of Jesus Christ.* **7** Continuing with the theme of personal interaction, Luke tells us that Peter took the man *by the right hand* and *helped him up*, and in that action *instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.*

8 The picture of this man, who earlier had had to be carried into position, now not only *walking* but also *jumping* in his praise of God is all the more striking for the undignified spectacle this must have been in the temple courts. **9–10** One can well imagine people's surprise and amazement as they began to recognize him.

11 *Solomon's Colonnade* was a portico that stretched along the east side of the temple's outer court. John's gospel tells us that Jesus himself taught there (Jn. 10:23), and it seems to have been a favourite meeting place for the Christians (*cf.* Acts 5:12). The beggar *held on to Peter and John*, and all the people *came running to them*, as if the disciples themselves were 'holy men' or healers.

12–16 On Luke's use of speeches in general, see the remarks on 2:14. Peter began his address to the people by deliberately turning their attention away from himself, denying any special *power or godliness.* Instead he focused their attention on the God that they worshipped already and God's approval and resurrection of Jesus. In v 16 Peter seems to imply that human beings cannot even rightfully claim faith as their own. Rather he is speaking of *Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him.*

As in the Pentecost speech above, much is made in vs 13–15 of the people's well-known rejection of Jesus, in stark contrast to God's vindication of him, of which the disciples *are witnesses*, just as the people present are witnesses of the power in the healing. Again, the emphasis in a sentence like *you killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead* is on the phrase *but God*, indicating God's acceptance of the rejected one (see esp. 4:11 below).

17–21 Peter did not say what terrible people they were for rejecting Jesus, but rather *I know that you acted in ignorance.* The call in v 19 to *repent, then, and turn to God* is for their *sins* in general. Their ignorance did not place them beyond the need of repentance, but neither did their direct involvement in Jesus' condemnation place them beyond redemption's reach.

Many modern Jews look forward to the coming of the Messiah as a time of peace and prosperity for the whole earth. If, as seems likely, many first-century Jews thought similarly, then it would have been important for Peter to clarify that although the Jewish Messiah had come, the Messianic age in its fullness was still to come when he returns (20). His audience's participation in these *times of refreshing* (19) when *the time comes for God to restore everything* (21) hinged upon their attitude towards Jesus.

22–26 Peter spoke throughout this speech of 'the fathers' (13) and 'the prophets' (18, 21, 24, 25). He next quoted from Moses (Dt. 18: 15, 18–19) to make clear the danger of continuing to reject God's chosen one (23).

The speech ends with Peter making it clear that he regarded the Jews as in a unique position. He told them that they were *heirs of the prophets and of the covenant*, that Jesus was sent *first to you to bless you*, and that it is through them that *all peoples on earth will be blessed* (see Gn. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18).

4:1–4 Acts is the story of the triumphant spread of the good news from the Jews to the rest of the world, but we must not forget that it begins with the Jews, whom God prepared through their history and through the Scriptures. Although the gospel reaches some interesting places and people later in the book, we never again see the mass positive response to the message that we see in 2:41 and here in 4:4, when the numbers grew to *about five thousand.*

The response, however, was not uniformly positive. Some of the people in positions of authority in the temple were provoked not by the fact that these were former disciples of Jesus but by the fact that the apostles were *teaching the people* and *proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.* Imagine how you might feel if the members of some sect began to use your church building to preach their own doctrines. The fact that these Galileans were teaching at all might have been tolerated, but the Sadducean temple authorities would have been unhappy about anyone proclaiming resurrection, which they did not believe the Scriptures taught (*cf.* Lk. 20:27).

5–12 After having spent the night in prison, Peter and John were brought before the national Jewish leaders. The question that they faced, *By what power or what name did you do this?* could well be paraphrased, 'On whose authority did you do this?' and amounts essentially to 'Who do you think you are?' The authorities' reaction in v 13 below indicates that it was not a question to which they expected a substantial answer; in terms of the temple and Jewish religion, there was no higher earthly authority than the high priest, who was present.

The question asked probably referred to the teaching and proclaiming that formed the problem in 4:2 above. The vagueness of the wording, however, allowed Peter to backtrack to the *act of kindness*, the healing. The whole episode, after all, came about only because Peter explained the healing to the enthusiastic crowd.

In vs 10–11 we have once again the reversal theme found in 2:23–24 and 3:15. As in those passages, the emphasis is not upon the wickedness of people's actions but rather on the fact that the negative decision was overruled and reversed by the ultimate authority, God.

The answer to the question comes in v 12 – Peter claimed a higher authority than that of the high priest: *there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*

13–17 *The courage of Peter and John* in such circumstances is astonishing. It is perhaps the more so for us who know, as the council did not, that when some of these same men accused Jesus a few weeks before this, Peter timidly cowered outside. Far from facing up to the high priest then, he had made frightened alibis to servants (Lk. 22:54–62).

In the Sanhedrin's conference together, the question of the truth of the apostles' claims was not discussed, only how they might *stop this thing from spreading.*

18–22 Ordered *not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus*, Peter and John bravely replied *Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.* To claim to know God's will better than the high priest and ruling council was no small claim. What is stressed here, as throughout the story, is the inevitability: *We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*

That *the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old* emphasizes the radical nature of the cure (since he had been cripped from birth; 3:2) and also clarifies how well and widely known he must have been.

23–31 When the two returned to their people and reported what had occurred, the first reaction of the church was to raise *their voices together in prayer to God.* But it was not primarily a prayer of triumph, celebrating the release of the disciples, but a prayer for courage and strength against expected, prophetically foretold, opposition. The quotation is once again from Psalms (2:1–2). When the believers prayed about the Jewish king Herod meeting with the Roman ruler Pilate, and the Gentiles conspiring with Israel (27), it is clear that they felt that everyone was against them as everyone had been against Jesus. Oddly, however, they didn't pray for the defeat of the evil forces, or for their own safety, but rather for boldness and for the hand of God to heal and perform signs

and wonders. Their answer came with the awesome shaking of their meeting place and the granting of their request to speak boldly.

4:32 – 5:11 Hypocrisy in the early church

Having described how the church began to come under fire from outside, Luke now tells that all was not perfect inside the community either. This section begins with a brief summary very like 2:43–47, but this time leading into a less savoury incident inside the Christian community, the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

32 As in ch. 2, what is important here is not to whom the possessions actually belonged, but rather the believers' attitude toward them. Once again it is clear that the selling of goods had to do with *need* and was not a formal condition of membership (34).

36–37 A particular example of this attitude was displayed by *Barnabas* from Cyprus, who will become a very important character later in the book.

5:1 The unfortunate second example of selling possessions was shown by the husband and wife Ananias and Sapphira. **4** That their sin was not the keeping of money, but the lie, is clear from Peter's questions. **8** It also seems from Sapphira's behaviour that the lie was something that they had planned out together ahead of time.

11 The severity of the couple's judgment is as disturbing to us as it was to their contemporaries (5). The judgment does not appear to have been Peter's or the church's doing in the first instance, but is rather God's judgment (When Peter pronounced a judgment later, the offer of repentence was held out; see 8:20–22.) It is crucial to note that the point is not that God demands our financial accounts be in order, but rather that God hates hypocrisy of any kind, how much more that which is deliberate and designed to *test the Spirit of the Lord* (9).

Luke does not present pure propaganda about an ideal church. There were needs in the church (2:44–45) and although those needs were met through the sharing of the community (4:34), even this sharing was not without problems (6:1).

5:12–42 Before the Sanhedrin again: Gamaliel's ruling

12 The apostles' prayer of 4:29–30 was answered. They *performed many miraculous signs and wonders* and continued to meet and speak in *Solomon's Colonnade* in the temple. **13** No one dared publicly listen unless they were willing to take the bigger step and actually join the believers. **15** *People brought the sick* hoping that Peter's shadow might fall upon them so that they might be healed. Peter was obviously held in high esteem, but whether the shadow actually healed or that was just the people's expectation before meeting Peter is not clear (see note below). **16** Other people from nearby towns also brought their sick and possessed and *all of them were healed.*

Note. Magic and miracle. Mk. 6:56 and Acts 19:12 contain similar accounts of healings which seem to us to have a 'magical' quality about them. It is clear from other passages, however, that the NT authors distinguished the Christian movement from contemporary magic and sorcery (see *e.g.* the encounter with Simon the Sorcerer in 8:9–25). What seems most likely is that God is willing to 'speak the language' that people require. He is willing to meet their expectations in order to take them further. In that regard, people with superstitious expectations about God's power, such as the woman who touched Jesus' cloak in Lk. 8:43–48, receive what they honestly desire and more. Those who concern themselves to *control* supernatural power rather than place themselves at God's disposal, however, are less successful (see 8:9–25; 19:13–16).

17 It was the popularity of the Christians that filled the Jewish leaders with *jealousy* and prompted them to action, rather than the mere fact of the connection with Jesus. They were not, at this stage, persecuted because they were Christians but because they were successful.

18 As in 4:3, the apostles were arrested and put in prison to be questioned the next day. **19** This time, however, God intervened and *during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail.* Presumably he locked them again, for the next morning the temple officers *found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors* but with *no-one inside.*

Because the apostles followed the angel's orders, however, they were easy enough to find. **28** *We gave you strict orders* refers back to the previous encounter in 4:18. The perception of the teaching of the Christians as an attempt to show the Jewish leaders as *guilty of this man's blood* misses the point of such passages as 3:14–17 or 5:30–32 below. The Christians were not trying to incite the crowd, as the Sanhedrin thought.

29 The Sanhedrin having repeated their ruling, Peter repeated his answer of 4:19–20. **30–32** Peter also repeated the message which had been incompletely understood by the leaders. The emphasis again is not on condemning those behind the crucifixion, but rather on proclaiming that God reversed the human judgment in Jesus' case.

That the crucifixion was described as *hanging . . . on a tree* was not to the advantage of the Christian message, since it brought Jesus' death

into closer association with Dt. 21:22–23. Perhaps it was originally a phrase used of Jesus' crucifixion by the opponents of the gospel. In any case, it sets the actions of God on Jesus' behalf in a sharp contrast.

33 Most of the Sanhedrin could see only the implication that they were being accused by unlearned people claiming to have divine authority, and thus they were *furious and wanted to put them to death*. 34 *Gamaliel* is a name known to us from Jewish as well as Christian sources as *a teacher of the law, who was honoured by all the people.* It is perhaps significant that he was a Pharisee, whereas at this stage in the church's history it seems it was the Sadducees who were the more determined opponents (5:17; see also 4:1). Gamaliel was a student of one of the greatest rabbis of all times, Hillel, and he was Paul's tutor (22:3). This great man does seem to have taken the point of the apostles 'reversal' statements, and he advocated taking the apostles at their word and allowing similar principles to settle the current dispute: these Christians have argued that God's ruling in the case of Jesus overturned the human judgment. Then let God decide in this case as well. Gamaliel was, of course, confident that God was not on the side of the Christians and that, therefore, nothing would come of their movement, just as nothing had come of the two rebellions that he mentioned.

Note. The puzzle of Gamaliel's speech. We do know of rebel leaders bearing the names Gamaliel mentions from non-Christian sources, notably the Jewish historian Josephus. It is the chronology, however, that is odd. V 37 seems to state that Judas the Galilean came after Theudas, whereas Josephus dates them the other way around. More difficult still is the fact that Josephus links Theudas' revolt with the rule of the Roman procurator Fadus, which wasn't until ten years after these events took place. The most likely solution is that Gamaliel's *Theudas* was different from and prior to the Theudas of whom Josephus wrote. The latter, in fact, may have taken over the earlier Theudas' name and mantle. (For further discussion see C. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* [Mohr, 1989], pp. 162–163, 223–224.)

40 The fact that the apostles were *flogged* and ordered *not to speak in the name of Jesus* suggests that the Sanhedrin may have been taking an easy road and avoiding the risk of upsetting the crowds. 41 Miraculously freed from prison, only to find themselves flogged the next day anyway, the apostles must have been at least tempted to be confused. Yet they rejoiced *because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.* 42 They took no more notice of this order not to preach the gospel than they had of the others, and they continued to meet both *in the temple courts and from house to house*, where they *never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news.*

6:1 – 8:3 Stephen before the Sanhedrin: the end of an era

It generally surprises people to learn that the longest speech of the many found in Acts is not by Paul, or even Peter, but Stephen. These chapters are a real hinge in the story of the early church. Up to this point, although there had been opposition to the spread of the gospel, it was motivated by jealousy and a sense of public order. Judaism and Christianity were not thought of as separate religions, but as the same religion – the Christians still went to the temple and never preached that people had to leave their Judaism behind, but rather that they had to accept Jesus as the fulfilment of all that the law and prophets pointed towards.

With the story of Stephen this state of affairs changes drastically. False witnesses claimed that the message of Stephen attacked the temple and the law of Moses. Stephen's speech shows that these charges were both true and false. The long, and at first glance irrelevant, account of the early history of Israel was intended to show that God had a long-standing and living relationship with his people before and apart from the law of Moses and the temple. People like Joseph and Moses, with whom God took the relationship further, were met with jealousy and rejection by their own people. The law and the tabernacle/temple were expressions of this relationship, rather than its core. If Judaism is thought of in this way, as the ongoing relationship of God with his people, then Christianity stands in continuity with it. But if Judaism is thought of only in terms of temple and law, then Christianity is in conflict with it, since Christianity claims that through the Messiah God has taken the relationship further.

When the story begins, the believers were thought of as Jews, and large numbers of people in Jerusalem, even priests, were becoming believers (6:7). At the end of the story, Christians were being opposed by Jews not merely when they were successful or causing a disturbance, but because they were Christians (8:1–3). Equally, however, it must be said that when Stephen talked about the rejection of Jesus he was not, as Peter was (2:23–24; 3:14–15; 4:10–11; 5:30–31) primarily doing so to focus on God's reversal of the human judgment about Jesus. Stephen was blaming the Jewish leadership in a more direct way. This sad episode marks the end of an era.

1 *The Grecian Jews* and the *Hebraic Jews*

appear to be two cultural groups within Christian (and Jewish) society. We may assume that the disciples and other native Palestinian Jews spoke Aramaic (a language related to Hebrew) as their first language, whereas many of those converted from the visitors at the Pentecost festival, for instance, could be called Grecian or Hellenistic Jews, and their main language was Greek. Both groups were Jewish.

A dispute arose about the *daily distribution of food.* Although Luke has mentioned before the way that the Christians shared among themselves (2:44–47 and 4:32–35), it is only here that we get a glimpse of the scale and regularity of this ministry.

2–4 The contrast between *prayer and the ministry of the word* on the one hand and *to wait on tables* on the other should not be read as meaning that one task is inferior to the other. In many modern cultures, the phrase 'waiting on tables' brings to mind servants or hired help at restaurants. This image is wrong in several ways. For one thing, it is the job of the *head* of the household to distribute the food (thus Jesus' actions at the Last Supper of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing; Lk. 22:19; *cf.* 9:16 and 24:30). Furthermore, the word used here for 'table' has two special meanings: the dining table and also a money-changer's table (Mk. 11:15; the same word is used in the sense of 'bank' in Lk. 19:23). Thus it may be that 'to sit at managers' desks' is as valid a paraphrase of the text as 'to wait on tables'. Although the passage mentions food, the distribution may well have been in form of money for food, and certainly in 4:35–37 it was money which the apostles received towards this aid. Such an interpretation would also fit better with the gifts required of the Seven: as well as being *full of the Spirit*, they would need *wisdom* in their management roles.

It is, of course, not the case that the Twelve thereafter avoided anything to do with management or physical needs, nor did the Seven stay away from praying or the ministry of the word. In fact, the stories that Luke gives us about Stephen and Philip concern neither food nor finance, but their ministry of the word!

8–10 Stephen, one of the Seven, provoked *opposition* among non-believing 'Grecian Jews' in the *Synagogue of the Freedmen* by doing signs and wonders. Cilicia is mentioned as one of the provinces from which this synagogue drew its members. Tarsus, Paul's hometown, was in Cilicia and it may be that he had something to do with the synagogue and the antagonism. Their opposition was fruitless until they *secretly persuaded* some people to bear false witness against Stephen, exaggerating, no doubt, aspects of what Stephen really said to the point where it could be considered *blasphemy against Moses and against God.* **13–14** The testimony of the false witnesses is similar to that in the trial of Jesus (Mk. 14:58). The charges concerned the temple and the law.

7:1 On Luke's use of speeches in general, see on 2:14. Stephen's reply to the question *Are these charges true?* is not a simple yes or no. The question of the relationship of Christianity to the law and to the temple was a complex one, and Stephen wisely answered it from the OT history. His answer was, essentially, that Judaism as the relationship between God and his people predated the temple, the law and even the land of Israel; all of these were expressions of Judaism rather than its core. Paul used the same strategy of going back to Abraham when writing to those who were facing teachers in Galatia who preached the centrality of the law of Moses (Gal. 3:15–19). Was a seed planted in the mind of Saul as he stood there, not yet convinced (8:1)?

2–19 The first main section of the speech concerns Jewish history prior to Moses, chiefly Abraham and Joseph. The important point with the former is that the Jewish religion is built upon the foundation of God's calling and promises. These began to be worked out in the life of Joseph, although his family did not recognize it, were jealous of him and worked against him by handing him over to foreigners (as Stephen's contemporaries treated Jesus).

20–43 The accusation against Stephen included the charge that the customs that Moses handed down would be changed (6:14). Here and in the next section, Stephen was, among other things, reminding his audience that the features of Judaism they were so concerned to protect were themselves at one point changes in the traditions. Thus when Stephen told the Moses story, he focused again upon the people's rejection of him and his message despite the approval of God.

44–50 The third part of the speech concerns the temple proper. If he was charged with speaking against the temple and the customs of Moses, as if those were two permanent features of Judaism, Stephen reminded his audience that precisely those two features were at variance with each other. The temple itself was a change to the customs handed down by Moses (6:14), which concerned a tabernacle built at God's direction. This was a change tolerated, but not initiated, by God. Stephen was no more against Judaism than the Jewish Scripture itself, as expressed through the prophet Isaiah, whom he quoted (Is. 66).

51–53 It was rather Stephen's audience who were against the prophets, the Holy Spirit who spoke through them and the Messiah whose

coming they predicted. Stephen closed with this fierce attack: it was his audience who should be on trial for violating the spirit of Judaism, not him.

54 Stephen probably intended to say more, but he was interrupted by the fury of his audience, who *gnashed their teeth at him*, almost snarling in their anger and frustration. 55–56 Stephen was granted a vision which, like the opening of heaven and voice of God at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, was not only meant to give him courage for the task ahead, but was also God's endorsement of the crucial change that was taking place. At Jesus' transfiguration the voice was endorsing Jesus' determination to go to Jerusalem and die, not because God preferred it, but because it must be. So also here, the estrangement of God's new community from the traditional people of God is acknowledged. It is probably still too strong a statement to say that now Christianity was completely divorced from Judaism; Paul's defence strategy in the trial scenes at the end of the book revolves around the idea that the charges he faced in the secular courts boiled down to internal Jewish matters. Christianity, from Stephen's stoning, did become an estranged and distinct group within Judaism, or perhaps a rival vision of what Judaism should now be, rather than a movement made up of all parties.

7:57 – 8:1a They *covered their ears* and yelled out so as not to hear any more of the supposed blasphemy. The mob was unable to wait for the niceties of a trial, and without officially pronouncing a verdict or sentence they dragged *him out of the city and began to stone him.*

By the fact that *the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul*, the reader learns not only that Saul was present, but also that he was not one of the witnesses against Stephen. Similarly, in 8:1, the fact that the text explicitly mentions his *approval* probably means that he did not actively participate in the stoning. Interestingly, it also numbers Saul as among those about whom Stephen prays *do not hold this sin against them*, echoing the words of Jesus in Lk. 23:34, 46

1b The *great persecution* (this episode is the first time that Acts uses the word) and scattering *throughout Judaea and Samaria* that it caused is the backdrop for the chapters that follow. 3 Saul's actions in this persecution are confirmed from his own letters (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13, 23; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13). Saul went house to house looking for Christians, which suggests that they no longer met openly in the temple (5:42).

8:4 – 12:25 Extra-Jewish ministry supervised from Jerusalem

8:4–25 Philip in Samaria

4 Persecution, rather than deliberate policy, was the reason for the first real missionary thrust in the church: *those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.* 5 Philip preached *in Samaria*, because that was where he happened to go. As John's gospel tells us parenthetically, Jews had no dealings with Samaritans (Jn. 4:9). Regarded by Judeans and Galileans alike as heretical half-Jews, the occupants of this area to the north of Judea believed in the books of Moses, but none of the rest of the Jewish Scriptures, and they believed that God should be worshipped on Mt Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem.

6–13 Philip is introduced to the readers by mention of the *miraculous signs he did*, including exorcisms of *evil spirits* and *healings.* As a result of these works, the people paid *close attention* to what he had to say. In this regard he was similar to *Simon*, a man who practised sorcery, and who all the people, both high and low, esteemed because of *his magic.*

We are not told how Philip's works and message were superior to Simon's, but the difference must have been significant, for the people, including Simon, *believed* and *were baptised.* This 'miracle-worker' was *astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw* Philip working. (See 5:12–16 above.)

14 Perhaps because mission work among the Samaritans had not been planned beforehand, the news of it seemed to take the *apostles in Jerusalem* by surprise, and they sent out Peter and John to investigate. Similarly, Barnabas was sent to investigate Gentile converts in Antioch (11:22) and, immediately prior to that, Peter was interviewed about the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius (11:1–18). 15–17 It is probably that latter passage that helps to explain why the gift of the Holy Spirit came so long after the Samaritans' baptism. In the light of 2:38, 10:48 and 19:5, it is highly unlikely that baptism in the name of Jesus was regarded as inferior to baptism in the full three names of the Trinity. Nor is it likely that the laying on of hands by the apostles was a necessity for the reception of the Holy Spirit (see *e.g.* 10:44–48; 16:30–34; and 13:3, where it was the congregation that laid hands on the apostles in expression of the unity that the Holy Spirit brings).

In 11:15–17, however, Peter understood the giving of the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his people as God's sign that the Gentiles were to be accepted as full members of the Christian community (see on 11:1–18). Similarly, the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon these first Samaritans converts was proof of their equality with the Jerusalem believers; proof, we might add, to the Jerusalem apostles as well as to the Samaritans. It is, of course, delightful that John, who once wanted to call down the fire of judgment on a Samaritan village (Lk. 9:54), was one of those who was now calling down the Holy Spirit!

18–19 Simon thought Christianity was essentially the same as his magic, even if more powerful. **20–23** Peter's reply implies some discernment of Simon's attitude. The apostle's sharp condemnation was tempered by the appeal to repent that the Lord might forgive him. **24** Despite the apparently genuine request to Peter to pray that this wouldn't happen, Simon became known in later Christian tradition as the archetypal heretic and enemy of Christianity.

8:26–40 Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch

The contrast between the two stories about Philip is remarkable. The first takes place in Samaria to the north, this one to the south. The first concerns a mass conversion that comes about because of the scattering, this one is a single conversion because of direct messages from God. The first happens among a people who have only the Jewish books of Moses, the second involves someone reading from the prophets. The stories are linked, however, not only by the presence of Philip, but also because they concern outsiders to Judaism.

27–28 The ancient kingdom of Ethiopia was probably in the area now called the Sudan, but this is less important to Luke than the impression of 'foreignness'. A more exotic person could hardly be imagined! Not only from one of the most remote regions of the world, he was also an *important official* there and a *eunuch* as well. *Candace* was not a personal name, but a title for the mother of the reigning monarch. The Ethiopian was on his way home from Jerusalem, where he had been worshipping and *was reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.*

30–31 In NT times, reading aloud was the norm, even when reading to oneself. Philip's interruption of this important official was received with notable humility and grace. Travelling was typically a dirty business, and Philip was not the social equal of such a man, yet he invited him *to come up and sit with him* in order to explain what he was reading.

32–35 The eunuch was puzzled about who the verses from Is. 53 were describing, but Philip had little trouble using *that very passage of Scripture* as a springboard to tell the whole *good news about Jesus.*

36 Since the eunuch initiated the conversation about his own baptism, we can assume that Philip followed the story of Jesus with an appeal similar to that of Peter in 2:37–39. The eunuch's question, *Why shouldn't I be baptised?* suggests he expected some objection to be raised. Perhaps he had previously been refused Jewish proselyte baptism (a normal step in the full conversion to Judaism) because of his 'mutilated' condition (see the note below on 'The first Gentile convert?').

On the other hand, similar wording is found in other accounts of baptisms (Acts 10:47; Mt. 3:13), so it has been argued that this is the reflection of an early baptismal ritual question and response. In the light of Mk. 9:39 and 10:14, however, it would be better to say that the wording is found in accounts having something to do with acceptance into the community, in cases where equality in fellowship might be questionable for some reason.

38 V 37 is not found in the oldest and most reliable copies of Acts, and the NIV, along with most modern translations, includes it only in the mg. Philip's response to the question was not with words, but with actions; they went down to the water and the eunuch was baptized on the spot.

39–40 The remark that *the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away* and how he later *appeared at Azotus* (which is north of Gaza, and not on the Jerusalem to Gaza road) is suggestive of more than spiritual leading. The emphasis is not on the manner of transportation, however, but the suddenness and completeness of the departure. From the previous episode in Samaria (8:14), the Cornelius episode in chs. 10–11, and the account of the start of the Antioch church in 11:20–22 we can be sure that the Jerusalem church would have wanted to look into this conversion as well, had they heard about it at the time. But the eunuch was out of the hands of Philip and also of the Jerusalem church. We next meet Philip, much later (21:8–9), in Caesarea.

The eunuch however, continued *on his way rejoicing.* One cannot help wondering if he also continued reading Isaiah where he left off. If so, it would not have been long before he came upon this passage: 'Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not the eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." For this is what the LORD says: ". . . I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off . . . ."' (Is. 56:3–5).

Note. The first Gentile convert? Although the term translated *eunuch* came to mean merely 'an official', it is likely that Luke here intends the more literal meaning, else the phrase which follows, *an important official*, would be redundant. In the light of the

scriptural regulations (see Dt. 23:1), it is unlikely that this man could have been a full convert to Judaism. But as the purpose of his trip was to worship, and as he apparently owned an actual copy of at least part of the Scripture, it is likely that he had some long-standing or deep connection with Judaism. If he was a Gentile 'God-fearer' (see 10:2 for the use of this term for a specific class of people), then it was this eunuch and not the centurion Cornelius who was the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity of whom we know. Thus it was Philip, and not Peter or Paul, who became the father of the Gentile mission, with clear divine leading.

9:1–31 Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road

Although we have seen little of him up to this point in the book, it is Paul (or Saul) who is arguably the most important human character in the book of Acts. From the middle of ch. 12 till the end of the book at ch. 28 the narrator focuses on Paul and his travels almost exclusively. The story of how this man came to join the Christians is told to us in some detail no less than three times (chs 9, 22 and 26). In this chapter, it is told by the narrator. In the later chapters it is related to the reader by Paul himself in the context of speeches, even though the narrator could easily have said 'and then Paul told them about his experiences on the Damascus road' rather than going through it all over again. The story was probably repeated because of the importance that Luke attached to the event. Each retelling, however, adds a bit more of the complete picture.

It is sometimes argued that 'conversion' implies rejecting one whole system of beliefs and embracing another. Saul had not been called so much to leave Judaism behind as to accept Jesus as the fulfilment of all he believed. And it must be said that the story has much in common with 'the call' of a prophet to a specific mission. Used in a non-technical sense, there can be no real objection to the term 'conversion' for such a fundamental and radical change of mind, heart and action as this man underwent. But we do well to remember the positive sense of 'call' in this important incident in the life of Paul.

1 Saul (the Hebrew name for Paul, 13:9) and his attitude towards Christians have been mentioned previously in 7:58–8:3. 2 The *letters to the synagogues in Damascus* were probably letters of introduction and what we might call 'extradition' (see the parallels in 22:5; 26:12). A letter with a similar purpose has been preserved in the Apocrypha: 'If any scoundrels have fled to you from their country, hand them over to the high priest Simon, so that he may punish them according to their law' (1 Macc. 15:21). Many Jewish congregations would not have felt quite as negatively about the Christians, and these letters from the high priest may have outlined the Jewish objections to Christianity as well as giving Paul authority to make *prisoners* of these 'criminals'. (See 28:21–22, where the Jewish leaders in Rome knew they were supposed to dislike the Christians but had no 'letters from Judea' telling them why.) It was only after the Stephen episode that the Jewish leaders took action against Christians simply because they were Christians. *The Way* was an early name for the Christian community.

3–9 Paul experienced an intense *light from heaven* and heard *a voice*. The NT authors have no objection to recording dreams or visions that only an individual sees, but Luke intended his readers to understand this as an observable event. It was aimed somewhat exclusively at Paul, but Paul's companions *heard the sound* even if *they did not see anyone*. The retelling of the story in 26:12–14 implies that Paul's companions also were able to see the light flashing. Only Paul was blinded, however, and the condition was more than a temporary dazzling from an ordinary bright light, since he was blind *for three days*, and we are told in v 18 that at his healing something like 'scales' fell from his eyes (see also 22:11–13).

10–16 Only the telling of the conversion story in this chapter mentions the understandable initial reluctance of Ananias, although he is also mentioned in 22:12–16. Right from the start of Paul's commissioning, his task *before the Gentiles* is made clear to him and to Ananias in a number of ways (see also 22:21; 26:17), as is *how much he must suffer for my name*.

17–19 Ananias's placing of *his hands on Saul* was a gesture expressing recognition and confirmation of God's acceptance and Christian unity, as was the greeting, *Brother Saul*. In Saul's case the laying on of hands and God's acceptance were tied up with his healing, his reception of the Holy Spirit and baptism and even with the breaking of his fast. All these things happened together. Perhaps it is also significant that they happened independently of the Jerusalem apostles (see on 9:26–27).

20–25 It is interesting that despite the order *Gentiles . . . kings and . . . people of Israel* in v 15 above, Paul first of all began *to preach in the synagogues*. This was to be the pattern throughout his missionary career: to the Jew first and then the Gentile (see 13:46). Although Paul's preaching *grew more and more powerful* over time, it *baffled the Jews* rather than convinced them and *after many days* they *conspired to kill him*. His escape *in a basket* seems to be something that he remembered as more disgraceful

and cowardly than as a thrilling and glamorous adventure (2 Cor. 11:30–33).

26–30 Although by the time Paul came to Jerusalem he had been a Christian for some time, the apostles, like Ananias before them, found it difficult to believe. It was not until Barnabas ('the Son of Encouragement'), whom we first met in 4:36, took responsibility for him that the disciples were prepared to accept this former persecutor of the church. Paul then *moved about freely for* about fifteen days (see Gal. 1:18–19). Although he stayed with Peter, he did not meet many of the other disciples, but did spend a considerable amount of time *with the Grecian Jews* (see on 6:1 above), with whom Barnabas of Cyprus may also have worked, and perhaps the same Synagogue of Freemen mentioned in connection with Stephen (6:9). As happened in Damascus, Paul's opponents soon *tried to kill him*, and for his own protection the brothers sent him away to his own country, from which place Barnabas would fetch him again in 11:25.

31 With this pause in the persecution, Luke also pauses to end this story with a general summary. It is, of course, as a result of all he has described thus far that the company of believers had grown from a small group in an upper room to *the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria.*

9:32–43 Peter in Lydda and Joppa

These two brief stories bring the apostle Peter back to the fore and set the stage for the important story of Cornelius in ch. 10.

32–35 *Lydda* was north-west of Jerusalem. That Peter went *to visit the saints* means that there was a Christian community there. Probably these people had been evangelized during the period of scattering following Stephen's stoning, but we are not told who evangelized either Lydda or Joppa, where there were also already Christians (9:38). When Aeneas was healed Peter attributed it to *Jesus Christ*, with himself as no more than the channel (*cf.* 3:12, 16). *All those who lived in Lydda* does not mean everyone, but rather that the healing was not done in secret, but in public, and a large number of people from outside the Christian circle saw and believed.

36–43 There was not only a Christian community already in Joppa before Peter's arrival, but they knew of his presence in Lydda, a dozen miles inland. With many of these incidents of healing or conversion, the author feels it important to tell the readers about the role of the person in the community, whether they are those who receive charity (3:2, 10) or those who give it (10:2). *Tabitha* was a person who *was always doing good and helping the poor* and who appears to have done so by making *robes and other fine clothing* for such people as *widows*, who are generally mentioned as examples of needy people (see 6:1).

The body of the dead woman *was washed* in line with rituals pertaining to the purification of the dead. Just why the people should be sent *out of the room* before the praying is not clear, but it is something that Jesus also did when raising Jairus' daughter (Mk. 5:40). F.F. Bruce points out that where Jesus said, in Aramaic, *Talitha qum*, 'Little girl, get up', what Peter said differed in only one letter if he also used that language, *Tabitha qum* (*Book of Acts* [Eerdmans, 1988], p. 199).

That Peter stayed with a person who was *a tanner* by occupation is perhaps significant because he would have been regarded as ritually unclean for much of the time, working as he did with skins of dead animals.

10:1 – 11:18 Peter, Cornelius and the Gentile question

This story was clearly important to Luke. As with the story of Paul's conversion, it is told in detail and repeated (within chs. 10 and 11) and also referred to in ch. 15. The episode represents another turning point in the direction and focus of the church. Although it is likely that the Ethiopian eunuch was the first non-Jewish convert to Christianity (8:25–40), it was the conversion of Cornelius that sparked the controversy about Gentile converts among the Jewish Christians who probably had not heard about Philip and the eunuch. The account here suggests that the Christian community in general, and Peter in particular, were not prepared for the direct acceptance of Gentile converts and had to be convinced. Luke means us to see the acceptance of the situation by the church in ch. 11 as forming the background for the later decision in ch. 15.

The whole story can easily be divided into scenes: 10:1–8, Cornelius in Caesarea; 9–23a, Peter in Joppa; 23b–48, the meeting of Peter and Cornelius in Caesarea; 11:1–18, the aftermath: the church leaders dealing with the Gentile question.

1–8 The first scene in this complex story begins with an introduction of *Cornelius, a centurion.* This was a position of some limited authority. He served in the *Italian Regiment* of which we know little. A regiment or 'cohort' of 600 soldiers was divided into six 'centuries', with a centurion as the head of each.

Although he was a Roman soldier, *he and all his family were devout and God-fearing.* The term 'God-fearers' appears to have been frequently used for a class of people who believed, and to some extent followed, the Jewish religion

without being full converts to Judaism (see 13:16, 26; 17:4, 17 for this sense; the phrase 'worshipper of God' is probably referring to the same phenomenon; 16:14, 18:7). 'Fearing God' could also be used to describe someone as merely religious (so 2:5), but would seem redundant in this sentence if that was all it meant here. In short, this man and his family were not Jews nor Jewish converts, but were also no longer pagans worshipping other gods.

As with Tabitha in the previous chapter, the good deeds of Cornelius are mentioned. They were evidence of his faith as well as 'good deeds': *he gave generously ... and prayed ... regularly.* It was his devout and active faith, not mere words but *prayers and gifts*, that were commended by the angelic visitor. It is interesting that the angel told Cornelius to *send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter* rather than having given him the good news about Jesus then and there. God had something in mind for Peter and the church as well as for Cornelius and his family.

9–23a Meanwhile in Joppa, *Peter went up on the roof to pray.* The roof would have been flat and a good place to be alone for prayer. Luke tells us that *he fell into a trance* in order to make it clear that unlike the light and sound Paul experienced earlier, this was a 'vision' that another person next to Peter on the roof would not have seen.

The vision itself was a strange one. A bundle was let down containing all kinds of living creatures: *four-footed animals ... reptiles of the earth and birds of the air* make up the three classifications of the whole animal kingdom (see the Noah story; Gn 6:20). There were, therefore, animals there that a Jew could not eat, by the food laws (see Lv. 11; 20:25). Thus the command that came, *Kill and eat*, caused Peter to protest his innocence (*cf.* Ezk. 4:14). The voice replied *Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.* The whole interchange was repeated twice more – Peter was no stranger to triple repetition (Jn. 13:38; 21:15–17).

Peter wondered *about the meaning of the vision.* Although Mk. 7:19 says Jesus 'declared all foods "clean",' the NIV, in common with other translations, puts this comment in brackets. That meaning of Jesus' saying was not at the fore in the original context, and it is only with the benefit of hindsight that the disciples were able to see that implication in what Jesus said at that time; hence Peter's protests in this story, years later.

It was while Peter was *thinking about the vision* that the messengers from Cornelius arrived. The Spirit gave Peter clear instructions that he should *not hesitate to go with them.* By the immediate linking of Cornelius with the vision we see that God had more to teach Peter than a lesson about foods (important as that was). Gentile–Jewish relations were profoundly affected by the change in what Jewish Christians could consider clean foods. 'It would be a short step from recognizing that Gentile food was clean to realizing that Gentiles themselves were clean also' (I. H. Marshall, *Acts* [IVP, 1980], p. 186; see 10:28). The Lord did not cover this in Peter's vision, because he intended a much more dramatic and wonderful sign in 10:44 below.

23b–43 That Cornelius *fell at his feet in reverence* does not mean that Cornelius was attempting to 'worship' Peter (unlike the situation in which Paul and Barnabas found themselves when among pagans in 14:11–15) but was merely showing respect. This makes Peter's insistence on being treated as an equal all the stronger (see 3:12). Peter (and Simon the tanner) had offered hospitality to Cornelius' men in Joppa and that was not unusual or prohibited by Jewish law. For a Jew to accept hospitality from a Gentile, however, was another matter altogether. But Peter had already made the connection and told the gathering in Cornelius' house that God *has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean* (28). This thought was echoed by Peter after Cornelius repeated the story of the visit that led to him sending for him (*I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism*) and again later in the speech (*Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all*). How new this was for Peter and for the other Jewish Christians can be gauged by the lengths to which God went to convey the point and the seriousness of the discussion that ensues in ch. 11. Jesus had told his disciples that they would 'make disciples of all nations' (Mt. 28:19), but they must have thought that it included making them Jews first.

When Peter said, *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ*, it need not imply a detailed knowledge or familiarity (36; *cf.* 2:22). The *you know* in 10:36 and 37 should be read as 'you have heard of', and these words are meant to contrast with the fact that Peter was there: *we are witnesses of everything he did* (39). In fact, more details about Jesus' life and ministry are presented in this speech than in any other speech in Acts.

What is being emphasized in the expression *they killed him* is not the guilt of the Jews, but rather God's reversal of the human judgment on Jesus: *they killed him ... but God raised him* (as also in 2:23–24). The crucifixion is once again described as *hanging ... on a tree* (see on 5:30). That Jesus *ate and drank ... after he rose from*

the dead was seen as proof that he really did rise again (and was not just a spirit). As in 1:4, however, it also indicates the closeness of table fellowship. Now Peter was accepting once taboo table fellowship with Gentiles. Certainly we should read *He commanded us to preach to the people* and *everyone who believes in him* (42)with the Gentile situation in mind. (On Luke's use of speeches in general, see on 2:14.)

44–48 Peter had not even finished speaking when the Gentiles' response was confirmed by the giving of the Holy Spirit, evidenced by their *speaking in tongues and praising God.* This was taken by *the circumcised believers* present, as well as, later, those in Jerusalem (11:15–18), as a sign that these people should be accepted into the body of Christ – and apparently such a strong sign was needed, for the believers present *were astonished* that the Holy Spirit could come *even on the Gentiles.* As in the story of the eunuch (8:36), there is a curiously negative question about their baptism, *Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water?* This indicates that there might have seemed to some a possible objection: that the people to be baptized were not yet full Jews (see 11:18: 'no further objections').

11:1–18 The final scene in this story took place later, in Jerusalem. Having *heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God . . . the circumcised believers criticised* Peter for visiting and eating with non-Jews. Peter's defence and their response make clear that they were also unsure about whether Gentiles could become Christians without also becoming Jews. Peter told them everything that had happened; and the fact that Luke records this in full when it is a repetition of 10:9–48 is a measure of its importance in his eyes.

Peter saw the gift of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius as *the same gift as he gave* the apostles at Pentecost (17). The reasoning was that if God had baptized these people with the gift of the Holy Spirit, thus showing divine acceptance in the company of the redeemed, who could possibly withhold baptism with water and deny them earthly fellowship (8:36; 10:45)? To do so would have been to *oppose God.* With such words the circumcised believers were convinced, and had *no further objections.* Once again the phrase *even the Gentiles* occurs – it was still a surprise to them. Who would have thought that God would grant *even the Gentiles repentance unto life?*

11:19–30 Barnabas, Saul and the first Gentile church

19–21 This paragraph refers back to the events of ch. 8, *the persecution in connection with Stephen*, which was at least indirectly responsible for the gospel being preached to the Samaritans in that chapter. At first, those who were scattered told *the message only to Jews.* Others, however, *began to speak to Greeks*, and to do so with success. *Greeks* in this context probably means Gentiles who were not even 'God-fearers'.

22–24 In any case, as with the Samaritans (8:14), *the church at Jerusalem*, hearing of this turn of events, sent someone to the scene. This time it was *Barnabas* rather than one of the Twelve. When Barnabas arrived, he found *evidence of the grace of God.* Judging from the ease of acceptance, if the converts in question were Gentiles, this episode must have taken place after the church's decision about the Cornelius affair.

25–26 Tarsus was a few days away from Antioch by foot. Why *Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul and . . . brought him back to Antioch* is uncertain. Nor do we know what work Paul was doing in Tarsus (Gal. 1:21 is not much help). Possibly Barnabas went for Paul precisely because the Antioch church contained Gentiles and that was part of Paul's call (26:12–19), as Barnabas would probably have known (9:27). Their partnership in Antioch seems to have been a great success and they *taught great numbers of people.* Luke adds the interesting detail that it was in Antioch that the believers were first called 'Christians', probably first as a form of mockery by the Gentile non-believers. Jewish non-believers did not believe Jesus was the Christ, and the believers are never pictured as using the term of themselves, preferring 'disciples' or 'saints' or 'brothers' (26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16 are the other NT uses of the term). In a non-Jewish context 'Christos' would not have implied 'the anointed one' but probably 'the oily one'!

27–30 The role of *prophets* in Scripture is frequently thought to have been that of prediction, but their main role was to prepare people for action. Frequently in the OT the prophets worked towards social justice, and here the important part of Agabus' work was not so much that he successfully foretold the future, as that he encouraged and enabled the believers to help each other. (Agabus appears again in 21:10–11, and the work of other Christian prophets is described in 15:32. See also 1 Corinthians.) *The reign of Claudius* was from 41–54, and the Roman historian Suetonius confirms that there were droughts during this period. The *gift* sent via *Barnabas and Saul* was probably delivered during the visit spoken of in Gal. 2. The gift is not there mentioned explicitly, but Paul does say in response to Peter and John's request to remember the poor that that was the very thing he was already concerned about. See further

the note on chronology in connection with ch. 15.

12:1–25 Herod Agrippa and the church: the end of an era

1–3 The *King Herod* spoken of is Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. Once again, we see Luke's realistic attitude towards the early period of the Christian church. He tells us not only about the miraculous releases from prison but also about the setbacks and martyrdoms, such as James, who *was put to death with the sword.* This would have *pleased the Jews* in Jerusalem who, after the speech given by Stephen, were no longer neutral.

4–11 *Four squads of four soldiers each* were appointed as guards – one squad for each of the four watches of the night, so four men were on duty at any given time. *Peter was sleeping between two soldiers* and two more *sentries stood guard at the entrance.* Careful precautions had been taken, perhaps because the authorities had trouble containing Peter in the past (5:22–24).

The *angel of the Lord appeared* and a *light shone in the cell,* but this was insufficient to wake the sleeping apostle and so the angel *struck Peter,* which finally did the trick. Despite the blow, the removal of the chains and the donning of clothes, however, Peter *had no idea* that these things were *really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.* Only when the angel left him and he found himself free in the streets of Jerusalem did he realize that he really was awake.

12–17 But even when Peter believed it, he had trouble convincing anyone else! He went to the house of *Mary,* who is identified by reference to her son probably because of his importance later in the story and in the early church (see also 12:25; 13:5, 13; 15:36–40; he was Barnabas' cousin, Col. 4:10). This is the same John Mark who is usually thought to be the author of the gospel according to Mark. Rhoda, the servant who answered the door, *recognised Peter's voice,* but *was so overjoyed she ran back without opening* the door. The irony of the scene is simply delicious. *Many people had gathered and were praying,* and it is quite probable that Peter's plight was one of the things that they were praying about (5), yet he was kept out in the street while the gathering told Rhoda that she was either out of her mind or had seen Peter's spirit or guardian angel. (There was a belief that a person's spirit or guardian angel could roam around on its own and be mistaken for the person; see Mt. 14:26 for another case where the presence of a spirit was assumed when a person was seen in an unlikely situation; see Mt. 18:10 and Heb. 1:14 regarding the idea of 'guardian angels'.)

When they finally did let Peter in he asked them to *tell James and the brothers about this.* James the brother of Jesus was in a position of authority in the church (15:13; see also 21:18). What is meant by *he left for another place* may be simply that Peter went into hiding. Peter did not, at this stage, go back to speaking boldly as he did after the miraculous release in 5:21. There was no instruction to do so in this case, and the situation in Jerusalem was very different.

18–19a It would not have been considered excessively cruel for Herod to have *cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.* It was not at all unusual for guards who lost their prisoners to be subjected to the punishment that was due to their former charges (see 16:27; 27:42), and Herod would not have been at all pleased to lose a chance to boost his popularity (12:3–4).

19b–23 The story of Herod Agrippa's death seems only indirectly related to the author's main interest, the spread and growth of the church. The contrasts between Herod's actions and attitudes and those of the apostles are striking. Herod is described at a moment of particular triumph: those who had been quarrelling with him had *asked for peace,* and he appeared *wearing his royal robes* and seated *on his throne and delivered a public address to the people* which was enthusiastically received. Their acclamation, *This is the voice of a god, not a man,* contrasts with the apostles', who were always quick to assert that they were mere men (3:12; 10:26; 14:15), speaking the word of God.

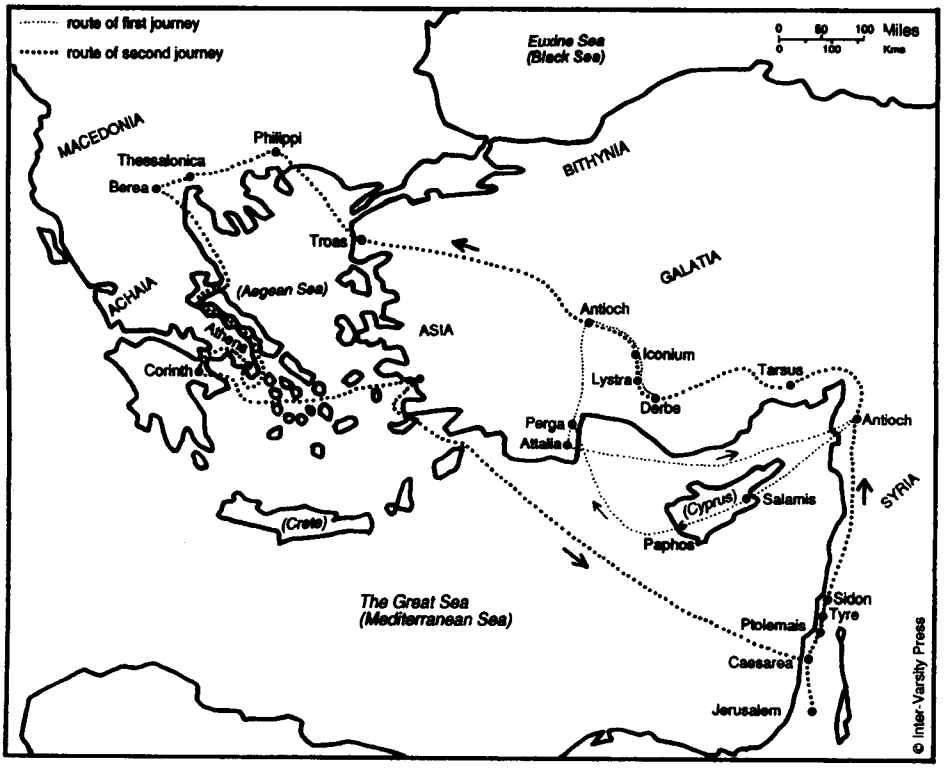
The details of Herod's death are recorded slightly differently by Josephus, but the accounts are complementary. The fact that Luke mentions *an angel of the Lord* does not mean that it was necessarily a quick and obviously supernatural death, but rather that God was ultimately responsible for what may have looked like a natural death. Luke's description of Herod as being *eaten by worms* is probably directly related to the abdominal pains referred to in Josephus' account.

24–25 In contrast to Herod, acclaimed by the people as having the 'voice of a god', the true *word of God continued to increase.* Barnabas, Saul and John Mark (see on 12:12–17) returned to Antioch from Jerusalem.

13:1 – 20:38 Deliberate Gentile ministry

13:1 – 14:28 The first missionary journey

13:1–3 The commissioning. Up to this point in the book, whenever the church has sent someone out on a mission, that mission seems to have been not to evangelize, but to check up on evangelism (8:14; 11:22). The evangelism itself



Paul's missions to Galatia and Greece.

seems to have taken place spontaneously, usually in the local synagogue, or else in specific circumstances under the leading of the Holy Spirit (through the 'scattering' as in 8:4–5, or directly from a divine messenger as in 8:26). 1 Even now, it was not so much a case of the church with an over-abundance of *prophets and teachers* sending some of them out to do mission work. Rather the church, called by the Holy Spirit, recognized and endorsed God's previous claim on Barnabas and Saul: *Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.* It was not by their own initiative, but by God's. 3 Here the recognition of Christian unity of fellowship and purpose in the Holy Spirit was expressed by the congregation *placing their hands on* the apostles.

13:4–12 Barnabas and Saul on Cyprus. 4 The island of Cyprus is in the north-eastern 'corner' of the Mediterranean Sea and had already been evangelized (11:19–20). This part of the journey may, therefore, have been intended as a follow-up visit (see 8:14; 11:22; and also 15:36 and 18:23). 5 Proclaiming *the word of God in the Jewish synagogues* is probably best understood, at this stage in the book, as evangelistic work among Jews who were not yet believers. Paul's missionary pattern involved starting with the Jews, but moving to the Gentiles in each community (see on 13:46). Barnabas was from Cyprus originally (4:36), and John Mark, who was his cousin (see on 12:12–17), accompanied them.

Salamis was the port city on the east where the party landed, and the tour of the island seems to have passed without notable incident until they came to the other end, Paphos. The name Bar-Jesus ('son of Jesus or Joshua') had no connection with Jesus of Nazareth; Jesus was a common name at the time. The phrase *Jewish sorcerer* (6) seems like a contradiction in terms, given the Jewish laws against sorcery and magic, but Bar-Jesus was not a law-abiding Jew but a false prophet, a self-styled revealer, perhaps along the lines of Sceva. Both seemed to use the title 'chief priest' without any real credentials to authenticate their alleged control over magical and spiritual entities (see on 19:13–14; see also Philip and Peter's encounter with the Samaritan magician Simon Magus, 8:9–24). 7 Like the Ethiopian eunuch (ch. 8) and the centurion Cornelius (ch. 10), it would seem that the Gentile

proconsul Sergius Paulus had some respect for and connection with some form of Judaism, since he had a Jew (albeit a Jewish heretic) as one of his advisers, and showed interest in Barnabas and Saul. A proconsul was a governor, appointed by Rome, of a senatorial province such as Cyprus.

8 Bar-Jesus also used the semitic name Elymas for himself, and Luke tells us that this word meant sorcerer. As Sergius Paulus listened to the word of God, Elymas used his influence against it and *tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.* 9 (From this point in the book, the name 'Paul' is introduced, and 'Saul' is not used again, except for the re-tellings of the earlier Road to Damascus incident in chs. 22 and 26. This change to the Greek name from the Hebraic probably reflects the fact that Paul's sphere of work was more specifically among Gentiles and in Gentile territories. In the argument before Sergius Paulus, God intervened, and the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to announce, rather than to 'call down', God's judgment: *the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind . . . for a time.* The form this judgment took, of course, is strikingly similar to Paul's own experience when he too needed to be led away *by the hand.* What Jesus did *to* Paul he will now continue to do *through* Paul. 12 The proconsul had his interest in the *teaching about the Lord* turn to belief as a result of observing the judgment.

13:13–52 Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch. This section of the chapter contains the first recorded sermon or speech by the apostle Paul (see on 2:14 regarding Luke's use of speeches in Acts). It was not, however, the first sermon that Paul gave. The reason that the author gives us a summary of the contents of this one, rather than the simple statement as in 9:20–21 points to the pattern for so much of the later missionary experience of Paul. On entering a community, the Christians spoke first in the synagogue, and only after trouble arose there did they begin work among the Gentiles (see *e.g.* 14:1–6; 18:4–17; 19:8–9) until opposition (usually, but not exclusively, from the Jews) forced them to leave entirely.

13 The narrator here refers to the party as *Paul and his companions*, whereas prior to this, even in the message to the Antioch church from the Holy Spirit (13:2), Barnabas seems to have been reckoned as the leader and Paul as the companion. The fact that *John left them*, recorded here very simply, was to cause some disagreement later (15:36–41). That the parties became reconciled again is clear from Col. 4:10–11 and 2 Tim. 4:11, both written after the events here recorded.

14 One of the many ancient cities with the name Antioch, Pisidian Antioch was so called because it is nearer Pisidia than the Antioch in Galatia. 15 It was perfectly natural for the synagogue ruler to invite a visiting rabbi to give the homily. One almost feels sorry, however, for these particular synagogue rulers, who had no idea what would come of their unsuspecting offer.

The speech itself can be thought of as revolving around the themes of displacement of people and choice. It is often thought that this sermon was preached from the text 2 Sa. 7:6–16, although the context does not demand it.

16–25 This speech was addressed not only to Jews but also to *Gentiles who worship God*, who were apparently also present in the synagogue service (see on 10:1–8 for a discussion of 'God-fearers'). The first and longest section of the speech is a rehearsal of the events leading up to the coming of the Messiah. The first paragraph concerns God's choice of Israel and the displacement of the *nations of Canaan* in favour of God's chosen people (even though they did not earn it by their behaviour which God merely *endured*). The second section is the displacement of Saul with David, the king of God's choice. A third, contemporary, theme is John the Baptist, introduced with reference to Jesus. The modern reader may miss the revolutionary fact that *John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel.* Repentance was one thing, but Jews of his day would have seen baptism as part of converting to Judaism – the speech implied that those who thought of themselves as Jews already also stood in need of 'conversion'. Thus the 'chosen people' now had themselves to choose or perhaps be displaced. John was revered by Jews, and his fame had spread widely (see Lk. 20:5–7, in which the Pharisees are not afraid to oppose Jesus, but shied away from making any statement against John; and Acts 19:1–7 where Paul ran across disciples of John in Ephesus, far from Palestine). For this reason, John's own statements about being 'displaced' by someone greater bore great significance. It is very possible that Paul's hearers would have known more about John than about Jesus.

26–31 Having gone over some history, Paul emphasized that *it is to us* that the message had been sent. Jesus' apparent failure in Jerusalem is faced squarely, and the reversal that features in Peter's speeches (see *e.g.* 2:23–24; 3:15; 4:10–11) comes in here as well. Yes, Paul said, the human decision about Jesus was one thing, but God's was quite different: his enemies had him executed, *but God raised him from the dead.*

32–37 This was *good news*, and it was related to the promises given to David. As in Peter's speech in 2:25–32, the argument here revolves

around the promise in Ps. 16:10 that God would not let his Holy One see decay. David did in fact 'see decay', which must mean that he was speaking in the Psalm of someone else who could not be defeated by death. But although Peter used a similar argument (which may have been widely used by early evangelists), the difference in style of the arguments is striking. Paul here showed his rabbinic training by using strings of citations, and also by the variety throughout the speech. Once again, the theme is displacement: the promises of David were not fulfilled until Jesus.

38–41 All this could be good news for the hearers (thus Paul says to his audience: *I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you*), but it was also an occasion for a stern warning: *Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you.* The themes of choice and displacement thus lead to the clear demand for the hearers to make a choice about Jesus in order to avoid being displaced as God's people. This was more easily seen as good news by the 'Gentiles who worship God' and who were looking for a way in to God's promises and community, than it was for those who were born Jews and now found themselves being threatened with exclusion from something they always regarded as theirs by gift and right. The quotation of warning is from the Greek version of Hab. 1:5, where the word 'scoffers' replaces the phrase from the Hebrew text 'among the nations'. Whichever translation one uses, it is probably no coincidence that the context of the prophecy concerns not only the judgment of God's chosen people Israel but also the way that God can and will work through the Gentiles.

42 Despite the harshness of Paul's tone at the end of the message, the reaction was extremely favourable: *the people invited them to speak further* and *many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas.* The apostles *urged them* to *continue.*

If this was the reaction of the people, however, the reaction of their leaders was less warm. **45** As in Jerusalem, *the Jews* (by which Luke must mean the more influential people in the Jewish community, judging by v 43 above) were *filled with jealousy* by the sight of the crowds that Paul and Barnabas were attracting.

Their abusive talk and opposition was answered (46–48) along the lines that the speech suggested: the choice these people made led to their displacement as God's people: *Since you reject it . . . we turn now to the Gentiles,* who were glad to receive it. This 'turning' had to do with this particular community rather than to the Jews as a race. In 14:1 (as in every town after) Paul went first to the Jews in that community if it had a synagogue (see 9:20–25; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1–2,10; 17:17; 18:4,19; 19:8). Luke's phrase *all who were appointed for eternal life believed* is to redress a balance. For it is never merely a person's own choice that saves them, it is always God's love and mercy. As with all the passages dealing with the conversion of Gentiles, Luke is at pains to show that what happened was at God's initiative and had God's approval. The acceptance of the Jewish Messiah by the Gentiles was sometimes a surprise and sometimes an offence to the early Christians, but none of it took God by surprise; he had always planned it just this way, as the quotation in v 47 shows.

49 That *the word of the Lord spread through the whole region* should probably also be seen as part of Paul's missionary strategy. He seems to have done his work mainly in urban areas and allowed the local people to take the message to the surrounding towns and villages (perhaps because of the location of local synagogues, perhaps partly because of language constraints; see 14:11, 18). **50** Again, despite the fact that so many Jews had followed the apostles, the opponents are simply called the Jews, suggesting that these were influential people who in some sense 'spoke for the community'. These people used all their influence in high places to stir up *persecution* against *the brothers* and eventually had them *expelled.* A later example of a woman *of high standing* was Drusilla, the Jewish wife of the Roman governor Felix (24:24). **51** Shaking *the dust from their feet* was an insult of sorts. In its strongest sense it implied that the people that they were leaving behind were 'contaminated' in some way, but was probably no stronger than the modern 'Good riddance!' **52** This rejection affected neither their spirit nor the Spirit; they remained *filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*

14:1–7 Paul and Barnabas in Iconium. The pattern that manifested itself in Pisidian Antioch above was repeated in Iconium, and Luke recounts it only in summary form (see also 17:1–11; 18:4–17; 19:8–10; 28:17–32). **1** Despite the simplest reading of 13:46, it is clear that Paul and Barnabas did not turn their backs on all the Jews to go directly to Gentiles but allowed each local congregation of Jews to make a decision before going to the Gentiles there. Thus the apostles *went as usual to the Jewish synagogue.* Paul and Barnabas told the good news, and with great effect, but their address is not recorded. **3** Again, those Jews who did not believe stirred up opposition (see 13:50). *Miraculous signs and wonders* confirmed their message to the people in Iconium, but the inhabitants remained divided about the apostles (here and v 14 are the only places that Luke explicitly uses the term 'apostle' for Paul or

Barnabas), and eventually Paul and Barnabas were forced to flee to Lystra and Derbe.

14:8–20a Paul and Barnabas in Lystra. This remarkable story is one of two that show how the apostles dealt with pagan Gentile audiences (here simple village folk, and in 17:16–34 sophisticated Athenians), and it is perhaps significant that in both cases the gospel was initially misunderstood. We may guess from vs 8–11 that Paul's initial preaching (which is not recorded in detail) took place in the open air, perhaps near the city gates (13). From this and the fact that Jewish opposition was from Antioch and Iconium rather than from locals, we may further guess that there was no synagogue for the apostles to begin at.

8–10 In Lystra lived a man who had been *lame from birth.* The seriousness of his affliction, the fact that the apostle is said to have *looked directly at him* and the way in which the man *jumped up* is probably intended to remind the reader of the way that Peter and John healed a lame man in Jerusalem (3:4–8). In this story, however, we are told that when the apostle looked directly at the man, he was able to tell that *he had the faith to be healed.*

11–13 The preaching, and especially the healing, impressed the crowd, but they had the wrong idea and mistook the apostles for gods. There is an ancient story about these same two gods visiting a town in the area. They were not recognized and received only a cool reception. In anger they destroyed the town that had been so inhospitable. With such a folk-tale circulating in this region, it is hardly any wonder that the crowd reacted in the way that they did, bringing forth a bull and wreathes and wanting to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas after a simple healing. The legend also helps to explain why they assumed the visitors were those particular gods rather than a god of healing, as might have been expected from the events themselves. The crowd, when excited, spoke in their native *Lycaonian language.* The language barrier may in part explain why the people so easily misunderstood the apostles' message and why the apostles had so much trouble discouraging the sacrifice (18).

14 Language difficulties may also be why Barnabas and Paul were so slow to understand what was going on. Once they did *they tore their clothes*, which throughout the ancient world was understood as a gesture of deep sorrow or self-humiliation. **15** Their cry of protest was *We too are only men, human like you* (*cf.* 3:12). That *the living God* was the one *who made heaven and earth and sea and everything* is also the way that Paul described and argued for God in more detail at Athens (17:16–34), where the fact that *he let all nations go their own way* is described as 'the times of ignorance'.

19–20a A group of *Jews from Antioch and Iconium* swayed the crowds against Paul and Barnabas. It is not hard to imagine the disillusioned crowd being embarrassed at their foolishness and turning against the innocent apostles. That they thought Paul was dead does not of course mean that he was dead. If this were a resurrection, we would expect Luke to have made more of it (see 9:40–43; also 20:9–12).

14:20b–28 Paul and Barnabas reach Derbe and make the return voyage to Antioch. 20b–21 The mission work in Derbe is told with even more brevity than the Iconium account, even though Paul and Barnabas *won a large number of disciples.* That they were able to make brief return visits to places from which they had specifically been expelled is not impossible, but this opposition was undoubtedly part of their thinking in saying *We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God* (Paul gives similar warnings in his letters; see 2 Thes. 1:5). In each of the churches that they revisited, Paul and Barnabas *appointed elders* (see 1 Tim. 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9 for the qualifications they looked for) and committed them to the task *with prayer and fasting*, just as they themselves had been set aside for their task by the church in Antioch (13:1–3).

28–28 Having returned to Syrian Antioch, there is a real sense of fulfilment provided by recalling their sending out and by pronouncing the work *completed. They gathered the church together* to share with them *all that God had done through them*, including especially how God *had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.*

15:1 – 16:5 Jerusalem Council and the Gentile question settled

This important episode once again shows Luke's willingness to recount not only the church's successes but also its struggles and conflicts. It was, in fact, the very success of the Gentile mission that led up to the crisis here discussed. 1 The people that *came down from Judea to Antioch* and the *sharp dispute and debate* may well have been the same as that mentioned in Gal. 2:12 (see the Note below).

2–6 The modern reader can only appreciate with difficulty how compelling the argument *unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved* would have been to the early Jewish Christians. Centuries of reading the NT writers' solutions have blunted the sharpness of this question for us. These were people who believed that the God of the Scriptures (there was of course no 'New Testament' yet) was the same God who sent Jesus. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, the answer to

Jewish questions, the fulfilment of the Jewish law and prophets, sent by the same God who sent those laws and prophets. How could a person claim to accept Jesus and the Father who sent him, while refusing to listen to the other things that God had said and asked? It must have appeared, even to those Jewish Christians who were prepared to see 'even the Gentiles' (10:45; 11:18) become part of the chosen people, that they should do so completely and become Jews before thinking they could become fulfilled, believing Jews. Even Paul writing to the Romans some while after this controversy writes about the Gentiles as 'honorary Jews', grafted into Judaism (Rom. 11:17–21). Yet, the tide was clearly changing, for when Paul and Barnabas told people on their travels *how the Gentiles had been converted, this news made all the brothers very glad*, which seems a healthier attitude than Peter faced in 11:1–3.

7 There was *much discussion* over this issue and Peter addressed *the apostles and elders*, reminding them of his experiences with Cornelius. He may have been emphasizing that what Paul and Barnabas were doing was no real innovation compared with what God had done through Peter then: *God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.* **8–9** As in chs. 10 and 11, it is clear that at least part of the reason for the unusually dramatic giving of the Spirit to Cornelius and his people was so that the other believers might have been in no doubt that God regarded them as equals: *he made no distinction between us and them* and gave them the Holy Spirit *just as he did to us.* **10–11** Similarly, Peter says *we are saved, just as they are* by *grace* rather than by accepting the *yoke* of obedience to the law. This part of Peter's argument sounds so similar to things that Paul wrote in his letters that we have grounds for wondering whether this was a reflection of a rebuke received and accepted (Gal. 2:11–21).

12 Only after Peter had spoken did the missionaries from Antioch themselves relate their experiences *among the Gentiles.* Once again Barnabas' name is mentioned first. It was he who had first introduced Paul to the believers in Jerusalem (9:26–27).

13–21 James's reply seems to suggest that he was in a position of authority, although Luke gives no details (see 12:17 and 21:18). It is interesting that on a matter of such importance the church proceeded by holding a meeting and making a decision rather than trying to discern God's will be casting lots (as in ch. 1) or by making direct use of prophets who were presumably present and obviously respected (15:22, 32). *The words of the prophets* are phrases and ideas from Jer. 12:15, Am. 9:11–12 and Is. 45:21. James's decision was that they *should not make it difficult for the Gentiles.* It is by grace that they are saved, and no further restrictions are imposed by God. Nonetheless, there were some practical steps that James did want the Gentiles to follow. The reason James gives for this advice is that the Jewish code of behaviour was so well known that Jewish (and perhaps even God-fearing Gentile) believers would have expected some concessions to what they believed to be God's preferences on these matters.

22–29 The letter was delivered to Antioch first, as the objections to Paul and Barnabas's practices arose there. It was not delivered only by the missionaries concerned, but also by Judas and Silas, the latter of whom became a missionary companion of Paul (40; see also 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1). These were sent to *confirm by word of mouth*, since the written word, though more 'permanent', was still often regarded as inferior to a 'living word of testimony'. These witnesses would have been especially useful in Antioch if the objectors of 15:1 were identical with those in Gal. 2 and claimed to have James's authority (see the Note below on the relationship of this episode with Galatians). The letter makes clear that the original objectors had gone out *without our authorisation.*

We have seen from the early chapters of Acts that when Jews became Christians, they nonetheless remained Jews and were called Jewish believers. The question here had been whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised and thus also become 'Jewish believers' (15:1). The answer of the council is a clear no. Thus there is no mention in James's speech, or in the letter, that circumcision was necessary. But that first question was easily tied in with another: if serving the true God had certain ethical implications (as everyone of the time would have known; 15:21) then could these safely be ignored by the new Gentile Christians? The answer given by the council is thus twofold: Gentile Christians need not become Jews, but neither may they continue to act like typical Gentiles.

For modern readers, the riddle of James's list is not only why some things are included but also why other important ethical imperatives are omitted. For surely Gentile believers would have been expected not to steal, for example. It is the perceived 'typical Gentile behaviour' that explains the contents of the list – all believers should act more like servants of the true God than like ordinary Gentiles of the day.

Things which are cultural *requirements* for Jews were not necessary for the salvation of Gentiles, but their observance would have made it much easier for all types of believers to associate, worship and eat with each other. In

addition, it would have also served as a witness to non-believers that this person had changed and was now following the living God. James and the council repeatedly spoke in terms of a burden placed upon the Gentile believers (15:19, 24, 28) but it is a light burden. The letter concludes, *You will do well to avoid these things.* Paul expands on this in 1 Corinthians, where his explanation is that while everything is 'permissible', not everything is 'beneficial' (1 Cor. 10:23).

31 The decision was well received in Antioch, as were Judas and Silas themselves. 35 After a time in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas decided to *go back and visit* the places they had been to originally to see how they were doing. 37–41 Unfortunately, this led to a disagreement between the old friends Barnabas and Paul, such a *sharp disagreement* that they split up over it. It concerned *John, also called Mark*, whom Paul regarded as a deserter (see 13:13 and above on 12:5). Luke did not shrink from recording this incident and said nothing about the reconciliation that we know from Paul's letters took place later; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Phm. 24; all three letters also mention Luke within a few verses! Silas (16:47; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1), who was sometimes called Silvanus, set off with Paul.

16:1–5 Another helper of Paul's who joined the work at this time was Timothy. Of mixed race, he was for some reason not circumcised as an infant. But the Jews reckon Jewishness through the mother's line rather than the father's, so Timothy became circumcised in order not to seem a Jew who had rejected God's covenant. If his parentage had been reversed, Timothy would not have been regarded as a Jew and things might well have been different. Circumcision itself was a matter of indifference to Paul, as long as Gentiles were not being told that their salvation depended upon it (see Gal. 5:6; 6:15). The agreement reached in Jerusalem was not an easy one, and a dispute could easily have arisen again. Saying that Gentiles did not need to become Jews was one thing, but if Paul was seen to be teaching that Jews shouldn't act like Jews either, there would have been trouble (see below on 21:20–25, where it is clear that despite such precautions, many Jews believed that Paul was against the law, even for Jews). As it was, *the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.*

Note. The Council of Jerusalem and the letter to the Galatians. Working out a chronology of Paul's life from the letters and Acts is not as simple as one would think. It has been compounded by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars who have come to doubt Luke's reliability, and who therefore try to construct a framework purely from the letters (which of course were never intended to provide a Pauline biography). Information from Acts is then fitted into that preconstructed frame. Thus, Acts 15 has frequently been thought to be Luke's fanciful elaboration of Gal. 2:1–10, the rather significant differences between the reports being explained by a combination of Luke's ignorance of the real events and his desire to portray the church as united on the matter.

The most satisfactory solution is to identify Gal. 2:1–10 with the visit mentioned in Acts 11:30, and the incident in Gal. 2:11–14 as being part of the reason for the meeting recorded in Acts 15. This meeting, had, of course, not yet taken place when Paul wrote Galatians (and therefore he could not solve that church's problem by referring them to the letter and decision). This solution is not without its own difficulties, but these can be more readily explained without resorting to accusing either Paul or Luke of falsehoods. For a more detailed discussion see I. H. Marshall, *Acts*, pp. 244–247, and C. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Mohr, 1989), chs. 6 and 7.

16:6 – 18:22 The second journey becomes a missionary journey

16:6–10 Divine steering. Somewhere along the way, the trip to strengthen the churches became a missionary venture, but one with a few false starts. 6 They travelled through *the region of Phrygia and Galatia* or 'the Phrygian region of the province of Galatia' (see also 18:23). They had intended to preach *in the province of Asia* (roughly modern Turkey) but were kept from doing so *by the Holy Spirit.* 7 Again, when they tried to enter Bithynia, *the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to*, so they *went down to Troas.* The unique phrase *the Spirit of Jesus* may imply a vision of the Lord. On the other hand, Paul was travelling with Silas, a man known as a prophet (15:32), and the directions may have come through him. 9 It is Paul himself who received more positive leading in Troas, when during the night he *had a vision of man of Macedonia* asking for help. 10 Having come to the conclusion that this was no mere dream, the party prepared to leave. The author himself appears to have joined the group in Troas, as indicated by the use of the pronoun *we* for the first time in the book. The so-called 'we-passages' are 16:10–17; 20:5 – 21:18; 27:1 – 28:16.

16:11–40 Paul and Silas in Philippi. 11–12 The detailed log of the journey is typical of the latter part of Acts. *Philippi*, though not the capital of *that district of Macedonia*, was a Roman colony and its occupants enjoyed the same privileges as the citizens of Rome itself.

13 The phrase *we expected to find a place of*

prayer would normally refer to a synagogue, but it is often suggested that without the mandatory ten men, a proper congregation could not be established. Paul and his companions nevertheless kept to their custom and spoke first to the Jewish and God-fearing *women who had gathered there* for prayer to the living God (see also 16:16). **14–15** One of the women was named *Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira.* Her name indicates a servant or slave background, but the fact that she had a *household* and could invite people to her *house* suggests that she was a single freed-woman of means. *A worshipper of God* probably means that she was a Gentile who had already been attracted to the Jewish God (see on 10:2). On this journey Paul had the influential God-fearing women on his side, unlike some incidents on the previous missionary journey (13:50; see also 17:4, 12, 34).

Luke's phrase *the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message* (see also Lk. 24:45) is a lovely way of giving credit to the Lord for successful preaching. Paul was no 'irresistible orator' any more than Peter was a 'spiritual healer'. That the Lord was responsible for the successes does not detract from Paul's (or our) responsibility to speak, much less the hearers' responsibility to repent and turn to the true God. Although Luke only mentions that Lydia's heart was opened, he goes on to tell us that *she and the members of her household were baptised.* These 'household' texts are often seen as indicating infant baptism but there is no mention of children here. The validity of infant baptism is best discussed on the basis of other passages of Scripture (see on 16:31–34). The forcefulness of Lydia's invitation may have been due to strong taboos against Jews accepting hospitality from Gentiles. Here they would be going to the house of a single woman as well! That the party were *persuaded* shows that Paul was willing to practise what he preached: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). The church may have continued to meet in her house (16:40).

16 Even though they now had a base at Lydia's house, the Christians continued *going to the place of prayer, i.e.* where the Philippian Jews met for worship (16:13). The *slave girl* whom they met on the way there one day *had a spirit by which she predicted the future.* **17** As happened frequently in the gospels, the evil spirit correctly identified the spiritual forces behind the Lord's work (*cf.* Lk. 4:34, 41; 8:28). In the ancient world generally, one was thought to have power over something if one knew its real name, thus it is often argued that the evil spirits tried to gain this type of control over Jesus and the disciples. Here, as elsewhere, however, it seems that their remarks were directed at the public and should be seen, therefore, as either attempts to 'blow the cover' on what they assume is God's undercover work, or as an almost involuntary acknowledgment of the authority of Jesus over them (on this whole matter see the curious episode in 19:15). Some have argued that the wording of v 17 was capable of misinterpretation by pagans, but that was also true of virtually any short summary of the Christian message, even the missionaries' own statements and actions (14:11; 17:18b). **18** Over the course of *days* Paul would have had a chance to see that what might have been taken for a profession of faith was not followed by real evidence of conversion. Paul then addressed *the spirit* directly, commanding it, *in the name of Jesus Christ . . . to come out of her.*

19 How perplexed and angry *the owners of the slave girl* must have been! After all, they hadn't done anything to Paul and Silas. If anything, the girl's words might have been construed as helping. But they found *their hope of making money* left with the spirit! (Luke has probably used the same verb in vs 18 and 19 on purpose.) Several free, significant people were making a living through the exploitation of one so insignificant slave. But in Paul's mind, even free publicity for the gospel from a popularly acclaimed source was not sufficient compensation for spiritual domination, even of someone so insignificant to that society as a slave girl.

20–24 The accusation that the slave's owners made in front of the magistrates omitted specific mention of their financial inconvenience, however, and capitalized instead on anti-Jewish sentiment with general charges of 'un-Roman' activities and causing an uproar. When *the crowd joined in the attack*, it was perhaps inevitable that the decision should go against the foreigners, who were *stripped . . . severely flogged* and *thrown into prison*, where they were securely locked up and bound.

25 The picture of Paul and Silas *praying and singing hymns* while clamped in *stocks* in their damp, dark cell is an enduring one. Little wonder *the other prisoners were listening to them*: whether they were regarded as holy men or just lunatics, no-one could accuse them of being dull! **26** It is unlikely that Paul and Barnabas were praying for their release, since they didn't make use of it when offered (see v 28 and especially v 37 below), but the other prisoners could hardly fail to have regarded the *violent earthquake* that threw *all the prison doors* open and loosened *everybody's chains* as a supernatural answer to Paul and Silas' midnight session. **27** That the jailer *drew his sword and was about to kill himself* at the thought of the escape of all his prisoners is not surprising (see

12:18–19; 27:42). **28** Paul may have taken some deliberate control over the rest of the prisoners (as he seems to have taken up the leader's role as a prisoner on board ship in ch. 27), or they may just have been too frightened to leave when he and Silas were staying. Either way, Paul was able to prevent the suicide and announced that all the prisoners were still present.

29–34 The account of the salvation of the jailer is full of irony: that he should receive wholeness at the hands of his prisoners; that he should get water and wash their wounds and they in turn use the water to baptize him; and of course the picture of a jailer inviting two prisoners *into his house* to *set a meal before them* is simply amazing. It should be noted that here the other members of the family, or household, are said to have heard the message and to have *come to believe in God* (34; see also 11:14; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16). Because of this and because of the lack of specific mention of young children, these texts are not decisive in the debate about infant baptism.

35–36 It is not clear whether the magistrates ordered the release of Paul and Silas because they felt that the beating and night in prison were sufficient punishment or whether they too had been impressed by the earthquake of the previous evening. **37** In any case, much to everyone's surprise, Paul who, having been freed by God through an earthquake stayed in the jail, now, having been freed by his judges, again refused to depart! **38–39** The magistrates, however, did not see the humour in the situation. The revelation that Paul and Silas were *Roman citizens* caused them to become *alarmed* because they had broken Roman laws in that they had flogged and imprisoned Romans, and with a trial so cursory that they hadn't a chance to find out about the citizenship. Irony is again in evidence: it was not Paul or Silas but the Philippians themselves who acted in an 'un-Roman way' towards Roman citizens (see 16:21). Paul's citizenship will become a turning point again in 25:1–12. **40** After revisiting Lydia and the rest of the young church in her house, Paul and Silas agreed to the magistrates' request and *left the city.*

17:1–9 Paul and Silas in Thessalonica. **1** Travelling along the great Roman highway in this area, the Via Egnatia, Paul and Silas passed through several other important Macedonian cities and arrived at the capital of the province, where, unlike Philippi, *there was a Jewish synagogue.* **2–3** *As his custom was,* Paul went into the synagogue first of all, despite his earlier rejections in synagogues in other communities (see *e.g.* 13:33–48). Luke's claim that *he reasoned with them* rather than merely 'preaching at them' is upheld by the two-step argument: first, that according to the Scriptures, the Messiah (or 'Christ' in Gk.) would have *to suffer and rise from the dead,* and secondly, that *Jesus* of Nazareth was in fact *the Christ.* **4** Some Jews were won over, as were some God-fearers (see on 10:2) and some of the prominent women, but the more influential members of the Jewish community (*the Jews* in contrast to *some of the Jews* in the previous verse; see 13:43, 45) became *jealous* of their success. Their plan was secretly to begin a small riot with some bad characters they rounded up for the purpose, so that they could accuse the Christians, including Jason, with whom Paul and Silas were staying, of causing civil unrest. The opponents' knowledge of the story so far, which they twisted slightly in their presentation (6–7), probably came out of their conversations with Paul and Silas in the synagogue. **9** The result of the meeting was less agreeable than it may look to a modern reader. By putting Jason and the others *on bail* is probably meant that these local Christians were forced to give security and pledge Paul and Silas' departure or be subject to severe penalties. It is probably this decision that he refers to as the work of Satan in 1 Thes. 2:17–18, 'But, brothers, when we were torn away from you . . . we made every effort to see you . . . we wanted to come to you . . . but Satan stopped us.'

17:10–15 Paul and Silas in Berea. The pattern of 17:1–7 repeats in Berea, except that *the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians,* not because they all agreed with Paul and Silas, but because those who did not agree did not act out of jealousy, but *examined the Scriptures . . . to see if what Paul said was true.* And as before, the word planted bore fruit. **13** The opposition of the Thessalonians reached into Berea, however, and their *agitating the crowds* led the Christians to send the 'chief trouble-maker', Paul, away. Silas and Timothy stayed for a time in Berea.

17:16–35 Paul in Athens. This episode, especially the great address on Mars Hill (or *the Areopagus*), is often pointed out as a brilliant example of missionary strategy. Paul, who used the OT so masterfully in speeches to the Jews (see 13:16–41; 17:2), now quoted from pagan poetry to prove some of his points (28). Some, indeed, fear that he appeared to be arguing that the living God was identical to one of the gods worshipped in Athens and commemorated with a statue (23). It has even been argued that Luke meant to show that this attempt by Paul to use worldly strategies and worldly wisdom was a failure, and that Paul changed his style in the next city he visited, Corinth. This would put a very particular emphasis on the freshness of the decision mentioned in 1 Cor. 2:2, 'For I

resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.' But far from endorsing paganism, this speech is actually a very strong and very Jewish attack on the smug complacency of the Athenians. Paul used his knowledge of Athens and its culture not in order to agree with them, but to point out their failings all the more clearly.

16–17 Paul broke his usual pattern of going first to the synagogue (9:20–25; 13:5, 14, 46; 14:1; 17:1–2, 10; 18:4, 19; 19:8) because *he was greatly distressed that the city was full of idols.* Thus he pursued a parallel course: reasoning *in the synagogue* as well as *in the market-place* (the natural gathering place for those who would discuss such matters as philosophy or listen to the debates). **18** And so it was that Paul found himself in a dispute with *Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.* These had very different practical approaches to life. Epicureans taught that one should pursue fulfilment and actively avoid displeasure. The role of the gods in a person's life was seen as strictly marginal. The Stoics thought that one attained fulfilment by accepting the course of events, including pain and suffering. These should be endured quietly, almost gratefully, since they are part of nature and are controlled by an impersonal divine necessity or 'fate'. Neither school was bound up with the many gods and idols, and monotheism (though not full-blown Judaism) would not have been regarded as unlikely in theory by either philosophy.

The debates in the market-place led to more misunderstanding than enlightenment. At best, Paul was regarded as a *babbler*, or more literally, 'someone who collects scraps', since they would have found echoes of bits and pieces of their systems in his beliefs. At worst, Paul was accused of a serious crime: *advocating foreign gods* (see, however, on v 21). This was the very crime of which the great philosopher Socrates had been accused, also in Athens, some 450 years earlier, and which led to his death. The Athenians in the market-place misunderstood Paul's message fundamentally: they thought that 'Jesus' and 'resurrection' referred to two gods, perhaps interpreting these terms as 'Healing' and 'Restoration'. **19–20** *They took him* is a good translation of the original, which carries the hint of force – the polite phrasing of the question that follows is belied by the fact that his appearance at the *meeting* was not in the nature of an invitation but a command. *The Areopagus* is Greek for 'Mars Hill'. It is a place-name in the first instance, but was also the term for the council which met there. Thus we speak of 'Washington's' response to some crisis, using a place-name for the institutions it houses. Paul probably did not appear before the council meeting in its formal and official capacity, since the public (including women) seem to have been present (33–34). **21** Despite the seriousness of the charge of 'preaching foreign gods' (18), the Athenians were more interested in being titillated by this exotic teaching than in preventing its spread. It is they who were 'collectors of scraps' (*cf.* v 18).

22–23 Paul's speech is best regarded as a reply to the charge of 'preaching foreign gods' (18) rather than as an initial presentation of the gospel (which had already happened; 17–18). Such a defence would normally have begun with a positive statement, intended to put the listeners in a friendly frame of mind (see *e.g.* the opening of Tertullus, a professional speaker, 24:2–4), but Paul used very guarded and ambiguous phrases, and on reflection even his introduction becomes a veiled attack. The observation *in every way you are very religious* was in itself a neutral one, and could bear either the meaning of 'religious' in a positive sense, or more negatively, along the lines of 'superstitious'.

The altar with the inscription *TO AN UNKNOWN GOD* and the legend behind its establishment provided the backdrop for the entire speech. Once, legend had it, there was a terrible plague in the city of Athens, and attempts to appease the gods and stop the plague had no effect. One of the wise men of the day brought a flock of sheep to the top of Mars Hill and released them. Wherever these sheep stopped, an altar was set up to an 'anonymous god' and the animal was sacrificed. This course of action was allegedly effective and the city returned to health.

When Luke records that Paul said that *what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you*, it appears to some readers he was saying that these pagans were doing well – that, in their ignorance, they were worshipping the right God all along and didn't know it. This is, however, far from the intent, and three points should be borne in mind. First, this forms Paul's first line of defence to the charge against him, for how can he be accused of preaching a foreign god contrary to their religions, if their religion itself incorporates worship to gods they do not know? Secondly, the translation is misleading. The emphasis in the sentence is not on the identity of the 'unknown god' but on the ignorance of the worship. Paul, in the city of 'the lovers of wisdom', focused on the ignorance they admitted about the identity of God. Thirdly, although this first paragraph of the speech seems to have a positive thrust, it must be taken in the context of the rest of the speech; Paul was in effect saying, 'Yes, but . . .'.

24–29 The second part of the speech shifted

more obviously to the attack on idol-worship, using arguments which find their parallels in Jewish thought and writing on the matter. Paul moved on from their admitted ignorance about the true God's identity, to arguing that they were also ignorant about where God dwells (24), they were wrong about what kind of worship God wanted from them (25–27), and they were wrong about how God can be thought of or represented (28–29). In short, everything about their 'religiousness' was in error except for their admission of ignorance.

Paul's statement that God's intention is that people *would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us* again might look as though the pagan has only to reach out and touch God. In fact, the language is that of tragedy. The grammar reinforces that this is God's wish, rather than what happens. The word used for the 'seeking' is a very graphic one, often translated 'groping' in the sense of 'blindly feeling about for'. The negative result is clearly seen in the final clause: 'though he is not far' rather than 'since he is not far'. The point being made is not 'he is close, so people can find him' but rather, 'people cannot find him, but that isn't because he is far away'. A more literal translation of this passage might thus be: 'they should seek after God, as if perhaps they might grope around to find him, even though he is not far from each of us.'

Although the NIV sets it in inverted commas, the phrase '*in him we live and move and have our being*' may be more of a pagan stock phrase than an exact quotation, since words to this effect are found in several pagan writers. The phrase *we are his offspring* seems most likely to be from a poem to Zeus by the astronomer Aratus, although it is possible that Paul came by this quotation in the work of a Jewish apologist. Paul's point is not that the pagan poets knew a lot about what was right, but rather that pagan thought and practice were inconsistent and self-contradictory.

30–31 The final part of the speech can only be seen correctly in the context of the whole dispute. It is not intended primarily as a theological outworking of the difficult question of the status of those who had never heard the gospel. The speech purports to concern primarily the altar to the 'unknown god' (see on vs 22–23). This altar was used as a sort of precautionary worship; service was offered to this unknown god in order that the city might be spared from catastrophe. Faced with a man who argued that all these precautions were in error and therefore presumably ineffective, any good pagan would have demanded, 'If we are so wrong, then why is there no catastrophe, no plague?' It is this question to which the speech responds. That there was no catastrophe was not due, as they thought, to the effectiveness of their idol-worship, but rather to God's mercy in overlooking their ignorance (note the return to the theme of their ignorance). God now wants *all people everywhere to repent*; the catastrophe will not be held back for ever: *he has set a day when he will judge.* The somewhat limited description of Jesus as *a man he has appointed* is probably an attempt to avoid the impression that Jesus was just another god (see on v 18). Thus, too, rather than using the abstract noun, resurrection, Paul clearly spelled out what he meant by it – all too clearly, it seems.

32 Once the Athenians understood what Paul really meant by 'resurrection', hecklers brought his address to an abrupt halt. The immortality of the divine soul was one thing, but that anyone could believe in the resuscitation of corpses would have seemed to most Greeks simply naïve and absurd; thus, *some of them sneered. We will hear you again on this subject* may have been genuine or sarcastic, but there was another famous incident in which the Areopagus council avoided making a decision in a murder case by temporarily adjourning the trial – for 100 years! **34** A few people did respond positively, however, among them a member of the council, *Dionysius.*

18:1–17 Paul in Corinth. **1–3** In Corinth, Paul met some people who were to become lifelong friends, *Aquila* and *Priscilla* (see Rom. 16:3 and 2 Tim. 4:19, where, as in 18:18–19 below, Priscilla is given the more prominent position). They had much in common with Paul: they were visitors in Corinth; Jews by background; tentmakers by trade; and they were probably Christians already when Paul met them. **4–8** As was his custom (see on 13:46), Paul preached first to the people in the synagogue, both Jews and interested Greeks. Although some Jews did believe (in this case *Crispus, the synagogue ruler and his entire household*), when the congregation as a whole had rejected the message Paul *shook out his clothes* (similar to 'shaking his feet'; see on 13:51) and turned from them with the words *From now on I will go to the Gentiles* (but see 18:19). *Titius Justus* was probably one of those Greeks who were interested in the Jewish religion and encountered Paul in the synagogue. (see on 10:2).

9–11 Despite the presence of friends in the city, the stay in Corinth was to be a very testing time for Paul, and the Lord spoke to him *in a vision* giving him words of encouragement. **12** When the *attack* did come, it was before the *court of Gallio.* As the Lord had promised, however, Paul came to no harm as a result. **13–15** The accusation and the decision indicate

the precarious state that the Christians found themselves in with regard to Roman law. Judaism was an allowable religion, and if Christianity was a sect of Judaism as Gallio seems to imply, then it was allowed and even protected under Roman law. If, however, it was a separate religion altogether, it could be in for closer scrutiny and its members would receive no such religious freedoms. Although the incident came to nothing in itself, it provided a precedent which was very favourable for Paul and the Christians: they had nothing to fear from fair hearings before Roman courts. **17** Groundless prosecution was a serious problem in the Roman world at this time, and during Paul's lifetime laws were being passed to discourage the practice of accusing enemies in order to have them locked up for a time when one had no real case against them.

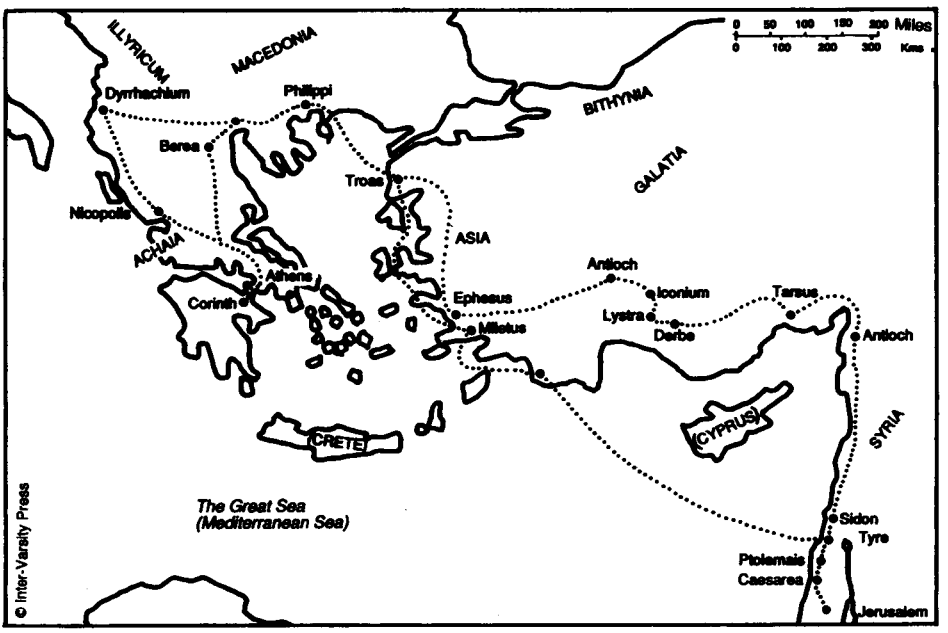
18:18–22 Paul visits Ephesus and returns to Antioch. A brief visit to Ephesus, which was to become an important mission centre on Paul's next journey (19:1–41), ended Paul's second missionary travels. **18** That *Paul had his hair cut off* as part of a vow he had taken probably relates to a form of the Nazirite vow (see Nu. 6:1–21), since it is known to have been practised by the early Christians (Acts 21:23–26). It was offered in gratefulness for deliverance from danger (9–10) and specifically involved shaving the head. It was probably Paul's expression of his gratitude to God in a way that was culturally appropriate for him.

19 Typically, upon arriving in Ephesus, Paul *went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews* (despite 18:6). On Paul's missionary pattern see 13:5 and 46. **20** On this occasion, however, Paul did not spend enough time there to arouse much interest. **21** His promise to *come back if it is God's will* is fulfilled in the next chapter. **22** Thus Paul arrived back in Antioch and concluded his second set of missionary visits.

18:23 – 20:12 The third journey and the decision to go to Jerusalem

18:23–28 Priscilla, Aquila and Apollos. The account of the third journey of Paul begins with a brief aside about Priscilla and Aquila, who had remained in Ephesus when Paul returned to Antioch (19–22). **23** In a way similar to the second voyage, this journey began with a trip through *the region of Galatia and Phrygia* (not identical to the phrase in 16:6). And, as before, the purpose of the trip at the outset was pastoral rather than evangelistic: Paul was *strengthening all the disciples.*

24 Alexandria in Egypt was among the most important cities in the Roman Empire. The large Jewish population there had a reputation for scholarly pursuits, producing both the influential Greek translation of the OT called the Septuagint and the great philosopher Philo. Apollos, *a learned man with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures*, may have seen himself in this



Paul's Aegean ministry.

tradition. **25** Apollos *spoke with great fervour* (lit. 'fervent in spirit') and *taught about Jesus accurately*, but although he *had been instructed in the way of the Lord*, somehow he *knew only of the baptism of John*. The 'disciples' Paul encountered later in Ephesus (19:1–7) similarly had received only the baptism of John. Apollos, however, knew and taught about Jesus, whereas the impression one gets from 19:4–5 is that those disciples had never heard of the fulfilment of John's hope for the one who would come after him. **26** Like Paul, Apollos seems to have gone first to the synagogues. That Priscilla and Aquila, on hearing Apollos, *explained to him the way of God more accurately* implies that though his teaching was accurate (25), it was based on incomplete knowledge. **27–28** Letters of recommendation were commonly used at this time to secure acceptance (see, *e.g.* Rom. 16: 1–2). Apollos proved very popular with the Corinthian Christians, both Jews and Gentiles (see 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–5, 22; 16:12).

19:1–22 Paul's ministry in Ephesus. The first episode in Paul's long stay (almost three years) in Ephesus was an encounter with some followers of John the Baptist. John's fame had evidently spread far beyond Palestine (on his importance see 1:21–22; 13:16–25; 18:23–28 and Lk. 20:5–7). The term *some disciples* usually refers to Christians, but since these people had not received the Holy Spirit, it is more likely that they are to be regarded as disciples of John the Baptist, on 'the Way' but not very far along. **2** Since the Holy Spirit formed an important part of John's own teaching, the reply of these men that they had *not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit* probably means that they had heard a version of John's message rather than John himself, and the reports that they had heard concentrated on his ethical teaching rather than his role as preparing the way (for an example of his teaching see Lk. 3:7–14). **3** These people had received a baptism of repentance, which was in itself a good thing, but unlike Apollos (18–25), they did not seem to know anything about Jesus. We are not told that Apollos needed to be rebaptized (Priscilla and Aquila certainly would have been able to baptize him, if Ananias could baptize Paul, Acts 9: 17–19). The probable difference was that Apollos knew about and trusted in the Messiah (having accurate, if incomplete knowledge about him, 18:25–26) and saw his baptism in connection with that faith, whereas for these disciples, the baptism was merely a pledge of good behaviour. They still needed to be *baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.*

6 As a sign to all concerned of their acceptance, there came a very public display of the reception of the Holy Spirit (see 8:15–17; 10:44–46), *and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.* Whether such manifestations should be regarded as typical or normal is not an easy question to answer. Luke certainly does not mention such gifts at all the conversions that he records, but then again, neither does he ever say that 'such and such a person did *not* manifest any gifts'. Whatever we may believe about the 'normal' conversion, Luke seems to have emphasized mention of these gifts and the reception of the Holy Spirit in his account primarily where he felt that the church or his readers needed to be assured that the group to which the converts belonged were really acceptable to the Lord, *e.g.* the Samaritans (ch. 8), the Gentiles (ch. 10) and these disciples of John. As mentioned in the Commentary on those other passages, the way that Luke records these events suggests that for him they functioned as much as a sign to the missionaries as to the converts themselves.

8–10 Paul's usual missionary pattern (see on 13:46) was also followed in Ephesus: to the synagogue first, then to the Gentiles. In Ephesus, he had daily use of *the lecture hall of Tyrannus*, probably in the hours it was not required for the usual lectures. After three months of meeting in the synagogue, the believers probably would have had their own place for worship, but the lecture hall would have been used, as was the synagogue, for evangelism.

11–12 The next few stories describe the confrontation of the power of the living God with a city that was deeply interested in magic and the occult. It is in this setting that Luke records what he calls *extraordinary miracles*, and one can readily forgive him the implication that, by comparison, other miracles are 'ordinary'. That God healed through Paul does not surprise us, that God can heal at a distance does not surprise us, what surprises us is that he used such 'props' as *handkerchiefs and aprons* that Paul touched. But these props were probably employed for the sake of the expectations of the people, rather than being a necessary or effective part of the healing. In the same way, Jesus allowed a woman to be healed by touching cloth that was in contact with his body (Lk. 8:43–48). The incarnation has always been about God limiting himself in dramatic, nearly absurd, ways in order to communicate to a fallen and absurd people. See also 5:12–16 on the healing effect of Peter's shadow and the note there.

13–16 As if in contrast to the previous story, which could be construed as 'magic', Luke presents this attempt by non-Christian Jews to harness the power of God (see also Lk. 11:19, 24–26) through the use of the name of Jesus (see Acts 8:18). *Sceva* may have been of a high

priestly family, but may have used the title *chief priest* as a form of self-advertisement. Things associated with the ancient 'exotic' Jewish religion held a certain appeal to many Gentiles, and Hebrew names and words are found on pagan magical scrolls. The formula *in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches*, may have been an attempt to make clear to the evil spirit just which Jesus they were invoking since the name was a common one among Jews. This particular evil spirit did not, however, need such information; he had heard of both Jesus and Paul, but not of the seven sons of Sceva! And, proving that they had no power over him, he gave them *such a beating that they ran.* Aside from the comical overtones of the story, there is, for Luke, a crucial point to make here: contrary to common belief at the time (which is perhaps unconsciously reflected even in Christian phrasing about exorcism) it is not the *name* of Jesus that works in a mechanical way over the powers. The name is not a 'key' of some sort. If we are channels of his power, it is not because we know of his name (this the demons know and tremble) but because we know him and, more importantly, are known by him (see also the note on 5:12–16).

17–20 With such events going on at Ephesus, it is little wonder that the people were in awe and *the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honour.* The burning of magical scrolls and public confession of sorcerers is the Gentile equivalent of the 'many priests in Jerusalem' who believed (6:7). *Fifty thousand drachmas* was an outrageous total, showing clearly the Ephesians' fascination with such things. The drachma was a silver coin representing the average wage for a day, thus this total represents over 135 years' wages.

21–22 The success of the church coupled with Paul's desire to accompany the gifts of the Gentile churches (see 24:17; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9) helped him to begin preparations for a trip to Jerusalem, which he intended to follow with a trip to Rome. The Greek of v 21 has the word 'spirit', but it is not clear whether Paul's own spirit is meant, or the Holy Spirit. In the light of 20:22, however, it is likely that the phrase translated simply *Paul decided* should really be something like 'Paul decided in the Spirit'.

19:23–45 The riot in Ephesus. The amount of money involved in the scroll-burning (19) must have in itself caused a stir among the people. Those who depended upon the sale of religious objects for their livelihood would have cause to think through the implications of a successful growing Christian church. If Luke portrays the Jewish leaders as becoming opponents of Christianity for petty reasons like personal jealousy, he also clearly portrays pagan opponents in matching colours. Similar financial reasons behind the treatment of Christians are found in 16:19 and also 24:26, where it is implied that only a bribe stood between Paul and freedom.

23–27 The *disturbance* arose through the speech of Demetrius. His motivation clearly had financial roots: *we receive a good income from this business.* Paul must have preached in Ephesus along the anti-idolatry lines found in the Athens speech (see on 17:16–35): *he says that man-made gods are no gods at all* (see also 1 Cor. 8:4–6). The most effective part of Demetrius's speech, however, was his tactic of rationalizing and turning what really worried him, the financial threat, into more socially acceptable 'nobler' concerns like the pride of the trade, and even civic pride and religious loyalty (which should perhaps have been the first consideration).

28–34 The realism of Luke's account is striking. Were he merely making up propaganda for Christianity there is no way he would have missed this opportunity for his hero Paul to score an oratorical victory here as in Athens. Instead, Gaius and Aristarchus were seized, and Paul was not permitted to go. The description of *some of the officials of the province* as *friends of Paul* is intriguing. From the way Luke wrote, it seems unlikely that these were Christians, but they may have been interested parties, as Sergius Paulus was at first (13:6–8). The description of mob behaviour in v 32 is perfect. Perhaps the Jews pushed forward *Alexander . . . to make a defence* (33) in order to distance themselves from the Christians. The pagan crowd may not otherwise have been able to distinguish between these two groups of 'atheists', as Jews and Christians, who both denied the existence of the gods, were called.

35–41 Very like Gamaliel in 5:33–40, the city clerk was not 'on the side of the Christians', yet in both cases their faith in what they did believe had a calming effect on the opponents. Both argued, in essence, that events would take care of themselves. Where the troublemaker Demetrius had rendered selfish considerations noble, the clerk in his speech showed the crowd that their unnecessary acts were rash and dangerous. He cleverly first addressed and agreed with their civic and religious pride and implied that those who did not accept the *undeniable* 'facts' about Artemis were merely ignorant rather than likely to be dangerous, unless they had specifically *robbed temples or blasphemed.* (There are cases where temples in the ancient world housed an *image, which fell from heaven*, or what we today would call a meteorite.) The clerk then cut through the veneer

of civic and religious pride and directly addressed Demetrius's real concern, the financial grievances. He did not deny that this was a legitimate concern but pointed out that *the courts are open* if he or anyone else wished to *press charges.* With all the problems addressed, the clerk went on to point out to the crowd that their meeting, which no longer could serve any use, put them (still including and aligning himself with them) *in danger of being charged with rioting.* His speech was as successful as it was brilliant, and he was thus able to end the incident and dismiss *the assembly.*

20:1–6 Paul travels through Macedonia and Greece. It is only after this *uproar* that Paul set out for Macedonia and Greece. His travels were marked by *words of encouragement* and opposition. The narrator himself seems to have joined the party at Philippi, as indicated by the use of *we* in v 6 (see 16:10–17; 20:5 – 21:18; 27:1 – 28:16). Many of the names in the list of travelling companions can be found in the 'greetings' in Paul's own letters (see *e.g.* Rom. 16:21–23).

20:7–12 Paul and the Eutychus incident at Troas. This is one of the occasional glimpses of early church life that Luke gives us. **7** This is the first time we hear that the Christians met on *the first day of the week* for the purpose of breaking bread together (see 2:42). Because Paul intended to leave the next day his talk went on until midnight. **8–9** Mention of the *many lamps* suggests that the fumes may have contributed to Eutychus's drowsiness. There is no doubt about the main reason for his nodding off, however, as *Paul talked on and on.* As a result of his long fall, Eutychus was *picked up dead.* The language is not ambiguous (as it is in 14:19–20, where people left Paul for dead), and it is unlikely that Luke meant anything other than that a miraculous raising from the dead (along the lines of 9:36–43) took place. **10** The resuscitation took a rather dramatic form, in line with the miracles of Elijah and Elisha (1 Ki. 17:21; 2 Ki. 4:32–33), and when the healing was accomplished Paul announced gladly, *He's alive!* **11** Undaunted, they now broke the bread, *i.e.* had communion, and Paul picked up where he'd left off, *talking until daylight.* After all that had happened, one would imagine, everyone stayed awake!

20:13–38Paul's farewell in Miletus: the end of an era

This is the one record we have in Acts of Paul's speech to people who were already Christians. But it is unusual in being a 'farewell address' in a fairly stereotyped form, complete with the expected, though unnecessary, statements of self-defence which seem to have been expected. (For a parallel see 1 Sa. 12:2–5; Samuel was unlikely to have ever been accused of stealing a donkey!) On the speeches in general, see on 2:14.

13–17 The stages of the journey from Troas to Miletus are outlined in another of the 'we' passages (see the Introduction and Commentary on 16:10), containing typically detailed information of routes and stops. There is an apparent contradiction between Paul's decision *to sail past Ephesus* because he was *in a hurry* and his having then taken the time to *send word to Ephesus to the elders of the church.* This probably had something to do either with the scheduled sailings or with a desire to avoid some anticipated trouble in Ephesus or Asia which might have delayed him further.

18–21 The speech amounts to a summary of the nearly three years Paul spent in Ephesus. He never *hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful,* and did so both *publicly and from house to house . . . to both Jews and Greeks.*

22–27 Either the decision to go to Jerusalem (19:21) was not merely Paul's own, or the Holy Spirit had confirmed the decision to Paul in some way, for to the elders he used strong language: *compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem,* although the Holy Spirit had warned him of *prison and hardships,* perhaps through prophets *in every city* (see 21:4, 11). These warnings have some ambiguity about them, for although Paul said he knew that none of his audience would ever see him again, he also said that he would be going to Jerusalem not knowing what would happen to him there. Divine guidance was not a crystal clear matter even for the apostle Paul. Whatever was in store for him, it did not include further work in this area of the world (Rom. 15:23, 31–32). This section of the speech closes with more of the self-defence language typical of the farewell speech: *I am innocent of the blood of all men.*

28–31 From his own history and future, Paul turned to discussing the role of the leaders of the church, although he continued to use his own behaviour as an example. First, he dealt with the matter of false teachers. If the church was a *flock* and the leaders were like *shepherds,* then the false teachers would be like *savage wolves.* Paul warned that these false teachers would come in to the church, but some would also arise *from your own number.* Although Paul said that he knew this would happen after his departure, it also had happened during his lifetime, and perhaps even at Ephesus. Thus *for three years* (counting the partial third year there) he warned them *with tears.*

The word *overseers* (sometimes translated 'bishops') should probably not be taken as a technical term yet, since elsewhere these people

are called 'elders'. At the time that the speech was delivered the terms were probably interchangeable.

32–35 The Lord had made clear that his witnesses were permitted to receive an income (Lk. 10:7; see also 1 Cor. 9:4–14). Nonetheless, Paul did not usually avail himself of this 'right', not wanting to be a burden to the churches. Mixed in with the typical farewell speech protests of innocence (*I have not coveted anyone's silver*) is the clear implication that he would like the Ephesian elders to take the same attitude about financial support, perhaps because the other members of the church were not well off: *with this kind of hard work we must help the weak.*

These particular *words of the Lord Jesus* are not recorded in the gospels themselves, but as one of the gospel writers pointed out, all the books in the world could not have held accounts of everything that Jesus said and did (Jn. 21:25). It does not, of course, mean that there is anything wrong with receiving gifts or even receiving charity – just that if gifts are a blessing, as they can be, the act of giving is itself a blessing.

36–38 The account of the elders' visit closes with a very emotional scene, prayers together were followed by tears, embraces and kisses. Even with the prospect of eternity together, there is no doubt that farewells on earth are difficult.

21:1 – 28:31 Jerusalem and Rome: Paul on trial

21:1 – 23:11 Before the Jews: Jerusalem

21:1–16 Warnings on the way to Jerusalem. These final weeks of the trip to Judea are full of meetings with old friends and new, but also full of warnings to dissuade Paul from visiting Jerusalem. The whole section is told in the first person plural, indicating that Luke was there. **4** The disciples encountered in Tyre probably had connections with those believers who had spread into Phoenicia following the Stephen incident (11:19). It is interesting that here, as in Caesarea (10–12), believers received *through the Holy Spirit* some indication about what was about to happen to Paul. In both cases, however, the human interpretation of this divinely granted insight, while understandable, was wrong: *they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.* Paul correctly relied upon the insight granted to him, and the other believers had to reinterpret their own prophetic insights to fit with that. When the Holy Spirit warns that something is going to go wrong, it is not necessarily the case that he is saying the attempt should not be made. **5–6** As at the close of the previous chapter, in Miletus, the Christians *knelt to pray* together before *saying goodbye.*

8–9 Philip is a familiar figure from chs. 6 and 8. After the episode of the Ethiopian eunuch, he began his journey to Caesarea (8:40), but we do not know whether he was in the city when Peter was making his historic visit to the house of Cornelius (10:24–48). Since Luke claims (through the use of *we*) to have been among those who stayed at Philip's house, it is likely that it was during this very visit that Philip related to him the information behind ch. 8 of Acts. To remark that some twenty years had gone by does not have nearly the impact of finding a whole family with children of marriageable age! Mention that Philip's *four unmarried daughters* were prophetesses may have been included by Luke primarily to convey how long it was since those early days of the scattering (8:1). But it also tells us about the inclusion of even 'low-status' people (not just females, but unmarried ones!) in positions of prominence in the church.

10–11 The prophet *Agabus*, whom we know from earlier in the book (11:27–28), reappears rather abruptly. In the manner of some of the OT prophets, his message was an enacted one, illustrating the way that the Jews of Jerusalem would *bind* Paul. The phrase *and will hand him over to the Gentiles* was used by Jesus to predict his own fate (Lk. 18:32). **12** Although the message of the prophet ended with the prediction, all the people (incorrectly; *cf.* v 4) interpreted the Spirit's warning about what would happen as if it meant that Paul should not go, and they *pleaded with Paul not to go.* This should be a warning that even if we are shown that a 'door will close', it does not *necessarily* mean that we should not attempt to go through it. **13–14** Some must have thought that Paul was being disobedient to the clear leading of the Spirit, but Paul had the courage to stand firm and *would not be dissuaded.* In the end, everyone could agree on the formula *The Lord's will be done*, and thus they parted.

15–16 The location of Mnason's house is unclear from the text; it was either in Jerusalem, or between Caesarea and Jerusalem. Like Mnason, many of the *early disciples* seem to have come from Cyprus, among them Barnabas and probably his cousin John Mark. Paul had spent an early part if his first mission journey there (4:36–37; 11:19–21; 13:4–13).

21:17–26 Paul's arrival in Jerusalem. Although Paul was later arrested for causing a disturbance in the temple, he went to great lengths not to upset the Jews or the Jewish Christians. **17–18** After an informal welcome from *the brothers*, the party went to visit the church leaders, with *James* again appearing as the head (see on 12:12–17 and 15:13–21).

19–20 Although Paul's reports about the work *among the Gentiles* were greeted with praise for God, the leadership did foresee some problems among the *many thousands* of believing Jews, who were still *zealous for the law*. In light of the population of Jerusalem, it is likely that many of these thousands, like many of those converted on the day of Pentecost (ch. 2), were not resident in Jerusalem. **21** Somehow, many Jews, even Jewish believers, had heard and believed greatly exaggerated reports of Paul's message: namely that he was telling *Jews* that they should *turn away from Moses*. This, of course, was not the case. Paul was teaching Gentiles that they need not become Jews, a very different matter from teaching Jews that they must not remain Jews (see 21:28–29 and on 16:1–5).

22–24 James recommended that Paul should openly endorse and support something very Jewish, the Nazarite vows of several men. Paul had taken a similar vow himself (see on 18:18 and Nu. 6:1–21), so he would not be supporting something merely for political reasons. James hoped that by such participation, everyone would *know there is no truth in these reports* about Paul. **25** But James still supported the agreement made in ch. 15 limiting the 'burden' the Gentile believers were asked to shoulder regarding certain behaviour which Jews regarded as 'typically Gentile' and offensive. **26** Paul went along with James's suggestion. The fact that everywhere the Holy Spirit had warned him about opposition and even imprisonment in Jerusalem (see 20:22–23; 21:11–12) did not stop him from taking this sort of action. Although the main thrust and intent of his actions regarding the vows are clear, the circumstances of how his involvement would have worked out in practice remain unclear.

21:27–36 Paul arrested at the temple. As it turned out, however, there was no time for the plan to run its full course. **27** The trouble came not from the Jewish Christians but from *some Jews from the province of Asia* who had probably come on a pilgrimage. On the way to Jerusalem, Paul deliberately avoided the province of Asia, perhaps because he expected such problems from the people there (see on 20:16–17). **28–29** As James and the church leaders had feared, these Jews falsely announced in the temple that Paul taught *all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place*. To illustrate this last point, they mistakenly accused Paul of having brought *Trophimus the Ephesian* beyond the place in the temple to which a Gentile was permitted access, a very serious offence. **30** The accusations caused a stir among the population of the city, where Christianity probably had had a bad name since the aftermath of the Stephen incident (8:1). *The gates were shut* to keep the violence out of the inner courts of the temple, the mob tried *to kill* Paul. Such an uproar attracted the notice of the Roman authorities, who were wary about the Jews at festival times in any case. The rule of Felix, currently procurator of Judea (23:24, 26), is known for its strict suppression of insurgents (see 37–38). **33** Although the commander attempted to find out Paul's identity, he either did not ask Paul himself or could not hear his answers, since v 37 below shows the commander's surprise that Paul spoke Greek. **34** The mindless shouting of this Jewish crowd is reminiscent of the similar pagan crowd in Ephesus, where too some . . . *shouted one thing and some another* (see 19:32). But whereas that mob violence had been motivated by personal greed, this public outrage seems to have been a genuine, if misguided, zeal for the Jewish religion.

21:37 – 22:22 Paul before the crowd. This speech is the first of what are sometimes referred to as 'the defence speeches'. Paul's justification for his actions was simple: he was a good Jew and as such when confronted with visions and words from the Lord he could do nothing but obey them.

37–38 The commander was surprised at Paul's ability to speak Greek and guessed that Paul was the leader of a revolt, an *Egyptian* whose following was crushed under Felix and about whom we also have information from the Jewish historian Josephus. There was no shortage of Jewish would-be rebels at this time (*cf. e.g.* the two cited by Gamaliel in 5:36–37). **39** Paul, however, corrected him and identified himself as a citizen of Tarsus, *no ordinary city*. This was a different matter from the claim to Roman citizenship, which would come into play shortly (22:25).

40 That the unruly crowd should have become silent at the motioning of Paul seems to some unlikely, and the whole historicity of the speech has been questioned on the grounds that a man who had been rescued from a beating by a murderous mob was unlikely to have been in good enough condition to address a crowd. But it may in fact be that the crowd were waiting to hear if this battered heretic (as they would have seen him) was now going to recant.

22:2 When Paul spoke to them in Aramaic, they continued listening quietly. At this time, Hebrew and Aramaic were not known by all the Jews of the dispersion and so if the Asian trouble-makers (21:27) had spoken Greek when they accused Paul of being anti-Jewish, Paul's reply to them in the Aramaic or Hebrew tongue would have been in itself the beginning of a refutation. **3–4** The speech continued with Paul's credentials, showing himself as, if anything, more Jewish and with closer Jerusalem

connections than the Asian pilgrims. The style of the argument is, of course, reminiscent of the way Paul argues in his letters (see esp. Phil. 3:4–6). That Paul *was brought up in this city* implies that he came to Jerusalem from Tarsus at an early age [for a reasonable reconstruction of the early part of Paul's life see Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (SCM, 1991)]. *Gamaliel* was a leading Jewish rabbi of the time, in the liberal 'Hillel' school of Pharisaism (see on 5:34). **5** Paul's record of persecution, which caused him some difficulties with Christians (see on 9:26) and some embarrassment even in his letters (see 1 Cor. 15:9), provided a perfect backdrop for this defence. He explained how he became a Christian against his will and argued that any Jew who had received the messages from God that he had could not fail to have done the same.

6–13 The account of Paul's encounter on the Damascus road differs only slightly from the description in 9:1–31. **14–16** Ananias's part in the story is told most fully in this report of the events (*cf.* 9:17).

17–21 This part of Paul's story is known only from this version. In response to God's statement in the vision that the Jews in Jerusalem would not accept Paul's testimony, he seems to have argued with God that because the Jews knew his record of zeal against the Christians, he would be an effective witness to the Jews. Instead God replied, '*Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles*'. **22** At this juncture the crowd could stand no more and interrupted angrily before Paul could actually deny the specific charge regarding Trophimus and the temple.

22:23–29 Paul the Roman citizen. **23** The commander could not have been very glad that he had consented to let Paul speak, the crowd were in a frenzy again, *shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air.* **24–26** They would have questioned Paul by flogging him, but it was not legal to subject a Roman citizen to this sort of torture. When Paul pointed this out to his guards, their response was a very gratifying one, and the commander was fetched again. **27–29** The further exchange between the commander and the apostle left the former more impressed than before. In an era when Roman citizenship had been debased to the point where it could be purchased with money, Paul was a Roman citizen by birth (unlike the commander himself). **29** As in the previous case when Paul mentioned his Roman citizenship, the authorities became uneasy (*cf.* 16:37–40).

22:30 – 23:11 Paul before the Sanhedrin. **30** The mere fact that Paul was a Roman citizen was not sufficient to have him freed; the centurion still wanted to determine what the trouble had all been about. Thus the Sanhedrin was assembled and Paul was made to answer to them. Although we do not know if a Roman commander had the legal right to order the Sanhedrin to meet, in this case it was in their interest, since they wanted to sentence Paul and needed Roman approval.

23:1–2 It is odd that Paul protested his innocence before any charges were made. Perhaps Luke has merely omitted the charges, if they were the same as those given in 21:28 (see also 24:5–6). Paul's protestation of innocence was met with a slap in the face, perhaps because of the reference to God. **3** His response to this was swift and angry. The phrase *whitewashed wall* is reminiscent of Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy in Mt. 23:27, but is even closer to the image in Ezk. 13:10–12. Paul's reply seems clearly to go against the injunction to 'turn the other cheek' (Mk. 5:39) and the apostle's own description of his actions in the face of persecution in 1 Cor. 4:12. **4–5** The exchange that followed has been taken as an apology or at least excuse, by Paul. Did Paul really not know that Ananias was the high priest? Perhaps the high priest was not dressed in splendid robes, but the deference shown to him would have been sufficient clue to his identity, even in an informal gathering. On the other hand, suggestions that the sentence should be interpreted as sarcasm, 'It didn't occur to me that someone who acts this way could be a high priest', have no strong textual base and do not fit well with the phrasing of the quotation from Ex. 22:28. It is probably best to take the text as it is and accept the puzzle of Paul's apparent ignorance.

5–8 The remarkable turn of events that followed is easily misunderstood. Paul well knew that *some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees* and appears to make good use of a sort of loophole by referring them all to *the resurrection of the dead*, a doctrine which he knew they disagreed about. But Paul was at once more clever and more honest than he is usually given credit for. 'More clever' because this was more than just a delaying tactic to distract them while he slipped out of the door. He discredited their charges before the Roman commander. No Roman could cheerfully ally himself with the decisions of a body such as the Sanhedrin proved itself to be in the ensuing argument. And 'more honest' because the issue of resurrection was more than just a convenient Christian doctrine to bring up at this stage (see 4:1–2, where it was precisely what the temple officials objected to). The appearance of the resurrected Jesus to Paul on the road to Damascus was the main prop in Paul's self-defence: only the divine vindication of the risen Jesus could have turned Paul from his former zeal. If God had raised

Jesus, then Paul had to do what he was doing. If God had not raised Jesus, then Paul was mistaken. It was that simple (see 1 Cor. 15:12–15).

9 In the *uproar* at least some of the Pharisees were willing to admit that what had happened to Paul on the Damascus road might have had some basis in fact. **10** The Roman commander once again needed to rescue Paul from a violent dispute. He must have become convinced of two things. First, that the Jews would not be able to reach a rational decision on the matter; and secondly, that the dispute was, at its core, a religious one. But one who could cause so much trouble could not easily be released. **11** The following night the Lord appeared, as he had before (*e.g.* 18:9–10) to encourage Paul and confirm his purpose. Even in these seemingly fruitless encounters, Paul was to continue to testify about the Lord.

23:12 – 26:32 Before the Romans: Caesarea

23:12–35 Transfer because of a plot. There is irony in the Holy Spirit's message through Agabus in 21:10–11, 'the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles'. It was in fact the Gentiles who saved Paul from two violent incidents and went on to thwart those Jews who wanted to kill him. **12–14** There were *more than forty men* directly *involved in the plot* and the fact that they took such *an oath* shows how seriously they took themselves. **15** Several, though not all, of the members of the Sanhedrin were in the conspiracy. The rest were to be deceived along with the Roman commander *on the pretext of wanting more accurate information.* Sentence would be passed and executed while Paul was *en route* to the hearing.

16–22 It is somewhat surprising that Luke gives us such scant information about Paul; we do not even know his full three-part Roman name! We learn only here that he had relatives in Jerusalem. Speculation about how the nephew got his information is unlikely to be productive.

23–24 The description of Paul's escort seems a trifle excessive, amounting to nearly half the Jerusalem garrison, by some estimates. The size of the military guard was probably determined by the very real threat of open mass revolt, clearly on the authorities' minds from the outset (see on 21:30–32, 37–38). The commander's concern was primarily peace in Jerusalem; the bulk of the force returned there quickly (31–32).

25–30 Neither Luke nor Paul would have had access to the governor's mail, and the introduction *he wrote a letter as follows* perhaps means that Luke is giving us the gist of what he guessed to have been in the letter. On the other hand, it is possible that the letter would later have become part of the paperwork connected with Paul's trial and perhaps even read out in court. The letter as we have it is in just the sort of tones that we might expect in the situation, complete with all the subtle political undertones emphasizing the commander's own initiative and responsible actions, including the slight 'streamlining' of the truth: *I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen* (*cf.* 21:33; 22:29).

31–35 The detail that Paul was from Cilicia was solicited by Felix in an attempt to determine under whose jurisdiction the case would come. In the event, Felix agreed to take responsibility.

24:1–26 Paul before Felix. This was the first of three hearings before important officials, all of which, though inconclusive in verdict, leave the reader with little doubt that only bias and technicalities kept Paul a prisoner. **1–9** This trial was unusual in being the only one in Acts in which the accusers employed a lawyer. It has often been thought that Tertullus was a 'second-rate' orator and guilty of flattery in his weak speech, but it was accepted practice for the speech to begin with an acknowledgment of the judge's authority on the matter, phrased to win favour and good will, and Luke's brief outline of the contents of the actual speech contains some clever points. When Tertullus claimed, for example, that *we have enjoyed a long period of peace under you* (2), this might be taken as nonsense, since there had been disturbances and attempted revolts, which the procurator had dealt with harshly (see 21:31, 37–38; 23:23–24). This was, however, Tertullus' attempt to remind Felix that stability had been purchased through his severe action against troublemakers, of which, he goes on to argue, Paul was one, causing *riots in all the world* (5). This is a clever charge, perhaps drawing upon knowledge supplied by the Asian Jews (21:27–28) regarding the riot in Ephesus (19:23–41), which Paul could qualify, but not deny.

10 After some rather plain opening remarks, which would have been considered the bare minimum politeness required, Paul extremely effectively refuted the charges made by Tertullus. Luke has, of course, recorded only summaries of the speeches (see on 2:14) and seems to have deliberately edited these two in such a way as to emphasize that Tertullus' speech had correct, perhaps even exemplary, form but little substance; whereas Paul, who could not really compete rhetorically, was obviously in the right (see the more acceptable opening before Agrippa in 26:2–3). **11–13** Paul began the defence proper by denying the charge that he

deliberately tried to cause trouble in Jerusalem. Charges of intent to make trouble could not be borne out by the evidence. **14–16** He did admit to being a Christian, *a follower of the Way, which they call a sect* (see v 5). This perhaps should be translated 'which they admit is a sect', since the same word would have been used in phrases like 'the sect of the Pharisees'. The thrust of this comment was that the beliefs of the Christian group of Jews need to be no less Jewish than the differing groups of Pharisees and Sadducees: *I have the same hope in God as these men.* **17–18** Having stated that he did not deliberately make trouble, Paul then clarified that neither did he unintentionally defile the temple: he was presenting *gifts to the poor* and *offerings* and was even *ceremonially clean* at the time.

19 There was a change of tactics in the final section of the speech. Paul mentioned that the *Jews from the province of Asia* should have been the ones *bringing charges.* This line of argument was a potential bombshell, for there were two immediate implications. First, there was strong feeling against the practice of accusing someone without appearing in court to prosecute (see on 17:17). Secondly, any infractions or accusations that primarily concerned the province of Asia (as it would now appear Tertullus had meant by 'all over the world' in v 5 above) would place the affair out of Felix's jurisdiction. **20** Those present could only speak about the events in Jerusalem, and referring the court to the shambles of a meeting conducted by the Sanhedrin (22: 30 – 23:10) revealed that there were no charges made and that the matter concerned differences between the beliefs of sects, rather than Paul's personal conduct (*cf.* 14–16).

22–25 Perhaps Felix was *acquainted with the Way* through the interest of his Jewish wife Drusilla, who accompanied him as he listened to Paul talking about *faith in Christ Jesus.* The contrast between the practical urgent teaching that Paul gave *on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come* and the cool attitude with which it was received is emphasized in Felix's words, '*When I find it convenient, I will send for you.*'

Felix had allegedly adjourned the proceedings until the Roman commander Lysias could come to testify, but in fact he was hoping that Paul or his friends *would offer him a bribe.* That he had no real interest in Paul or his case for its own merits was confirmed when he was succeeded by Porcius Festus, at which point he left Paul in jail merely *to grant a favour to the Jews.* The Jews of Caesarea disliked Felix strongly enough to send a deputation to Rome to speak against his 'misdeeds'.

25:1–12 Paul before Festus. The second of the three hearings before officials in Caesarea is presented even more briefly, focusing only on the Jews' desire to get Paul to Jerusalem and his appeal to Rome. This act determined the rest of the events recorded in Acts.

1–5 In Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders' grievances against Paul were insufficient to have him transferred there, which was just as well, since they were preparing an ambush again. The Jews had flexed their muscles by having made a deputation against Felix (even though it was not completely successful), and they may have hoped that Festus would do them a *favour* to keep in their good graces. Festus was agreeable (9) and willing to reopen the case, but on his terms, not theirs (see his account of the matter in 25:15–17).

6–8 Luke reports merely that the serious charges could not be substantiated and that Paul had a clear conscience (but see 25:17–19). **9** Festus was still willing to grant the Jews concessions and unwilling to make a decision on a matter that touched upon their own religious beliefs (see 25:20). He was also probably unwilling to declare Paul innocent at this sensitive point in his own political career. **10–11** His offer to reconvene the trial in Jerusalem, however, was not acceptable to Paul, who protested that *no-one has the right to hand me over* to the Jews. (Paul's citizenship also figured in his treatment in 16:37–39 and 22:25–29.) This is ironic in the light of the prophecy of Agabus that the Jews will deliver Paul into the hands of the Gentiles (21:11), for repeatedly it was the Jews who tried to prise Paul out of those hands! **12** Apparently, every Roman citizen possessed the right of appeal to Caesar in certain circumstances, but the details of the precise rules in the first century are the subject of some controversy. Festus was probably greatly relieved to avoid final responsibility in the matter.

25:13 – 26:32 Paul Before Festus and Agrippa. The final hearing in Caesarea was little more than a whim on the part of Herod Agrippa. It took place without the accusers and without any decision-making power, but not without some ceremony. **13** The king and his wife Bernice had come for a state visit to the newly appointed Festus. **14–22** It is natural that this affair which seemed important in Festus's relationship with the Jews should come up in conversation with King Agrippa, who was familiar with Judaism and, by virtue of his office, had the power to appoint the Jewish high priest (see below 26:3). Festus would have been especially interested in Agrippa's opinion on the matter because he had to write a report about the prisoner, and he admitted *I was at a loss how to investigate such matters* (26). Given the strength of Jewish feeling against Paul (24), Festus had expected Paul to have done

something truly dreadful. His description of the point of the actual dispute is almost humorous because of his bewilderment: [the argument was] *about a dead man named Jesus whom Paul claimed was alive.*

23 The ceremony of the occasion was notable. With all the *high-ranking officers and the leading men of the city* present as well as the king and queen, this provided the new governor with what today would be considered a 'photo opportunity'. **24–27** Festus's introductory speech adds little to the account in the previous chapter, but explicitly confirms the emotional nature of the Jewish leaders' complaint against Paul (*shouting that he ought not to live any longer*) and Festus's own impression of Paul's innocence. However, he needed to write a report to Rome about Paul (as Lysias had written to his predecessor Felix; 23:26–30) and hoped to gain some insight from Agrippa's expertise.

26:1–3 As in both sides' speeches before Felix (24:2–4, 10), this speech began with an introductory statement acknowledging (and praising) the authority of the judge.

4–8 The speech continued along the lines of the defence in ch. 22. As in his defence before the Sanhedrin, Paul maintained that it was *because of his hope in what God has promised our fathers that he was on trial that day*, namely the hope and belief *that God raises the dead.*

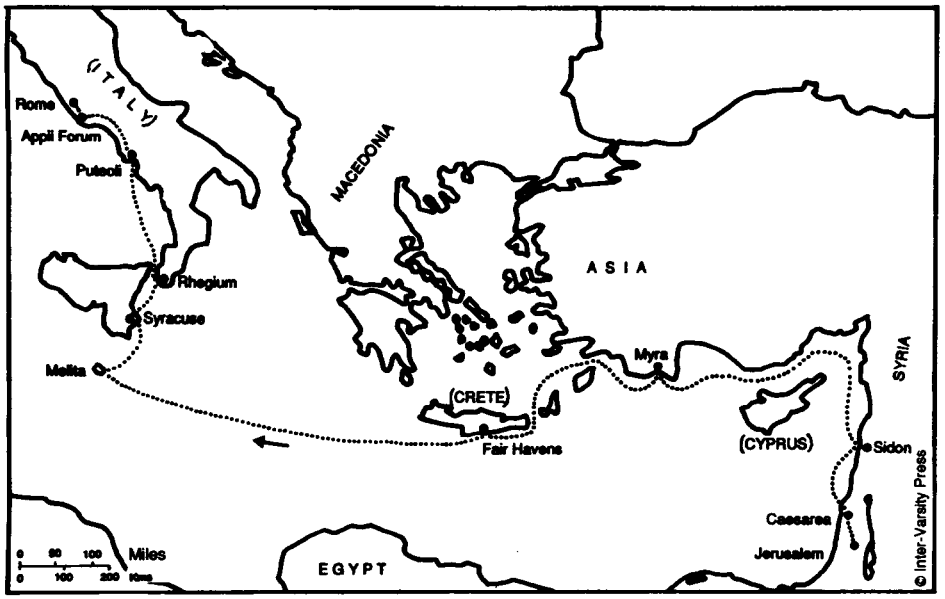
9–14 The first part of the account of Paul's experience on his way to Damascus is in harmony with the other versions in chs. 9 and 22 (see esp. on 9:1–9), except that this telling of the story reveals that the Lord also said to Paul '*It is hard for you to kick against the goads*'. The picture is of an ox or beast of burden moving against the sharp stick used to guide it, and this was a common proverbial phrase in secular and even Jewish writings. It is an accurate picture of Paul's experience; his actions before his experience on the Damascus road showed that he had indeed always felt Jesus to be an irritant, and then God showed him just what kind of irritant. **15–18** Either Luke or Paul himself has abbreviated the rest of the account. The emphasis in this version of the story is on the word of the Lord and Paul's desire to obey. **19–21** It was the obedience to the vision of Jesus, raised by God from the dead, that was the reason *why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me.* **22–23** The relationship of the gospel to *the prophets and Moses* may also have been drastically abbreviated (see on 2:14). If Paul's original speech contained quotations from the Scriptures (see *e.g.* the speech in 13:16–41, esp. vs 33–41; 17:3) and used some of the rabbinic techniques of interpretation that we know Paul could handle (see *e.g.* Gal. 4:21–31), then Festus's interjection *your great learning is driving you insane* (24) makes all the more sense, as does Paul's reply that the king would be *familiar with these things* and his rhetorical question *do you believe the prophets? I know you do* (25–27).

28–29 Agrippa's question was an attempt to sidestep Paul's to him. The king neatly avoided either denying his belief in the prophets or accepting Paul's interpretation of them. Paul replied that whether it took a *short time or long*, he did indeed hope to make everyone as he was, *except for these chains.* Far from begging to be free like everyone else there, he wished everyone else could be like him! Those in attendance could not have failed to have been impressed with the bravery and wit of Paul in engaging a king in such lively conversation! **30–32** Indeed, after the interview the people of importance were clear in their own minds of Paul's essential innocence. Ironically, it was only Paul's appeal to Caesar that kept him in his chains, since to free him now would have been to usurp the emperor's right to judge the case. Paul had wanted to go to Rome in any case and Festus was glad not to be responsible in the eyes of the Jewish leaders for releasing him.

27:1 – 28:31 To Rome itself

27:1–12 Paul sails for Rome. On the whole matter of sea voyages in the ancient world and on the terminology and place-names in this chapter in particular, see C. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Mohr, 1989), pp. 132–152. **1–2** The narrator once again uses *we* (see on 16:10; 21:8), to indicate his own presence on the voyage. The other notable characters in the story include a centurion named Julius, some other prisoners who were also in his charge and the Christian Aristarchus. About the latter, however, Acts does not tell any more (but see Col. 4:10 and Phm. 24, perhaps written during Paul's captivity in Rome).

3–8 From the very beginning of the sea part of the voyage, *the winds were against* the boat and it *made slow headway* and *moved along the coast with difficulty.* The voyage was still underway at the end of summer (the Fast is a reference to the Day of Atonement in September/October). It was about this time that sailing stopped until the spring and ships would 'winter' in a safe harbour somewhere. **10–12** From his letters we know that Paul had had some previous experience of sailing and even shipwrecks (see 2 Cor. 11:25). Even so, it is hard to be surprised, as Luke appears to be, that the centurion chose to *follow the advice of the pilot and owner of the ship* rather than one of his prisoners. Thus it was that the decision was taken to *sail on* another approximately 40 miles for a port with the proper facing for shelter from the winter winds.



Paul's journey to Rome.

27:13–44 Storm and shipwreck. The events of this final voyage to Rome might itself be considered a trial scene: trial by nature. There are various tales in the ancient world of people who commit crimes and though they escape from their human prosecutors, the gods, notably Poseidon the sea god, find them and punish them. That the sea 'spared' Paul through the shipwreck would not, of course, make the same supernatural point for Luke and for Christians, but the escape from the sea would have been charged with significance for most Gentiles of Luke's time (see 28:4 below).

The knowledge of the events does seem to be firsthand, and the language used by Luke is consistent with someone without detailed nautical knowledge reporting accurately what the sailors in a crisis situation were doing.

13–20 A *gentle south wind* (13) quickly turned to *a wind of hurricane force* (14) once the ship was underway. This forced the crew to abandon control of their own boat. The various precautions taken, such as using cables to reinforce the ship's hull, lowering the sea anchor, throwing some of the cargo overboard, and later even jettisoning part of the ship's tackle were the correct procedures, and they are given in the probable order of occurrence as the situation became more and more desperate until the point where *we finally gave up all hope of being saved* (20).

21–26 Paul's speech appears at first to have a touch of 'I told you so' about it, but in fact his previous advice is highlighted in order that the ship's crew might have more cause to believe this latest 'forecast', which came to Paul from God, through an angel. Not that everything was going to come out fine, there was to be danger and loss, but everyone would survive. The main thrust of Paul's address is found twice in the space of five verses: *Keep up your courage, men.*

The speech also tells us something about the nature of accidents and tragedies. It is clear that the storm and shipwreck were not interpreted by Paul as divine judgment upon his captors but rather as the result of circumstances. It was not that God was tracking them down with storms and they could not hide. It was not that they could have avoided the storm if they had had a different attitude towards the Christians. The only way they could have avoided all of this was by not making the foolish decision to sail to Phoenix in the first place. Those critics who argue that Luke has made up this whole episode to add excitement to his story and to stress Paul's mastery over the situation are themselves shipwrecked on the notable lack of superstition in the speech. Surely any admirer of Paul's who would not stop short of creating such a story out of thin air would certainly have used the opportunity to portray his hero, who on occasion healed as his master did, also calming storms as his master did (Lk. 8:22–25).

27–29 Two weeks after leaving Fair Havens on what should have been a one-day journey, the sailors *sensed they were approaching land* (27), and the depth soundings that they took

confirmed this. No longer afraid of running aground, they let down more anchors and *prayed for daylight* (29), hoping that in the light they would be able to steer the boat towards a beach rather than run aground on rocks further out. **30–32** If it had been daylight, and if the ship was holding together reasonably well, it would almost certainly have been safer to stay on board than to venture out in stormy conditions in a smaller lifeboat. The attempt of some of the sailors to escape in this way is an indication of their desperation and perhaps also of how damaged the ship was already. Without a full complement of crew to steer the ship the safety of the rest was obviously in jeopardy, and the Roman soldiers assured themselves of the crew's cooperation by cutting the lifeboat loose.

33–38 Paul's advice to the people to eat makes sense in the light of the strenuous ordeal that they knew would be facing them with the arrival of dawn. Although there is a marked similarity in the wording used of this meal and Jesus' own actions in hosting the Lord's Supper (*took . . ., gave thanks . . ., broke . . . and gave . . .*; see Lk. 9:16; 22:19; 24:30), there is no other indication that 'communion' was being celebrated here, and the mixed party of Christians and non-Christians tells against it.

Although some of the cargo had already been abandoned (18), the grain appears to have been retained as ballast. Now that the objective was to be beaching the ship, the higher it could be made to ride in the water, the better. It may have been the decision to throw the grain overboard that occasioned Paul's call for the people to eat first.

39–40 At first light they could see the land. With a *sandy beach* in sight, there was an obvious target for a place to *run the ship aground.* **41** The ship never reached the beach, however, but instead *struck a sand-bar* and broke up.

42 The soldiers' plan to kill the prisoners rather than run the risk of them escaping reflects the attitude also shown in 12:18–19 and 16:27 that the guards would be liable for the punishment due to the prisoners that they had allowed to escape. **43** The centurion stopped this. As a result of his travels with Paul thus far, he had understandably developed some respect for him. As Paul had been told beforehand, *everyone reached the land in safety.*

28:1–10 Paul on Malta. 1–2 It was only upon reaching shore that the party learned where they were (see 27:39–40). The word Luke used of *the islanders* is lit. 'barbarians' (used for all people who did not speak Greek, without any implication about the level of their culture or civilization). **3–6** The incident of the snake should probably not be regarded as a tale about Paul's immunity to poisonous snakes, but rather another instance (*cf.* 14:8–13) of Christians being mistaken for gods by superstitious Gentiles. There is a snake found on Malta even today that may well have been classed as a *viper* (3) in ancient times because of its close physical resemblance. This snake, though not poisonous, clings to its victim as the snake which attacked Paul did. The picture Luke presents of Paul having shaken the snake off *into the fire* (5) is not the portrayal of someone displaying a supernatural mastery over a dangerous beast. It was only after waiting a long time that it became obvious that Paul was not in danger, and only then that the local people stopped thinking of Paul as *a murderer*, relentlessly pursued by some avenging god of justice, and instead regarded him as *a god* himself.

7–10 Eventually the party made contact with the Roman governor of the island, Publius. The sickness suffered by his father and cured by Paul is often thought to have been a local affliction caused by contamination of goat's milk (known widely as 'Malta fever'). Healing came about through *prayer* and the laying on of hands, and the prominence of the person healed led to much publicity. We may assume that Paul and the other Christians in the party preached the good news and had at least some success, even though the text is curiously silent about the matter, saying only that the natives *honoured us in many ways.* The islanders' good will stood the whole party in good stead and *when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed (10).*

28:11–31 Paul in Rome. In marked contrast to the previous voyage, the final leg of the journey went smoothly and was without incident, except for the pleasant welcome from *the brothers* (15) from Rome who travelled more than 30 miles to meet Paul and his companions. **16** Upon arrival in Rome proper, the freedoms enjoyed by Paul were relative. Luke is stressing only that he was not formally imprisoned (see also 28:30–31). He would still have been handcuffed to the soldier who was there to guard him (see v 20, . . . *bound with this chain*).

17–20 Another limit to Paul's freedom is perhaps seen by the way that the Jewish leaders visited him rather than his visiting the synagogue. The claim made by Paul that the Romans *wanted to release* him (18) was a bit of a simplification, although it is true that except for hopes of a bribe (24:25) and a desire to please the Jerusalem Jewish leaders (24:26), Paul probably would have been freed. Agrippa, too, felt that Paul could have been freed had he not appealed to Rome (see 26:32). Paul's desire to speak to the Jews in Rome concerns this certainty on his part that Jesus was *the hope of Israel.* Despite the fact that in city after city, preaching

to the Jewish communities led to some conversions from the people but also much opposition, Paul was aware that his was a Jewish message in the first instance, and each new Jewish community was given a fresh opportunity to respond.

21 Some are surprised that the Roman Jews would not have heard from Jerusalem regarding this trouble-maker. But the Jerusalem Jews may have decided not to press their case in Rome. The case against Paul might have beeen strong in Palestine before officials who felt they had to pacify the Jews, but in Rome the religious accusations of a bunch of provincials against a cosmopolitan Roman citizen were almost certain to fail. **22** It is even more difficult, however, to understand the Jews' protestations of ignorance about Paul's views. The implication is that, despite the presence of a Christian community at Rome (as evidenced by Paul's letter and 28:14–15), these people had only heard rumours. But the Jewish community had been expelled from Rome for a time by Claudius (see 18:2). In the interim, the church would have become predominantly Gentile in make-up, and the recently returned Jewish community may have had no contact with them in this big city.

23–24 Paul and the Jewish leaders arranged a time to get together, at which Paul's attempts to evangelize them met with only mixed success. **25–27** Paul expressed his frustration and disappointment by quoting from Is. 6:9–10 (*cf.* Mk. 4:12 and parallels), part of which he had previously referred to in his letter to the Roman Christians (Rom. 11:8). **28** His conclusion – *I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!* – is, due to its placement so near to the end of the book, easily misread as closing the possibility of further mission to the Jews. But this passage must be read in the same spirit as the similar declaration in 13:46. Throughout Acts, Paul may turn his back on specific Jewish congregations, but not on the whole Jewish race (see also Rom. 11:25–32).

30–31 The situation remained as in 28:16, with Paul under 'house arrest' but free to witness to anyone who came within earshot. The phrase *for two whole years* prompts the reader to wonder what might have happened after that. It is likely that Paul was eventually executed by the Romans, but probably not at this point. What seems most likely is that the present case against Paul failed, he was released and travelled and wrote some more letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) before being re-arrested and executed in AD 64. Why then did Luke end the account here? We may never know the answer to this, but the simplest answer remains a strong possibility. Luke finished the way that he did because he had brought the reader up to date. He was writing the book during Paul's imprisonment and did not write about his trial or further adventures because they had not happened yet. The long road over Luke's two books had brought the Christian story from its very beginnings, in the mysterious eastern capital Jerusalem, right up to what were to him and his readers 'modern times' and the centre of the world empire, Rome.

Conrad Gempf

READING THE LETTERS

Letters in the ancient world

A modern reader first coming to the NT might think it strange that twenty-one of its twenty-seven books are letters, or something very much like letters, and that these make up 35% of the text. Why this particular form?

At least four factors should be borne in mind. First, we sometimes forget how blasé we are about the sheer wealth of options we have today in the field of communications, almost none of which was open to the first-century church. Letters (we shall see) were established means of both private and public communication; there were not many others. There were ancient equivalents to town criers, some book publication (but no printing), plays, many speeches – but most of these were not realistic options for the kinds of messages the first Christian leaders needed to send.

Secondly, the rapid growth of the Christian church in the first decades of its life required a flexible, inexpensive and prompt means of keeping in touch with believers scattered around the empire. It is difficult to imagine a better alternative from the options available at the time.

Thirdly, as the Christian church grew, it confronted more questions than it could easily cope with. Some of these arose from its own growth out of the religion of the old covenant; some of them stemmed from its confrontation with the paganism of the Graeco-Roman world. Rapid growth and far-flung geography thus combined with kaleidoscopic agendas. In the providence of God, these diverse topics became the means by which the first generation of believers, led by the Spirit, learned to express and defend the faith in extraordinarily rich expressions of the truth. These pressures were often most conveniently addressed by letters; it is not surprising that such letters became under God the church's charter documents.

Finally, letters were an established means in the ancient world of establishing 'presence'. We would perhaps speak of 'keeping in touch', of 'maintaining friendship', in some organizations of 'preserving lines of authority'. To achieve such ends in the western world we might turn first to telephone and 'fax'. In the Roman Empire the same ends were achieved through letters, doubtless valued all the more for the delays that frequently separated one missive from the next. Certainly there is evidence that on numerous occasions the NT writers wanted to establish their 'presence' for various reasons (*e.g.* 1 Cor. 5:3–5; Gal. 4:19–20; 1 Thes. 5:27), even though nothing could entirely close the gap in communication opened up by distance (1 Thes. 2:17 – 3: 8; 2 Jn. 12).

Types of letters

About a hundred years ago it was argued that ancient Graeco-Roman missives could be divided into two kinds: (i) epistles, *i.e.* literary productions that somewhat superficially took the form of letters but were meant for universal publication and wide readership; and (ii) letters, occasional writings (*i.e.* letters occasioned by concrete circumstances) designed to be read by an individual or defined group. Paul's letters, it was argued, all belong in the latter category. But this simple division is now universally abandoned. It is too simple: far more types of letters have been classified. It is also too rigid, for there is ample evidence that at least some letters addressed to concrete situations were nevertheless treated as having normative interest and significance beyond the original addressee (*e.g.* Col. 4:16). Moreover, the sheer diversity of NT letters (compare, say, Philemon and 3 John with Romans) calls out for more suitable categories.

One group of scholars has classified ancient letters into ten categories (though these overlap somewhat). What is clear is that ancient letters varied from private, personal communications (such as a letter home asking for money) to formal treatises or tractates that aimed for the widest possible circulation. In between there were shorter public letters (something akin to a modern 'Letter to the Editor' without the newspaper!). The NT letters cover a large part of this range, but not all of it. Romans and Hebrews, for instance, stand closer to the tractate end of the spectrum, but even so they remain occasional letters (see Rom. 15:17–22; Heb. 10:32–39; 13:22–24). Philemon, Titus and 3 John stand closer to the other end, but their inclusion in the canon shows they were perceived to have wider authority and relevance than the needs of their first readers might have dictated.

The contents of a letter

Most letters in the ancient world comprised

three parts: an opening made up of address and greeting, the main body and a closing. The opening was usually very short: 'X to Y, Greetings [*chairein*]'. In the NT, this simple form is preserved in the letter sent by the apostolic council (Acts 15:23), in the letter of Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26), and in James (1:1). Two NT letters (Hebrews, 1 John) include no such opening at all, raising questions about their genre (see below); but most of them expand the opening, sometimes quite a bit (*e.g.* Rom. 1:1–7), and change the traditional *chairein* ('greetings') to *charis* ('grace'), doubtless under the influence of Christian experience of the grace of God in the gospel (so all of Paul's letters, 1 and 2 Peter and 2 John).

Some ancient letters included a health-wish or some blessing. Here the NT letters display considerable diversity. The closest thing to a health-wish is 3 John 2, where, remarkably, it is Gaius's *spiritual* health that sets the standard for his general well-being. NT letter writers customarily open with thanksgiving to God (all of Paul's letters except Galatians, 2 Corinthians, 1 Timothy and Titus do); some begin with a paean of praise (2 Corinthians, Ephesians and 1 Peter). Ancient letters tended to close with greetings of various kinds; the NT writers follow the same practice, often adding a doxology or a benediction. Romans is extraordinary for the space it devotes to a sketch of Paul's travel plans (15:22–29), a request for prayer (15:30–32) and a prayer-wish (as third-person prayers are called; 15:33), a long list of commendations and greetings (16:1–16), and final greetings from co-workers and the concluding grace and benediction (16:20–27). Although some have seen ch.16 as a later editorial edition, the considerable space Paul devotes to this closing is probably because he had no prior involvement with the church as a whole, and so he was concerned to establish the best possible relations with them in view of his proposed stay with them while heading for Spain.

In the main body, the form of letters from late antiquity differed widely. Some modern scholars have attempted to identify typical forms and sequences, typical transitions from the opening to the body, and so forth. So far these efforts have not commanded wide assent. It seems best simply to respect the diversity, acknowledging that Christian writers could be as creative as others (Paul's letters are particularly creative and eclectic), and that some peculiarities of NT letters probably owe something to the heritage of Jewish influence that characterized the early church.

Some special considerations

Four additional comments of a general nature are in order. First, NT letters tend to be a little longer than their secular counterparts. Commonly the letters of Seneca and Cicero are compared with those of Paul. The 124 letters of Seneca vary in length from 149 words to 4134; the 776 letters of Cicero range from 22 words to 2530. Paul's letters average 1300 words in length, but Romans has 7114 words.

Secondly, independent evidence attests how common it was for writers to use 'amanuenses', trained scribes who did the actual writing at their dictation. Doubtless many amanuenses were slaves hired to help a scarcely literate master in business and correspondence; others worked as free agents for their wages. Rom. 16:22 shows how Tertius was the amanuensis who 'wrote down' what Paul dictated in that letter. It was common for those doing the dictation to attest the authenticity of the finished product by adding final greetings in their own hand; certainly that was Paul's practice (Gal. 6:11; 2 Thes. 3:17). The inference is that he dictated all his letters, and perhaps other NT writers did the same.

The difficult question to sort out is how much freedom such amanuenses enjoyed. The evidence is unclear, and therefore much disputed. That some freedom was possible is hinted at even by the fact that Tertius identifies himself. Even so, there is no reason to think that amanuenses regularly enjoyed independent freedom. The degree of freedom probably depended on the relationship between the amanuensis and the one doing the dictation, the relative skill of the two persons, the nature of the correspondence, and so forth – much as the degree of independence given to a secretary today turns on similar variables. However, once the author had read the finished product and signed it, the document was 'owned' by the author, not simply by the amanuensis. Still, it may be that some differences in wording between, say, the Pastoral letters and the rest of the Pauline corpus turn on the probability that Luke was the amanuensis for the former (see 2 Tim. 4:11), which contain a substantial number of turns of phrase more typical of Luke's own writings.

Thirdly, it is often asserted that the writing of pseudonymous letters (*i.e.* letters purporting to be written by some well known author, but in fact written by someone else) was a common practice in the first two centuries of this era, that NT writers would have seen nothing wrong with it, and that literary evidence demands the conclusion that some NT letters are pseudonymous. (The list differs from scholar to scholar, but the Pastorals and 2 Peter are most commonly thought to be pseudonymous, followed by Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians,

and less frequently several others.) But although pseudonymity was not uncommon in the ancient world, especially in apocalyptic books, it was rare, and perhaps quite non-existent, in the domain of letters. There is no certain example of a pseudonymous letter that has come down to us from the first two centuries. The examples that are cited are not very impressive. On the Jewish side, *The Epistle of Jeremiah* is a homily rather than a letter, and *The Letter of Aristeas* is an apologetic narrative (both of these examples are also a trifle earlier). Similar problems attend the later Christian examples (*e.g.* letters of Christ and Abgarus, a letter of Lentulus, some alleged correspondence between Paul and Seneca). There is not one convincing example from the Graeco-Roman pagan world. Certainly as soon as the church started to evaluate such matters, any suspicion that a document was pseudonymous meant that it could not be recognized as having canonical authority. And in any case many scholars have become convinced that the traditional reasons for labelling certain NT letters pseudonymous are not very compelling. These matters are briefly treated in the introductions to the relevant books.

Finally, for the sake of completeness, the means of transporting these letters should be mentioned. Although the imperial government had its own postal system, it could not be used by the general public. Letters were therefore carried by friends, acquaintances, slaves, employees, soldiers, business people, passing travellers – whoever was willing and was heading in the right direction.

The letters of Paul

If we assume that the thirteen canonical letters that bear his name are Paul's work, we must nevertheless ask how they came together, and on what principles they found their way into the NT as we know it.

The collection of Paul's letters

Paul's letters were written over a period of about fifteen years (after he had himself been a Christian for about fifteen years), and sent to churches and individuals far removed from one another. How, then, did these thirteen come together? The short answer is that we do not know; the evidence is too slight to be certain. In some cases Paul himself ordered limited circulation (Col. 4:16). Good arguments have been advanced in support of the view that Ephesians was first written as a general circular letter for believers in Ephesus and in neighbouring towns and cities, a general letter covering more specific ones such as Colossians and Philemon (and perhaps Philippians).

The first concrete list that has come down to us is the list of ten Pauline letters (excluding the Pastorals) compiled by Marcion (the leader of an unorthodox Christian movement about 140). Some scholars argue that this was the first time any such list was put together. But this is highly unlikely. Only a tiny fraction of written material from late antiquity has come down to us, and Marcion's list is valuable primarily as evidence that larger, more orthodox lists were probably already circulating. It was the practice of such pseudo-Christian leaders to adapt Christian literature to their own needs. Marcion excluded all of the OT and most of the New; even of the gospels he preserved only a mutilated edition of Luke.

Others have argued that Paul's letters were first brought together shortly after AD 90, fifty years before Marcion. Some devoted follower of Paul, spurred on by the publication of Acts (shortly before 90, on this view), pulled the extant Pauline letters together. But it is far more likely that Acts was published much earlier, about 64, and difficult to see why the collection of at least some of Paul's writings would have had to wait for that event anyway. There is strong evidence that several of Paul's letters are cited in the early apostolic fathers (especially Clement of Rome; *c.* 96). More importantly, 2 Pet. 3:16 refers to the way Paul writes 'in all his letters', an expression which, though it does not necessarily embrace precisely the thirteen canonical letters that have come down to us, certainly presupposes that there is common knowledge of a circulating body of Pauline correspondence. Although the weight of contemporary scholarship favours a late date for 2 Peter, substantial reasons can be adduced for a publication date as early as 64 or 65.

Though it cannot be proved, another theory is perhaps more plausible than its principal competitors. Small groups of Paul's letters circulated regionally even during Paul's lifetime, partially owing to his own requirements in this regard (Col. 4:16). Then, after his martyrdom (*c.* 65). one or more of his closest co-workers (Timothy?) undertook to preserve as much of his master's circulating correspondence as possible. None of this can be proved beyond doubt. Nevertheless, some such theory seems best able to fit the facts that have come down to us.

The order of the letters

The organization of the Pauline corpus in our New Testaments demands some explanation. The sequence follows neither chronology (publication date? time of writing?) nor themes. It is based on two simple principles: letters to

churches (Romans to 2 Thessalonians) are grouped before letters to individuals (1 Timothy to Philemon), and in each group longer letters are placed before shorter letters. The one exception is Ephesians, which on these principles should be placed before Galatians. At a guess, those who ordered Paul's letters in this way had a copy of Ephesians written in a slightly tighter hand, and therefore mistakenly thought it was shorter than Galatians but longer than Philippians.

Paul's letters are often classified, in more topical fashion, into four groups. The first, comprising Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians, are sometimes described as the great evangelical letters. The first three were written during Paul's third missionary journey. Though many assign Galatians to the same period, a fairly convincing case can be made for the view that it was the first of Paul's extant letters to be written. In content, Romans and Galatians are fairly close, though Galatians was clearly written to warn the churches of Galatia against those who were elevating Judaism within the (Gentile) Christian community, while Romans does not appear to have so specific a purpose.

The second group is often called the captivity or prison letters since in each of them Paul refers to himself as a prisoner. These are Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Perhaps all four were written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome, though many scholars have argued that Philippians and perhaps others of these four were sent from Ephesus or Caesarea.

The third group embraces 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Many argue that of Paul's extant letters these two were the first he wrote. Even if Paul wrote Galatians earlier, these two, written from Corinth during his second missionary journey, establish a pastoral sensitivity and a 'last days' perspective that resurface in many of his other letters. Although Paul commonly associates one or more of his colleagues with him in the opening lines of his letters, these two are explicitly tied to Paul, Silas and Timothy, and then rather unusually, are written almost entirely in the first person *plural*.

The fourth group, the Pastoral letters, comprises 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. These are the Pauline letters that are most frequently regarded as pseudonymous. If we do attribute them to Paul, however, we must conclude that Paul was released from his Roman imprisonment, for in 1 Timothy and Titus Paul is no longer in chains. By 2 Timothy, however, Paul is again a prisoner, and this time he quite clearly does not expect to survive. Although the linguistic and thematic peculiarities of this group have sometimes been exaggerated, they are substantial, and probably arise from a mixture of factors. These letters are to individuals, late in the apostle's life, dealing in part with the principles of Christian leadership, and possibly dictated to a trusted colleague (Luke?) serving as an amanuensis with relatively greater freedom than usual.

The non-Pauline letters

These are highly diverse in authorship and character. The letter to the Hebrews is formally anonymous, and there is no consensus as to its author. Two letters announce themselves as having been written by Peter, and one each by James and Jude (whom many take to be half-brothers of our Lord). The remaining three are formally anonymous, though two of them announce themselves as the work of 'the elder'. There is good reason for thinking that the author of all three is the apostle John. Two of these seven letters are amongst the shortest in the NT (2 and 3 John); one is amongst the longest (Hebrews).

Hebrews and 1 John are alike in one interesting respect. Both begin without a salutation of any sort (unlike the rest of the NT letters). This has prompted some scholars to suggest that these writings are not letters at all, but brochures or small books, homilies or essays. But Hebrews, at least, concludes like a letter, and both contain enough personal remarks, not to mention references to specific details in the experience of the readers, that one must conclude their respective authors had specific readers in mind (*e.g.* Heb. 5:12; 6:10; 10:32; 1 Jn. 2:19). Still, the wealth of phrases used normally in speech in Hebrews suggests that the letter began as a series of homilies that were reduced to this form. It is possible that 1 John served as a general pastoral letter circulated amongst a number of churches, with some churches also receiving their own specific and briefer missives (2 and 3 John?).

Several of these letters have features calling for extended comment, even though they can only be noticed here. Jude and 2 Peter share some relationship of literary dependence (as do, say, Mark and Matthew). It is possible that the letter of James was the first book of the NT to be written. John's second letter is unique in its address: it is directed to 'the chosen lady and her children', most probably a sister church and her members (though the reasons why John chose these words are far from agreed). John's third letter is remarkable for its frank reflection of 'power politics' within the primitive church, somewhat reminiscent of 2 Cor. 10 – 13.

Interpreting the letters

The general interpretative principles briefly summarized earlier (see 'How to interpret the Bible' in the article Approaching the Bible) must of course be borne in mind, but in addition there are a few guidelines that are particularly valuable when reading the letters.

1. Because most of the letters maintain some degree of a linear flow of thought, we must do our best to trace that flow. At the same time, allowance must be made for several important variations.

First, sometimes a writer is responding to the agendas of those to whom he is writing. This is particularly true in 1 Corinthians. Although chs. 1–4 address the problem of factionalism in the church in Corinth, the remaining chapters find Paul treating, item by item, matters raised by oral reports that had reached him (chs. 5–6), and then items raised in a letter from the Corinthians (ch. 7 onwards).

Secondly, the movement of thought is anything but straightforward in several letters. James is notoriously hard to outline, 1 John even more so. Some have argued that in the latter case there is a 'rondo style', with several basic points being treated again and again. If so, it is not a matter of mere repetition: each cycle introduces new material and insight. In any case the development of the argument is not linear (as it is, relatively speaking, in much of Romans or 2 Corinthians); nor is it piecemeal, as in some lists of proverbs. The flow of thought has to be teased out, but it often circles back on itself and looks at ground already covered, but from a slightly different perspective.

2. The earliest of the letters were the first canonical documents to be produced after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; the latest of them were amongst the last canonical documents to be written. But although they cover a period roughly contemporaneous with the writing of the gospels, the gospels, unlike the letters, set out to present Jesus in the days of his flesh. However much we can reasonably know from the gospels about the state of the church when they were written, what we glean is never more than inference. By contrast, the letters offer us relatively direct insight into the nature of the early church.

Thus the letters provide us with the doctrinal, ethical and spiritual culmination (this side of the second coming) of the salvation-historical movement of the Bible. That the picture is rich and multi-faceted must not be denied. That we do not have all the pictures of the puzzle is certain. But these are the pieces that draw together many of the themes of Scripture and set out the ways in which apparently divergent strands are drawn together in God's revelation, in these last days, in his Son. It is difficult to imagine how impoverished we would be if the NT did not include, say, Hebrews, with its comprehensive vision of the way the levitical system and its related covenant pointed forward to the sacrifice and priest who would deal effectively with sin once and for all; Ephesians, with its breath-taking vision of the sweep of God's plan in drawing lost Jews and lost Gentiles together into one new humanity, the church; 1 John, with its stirring insistence that real Christianity can take comfort and assurance from doctrinal fidelity, moral obedience, and genuine love; Colossians, with its pointed warnings, peculiarly relevant in our pluralistic age, that Jesus Christ is not one deity among many, but the exclusive, redeeming, self-disclosure of God, the One in whom all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col. 2:9). Similarly distinctive claims could be made for every letter in the NT canon.

3. In substantial measure, the letters are bridge documents. The OT Scriptures were written by Jews, very largely in the context of the covenant Yahweh made with his people. True, these books reflect something of the ancient Near Eastern context in which the Israelites lived. We are familiar, for example, with something like Jewish Wisdom Literature in the literature of Egypt, something akin to the structure of the covenant in the treaties of the ancient Hittites and other peoples, and the use of circumcision in other tribal groupings (though with quite different symbolism than amongst Abraham and his sons). But the NT letters self-consciously spring from this Jewish heritage and, in many cases, address fledgling churches in the Graeco-Roman world. The change was not incidental; it reflected the transformation of the people of God from a tribal grouping to an international community of the redeemed. As the NT writers faced this extraordinary transition, as they began to work out this globalizing vision to which the Spirit of God pressed them, they not only had to sort out the relationship Christians have to the law of Moses, but the challenge of keeping Jewish and Gentile Christians together. There were new social and political implications of a covenantal community that was not a nation but an international fellowship.

Even at the literary level this 'bridge' value of the letters takes on large importance. On the one hand, it is possible to examine the letters of Paul and note his largely Jewish handling of

Scripture and his profound acquaintance with Jewish methods of interpretation. At the same time, Paul had enjoyed not only the advantages of excellent education at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem but also sufficient exposure to Greek thought that he could cite minor Greek poets and make use of rhetorical and literary devices that spring from the Graeco-Roman world. Sensitivity to this dual heritage will enrich our exegesis. At the same time, it calls forth wonder before the providential wisdom of the God who so carefully prepared the way for this supreme act of self-revelation.

4. Because the letters reflect not only concrete historical circumstances but also culminating biblical theology, there are two additional tools that are very helpful to pastors and laypersons (in addition to commentaries). Good Bible dictionaries provide a wealth of material on cities, movements, technical expressions, relevant archaeological evidence and some critical matters. When reading 1 Corinthians, it is helpful to know something about Corinth; when reading the last of the letters to the seven churchs (Rev. 3:14–22), it is extremely helpful to learn something about Laodicea. At the same time, good theological dictionaries can summarize a great deal of biblical and post-biblical Christian discussion in a few paragraphs or pages, setting discussions within broader frameworks that might easily be missed by those who are seriously studying the text of Scripture for the first time.

5. Because all of the NT letters were in some measure prompted by specific occasions, it is helpful to reconstruct the occasion. Sometimes this exercise is vital; sometimes it is dangerous; always it is a bit tricky.

Reconstructing the occasion that calls forth a letter from the evidence of the letter itself is a little like trying to reconstruct a telephone conversation from the evidence of what is said at only one end. Sometimes the task is very easy; sometimes it is exceedingly difficult. At the risk of pushing the analogy too far, it is easy to reconstruct a telephone conversation where the end to which you are listening constantly repeats what the other is saying; it is a trifle more difficult, but not challenging, where only one inference is possible; it is more difficult, but not impossible, where several inferences are possible but where the trends in the conversation tend to eliminate some of them; and it is impossible to get beyond probabilities or even sheer speculation where there are many possible inferences that can be drawn, and few certain ones. Even there, however, what can actually be heard at one end may be exceedingly valuable in its own right.

This effort of reconstructing the occasion that calls forth a particular letter is sometimes called 'mirror-reading'. For example, from the very surface of the text of Hebrews one observes that the author is deeply concerned that the readers persevere in the faith, regardless of difficulty. But are the readers Jewish Christians who want to return to detailed observance of the Jewish law? Are they Gentile proselytes to Judaism, and thence to Christianity, who want to return to more overt connections with practising Judaism? Have they or the author been heavily influenced by the writings of Philo of Alexandria, whose work at a merely formal level frequently parallels Hebrews rather closely? Certainly one can mention scholars who support each of these views, and many more.

At one level, such questions do not matter very much. Regardless of the decisions a modern interpreter reaches, virtually all will agree that the text of Hebrews urges professing Christians to persevere. Nevertheless, the questions are not merely academic. The nature of the readers' temptation and the manner in which they are drawn to persevere are tied to their concrete circumstances. That one can find scholars who disagree with this position or that is no reason not to think through such matters for oneself; scholarship is not above partisanship, nor is it free from bias and cant. Arguments must be weighed by every thoughtful reader. What is clear, however, is that what we make of the occasion that calls Hebrews forth will affect not only our understanding of the call to persevere, but it will also affect our understanding of the way this letter should be applied to believers today. Telling, appropriate and effective application turns in the first instance on establishing reasonable links between our circumstances and the circumstances first addressed.

Despite arguments to the contrary, the main lines of the occasion that called forth Hebrews are much more straightforward than the situation behind Colossians. Precisely what the 'Colossian heresy' was has never won widespread agreement. The answer, in any case, is the exclusive supremacy of Christ, the only one in whom the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col. 2:9), the only one who is the image of the invisible God, the only one through whose blood, shed on the cross, God has made peace (Col. 1:15, 20). These great truths are firm regardless of the nature of the Colossian heresy. Doubtless it would be a little clearer exactly why Paul argues as he does if we knew more certainly just what he was confronting, but the main lines of the thought of the letter are clear in any case.

The principal point to observe is that the nature of the letters requires that the interpreter

make the effort to understand the historical circumstances surrounding the writing of each document. What is not permissible is to make one particular interpretation utterly dependent on a reconstruction that is itself the result of a merely possible set of inferences.

6. The occasional nature of letters in some ways makes the interpreter's task difficult. The themes that Paul, say, is likely to stress are determined in part by the situations he confronts. In that sense his themes may not be fair representations of his theology as he might preach it in the marketplace, or as he might articulate it in a book for his fellow apostles. This does not mean his letters are contrary to his theology; it means, rather, that with the possible exception of Romans, Paul nowhere sets out to give an overview of the theological structures of thought he has adopted as a Christian apostle.

This means that much that is written about the 'centre' of Pauline theology does not adequately take into account the nature of his writings as they have come down to us. One cannot reasonably determine the relative importance of the cross and the Spirit in Paul's thought by simply counting up the number of occurrences of each word. There may have been important pastoral reasons why he said more about one than the other, even though the other was more controlling in his thought. Moreover, one needs to examine all the places where, say, 'cross', 'crucified', 'death' and 'blood' occur, to see what function such references have in Paul's thought.

Even the notion of the 'centre' of Paul's thought may be misleading. It demands of him an ordering of his theology, with successive hierarchies of importance, that he might well have found strangely abstract, even repulsive. 'Centre' is not in any case a clear term; it needs to be defined more clearly. What can be argued is that justification is the 'centre' of Paul's thought in the sense that it marks the turning point in a person's relation to God and is, therefore, the fundamental concept on which all other saving blessings depend. But one could define 'centre' in a slightly different way and insist that the cross, Christology, or the glory of God, or half a dozen other things are central for Paul.

7. But if the occasional nature of the NT letters causes difficulties of interpretation, at another level the Christian's task is much easier than would otherwise be the case. If the writers of the letters had chosen instead to write theological tomes, doubtless Christian intellectuals would be very gratified. The letters as we have them, however, not only stimulate thought and increase understanding, but bear on all of life. The letters deal with ethical questions, pastoral attitudes, the deep wellsprings of human emotions, conscience, will, morality, truth. We find tender thanksgiving in Philippians, deep and loving yearning in 1 Thessalonians, blistering indignation mingled with pained love in Galatians, passionate pleading in Hebrews, and so forth.

This, surely, is as it should be. For the Bible, not least the letters, was given not merely to inform the mind, but to transform the life. These letters constitute a graciously given divine means to mediate the presence of God to men and women who would otherwise be lost and abandoned. Thus the interpretative challenge must never be a merely intellectual one. It must be a part of our calling as Christians, as justified sinners, as disciples who confess Jesus as Lord.

D. A. Carson

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ROMANS

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome is one of the most important theological documents ever written. Its influence on the church has been enormous: Romans has decisively shaped the teaching of Augustine, Calvin, Luther and Wesley, to mention only a few. Yet Romans is not a systematic theology but a letter written in specific historical circumstances. We will understand it better if we understand those circumstances (see also the general article, Reading the letters).

General circumstances

1. Paul

Paul provides us in 15:14–29 with some details about his own circumstances. He is on his way to Jerusalem, where he plans to hand over to the Jewish church the money that he has collected from the Gentile mission churches. From Jerusalem, Paul intends to travel to Spain in order to begin a new evangelistic work there. On his way to Spain, Paul plans to stop in Rome. Comparing these plans with Luke's narrative in Acts, we can conclude that Paul wrote Romans at the end of the third missionary journey, probably during his three-month stay in Greece (Acts 20:3–6). Paul undoubtedly spent most of this time in Corinth (see 2 Cor. 13:1,10), and indirect confirmation of this as the place where Romans was written comes from Paul's commendation of Phoebe, who was from Cenchrea, the seaport adjacent to Corinth (16:1–2). This stay in Corinth probably occurred in AD 57, although it could have been a year earlier or later.

A factor of some importance in our understanding of Romans is Paul's indication in these verses that he had reached a crucial turning point in his missionary career. Paul had decided to preach in Spain because 'there is no more place for me to work in these regions,' that is, in the eastern Mediterranean (15:23). With the establishment of vigorous churches 'from Jerusalem all the way around to Ilyricum' (15:19), Paul believed that the work God had given him to do – to plant strategic churches through which the gospel could be proclaimed – was finished in that area. Just as early American pioneers felt crowded and moved on whenever they could see the smoke from someone else's cabin, so Paul felt 'crowded' by the number of Christians where he was ministering and wanted to move on to what we might today call 'unreached peoples'.

2. The church in Rome

Some early traditions make Peter the founder of the Roman church, but this is unlikely. Probably Jewish pilgrims from Rome, converted through the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost, planted the gospel among the large Jewish population in the capital city (Luke notes in Acts 2:10 that Jews from Rome were present on that day). As in so many other cities, the Jews of Rome did not all embrace this new Messianic teaching. The historian Suetonius noted that the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome 'because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus' (*Life of Claudius*, 25.2). He was almost certainly referring to violent debates within the Jewish community over the claims of Christians that Jesus was the 'Christ' (Gk. *Christos*), corrupted here into 'Chrestus'. This expulsion of Jews, then, would have included Jewish Christians, as Luke himself implies when he mentions that it was because of this edict of Claudius that Priscilla and Aquila had come to Corinth (Acts 18:2). The expulsion (which is probably to be dated in AD 49) would have had a significant effect on the make-up of the Christian community in Rome: Gentiles, who had up to this point comprised a minority of the believers, were now left as the only Christians in the city. Therefore, although Jews had been allowed to move back to Rome by the time Paul wrote to the Romans – Priscilla and Aquila, for instance, had returned (Rom. 16:3–4) – Gentiles were in the majority in the church, and had come to dominate both its leadership and theological tone.

Literary history

Textual variants in chs. 14 – 16 raise questions about the original form and literary history of Romans. The doxology (16:25–27) at the end of the letter is placed at the end of ch.14 in some manuscripts, at both the end of chs. 14 and 16 in other, and at the end of ch. 15 in one early text. Some Latin manuscripts not only have the doxology at the end of ch. 14 but also omit all of ch. 15 and the rest of ch. 16. These data raise the possibility that the sixteen-chapter form of the letter we now have many have been preceded by

a fourteen or fifteen-chapter form. Perhaps the most popular of the reconstructions holds that Paul had first written chs. 1 – 15, with the doxology, to the church at Rome and had subsequently sent this letter, with the addition of 16:1–23, to the church at Ephesus. Not only would this explain why the doxology appears at the end of both chs. 15 and 16, but it would also account for the number of people whom Paul greets in 16:3–16. Acquaintance with so many believers in Rome, a church that Paul had never visited, seems unlikely, but makes perfectly good sense if these verses were written to the church at Ephesus, with which Paul had a long and close relationship. (The best-known advocate of this theory is T.W. Manson, 'St. Paul's Letter to the Romans – and Others', *The Romans Debate*, ed. K. Donfried [Augsburg, 1977], pp. 1–16.)

This theory and others similar to it must, however, be rejected. For one thing, the textual evidence on which it is based is very slim. To be sure, one manuscript does put the doxology at the end of ch. 15; but the same manuscript includes 16:1–23. We possess no manuscript that contains the fifteen-chapter form of text posited by Manson. There is evidence for a fourteen-chapter form of the text, but it is most improbable that Paul wrote such a text, since it cuts him off in the middle of his argument about the 'strong' and the 'weak' (14:1 – 15:13). Early Christians must have been responsible for omitting the last two chapters of the letter, perhaps to give it a more universal appeal (Harry Gamble, Jr, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* [Eerdmans, 1977]). More likely, however, as Origen suggests, it was Marcion (a second-century theologian who disliked the OT and Jewish elements within Christianity) who removed these chapters.

We have good reason, then, for thinking that the letter printed in our Bibles is substantially identical to the letter that Paul wrote to the Roman church. How do we explain, then, the number of greetings? First, Paul could have met a number of these people – like Priscilla and Aquila – during their exile from Rome in the course of his ministry in the east. The famous Roman roads, well-built and well-maintained, afforded excellent opportunities for travel in the first-century Mediterranean world. Secondly, Paul may have taken the opportunity afforded him by his unfamiliarity with the Roman church to greet every Christian he knew in the city.

Audience

Paul seems to send mixed signals on the issue of the particular audience that he had in view as he wrote to the Roman church. On the one hand, several elements of the letter point to a mainly, if not exclusively, Jewish audience: he greets Jewish Christians in 16:3,7,11; he addresses 'the Jew' in 2:17 and implies that his readers are closely related to the Mosaic law (*cf.* 6:14; 7:1,4); he calls Abraham 'our forefather' (4:1); and he devotes considerable attention to 'Jewish' issues *e.g.* the sin and failure of Jews (2:17 – 3:8), the place of the law in salvation-history (ch. 7) and the past and future of Israel (chs. 9 – 11). Indications of a Gentile readership are, however, equally clear: the address of the letter associates the Romans with the Gentiles among whom Paul had specially been called to minister (1:5–6; *cf.* 1:13 and 15:14–21); Paul directly addresses Gentiles (11:11–24) and his plea for unity and tolerance seems to be directed especially to Gentiles (15:7–9). W. G. Kümmel succinctly summarizes the ambiguity of this evidence: 'Romans manifests a double character: it is essentially a debate between the Pauline gospel and Judaism, so that the conclusion seems obvious that the readers were Jewish Christians. Yet the letter contains statements which indicate specifically that the community was Gentile-Christian' (*Introduction to the New Testament* [SCM, 1975], p.309).

Faced with this conflicting evidence, some scholars have concluded that Paul had a distinctly Jewish audience in mind, others that he was writing to a wholly Gentile audience and still others that he was addressing Jews at some points and Gentiles at others. The evidence is, however, better explained by the supposition that the audience Paul addressed was one made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Nevertheless, the way in which Paul associates the church with his ministry to Gentiles in 1:5–6 suggests that Gentiles were in such a majority that the church had taken on a Gentile flavour and identity.

Class of literature

Ancient letters ranged from brief, intimate notes to family members to elaborate treatises designed for a wide audience. Among the letters of Paul, Romans is clearly the one that is closest to the latter type. Thus, while Romans has the typical opening (1:1–15) and closing (15:14 – 16:27) of a letter, its most striking feature is its sustained theological/pastoral argument in 1:16 – 11:36. At no point in this lengthy section does Paul directly address the Roman Christians *per se* or suggest that the issues he is talking about have been raised by them. And this is true even in the more 'practically' oriented 12:1 – 15:13 (although it is likely that the appeals to the 'strong' and the 'weak' in 14:1 – 15:13 reflect an actual problem in Rome). The movement of the letter is dictated by the internal logic of the gospel rather than by local issues. This does not

mean that Paul wrote the letter in a vacuum: Romans is not a timeless theological treatise, but a *letter*, written to a specific church in a specific situation. Romans, like all Paul's letters, is an *occasional* document. We must not forget the audience he had in view as he wrote. The character of the letter makes clear, at the same time, that the occasion for its writing must have resided in the need to address certain theological issues of relevance to early Christians generally – and to every Christian since.

Scholars have occasionally attempted a more precise identification of the nature of Romans, comparing it to specific kinds of letters of other literary works in the ancient world. While these attempts have often shed light on certain specific features of Romans, none of them can be judged to be an acceptable identification of the letter as a whole. As James Dunn concludes, 'the distinctiveness of the letter far outweights the significance of its conformity with current literary or rhetorical custom' (*Romans 1–8* [Word Books, 1988]).

Purpose

The 'treatise' style of Romans raises a critical question about the letter: why did Paul write this particular letter to this particular church? He says little about his purpose in writing, so our answer to this question must be based on our analysis of the contents of the letter against the general circumstances in which it was written (see above). The most likely answers can be grouped into two major categories: those that focus on Paul's own situation and those that focus on the situation of the Roman Christians.

1. A focus on Paul's circumstances

Three possibilities should be mentioned. First, Paul may have been writing to introduce himself to the Romans and explain what it is he believes with the purpose of gaining support from them for his mission to Spain. Secondly, Paul, knowing that he would be visiting Rome soon, may have taken this opportunity to put down in writing his own doctrinal conclusions. After all, the apostle had just emerged from a difficult theological and pastoral struggle with the Corinthian church, and had reached a critical turning point in his own ministry. What better time to reflect on, and solidify in writing, his own theological convictions? A third possibility is that Paul took the opportunity in this letter to the Romans to rehearse the speech he was going to give when he arrived in Jerusalem with the collection. Certainly this visit to Jerusalem was very much in Paul's mind (see 15:25–33), and the tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians that he hoped to heal by means of that collection could well explain why Romans focuses so much on issues relating to Israel and the law.

Probably each of these factors played some role in Paul's purposes in writing. But only the first explains why the letter was sent specifically to Rome, and it should therefore be given special attention. But before drawing further conclusions, we must note another approach to the question of purpose.

2. A focus on problems in the Roman church

The nineteenth-century biblical critic F. C. Baur pioneered a new approach to Romans by emphasizing that it, like Paul's other letters, was written to deal with specific problems within the community addressed. Many contemporary scholars agree, finding particularly in Paul's admonitions to the 'strong' and the 'weak' (14:1 – 15:13) the overarching purpose of the letter. On this view of the matter, Paul wrote in order to heal a division within the church at Rome. The division was specifically one between Gentile Christians (the 'strong') and Jewish Christians (the 'weak'), and this explains why Paul spends so much time in the letter carefully setting forth his theology as it relates to these two groups.

A desire to heal this division within the Roman church was probably one of Paul's purposes in writing, but not the primary purpose. Would Paul have delayed mentioning anything about his main purpose in writing until the letter was almost finished? Would we not expect him to be drawing applications to this problem from his theological discussion throughout the letter if it loomed so large in his thinking?

So it appears that Paul wrote Romans with a number of purposes in mind. Probably the overriding purpose was his desire to introduce himself to the church at Rome by setting forth the gospel he preached. This was especially important because false rumours about what Paul preached had reached the Romans (see 3:8). He had apparently earned the reputation in the early church of being anti-law and anti-Jewish. Paul sought to show that this was not the case (see particularly 1:16; 7:7–12; chs. 9 – 11) at the same time as he spelt out in detail in what sense he was critical of the Jews and the Mosaic law (see particularly 2:17 – 3:20; ch. 7). These same themes would have been debated in Jerusalem and were central to some of the debates within the Roman church. In other words, we have in Romans a series of purposes, all converging on the issue that predominates throughout the letter: what is the nature of the continuity between God's old covenant arrangement and his new covenant arrangement? What

is the relationship between the law and the gospel, Jewish believer and Gentile believer, Israel and the church? It is Paul's desire to address this central and enduring theological issue that gives to Romans its special universal character.

Theme

In the light of what we have said in the last paragraph, it is no wonder that many scholars think that the continuity of salvation-history is the central theme of the letter. They often single out chs. 9 – 11 as the heart of the letter. Many of the Protestant reformers, on the other hand, focused their attention on chs. 1 – 5 and concluded that the theme of justification by faith is the main theme of the letter. Somewhat similar to their approach is that of Ernst Käsemann, who sees 'the righteousness of God' (which he takes to mean God's intervention to reclaim his rebellious creation) as the theme of Romans. However, neither of these concepts is broad enough to encompass the contents of the letter as a whole. While justification by faith is a critical doctrine in Romans, and it becomes the theme of 3:21 – 4:25, it does not figure prominently in other parts of the letter. If, then, we are to identify a single theme for the letter, it must be 'the gospel'. The word is prominent in the introduction (1:1–2,9,15) and conclusion (15:16,19) of the letter, and has pride of place in what is usually identified as the statement of the letter's theme: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes' (1:16).

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1:18–32 God's wrath on the Gentiles
2:1 – 3:8 God's wrath on the Jews
3:9–20 The guilt of all humankind
3:21–26 The righteousness of God
3:27 – 4:25 'By faith alone'

5:1 – 8:39 **The gospel and the power of God for salvation**
5:1–11 The hope of glory
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6:1–23 Freedom from bondage to sin
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9:1 – 11:36 **The gospel and Israel**
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9:6b–29 Israel's past: God's sovereign election
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11:33–36 The awesome purpose and plan of God

12:1 – 15:13 **The gospel and the transformation of life**
12:1–2 The heart of the matter: a renewed mind
12:3–8 Humility and gifts
12:9–21 Love

13:1–7 The Christian's responsibility to government
13:8–10 Love and the law
13:11–14 Recognizing the times
14:1 – 15:13 Appeals for unity

15:14 – 16:27 The letter closing
15:14–33 Paul's ministry and plans
16:1–16 Commendation and greetings
16:17–20 Warning about false teachers
16:21–27 Final greetings and doxology

Commentary

1:1–17 The letter opening

The opening has elements common to Paul's other letter openings: a prescript, or address (1:1–7), a thanksgiving (1:8–15) and a transition between the opening and the body of the letter (1:16–17). A key word in all these sections is the 'gospel', introducing the theme of the letter as a whole.

1:1–7 Prescript

Ancient letters usually began with an identification of the writer and the recipients, and Paul usually began his letters in the same way. The prescript of Romans is, however, remarkable for its length and theological detail. Not content with simply identifying himself, Paul describes who he is in terms of his divine call to be an apostle (1), the gospel he preaches (2–4) and the special ministry that God has given him (5–6). Only then does he finally complete his prescript by naming the recipients of the letter (7). Paul goes into such detail because he needs to establish his 'credentials' before a church that he has never visited before.

These credentials reside especially in his divine call. Paul is *a servant of Christ Jesus*, and a special servant at that; for he has been *called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.* These words refer to the experience on the Damascus road when the risen Christ appeared to Saul, persecutor of Christians, and called him to play a central role in God's plan to bring the gospel to Gentiles. The term 'apostle' is used in most of the NT of someone who has seen Christ and been specially commissioned by him to function as part of the 'foundation' of the church (Eph. 2:20; see Acts 1:12–26). Paul, then, owed his authority as an apostle not to any human appointment or abilities, but to the risen Lord's call and gifts (see Gal. 1:1). The same is true of the message that Paul proclaimed, the *gospel* (Gal. 1:11–12). Paul takes this word from the OT, where it sometimes denotes the 'good news' about God's final victory in history (see Is. 40:9; 52:7; 61:1; Joel 2:32). Paul was very fond of the word, using it to denote both the actual events of Jesus' death and resurrection that constitute the good news, and the communicating of that good news to others ('preaching'). Here, *gospel* includes both ideas.

Having introduced himself in v1, Paul now briefly characterizes this gospel in vs 2–4. First, it has its roots in the OT: *promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.* Paul touches here on a theme that will become central to Romans: the continuity between God's plan in the OT and its culmination in the New. Secondly, the gospel has at its heart a person: God's *Son* (3), *Jesus Christ our Lord* (4). In a carefully balanced statement that may reflect general early Christian teaching about Jesus, Paul compares his earthly and heavenly states. V 3 looks at Jesus' earthly existence as the promised Messiah from the line of David (see 2 Sa. 7:12–16; Is. 11:1, 10; Ezk. 34:23–24). The phrase *as to his human nature* (Gk. *kata sarka*, lit. 'according to the flesh) is better paraphrased 'from the standpoint of a simply human perspective' (*cf.* RSV, NASB). This phrase is then to be contrasted with *through* (Gk. *kata*, 'according to') *the Spirit of Holiness* in v 4. The contrast between vs 3 and 4, then, is not between Christ's human and divine nature but between his earthly state and his heavenly state as the risen and exalted one. What happened at Christ's resurrection, then, is not simply a powerful declaration that Jesus is Son of God (as the NIV suggests), but the appointment of Jesus to a new status as 'Son-of-God-in-power'. Pre-existing eternally as the Son of God, Jesus, through his resurrection from the dead, gained new power and glory, power now exercised for the 'salvation of everyone who believes' (1:16; see also Phil. 2:9–11; Heb. 7:25).

It is *through* this powerful Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord (4) and *for his name's sake* that Paul received the special grace of being an

apostle (5). Paul's apostleship, as the NT repeatedly emphasizes, was focused especially on the Gentiles (see Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17–18; Gal. 1:16; 2:1–11; Eph. 3:1,6,8; 1Thes. 2:16). Paul here indicates that his specific purpose was to call Gentiles *to the obedience that comes from faith*. This translation suggests that Paul is focusing in his preaching on the need for Christians to live godly lives after their initial conversion. But we should perhaps give as much weight to the word 'faith' as to the word 'obedience' and understand Paul to be stating his comprehensive purpose to call Gentiles both to initial acceptance of the gospel and to continuing obedience to the demands of the gospel (the Greek is simply *hypakoēn pisteōs*, 'obedience of faith'). Believing and obeying are two different activities, but for Paul they were always inseparable: people cannot truly obey God without first bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus in faith; and people cannot truly believe in that *Lord* Jesus without obeying all that he has commanded us (Mt. 28:20).

Since Paul's commission was to go especially to the Gentiles, the Roman church, a largely Gentile church at this time (see the Introduction), was within the sphere of Paul's apostolic authority (6). Hence Paul addresses himself to all the Christians in Rome, *loved by God and called to be saints* (7). Such language, picking up standard OT terminology to describe Israel, reminds the readers that they are God's people. Paul concludes with his customary greeting, adapted from a popular Greek formula but given new theological content: *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.*

1:8–15 Thanksgiving and occasion

In this paragraph Paul briefly expresses his thanks for the widespread reputation of the Roman Christians' faith (8) and then speaks of his longing to visit and minister to the church at Rome (9–15). The strength of Paul's assertions about his desire to visit the church suggests that some of the Roman Christians may have felt slighted that the great 'apostle to the Gentiles' had not yet come to the capital of the Gentile world. Paul assures them that his absence has not been from lack of desire but from lack of opportunity: he has *been prevented* from visiting them (13), the hindrance probably being his obligations to the churches in the eastern Mediterranean (*cf.* 15:19–23). Paul also expresses his purpose for wanting to visit the Roman church. First, he wants to *impart* to them *some spiritual gift* (11). This translation suggests that it is Paul's hope to confer a special spiritual gift (*charisma*) on the Christians in Rome. We should, however, probably translate his words, 'share with you a certain spiritual gift', the reference being to a gift of Paul's own that he is planning to use to strengthen the church. Secondly, Paul expresses his desire to *have a harvest among you* (13), a harvest that he apparently intends to gather by 'preaching the gospel' among them (15). Perhaps we should interpret the first, more general, purpose by the second, more specific one and conclude that Paul wants to come to Rome to use his gift of evangelism to gain converts for the church and so strengthen it. Such a desire is fully in keeping with Paul's overwhelming sense of being *bound* [under obligation] *both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish* (14). Paul's wish to minister in Rome stems not from any selfish desire, but from the knowledge that God has called him and equipped him for a purpose (see 1 Cor. 9:16b: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!').

1:16–17 The theme of the letter

Paul's eagerness to preach the gospel in Rome (15) leads directly into his description of this gospel in vs 16–17. These verses express the central theme of Romans and form the transition between the letter opening (1:1–15) and the body of the letter (1:18 – 15:13). The keyword in this statement of theme, and the central motif of the letter, is *the gospel* (see on v1 for the meaning of this word). In saying that he is *not ashamed* of this gospel, Paul may mean simply that he is 'very proud' of it. But the fact that false rumours about Paul were known to the Roman Christians (3:8) may suggest that he is truly defending himself against accusations that he should be 'ashamed' of what he preaches. In either case, we should note Paul's fierce and defiant pride in that which is a 'stumbling-block' to Jews and 'foolishness' to Greeks (1 Cor. 1:23).

Why this pride in the gospel? Because Paul knows, and knows from experience, that the gospel *is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*. 'Salvation' is a word that denotes deliverance from a broad range of evils and was used in the OT to describe God's ultimate deliverance of his people. See, particularly, Is. 52:7, which uses two of the keywords in this part of Romans: 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who *bring good news*, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim *salvation*, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"' In v16, as always in Paul, salvation refers to God's act in rescuing the sinner from the penalty of sin. Paul's insistence that this salvation is for *everyone who believes* sounds a note that will reverberate throughout Romans. Equally characteristic is the addition *first for the Jew, then for the Gentile*. The universally available power of the gospel

does not cancel Jewish priority. As the recipients of God's OT word and covenant, the Jewish people still stand as the first addressees of God's good news about the completion of his OT plan and promises (3:1–2; 11:1–2,29).

The gospel is the source of God's power to save because in it *a righteousness from God is revealed.* We would do better to make this phrase definite – 'the righteousness of God' – because Paul is referring to a specific concept, rooted once again in OT promises. The 'last days', when God would intervene to save his people, were characterized by prophets like Isaiah as a time when he would reveal his 'righteousness' (*e.g.* Is. 46:13; 51:5–6, 8). This 'righteousness of God' is a central motif in Romans (*cf.* 3:5, 21–22, 25–26; 10:3; outside Romans Paul uses the phrase only in 2 Cor. 5:21). This righteousness is taken by some scholars to mean the gift of 'right standing' that God gives to those who believe, and by others to mean the activity by which God saves his people. But it is not necessary to choose between these alternatives. In both the OT and in Paul, 'the righteousness of God' is a broad concept, embracing both the act of giving (on God's part) and the status of those who receive the gift (on our part). God's righteousness is revealed, then, as the gospel is preached and people respond to the message in faith. For in that moment, God acts to bring the sinner into a new 'right' relationship with himself. Note also that the phrase refers to a new relationship, not to a new moral ability. Paul (and the OT) take the language from the realm of the law court, and it pictures the act by which the judge declares a person 'innocent' before him.

One of the distinguishing features of Paul's discussion of God's righteousness is his insistence on its connection with faith. This connection is underscored in the last part of v17. *By faith from first to last* is a fair paraphrase of the Greek *ek pisteōs eis pistin*, 'by faith unto faith'. The phrase emphasizes that God's righteousness is experienced by faith and nothing but faith. The quotation from Hab. 2:4 reinforces the connection between 'righteousness' and 'faith'. Indeed, it may be that Paul wants to connect these terms even more closely than is suggested by the NIV rendering, for we could also translate the phrase as, 'the one who is righteous by faith will live' (see the AV and RSV). 'Will live' refers, in the context of Romans, to eternal, spiritual life.

Note. 17 In Hab. 2:4 God is reminding the prophet that the person who is part of God's covenant people ('righteous') will experience God's blessing and understand his ways only through faithfulness to God and his covenant. In Paul's use of the verse (*cf.* also Gal. 3:11), each of the key terms – 'righteous', 'live', 'faith' – is given a deeper significance in light of the coming of Christ, but the general sense of the original is maintained. Habakkuk and Paul both affirm that life before God demands the wholehearted commitment of the individual.

1:18 – 4:25 The gospel and the righteousness of God by faith

The Hab. 2:4 quotation in v 17 introduces the theme of the first major section of the body of Romans: the revelation of God's long-promised saving righteousness in Jesus Christ, and faith as the only means by which human beings can experience that righteousness. It is particularly this latter theme that is central to Paul's argument in 1:18 – 4:25. (It may be noted that 'righteousness' and the related words 'justify' and 'righteous' occur twenty-four times in this section; the words 'faith' and 'believe' twenty-seven times.) God's justifying activity, based on the cross of Christ and revealed in the preaching of the gospel, is entirely free – a matter of 'grace' (3:24; 4:4–5, 16) – and can thus be experienced only by faith. For faith is no 'work', but an act of grateful acceptance and surrender (4:4–8). God's grace as the means of revelation, and human faith as the means of acceptance point to another truth that Paul is concerned to emphasize throughout this section: that God's righteousness is for *anyone* who believes, whether Gentile or Jew. Both, Paul asserts, are alike 'under sin' (3:9); both can be justified only by faith (3:28–30). Paul develops the first of these assertions in 1:18–3:20 and the second in 3:21–4:25.

Paul prepares for his exposition of 'the righteousness of God by faith' (3:21 – 4:25) by first demonstrating the depth and breadth of the 'sin problem' (1:18 – 3:20). He seeks to answer two specific questions. Why did God need to reveal his saving righteousness in Christ? Why can people experience it only by faith? The answers to both questions are found in Paul's contention that 'all are under sin' (3:9) – helpless captives to the deadly rule of sin. As Paul develops the argument that leads to this conclusion, it becomes clear that his particular purpose is to show that Jews, just as much as Gentiles, are subject to sin's rule and in need of the gospel of God's righteouness. Thus, after exposing the sin and need of the Gentiles in 1:18–32, Paul spends considerable time showing that the Jews are in no better state (2:1 – 3:8).

3:21–26 is the central paragraph in this section, a paragraph Luther said was 'the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible' (margin of the Luther Bible, on 3:23–26). The rest of the section (3:27 – 4:25) elaborates one major element

from this paragraph: faith as the only means of justification before God. Paul develops his basic points about faith in vs 27–31 and then elaborates these in turn in ch. 4 with reference to Abraham.

1:18–32 God's wrath on the Gentiles

Vs 18–19 act as the 'heading' for all of 1:18 – 3:20: God's wrath falls on all human beings who do not follow the truth as God has revealed it to them. Some theologians have trouble reconciling the idea of wrath with the God of the Bible. But in fact the Bible constantly portrays God as a God who acts to judge sin. The OT mentions several occasions when God's wrath came upon people for their sin (*e.g.* Ex. 15:7; 32:10–12; Nu. 11:1), and the NT predicts a time when the final expression of God's wrath will fall on rebellious humanity (*e.g.* Rom. 2:5; 5:9; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9). The wrath of God is not, of course, an emotional rage but a steadfast and absolute opposition to all that is evil. It is essential to the character of God: 'As long as God is God, He cannot behold with indifference that His creation is destroyed and His holy will trodden underfoot. Therefore He meets sin with His mighty and annihilating reaction' [A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Fortress, 1949)].

Paul shows first how God's wrath has come deservedly on Gentiles (20–32). This whole section has many parallels to Jewish texts in which the Gentiles are criticized for their sins (see especially Wisdom of Solomon 13 – 15). Also evident are allusions to the story of creation and the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (*cf.* v 23 with Gn. 1:20,24). Some scholars think that Paul is here describing that original fall of humanity (20–23) and the consequences for subsequent human history (24–32). But this is not likely, since Paul makes clear that the same people who turned from God are also those who are guilty of the sins he depicts in these verses. We should view this section, then, as Paul's picture of the situation of Gentiles generally, drawn against the background of the fall of the original human beings into sin. Paul pictures each person as his or her 'own Adam', repeating the same basic sin committed by our original human parents. Vs 20–23 describe the basic decision made by Gentiles and vs 24–32 God's reaction to that decision.

Though Gentiles do not have 'special revelation', as the Jews do in the Scriptures, they nevertheless have been given knowledge of the truth about God in the creation around them. *God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen* (20). Paul makes clear that Gentiles in his day, and people who have never heard the gospel or read the Bible in ours, have genuinely 'seen' something of God and who he is. But some people who receive that truth do not respond appropriately to it: rather than glorifying God or giving him thanks, they turn from the truth to embrace idolatry (21–23).

This passage is one of the most important in the Bible for the concept of 'natural revelation': the idea that, in addition to revealing himself in Christ and in the Scriptures, God has also revealed himself to everybody through nature and history. As Paul will hint at later (see 1:32; 2:14–16), all human beings have the capacity to receive such revelation because they continue to bear the divine image. This text not only affirms this concept but also, and most importantly, teaches what is the ultimate result of natural revelation unaccompanied by any other means of grace: a rejection of God. No-one, Paul makes clear here, can ever be saved on the basis of the truth revealed in nature by itself. Thus, Paul concludes, because all people have been given access to genuine knowledge about God, they are, when they turn from it, *without excuse* (20).

This text provides one of the most important theological bases for the missionary enterprise: the lost state of all those who have never had the chance of responding to the gospel of God's grace. For this text makes clear that there can be no salvation apart from response to the gospel of Christ. Those who have never heard that gospel are therefore bound in their sin and without hope. To be sure, God is sovereign in the communication of his grace as well as in its application, and he may at times choose to bring to people a knowledge of the gospel in ways quite unforeseen and even unknowable to us. But the Scriptures make plain that God has chosen to make known the good news of Jesus Christ through the witness of his own people (Mt. 28:16–20; Rom. 10:14–15). This was one of the main reasons why Paul and other early Christian missionaries were so passionately committed to the spread of the gospel.

Human rejection of God leads to God's punishment of humans. Three times in this paragraph Paul tells us that Gentiles have made an 'exchange': turning from the truth of God and his moral requirements to their own gods and sinful ways (23, 25, 27). Three times also Paul indicates God's reaction to this 'exchange' with the statement *God gave them over* (24, 26, 28). Faced with human sin and rebellion, God turns people over to the sin they have chosen and its consequences. The language Paul uses (Gk. *paradidōmi*, 'hand over') refers to more than a passive withholding of divine grace on God's part. Paul thinks, apparently, of a judicial act in which God confirms people in the

decision they have made and turns them over to the consequences of it. Prominent among the sins to which God has handed over people are idolatry (25; *cf.* v 23) and sexual sins, especially the sin of homosexuality (24, 26–27). Paul here agrees with the Jewish tradition – and the OT – in seizing on homosexual practice as a particularly evident example of the Gentiles' rejection of God. *Unnatural*, applied to homosexual practice in v 26, in this context denotes the practice as one that is against the natural law, given by God to regulate all people.

Vs 29–31 show how human failure to give God his due has brought on the human race destructive evils of all kinds, ranging from gossip to murder. It may be that Paul implies a sequence in these sins, the basic sin of idolatry – putting something in God's place – leading to all other kinds of sin. V 32 suggests that peoples' knowledge of divine things is not completely effaced by their 'fall' into sin. Although the minds of human beings can no longer function as they should (28), people are still able to understand that the things they do are deserving of God's penalty of death. Yet they not only do them, but also *approve of those who practise them.* What Paul means by this is not that approving the sin of others is, in an absolute sense, worse than doing the sin ourselves, but that encouraging others in sin reveals the extent to which people have become outright rebels against God's righteous rule.

2:1 – 3:8 God's wrath on the Jews

In 1:18–32 Paul has described the sin and judgment of the Gentiles using the third person: 'they' turned from God, God gave 'them' over. Through most of ch. 2, however, Paul uses the second person singular, as in v 1: '*You, therefore, have no excuse*'. This shift in person does not mean that Paul is now addressing his readers in Rome directly. Paul is using a literary device, popular in the ancient world, in which an author addresses an imaginary opponent or discussion partner as a vivid means of getting their points across to their audience. (This style was named the diatribe.) Who is Paul's 'opponent' or debating partner in these verses? V 17 makes clear that in vs 17–29, at least, Paul is speaking to a Jew. Many scholars (*e.g.* Barrett) think that in vs 1–16 Paul is speaking more generally to any self-proclaimed 'moral' person. But it is more likely that even here Paul's real 'target' is the Jew. He omits any specific identification at first so that he can engage the Jew in his argument before the force of his accusation becomes clear. Paul's technique here probably reflects his preaching style. We can imagine Jews in Paul's audience expressing their agreement with Paul's indictment of Gentile sinners in ch. 1, only to find themselves indicted for doing *the same things* (3).

Throughout 2:1 – 3:8, then, Paul focuses on Jews. He demonstrates that their status before God in the judgment is no different from that of the Gentiles (2:1–16), despite the fact that they possess genuine gifts of God such as the law and circumcision (2:17–29). In 3:1–8 Paul takes a brief detour from this main line of argument to deal with some issues raised by what he has said in ch. 2.

2:1–16 God's impartial judgment

Paul's purpose in this section is to place the Jew in the same category as the Gentile sinner in ch. 1. He proceeds in the three stages. Vs 1–5 contain the heart of Paul's indictment: the Jew (the 'hidden target' behind the 'you' Paul addresses) does the 'same things' that the Gentiles do and is therefore liable to the same judgment. Paul follows this with two paragraphs in which he departs from his 'accusation' style to explain and elaborate the charge he has made in vs 1–5. Paul defends his accusation of the Jew by showing that God's impartiality, taught in the OT and in Judaism, demands that he should have no favourites but treat every person, whether Jew or Gentile, in the same way (6–11). Nor does the Jewish people's possession of the Mosaic law make the situation of the Jew significantly different from that of the Gentile; for it is not *having* the law, but *doing* the law that matters before God and, in any case, the Gentiles also have God's law in a certain sense (12–16).

The *therefore* in v 1 is, at first sight, difficult to understand. How can Paul's condemnation of Gentiles (1:18–32) lead to the conclusion that Jews are under condemnation also? Some suggest that the word is a simple transition word, without logical force; others (*e.g.* Cranfield) that 1:18–32 is not really about Gentiles but about all people. A modification of this latter suggestion would seem most likely. While Paul's language in vs 20–32 indicates that he is thinking only of Gentiles, vs 18–19 include all people. As was pointed out above, these verses stand as the heading for all of 1:18 – 3:20, and it is to these verses that Paul now returns in 2:1. Because God's wrath is revealed from heaven against *all* people who suppress God's truth, *you, therefore, have no excuse.* For whoever it is who judges the Gentile sinners Paul has described in 1:20–32 is also judging himself or herself. This is because the one standing in judgment is doing *the same things.* While not every person is involved in rank idolatry and sexual promiscuity, no person is guiltless with respect to the sins enumerated in vs. 29–31: *e.g.* greed, hatred of God, arrogance. And perhaps, in the larger sense, even the Jew who puts the

law, or his circumcision, or his piety above devotion to God is guilty of idolatry. Since God's judgment *is based on truth, i.e.* it is always exactly in keeping with the facts (2), he cannot simply overlook such sin (3). Paul's argument in these first three verses may then be summarized in three propositions: God's judgment falls on those who do 'such things'; even the self-righteous judge of others does 'such things'; therefore, even the self-righteous judge stands under God's judgment.

The rhetorical question in v 4 exposes the false assumptions with which this self-righteous judge of others is operating. That Paul is speaking to a Jew, and reflecting a real situation, is clear from the fact that the sentiment and even much of the wording of this question is drawn from the Jewish inter-testamental book the Wisdom of Solomon. After rebuking the Gentiles for their idolatry and sin in chs. 13 – 14 (a text that Paul parallels in 1:18–32), the author of this book says in 15:1–2: 'But thou, our God, art kind [*chrēstos*] and true, patient [*makrothymos*], and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin we are thine, knowing thy power.' It is clear that it is just this assumption of automatic exclusion from God's judgment that Paul is contesting. The Jew who fails to repent sincerely will not go free in the judgment simply because he or she is a part of God's covenant people. Such a person is, in fact, simply *storing up wrath* for the day of God's righteous judgment (5).

V6 is tied closely to v 5 (and hence the paragraph division in the NIV), but actually introduces a new section. The theme of this section is expressed in both its opening and closing verses: *God does not show favouritism* (11); he *willl give to each person according to what he has done* (6). Paul uses this same technique (sometimes called chiasm) to detail the two possible outcomes of God's impartial judgment: eternal life for those who do good (vs 7 and 10) and wrath for those who sin (vs 8 and 9). The following outline displays this structure:

A God's equitable judgment (v 6)
  B Life for those who go good (v 7)
    C Wrath for those who do evil (v 8)
    C Wrath for those who do evil (v 9)
  B Glory for those who do good (v 10)
A God's impartiality (v 11)

Paul applies this teaching about God's impartial judgment explicitly to Jew and Gentile (9–10), revealing his overall purpose of showing that God's standard of judging Jews will not differ at all from the standard he uses to evaluate Gentiles. For both, it is *doing* that will be decisive. That doing evil will incur God's wrath is no surprise and represents consistent biblical teaching. But what does Paul mean when he asserts that people who do good will gain eternal life (7; *cf.* v 10)? Since Paul elsewhere makes clear that people can achieve eternal life only through faith (1:17; 3:20, 21–22), he cannot mean that people can actually be saved simply by doing good works. Some scholars (*e.g.* Cranfield) think that Paul is describing Christians, whose good works demonstrate the reality of their new life. But Paul says that it is the doing of good itself that brings life. It is better, then, to view these statements as general assertions of principle: if someone were to do good persistently (see v 7), that person would gain eternal life. But what Paul will make clear elsewhere is that no person, since the fall of Adam, can, in fact, do that good persistently (see 3:9–18, 23). Paul's purpose at this point is not to show how people can be saved but to set forth the standards of God's evaluation apart from the gospel. These standards are the same for everyone – whether they be Jews or Gentiles, black or white.

A Jew listening to Paul's argument to this point would surely have offered a crucial objection: does not the fact that the Jews are God's chosen people and have been given his law as a sign of his covenant, put them in a very different position before God's judgment from the Gentiles? Paul anticipates this objection and provides a preliminary answer in vs 12–16. As in vs 6–11, Paul's purpose is to iron out any distinction between Jew and Gentile with respect to the ultimate judgment of God. He does so by making two points. First, it is not simple possession of the law that will excuse the Jew from judgment; only if it is actually obeyed will it do the Jew any good (12–13). Those who *sin apart from the law* and those who *sin under the law* (12) are clearly Gentiles and Jews, respectively. This makes clear that Paul uses the word 'law' here (Gk. *nomos*), as he usually does, to refer to the law of Moses. Both Jews and Gentiles will be condemned by the law (12) because it is only the one who obeys the law who will be *righteous in God's sight* (13). The logic of these verses assumes that there is no person who is able to obey God's law sufficiently so as to become righteous before him.

The second point Paul makes here is that Gentiles themselves possess God's law, and so there is not really as much difference between the Jew and the Gentile as the Jew might think (14–15). Gentiles do not have the law of Moses, but in doing *by nature things required by the law, i.e.* by following some of the standards of God's law – refraining from murder, theft, adultery; honouring parents – they reveal that they are *a law for themselves.* What Paul means by this is spelled out in v 15: *the requirements of the law are*

written on their hearts. By their occasional conformity to the demands of God's law, these Gentiles show that they have access to God's moral demands. While not possessing the written law, they have some knowledge of God's requirements from within, so that their consciences can, to some extent, accurately monitor their conformity to God's will (15b). Here Paul supplements his 'natural revelation' teaching of ch. 1 by reminding us that every person has some knowledge of God's moral will. As with natural revelation generally, however, this knowledge cannot lead to salvation; v 15b means not that some Gentiles might actually be saved at the judgment, but that each Gentile will have some thoughts that 'accuse' him and some that 'excuse' him.

The parentheses that the NIV places around vs 14–15 suggest that we should see v 16 as the continuation of v 13: God's declaration of righteous status will take place *on the day when God will judge men's secret thoughts through Jesus Christ.* But vs 14–15 are integral to Paul's argument. V 16, then, is probably to be connected to v 15b: the conflicting 'thoughts' of people will be revealed and used as evidence at the judgment day by the God who has perfect knowledge of our hearts (see 1 Sa. 16:7; Ps. 139:1–2; Je. 17:10).

Note. 14 Some scholars think that Paul is describing Gentile Christians in vs 14–15, but this is unlikely. Gentile Christians do not do the things of the law *by nature*; and Paul's whole argument bears many similarities to a popular Greek teaching about the 'natural law' that all people possess.

2:17–29 The law and circumcision. Paul returns to the diatribe style of 2:1–5 in these verses, as he again uses the second person singular to address his 'dialogue partner'. For the first time this dialogue partner is explicitly identified as a Jew (17). What Paul argues in this section is that the Jew cannot rely on either the law or circumcision to protect him or her from the judgment of God. Jews viewed these as signs of their special covenantal status before God and believed that this status would guarantee salvation for all Jews who did not deliberately reject it: Paul does not deny either the value of the law and circumcision or the special status of the Jews; but he does deny that this special relationship gives Jews automatic immunity from the righteous judgment of God. God's word given to Israel and his covenant with the people are great privileges; but they do not, in themselves, justify or save. As he has done repeatedly throughout 2:1–16, Paul asserts again that the law and circumcision can shield the Jew from judgment *only if the law is truly obeyed.* And, as Paul suggests in vs 17–24 and asserts plainly in 3:9–18, the Jews are not able truly to obey the law.

The first paragraph, vs 17–24, is made up of a long conditional sentence (17–23) and a concluding scriptural citation (24). In a series of 'if' clauses, Paul enumerates privileges that Jews claim for themselves (17–20). They claim the name *Jew*, the honorific title inherited from their ancestor Judah who became the nucleus of God's chosen people. They *rely on the law*, what Paul calls in v 20 *the embodiment of knowledge and truth.* Gentiles have access to certain limited knowledge about God through 'natural revelation' (1:18–19, 25, 28, 32); but the Jews have a far more clear and complete revelation in the Mosaic law. Because they are instructed by this law, Jews *know his will* and can *approve of what is superior* (18). And, for the same reason, Jews can legitimately claim the right to instruct other nations which have not been blessed with so clear a revelation of the divine will (19–20). Israel's 'teaching' role with respect to the rest of the world is asserted in the OT – the nation, the 'servant of the Lord', was to be a 'light for the Gentiles', and 'to open eyes that are blind' (Is. 42:6–7; 49:6). (This task, in which the nation itself failed, was ultimately fulfilled in the servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ.)

In the 'then' clause of his conditional sentence, Paul uses a series of questions to remind the Jews of their failure in this respect (21–23). What is surprising is that Paul selects such blatant sins – *stealing, adultery* and *robbing temples* (probably referring to the use of metals from idolatrous articles; *cf.* Dt. 7:26) – as examples of Jewish failure to keep the law. For would not most Jews have responded that they had not, in fact, disobeyed these commandments? Perhaps the answer is that Paul is assuming Jesus' radical extension of the law: 'When theft, adultery, and sacrilege are strictly and radically understood, there is no man who is not guilty of all three' [C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Harper & Row, 1957)]. But there is nothing in this context to suggest that Paul is assuming such a perspective. Perhaps, rather, Paul has selected these particular sins because of their prominence within the Mosaic law (taking *robbing temples* as a form of idolatry). Paul is not here trying to prove that all Jews commit these sins, but that they are particularly clear indications of the contrast between claim and practice that does pervade Judaism. Paul sharply expresses this contrast in the last of his rhetorical questions (23): *You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law?* The consequences of this contrast between claim and reality are highlighted in the quotation of Is. 52:5 in v 24. Perhaps there is irony here in the

fact that Paul transfers the responsibility for God's name being blasphemed from the Gentiles (as in the OT context) to the people of Israel themselves.

Circumcision, like the law of Moses, was a particularly prominent sign of the Jews' special status (some rabbis claimed that 'no person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna'). Paul, however, asserts that circumcision will be of value only if the Jew observes the law. Conversely, the Jew who breaks the law will lose the value of his circumcision. Simply belonging to Israel, symbolized in circumcision, cannot save a person from God's just judgment. For God's judgment on a person is 'according to what he has done' (2:6), and it is only by 'observing the law' that circumcision will have any value. It is not clear whether Paul means by this that circumcision will have saving benefit if it is accompanied by a heart-felt, faith-motivated doing of the law (see, *e.g.* Murray, Cranfield), or that circumcision can never have saving power because no one is able to fulfil the condition of observing the law (*e.g.* Calvin, Bruce). But the latter seems preferable, since Paul's purpose in this part of the letter seems to be to deny any saving benefit to circumcision and to the law.

If Jews who fail to do the law lose the value of their circumcision, could not Gentiles *be regarded as though they were circumcised* when they *keep the law's requirements*? (26) This follows logically from v 25. Paul goes further in v 27: such an uncircumcised person who obeys the law *will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a law-breaker. The written code* translates the Greek word *gramma*, 'letter', which Paul uses elsewhere to denote the law of Moses (see v 29 and Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6–7). The law demands of its recipients an obedience that in itself it cannot secure. These verses are occasionally interpreted to mean that people who have never heard the gospel can be saved if they follow the dictates of their consciences. But this is plainly contrary to what Paul affirms elsewhere (3:20). More popular is the view that these uncircumcised people who keep the law are Gentile Christians (Murray, Cranfield, Godet). But would Paul have ever made law-keeping a means to salvation? Probably, then, as in 2:7 and 10, Paul advances this corollary only as a theoretical possibility: should a Gentile truly keep the law's requirements (which Paul elsewhere denies), he or she would be saved (*cf.* Calvin, Käsemann, Wilckens).

Vs 28–29 explain why circumcision does not guarantee salvation and why its lack does not exclude from salvation. For the circumcision that ultimately counts before God is the *circumcision of the heart*, accomplished *by the Spirit*. What Paul says here is, of course, not new; the OT used this language to demand internal transformation (*e.g.* Dt. 10:16; Je. 4:4) and, like Paul, stressed that it was ultimately only God's Spirit who could effect such a transformation (Je. 31:31–34; Ezk. 36:26–27). But what was a matter of expectation in the OT prophets has become a reality in the new covenant inaugurated in Jesus Christ. Paul's language here, then, brings ch. 2 to a climax by hinting at the truth that becoming a member of God's family is not a matter of Jewish covenant status or of doing the law but of creation anew through the Spirit of God.

3:1–8 God's faithfulness and the Jews. In his attack on Jewish pretension in ch. 2, Paul wrote as if there were now no more difference at all between Jew and Gentile (see *e.g.* vs 9–10, 26–29). But this would be to misunderstand his argument. Paul's purpose was to show that Jews have no advantage with respect to Gentiles in the judgment of God simply because they are Jews. Paul, experienced preacher that he was, knew that his argument could be misunderstood, so he added a detailed discussion on to the end of his exposure of Jewish sin in which he both affirms Jewish privileges and delineates the nature and limitations of those privileges. This issue would, of course, be of particulcar concern to Jews and Jewish Christians; but in that it raises questions of God's own consistency and reliability – for circumcision and the law, it must be remembered, were given by God to the people of Israel – the matter would be of interest to Gentile Christians as well.

C. H. Dodd claimed that the logical answer to the question Paul asks in v 1 is 'No'; there is no more advantage in *being a Jew* or in *circumcision*. He thought that Paul's opposite answer – *Much in every way*! – stems from his emotional commitment to his 'kinsmen according to the flesh'. But this is to misunderstand Paul's carefully balanced theology of Israel. The Jews do not possess a saving relationship with God as a birthright; but they do have undeniable advantages, the greatest of which is the fact that *they have been entrusted with the very words of God*. The *First of all* at the beginning of v 2 suggests that Paul was going to continue to enumerate other privileges, but became sidetracked and so never finished the list (*cf.* however, Rom. 9:3–5). Israel's greatest gift is the Scriptures, *the very words of God* (Gk. *ta logia*, 'the oracles', used twenty-four times in Ps. 119 of the word of God). True, *some* Jews have not proved faithful to this word: they have neither obeyed the law nor embraced Jesus in faith. But human unfaithfulness can never detract from the faithfulness of God (3). Even when a person is *a liar*, God is still *true* (4a).

Most scholars see in these verses a positive affirmation of God's continuing faithfulness to his people Israel who, as Paul makes clear in Rom. 11, have not been rejected by God (11:1–2) and who will one day be saved (11:25–26). However, while the positive aspect of God's faithfulness is certainly present, v 4b suggests that there is a negative side to this faithfulness as well. Paul here quotes David's affirmation from Ps. 51:4 that God is just in his punishment of him, for he has indeed sinned (in his relationship with Bathsheba). The point is that God is just when he *judges*. In the light of this, we should understand Paul to be affirming in vs 3–4 God's faithfulnesss to all aspects of his word to Israel. And that word both promises blessing for obedience and threatens judgment for disobedience (see, Dt. 28; 30:11–20). God's faithfulness, then, to his word does not preclude judgment of the Jewish people for their sin (see, for similar emphases, Ne. 9:32–33; La. 1:18; *Psalms of Solomon* 2:18; 3:5; 4:8; 8:7).

But this assertion raises a further question: if God's righteousness becomes even more evident through human unrighteousness, how is it fair for God to judge that unrighteousness (5)? Some (*e.g.* Murray) think that Paul is raising this as a question about God's dealings with human beings generally. But the context of Jewish argumentation makes it likely that he is still thinking of Jewish *unrighteousness* specifically. *God's righteousness* cannot mean here what it did in 1:17 – God's saving righteousness – but must refer, as the parallel words *faithfulness* (3), *true* (4) and *truthfulness* (7) suggest, to his faithfulness. The OT frequently uses the word 'righteousness' (Heb. *ṣédeq* or *ṣᵉdāqâ;* translated in the LXX with the same Greek word Paul uses here, *dikaiosynē*) to refer to God's faithfulness (*e.g.* Pss. 31:1; 36:5–6; Is. 38:19; 63:7). Scholars often claim that this faithfulness refers to God's commitment to carry out his positive covenant obligations to Israel. But many texts suggest a more basic concept, in which God's faithfulness is to his own person and word; and in some of these contexts God's 'righteousness' is displayed in his fair and just judgment of his people's sins (*e.g.* Pss. 67:4; 94:15; Is. 5:16; 10:22). Since v 4 has proclaimed God to be 'right' (*dikaiōthēs*) in his punishment of sin, this more basic idea of God's righteousness must be present in v 5. The Jews' failure to obey God's word has brought upon them judgment, and so highlighted God's faithfulness to his word of threatened judgment for sin. But, whatever the positive result of sin might be, God is never unjust to punish it. He will *judge the world*, and do so in strict justice (see Gn. 18:25; Jb. 8:3; 32:10–12). Vs 7–8 repeat the objection of v 5 in other terms, but v 8 sheds new light on the nature of this issue for Paul. As he here suggests, he himself has been accused of preaching a doctrine that leads to a '*Let us do evil that good may result*' conclusion. Paul's assertion that God is 'righteous' even when he judges Jewish sin is taken by some Jews to mean that sin is therefore justified. Paul engages in no logical defence of his position here, but simply pronounces a condemnation on those who suggest so blasphemous a conclusion (8b).

3:9–20 The guilt of all humankind

Although the brief questions opening v 9 connect it with vs 1–8, it is clear that Paul begins here a summary and application of the argument he began in 1:18. He has demonstrated that God's wrath justly falls on both Gentiles (1:18–32) and Jews (2:1 – 3:8). Thus, Paul concludes, all people are 'under sin'. Paul bolsters this conclusion with an OT proof (10–18) and then applies the principle to Jews (19–20).

Paul's assertion of continuing Jewish privilege in 3:1–8 (especially vs 1–3) stimulates his question *Are we* [Jews] *any better?* His answer, *Not at all!*, is not intended to retract what he has said in vs 1–3, but to guard against the conclusion that God's gifts to the Jews give to them any advantage in God's judgment. Paul makes this point by reminding his readers that he has *already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.* To be 'under sin' means not only 'to be a sinner'; it means to be a helpless slave to the power of sin (*cf.* 6:15–23).

Paul underlines his conclusion about universal sinfulness with a series of OT quotations. Such collections of thematically connected quotations were popular with the rabbis, and some have thought that Paul may here be quoting a pre-existing Christian collection. The purpose of this series is especially to illustrate the 'all' of v 9: note the repeated *there is no-one* (vs 10, 11, 12) and the return of the all-embracing theme in vs 19–20: *every mouth, the whole world, no-one*. The texts appear to be arranged haphazardly at first sight, but there is evidence of some attention to structure and sequence. The first line, *There is no-one righteous, not even one*, is the heading, with the *there is* in v18 harking back to it to round off the series. Vs 11–12 develop the first line with five generally synonymous repetitions of the theme 'there is no-one righteous'. These quotations are all from Ps. 143:1–3. Paul continues to mine the Psalms (5:9, 140:4; 10:7) in the next four lines (13–14), each of which features sins of speech. Vs 15–17, on the other hand, use quotations from Is. 59:7–8 to depict sins of violence against others. Significantly, while some of the OT passages Paul quotes describe the enemies of Israel, others (*e.g.* Is. 59:7–8) refer to sins of the

people of Israel. Paul thus subtly again makes the point that Jews must also be counted in the category of 'the wicked'.

Paul's application of the teaching of vs 9–18 (and indirectly of 1:18 – 3:18 as a whole) in vs 19–20 reveals again his preoccupation with the status of the Jews. He reminds his readers that his quotations have been taken from *the law (nomos)*, the word here referring to the Scriptures as a whole (*cf.* also 1 Cor. 9:8–9; 14:21, 34; Gal. 4:21b). But this law is directed especially *to those who are under the law*, that is, the Jews (see 2:12; 3:2). From this Paul concludes that *every mouth* is now *silenced* – no-one has any defence to offer before God (see Jb. 5:16; Pss. 63:11; 107:42) – and *the whole world* is *accountable to God*, awaiting the sentence of condemnation. Paul can validly draw such a universal conclusion from the scriptural proof of Jewish sinfulness because, in demonstrating the sinfulness of God's own covenant people, he has proven the most difficult part of his case. If even the Jews are condemned, then no person can escape the same sentence.

This means, in turn, that *no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law* (20a). The fact that all people are 'under sin's power' (3:9) means that no person can ever obey God's law sufficiently as to merit a right standing before him. In putting it in terms of obedience to the law, Paul is again thinking particularly of the situation of the Jew. But Jewish obedience to the law is one instance of human obedience to God's moral rules. In dismissing Jewish 'works of the law' as insufficient to attain salvation, Paul implicitly condemns all human 'works' as similarly inadequate. The power of sin holds all people in its inexorable grasp, and nothing that *we* do can ever release us from it. What, then, is the purpose of the law of Moses? It functions to make people *conscious of sin*. By setting forth God's will in great detail, the Mosaic law makes absolutely clear that it is the living God whom we offend when we sin. It thus gives to humanity a clear understanding of its 'accountability' (see v 19) before God.

Note. 20 The NIV *observing the law* translates *ergōv nomou*, 'works of the law' (see also Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10). Traditionally, this phrase has been understood to mean anything that a person does in obedience to God's law. This is the interpretation adopted in the commentary above, and we think there are sound reasons for accepting it. While the phrase appears nowhere else in Greek, a parallel Hebrew phrase occurs in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and it is reminiscent also of the frequent rabbinic references to 'works' and 'the commandments' – all of which refer to doing what the law demands generally. But scholars have suggested several other interpretations in recent years. James Dunn's is probably the most popular and significant. He thinks that 'works of the law' refers to those areas of the Jews' life that marked them out as God's people, especially circumcision, dietary laws and observances of feasts. Paul, then, in v 20, would be denying that the Jewish covenant identification is able to justify. While Paul does indeed teach this, it seems as though this verse is saying more than that. Throughout 1:18 – 3:20, Paul's focus has been on 'works' in a general sense (see, with reference to the Jews, 2:2–3, 6–10, 21–23, 25–27) and there is no good reason, then, either in the general use of the phrase or in the context, to restrict its meaning to certain works, or to works done in a certain attitude.

3:21–26 The righteousness of God

God's 'righteousness' (*dikaiosynē*) stands at the heart of this great text. It is mentioned four times (21, 22, 25, 26), while the occurrence of two cognate words, 'justify' (*dikaioō;* 24, 26) and 'just' (*dikaios*; 26) reinforces its centrality. Paul develops his exposition of God's righteousness in four steps.

First, he announces 'the righteousness of God' (21). The NIV *righteousness from God* is a possible but surely incorrect rendering, because Paul is referring to an activity *of* God (as in 1:17) not to a gift or status *from* God. Paul's wording deliberately echoes 1:17, as he returns, after the necessary backdrop of 1:18 – 3:20, to the theme of 1:18 – 4:25. Here, however, Paul's focus is less on the way that God's activity of 'making right' or justifying is revealed in the preaching of the gospel than on the historical foundation for that justifying in the cross of Christ (the perfect tense of *has been made known* suggests this). Further, in positive confirmation of what he said in 3:20, Paul makes clear that this righteousness of God has been made known *apart from law*. The NIV rendering suggests that this phrase could modify what comes before it: 'an apart-from-the-law righteousness of God', but the phrase probably modifies the verb. Paul's point is that a new era in God's plan has arrived *now* and that his way of bringing people into relationship with himself takes place outside the confines of that old era, of which the Mosaic law was a central component. But Paul is careful at the same time to emphasize the continuity in God's plan. God's righteousness may not take place within the old era, or covenant; but the law and the prophets of that covenant *testify* to it.

In the second step of his exposition, Paul highlights the universal character of God's righteousness. Experiencing God's justifying activity is possible only *through faith in Jesus*

Christ, and is for *all who believe*; for all are alike in needing God's righteousness, since *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (22–23). The NIV translation *through faith in Jesus Christ* presumes that the genitive *Iēsou Christou* is objective, but many scholars are convinced it is a subjective genitive and translate the phrase 'faith [or faithfulness] of Jesus Christ'. Paul would then be saying two separate things in v 22b: that God's righteousness is based on Christ's faithfulness and that it is available for everyone who believes. This is certainly a possible interpretation, but it is probably best to stick with the NIV rendering at this point. The idea of Christ's 'faithfulness' (expressed with the word *pistis*) is not clearly attested elsewhere in Paul, while this whole section of Romans focuses again and again on the centrality of human faith in Christ for justification (see especially v 26 at the end of this paragraph). Paul, then, repeats the notion of human faith in v 22 because he wants to say both that God's righteousness comes *only* by faith in Christ and that it comes to *everybody* who has such faith. V 23 is a succinct summary of 1:18 – 3:20.

The third part of the paragraph (24–25a) draws attention to the source of God's righteousness. *Are justified* at the beginning of v 24 harks back to God's righteousness in vs 21–22. (The connection is not clear in English because we have to use words from two different roots – 'justify' and 'righteousness' – to translate Greek words that come from the same root.) God's act of putting people into a new and right relationship with himself is an act of sheer grace: he acts without compulsion and apart from any 'reasons' outside his own will (see also 4:4–5, 13–16; 11:6). This is why faith, an act of acceptance and surrender, is necessary to experience this righteousness. Our justification, furthermore, has its source in *the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Redemption (apolytrōseōs)* is another of the important theological terms in this paragraph. It denotes an act of 'buying out of slavery' and suggests that God provided in Jesus Christ a full 'payment' for our sin that we might be released from its bondage (see 3:9) to serve a new master.

V 25 continues this thought by describing in more detail the nature of Christ's work on the cross for us. The key word is *hilastērion*, translated 'sacrifice of atonement' in the NIV. Many think, in light of the use of this word in secular Greek, that it means here 'propitiation,' that is, an act in which the wrath of God is turned away. Others (*e.g.* Dodd) insist that the word means '*expiation*' (see the RSV), an act in which sins are forgiven and 'wiped away'. But the evidence of the word's use in the LXX points in a slightly different, and broader, direction. The word there usually refers to the 'mercy seat' a component of the altar in the tabernacle. The word is particularly prominent in Lv. 16, where the ritual of the Day of Atonement is prescribed. It is on this 'mercy seat' that the blood of the sacrifice is sprinkled, in order 'to make atonement' for the people. Since in its only other NT occurrence (Heb. 9:5) *hilastērion* refers to this mercy seat, it seems likely that Paul uses the word with this meaning. His point, then, would be that Jesus Christ is the NT counterpart to the OT 'mercy seat'. As this 'mercy seat' was the place where God took care of his people's sin, so now Jesus Christ has been *presented* (publicly displayed for all to see) as the 'place' where God now deals, finally and forever, with his people's sin. Atonement now takes place in him and this atonement, as in the OT, includes both the forgiving of sins – expiation – and the turning away of God's wrath – propitiation. This propitiation is, of course, a far cry from the sort of 'bribery' of capricious and self-serving gods featured in some ancient religions. The propitiation that takes place at the cross is the gift of God himself and involves the satisfaction of his own righteous and holy anger at sin.

The fourth step in Paul's exposition of God's righteousness asserts that God's way of justifying sinners maintains his justice and holiness (25b–26). The key to understanding these verses is to realize that 'righteousness of God' has a different meaning here than it has in vs 21–22. As in 3:5 (see the notes there), it refers to God's faithfulness to his own person and word in a general sense. Hence the NIV translates the *dikaiosynē* as 'justice' in both its occurrences in these verses. God has, in the past, 'passed over', failed to punish with full severity (*paresis*) the sins of his people. He has justified people like Abraham and David without extracting the full penalty for their sins. That penalty has now been paid by Christ on the cross, revealing God to be just both in his passing over of those sins *committed beforehand* (25b) and in his justification of sinners *at the present time* (26a). Thus, in a sentence that summarizes the whole paragraph, God is now seen to be the one is both *just* and *the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus* (26b). James Denney provides his own beautiful summary of this paragraph: 'There can be no gospel unless there is such a thing as a righteousness of God for the ungodly. But just as little can there be any gospel unless the integrity of God's character be maintained. The problem of the sinful world, the problem of all religion, the problem of God in dealing with a sinful race, is how to unite these two things. The Christian answer to the problem is given by Paul in the words: "Jesus Christ whom God set forth a propitiation (or, in propitiatory power)

in His blood"' (J. Denney, *The Death of Christ* [Tyndale, 1951], p.98).

3:27 – 4:25 'By faith alone'

This passage elaborates one key element in the great theological summary of 3:21–26: faith as the only means of justification. Paul develops this thesis in two stages, the first being a general statement (3:27–31) and the second 4:1–25) an elaboration with respect to a specific instance – Abraham. The two sections not only focus on the same theme, but they develop it in the same manner:

3:27a	Boasting is excluded	Abraham cannot boast	4:1–2
3:27b–28	because one is justified by faith, not works of the law	because Abraham was justified by faith, not works	4:3–8
3:29–30	Circumcised and uncircumcised are united under the one God through faith	Circumcised and uncircumcised are united as children of Abraham through faith	4:9–17

3:27–31 'By faith alone': initial statement. In the discussion style he so favours in Romans, Paul moves his argument along with another question: '*Where, then, is boasting?* Paul probably asks this question with Jews particularly in mind. As Paul notes elsewhere, Jews had a tendency to rely upon their works as the basis for their relationship with God (9:30 – 10:3; *cf.* Phil. 3:2–9). The provision of God's righteousness 'apart from the law' and through faith in Jesus Christ (21–22) reveals the foolishness of such pride in accomplishment. *It is excluded*, Paul claims, through *the principle . . . of faith*. The word *principle* translates the Greek *nomos*, and many scholars think that *nomos* refers here, as it usually does in Paul, to the Mosaic law. Paul's point would then be that boasting is excluded when one sees in the Mosaic law not just a demand for works (*observing the law*) but its underlying call for faith as well. But the fact that v 28, which appears to be Paul's elaboration of v 27, contrasts 'works of the law' and 'faith' makes this interpretation unlikely. Translating *nomos* as 'principle' is possible, and makes better sense of the context: the Jews' boasting is the product of their preoccupation with the Mosaic law with its demand for works, and it will be seen to be excluded when the truth that *a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law* (28) is recognized (*observing the law* again translates *ergōn nomou*, 'works of the law'; see the comments on 3:20).

In vs 29–30 Paul cites the central Jewish teaching of the oneness of God (Dt. 6:4) as another argument in favour of the exclusivity of faith. For if God is truly to be the God of all people, then all people must have equal access to him, and by the same means. No longer can the law of Moses, the Torah, stand as a 'dividing wall' between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:11–22). God justifies both *the circumcised* (the Jew) and *the uncircumcised* (the Gentile) by faith. (The Greek text speaks of God justifying the Jew 'out of' [*ek*] faith and the Gentile 'through' [*dia*] faith, but there is probably no difference in meaning.)

The last verse in this paragraph (31) reveals again Paul's desire to prevent his readers from drawing too extreme a conclusion from his argument against the law. Paul's blunt rejection of the law from any role in justification in favour of faith. (20–21, 27–28) does not mean that he thereby seeks to *nullify the law*. On the contrary, Paul insists, *we uphold the law*. Unfortunately, Paul does not here explain how it is that his preaching upholds (or 'establishes', Gk. *histēmi*) the law. He may mean that his doctrine of justification by faith is fully in accord with the teaching of the Pentateuch ('the law'), as he makes clear in ch. 4. More likely, however, since his focus in vs 27–28 has been on the demands of the law, he is teaching that faith itself provides for the complete fulfilment of its demands. As Paul will put it in 8:4, '*the righteous requirements of the law*' are '*fully met*' in the Spirit-filled believer.

4:1–25 'By faith alone': the faith of Abraham. Paul now elaborates the points he has briefly made in 3:27–31 by referring to the history of Abraham. It was important for Paul to cite Abraham at this juncture for two reasons. First, Judaism made much of Abraham but tended to view him as a great pioneer of 'torah piety', a man who pleased God above all by his obedience to the law. Secondly Abraham, the recipient of God's promise and ancestor of the Jewish people, occupies a crucial place in OT salvation-history. Particularly was this so in Paul's understanding, for he saw that one of the central errors of his Jewish contemporaries was to emphasize the Mosaic covenant at the expense of God's prior arrangement with Abraham (see Gal. 3:15–18). Paul thus needs to cite Abraham to show that his emphasis on justification by faith is no new, revolutionary, doctrine, but the teaching of Scripture from the beginning. And, further, Paul uses Abraham to make absolutely clear just what faith is. He does

so in a series of contrasts that anticipate the great Reformation principle of *sola fide* ('by faith alone').

1–8 In this section Paul discusses faith versus works. The question that opens this chapter parallels the question that begins 3:27–31: *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter* – that is, in the matter of boasting and justification? For if Abraham was justified by works – as some Jews believed – then he had, indeed, good basis for boasting, and Paul's conclusion that boasting is excluded (3:27) is jeopardized. *But not before God* (2b) is Paul's response to this supposition. This may mean that Abraham had a basis for boasting before other people, 'but not before God'; or, more likely, that the condition Paul has stated – *if . . . Abraham was justified by works* – must be rejected when we place the matter 'before' God's own verdict. This verdict is given in Scripture itself: *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness* (Gn. 15:6). This text becomes the basis for the rest of Paul's exposition. He shows that this 'crediting as righteousness', precisely because it is based on faith, excludes 'works' (4–8), circumcision (9–12) and the law (13–17). He details the strength and nature of this faith of Abraham's that led to his righteousness (18–21) before citing his text once again (22) and then making clear its applicability to his readers (23–25).

Paul's purpose in vs 4–5 is to contrast faith and works. Works, on the one hand, imply a situation of obligation. A person who 'works' receives wages that an employer is obliged to pay. Faith, on the other hand, implies a situation of free giving. As an act of humble acceptance, faith makes no demands on the giver; nor is the giver 'obliged' to respond. These contrasts show clearly that justification must rest on faith. This is because God is, by definition, a God of grace, a God who *justifies the wicked* (5). People are not accepted into relationship with God because, by their righteousness, they have earned it. It is the 'wicked person', the person who has no righteousness of his own to plead his case, whom God accepts. Here Paul reminds us of one of the great truths of Scripture: that people can make no claim on God's attention. Establishing a relationship with him is a matter of his free gift, to be accepted in humble faith.

To underline the point that Paul has been making from the Pentateuch (Gn. 15:6), he adds, in good Jewish fashion, a confirmatory text from the 'Writings'. In Ps. 32:1–2, David also makes clear that God justifies people *apart from works*. Blessing, David makes clear, is a matter not of a person's achievements but of a person's being forgiven by God. Paul makes clear that the phrase 'credited as righteousness' in Gn. 15:6 means that God considers a person to have a status of 'righteousness', in which that person's sins are not 'counted' against him.

9–12 This *blessedness* of a righteous status is not based on circumcision. For God's pronouncing of Abraham as righteous (Gn. 15) took place well before he was circumcised (Gn. 18; according to the rabbis, twenty-nine years separated the two incidents). Circumcision, then, was not the basis for Abraham's righteousness, but a *sign* or *seal* of the righteousness that Abraham already possessed by virtue of his faith. In this way Abraham is qualified to be *the father of all who believe*. For, like Gentile Christians, Abraham was justified without being circumcised (11b) and, like Jewish Christians, he was both circumcised and justified by faith. Paul's reading of Genesis, in the light of the fulfilment of God's plan in Christ, allows him to see Abraham as more than just the father of the Jewish nation (1, 'our forefather according to the flesh'), but as the father of all Christians.

Note 12 The word order in this verse makes it possible to think that Paul has two distinct groups in mind: Jews – 'the circumcised' – and Jewish Christians – 'who are not only circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had . . .' But the interpretation presumed in the NIV translation is preferable. There, only one group – Jewish Christians – is mentioned.

13–17 In Gal. 3, Paul argues that the Mosaic law could have had nothing to do with Abraham's status before God because the law only came into the picture centuries after Abraham. Here in ch. 4 Paul prefers to argue less 'from history' and more 'from principle'. To show that obedience to the law had nothing to do with Abraham's being 'credited as righteous' (13), Paul cites the weakness of the law itself (14–15), the grace (16) and creative power of God (17b) and the universal 'fatherhood' of Abraham (16b–17a).

Faith *has no value* and the promise *is worthless* if inheriting Abraham's blessing depends on doing the law. This is because, as Paul has pointed out earlier (3:9–20), no-one can obey the law well enough to merit righteousness before God. The law, then, brings not blessing, but *wrath* (15). By spelling out the demand of God in great detail, the law increases the responsibility of the sinner before God. When, inevitably, the law is then broken, the guilt of the sinner is even greater than it would have been without the law to condemn him. This is the point Paul implies in v 15b when he claims that *where there is no law there is no transgression*. He does not mean that there is no 'sin' apart from the law, but that the definite form of sin called 'transgression' (Gk.

parabasis) can exist only in the face of definite, clear, commandments of God for which one is responsible. (This is the sense the word *parabasis* always has in Paul; Rom. 2:23; 5:14; Gal. 3:19; 1 Tim 2:14.)

Paul touches briefly on a second reason why righteousness cannot come by the law: to base righteousness on the law would mean that it would be based on 'works' and thus nullify God's grace (*cf.* 4:4–5). This point is related to the one Paul makes at the end of v 17, that the God in whom Abraham believed is no less than the one who *gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.* This looks ahead to the description of Abraham's own faith in vs 18–21, but it also reinforces the idea of God's freedom and creative power. It is parallel, in that sense, to Paul's earlier designation of God as the one who *'justifies the wicked'* (5). A third reason why righteousness cannot be based on the law reminds us of the argument Paul has used in 3:29–30. God's intention was to open up the inheritance he had promised to Abraham to all people, as the OT itself indicates: *'I have made you a father of many nations'* (Gn. 17:5). This could only be done when the inheritance was no longer based on an institution – the Mosaic law – peculiar to Israel.

18–21 In this brief paragraph, Paul pauses to characterize briefly the nature of Abraham's faith before bringing his exposition to a close. Abraham, Paul shows, had a faith that was strong and consistent in the face of much evidence that what God had promised could not come to pass. He squarely *faced the fact* that his age and the barrenness of Sarah made it humanly impossible for the promise that he would have many children to be fulfilled. Yet *Against all hope* – the kind based on ordinary human potentialities – Abraham believed *in hope* – the kind that sees beyond the circumstances to rest on the promises and ability of God. Note Calvin's encouraging application of this paragraph: 'Let us also remember, that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that he is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten his wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.'

Note. 20 Paul's insistence that Abraham *did not waver through unbelief* may seem inconsistent with Abraham's disbelieving and scornful laughter at God's promise in Gn. 17:17. Paul's point, however, is not that Abraham was a perfect person, or never had any doubts at all, but that his heart attitude was consistently one of faith and hope in the promise of God.

22–25 Paul rounds off his exposition of Abraham's faith by citing again his key text – Gn. 15:6 – and making clear what has been implicit throughout, that the verse and its meaning have direct application to Christians. Like Abraham, we too believe in the God who gives life to the dead; specifically, in the God *who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.*

V 25 describes the work of Jesus the Lord in two parallel statements (it may be that Paul is quoting an early Christian confession). The first statement alludes to the LXX of Is. 53:12, where the servant of the Lord is said to have been 'handed over because of their sins'. The *for* (Gk. *dia*) in this first line probably means 'because of': Jesus was handed over to death *because* it was necessary to provide for our sin problem. In the second line, however, the *for* probably has the meaning 'for the sake of, *with the purpose of*': Jesus was raised from the dead for the purpose of providing for our justification. While Paul usually connects our justification with Christ's death, this verse shows that Christ's resurrection also plays a role in our being made right with God.

5:1 – 8:39 The gospel and the power of God for salvation

If 'a righteousness that is by faith from first to last' summarizes the theme of 1:18 – 4:25, 'the power of God for salvation' captures the central thrust of 5:1 – 8:39. The gospel, in unveiling this power, secures not only the sinner's initial acceptance by God but his or her final deliverance on the day of judgment. 'If justified, then certain of final salvation' is Paul's overall theme, a theme that comes to expression especially at the beginning (ch. 5) and end (ch. 8) of the section. Between these chapters, Paul deals with two of the 'powers' that might threaten this eventual deliverance of the justified believer, *viz.* sin (ch. 6) and the law (ch. 7), showing in each case that the Christian has been delivered from bondage to these powers. The structure of chs. 5 – 8, then, is what some call a 'ring composition', and others a 'chiasm', in which there is a certain correspondence between the first and last components, the second and second to the last and so on:

5:1–11 Assurance of future glory
  5:12–21 Basis for this assurance in the work of Christ
    6:1–23 Delivered from the power of sin
    7:1–25 Delivered from the power of the law
  8:1–17 Basis for assurance in the work of Christ, mediated by the Spirit
8:18–39 Assurance of future glory

5:1–11 The hope of glory

Paul begins a new section of his letter at 5:1 (rather than at, for instance, 6:1). This is shown by the transitional 'since we have been justified through faith' in v 1; a shift, at this point, from an emphasis on 'faith' (thirty-three occurrences in 1:18 – 4:25 versus only three in chs. 5 – 8) to an emphasis on 'life' (twenty-four times in chs. 5 – 8 versus only two in 1:18 – 4:25); and by the clarity of the theme and structure outlined above.

Echoing throughout chs. 5 – 8 is a question created by the tension between Paul's teaching that a person is justified before God the minute that person believes and the biblical truth that a day of divine judgment must yet be faced. How do these two truths relate to one another? Can I be sure that my justification now will do any good on the day of judgment? To this question, Paul answers in this paragraph with an emphatic 'Yes!': *We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God* (2b) and *hope does not disappoint us* (5a). In these assurances we find the heart of this paragraph.

Vs 1–2a lead up to these assurances with a reminder of what Christians who *have been justified by faith* now enjoy: *peace with God*, a relationship in which we are no longer threatened by God's wrath, and *access . . . into this grace in which we now stand*, continual participation in the blessings secured by God's grace in Christ. Paul is, however, aware of the struggles that Christians still face in this world. But these struggles, far from threatening our peace and assurance, actually give us greater assurance of them (3b–4). For *sufferings* are used by God to produce in us *perseverance*, the ability to endure. Perseverance produces *character* (*dokimē*), the strength that comes only from severe testing, and character, in turn, produces *hope*. Because God so works in our lives, and because we should want so desperately this kind of character and hope, we should *rejoice in our sufferings* (3a). Paul here reflects a common early Christian perspective on the far greater value of divine virtues in comparison with earthly troubles (see also 8:18; Jas. 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:6–7) – a perspective that too many Christians today have lost.

Vs 5b–8 set Christian hope (5a) on the unshakable foundation of God's love for us in Christ. The Holy Spirit enables the believer to sense from within that God has effusively *poured out* [*ekcheō*] *his love into our hearts*. Added to this inward appreciation is the objective, historical demonstration of that love of God for us in the cross of Christ. On Calvary was shown to the world a love that far transcends the love typical among humans, a love according to which only for *a good man* would one conceivably die (7). It is just the nature of God's love that he sacrificed his own son for the *ungodly* (6) and *sinners* (8) – for those very people who had refused to honour and worship him (*cf.* 1:21–22). It is this idea that is conveyed in the phrase *at just the right time* (6a): at the very time *when we were still powerless*, Christ died for us. God has not waited for us to take the first step back to him but has intervened in an act of pure grace to provide a way for us to come back.

Vs 9–10 gather together the main pieces of vs 1–8 repeating the certainty of Christian hope (2, 5a). They are obviously parallel. Paul asserts the unbreakable connection between the believer's present status before God (*justified by his blood, reconciled to him*), and his or her future status (*saved from God's wrath, saved*). His argument moves from 'the greater' to 'the lesser'. God has done 'the greater thing' in bringing us into relationship with him through the terrible cost of his Son's blood and *when we were God's enemies*. We were in a state of mutual hostility in which God's wrath rested on us (1:18) and we were 'God-haters' (1:30). Surely, then, God will do what in the terms of this argument is the 'easier' thing: deliver us whom he has already accepted from the pouring out of his wrath on the day of judgment. V 11 wraps up the paragraph with a final rehearsal of some of its key ideas: 'rejoicing' (2–3); the present enjoyment of reconciliation with God (1b, 10); and, most of all, the fact that this rejoicing and reconciliation come only *through our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Note 1 A strongly attested variant reads, instead of the indicative verb 'we have' (*echomen*), the subjunctive verb 'let us have' (*echōmen*). This has the effect of making v 1 an appeal to enjoy peace with God rather than a statement that we now are enjoying it. However, despite the strength of its manuscript support (the two most important copies of Paul's letters read the subjunctive) and its acceptance by many scholars (*e.g.* Sanday-Headlam, Murray), the indicative reading makes better sense in the context and is widely and strongly attested.

5:12–21 The reign of grace and life

The power of Christ's obedience to overcome Adam's act of disobedience is the great theme of this paragraph. Paul presents both Adam and Christ as 'representative figures' whose acts determine the destiny of all who belong to them. *Just as* Adam has sinned, and through his sin, brought sin and death to all who belong to him (12a, 18a, 19a), *so also* Christ has obeyed, and through his obedience brought righteousness and life to all who belong to him (18b, 19b). The emphasis lies on the 'so also' part of the comparison. Paul assumes the truth of Adam's sin and the reign of death that it introduced, a

doctrine found elsewhere with varying emphases in Jewish literature. What Paul wants to teach us here is that Christ's giving of himself on the cross has similarly established a reign – but a reign of life rather than death, of grace (see vs 15–17, 21) rather than of just deserts. Believers can be certain of living eternally because we have been transferred into this new realm in which grace and life reign (21). This teaching of the certainty of life in Christ supports what Paul has taught in 5:1–11. We can be sure of final salvation (9–10) because our relationship to Christ guarantees that we will 'reign in life' (17).

Paul begins to state his key point about the parallel between Adam and Christ in v 12, but interrupts himself before he finishes. We have, therefore, a *just as* with no corresponding 'so also' (most English translations signal the break in thought with a dash at the end of the verse). Only in vs 18–19 does Paul come back to state the full comparison. This *just as* clause presents the universal effects of the sin of the *one man*, Adam: it has brought *death* into the world and *in this way* (*e.g.* through sinning) caused death to spread to all people. Many scholars think that the 'death' Paul refers to here is physical death only (Sanday-Headlam, Godet, Murray); a few, that it denotes 'spiritual' death only. But it probably includes both, separation from fellowship with God and physical mortality as the judgment of God on sin.

The last clause of the verse explains why death spread to *all men, because all sinned.* (As is almost universally recognized, the Greek *eph hō* must be translated 'because'.) This may mean simply that every person dies because every person, in his or her own body, sins. But Paul's stress on the way in which *one trespass, the disobedience of the one man*, led to sin and condemnation for all people (this idea is repeated in vs 10a and 19a) suggests that in v 12 also he is thinking of a sinning of all people that takes place in relationship to Adam. What he may intend is that all people sin (12) because they inherit a corrupted 'sin nature' from Adam (18–19). But vs 18–19 suggest a closer relationship between Adam's sin and ours than this. It is therefore better to think that the sinning of all people in v 12 is a sinning that actually takes place 'in' Adam. Paul may think of this in a 'biological' sense: all human beings sinned in Adam because we were all seminally 'present' in him (see, for a possible parallel to this idea, Heb. 7:10). Or he may think of this solidarity in a 'forensic' sense: as our God-appointed representative, Adam's sin is accounted by God to be the sin of all people at the same time, and it is by reason of this sin that all people die. In any case, the important point for Paul, and for us, is that all people, by virtue of their relationship to Adam, are sinners under sentence of death.

Paul breaks off the comparison he began in v 12 to insert two digressions, vs 13–14 and vs 15–17. The first guards Paul's teaching in v 12 about the universality of death from the possible objection that people could not be held responsible for their sins if they did not 'transgress' the law of Moses (*cf.* 3:20 and 4:15). Paul responds simply by asserting the reality of universal death throughout the time before the giving of the law through Moses. The second digression (15–17) highlights two points of contrast between Adam and Christ. There is, first, a contrast in the effect of their actions: Adam's *trespass* brought *condemnation* (16) and *death* (17); Christ has brought *justification* (16) and *righteousness* (17). Secondly, there is a contrast in the power of these acts. Adam's act has certainly been powerful enough, bringing as it has, sin, death and misery on all the world. But, Paul asserts, *how much more* powerful is Christ's act and its effects (15, 17). This is because the grace of God is at work through Christ, and God's grace has power to more than conquer any act of Adam's.

In vs 18–19 Paul finally states the full comparison between Adam and Christ. The verses are parallel, each of them comparing the way in which Adam's *trespass/disobedience* has brought *condemnation* and sinfulness to the way in which Christ's *one act of righteousness/obedience* has brought *justification* and *righteousness*. But does the parallel between them extend to the universal effects of these results? This might seem to be the case, since Paul asserts in v 18 that the effects of both Adam's act and Christ's extends to *all men*. Yet Paul elsewhere plainly repudiates the idea that all people will be saved (*e.g.* Rom. 2:12; 2 Thes. 1:8–9), and v 17 also makes clear that it is only *those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness* who will *reign in life*. Therefore, we must understand the universalism of v 18 in terms of the representative significance of each individual: the effects of Christ's action extend to all who belong to him, just as the effects of Adam's action extend to all who belong to him. All people, without exception, belong to Adam (12); but only those who come to faith, who 'receive the gift', belong to Christ (see also 1 Cor. 15: 22–23).

The paragraph concludes with a further remark about the law (20) and a final summing up. The fact that Paul again mentions the law (*cf.* also vs 13–14) reveals how much Paul is preoccupied with 'Jewish' issues in Romans. His point here is that the law of Moses has done nothing to change the situation of sin and death introduced into the world by Adam. Indeed, the law has made things worse, increasing the

trespass by turning sin against God into a more serious rebellion against his explicit commands (see the comments on 4:15). Yet even where sin thus 'increased', God's grace increased all the more. As a result, Paul concludes, the reign of death has been replaced by the reign of grace for those who are in Christ, bringing to us a new status of righteousness (*cf.* 3:21 – 4:25) and leading inevitably to *eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Note 12 *Therefore* in the NIV translates *dia touto*, 'because of this'. In this context, the word *dia* probably has a 'final' meaning – 'for the sake of, with the purpose of' – and *touto* is probably retrospective, referring back to the certainty of salvation theme in vs 9–10. The whole phrase, then, has the sense 'with the purpose of securing this final salvation'.

6:1–23 Freedom from bondage to sin

Paul's insistence that Christians who are justified will infallibly be saved from God's wrath (5:9–10) because of their transfer in union with Christ into the realm of grace and life (5:12–21) raises the question of sin in the life of the Christian. Does not sin have the power to interrupt this process, to prevent the justified believer from attaining final salvation and glory? In ch. 6 Paul deals with this question, answering it by asserting that believers are not only delivered in Christ from the penalty of sin – justified – but from the power of sin as well – sanctified. Without minimizing the continuing threat that sin poses to Christian living, Paul insists that the Christian has been put into a decisively new relationship to sin, a relationship in which sin no longer has the power to 'master' us, to hold us in bondage (see vs 6, 14, 18, 22). Throughout the chapter (and, as we will see, into the next), Paul pictures Christian experience in terms of a transfer from one 'regime' or 'realm' to another. To become a Christian, Paul asserts, means to be released from the old regime, dominated by Adam (5:12–21), sin (ch. 6), the law (ch. 7) and death (ch. 8) and to be introduced into the new regime, dominated by Christ (5:12–21; 7:1–6), righteousness (ch. 6), the Spirit (7:6; 8), grace (6:14–15) and life (5:12–21; 6:4; 8:1–13).

6:1–14 'Dead to sin' through union with Christ. The immediate occasion for Paul's discussion of the Christian and sin is his assertion in 5:20b: 'But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.' Paul himself poses the question that he had undoubtedly had to answer many times as a result of his insistence on the power of God's grace: *Shall we* [Christians] *go on sinning, so that grace may increase?* (1) Paul emphatically rejects any such inference – *By no means!* – explaining why he does so with the key idea of the chapter: *We died to sin* (2). What Paul means by this becomes clear as he unfolds the concept in the rest of the chapter: we are no longer *slaves to sin* (6, 17–18, 22); sin is no longer our *master* (14a). To be 'dead to sin', thus, does not mean to be insensible to its enticements, for Paul makes clear that sin remains for the Christian an attraction to be battled with every day (see v 13). Rather it means to be delivered from the absolute tyranny of sin, from the state in which sin holds unchallenged sway, the state in which we all lived before conversion (see 3:9). As a result of this death to sin, we can no longer *live in it* (2b) – for habitual sinning reveals sin's tyranny, a tyranny from which the believer has been freed.

Vs 3–5 reveal the means by which we have 'died to sin': through union with Jesus Christ in his death. The Christian rite of initiation, water baptism, puts us into relationship with Jesus Christ and, specifically, with the death of Christ (3). This 'union' with Christ is no mystical merging of our own persons with that of Christ, but a 'forensic' relationship, in which God views us in association with his Son and thereby applies to us the benefits won by his Son. It can be said, thus, that we were *buried with him through baptism into* [his] *death.* What Paul means by this is not that our baptism simply symbolizes, in submergence under the water, Christ's death and burial, for Paul makes clear that we were buried 'with' him, not just 'like' him. He is saying, rather, that our faith, symbolized by baptism, puts us into relationship with Christ's own burial. Why this reference to Christ's burial? Paul elsewhere includes Christ's burial as a key element in the gospel he preaches: 'I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3–4; *cf.* also Col. 2:12). Here in ch. 6, Paul asserts that believers have been joined with Christ in such a way that they experience each of these events themselves: we have 'died with Christ' (8; *cf.* vs 3–6); we have been 'buried with Christ' (4); we shall 'live with him' (8; *cf.* vs 4–5). It is this actual union with these key redemptive events that gives to the Christian a new relationship to sin's power. The basic thrust of Paul's argument is clear: since Christ's death itself was a 'death to sin' (10), our participation in his death (3–6) means that we, too, have 'died to sin' (3).

Baptism, as v 4 makes clear, is the means (the Greek word is *dia*) by which we are put into relationship with these events. Some interpreters think that Paul may be referring to 'spirit' baptism, but this is unlikely. It is better to understand Paul to be using water baptism as 'shorthand' for the Christian's initial conversion

experience. The NT consistently portrays water baptism as a fundamental component of conversion (see, *e.g.* Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 3:21). This does not mean that baptism in and of itself has the power to convert or to bring us into relationship with Christ. It is only as it is joined with genuine faith that it possesses any meaning, and what Paul has written in chs. 1 – 5 makes clear that it is ultimately this faith that is the crucial element in the process. (On baptism in the NT and in this passage, see especially G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* [Eerdmans, 1962].)

Our union with Christ in death and burial means that we *may live a new life* (4b). Not only have we been delivered from sin's tyranny, but we have also been given new power of obedience through our participation in the power of Christ's resurrection. This is the point that Paul makes in v 5: participation in Christ's death means also participation in his resurrection. Some think that, as in Eph. 2:6 and Col. 2:12, 3:1, Paul here presents our resurrection with Christ as a past experience. But the future tenses both in v 5 (*will . . . be united*) and in v 8 (*we will . . . live*) render it more likely that Paul speaks here of our actual resurrection with Christ as future, while it is presently the power of Christ's resurrection that is working within us (*cf.* v 11: *alive to God*).

Vs 6–7 and 8–10 elaborate, respectively, the 'death' and 'life' aspects of our union with Christ. *Our old self* (6) picks up the imagery of corporate identity from ch. 5. It alludes to our identification with 'the old man', Adam, and denotes 'not a part of me called my old nature, but the whole of me as I was before I was converted' (John Stott, *Men Made New* (IVP, 1966), p. 45). As a result of our crucifixion with Christ, this *body of sin*, the whole person dominated by sin's power, has been 'rendered powerless' (the NIV marginal rendering is preferable to the *done away with* in the text). As a result, we need *no longer be slaves to sin*. As further support for this conclusion, Paul cites a popular rabbinic maxim to the effect that death severs the hold of sin on a person. Vs 8–10 reinforce the connection between dying with Christ and living with him asserted in v 5 and provide a crucial link in Paul's argument by describing Christ's death as a death 'to sin'. Though sinless himself, Christ nevertheless was subject to sin's power by virtue of his incarnation, and his death removed him for ever from that power.

The paragraph concludes with a summary and application. Our identification with Christ in his death must be seized and acted upon if it is to become effective in subduing the power of sin in our lives. Thus Paul exhorts us to recognize who we now are in Christ (11) and to put that new identity into effect by dethroning sin in our daily behaviour (12–13). This victory over sin is possible, Paul reminds us in a summary of vs 1–10, because *sin shall not be your master* (the future tense is used to stress that at no time will sin ever have domination over us again). For we are no longer *under law* – that is, under the regime of the Mosiac law in which sin 'increased' (5:20) and brought wrath (4:15) – but *under grace* – the new regime inaugurated by Christ in which 'grace reigns through righteousness to bring eternal life' (see Jn. 1:17 for a similar contrast between 'law' and 'grace').

6:15–23 Freed from sin's power to serve righteousness. As was the case in 6:1–14, this paragraph is prompted by a question relating to something Paul has just said. His assertion that the Christian is not 'under law, but under grace' (14b) could imply that there are no more rules the Christian needs to obey and no more penalty for any sins that he or she does commit. Paul's response is similar to his teaching in vs 3–10: habitual sinning would manifest a state of slavery to sin (16), a state from which every Christian has been released (17–18). Paul is sure that the Roman Christians have themselves experienced this new freedom from sin, for they *wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which* [they] *were entrusted* (17b). By wording the matter in this way, Paul hints at the same time that Christians, freed from the Mosaic law, are nevertheless bound by an authoritative code, a 'form of teaching' in some ways similar to that of the Mosaic law (see 2:20). Christains have a new obligation. Vs 17–23 explain it as a development from what Paul has said earlier in the chapter. Freedom from sin, Paul asserts, means not that Christians are autonomous, living with no master or any obligations. It means rather a new slavery: but to righteousness (18–19) and to God (22). Like Jesus, Paul insists that true 'freedom' is to be found only in a relationship to the God who created us (Jn. 8:31–36). Only by bowing the knee to God can a person become what God originally intended that person to be: 'righteous' (conforming to God's standards of behaviour), and 'holy' (living in a way that is God-centred and world-renouncing). And the outcome of these is *eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (23; *cf.* v 22).

7:1–25 Freedom from bondage to the law

The main point of this chapter is very similar to the central thrust of the previous one. Just as in ch. 6 Christians, through union with Christ, 'die to sin' and become 'slaves of God', reaping holiness as a benefit, so also in ch. 7 Christians, *through the body of Christ, die to the law* and become related to Jesus Christ so that they can

bear fruit to God (4). Paul suggests that the Mosaic law, like sin, is in some way, a 'power' of the old regime of salvation-history from which Christians must be freed if they are to enjoy life in the new regime of righteousness and life inaugurated by Jesus Christ. The apostle has already hinted at this idea in 6:14–15. These verses provide the immediate occasion for his discussion in ch. 7.

The first paragraph (1–6) conveys the central thrust of the chapter. But Paul's negative perspective on the Mosaic law in those verses leads him to add an important digression, in which he affirms the divine origin and goodness of the law and elaborates on the way in which the law has come to have so negative a result in the history of salvation (7–25).

7:1–6 Released from the law; joined to Christ. The believer's transfer from the domain of the law to the domain of Christ is the central point of this paragraph (4). Paul leads up to this point with a reminder about the nature of *the law*: that it has power over people only as long as they live. The 'law' to which Paul refers here could be the Roman law (Käsemann) or law in general (Sanday-Headlam) but is probably the Mosaic law (most scholars). Vs 2–3 illustrate the truth of this principle with a marriage analogy. While various detailed comparisons with Christian experience are sometimes found in this illustration, Paul intends simply to make two points: death severs one's relationship to the law, and release from the law enables a person to be joined to another.

These are the points that Paul now applies theologically in v 4. Through our relationship to Christ in his death on the cross – *through the body of Christ* – we believers have *died to the law*, *i.e.* we have been set free from its bondage (see 6:2). The Mosaic law ruled over Jews, and, by extension, all people (*cf.* 2:14), in the old regime of salvation-history. It regulated the covenant relationship between God and his people and, because it demanded obedience without giving the power to obey, had the effect of locking up people under the power of sin and death (see 4:15; 5:20; 6:14–15; Gal. 3:21–25). It is only by being freed from the regime of the law that we can be freed also from sin and be joined to Christ in the new regime where we can *bear fruit to God*.

The connection between sin and the law is elaborated in v 5. The NIV *when we were controlled by the sinful nature* is better translated, more literally, 'when we were in the flesh' (*en tē sarki*; see the NIV marginal rendering). In texts like this, Paul uses the word 'flesh' to denote not a sinful propensity within a person (as the NIV suggests) but the 'power sphere' in which a person lives. Since its root theological idea is that which is typical of this world in distinction from the spiritual realm, 'flesh' can be used as shorthand for the old regime. 'When we were in the flesh' means basically, 'when we were living in the old, non-Christian, regime'. In this regime the law was instrumental in arousing *sinful passions*; for it stimulated our innate rebelliousness against God. Now, however, we have died to that law and can serve *in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code*. As in 2:29, the contrast between 'written code' (*gramma*) and 'Spirit' is the contrast between the Mosaic law as a determining power of the old age and the Spirit, the ruling agent of the new.

7:7–25 The history and experience of Jews under the law. Paul has said some negative things about the law in 7:1–6: he has associated it with sin as a 'power' of the old regime of death and claimed that it actually arouses sin (v 5), but these verses only climax a series of negative statements about the law in Romans. Paul has shown that it is incapable of justifying (3:20a), makes sin known (3:20b) and, indeed, stimulates sin (5:20) and brings wrath (4:15). We can, then, well imagine someone thinking that Paul views the law as evil. Paul has had enough experience to know that such a misunderstanding of his theology of the law was an ever-present possibility. He therefore introduces a digression on the Mosaic law in which he guards against this false interpretation. He defends the goodness of the law by demonstrating that the negative effects the law produces are due not to the law itself but to the power of sin and to human weakness. Paul succinctly summarizes the central thrust of 7:7–25 in 8:3a: 'what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature'. Paul makes these points in the context of a sketch of the effect that the law has had on the Jewish people.

7–12 This paragraph about the coming of the law accomplishes two purposes: to maintain, against a possible misunderstanding (7a), that the law of Moses is *holy, righteous and good* (12) and to explain the relationship between sin and the law (7b–11). In making the latter point, Paul asserts that the law had been the means by which he came to 'know' sin (7b). What Paul means by this is not simply that the law told Paul what sin was but that the law, with its explicit spelling out of the commandments of God, gave sin the opportunity to stimulate rebellion against God and made absolutely clear his sinfulness and death (8–11). Such is our sinfulness that the very labelling of an action as transgression against God's holy law leads us to violate it; and it is in this way that the law 'stimulates sinning' (5:20; 7:5) and brings wrath (4:15).

Paul's use of a first person singular ('I') narrative to make this point raises the question about what experience he is describing here. Many think that he is reflecting on his coming of age as a Jewish young man, when sin first *sprang to life* in his experience and made clear to him that he was a sinner (*I died*). Others think Paul is describing the time when, just before his conversion, the Spirit began to convict him of his sin. But the fact that this experience took place *when the commandment came* suggests another possibility. As the context makes clear, the commandment must refer to the Mosaic law (see vs 7, 12); and the Mosaic law 'came' when God gave it to the people of Israel at Mt Sinai. First-century Jews were taught to think of themselves as having taken part in the historical experiences of Israel (as in the Passover ritual). Paul may, then, be describing in these verses not his own personal experience but the experience of the Jewish people corporately. What Paul would then be saying is that the giving of the law of Moses to Israel meant for them not life (as some rabbis taught) but death; for the law of Moses, by stimulating sin, 'brought wrath', making more clear than ever the Jews' distance from God.

13–25 This second part of Paul's digression on the Mosaic law provides a 'missing link' in his argument in 7:7–12: the weakness of human beings as the reason why sin could use the law to bring death. The law, though *spiritual*, cannot deliver people from their bondage to sin and death (21–25) because they are *unspiritual* (14), unable to obey the law that they confess to be *good* (16). It is the law of Moses, then, on which Paul focuses in these verses.

Paul's teaching about the law comes within a lengthy 'personal confession'. Whose experience is Paul describing here? Many, noting that Paul now writes in the present tense (in contrast to the past tense in vs 7–11) and claims to *delight in God's law*, argue that he must be describing his present situation as a mature believer. The passage would then make clear that the law cannot provide victory over the power of sin within the Christian, who, though regenerate and free from sin's condemning power, cannot escape sin's clutches (*cf.* 14, 23, 25). While this interpretation of the passage can muster very strong support (*e.g.* Augustine, Luther, Calvin) and deserves great respect, there is an alternative approach. Most of us can identify, as Christians, with the struggle depicted in vs 15–20, but Paul's objective treatment of the situation he is talking about makes it difficult to think that a Christian is being described. Paul claims that he is *sold as a slave to sin* (14b; *cf.* v 25) and is *a prisoner of the law of sin* (23). The former description seems to be diametrically opposed to the description of the Christian in ch. 6 – 'set free from sin' (v 22) – and the latter conflicts with Paul's assertion in 8:2 that the Christian has been set free 'from the law of sin and death'. It seems then, that Paul in these verses is describing his experience as an unregenerate Jew, finding his love for God's law and desire to obey it constantly frustrated by his failure to obey it. To be sure, we cannot be certain about the extent to which Paul was actually conscious of this struggle in his pre-Christian days. (His claim in Phil. 3:6 that he was 'faultless' with respect to 'legalistic righteousness' refers to his legal standing according to Pharisaic standards and not to his actual situation.) Certainly it would only have been in the light of his knowledge of Christ that Paul would have recognized the depths of the sinfulness he depicts here. In vs 7–11, then, Paul describes the effect of the giving of the law on himself and all other Jews, while in vs 13–25 he describes the continuing existence of a Jew, such as he once was, under the law. The present tense, which he begins to use in v 14, is much better suited to this depiction of a regular state of affairs.

V 13 is transitional, summing up the argument of vs 7–12 – the law is good, but has been used by sin to produce death and thus reveals sin in its 'true colours' (*utterly sinful*) – as the starting point for vs 14–25. The fact that the law is *spiritual* but that 'I' am *unspiritual* (*sarkinos*, 'fleshly, carnal') sets the stage for the struggle depicted in vs 15–20. Acknowledgement of the goodness of God's law and desire to obey it is met by the inability actually to do the law in practice. 'Willing' (used here in an untechnical way) and 'doing' are in opposition to one another. This reveals, Paul concludes, that *nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature* [or 'flesh'] (18) and that *sin living in me* must be responsible for my actions (17, 20). Those who advocate the 'mature Christian' interpretation of the passage think that Paul is referring to the continuing power of sin and the flesh in the life of the believer. It seems, however, that the reference is to the way in which the non-Christian is prevented from obeying God's law because of the ruling power of sin.

In v 21 Paul summarizes the *law* (better translated here 'principle'; *cf.* the RSV) that he finds at work in the struggle he has described in vs 15–20: the desire to do good is matched, and over-matched, by the tendency to do evil. Delight in God's law – such as was typical of the Jewish people – is met by the force of *another law*. While some take this 'other law' to be another function of the Mosaic law itself, the word 'another' (*heteros*) suggests that Paul has in mind a 'law' distinct from the Mosaic law. This

'law' is the 'force' or 'power' of sin, which Paul sets in contrast to the law of God (see also 3:27; 8:2). Paul confesses himself to be a prisoner of this law of sin, a strong indication that he is describing his past experience as a Jew under the law (contrast 8:2).

Paul's response to this imprisonment is to cry, *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* The emotion of this cry may suggest that Paul is actually in this 'wretched' condition as he writes and that his plea is for deliverance, as a Christian, from physical mortality. But Paul the Christian does not need to ask who his deliverer is, and 'death' in this passage generally refers to death in all its aspects as the penalty of God on sin (see vs 5, 9–11, 13). It is, therefore, better to attribute this cry to the sincere and pious Jew, frustrated by his or her inability to obey God's law and longing for deliverance from sin and death. Paul can write so realistically and so passionately because this was a state that he himself had experienced, and because it was a condition which still tragically characterized most of his 'brothers, those of my own race' (see 9:1–3). In the beginning of v 25 Paul the Christian interrupts his description of Jewish life under the law to announce the one in whom deliverance from death is to be found: Jesus Christ our Lord. In the end of the verse, then, Paul returns to summarize the situation of the Jew under the law: *a slave to God's law* in the *mind* – admitting that God's law is good and seeking to do it – but *a slave to the law of sin* in the 'flesh' – prevented by the flesh from doing it.

8:1–30 Assurance of eternal life in the Spirit

Rom. 8 is famous for its focus on the Holy Spirit. The word 'spirit' (Gk. *pneuma*) occurs twenty-one times in the chapter, and all but two (*cf.* vs 15a and 16b) denote the Holy Spirit. However, while the Spirit is therefore extremely prominent, it is not the real topic of the chapter. It is not the Spirit himself, but the assurance of eternal life that the Spirit helps to secure, that is Paul's topic. From 'no condemnation' at the beginning to 'no separation' at the end, the chapter passes in review those acts and gifts of God that together give to every Christian the certainty that his or her relationship with God is secure and settled. Paul shows how the Spirit confers on the believer life (1–13), adoption into God's family (14–17) and the certain hope for glory (18–30).

8:1–13 The Spirit of life. This chapter has one main connection and two subordinate ones with the earlier part of the letter. The *Therefore* with which Paul begins suggests that he is drawing a conclusion from something he has previously said. Both the vocabulary and the content of v 1 point back to the end of ch. 5 as the basis for this conclusion. Paul's argument there was that Christians are set free from the condemnation (*katakrima*; vs 16 and 18) produced by Adam because they have been joined to Jesus Christ. It is this point that Paul, after his digression in chs. 6 – 7, now reiterates: *there is now no condemnation* [*katakrima*] *for those who are in Christ Jesus.* But two other points of contact can be discerned in the deliberate contrast Paul creates between the situation 'under the law' in 7:7–25 and the state 'under the Spirit' (*cf.* 8:2–4, 7), and in the elaboration in ch. 8 of the brief mention of the 'new way of the Spirit' in 7:6b.

The Christian's deliverance from *condemnation* – the penalty of death because of sin under which all people live – takes place by virtue of our union with Christ (5:12–21). Vs 2–4 explain further that this deliverance has been accomplished by the triune God: the Father sending the Son as a sin offering for us (3), on the basis of which the Spirit liberates us from the power of sin and death (2) and secures complete fulfilment of the law on our behalf (4). The contrasting 'laws' in v 2 may refer to two distinct operations of the Mosaic law, which functions to imprison people when it is viewed narrowly as a demand for works, but which operates to liberate people when they understand it correctly as a demand for 'faithful obedience'. But it would be unprecedented for Paul to attribute to the law, however understood, the power to liberate from sin and death, and *the law of the Spirit* must therefore mean 'the power (or authority) exercised by the Spirit'. Correspondingly, then, *the law of sin and death* (2) will also denote, not the Mosaic law, but 'the power (or authority) of sin and death' (see also 7:23).

Through Christ Jesus the Spirit of God sets us free from the situation of bondage to sin and death alluded to in 5:12–21 and 6:1–23 and described in 7:7–25. The Spirit must so act because the great power of the 'old regime', the Mosaic law, was quite incapable, because of human weakness, of breaking sin's bondage (3a; *cf.* 7:14–25). What the law could not do, God did: he broke sin's power – *condemned sin* – by sending his Son to identify with us and to give himself as *a sin offering* (so the NIV properly renders *peri hamartias*, in accordance with the use of the phrase in the LXX). This sending of the Son enables the true fulfilment of the law by those who live according to the Spirit. Paul does not mean that Christians are enabled to obey the law (however true this might be) but that Christians are considered by God to have fully met the law's demand because of Christ's obedience on our behalf (see Calvin). This is suggested by

the singular *dikaiōma* ('righteous requirement'; the NIV inexplicably translates it with the plural *requirements*) and the passive sense of the phrase *be fully met in us* (4). As believers 'in Christ', we are free from condemnation because Jesus Christ has completely fulfilled the law on our behalf. He became what we are – weak, human and subject to sin's power – that we might become what he is – righteous and holy.

The contrast between 'flesh' (NIV, *sinful nature*; see 7:5) and *Spirit* in v 4b leads to the series of contrasts between these two 'powers' in vs 5–8. Through these contrasts Paul explains why it is that the Spirit, and not the flesh, brings life. People 'in the flesh' – that is, those who live in the 'old regime' where sin and death reign – have mind-sets dominated by ungodly impulses (5); they cannot *submit to God's law* (7) or *please God* (8) but are under sentence of death (6). On the other hand, Christians, 'in the Spirit', who have been transferred into the new regime where grace and righteousness reign and who have therefore been given a new mind-set focused on the Spirit, enjoy *life and peace* (6). V 9 makes clear that every person who belongs to Christ has been transferred into this new domain in which the Spirit rather than the flesh rules. Then, in vs 10–11, Paul shows how the present possession of 'spiritual' life will lead to the enjoyment of 'physical' life through the resurrection of the body. And this will also be accomplished through the power of the Spirit, who now indwells us.

Vs 12–13 conclude this first section of ch. 8 with a practical reminder: the Spirit's work in assuring us of life does not mean that we can be passive about our obligation to manifest the life of the Spirit in our daily lives. Only as we submit to the Spirit's control and direction, turning away from the 'fleshly' life-style, will we be able to *live* (13). Paul is clearly referring to spiritual, eternal, life and thus makes the enjoyment of that life in some sense dependent on Christian obedience. Here we are called by faithfulness to the Scriptures to hold in tension two clear truths: that the indwelling of the Spirit as the result of faith in Christ infallibly secures eternal life, and that a life-style patterned after God's Spirit is necessary to inherit eternal life. The tension can be softened somewhat by remembering that the Spirit given to us at conversion is himself active to produce obedience. But it does not remove the tension, for we are still called upon to submit ourselves to this work of the Spirit.

8:14–17 The Spirit of adoption. As 'life' is the ruling idea in vs 1–13, so is sonship in vs 14–17. This brief paragraph, in addition to making its own contribution to the theme of the chapter by recounting the wonderful and comforting truth that Christians have been adopted into God's own family, provides a transition between vs 1–13 and 18–30. Being a child of God explains both why God's Spirit confers life on us (13–14) and why it can be said that we are *heirs* with a glorious prospect for the future (17–18).

To be *led by the Spirit of God* (14) means not to be guided by the Spirit in decision-making, but to be under the dominating influence of the Spirit (Gal. 5:18). The clause sums up the various descriptions of life in the Spirit in vs 5–9. Paul can claim that those so led by the Spirit are *sons of God* and so destined for life (13) because *sons of God* is a biblical title for the people of God (see, *e.g.* Dt. 14:1; Is. 43:6; *cf.* Rom. 9:26). But we must also recognize in the title an allusion to the sonship of Jesus himself (see vs 3 and 29); as v 15 confirms, '*Abba*' was Jesus' own address to God (see Mk. 14:36), one that showed especial intimacy. This same address is now one that Christians spontaneously 'cry out' in their own approach to God. It is the Spirit, again, who implants in us that sense of intimacy (16) and abolishes, thereby, all bondage (to 'the law of sin and death', v 2) and all reason to fear (15a). The Spirit, thus, is *the Spirit of sonship*. Paul takes the word 'sonship' (which could also be translated 'adoption' – *hyiothesia*) from the Greco-Roman world, where it denoted the legal institution whereby one could adopt a child and confer on that child all the rights and privileges that would accrue to a natural child. But the conception is rooted in the biblical picture of God as one who graciously chooses a people to be his very own (see 8:23; 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5).

Our adoption into God's family, however amazing and comforting, is not the end of the story. For to be children is also to be *heirs*: to be still waiting for the full bestowment of all the rights and privileges conferred on us as God's children (17; see especially Gal. 4:1–7, with an argument quite similar to that in 8:1–17). As *the* Son of God had to suffer before entering into his glory (1 Pet. 1:11), so we sons of God by adoption must also suffer 'with him' before sharing in his glory (see also Phil. 1:29; 3:20; 2 Cor. 1:5). Because we are joined to Christ, the servant of the Lord 'despised and rejected by men' (Is. 53:3), we can expect the path to our glorious inheritance to be strewn with difficulties and dangers.

8:18–30 The Spirit of glory. In this paragraph, Paul elaborates his reference to suffering and glory in v 17, further develops his overall theme of Christian assurance and brings us back full circle to the beginning of this major section of the letter (5:1–11; see the notes on 5:1). The Christian's hope of glory frames the paragraph,

occurring at its beginning (18) and end (30), and is its overarching theme. Believers, facing the necessity of 'suffering with Christ' in this world can nevertheless be confident and secure, knowing that God has determined to bring us through to our inheritance (18–22, 29–30), that he is providentially working on our behalf (28) and that he has given us his Spirit as the guarantee of our final redemption (23).

Paul never minimizes the fact or severity of Christian suffering in this world. But it is still to be seen as insignificant in comparison with *the glory that will be revealed in us* (18). In the OT, 'glory' denotes the 'weight' and majesty of God's presence. Paul applies the term to the final state of the believer, when we have been transformed into the image of God's son (29). For Christ has already entered into this state of glory (Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4), and the transformation of our bodies will bring to light in the last day our share in that glory.

Vs 19–25, whose key words are *wait eagerly* (19, 23 and 25) and *hope* (20, 24–25), show that Christians, along with the entire creation, have to wait for God's work to be completed. Paul follows OT precedent (Ps. 65:12–13; Is. 24:4; Je. 4:28; 12:4) in personifying the entire subhuman creation: it groans in frustration (20, 22) and anticipates eagerly the day when our status as God's children will be finalized and made public (19, 21). What makes it clear that Paul does not include angels and human beings in his purview is the fact that the frustration now experienced by the creation did not come about *by its own choice* (20). It came, rather, *by the will of the one who subjected it* (20), *i.e.* God, who decreed a curse on the earth as a result of Adam's sin (Gn. 3:17–18; *cf.* 1 Cor. 15:27). But the decree of subjection was always accompanied by hope that God would one day make his creation what he originally intended it to be, a place where 'the wolf will live with the lamb' (Is. 11:6). We Christians share creation's groaning and hope (23), for we possess the Spirit as *the firstfruits*, the downpayment and pledge of our final redemption, and this causes us all the more to long for the finishing of God's work in us. What is often called the NT 'already – not – yet' tension between what God has already done for the believer and what he has yet to do is very evident when we compare v 23 with vs 14–17. For the 'sonship' we are there said to possess is here tied to *the redemption of our bodies* and made the object of hope and expectation. Such hope is the very essence of our salvation. We must, therefore, wait patiently for what God has promised (24–25).

In vs 26–30 Paul gives three reasons why we can wait with patience and confidence for the culmination of our hope. First, the Spirit assists our ignorance about what to pray for (26–27). In this life we are necessarily uncertain about *what we ought to pray for*. But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with God, praying on our behalf that prayer which is always in perfect *accordance with God's will* (27). Paul is not here describing the gift of speaking in tongues; it is not even clear that he denotes an audible process at all, since the Spirit's *groans* may be metaphorical (see v 22). Rather, he is probably describing an intercessory ministry of the Spirit in the heart of the believer that occurs without even our knowledge.

A second basis for the believer's confident expectation of the future is God's constant working in all things *for the good of those who love him* (28). Nothing that can touch us lies outside the scope of our Father's providential care: here, indeed, is cause for joy and a rock-solid foundation for hope. We must, however, define *the good* that God is working to produce for us in his terms and not in ours. God knows that our greatest good is to know him and to enjoy his presence forever. He may, then, in pursuit of this final 'good', allow difficulties such as poverty, grief and ill health to afflict us. Our joy will come not from knowing that we will never face such difficulties – for we certainly will (17) – but that whatever the difficulty, our loving Father is at work to make us stronger Christians.

Paul describes those for whom God so works from the human point of view (*those who love him*) and the divine (*who have been called according to his purpose*, 28). God's 'call' is not simply his invitation to people to embrace the gospel, but his effectual summoning of people into a relationship with himself (see *e.g.* 4:17; 9:12, 24). This calling takes place in accordance with God's purpose, that purpose being ultimately to conform us *to the likeness of his Son* (29). God brings each of us to that goal through a series of acts on our behalf. First, he 'foreknows' us. Some scholars think that *proginōskō* ('foreknow') here means what it often does in Greek literature – 'know something ahead of time'. But Paul says that it is we Christians whom God knows, and this suggests the more personal idea of 'knowing' that is sometimes found in the OT: election into personal relationship (*e.g.* Gn. 18:19; Je. 1:5; Am. 3:2). This is almost certainly also the sense that 'foreknow' has in its other NT occurrences (11:2; Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:2, 20). God's 'foreknowing', his selection of us to be saved from 'before the creation of the world' (Eph. 1:4), leads to his 'predestining us', his appointing us to a specific destiny. This destiny is that we become like Christ, a final event that God accomplishes by 'calling' us (see v 28b), 'justifying' us (see 3:21 – 4:25) and 'glorifying'

us. It is significant that this last verb is, like the others in v 30, in the past tense, suggesting that, though the attaining of glory may be future, God's determining that we shall attain it is already accomplished.

8:31–39 Celebration of the believer's security

We may view this beautiful, hymn-like celebration of our security in Christ as a response to what Paul has just said (28–30, or 18–30 or even 1–30), but it is better to see it as a concluding reflection of chs. 5 – 8 as a whole. It falls into two parts. In the first (31–34) Paul reminds us that God is *for us*: in giving his Son, he has at the same time secured for us all that we need to get through this life and attain final salvation. No-one, then, is able successfully to bring any charge against us, to cause us to be condemned in the judgment. For it is God who has chosen us and justified us and his own Son who answers any indictment brought against us. The second part of the hymn (35–39) celebrates the love of God in Christ for us. It is as impossible to separate us from that love as it is to bring a charge against us. No earthly peril or disaster can do so (35b–36). Though such suffering can be expected, as Paul reminds us with his quotation of Ps. 44:22, *in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* Nor can any spiritual power separate us from God's love (*angels, demons* and *powers* in v 38). Indeed, there is nothing in all creation that can remove us from the new regime in which God's love in Christ reigns over us.

9:1 – 11:36 The gospel and Israel

Interpreters have often considered these three chapters to have little connection with the real theme of Romans. This section has been understood as an aside motivated by Paul's personal concern for his people, or as a digression on the theme of God's election. But the theme of these chapters is the place of Israel in God's plan of salvation, and this is a theme that is much involved with Paul's concerns in Romans. From the beginning of the letter (1:2; *cf.* also 3:21, 31; ch. 4) Paul has been concerned to demonstrate that the gospel stands in continuity with the OT. He wants to make it clear that the coming of Jesus Christ and the new regime of salvation-history that he has inaugurated is no innovation in God's plan for history, but its intended culmination. However, the unbelief of the majority of Jews in Paul's day presents a potential problem for Paul's attempt to establish such continuity. Was not God's promise of salvation given to the people of Israel? How can he remain true to that promise if it is now fulfilled in the church instead of in Israel?

These are the questions Paul answers in chs. 9 – 11, as he defends the thesis that *It is not as though God's word had failed* (9:6a). Jewish unbelief at the present time does not mean, Paul asserts, that God's promises to his people have *failed* because (i) God had never promised to save every single Jew (9:6b–29); (ii) the Jews are themselves responsible for failing to believe (9:30 – 10:21); (iii) God's promises to Israel are even now being fulfilled in a *remnant*, of Jewish Christians (11:1–10); and (iv) God will yet save *all Israel* (11:12–32). Throughout, Paul is concerned to show that God's promises to his people Israel – when correctly understood – remain fully intact. This 'theology of Israel', in addition to establishing the coherence of the gospel, is also of practical importance. For, as the appeals in 11:12–32 reveal, Paul was aware that the Gentiles in the Roman church were neglecting their indispensable OT 'roots' and looking down on Jews and Jewish Christians.

9:1–6a The issue: Paul's anguish over Israel

The lack of a word or phrase to connect ch. 8 with ch. 9 suggests that there is a pause in Paul's argument at this point. With the celebration of God's unchangeable love for Christians (8:31–39) the climax of his argument to this point has been reached. But it is just this assertion of the certain fulfilment of God's promises to Christians that leads Paul now to raise the question of God's promises to Israel. Vs 1–3 show that this question was an intensely emotional one for him. For Paul never lost his sense of identification with his fellow-Jews. He therefore experiences *great sorrow and unceasing anguish* over those who are from the standpoint of the flesh (*kata sarka*) his 'kinsmen' and *brothers* (2–3). Although Paul does not tell us why he feels so badly about his fellow-Jews, the parallel in 10:1 makes clear that it is because the great majority of Jews are not saved; for they have refused to believe in Jesus Christ (*cf.* 9:30 – 10:21). So strongly does Paul feel this, like Moses before him (Ex. 32:31–34), he is willing to sacrifice his own salvation for the sake of the salvation of his fellow-Jews. The strength of Paul's assertion (*cf.* also v 1) suggests that he may have been aware of some Jews who doubted his concern for his 'kinsmen according to the flesh'.

Paul's emotion over Jewish unbelief has, however, another – and perhaps deeper – basis: the incongruity between the Jews' present status and their marvellous privileges (4–5). Simply being *the people of Israel* can be numbered among these, for 'Israel' (which Paul prefers to use throughout chs. 9 – 11) suggests the covenant status granted to the descendants

of Jacob ('Israel'). Equally significant is the Jews' *adoption as sons*, a designation Paul elsewhere uses of Christians (8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). In just what sense the Jews can be said to possess this status Paul will explain in 9:6b–13 and 11:1–32. The climax to the Jews' privileges is the fact that Christ, the promised Messiah, comes from them. But this tells the story from the human side; from the divine side, this same Christ is 'God' himself. This, at least, is the interpretation suggested by the NIV (*cf.* also the NASB), which places a comma between *Christ* and *who is God over all.* Other versions, however, place a full point after Christ, and understand the last part of the verse to be an independent ascription of praise to God (the Father) (see the NIV mg. and the RSV). The interpretation adopted in the NIV text is, however, probably correct and if so this verse is one of the few places in the NT where Jesus Christ is *explicitly* called 'God'.

The privileges that Paul has enumerated all stem from God himself and could be taken to guarantee – indeed, were taken by many Jews to guarantee – the salvation of Jews generally. It is this salvation that the gospel specifically calls into question (see *e.g.* ch. 2), and, by doing so, raises the issue that is central to these chapters: has God abandoned his promises to Israel (6a)?

9:6b–29 Israel's past: God's sovereign election

Paul's first response is to argue that God's word has all along promised salvation only to those whom God sovereignly chose. Paul cites extensively from Israel's history to make this argument, showing that belonging to God's people depends not on birth or on anything a person does, but on God's *call* (this word is key to the section; *cf.* vs 7 (NIV 'reckoned'), 12, 24–26). As God selected only some from among Abraham's descendants to be his people (6b–13), so also he is now selecting Gentiles (24–26) and only a *remnant* of Jews (27–29) to be his people at the present time. The burden of Paul's argument, then, comes in vs 6b–13 and 24–29, with vs 14–23 being a separate response to questions raised by Paul's stress on the sovereignty of God.

9:6b–13 The Israel within Israel. The thesis of the paragraph is stated in v 6b: *not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.* There is, Paul suggests, in keeping with the OT 'remnant' theology, a spiritual Israel within a larger ethnic Israel. Paul may elsewhere use 'Israel' to denote the entire people of God, both Jew and Gentile (Gal. 6:16). Here, however, as the sequel makes clear, he is thinking only of Jews. Paul proves his point about the Israel within Israel in two roughly parallel arguments drawn from OT history (7–10, 11–13). In the first, Paul shows that physical descent from Abraham was not enough to guarantee a place within the people of God. Ishmael and Isaac were both Abraham's children; yet it was through Isaac alone that God 'reckoned' Abraham's spiritual descendants (Gn. 21:12). Spiritual descent from Abraham, then, is based not on birth but on God's promise. Isaac, not Ishmael, was the recipient of that promise (10, quoting Gn. 18: 10 and 14).

As if the point were not clear enough, Paul now makes it even more emphatically by choosing an illustration from the next generation of Israel (10–13). For one could object to Paul's first illustration that a significant difference in natural descent distinguished Isaac and Ishamel: the former was born to Sarah, 'the free woman', and the latter to Hagar, 'the slave woman' (*cf.* Gal. 4:21–31). But no such difference existed between Jacob and Esau. As twins, they were not only born to the same mother, Rebekah, but they were even conceived at the same moment (the Greek *koitēn* probably refers to sexual intercourse). Yet even before their birth Rebekah was told that '*The older shall serve the younger*' (Gn. 25:23). This priority of Jacob is confirmed by a second OT text quoted by Paul, Mal. 1:2–3, '*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*'. From these OT testimonies to Jacob's priority Paul draws the conclusion, in a parenthetical note (11b–12a), that the blessing enjoyed by Jacob was based on nothing that he had done but on God's free, sovereign call.

What is this blessing? Since the OT contexts from which Paul draws his illustration are speaking mainly about the historical roles of Jacob and Esau, or the nations they represent (Israel and Edom), the plan of God, (*cf.* Mal. 1:2–3), Paul may mean nothing more than that Jacob enjoyed the privilege of being a positive instrument in that plan. But the language that Paul uses throughout this paragraph – *reckoned* (7; *cf.* 4:2–21); *election* (11; *cf.* 11:5, 7, 28; Acts 9:15; 1 Thes. 1:4; 2 Pet. 1:10); *purpose* (11; *cf.* 8:28; Eph. 1:11); *works* (12; *cf.* 4:4–8); *calls* (12; *cf.* 8:29) – generally refers to the issue of eternal salvation. And it is this issue, the fact that so many Jews have not become saved through the gospel, that has sparked this whole discussion. We conclude, therefore, that Paul is using these OT texts to illustrate the principle of God's sovereignty in salvation: being a child of God (*cf.* vs 7–9) depends ultimately on God's calling. God's 'love' of Jacob and 'hate' of Esau are ways of describing in sharply contrasting terms God's election to salvation and his exclusion from salvation, respectively.

9:14–23 Objections: The freedom of

God. Paul's emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation raises certain objections, as he well knew from many years of preaching. Paul deals with two of these in this section. Is not God unfair to choose some and reject others (14)? And how can people be blamed for rejecting God if he himself determines that rejection (19)? Such questions are our natural response to the biblical teaching about God's sovereignty. It is significant that Paul here offers no 'logical' explanation for the compatibility of God's sovereignty with the equally biblical teaching that God is scrupulously fair and that human beings are justifiably blameworthy for their actions. We would do well to follow his approach: to affirm the truth of these great biblical doctrines without eliminating or weakening one or the other through an insistence on an exhaustive explanation. This is a point at which, with Paul (*cf.* 11:33–36), we should be prepared to recognize a mystery beyond our comprehension.

In the diatribe style that he had adopted frequently in Romans, Paul himself asks the question that he knows will be raised by his insistence on the sovereignty of God in election: *is God unjust*? This inference Paul emphatically rejects and again cites the OT to support his viewpoint (15). But the text Paul cites – Ex. 33:19 – appears simply to reiterate God's free and sovereign activity rather than to explain why that activity is just. But perhaps this is Paul's point: that God's actions can be 'judged' by nothing beyond his own nature as revealed in Scripture. Paul again states that what follows from God's freedom is that *it* (*i.e.* God's election to salvation; *cf.* vs 11–12) does not *depend on man's desire or effort*.

Vs 17–18 provide further support for this denial that God's acts are based on human decisions and actions, but now from the 'negative' side (*cf.* 'Esau I hated' in v 13b). Pharaoh's role in the history of salvation was a matter of God's determination. It was God who brought Pharaoh on to the stage of history ('*I raised you up*'; *cf.* Ex. 9:16) and caused his heart to be hardened. What is said in the OT about Pharaoh applies, of course, to his role in the history of salvation and not to his personal destiny. But, as in vs 10–13, Paul suggests in v 18 that God's working in Pharaoh illustrates the way in which God works in people generally: as he *has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy* (15–16; *cf.* '*Jacob I loved*' in v 13a) so *he hardens whom he wants to harden* (17; *cf.* '*Esau I hated*' in v 13b). Neither the bestowal of God's mercy nor his hardening are based on human actions (although it should be remembered that God acts on people who are already lost in sin and that his exclusion of some from salvation is in some sense simply a confirmation of the choice they have already made). It should also be remembered that God's decisions on these matters are not disclosed to us and that they are not meant in any way to cause despair. The Scriptures make plain that God will never refuse to accept, or cast away, those who diligently seek him.

The very question Paul now poses is exactly the one that we are tempted to raise at this point also: how can God blame people for rejecting him if he himself, by choosing some and 'passing over' others, in some sense causes that very rejection? Paul's response reveals that he himself has no logically satisfactory answer to this question. He has earlier in the letter made it plain that people are fully responsible for their rejection of the truth of God (1:20 – 2:11), and he will make the point again with respect to Israel (9:30 – 10:21). But Paul does not mention this as a way of avoiding the issue that he now raises. He thereby implies that God's sovereignty in rejection and man's responsibility for that rejection are to be maintained as two complementary truths, truths that must not be used to detract from one another. Here Paul simply contests anyone's right to stand in judgment over the ways of God. He is the potter, who has full right over the vessels that he creates (see Je. 18; Wisdom of Solomon 12:3–22; 15:7). In vs 22–23, Paul relates this freedom of God to his willingness to bear patiently with those *objects of his wrath* which are *prepared for destruction*. The 'objects' Paul here has in mind are probably unbelieving Jews, who are now playing a role in salvation-history something like that played by Pharaoh at the time of the exodus (see 11:12–15). As in Pharaoh's case, the stress lies on their historical role at the present time (although their destiny is nevertheless clear: wrath and destruction). But God's ultimate purpose is not wrath but mercy and glory. For the main point of vs 22–23 is how God expresses his concern with *the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory*.

9:24–29 God's calling of a new people. While v 24 is grammatically tied to vs 22–23, it returns to the theme with which Paul started this section: God's calling. In vs 7–13 Paul has shown how God called from within ethnic Israel a smaller number of Jews who formed a 'spiritual' Israel. Now he shows that this sovereign call of God has in the present time created a new people, composed of both Gentiles (25–26) and a Jewish *remnant* (27–29). In vs 25–26 Paul applies Ho. 2:23 and 1:10, which in their original context applied to Israel, to the calling of Gentiles to become his people, *sons of the living God* (*cf.* 'God's children' in v 8). Paul quotes Isaiah to illustrate the situation of the Jews and, in doing

so, makes three points that serve to summarize this whole section and prepare for ch. 11: (i) the unbelief of many of Paul's fellow-Jews is not surprising, since Scripture itself predicted that *'only the remnant will be saved'* (Is. 10:22); (ii) Jews are being saved and are becoming part of the new people of God: a *'remnant will be saved'* (*cf.* 11:3–7); and (iii) God is the one who brings about the salvation of his people: *'unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants . . .'* (Is. 1:9).

9:30 – 10:21 Israel's present: disobedience

Paul's second argument in defence of the proposition that God's word of promise to Israel has not failed (9:6a) is that Israel itself, by its failure to respond rightly to God's word, is at fault for its exclusion from God's new people. In 9:30 – 10:13, Paul faults Israel for seeking a right standing with God based on doing the law rather than on faith in Christ. Then, in 10:14–21, he demonstrates that Israel cannot plead ignorance for its failure, for God has made his plan and purpose clear to Israel in the Scriptures. The unbelief of the majority of Paul's fellow-Jews is due both to God's sovereign election (9:6b–29) and to their culpable refusal to believe. Unconditional divine election and human responsibility stand side by side, and neither should be allowed to cancel or mitigate the other.

9:30 – 10:13 The righteousness of God and the righteousness of the law. A contrast between two kinds of righteousness rules this section: God's righteousness (10:3), a righteousness available only through faith (9:30; 10:4, 6,10), and one's own 'righteousness' (10:3), a righteousness that is bound up with the law (9:31; 10:5) and with works (9:32). Paul develops this contrast in three somewhat parallel paragraphs (9:30–33; 10:1–4; 10:5–13). In each he accuses Israel as a whole of missing God's righteousness in Christ, the only righteousness that can save (see 10:1, 9–10), because of its preoccupation with works and the law of Moses. An approach to the law informed by right knowledge would have led them to Christ and true righteousness, for the law itself points forward to Christ (10:4).

Paul's question *What then shall we say?* (30) introduces the new stage in his argument. It suggests that he will be dealing with an issue raised by his previous discussion. This issue is the unexpected development in salvation-history that he has just mentioned (24–29): Jews, God's 'chosen people', are left as only a remnant, while Gentiles, once far from God, are now being called 'sons of the living God'. Paul provides a first explanation in vs 30b–33 as to why this has taken place. He uses racecourse imagery to contrast Gentiles with Israel. The former, though not even 'in the race' (*who did not pursue righteousness*) have, nevertheless, reached the 'finishing line': they have obtained a right standing with God. And they have obtained it, Paul makes clear, because of their faith. Israel, on the other hand, though actively engaged in the race, has not reached the goal of that race. At this point, however, Paul's careful contrast appears to break down, for the goal that Israel pursued but did not obtain is not righteousness, but *a law of righteousness*. Some scholars suggest that Paul means by this simply the 'principle of righteousness' or that we can reverse the terms and translate it 'righteousness of the law' (*cf.* 10:5). But the law is almost certainly the Mosaic law, and we should respect the word order that Paul has chosen. Paul uses this phrase to stress that Israel's pursuit of a right standing with God was completely bound up with the law: they were pursuing 'a law that held out the promise of righteousness' (*cf.* 2:13).

This goal they did not obtain, nor could they ever attain it. For the law, as Paul has made clear earlier, can never bring righteousness (3:20, 28; 4:13–15; 8:3). Paul, therefore, disrupts the parallelism between Gentiles and Israel to bring out the fact that Israel are to be faulted both for what they were pursuing (*a law of righteousness*) and for the manner in which they were pursuing it (*not by faith but as if it* [*i.e.* righteousness] *were by works*). So narrowly were their eyes focused on the law that, rather than embracing Jesus Christ, the true goal of the 'race' (see 10:4), they have *stumbled over* him. Paul borrows this imagery from Is. 8:14, which he quotes along with Is. 28:16 in v 33.

In 10:1–4, Paul elaborates on this 'stumbling' of the Jews over Jesus Christ. After reasserting his deep longing for the salvation of his Jewish brothers and sisters (see 9:1–3), Paul faults the Jews for not having a knowledge of God's ways and purposes that matches their undoubted zeal. To use the race imagery of 9:30–33, Israel were running strenuously, but they were not heading towards the true finishing line of the race. That finishing line is *the righteousness that comes from God* (3). This phrase is better translated 'the righteousness of God' (Gk. *tēn tou theou dikaiosynēn*) and, as in 1:17 and 3:21–22, refers to God's act of making people right before him. Focused on the pursuit of *their own* righteousness, the righteousness that comes by works (9:32) and the law (10:5), the Jews have not submitted to, have not been willing to accept in faith, God's way of putting people in relationship with himself.

The Jews' preoccupation with the law is again the underlying problem, as Paul implies in v 4. For they have failed to understand that Christ is

himself the 'culmination' of the law. Paul uses the word *telos*, which some translate 'end' (NIV; RSV) and others 'goal'. In keeping with the race imagery of the passage, however, the word probably contains elements of both these translations. Christ, Paul is saying, has all along been the goal to which the law has been pointing; and, since that goal has now been attained – Christ has come – the pursuit of the law should now be at an end. This verse stands along with Mt. 5:17, as a key expression of a dominant NT theme: the culmination or 'fulfilment' of the old covenant law and all its institutions in Jesus the Messiah. With that culmination comes also God's intention to offer righteousness to anyone who believes, Gentile as well as Jew (see 9:30; 10:12–13).

Paul's third statement of the contrast between the two ways of righteousness (10:5–13) has two main purposes. It uses the OT itself to reassert that the key difference between them is the difference between 'doing' (the law) and 'believing' (the gospel) (5–10) and reinforces the 'universalistic' dimension of the righteousness of God by faith (11–13; *cf.* 10:4b: *for everyone who believes*). Paul's quoting of the OT apparently 'against itself' in vs 5–8 has been the topic of considerable controversy and discussion. We cannot avoid the problem by eliminating the contrast between vs 5 and 6 (Cranfield, for instance, would translate 'and' at the beginning of v 6) or by denying that Paul is truly quoting the OT in v 6–8). Rather, we should understand Paul to be teasing out a fuller meaning of the passages he quotes in the light of Christ's coming. Lv. 18:5 may stand as a valid expression of *the righteousness that is by the law* because it focuses on what was characteristic of the Mosaic legal system: doing. Only by obedience, Moses repeatedly emphasized, could a Jew *live*, *i.e.* enjoy God's covenant blessings. Taken on its own terms, severed from the undergirding promise of God, the Mosaic law offers the possibility of righteousness and life only if it is truly done. By focusing so narrowly on the Mosaic law the Jews had put themselves in the position of being able to find life and salvation only by 'doing' it – an impossible task, as Paul has made clear (*cf.* 3:9–20).

It is precisely the ready availability of the *righteousness that is by faith*, in contrast to the impossibility of achieving the righteousness that is by the law, that is the point of Paul's selective quotations from Dt. 30:12–14 in vs 6–8. The Deuteronomy passage encourages obedience to the law of God by reminding the Israelites that the *word* of God's law *is near*, and that there is no need to ascend to heaven or into *the deep* (Paul may here have mixed an allusion to Ps. 107:26 with his quotation) to find it. Paul can apply the text to Christ's death and resurrection (6–7) and to the *word of faith*, the gospel (8), because he sees in Christ the culmination of the law (4). What the OT attributed to the law Paul now understands to be 'fulfilled' in Christ and the gospel message: the ready availability of the means of righteousness. To continue to strive to fulfil the Mosaic law as a means of righteousness – as the Jews were doing – is to miss the fact that God has now brought near his word to people in the message of the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection.

Vs 9–13 elaborate two implications of the nearness of God's word in the gospel. First, because God has already 'done' what is needed to secure righteousness, all that people are required to do is to believe. Secondly, the gospel is 'near' for everybody, not just for the Jews. The mention of both *mouth* and *heart* in Dt. 30:14 leads Paul to develop each of these in vs 9–10. (Since this is the origin for the imagery, we should not place undue emphasis on oral confession, as if Paul is elevating it to a necessary component of salvation.) Acknowledging that *Jesus is Lord* is a component of what Paul clearly wants to highlight: believing in the heart (see 2:28–29). Faith, not doing the law, brings salvation, and brings it for anyone, whether Jew or Gentile. Paul proves these points by quoting from Is. 28:16 (11; note that Paul has used this text earlier in 9:33) and Joel 2:32 (13). Indicative of Paul's very high view of Jesus Christ is the fact that he applies texts that speak of the LORD God to the Lord Jesus.

Note. 33 The fact that Peter also quotes Is. 28:16 and 8:14 together (1 Pet. 2:6, 8) may indicate that they were part of an early Christian collection of Messianic 'proof texts', focused on Christ as the 'stone'.

10:14–21 Israel's lack of excuse. In 9:30 – 10:13, Paul has shown that Israel's failure to attain salvation must be attributed to its failure to believe and not to the failure of God's word (9:6a). Paul now removes any possible excuse that Israel might have for its failure to believe by asserting that the gospel has indeed been brought 'near' to Israel (*cf.* v 8). The conditions for believing in the gospel and finding salvation have been met (14–15, 17–18). The fault, then, is Israel's for refusing to be obedient to the gospel (16) and for failing to understand the OT itself, which prophesied what God has now done in the gospel (19–21).

In vs 14–15a, Paul uses a series of questions to set forth the series of conditions that must be met if people are 'to call on the name of the Lord' (13): messengers must be sent, the message must be preached, people must hear the message and hearing must be met by faith. Paul then quotes Is. 52:7 – *How beautiful are the*

feet of those who bring good news – to emphasize the importance of the sending of the preachers and also to move into an explicit focus on the gospel. For in v 16 Paul makes clear that the condition in this chain that has gone unfulfilled is the responsibility of those who hear the preachers of the good news to respond in obedience and faith. As the NIV translation makes explicit (the Greek has only *ou pantes*, 'not all'), Paul is now thinking specifically of the Israelites. Paul again quotes Isaiah (53:1) for prophetic confirmation of Israel's failure to respond to the message (*cf.* also Jn. 12:38).

V 17 begins a new paragraph. Taking his vocabulary from the Is. 53:1 quotation, Paul reiterates the connection between faith and the hearing of the message (see v 14) and identifies this message with *the word of Christ*, *i.e.* 'the word that proclaims Christ', the gospel (*cf.* vs 15–16). Paul's point in vs 18–20 is to show that Israel has, indeed, both 'heard' the word of Christ and 'known' about God's plan of salvation as it has now been unfolded through the preaching of the gospel. Paul probably quotes Ps. 19:4 (v 18b) not as a prophecy of the preaching of the gospel, but simply in order to use its language to assert the widespread proclamation of the gospel to Jews throughout the Mediterranean world. It is perhaps the reference to 'the ends of the earth' in this quotation that leads Paul in vs 19–20 to reflect on what was for the Jews of his day a key 'stumbling block' in the way of accepting the gospel: the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. Paul shows from both Moses (Dt. 32:21) and Isaiah (65:1) that God had planned all along to include the Gentiles in his ultimate plan of salvation and to make them his people (*cf.* 9:24–26). Continuing his quotation from Isaiah (65:2), Paul concludes this section of his argument by reminding his readers of two key facts: God has constantly been extending the word of his grace, the gospel, to the Jews; but they, for their part, have been largely *disobedient and obstinate*.

11:1–10 Israel's present: 'a remnant by grace'

As Paul has described it in 9:30 – 10:21, Israel's present status appears to be one of unrelieved resistance to the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel. As the concluding verse puts it, Israel is 'disobedient and obstinate'. This is, however, not the case, as Paul now reminds us. Already in 9:24, 27–29 he stressed that there is a remnant of Jews who remain a part of God's people. He now returns to this theme, making clear that, while a significant part of Israel has been 'hardened' (7–10; *cf.* 9:30 – 10:21), there still exists *a remnant chosen by grace* (5), Jews who have believed in Christ.

Paul again demonstrates his sensitivity to the way in which his teaching could be misunderstood by raising the question, *Did God reject his people?* (2) That God has rejected Israel as 'his people' could well be the conclusion drawn from Paul's argument that belonging to God's people depends entirely on God's sovereign 'call' and not on physical descent from Abraham (9:6–29) and from his charge, that Israel has failed to submit to the righteousness of God (9:30 – 10:21; *cf.* 10:3). But, as Paul now makes clear, this is not the conclusion that he wants us to draw. *God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew* (2a; *cf.* Ps. 94:14). Paul is not only affirming the election to salvation of *the remnant* (*cf.* 9:6–9; 11:3–6; so Calvin) but is also affirming a continuing 'election' of Israel as a whole (see 11:28–29). This assertion, then, stands as the heading for the whole chapter, as Paul describes how God's election of Israel works out in the present through the salvation of the remnant (3–10) and in the future through the salvation of 'all Israel' (11–27).

The situation in his own day, Paul suggests, could be compared to that in Elijah's. For the prophet's discouragement at the widespread defection of Israel from true worship of the LORD was met by the LORD's assurance to him that there still existed a solid core of 7,000 'true believers' (see 1 Ki. 19:10–18). In the same way, despite the prevalence of unbelief among the Jews of Paul's day, the yet remains *a remnant chosen by grace*. A significant number of Jews – like Paul himself (*cf.* v 1b) – *have* been obedient to the gospel of Jesus Christ and been saved. But the remnant exists only as the product of God's grace, and cannot therefore be entered into *by works* (6). It is this preoccupation with works that has proved the downfall of so many of Paul's fellow-Jews and has resulted in their not obtaining the righteousness that they so diligently sought (7; *cf.* 9:31–32; 10:2–3). But, as it is God's intervention that brings salvation to the elect (*cf. grace* in v 6), so it is by God's act that *The others* failed to reach it; they *were hardened*. That God is the cause of this hardening is made clear by the quotation of a blend of Dt. 29:4 and Is. 29:10 in v 8, and by the parallel text in 9:18 [although a different Greek word (*sklērynō*) is used there, the concept is the same]. While Israel remains fully responsible for its lack of response to the gospel, Paul makes it clear that, in some mysterious way, God is behind this failure to respond.

11:11–32 Israel's future: salvation

God's faithfulness to his word of promise to Israel as a nation (9:6a) is inviolate: he will not reject the people whom he has foreknown (1–2). The unbelief of the majority of Paul's

fellow-Jews must not blind us to the fact that Israel's 'hardening' is neither total ('at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace'; 5) nor final (*all Israel will be saved*; 26). The prediction of Israel's future salvation is the focus of this section and the climax to Paul's discussion of Israel and the gospel. Paul leads up to it by showing how God is using Israel's current unbelief to accomplish his plan for the salvation of the world (11–24). His scolding of Gentile Christians for inappropriate 'boasting' over Jewish unbelievers shows that the theology Paul develops in this section has a very specific practical application.

11:11–24 Jew and Gentile in God's plan. Paul again uses a question to introduce the next stage of his argument. *Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?* And his quick and emphatic response, *Not at all!*, shows again that the question betrays a misunderstanding of what Paul has been saying. Yes, Israel, taken as a whole, has 'stumbled': it has failed to have faith in Christ, God's appointed means of providing righteousness (see 9:33; 10:2–4). But Israel's stumble has not led to irretrievable ruin. For the Jews' *transgression* has inaugurated a process by which they will be made *envious* and be brought ultimately to salvation (11b; *cf.* 11:26). This happens via an intermediate stage: the salvation of the Gentiles. Jewish refusal to respond to the gospel, Paul implies, has opened the way for preaching to the Gentiles – a circumstance Paul had witnessed repeatedly in his own missionary work (*e.g.* Acts 13:45–47; 18:6; 19:8–10; 28:24–28). At the same time, we must emphasize that the turn from Jews to Gentiles was much more than a historical circumstance: as the NT makes clear here and elsewhere, it was part of God's sovereign plan of salvation (see the quotations of Is. 49:6 in Acts 13:47 and of Am. 9:11–12 in Acts 15:16–18). Then, as Jews see Gentiles enjoying God's blessing, they in turn are made envious – as Dt. 32:21, which Paul quotes in 10:19, predicts.

In this paragraph Paul sets Jewish unbelief in the context of an unfolding plan of God for the salvation of all his people. That plan involves an oscillation between Jews and Gentiles in three stages: (i) Jewish transgression opens the way for (ii) Gentile salvation, which leads in the end to (iii) Jewish salvation. The importance of this point to Paul's argument is revealed by the fact that he restates it no less than six times in this section (*cf.* vs 12, 15, 16, 17–24, 25–26, 30–31). In v 12 and again in v 15 the final inclusion of the Jews – *their fullness/their acceptance* – leads to a fourth stage: *greater riches/life from the dead*. Since Paul presents this inclusion of the Jews as an event of the end-times (11:26), it is likely that these phrases refer to the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom through the coming of Christ, bringing with it extraordinary blessing and the resurrection of the dead.

In addition to explaining how it is that Israel's present transgression will be reversed, this scheme accomplishes two other purposes. First, Paul appeals to it to explain how his being *the apostle to the Gentiles* involves no departure from his deep desire to save as many of his fellow-Jews as possible (13–14). For, by converting Gentiles, Paul is at the same time fostering greater envy among the Jews and perhaps bringing closer that day when 'the full number of the Gentiles has come in' (25).

Secondly, Paul finds in this process reason to scold the Gentile Christians in Rome for their boastful attitude towards the Jews (17–24). Paul makes clear in v 13 that he is writing to these Gentile Christians as responsible individuals in vs 17–24 (the 'you' throughout these verses is singular). These verses feature Paul's famous metaphor of the olive tree. Paul compares the *root* of the tree to the patriarchs of Israel (see v 28), the *natural branches* to the Jews, the *wild olive shoots* to the Gentiles and the olive tree itself to the people of God. Scholars have debated whether Paul's imagery follows actual horticultural practices of his day. The debate is, however, misguided, since Paul could well be adapting the natural process to suit his theological application. The boasting of the Gentile Christians about which Paul is here concerned seems to be occasioned by the fact that natural branches, Jews, have been *broken off* so that wild olive shoots, Gentiles, might be *grafted in* (17, 19). Paul does not dispute this – and, indeed, he has just asserted something very like this himself (11–12, 15) – but disputes the Gentile Christians' right to any bragging about the fact. They are not to forget that the root of the olive tree into which they have been grafted is itself Jewish, for God's people are built on his promises to, and dealings with, the patriarchs (*cf.* also 4:11–12, 16–17; Gal. 3:15–29). The church to which the Gentile Christians in Rome belong is nothing less than the continuation of the one people of God from the OT.

Paul gives a second reason why the Gentiles should not boast: it is dangerous to one's spiritual status. For boasting is the very opposite of faith, our humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation (20–22). Jews have forfeited their place within the people of God through unbelief, and the Gentile Christians at Rome need to recognize the danger they put themselves in if they succumb to the same sin.

At the end of this section (23–24), Paul returns to the point at which he began (12–13), using the olive tree imagery to give hope for

eventual Jewish salvation. Though presently *broken off* (17, 20), these natural branches continue to partake of the holiness of the root from which they have come (16b). Far more readily then than Gentiles, who are grafted in *contrary to nature*, Jews can be grafted back into God's olive tree once again. But this can only happen if the Jews *do not persist in unbelief*. While Israel's ultimate salvation is certainly the work of God, it cannot take place without that response of faith that God has always made the prerequisite for the enjoyment of his blessings.

11:25–32 'All Israel will be saved'. The hope for a future restoration of Israel that Paul has hinted at throughout vs 11–24 (*cf.* vs 12, 15, 23–24) is now asserted in the form of the revelation of a *mystery*. Paul's use of this term is based on the OT (Dn. 2:27–30, 47; 4:9) and Jewish apocalyptic conception according to which God's plan for history is fully determined but hidden and awaiting its revelation at the proper moment (see especially 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26–27). A primary component of this now-revealed mystery for Paul is the way in which God is now working with the Gentiles (see Eph. 3:1–10 especially). Thus it is not surprising that Paul labels the oscillation between Jews and Gentiles in God's plan for salvation a 'mystery'. V 25a summarily restates the process that Paul has sketched several times in vs 11–24: *Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in*. God's hardening of Jews, as Paul has shown in vs 3–10 is partial, for some Jews are coming to Christ and being saved. And he has more than once hinted at the temporal limitation of this hardening, which he now makes explicit: it will last only until the divinely determined number of Gentiles has come into the kingdom of God (*cf.* also Lk. 21:24).

This clear temporal stress in v 25 makes it likely that the salvation of all Israel (26a) is to take place after the full number of the Gentiles has come in. To be sure, the word that introduces this verse (*houtos*) focuses not on the time of this salvation, but on its manner – *so*, or 'in this manner'. But, as Paul has repeatedly shown, the manner in which God will bring Israel to salvation is as the last stage in a historical process. Therefore, it is unlikely that Paul is speaking in this verse of the salvation of Jews throughout church history. Equally improbable is the view, held by the Reformers, that Paul is referring to the salvation of the entire church, 'the Israel of God' (*cf.* Gal. 6:16). *Israel* throughout chs. 9 – 11 denotes the race rather than a spiritual entity, and the contrast with the Gentiles in v 25 renders this meaning all the more likely here. Paul is describing an event that will take place at the end of history, when Christ returns in glory; when, as Is. 59:20–21 puts it, '*The deliverer will come from Zion*' and Israel's sins are taken away (26b–27). *All Israel* has a corporate sense: what is meant is not every single Israelite in the last generation, but, in contrast to the present meagre numbers, a number large enough to represent the race as a whole [*cf.* the rabbinic maxim 'All Israelites have a share in the world to come,' which is followed by a list of exceptions (*m. Sanh.* 10:1)]. Some scholars argue that God will save Israel in a 'special way', apart from conscious faith in Jesus, but this is not correct. The salvation of *all Israel* will take place only as individual Israelites of that day place their faith in Christ (see v 23: 'if they do not persist in unbelief'). Faith in Christ is the only means of salvation, for Jew as well as Gentile (1:16–17; 10:11–13).

Paul follows his climactic prediction of salvation for 'all Israel' with its basis: God's irrevocable election of his people Israel (28–29) and his determination to have mercy on 'all' (30–32). Both points rehearse essential components of Paul's argument in these chapters. As Paul has made clear, Jews as a whole are at the present time, through rejection of the gospel, *enemies* of God (see 9:30 – 10:21). At the same time he has also made clear that God's election of Israel remains valid (11:1–2). But we must not forget what Paul has argued in 9:6b–29: Israel's election is based on God's free and sovereign call and not on racial descent. Thus the continuing validity of Israel's election, as far as salvation is concerned, must be limited to those circumstances Paul has described: the coming to Christ of Jews throughout the church age (the remnant; *cf.* 9:27–29; 11:3–7) and the dramatic turn to their Messiah of large numbers of Jews at the time of Christ's return (11:25–27). Vs 30–31 restate one last time the process of Jewish disobedience/Gentile salvation/Jewish salvation that is central to this part of Paul's argument. It is in terms of this oscillation between Jews and Gentiles that v 32 must be interpreted. Paul is not here teaching an individual universalism – that every single human being will experience God's mercy, and so be saved (as, for instance, Dodd and Cranfield suggest). Rather he is teaching a national universalism: God's mercy comes to both the Gentiles and to Israel.

11:33–36 The awesome purpose and plan of God

Paul concludes his review of Israel's past, present and future with a hymn of praise to the God whose ways are beyond our understanding and criticism. God's *wisdom* and *knowledge* (33) refer particularly to the revelation of his purposes in Christ (Eph. 3:5, 10; Col. 2:3). These purposes,

as Paul has shown in chs. 9 – 11, are being worked out in the context of a historical process involving both Jews and Gentiles. We may not understand every detail of that plan, and we may even be tempted to quarrel with some parts of it, but, as Paul reminds us with the OT quotations in vs 34–35 (Is. 40:13 and Jb. 41:11a), any criticism from us, who are mere mortals, is completely out of place. For God is the source (*from him*), sustainer (*through him*) and goal (*to him*) of everything. Confronted with this sovereign and wise God, our response can only be Paul's: *To him be the glory for ever!*

12:1 – 15:13 The gospel and the transformation of life

Paul has shown that the gospel he preaches has the power to transfer Christians from the realm of sin and death into the realm of righteousness and life. But this transfer, as Paul has noted (6:11–23; 8:12–13), does not absolve the Christian from the responsibility to live out the righteousness so graciously granted in the gospel. God is working to transform us into the image of his Son (8:29), but we are to take part in this process as we work to make this transformation real in our daily lives. Hence 12:1 – 15:13 belongs naturally with Paul's presentation of the gospel; indeed, his presentation would be incomplete without it. A new way of living is not the consequence of the gospel, but part of that gospel whose purpose is to bring about 'the obedience of faith' (1:5).

Paul's initial appeal captures the heart of what it means to live as a Christian (12:1–2). There follow specific appeals relating to unity and gifts (12:3–8), love of both fellow-believers and unbelievers (12:9–21), attitudes to government (13:1–7); and, again, love (13:8–10). In 13:11–14 Paul returns to where he began in 12:1–2 with another reminder of the nature of the times in which Christians now live. Paul ends this section of the letter with a lengthy rebuke to the *strong* and the *weak* in the church at Rome (14:1 – 15:13). Clearly in this last section Paul is writing with the specific situation of the Roman Christians in mind. The earlier appeals (chs. 12 – 13) are not so clearly directed to the situation in Rome. Even here, however, while Paul is undoubtedly summarizing in a general way some of the basics of Christian living, there is some allusion to needs and problems in the Roman church.

12:1–2 The heart of the matter: a renewed mind

Paul's summons to transform our lives does not come in a vacuum. It is only *in view of God's mercy* that his appeal becomes relevant and that our obedience of it is possible. As we recognize all (the word 'mercy' is plural in the Greek) that God has done for us in his Son, as Paul has surveyed it in chs. 1 – 11, we realize that offering ourselves to God *as living sacrifices* is, indeed, a 'reasonable' (*logikēn*) act of worship (see the NIV mg. for this translation). The word *living* reminds us of what God has made us: we are people who are now 'alive to God in Christ Jesus' (6:11). Paul encourages us to look at our entire Christian lives as acts of worship. It is not just what is done on Sunday in a church building that 'ascribes worth' to God, but what God and the world see in us every day and every moment of the week.

V 2, while grammatically parallel to v 1, really explains in more detail how this giving of ourselves as sacrifices is to be carried out. What is required is nothing less than a total transformation in world-view. No longer are we to look at life in terms of *this world*, the realm of sin and death from which we have been transferred by God's power (see 5:12–21), but in terms of the new realm to which we belong, the realm ruled by righteousness, life and the Spirit. Living in the world, we are nevertheless no longer 'of the world' (Jn. 17:15–16). The essence of successful Christian living is the *renewing* of our minds so that we might be able to *approve what God's will is* – that is, to recognize and put into practice God's will for every situation we face. God has not given to Christians a set of detailed commandments to guide us. He has given us his Spirit, who is working to change our hearts and minds from within, so that our obedience to God might be natural and spontaneous (see 7:6; 8:5–9; Je. 31:31–34; 2 Cor. 3:6–7; Eph. 4:22–24).

12:3–8 Humility and gifts

Paul's purpose in this paragraph is to foster unity among Christians by encouraging an attitude of humility and respect towards one another, particularly in the possession and use of spiritual gifts. Paul urges us not to think to highly of ourselves, but to look at ourselves honestly and objectively. We are to measure ourselves, not by each other, but by *the measure of faith* (*metron pisteōs*). Some take this phrase to designate the differing amounts of faith that God has given each of us (*cf.* the NIV and RSV). The context, however, suggests that Paul is speaking here of our common Christian faith, against which each of us is to measure himself or herself (JB: 'the standard of faith'). When we do this, comparison of ourselves with other believers becomes relatively unimportant – particularly since God has given different gifts to the members of the church. Christ's body (4–5). What is needed is a recognition of the beautiful God-given and Spirit-led diversity

and complementarity within the church (see 1 Cor. 12:4–31 for a similar emphasis).

While Paul does not here explicitly mention the role of the Spirit, his involvement is implied by the reference to *gifts* (*charismata; cf.* 1:11; 1 Cor. 12:7–11). Paul mentions specific gifts in two other places (1 Cor. 12:7–11, 28; Eph. 4:11), and a comparison of these texts reveals that he is not seeking in any of them to give a comprehensive list. Rather, in each place Paul selects examples that will be relevant to his purpose. Paul's goal at this point is to encourage each Christian to use his or her gifts energetically and properly and not to worry about the gifts others may have, or the way in which they may be using them. *Prophesying* (6b) is the gift of conveying to other Christians truth that has been made known to the prophet from God (see 1 Cor. 14:1–32). The prophet must exercise his or her gift *in proportion to his* [or her] *faith*, a phrase that has the same sense as 'measure of faith' in v 3 (perhaps as playing his or her part in the whole work of the church). *Serving* (7a) may denote a specific ministry of teaching or leading worship but is probably a general designation of various ministries (see 1 Cor. 12:5). *Teaching* (7b) involves the transmission of Christian doctrine (see 2 Tim. 2:2); *encouraging* (8) includes a broader range of speaking ministries. We are reminded of the varied ways in which God leads people to serve him and the community by the inclusion of the gift of *contributing to the needs of others* (8b).

12:9–21 Love

These verses do not all pursue a single topic, as Paul touches on various components of that 'good, pleasing and perfect will' of God that Christians with renewed minds are to approve (2b). But they have a central theme: the demand for love of others, announced in v 9, and standing therefore as a heading for the entire section. While no rigid demarcation is possible, we may divide this paragraph into two main sections, vs 9–16 and vs 17–21. The former focuses more on the responsibilities of Christians to other Christians, while the latter (anticipated in v 14) concentrates on relationships with those outside the church. The number of close parallels to the teaching of Jesus (compare especially v 14 with Mt. 5:44 and v 21 with Mt. 5:39) suggests that Paul may here be reflecting a common early Christian set of ethical guidelines.

A *sincere* love is a love that is genuine and without pretence (see also 2 Cor. 6:6; 1 Tim. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:22), the sort that should stem from a renewed heart and mind. *Hate what is evil* and *cling to what is good* (9) may explain what a sincere love is but they are probably independent commands. Beginning in v 10, Paul encourages Christians to pursue sincere love and to do good in their relationships with other believers. *Honour one another above yourselves* could also be translated 'in honour prefer one another' – that is, as Paul puts it in Phil. 2:3b, 'consider others better than yourselves'. The similarity between this appeal and v 3 suggests that Paul already has his eye on the problems of disunity in the Roman church (see 14:1 – 15:13). *Zeal* (v 11) for God and the things of God should always characterize Christians, as it did our Lord (see Jn. 2:17). The means to keep this zeal strong is given in the next command, which is best translated 'allow oneself to be set on fire by the Holy Spirit' (Cranfield; the NIV differs, not taking *pneuma* to be the Holy Spirit). Such zeal, fired by the Spirit himself, will lead to a true *serving* of *the Lord*. Paul has spoken earlier in Romans about *hope* (5:2–10; 8:18–30), *tribulation* (5:3–4) and *prayer* (8:26–27); he now reminds Christians briefly (12) of the correct attitude towards each. Sincere love also leads to practical steps to help fellow believers who are in need (13; see also 1 Jn. 3:17–18).

V 14 interrupts the call to Christians to love and to do good to one another and anticipates vs 17–21. The relationship between Paul's command to *Bless those who persecute you* and Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (5:44) is clear. Jesus' command probably became a staple of early Christian instruction (see also 1 Pet. 3:9). With v 15, Paul turns back to inter-Christian relationships. Sympathetic involvement with the joys and sorrows of fellow-believers is a hallmark of sincere love for the brothers and sisters (10). The problem is that Christans think too much of *themselves*. Paul again warns the Roman Christians about this (*cf.* also vs 3, 10b), and encourages them to extend their sympathetic concern even to *people of low position*. The word Paul uses here (*tapeinos*) refers to those many first-century Christians who could boast of little in the way of worldly goods or social position (see Lk. 1:52; Jas. 1:10).

In the last section of this paragraph (17–21), Paul calls believers to demonstrate sincere love (9) towards those who oppose them. Echoing again the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 5:38–42; *cf.* 1 Thes. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9), Paul forbids retaliation (17a; *cf.* v 19a). In its place, he urges a positive response: *Be careful to do what is right* (lit. 'good things'; *cf.* 12:2b) *in the eyes of everybody*. Specifically, the Christian should seek to maintain peaceful relationships with everybody, Christians and non-Christians alike (*cf.* Pr. 3:4; 2 Cor. 8:21). Nevertheless, Paul recognizes that our freedom to do so will be limited by the attitudes of others and by our need not to compromise our Christian integrity. Peace with

others should never be purchased at the price of our Christian convictions and witness. Thus he adds the qualification *as far as it depends on you.*

Paul adds to his second prohibition (19a) an explanation of why such retaliation is unnecessary. We are to remember that we serve a sovereign and just God, a God who has promised to avenge the wrongs of those who are ill-treated in this world (Dt. 32:35). We should, therefore, not feel it necessary to take on ourselves the role of avenger, but rather *leave room for God's wrath.* (The Greek does not make clear that the wrath is God's, but this is certainly Paul's meaning.) Paul quotes Pr. 25:21–22 to reinforce his plea not to take vengeance. Again, as in v 17, the point is that Christians should substitute for vengeance the doing of good to our enemies. Through such kindness to our enemy, we *will heap burning coals on his head.* This could be a reference to future divine punishment: if the enemy is not moved to repentance by our good deeds, our kindly actions will render God's wrath all the worse. But the fact that it is we, by our good deeds, who bring the burning coals on the enemy suggests rather that Paul is holding out to us the hope that our kindness will stimulate shame and repentance in the enemy. V 21 – *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good* – is a fitting conclusion to this section (17–21) and, indirectly, to all of vs 3–20.

Notes. The commands in vs 9–13 and 16–19 represent Greek participles, a form of verb that does not usually indicate a command. Paul's usage here may reflect the tendency of many rabbis to use the Hebrew participle to give a command. 11 Instead of *serving the Lord (kuriō)*, some mss have the wording 'serving the time' (*kairō*)'. The latter is certainly a more difficult reading which is often an indication of authenticity, but lacks sufficient external support. 20 The use of burning coals to symbolize shame and repentance in Pr. 25:22 may derive from an Egyptian ritual in which a person could purge his or her sin by carrying on the head a dish containing burning charcoal.

13:1–7 The Christian's responsibility to government

Paul does not explicitly connect this paragraph with what comes before it, and this has led some scholars to think that it is a later, perhaps post-Pauline, addition to the text of Romans. But there is no textual evidence for so drastic an interpretation. The passage fits in the context perfectly well: submission to government is part of that 'good, pleasing and perfect will' (12:2b) that Paul has been outlining and is also a specific example of doing 'what is right in the eyes of everybody' (12:17b). Paul may have been aware that the Roman Christians were in particular need of such advice, since there is evidence that various groups in the capital, including Jews, were agitating against the paying of taxes at about this time. (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.50ff.). Paul, therefore, counsels that the Roman Christians pay their taxes (6–7) as part of their general obligation to submit to the authorities of the state (1a, 5a). Such submission is called for, Paul argues, because governmental authorities are established by God to serve his purposes of rewarding good and punishing evil (1b–4, 5b).

The *authorities* (Gk. *exousiai*) clearly denote persons in positions of authority in secular government; in Paul's day of course, Roman imperial and provincial officials especially. To *submit* to these authorities means to recognize their place 'over' the believer in the 'order' that exists in the world. This 'order' includes both secular institutions that lack God's sanction (*e.g.* slavery, Tit. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:18) and institutions ordained by God for the good of his people (*e.g.* marriage, Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1, 5; the family, Lk. 2:51; church leadership, 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Pet. 5:5; Eph. 5:21 probably includes marriage, family and slavery). Human government, Paul makes clear in vs 1b–4, falls clearly into this latter category. Echoing consistent OT (Pr. 8:15–16; Is. 40:15, 23–24; Dn. 2:21; 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21) and Jewish teaching, (Wisdom of Solomon 6:3; Ecclus. 10:4, 17:17) Paul reminds us that every ruler is *established* (*tetagmenai*) by God and is therefore *God's servant*, however indirectly or unconsciously (4, 6). Rulers serve God by commending those who do good (3b–4a) and punishing wrong-doers (3a, 4b). Therefore, Christians, like everyone else (*cf.* v 1), are to do what the governing authorities tell us to do; and not just because we fear punishment, but also because we recognize that God stands behind government and we want to avoid doing that which would violate our consciences (5b).

Paul's teaching in this paragraph appears to be quite straightforward and is, indeed, paralleled in other NT books (see especially 1 Pet. 2:13–17). Nevertheless, the apparently absolute command to do what rulers tell us to do creates problems for most Christians. These problems are created not only by our experience – many believers must live under dictatorial and rabidly anti-Christian governments – but by the NT itself, which elsewhere holds up disobedience to rulers in some situations as commendable (Acts 4:19–20; Revelation). The problem thus created by 13:1–7 has been solved in several ways. Some argue that Paul is commanding obedience to government only when it is fulfilling its God-given functions of rewarding good and punishing evil. While there may be some

truth to this, Paul does not make Christian obedience contingent on governmental behaviour. Others think that Paul may be restricting himself only to an immediate situation in the Roman community; but the universal language of the text (*everyone, no authority* in v 1) makes this unlikely. A more attractive alternative is that Paul's demand that Christians *submit* to government means simply that they recognize government's rightful place within the hierarchy of relationships estabished by God, a hierarchy at whose pinnacle is God. When, therefore, government usurps its place, and commands us to do something contrary to our ultimate Lord, we are free – indeed obliged – to disobey. This view may, however, unduly weaken the meaning of 'submit'. Perhaps the best solution, then, is to view 13:1–7 as a general statement about how the Christian should relate to government, with exceptions to this advice assumed but not spelled out here.

13:8–10 Love and the law

The first part of v 8 is transitional. *Let no debt remain outstanding* repeats an important implication drawn from the need for Christians to submit to secular rulers (*cf.* v 7a) and is the basis for Paul's reminder that Christians owe one debt that they can never repay: the *continuing debt to love one another*. Paul returns to the theme of love (see 12:9–21), highlighting its importance by presenting it as the fulfilment (8b and 10), or summary (9), of the Mosaic law. The centrality of Lv. 19:18, the 'love command', was stressed by Jesus himself (Mt. 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mk. 12:31; *cf.* Jn. 13:34–35), and is echoed throughout the NT (*cf.* Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8; 4:11–12; 1 Jn. 4:11, *passim*). What Paul means when he insists that obedience to this commandment 'fulfils' or 'sums up' all the other commandments is not the idea that all we need to do to please God is to 'love' – with the implication that as long as we have a 'loving' feeling, we can do anything else we please. Nor does Paul mean that loving others is simply the most important commandment in the law, or the spirit in which all the others are to be obeyed. Rather, he is saying that Christians now fulfil all the demands of the Mosaic law (at least those that relate to our obligations to other people) by loving. For love is at the heart of the 'law of Christ' (Gal. 6:2 *cf.* 1 Cor. 9:20–21), the law that Jesus made regulative of life in the new realm in which we live. And this law itself 'fulfils' the Mosaic law (see Mt. 5:17).

13:11–14 Recognizing the times

As Paul began this section on general Christian ethics with a reminder of the new situation in which believers now live – no longer 'of this world' (12:2) – so he concludes it. Believers must understand *the present time*: a time in which we expect imminently the dawning of *the day* (12), that 'day of the Lord Jesus' that will bring our final salvation. As Paul has made clear (5:9–10), *salvation* is a process that is completed only when we are delivered from the outpouring of God's wrath on the last day (see also Phil. 1:19; 2:12; 1 Thes. 5:9). This day comes progressively nearer as the present age runs its course, and casts its light back into the time in which we now live. Hence his appeal to act as those who live in *the daytime* (12b–13) and to refrain from those actions that are characteristic of the *darkness*, that world system in opposition to God. V 14 makes the same point in different langauge: we are to surround ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ in such a way that all we do is done through him and for him, and we are not even to give thought to any of those sinful desires that stem from this fallen and sinful world (Gk. *sarx*, 'flesh', *sinful mature*; see the note on 7:5).

14:1 – 15:13 Appeals for unity

In 12:3 – 13:14, Paul has mentioned several quite general components of God's 'good, pleasing and perfect will' that should characterize Christians whose minds are being renewed through the power of the gospel (*cf.* 12:1–2). Now Paul addresses a specific issue within the Roman church: a division between those whom he calls *the weak* [in faith] (14:1–2; 15:1) and *the strong* (15:1). These two groups are quarrelling over whether Christians should, eat meat (14:2, 6, 21); observe special religious days (14:5–6); and, possibly, drink wine (14:21; *cf.* v 17 – it is not completely clear whether this was a real issue in the church or whether Paul simply cites it as an example).

We cannot with certainty identify these two groups. Certain parallels with Paul's discussion in 1 Cor. 8 – 10 lead some scholars to think that Paul is addressing here the problem of whether Christians should eat meat sacrificed to idols. Others think that the debate is over the propriety of certain ascetic practices that have been adapted from pagan religions. But Paul's stress in 15:8–13 on the importance of unity between Jews and Gentiles – a persistent theme throughout the letter – suggests rather that the division had its roots in a Jewish Christian insistence on maintaining some of their traditional 'taboos'. Like other pious Jews in a Gentile environment (Dn. 1:8–16; Judith 12:1–4), many Jewish Christians in Rome had apparently decided to abstain from meat (and perhaps wine) for fear of contact with idolatry. (This decision may have been necessitated by their being cut off from the larger Jewish community,

where 'kosher' food would have been more easily obtained.)

We should, then, assume a situation in which Jewish Christians are priding themselves on their strict piety and 'condemning' (14:3) those who do not adopt the same standard, while many Gentile Christians, finding no value in such practices, are flaunting their 'freedom' on such matters (15–22) and 'judging' (14:1) and 'looking down on' (14:3) those whom they consider to be foolishly 'weak' about asserting their freedom in Christ. Paul's own view on these matters is clear: he numbers himself among 'the strong' (15:1) and asserts that *no food is unclean in itself* (14:14). Significantly, Paul does not try to convince *the weak* that they are wrong. Rather, he urges that *the strong* accept their weaker brothers and sisters (14:1; 15:7) and, indeed, curtail the exercise of their freedom on these contentious matters in order to foster unity and avoid hurting the faith of the weak (14:13–22). The weak, also, are to stop condemning the strong and accept them as fellow-believers (14:3, 13; 15:7). Paul clearly feels that the issues dividing the Christians in Rome belong in the category of the *adiaphora*, 'things indifferent' (*cf.* v 1, *disputable matters*) – matters that are not essential to the faith and on which committed and sincere Christians may disagree. His purpose is to foster unity in the church by urging tolerance of one another on such issues. While the issues have changed, the modern church has frequently been tragically divided in the same way over non-essential matters. Without compromising on those doctrines that are essential to the gospel, we need to heed Paul's call to accept all those whom God accepts (*cf.* 15:1 and 14:3b).

14:1–12 Rebuke of judgmental attitudes. Paul rebukes both the strong and the weak for their judgmental attitudes (1–3), reminding them that they have no right to stand in judgment over those whom God has accepted (4–12).

The person described in this context whose *faith is weak* (1–2) is not necessarily one who is immature or lacking in faith in Christ in an absolute sense. Rather he is one who does not believe that his Christian faith allows him to engage in some specific practice; one who is excessively scrupulous, or 'delicate'. Nevertheless, 'weak' is somewhat pejorative, and it is obvious that this must have been the label given to this group by the strong. Coupled with the fact that Paul initially addresses the 'strong', this suggests that the 'strong' are the majority party, and the group that Paul has most in mind as he writes (*cf.* also 15:1). These believers are convinced that their faith allows them to *eat everything*, whereas the one whose faith is weak *eats only vegetables* (2). As v 6 indicates, the weak avoided eating meat, probably because, as Jewish Christians, they had fears about its contact with idolatry. Each group is to stop criticizing the other, recognizing that they are all fellow-servants of the same master, who alone has the right to judge them (4). It is 'before' his own master (*tō idiō kyriō* is probably a dative of reference), the Lord, that each believer *stands* or *falls* – *i.e.* perseveres or fails in faith (*cf.* 11:20,22). And Paul is convinced that those whom God has accepted (3) will persevere, because it is the Lord himself who makes them stand (4).

Another issue dividing the weak from the strong was the observance of special religious days (5). Because of their Jewish background the weak were apparently continuing to observe Jewish feast days, including, probably, the Sabbath. The strong, on the other hand, saw no basis for treating one day differently from another. For Paul this is clearly another 'disputable matter' (1), and he therefore counsels toleration. Each believer should make up his or her own mind on these disputable matters and, whether participating or abstaining, do so 'for the sake of the Lord' (NIV, *to the Lord; to kuriō* is a dative of advantage; *cf.* also vs 7–8) and with thanks to God (6). For, as Paul reminds both groups, Christians are not autonomous: their liberty must be worked out in terms of service to the Lord who has died and returned to life for them (7–9). God – not other Christians – is the one to whom all Christians are responsibile and before whom we will have to answer for our behaviour. It is therefore wrong for us to stand in judgment over fellow-believers whose practices on disputable matters may disagree with ours (10–12).

Note 11 Paul also quotes Is. 45:23 in Phil. 2:10–11. There, however, it is before the Lord Jesus that every knee bows, while here the 'Lord' before whom one bows is probably God.

14:13–23 The limits of liberty. After a further appeal to both groups to *stop passing judgment on one another*, Paul turns to the strong in faith, urging them not to *put any stumbling-block or obstacle* (13) in the way of the weaker brother. This is the central point of the section, with vs 14–21 elaborating and explaining this command. Vs 22–23 then deal more generally with both groups again.

The strong are creating for the weak a situation for sin [*stumbling-block* and *obstacle*; *cf.* 9:33 (Is. 8:16)] by continuing to eat food that the weak consider 'unclean'. Paul himself forcefully asserts his conviction that *no food is unclean in itself*, thereby aligning himself with the teaching of Jesus (Mk. 7:17–19; *cf.* also Acts 10:9–15). *Unclean* (*koinos*) denotes ritual impurity (Heb.

ṭāmē; *e.g.* Lv. 11:4–8). Paul understands, and wishes that all the Christians in Rome would understand, that Christ's coming has meant that the Jewish laws about ritual purity no longer apply. But he recognizes that Jewish Christians may have difficulty in discarding a lifetime of teaching and habit, and so he reminds the strong that *if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean* (14). Although Paul does not here use the word, he is clearly concerned that the 'conscience' of the weak believers will be violated (1 Cor. 8:7, 10) if they give in to pressure to eat food that they believe to be 'unclean'.

This 'eating against the conscience' is what Paul must mean by the 'distress' of the weak Christian in v 15. Addressing now an individual strong believer to bring his point home (*you* in v 15 is singular), Paul reminds him that his eating without concern for its effect on the weaker believers is a violation of the cardinal Christian principle of love (12:9–10; 13:8–10). Moreover, by tacitly encouraging the weaker believer to eat against his or her conscience, the strong believer may *destroy* one for whom Christ died. The word *destroy* (*apollymi*) is a strong one, usually denoting eternal damnation (2:12; 1 Cor. 1:18; 15:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 2 Thes. 2:10). This may be the meaning here, although, if so, Paul may not think of this eventuality literally. Or it may be that 'destroy' is used in a weaker sense here: 'cause spiritual damage to'.

A second reason for the strong to refrain from flaunting their freedom is that such behaviour, by causing distress and disunity within the community, brings the gospel into disrepute before outsiders (16–18). Unbelievers, seeing in the church disputes about *eating and drinking* rather than *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* (17), will not view the gospel as a good thing. The strong should therefore serve Christ by pursuing righteousness, peace and joy (*in this way* in v 18), avoiding behaviour that would decrease those qualities within the church. In doing so, they will be both *pleasing to God and approved by men* (18).

Vs 19–21 recapitulate points that Paul has made earlier in this paragraph. The strong (whom Paul is probably still addressing) are to pursue *peace* and *mutual edification* (see v 17; 1 Cor. 10:23). They are to recognize that their insistence on eating what others consider to be 'unclean' can lead to the destruction of *the work of God*, by which Paul probably means the weak brother (see vs 15, 21b) rather than the community. Those who pride themselves on the 'strength' of their consciences and their liberty in Christ should be the first to give up practices that might bring harm to a fellow-believer. Christian freedom is real and valuable, and nobody insisted on it more strongly than Paul (Gal. 5:1; Col. 2:16–23). But the exercise of Christian freedom, as Paul also stressed (Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 6:12), must always be subordinated to the needs of others. As Luther's famous dictum has it, 'A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.'

Paul rounds off his appeal to the strong by recommending that they keep to themselves what they believe about food, special days and drink. There is no need for them either to eat meat in front of those who might be spiritually damaged by them doing so or to refrain from eating with an arrogant insistence that there is nothing wrong with what they are doing. The strong believer should be content with recognizing that it is a real blessing to know that what he *approves* on these matters is not something for which he need condemn himself. Nevertheless, there are those who are not able to approve of the exercise of liberty on these matters. It would be sin for them to do what their consciences are telling them not to do. While the eating of meat may not be sin in God's eyes (14), doing something *that does not come from faith* (23) is.

15:1–13 Final call to unity. The conclusion to Paul's plea for tolerance in the Roman church falls into four parts: a final call to the *strong* (1–4); a prayer for unity among all the Christians in Rome (5–6); a last plea (with scriptural backing) to both weak and strong (7–12); and a concluding prayer (13).

Vs 1–4 are closely related to 14:13–23, as Paul, using the word for the first time, urges the *strong* (*dynatoi*) to *bear with the failings of the weak*. The use of the first person plural (*we*) shows that Paul numbers himself among the strong (see 14:14). The language of 'bearing with' (*bastazein*) suggests that the strong are to do more than simply tolerate the weak – they should help them in an attitude of love (see Gal. 6:2). This is confirmed by vs 2–3, which develop Paul's warning *not to please ourselves* at the end of v 1. The encouragement to please the *neighbour* reminds us of the love command (13:9; Lv. 19:18), and the allusion to Christ of sacrificial giving to benefit others. The quotation in v 3b comes from a Psalm (69) that NT writers frequently apply to Jesus' sufferings (see Mk. 15:23, 36 and parallels; Jn. 2:17; 15:25; 19:28–29; Acts 1:20). Paul's reminder in v 4 about the continuing relevance of what *was written in the past* has the immediate purpose of justifying the quotation in v 3 but is also true as a general principle.

What Paul is calling the Christians to do, he asks God to supply – a typical instance of the divine–human interplay involved in Christian living. Paul prays to the God who gives the

endurance and encouragement (5) he has just mentioned as the purpose of the teaching of Scripture. It is not clear whether the *spirit of unity* (5) (lit. 'thinking the same thing among one another') means agreement between the strong and the weak on the matters that divide them or, more likely, a mutual acceptance and respect in the midst of diverse viewpoints. The NIV takes *kata Christon Iēsoun* ('according to Christ Jesus') to mean the Christian imitation of Christ's example; but the phrase could also signify 'according to the will of Christ Jesus' (see 2 Cor. 11:17). The purpose of this unity, in any case, is clear: that all the Christians in Rome might be able to join their hearts and voices in fervent worship of God. Disunity among Christians not only damages our own walk with God and our reputation with outsiders: it also damages our ability to give God the glory he deserves.

V 7 is the climax of 14:1 – 15:13. Here we find Paul's basic plea to the Roman church (*accept one another*), the most important basis for that plea (*Christ accepted you*), and the highest purpose of that plea (*in order to bring praise to God*). Paul now adds a further reason for this mutual acceptance: Christ's ministry as one that incorporates both Jews (8) and Gentiles (9–12). Jesus' serving of (lit.) 'the circumcision' (the NIV legitimately translates *Jews*) is, Paul implies, a ministry that is rooted in the past but by no means ended (suggested by the perfect tense of the verb *gegenēsthai*). Thus Paul reminds the Gentiles that Christ continues to be concerned about and reach out to Jews (see 11:1–2, 28–29). Christ's ministry to Jews, however, has a larger purpose: it is for the sake of God's faithfulness to his promises (NIV, *on behalf of God's truth*; *alētheia* here means 'faithfulness' [see also 3:4 and 7]). These promises, *made to the patriarchs*, included the blessing of 'all the nations' (4:16–17). Therefore, when those promises are confirmed, the result (9) is that Gentiles are able to join with Jews in glorifying God for his mercy. This being the case, the Jewish Christians must recognize that the incorporation of Gentiles into the people of God is part of God's plan and try to get along with their fellow Gentile Christians.

The quotations in vs 9b–12 emphasize Paul's inclusion of the Gentiles in God's people. The words of Ps 18:49 (quoted from 2 Sa. 22:50), quoted in v 9b, are probably understood by Paul as the words of the Messiah: it is foretold that Gentiles will surround the Messiah as he brings praise to God. The presence of Gentiles in the Messianic community is also predicted by Scripture when it speaks of them rejoicing in God along with Israel (10; Dt. 32:43), singing praise to the Lord (11; Ps. 117:1), and putting their hope in the Messiah, the *Root of Jesse* (12; Is. 11:10).

V 13 seems almost isolated from the preceding context, but Paul's prayer-wish, as such third-person prayers may be called, that the believers in Rome might be characterized by *joy and peace* is most relevant after what he has just been saying (see 14:17, 19). Likewise, the emphasis on *hope* (see also v 4) makes sense as the conclusion to a discussion that has called into question the present state of the church and urged its members to take difficult steps to improve that state.

15:14 – 16:27 The letter closing

Romans concludes with those features typical of the closing sections of Paul's letters: a sketch of travel plans (15:22–29); a prayer request (15:30–32); a peace wish (15:33); commendations and greetings (16:1–15, 16b); the *holy kiss* (16:16a); final greetings from co-workers and concluding grace and benediction (16:20–27). What distinguishes the closing section of Romans from those of Paul's other letters is the much longer space devoted to many of these matters and the addition of a section in which Paul explains his reasons for writing (15:14–21). Both differences are the result of Paul's lack of prior involvement with the church at Rome. Though having a legitimate claim to exercise a certain authority over the church at Rome by virtue of his calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles (1:1, 5–7; 15:16), Paul wants to guard against being perceived as a heavy-handed interloper.

15:14–33 Paul's ministry and plans

This section may be divided into four parts: an explanation of the letter's purposes and circumstances (14–21); a sketch of Paul's immediate travel plans (22–29); a request for prayer concerning the collection for the Jerusalem Christians (30–32); and a wish for peace (33). There are many similarities to 1:8–15, demonstrating that Paul is consciously rounding off his letter by ending where he began.

In keeping with his desire to establish good relations with the Christians in Rome, Paul makes clear that he has written not because he finds some grievous problem in the church there. He commends the Roman believers for their *goodness* and their *knowledge* (14) (*e.g.* understanding of the Christian faith), noting that they themselves have the ability to *instruct* [or 'admonish'] *one another* (14) (*cf.* 1:8b). Paul almost apologizes for writing as he has (*quite boldly*) and stresses that what he has said has been no more than a reminder. This commendation is not simple flattery; Paul would not

have said what he has in these verses unless he believed that the Roman church was basically solid and stable. Nevertheless, Paul knows that even the most mature church needs reminders of the truth of the gospel. And the pleas of 12:1 – 15:13 (and especially 11:12–27; 14:1 – 15:13) demonstrate that the church had its problems. While wanting to avoid any hint of condescension or authoritarianism, Paul is nevertheless insistent that his authority *as a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles* (16) extends to the Romans (see 1:5–6). Paul describes his ministry with the help of cultic language. *Minister* translates a word that often refers to a priest (*leitourgos*; *cf.* Ne. 10:39; Is. 61:6; Heb. 8:2), and its priestly significance here is confirmed by what follows, in which Paul describes his proclamation of the gospel as a *priestly duty* and his Gentile converts as an *offering*. As do other NT authors (see especially 1 Pet. 2:4–10), Paul hints that the OT cult, with its priests, sacrifices and tabernacle or temple, finds its fulfilment in the ministry of the gospel (and note 12:1).

It is right, then, for Paul to *glory* (or 'boast') in this ministry, for it originates in God's grace (15b) and is a matter of Christ working through the apostle (18). This working of Christ in Paul has the purpose of bringing Gentiles *to obey God* (*cf.* 1:5) and what Paul says and does is accompanied by *power*: the power of miraculous signs ('signs and wonders'; *cf.* Acts 2:22, 43; 5:12; 15:12; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4) and the power of the Spirit himself (see 1:16a). The end of v 19 states the result of Paul's powerful, priestly and apostolic ministry: *from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ*. Illyricum was a Roman province that occupied the area covered roughly by what was Yugoslavia and Albania. Jerusalem was the point of departure for the Christian mission, while Illyricum was the farthest extent of Paul's preaching to date. A line drawn from one to another forms an arc, and hence Paul's language *all the way around* (lit. 'in a circle'). Paul is saying that he has planted strong, centrally located churches throughout this north-eastern part of the Mediterranean basin. He has therefore 'fulfilled' (*plēroō;* NIV 'fully proclaimed') his gospel commission in those areas, for his task was to *preach the gospel where Christ was not known* (20). The OT quotation that Paul uses to confirm this mission (21) is from the servant songs of Isaiah (52:15), but it is unlikely that Paul saw himself in the role of the servant.

Paul turns from the past to the present and the future. His obligation to fulfil his mission in the east has hindered him from coming to Rome before now (22). But that mission being completed, Paul can now fulfil a long-standing desire to visit Rome (*cf.* 1:10–15). Yet Rome will be only a stopover on a journey to Spain (24, 28). Paul has evidently decided that the well-populated Iberian peninsula offers the perfect location to continue his pioneer evangelism. One of the reasons that Paul is stopping in Rome is to secure help from the Roman Christians for this visit. The NIV *assist me on my journey* (24b) translates a verb that becomes in the NT almost a 'technical term for the Christian mission' (Cranfield; *cf.* Acts 15:3; 20:38; 21:5; 1 Cor. 16:6, 11; 2 Cor. 1:16; Tit. 3:13; 3 Jn. 6). It denotes the provision of material and logistical support for Christian missionaries. One of Paul's major reasons for writing this letter to Rome was to pave the way for this support.

Before Paul can carry out this plan, however, he has a more immediate task: to minister (*diakonōn*; NIV *in the service of*) to Christians in Jerusalem (25). This ministry, as vs 26–27 reveal, is the delivery to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem of a gift of money collected from many of the mainly Gentile Christian churches planted by Paul. General economic conditions, made worse no doubt by the isolation from fellow-Jews caused by their Christian profession, had impoverished many of the Jewish believers in and around Jerusalem. Paul felt it to be only right for Gentile Christians to repay with *material blessings* the *spiritual blessings* (27) that they have inherited from the Jews (see 11:17–18). Collecting the money for this relief effort was a major concern on Paul's third missionary journey (see 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9). Some scholars think that Paul was particularly interested in this collection because he viewed it as the fulfilment of the OT prediction that the wealth of Gentiles would flow into Jerusalem just before the day of the Lord. But there is little evidence that this was the case. However, Paul undoubtedly saw the relief effort as a practical means of cementing closer relationships between Gentile and Jewish Christians.

It is perhaps in the light of this purpose that Paul requests the Roman Christians' prayers for the success of the collection (30–32). Paul suggests the need for earnest and fervent prayer on this matter by asking them to 'strive together with me in your prayers' (RSV). (Viewing the 'striving together' [*synagōnizomai*, used only here in the Greek Bible] as taking place 'in prayer' is preferable to the separation between the two suggested by the NIV.) Paul asks them to pray specifically for two things: that he might *be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea* and that the collection might be *acceptable to the saints there*. Paul knows of the Jewish hostility towards his bold and public stand in favour of admitting Gentiles into the people of God

without imposing on them circumcision or the law of Moses. Many of the more radical Jews in his day (and they were growing in number at this time) would have considered such a stand as nothing less than treason. That Paul's fears on this score were warranted is proved by the fact that this trip to Jerusalem resulted in his being imprisoned by the Roman authorities at the instigation of the Jews (Acts 21:27–36).

We have no certain knowledge about the fulfilment of Paul's second prayer request. Certainly, Paul also had valid reason to fear that some of the Jewish Christians might still be so suspicious of him and so concerned to maintain relations with their fellow-Jews that they would spurn his efforts by refusing to accept the money from him and the Gentile Christians. Paul asks the Roman Christians to join with him in praying that this should not happen, so that he might be able to continue on to Rome *with joy* and a sense of positive accomplishment (32).

Paul's prayer that *the God of peace* be with the Roman Christians (33) parallels similar requests in many of his other letters (2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thes. 5:23; 2 Thes. 3:16; *cf.* also 16:20).

Notes 19 Whether Paul means that he had preached 'up to and into' Illyricum or 'up to' Illyricum is not clear. While Acts never mentions a preaching trip of Paul into this province, some scholars think that he may have preached there just before going to Corinth at the end of the third missionary journey (where Paul is writing Romans; *cf.* Acts 20:2). **24** We do not know whether Paul ever achieved his goal of preaching in Spain or not. *1 Clement*, a late first-century document written in Rome, claims that Paul 'reached the limit [*terma*] of the west' (5:1–7). Whether this refers to Spain or to Rome is unclear.

16:1–16 Commendation and greetings

The commendation of a fellow-Christian and greetings are typical components of Paul's letter closings. What is untypical about this text is the unparalleled number of people whom Paul greets: twenty-seven individuals are mentioned. This, coming in a letter to a church that Paul has not visited, has led many scholars to think that this chapter was not part of Paul's original letter to the Romans, but a separate commendatory letter, or an addition to the letter when it was sent to Ephesus. But this is unlikely (see the Introduction). Precisely because Paul has not founded the church at Rome, he is able to name perhaps all the Christians in the church that he knows, like Priscilla and Aquila (3) whom he had met in the course of his travels in the eastern Mediterranean.

In calling Phoebe a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea (a town five miles east of Corinth), Paul may mean simply that she is a Christian, called, like all Christians, to be a *servant* (1) of Christ and of the church (see 1 Pet. 4:10). But with the official-sounding addition *of the church of Cenchrea* it is more likely that Paul is identifying Phoebe as holding the office of 'deacon' (see Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12; many understand 1 Tim. 3:11 as a reference to female deacons). We have no solid first-century evidence about the nature of this ministry, but, as it did at a later date, it probably focused especially on the care for poorer and weaker members of the church. Perhaps Phoebe's secular status had something to do with her appointment to this ministry, for Paul calls her in v 2b a *prostatis*, a word that often denoted wealthy people who became 'patrons' and sponsors of people and movements (NIV paraphrases this with *she has been a great help*). Paul mentions Phoebe because she is going to Rome, probably carrying Paul's letter to the church with her (2a).

Paul's greetings do not follow an obvious sequence, but there is perhaps a movement from those whom Paul knows best and with whom he has personally worked (3–7) to those he knows less well (8–15). *Priscilla and Aquila* certainly belong in the former category. Paul first met them in Corinth, whence they had come because they had been forced by the edict of the Emperor Claudius to leave their home in Rome (Acts 18:2). They became *fellow-workers* with Paul, spending considerable time in the church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18, 26). It was perhaps here, maybe during the riot in that city (Acts 19:23–41), that they *risked their lives* for Paul (4). Now living in Rome again, they are continuing to minister, with one of the Roman 'house churches' meeting in their home (5a) *Epenetus* (5b), the first Christian in the Roman province of Asia (western Asia Minor), is not mentioned elsewhere in the NT; nor do we know anything of *Mary* (6).

Junias in v 7 should probably be rendered 'Junia' (ASV; NRSV). The Greek name *Iounian* could be a shortened form of the masculine name Junianis, but the form is poorly attested. It is more likely, then, to be a form of the feminine name Junia, which is quite common. Presumably, she was the wife of *Andronicus* (*cf.* v 3). The couple, who were Jewish [*syngeneis* probably means 'fellow-Jews' (as in 9:3) rather than 'relatives'], came to Christ before Paul and had been in prison with him – probably because of their shared ministry of being *apostles*. Since we know nothing of them elsewhere, Andronicus and Junia were probably not 'apostles' in exactly the same way that, for instance, Paul and Peter were – divinely chosen representatives of the risen Christ with a unique authority (see, *e.g.* Acts 1:12–26; Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor.

15:7–9). *Apostle* here, rather, will have the sense 'missionary' or 'accedited messenger' (see 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil 2:25).

Ampliatus (8) is not mentioned elsewhere in the NT but may be the person whose tomb has been found in the catacomb of Domitilla, a woman of wealthy and imperial family who was, apparently, a Christian. *Urbanus*, *Stachys* (9) and *Apelles* (10a) are otherwise unknown. *Aristobulus*, however, who had Christians among his household (10b) may be the brother of Agrippa I, king of Judea from AD 41–33 (see Acts 12). Paul's fellow-Jew (*syngenēs*; *cf.* on v 7) *Herodion* is probably a slave or freedman of the family of Herod, hereditary rulers of Judea. The *Narcissus* whose household Paul greets in v 11b may be the same Narcissus who gained fame (and notoriety) as a servant of the Emperor Claudius. *Tryphena*, *Tryphosa* and *Persis*, three women who laboured in the cause of Christ, are otherwise unknown. Paul greets nine women in this passage, six of whom are described as *fellow-workers* or as those who have *worked very hard in the Lord* (12). Nothing in the words Paul uses enables us to pinpoint the nature of their ministries, but we should give due recognition to the important role played by women in the varied ministries of the early church – and in ministries today also. Since the Gospel of Mark was probably written in Rome, and perhaps at about the same time as Romans, it is tempting to identify the *Rufus* of v 13 with the Rufus whose father carried Jesus' cross to Golgotha (Mk. 15:21). None of the names that occur in vs 14–15 is known from elsewhere in the NT or early Christian history.

The *kiss* (16a) as a form of greeting, salutation or parting was widespread in the ancient world, and was adapted by the early church (1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12, 1 Thes. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). It was to be a *holy* kiss, however, entirely distinct from any erotic or pagan connotations.

16:17–20 Warning about false teachers

So abrupt is Paul's sudden warning about false teachers that some scholars think the passage does not belong here at all. But while warnings of this sort are not standard in Paul's closing sections, they are certainly not unknown either (see 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 6:12–13; Phil. 3:2–21).

It is unclear whom Paul is warning the Roman Christians about. He describes them as being divisive and as putting *obstacles* (*skandala*; *cf.* 9:33; 11:9; 14:13) in the way of believers (17). They are 'smooth-talkers' and use flattery to try to deceive those who might be *naive* and unsuspecting (18). They have a preoccupation with *their own appetites* (lit. 'their own bellies'), but even this more specific indication helps us little in pinning down who these people were. Some think it refers to a Jewish insistence on the observance of food laws (Paul ironically scolding them for putting too much stress on what goes in their bellies), others to a sensual concern with one's own pleasures. We must be content to leave these false teachers unidentified.

Whoever they are, Paul urges the Roman Christians to *watch out* for them and to *keep away from them* (17). The latter probably does not mean that the church is to excommunicate them (*cf.* 1 Cor. 5:1–5) but that they are to avoid their society generally. Paul reaffirms his confidence in the Roman Christians (19a; *cf.* 15:14–15; 1:8) but does not want them to be naive about the dangers to their faith (18b). In imitation of the advice of Jesus to the Twelve, Paul encourages the believers to *be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil* (19b; *cf.* Mt. 10:16). In doing so, they can be sure that God himself will take action against those who are seeking to deceive them: *the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet* (20; this verse should be closely connected with vs 17–19, see the RSV). It may be that Paul is hinting at a quick 'crushing' of these false teachers, perceived as minions of Satan. But it is more likely that he is thinking of the great climax of the end times when, in fulfilment of Gn. 3:15, God will win the climactic victory over Satan. The *peace* (20) that God will ultimately create is the result both of deliverance of his people and of judgment of his enemies.

16:21–27 Final greetings and doxology

Paul's letter concludes with greetings from three of Paul's co-workers (21–23) and a doxology (25–27).

Timothy (21) had been a regular companion of Paul's since the beginning of the second missionary journey (Acts 16:3) and is now with Paul in Corinth. *Lucius* has occasionally been identified with Luke, 'the beloved physician', or with Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13:1), but neither is likely. *Jason*, however, could well be the Jason who hosted Paul on his initial visit to Thessalonica (Acts 17:5–9 – perhaps he has had to flee to Corinth because of persecution), while *Sosipater* is probably the same as the Sopater of Acts 20:4. *Relatives* again translates *syngeneis*, which refers to Paul's fellow-Jews, not to his blood relatives. *Tertius* (22), mentioned nowhere else in the NT, is Paul's amanuensis, or the scribe who *wrote down* the words Paul dictated to him. *Gaius* (23), in whose house one of the Corinthian Christian fellowships met, is almost certainly the Gaius mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:4, and perhaps is to be identified also with Titius Justus (Acts 18:7). Paul identifies *Erastus* as *the city's director of public works* (Gk. *oikonomos*

tēs poleōs), raising the question whether he might be the same Erastus mentioned as an 'aedile', or 'commissioner for public works' on an inscription from first-century Corinth. But the word Paul uses is not a natural equivalent to the Latin 'aedile,' so the identification is not certain. Neither is it clear that the Erastus here is the same as the one mentioned in Acts 19:22 and 2 Tim. 4:20, since the name was a common one.

Paul's doxology, in addition to concluding the letter on a high note of ascription of glory to God, also effectively sums up some of the key themes of the letter. Paul's defence and explanation of the gospel that he preaches is, we have suggested, the central theme of the letter. Paul now reminds us that it is by means of that *gospel* that God 'establishes' us in our faith (25). This gospel, which proclaims Jesus Christ (*the proclamation of Jesus Christ* is probably an explanation of the content of the gospel), is a *mystery* that has only recently been revealed (25b–26a). We are reminded of Paul's emphasis on the way in which God's saving righteousness has been revealed in the cross and in the preaching of the gospel (1:17; 3:21). *Made known through the prophetic writings* (26) is probably parallel to 'revealed' rather than subordinate to it (as the NIV takes it): it adds a second description to the gospel in v 25, which also picks up a key theme from the letter (1:2; 3:21; ch. 4; 10:14–21). The revelation and making known of the gospel has been at the command of God himself and has the purpose that *all nations* (the NIV rightly takes *ethnē* here to mean 'nations' rather than 'Gentiles' (*cf.* Mt. 28:19) *might believe and obey him* (lit. 'obedience of faith'; *cf.* 1:5 and the comments on the phrase there). As we continue to pursue the accomplishment of this purpose by our preaching of the gospel, we are reminded that it is ultimately for the glory of *the only wise God.*

Note 24 English versions do not print a v 24, because its content is almost certainly a later addition to the text of Romans. **25–27** Most modern commentators regard the doxology in vs 25–27 as a later addition to the letter. But there is nothing un-Pauline in its vocabulary and ideas, it has solid external support in the early manuscripts and its varied placement (at the end of ch. 14 or ch. 15) could have arisen from the movement of the original Pauline conclusion when the letter was shortened.

Douglas J. Moo

1 CORINTHIANS

Introduction

Background

By the time Paul reached Corinth, in the autumn of AD 50, it had been a Roman colony for over a century. It had formerly been a Greek city with a proud history but had been destroyed by Mummius in 146 BC after conflict with Rome, and lay in ruins for 100 years. Its town plan was laid on the traditional Roman grid pattern in 44 BC after the decision of Julius Caesar to make it a Roman colony. It became the seat of the Roman governor of the province of Achaea and soon had a population larger than that of Athens. Although founded as a 'soldier settlement', supplemented with some freedmen coming from Italy, it quickly established itself as an important centre of culture and trade. Some of the wealthy families of Greece had been attracted to Corinth and settled in the desirable residential suburb on the slopes of the enormous 1,800 foot (545 m.) outcrop known as Acrocorinth. They were among its leading civic benefactors. Inscriptions give evidence of many among the class of the wise, the well-born, and the powerful. By the beginning of the Christian era the Isthmian games had resumed under its auspices. The ports which served the colony were Lechaion and Cenchrae. The archaeological remains of the latter indicate its prosperity not only as a port but also as a satellite city, and at the time when Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians there was a church in existence (Rom. 16:1).

It was a city of rich culture and its citizens, as in Athens, worshipped many gods. Among them, Aphrodite is the best known. When Corinth was a Greek city this goddess was associated with love and especially temple prostitution. She had been thoroughly rehabilitated in the Roman period. She was claimed to be the mother of the imperial family; hence her presence in Roman Corinth as a venerated figure associated, as she was elsewhere, with the imperial cult. It is a gross exaggeration to say that the Corinthians' leanings towards immorality were a result of her patronage, and wrong to imply that the sexual sins of the Corinthian Christians could be explained because of her. Immorality, whether fornication, adultery or incest, was not confined to Corinth.

Paul founded the church circa AD 50, after his visit to Athens (Acts 18:1–7). It had its origins in the sermons Paul preached in the Jewish synagogue whose leader was among the early converts (Acts 18:8). Inevitably the church and synagogue clashed. The Jews attempted to institute criminal proceedings against the Christians. This failed when Gallio ruled that Christianity sat under the umbrella of Judaism (Acts 18:12–17), giving Christians the same favoured status as Jews. This was a decision with far-reaching consequences, especially for Christians who were Roman citizens with obligations to the imperial cult.

Paul underwent a period of discouragement in ministry which required the direct intervention of the Lord (Acts 18:9–11). After 18 months' work – his second longest stay in any city – he left Corinth. The work was continued by Apollos (1 Cor. 3:6), an able Jewish orator from Alexandria and more recently from Ephesus where his ministry had been greatly enhanced by Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:24–28). They had been with Paul in Corinth from the founding of the church and followed the same profession as tent-makers (Acts 18:2–3). It would seem that Peter was also in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12).

Before writing 1 Corinthians Paul appears to have written a letter about associating with immoral people which was misunderstood by the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9). He himself had by this time moved to Ephesus when some from the household of Chloe brought reports of dissention in the church (1 Cor. 1:11). Others also came, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17), bearing a letter which the Corinthians had written seeking Paul's ruling on a number of complex pastoral matters affecting the church – marriage, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, the collection for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, and the request for the return of Apollos (1 Cor. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

Verbal reports also disclosed problems of divisiveness, incest, civil litigation, immorality, women prophesying unveiled in church, abuse of the Lord's supper, and the denial of the resurrection of the body (Chs. 1 – 4; 5; 6; 12; 15).

For a more detailed discussion of the Corinthian correspondence and a reconstruction of Paul's several visits see the Introduction to 2 Corinthians. See also Reading the letters.

1 Corinthians is the longest pastoral document in the NT and gives important clues as to how difficult pastoral issues should be handled. It also provides crucial answers to critical problems which one way or another still haunt the church today.

Further reading

D. Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, BST (IVP, 1985).

D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12 – 14* (Baker Book House, 1987).

D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* (IVP/UK/Baker Book House, 1993).

L. Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1985).

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Commentary

1:1–3 Authors and recipients

Letter-writers in Paul's day began by mentioning first the author and then those to whom they were writing. Paul refers to himself and his qualifications for writing – he is not a self-styled teacher nor a self-appointed Christian worker, but one who has been commissioned for God's purposes to be Christ's missionary and mouthpiece. The letter is 'co-authored' by Sosthenes (1) who is described as 'our brother'. The inclusion of Sosthenes demonstrates Paul's concept of joint partnership in apostolic ministry. Paul was no 'prima donna' and never calls those who share in his work 'followers' or 'disciples' but rather colleagues – 'fellow workers'. Nor is the church 'his' although he was the founding apostle – it is God's gathering, it belongs to him (2).

Its status is determined by the work of Christ who made its members *holy*. As a result they are a particular class of people, 'saints'. The term 'class' is used to describe them. It was also the term used to describe the secular classes in class-conscious Corinth (the verb 'to be' is not in the Greek text). Their status as 'holy ones' or 'saints' is given not because of their holy deeds – in fact, some have engaged in unholy ones (5:1; 6:1, 16; 8:10; 10:8, *etc*). It is acquired solely because of what Christ has done, (*cf.* 1:30). Paul does not simply stress their status – secular Corinthians were arrogant and considered themselves superior because they lived in the capital of Achaea – but rather their common spiritual origin with every person in the world who calls upon the name of 'our Lord Jesus' for salvation (Rom. 10:13). Christ is both 'their Lord and ours'. 3 To the normal secular greeting of *peace* or 'health', Paul adds *grace* which is something given as a gift and not earned (Rom. 6:23). These blessings are real indeed, for they proceed from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (*cf.* 8:6).

1:4 – 4:21 Christian approach to ministry in the church

1:4–9 Thanksgiving for Christ's total sufficiency

In the thanksgiving sections, Paul often signals the issues he needs to deal with later in his letters. He can always give thanks because God's sufficiency is able to resolve all our needs in the person of his Son.

Here he alludes to the problem of inferiority felt in this Roman colony by the non-elite. Many Christians belonged to that group. He mentions specifically the highly-polished art of speaking, *i.e.* rhetoric (*logos*), and the possession of knowledge. These were the tools used by the educated public speaker and teacher, but were they crucial for bearing Christian witness and for being teachers and preachers in Christian gatherings? The Corinthians' traditional love of oratory ('even amongst women and children', Dio Chrysostom Or. 37) also explains one reason why some in the church had asked for the return of Apollos in preference to Paul. The former clearly used his training in rhetoric for preaching (1 Cor. 16:12; Acts 18:24–28). This is one of the major issues in the letter. In each of these verses Paul mentions Jesus Christ. The people of God are significant because everything they are and will be is a result of what God has done for them in the person of his Son (*cf.* 1:30), and not as a result of secular status, privileges or achievements.

4 His reason for thanking God constantly is to acknowledge the grace which God has given the Corinthians in Christ Jesus. 5 This has resulted

in the enrichment of every aspect of their lives. Paul singles out an area crucial to Christian evangelism, preaching and teaching: *in all your speaking and in all your knowledge.* These were gifts bequeathed to them by Christ. 7 As a result they are not deficient in any of the gifts necessary for the ministry they perform, as they wait, not for the ending of their lives by an inevitable event, but for the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. This expectation of the second coming represents a radical change in their world view which previously saw the history of mankind continuing for ever in an indestructible world. 8 In a society where the non-elite were judged to be socially and politically insignificant, Paul gives emphasis to the truth that Christ will keep them strong so that they will be blameless on the day of our Lord – an OT expression referring to the day of judgment. 9 Of themselves this is impossible, but the God who has called them into the *fellowship* of *his Son* is absolutely trustworthy, for he cannot fail to keep his promises. Therefore none of God's children should be paralysed in Christian service because of an inward feeling of inferiority or inadequacy, but should look to Christ who is all-sufficient for their needs.

1:10–17a The divisiveness of idolizing Christian teachers

The pupils or 'disciples' of a secular teacher had to give exclusive loyalty to him. Traditionally they engaged in quarrels with rival pupils over the merits of their mentors who were also by tradition jealous of each other. Corinthians who were converted and baptized through the ministry of Paul, Apollos and Peter also perceived themselves in this secular way as their exclusive followers and likewise engaged in quarrels over the merits of Christian teachers. Paul declares such loyalty as idolatrous. He wants them to follow the Messiah and not his servants. Idolizing teachers or 'charismatic' speakers who seek the loyalty of 'their' members has always been divisive and disastrous for the Christian community.

Paul's appeal for unity over against their perception of the role of Christian teachers – he never uses the secular term 'leaders' which always implied a superiority of status – is based on *the name of our Lord Jesus* whom they invoked for salvation (1:2). It is not an appeal which seeks unity on the lowest common denominator, but an urgent call that *all of you agree with one another* (10). The prohibitions against divisions and the demand for Christians to be *perfectly united in mind and thought* urge them to understand God's mind on this issue. Paul carefully argues this in 1:10 – 4:21.

12 Paul makes the charge absolutely clear, *What I mean is this*, that lit. 'each one is saying' – 'I am of . . .', *i.e.* 'I belong to . . .'. After some declared their loyalty to prominent teachers in the church, others appear to have set themselves up as Christ's party. 13 Christ can never be the exclusive property of one group in a church (*cf.* 1:2), hence *Is Christ divided?* The church, since it is Christ's body, cannot be divided. Such expressions of loyalty to Paul and others are seen by him as usurping the place of Christ. Just as religious objects found in Corinth were inscribed, 'I belong to Aphrodite', 'I belong to Demeter', so these misguided expressions of exclusive loyalty are idolatrous – they imply that Paul was the mediator of their salvation. Their entry into God's kingdom, expressed in baptism, was not in the name of the evangelist who preached to them. Their expressions of loyalty to teachers replaced the commitment and loyalty Christians must give to Christ alone. It could not be said that Christian baptism established membership in the 'Paul party' or indicated any special relationship with him for he had baptized very few of them (14–16). 17a He explains that his apostolic calling was not to baptize but to preach and then proceeds to give reasons in the following section why he renounced the use of the methods of professional public speakers.

1:17b – 2:5 Boasting in the Lord and not in the educated elite

A first-century orator or public speaker was expected to produce carefully crafted speeches which drew attention to his skilful use of rhetorical conventions. Oratory was called 'magic' because it was seen to bewitch the hearers. The content of the speech was immaterial, only the performance mattered. They spoke to gain the adulation of their audiences. 17b Paul used none of the orator's tricks of the trade, for he did not preach *with words of human wisdom*, lit. 'by means of the wisdom of rhetoric'. To have adopted the secular convention would have promoted the speaker on whose performance the audience sat in judgment. This would have diverted their attention away from the cross to Paul himself, thus robbing the hearers of the opportunity to hear about the amazing event by which God rescues people. This authoritative message is called *the gospel* and has as its content *the cross of Christ.* Christ sent him to preach the gospel and not to secure a personal following.

18 In a possible play on words, Paul calls the gospel *the message*, lit. 'the oratory' (*logos*) of the cross. He argues that the response to its preaching is twofold. It is regarded as absurd by some (*cf.* Acts 26:24), but for others it was the powerful means by which they became the

people of God. In vs 18–31 scriptural quotations begin and end his argument (Is. 29:14 and Je. 9:24). The first (19), promises that God will overthrow and bring to nothing the admired wisdom and intelligence of the wise; the second (31), renounces the boasting of the educated, wealthy and powerful elite and demands that those who boast must boast only in the Lord.

Paul states that the admired rhetoric and theological reflection of his day failed because it could not bring people to know God, (20–25). **20** Neither the wise man, *i.e.* the philosopher, nor the [Jewish] scholar or 'scribe', nor lit. 'the debator of this age', *i.e.* the orator, all of whom in their day epitomized education, taught the wisdom of God. In contrast their wisdom was foolishness. **21** In spite of the highly sophisticated discussion of natural theology by the Stoics and Epicureans on 'the nature of the gods', that intellectual world did not know God. God's purpose was achieved through what was regarded as foolish, *i.e.* what Paul preached, so as to save those who put their trust in that message. **23** A crucified Messiah defied all Jewish expectations, and was dismissed as absurd by the Gentile world. **24** Both God's wisdom and his power are located in Christ. **25** While this may be designated as a foolish and weak way by men, God is wiser and stronger than they are.

26–31 Paul calls on the Corinthians to reflect upon the secular status or class of those whom God has chosen to demonstrate the nature of God's wisdom. The elite of the first century were described as wise, influential in the political sphere and well-born. Of these, not many were called by God (26). God chose the foolish in contrast to the wise, the weak in preference to the powerful, and those whom secular society regarded as 'nobodies' as opposed to those who were courted as important (27–28). God's purpose in doing this is to prevent any boasting in secular status (29–30). It is all a matter of divine favour (*because of him*) for all that is needed is to be found in Christ Jesus, as Paul has stressed in his thanksgiving (1:4–7). For Paul and for all Christians, wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption are located in Christ. Thus the injunction of Je. 9:24 which spoke against the elite of his day is appropriately cited since neither the wise, the powerful nor the well-born can boast of anything except in the Lord (31).

1–5 Paul's early ministry. Now comes an illustration of the insufficiency of secular rhetoric and wisdom. 'And I', in the original text links this passage with the last statement about boasting only in the Lord (1:31). Vs 1–2 and 3–4 both begin with 'and I' and describe Paul's activities, in this case, his original entry to Corinth. Orators followed certain well-established conventions when they entered a city. They were expected to give flowery speeches in praise of the city and their own personal achievements. They did this is order to establish their reputation and reap financial rewards as political orators and teachers of the rich. Paul makes it clear in vs 1–2 that he rejected the entry conventions which displayed classical *eloquence* or *wisdom* as he proclaimed *the testimony about God* which was to *Jesus Christ and him crucified.* He had resolved what the content of his message would be before arriving. **3–4** He describes in negative terms what the orators called 'presence'. He cut no charismatic figure for he was there in *weakness and fear and with much trembling* and his *message* (better 'oratory') and *preaching* were not undertaken by means of the persuasive techniques of orators by acting out a part, playing on the audience's feelings and with classical demonstrations recommended in the handbooks on rhetoric. Instead of using one of the demonstration techniques recommended by Aristotle, his message was accompanied by the Spirit's power. **5** This was because he wanted the Corinthians' faith to rest in the power of God and not the eloquence of the speaker. Paul was no silver-tongued orator who persuaded the Corinthians to become Christians. He differed from the 'media' orators in that he did not adapt the content of his message to fit the methods of persuasion so prevalent in Corinth, for God had rejected the debaters of this age (1:20).

2:6–16 Wisdom revealed by the Spirit

Divine wisdom is contrasted with the admired wisdom of the ruling class. God has been pleased to reveal his wisdom through his Spirit to the apostles, *to us,* (10). The *we* referred to in vs 6, 7, 13, and 16 does not refer to the Corinthian Christians whose behaviour, as recorded in this letter, shows that they are not those who have the mind of Christ (16, *cf.* 5:1, 6:1, 11:1). Nor does it refer to Christians in general but rather to the unique ministry of the apostles.

6–8 Paul states that he speaks not only the gospel but also the wisdom of God. It is being spoken *among the mature.* The much-admired virtuoso orators of Paul's day used this term of themselves and claimed to make their pupils the same. They were to be the future rulers of cities and states. Paul may well have this in mind, when he says what his wisdom is not – it is not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of a world that is passing away. He then defines what it is (7). It is *God's secret wisdom* which was formerly hidden but has now been revealed, and which was destined for our glory before time began. In spite of their sophisticated education, the rulers of this age never understood it,

otherwise they would not have been party to the crucifixion of Jesus who is here called the *Lord of glory* (*cf.* Acts 13:27).

9 Is. 64:4 is cited because it draws attention to the totally unexpected grace God bestows on those who love him. **10a** The Isaiah verse is not a reference to what we will discover in the future by way of God's individual purposes for his people, nor to unanticipated gifts, because Paul uses the past tense when he states *but God has revealed it to us*, the apostles, through the activity of the Holy Spirit (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:12). **10b–11** Just as each person alone knows what he actually thinks, so too only God's Spirit knows *the thoughts of God.* **12** The apostles do not think in secular ways, for they have received this selfsame Spirit in order that they may understand what God has so generously bestowed upon us in his Son. **13** The apostles do not use secular wisdom to convey their truth, but rather *words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.* They did not resort to the rhetorical techniques used by the orators.

14–15 The person without the Spirit, lit. the 'natural person', rejects what the Spirit teaches because it requires spiritual examination. On the other hand the spiritual man interrogates all things, *i.e.* what the Spirit teaches. If the reference here is to the apostles, then it is clear why Paul says that the spiritual person is examined by no-one. If it refers to the spiritually-minded Christian then it could mean that he neither stands nor falls by the judgment of men but only as he is examined by the word of God. **16** Paul cites Isaiah 40:13 which asks whether anyone understands the Lord's mind that he can give instruction to him. He affirms that the apostles have the mind of Christ who is the Lord. Does this mean that Paul is dismissive of those Corinthians who would examine and pass judgment on him (*cf.* 4:3)?

The passage has dealt with the fact that God is a 'speaking' God (*cf.* Dt. 4:33–36) who has chosen to disclose his heart and mind through his servants, the apostles. Attributing the words of the apostles 'we do speak' and 'we speak' (both in the present tense, vs 6, 13) to the wisdom of God which has been revealed, points to the fact that the apostles spoke the word of God – which is why the church historically has held the view that what the apostles said is what God says.

3:1–23 The Corinthians' ongoing problem

Just as Paul illustrated his discussion of 1:10–31 about boasting in the Lord by referring to his own coming to Corinth, so too in 3:1–23. He discusses the original and continuing problems of the Corinthian Christians in relation to divisiveness (1–9), the role of the founding apostle and the present care needed to build the church because of future judgment (10–17), concluding with a correction of their misunderstanding of the relationship of teachers to the people of God, (18–23).

1 As in 2:1 and 2:3 Paul begins with another 'and I' in order to discuss further his experiences in Corinth. When he first arrived he could not address them as *spiritual* but only as *worldly* and 'infant believers'. **2** Their condition was determined by their diet then, as it still is. **3** That they are still worldly is clear from the presence of jealousy and quarrelling over teachers. *Are you not acting like mere men?* is lit. 'walking according to man' *i.e.* guided by secular norms. **4** When they cling exclusively to leaders, be they Paul or Apollos, he again asks, *Are you not mere men?* Worldliness in this instance proceeds from secular thinking about Christian ministry. **5** The citizens of Corinth reflected their secular world in evaluating people in terms of their privileges, status and wealth – Paul asks if this is not also what the Christians were doing. He uses low status terms to describe Apollos and himself as *servants, through whom you came to believe.* They could not claim personal credit because the Lord had *assigned to each his task.* **6** In an elitist Roman colony that despised manual labourers, Paul designates both Apollos and himself as gardeners with different duties. **8** The planter and the waterer have a single purpose, they are not in competition, and each will be rewarded on the basis of his own work. **9** They are God's fellow workers, just as the Corinthians are God's field, and God's building. In the same way that Corinth's magnificent buildings had the benefactor's name inscribed on them, the Corinthians are God's edifice. There is no such thing as 'my converts' and neither do Christians 'belong' to a particular Christian teacher or evangelist.

10 By God's grace Paul is the founding apostle or architect of the church. Subsequent teachers continue to erect the edifice and need to do so with great care. **11–12** Jesus Christ is the only foundation. Building materials can either be of a temporary or lasting kind (though gold, silver and precious stones are not normally used except to adorn the building). **13** Dishonest builders existed in the first century, but there will be *the Day* of judgment when the facts come to light and the fire tests the materials which have been used. **15** The dishonest builders will see all their work go up in flames, and they themselves will emerge singed. Their salvation is not in question, but their God-given role in the church has been thoroughly discredited by their own activities. **16** In addition to the analogy Paul has used in v 9, he describes the people of God as his sanctuary in which the Spirit dwells.

18 The Corinthians have been self-deceived about wisdom. Paul invites those who are the acknowledged 'wise' or 'educated elite' among the Christians to recognize their ignorance so that they may become wise. **19–20** The reason for this is given and backed up by citations from Jb. 5:13 and Ps. 94:11. **21** *So then* draws out the implications for the Corinthians of his discussion up to this point: one should not boast about men. All things belong to them, if Christ has enriched them in every way (*cf.* 1:4–7). **22** The Christian community does not belong to individual teachers, but the teachers belong to the community. They were each saying, 'I belong to . . .', but Paul says, 'Paul and Apollos and Peter all belong to you.' Everything in life belongs to them, including the present and future. **23** They belong not to the teachers, but to the Messiah who belongs to God. Paul never says this is 'my church' even though he is the founding apostle.

4:1–5 Ministry and criticism

1 Paul uses two highly appropriate terms to describe the role of teachers in the church – *servants*, lit. 'employees', and *those entrusted*, lit. 'stewards'. The first carries with it the sense of personal answerability to Christ in whose service the person is engaged. The second refers to the lynch-pin activity of the crucial servant in a household whose task it was to transfer the resources of the owner to the members of his household according to their needs. What Paul has been entrusted with are *the secret things of God*, *i.e.* the wisdom of God referred to in the previous chapter. He is a transferer of truth. **2** Certain qualities were sought in secular stewards. In the Christian context it is trustworthiness that is demanded – the record of untrustworthiness in the secular world is well documented. **3a** Paul cares little for the judgment of others, be they from the Christian community or from any human court (*cf.* 2:1–5 and Acts 17:19–34, where judgments were passed on public speakers). **3b–5** Although he knows of no inappropriate conduct in his Christian ministry, Paul is emphatic that it is the Lord who is his judge, and concludes with the command that they are to judge nothing before the time, *i.e.* the Day of the Lord. It is Christ who will expose attempts to cover up misdeeds and will judge not merely actions but motivation. It is at that time that each will receive his praise, *i.e.* his commendation, from God. As 2 Cor. 10:10–13 shows, the Corinthians were slow to learn that lesson; the church subsequently has not done any better.

4:6–13 Ministry and status

The connection with 4:1–5 is clear. The congregation's comparisons of Paul and Apollos (a judgment made prematurely) have a direct bearing on the future of the ministries of both men in Corinth (see the discussion on 16:12 which shows that the congregation had written asking specifically for the return of Apollos to Corinth). **6a** *I have applied these things* refers to the literary device called a 'covert allusion' which was used to refer to a person or situation indirectly and was a form of irony. Paul employs that device here, using irony to great effect, although as the discussion unfolds there is in fact nothing covert about his intentions. He uses this device so that the congregation should learn the meaning of the saying *Do not go beyond what is written.* This refers to the OT Scriptures, to which Paul often refers in chs. 1 – 4. The conduct of the Christian church was bound by the Scriptures. Certainly that is the case in Paul's indictment of the Corinthians, for Scripture has played a decisive role in Paul's assessment of the Christians who idolized secular wisdom and oratory. Paul is about to redress their conduct by pricking their consciences into a change of thinking and conduct. **6b** What they have been doing is now clearly spelt out, for each has been taking pride in one teacher at the expense of the other. **7** By asking three intimidating questions, he teaches them to avoid unscriptural conduct. The first relates to 1:30 where God's work in Christ is what makes them who they are. The second relates to the thanksgiving section in 1:4–9, where they have been reminded that they have been enriched in every way in Christ, and especially with respect to the abundance of the gifts they have been given. The third explains why their boasting is totally inappropriate, for their gifts were not self-generated nor did they arise from privilege or status, even though their boasting would suggest that they did.

After these questions, which should effectively eliminate all boasting by Christians, comes Paul's use of irony in vs 8–13. Here Paul draws contrasts between the Corinthian Christians and the apostles. **8** Orators and those of the upper social strata boasted about their self-sufficiency secured through their wealth and their political power which enabled them to live as liberated people (see Philo, *The Worse overcomes the Better* 32–34). Paul declares ironically that the Christians are also behaving thus *and that without us.* He only wished they were kings so that he could be a king as well. **9** That is not the case for God has placed the apostles in a position of ignominy – like captured slaves who made up the end of the procession in Roman victory parades before they were slaughtered. Apostles were not only a spectacle before men but before the whole unseen world. **10** Paul now

compares the 'social' status descriptions of the *not many* referred to in 1:26 with the Corinthian Christians, and the social status of the many whom *God chose* (1:27–28) with that of the apostles. **11** Even to this point they have been meted out the same treatment as prisoners of war. **12–13** While the social class boasted that they had never worked with their hands, Paul had (*cf.* 9:6). The apostles' response to the ignominy heaped upon them has been to endure it, and even to reply with blessing when abused.

4:14–17 Paul the apostle as their father

Just as the secular authorities of the Roman colony of Corinth recorded on inscriptions that Julius Caesar was its founding father, and recognized the jurisdiction of the present emperor by attributing the same title to him, so too Paul uses the image of the founding father of the Christian community to commend imitation of himself. **14** To be the recipient of criticism in such a culture was deeply shameful. Paul assures the Corinthians his aim is not to humiliate, but rather to warn them *as my dear children.* **15** Rich Corinthians had servants, *guardians*, who accompanied young sons to school and looked after them. Paul assures the Christians that they too have many such protectors, but it cannot be said they have many fathers. Paul declares that he himself has the relationship of a father to them because *in Christ* he had brought them into being *through the gospel.* **16** On this basis he encourages them to become imitators of him. This imitation should not be like that of the disciples of teachers, who imitated the way they dressed, walked and taught, but rather that of bearing ignominy on behalf of the message of the cross. **17** Timothy, Paul's *faithful* colleague and dear *son*, is coming to remind them of Paul's way of life in Christ Jesus which he teaches *everywhere in every church.* Paul did not merely teach the nature of true discipleship, but was able to put life and doctrine together and expected all Christians to imitate him.

4:18–21 The options facing the Corinthians

The kingdom of God is not an armchair philosophy, but is about power – power to change (*cf.* 6:9–11). The choice is theirs (21). Either they repent of their conduct which would enable Paul to come in a spirit of love and gentleness, or he will come like the secular governor did with his lictors who bore the rods as signs of their authority to inflict punishment.

In this long section, 1:4 – 4:21, Paul has dealt with the issue of the Christian's right attitude to ministry. This must be perceived as gospel-oriented ministry and not some form of Christian leadership which simply replicated secular models and apparently commended itself to the culturally conscious Corinthian Christians. Paul does not use the term 'leader' because of its elitist and political connotations which were totally out of keeping with Christian ministry. He had no clients or followers like the secular patrons. The church had failed to perceive and benefit from the ministry Christ ordained for the church and the world, and as a result their corporate Christian life had deteriorated. It was first on his agenda for very good reasons. Much depended on their developing maturity in this matter but they were slow to do so. Throughout the history of the church these problems have frequently recurred.

5:1 – 6:20 Moral issues

5:1–8 Immorality and the church's legitimate sphere of discipline

The first report was of divisions (1:11), the second relates to incest (5:1). It is sometimes thought that the immorality committed by this member of the church was endorsed by other Christians. That is only an assumption. The text does not say that the members were boasting because of his immorality. It would seem that the person who committed this sin was someone of high status and it was that which earned the applause of other Christians and not his gross immorality. Under Roman law this person was liable to banishment from this prestigious Roman colony for such conduct if he were brought to court. As no public prosecution service existed, a private prosecution would be required. Such legal proceedings could only be undertaken by a person of equal or higher status. Society and the church often turn a blind eye to the 'indiscretions' of socially powerful members but for the church this has always meant great spiritual loss.

1 The crime is incest with *his father's wife.* The term *has* is a common euphemism for sexual intercourse (*cf.* 7:2 and discussion). It may or may not be his natural mother – it could be a stepmother. Roman law was intolerant of such conduct, as were other legal codes (*cf.* Dt. 22:30). **2** Instead of being proud of this man because of his social status, the congregation should have excluded him from their fellowship. **3** Paul, as the founding apostle, passes judgment on such conduct as if he were actually present – *I am with you in spirit.* **4** He invokes the strongest judgment, calling upon the church to assemble in the name of, (*i.e.* in the character and power of), the Lord Jesus, and to be conscious of Paul's presence as judge. The power of the Lord Jesus, apparently invoked through prayer, will be present for the purpose

of handing this man over to Satan (5), *i.e.* excluding him from the believing earthly community for the destruction of his *sinful nature*, lit. 'the flesh' (*cf.* Gal. 6:8; 11:30–32). This man is not regarded as a non-Christian. The purpose of the community's action is the salvation of his soul at the judgment. 6 The boasting of the Corinthians with respect to this person is condemned as it has been elsewhere (*cf.* chs. 1 – 4). 7 The reason for excommunication is based in part on the OT's festival of unleavened bread (*cf.* Ex. 12:15–20) when the yeast with its impregnating capacity in bread-making was not to be used in preparing the Passover bread. Instead the permeating yeast was thrown away, and by implication the offending person must be excluded from the sphere of the community. The reason for this is that *Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed.* 8 The festival of rejoicing in the light of Christ's death must now be celebrated not with the infiltrating influence of malice and wickedness, but with sincerity and truth.

5:9–13 The church's sphere of judgment

9 Paul had written a previous letter which had been misunderstood (*cf.* 2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1 which has also been wrongly used to demand Christian separation from secular society). It had ruled on associating with immoral people. 10 Paul corrects any misunderstanding that he had condemned contacts in secular society with immoral people, those greedy for gain, the swindlers or idolaters. If this were the case, then Christians would have to withdraw from the world in the manner of certain religious sects in Judaism *e.g.* the Therapeutae and the Essenes. 11 Paul now clarifies what had been previously misunderstood – they are to withdraw from any Christian who is sexually immoral, greedy for money (*i.e.* covetous), an idolater, a drunkard (ancient dinners were notorious for their drinking and immorality *cf.* the discussion on 10:7), or dishonest business person. Table fellowship was prohibited. 12 It is interesting that Paul did not see himself as a judge of secular society's conduct. In a question which demanded an answer in the affirmative, Paul states that the Christian community is responsible for judging the insider, *i.e.* its own members. 13 It is for God to judge the inappropriate conduct of the outsider, while the community is to expel the immoral person from their midst, a point Paul emphasizes by citing Dt. 17:7. The ease with which the present day church often passes judgment on the ethical or structural misconduct of the outside community is at times matched only by its reluctance to take action to remedy the ethical conduct of its own members. We have reversed Paul's order of things.

6:1–8 Lawsuits among members

Among the elite of first-century society it was quite acceptable to institute civil proceedings before a magistrate and jury on trivial matters in order to establish one's social and political superiority over others. In weighing up their decision in such cases the jury had to take into account the status and power of the opposing parties, and the judge had to act likewise in imposing fines. Furthermore, certain persons were excluded from instituting legal proceedings against others; *i.e.* a son against his father, a slave against his master, a freedman against his patron, a citizen against the magistrate, and an inferior against his social superior. Judges and juries were regularly bribed by participants in a case. Mediation rather than litigation could be used in Jewish and Graeco-Roman courts. This was the preferred option of some because leading citizens feared the damaging effects of litigation on their social standing and public careers. Enmity was also engendered, for those who voted against the defendant automatically became his enemies. Civil litigation for the elite was simply seen as an extension of factions and discord in political life.

Characteristically Paul begins the discussion with a series of questions which operates both to interrogate and teach (*cf.* ch. 9 where he asks nineteen questions). 1 In the light of the way local courts operated it is little wonder that Paul is appalled that some Christians *dare* to *take* civil actions before annually elected magistrates and wealthy compatriots. They acted as either judge and jury with great partiality and could also be bribed. 2 If the *saints* are to judge the world (*cf.* Dn. 7:22) then they are surely competent to act as mediators in the civil actions which Paul calls *trivial cases.* The term used suggests that their civil litigation is vexatious rather than settling genuine matters. 3 Paul again uses a favourite argument form, *Do you not know . . .* (*cf.* v 2), to indicate that if the angels are to be judged by the saints, surely the latter can resolve these disputes. 4 In the event of disagreement, Paul asks, 'do you appoint as judges men of little account in the church?' This alternative translation offered by NIV (mg.) is to be preferred. While secular judges were people of high status in the community, in the Christian gathering secular status had no place. Paul uses the same term here as he does in 1:28 of those whom secular society despises.

5 Some of those who were wise (*cf.* 3:18) might undertake the role of mediator which was an accepted way to resolve matters in secular courts. The third stage of education in the first century trained students in legal studies and

therefore there would be some in the church who were legally competent to resolve matters equitably. **6** Paul indicates his revulsion at their actions by the words *brother ... against another* (brother) which signify the fellowship of believers – *and this in front of unbelievers*! **7** The fact that matters could not be resolved when a brother has a dispute against another Christian is a sign of defeat for the Christian community. **8** It is better to suffer wrong rather than go to court. Not only was dirty linen being washed in public but a fine was imposed on whoever lost the case – hence his accusation *you ... cheat and do wrong* – better 'defraud.'

In Rom. 13:1–7 Paul discusses the God-ordained role of the state in criminal cases, but he has no place for the locally elected magistrates and juries who used the civil actions as a political arena. Christians who were legally trained and acting as mediators would resolve issues in a just way in a society where unjust conventions prevailed.

6:9–20 Against Christian libertarianism

In Rom. 1:18–32 Paul's list of transgressions which invoke God's judgment does not include only sexual sins, (see vs 29–31). Here too, those sins which excluded members from the OT believing community, also exclude them from God's inheritance, (9b–10). Secular society had developed a sophisticated philosophical argument which endorsed the loose-living lifestyle of the elite. Their misdemeanours may have been beyond the arm of the secular law, but not of God's assize. There was clearly a measure of self-deception on the part of Christians as there often is today. The sexually immoral, (*pornoi*, which includes fornicators *i.e.* unmarried Christians cohabiting), worshippers of idols, men who cheat on their wives however much their wives tolerate this, the participants in male homosexuality, thieves, the greedy, (lit. 'the covetous') who are dissatisfied with God's goodness to them, those who are drunkards (normally those who went on drinking orgies at dinners), and people who are dishonest in business – all these have no inheritance in God's kingdom. None of these sins ever strengthens relationships with God or with others; as in the Ten Commandments, they are prohibited because they are destructive and unhelpful to relationships, and inflict grief and anguish. **11** Such were the activities of the Corinthians. They were no more or no less immoral than the rest of the society. As then, so now. But the work of Christ has cleansed them from their past, made them saints, *justified*, *i.e.* acquitted them from just judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and this by means of the activity of God's Spirit. This good news of the gospel means that past sinful activity need not determine the ultimate destiny of men and women.

12 Paul quotes popular libertine slogans which he counters with similar succinct sayings. The elite argued that their success enabled them to do as they wished, for everything was lawful, but Paul requires ethics that enhance and do not exploit – *not everything is beneficial i.e.* ethics that bestow blessings on others. They argued that everything was permissible – there were no restraints. Paul insists that actions must never enslave. **13** They argued that food was made for eating and the stomach was made for food. The perusal of first-century cookbooks shows how sophisticated the sin of gluttony was. Immorality and gluttony went hand in hand at pagan feasts. Paul counters that neither food nor the appetite are indestructible. The body is not meant to engage in sex outside marriage, but in the case of the Christian, his body belongs not to himself to do as he wishes, for it was made for the Lord. **14** Paul rejects Plato's argument that the senses could be indulged now because they could not be indulged in death. However, God intends to resurrect bodies, not souls, for he *raised the Lord from the dead.* **15** No Christian could say 'my body', for it is not the spirit but the whole person who is joined to Christ at conversion. Christians who are called members of Christ can never unite in sex with a prostitute. **16** Such behaviour, although accepted as the norm for men in the Roman world, was always precluded in the church because of the unity any sexual act establishes between two people. Paul cites the sexual ordinance in Gn. 2:24 – there is never any instance of special pleading for adultery in the Bible. **20** No Christian person can say 'my body' for he has been bought with a price *i.e.* ransomed by Christ's death. The clear implication is that his task is to honour, lit. 'glorify' God in his body, and this is done by relating to others both socially and sexually within the relational parameters laid down in the Bible.

7:1–40 Marriage problems

This is the longest discussion of sexuality and related matters in all of Paul's letters. It contains vital information on issues not touched upon elsewhere. Failure to understand the circumstances which gave rise to the problems written about in 7:1 and 7:25 has meant that valuable teaching on singleness and marriage has been ignored.

Concerning the circumstances: one clue rests in the letter itself, for Paul refers to *the present crisis* in 7:26 which gave rise to Christians rethinking the appropriateness of engaged couples getting married (7:25). There is firm

archaeological and literary evidence which indicates that there had been food shortages in Corinth during this period. These were inevitably accompanied by panic buying and riots because of social unrest and uncertainty about the future. Eleven inscriptions to the same person who was three times in charge of the grain supply in Corinth have been uncovered from this period. This office was only filled in times of famine, so there is good reason for connecting the crisis with the threat of famine. Tacitus also records earthquakes and famines. Many believed that these were divine portents. We know that Christians believed that the signs of the tribulation would be famines and earthquakes, and a blessedness was pronounced on those who were not pregnant (Mt. 24:7, 19; Mk 13:17). Here Paul not only answers their immediate questions but also provides an important framework in which Christian marriage is to be seen.

7:1–6 To the married

1 The first sentence can be translated either as, 'It is good for a man not to marry,' as in NIV or, 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman' (NIV mg.). One reason for uncertainty in translating this passage is that the Greek word for a woman and a wife is normally the same. It was also common in Greek not to use a pronoun when referring to one's spouse, so the sentence can be rendered literally – 'It is good for a man not to touch [his]wife'. The preference for the second translation is the use of the verb in the sentence which means 'to touch'. It was a euphemism in Greek and Latin, as well as some contemporary languages, for sexual intercourse. 2 Because of the problem of sexual temptation *each man should have* (it is a command) *his own wife* and *each woman* [wife] must have *her own husband.* The verb 'have' is also a synonym for sexual relationships. 3 The husband has an obligation to engage in sexual relationships with his wife, and the wife has the same commitment.

4 The wife's body is not her personal 'property' and neither is the man's. Once he is married, he must not engage in sexual intercourse with another woman. It is not possible to find another reference in the literature of the ancient world which teaches that the husband surrenders his body exclusively to his wife on marriage. In fact, in the secular world, it was traditional on the wedding day to declare to the bride that when her husband committed adultery with a prostitute or a woman of easy virtue, it was not a sign that he did not love her, but simply a way of gratifying his passions. 5 Not to engage in sexual intercourse in marriage is to *deprive* the other person. Paul forbids such abstinence except by mutual consent and then only for a season of prayer, perhaps connected with 'the present crisis'. He warns that Satan is a voyeur who can sexually tempt a partner and for this reason they must *come together* (another verb for sexual intercourse) again because of the temptation to infidelity.

This one exception shows the biblical stress on the importance of sexual intercourse as part and parcel of the fabric of marriage. It was not given simply for the purpose of procreation, nor is it dishonourable (*cf.* Heb. 13:4). Was it that some Christian couples, reading the signs of the times with famines and earthquakes, decided to abstain from sexual intercourse? This would have been the only acceptable form of contraception. Blessedness was promised to the woman not pregnant at the time of the tribulation (Mark 13:17).

7:6–7 The gift of singleness and marriage

In the statement *I say this as a concession and not as a command, this* refers to vs 6–7 and not vs 1–5. In vs 2–3, and 5 he issues six commands – 'should' in the NIV translates verbs of command. 7 He wishes that all men were as he is *i.e.* unmarried. *But*, which is the emphatic Greek form here, he recognizes that each person has his gift, *charisma*, from God, *i.e.* one is single and another married. Singleness in some societies is the subject of cruel innuendo. At times in the church it has been either over-valued or under-valued, in each case contrary to God's word. It, like other gifts, is a personal one to an individual from God.

7:8–9 Those without marriage partners

To the unmarried and the widowers I say: preferably they should remain in their present state. However, Paul concedes that this may not be possible and notes that in such cases a person should, *i.e.* must marry, for it is better to marry than to be filled with uncontrolled sexual desire. Such a person should accept that God's *charisma* for them is marriage.

7:10–11 To the married

Here Paul distinguishes between a known saying of Jesus, *i.e.* the Lord (10, 12) as distinct from his own. It must be remembered though that Paul gives clear commands in this section. The Christian wife is not free to separate from her husband. Paul accepts that there are occasions when that is necessary. However, in such circumstances she has only two options *i.e.* to remain unmarried (lit. separated) or else be reconciled to her husband. The husband is bound by the same strictures which Paul indicates by forbidding the option of divorce. It is presumed that unrepentant immorality is the

exception (Mt. 19:9). Both partners being Christians does not ensure their happiness, but it does if they live together in mutual love and respect. All inconsiderate actions not repented of have lasting consequences.

7:12–16 The options with an unbelieving partner

Paul has in mind marriages contracted before one of the partners became a Christian. The requirement by implication that a Christian widow can only remarry a Christian suggests that Christians were not free to marry those who did not share the Christian faith (7:39). Furthermore, the apostles had wives who are called 'sisters' *i.e.* believers (9:5). 12 Having a partner who was not a Christian was not grounds for separation or divorce by the believing husband. There may have been pressure to do so among some Christians because of a misreading of the OT, which demanded that Jews who contracted relationships with non-Jews, knowing full well the prohibition of the OT, must put away that wife. If the non-Christian wished to stay, the husband must not divorce her. The marriage ordinance is God-given for all humankind (Gn. 2:21–24) and not simply designed for Christians. The same applies to the Christian wife (13).

14 There is nothing unholy in the relationship. On the contrary there is a sanctifying influence where the benefits of Christ's blessings flow over to the other person. If the relationship was an unsanctified one, then the children would be unsanctified too, but the fact is that they are 'holy'. This is one instance in the Bible where the status of children of one or both believing people is declared. Christians who come from societies where the primary emphasis is on corporateness, especially in the family, will tend to regard this as a declaration of the Christian status of their children. Others from the West will take a different view, based at times on denominational distinctions, and may reflect something of the unspoken beliefs of the particular era in which they were formulated.

15 If an unbelieving husband wished to leave his wife, then the wife had to release him. At times the ancient world worried about the judgment of the gods if a person renounced them in favour of some new religion. Women in the first century in Graeco-Roman areas in particular, could readily divorce their husbands. They simply demanded their dowry back. If it was not returned, then under Roman law, 18% interest on its value was charged until the husband complied. If the woman wished to leave because her husband was a Christian then no obstacle was to be placed in her way, *e.g.* withholding the dowry. God has called his people to live in peace and not perpetual dissension. Certainly withholding it, however well meaning it might be to seek to save the marriage, would ultimately result in the unhappiness of court proceedings. Christians were *not bound in such circumstances*, *i.e.* not bound to that marriage and therefore by implication free to remarry, but only 'in the Lord' (*cf.* v 39). Divorce is permitted where one partner deserts the marriage because of the Christian conversion of the other partner. 16 While the hope may have been that the non-Christian partner would believe and thus every endeavour made to hold on to the marriage, there was no absolute guarantee that this would be the case.

7:17–24 God's personal calling

Paul takes up the theme of God's calling from v 15 and provides a summary of the teaching he laid down in all the churches.

17 *The place in life* means lit. 'calling' or 'class'. The latter was how the term was used by secular writers. People were classified both racially and socially in the first century with privileges being given to particular groups. As a general principle Paul says that they were to retain the present place that the Lord assigned to each and as each was called. 18 Young Jews attempted to escape their Jewishness by undergoing a surgical operation to conceal their circumcision. They did this in order to progress in their education both in the gymnasium and as citizens. But Jewish Christians were prohibited from renouncing their Jewishness in order to climb the social ladder. This was a period of anti-semitism, as noted in Acts 18:1–2. The Gentile Christian was not free to undergo circumcision – the reasons for wanting to do this are outlined in the Galatian letter. 19 With respect to pleasing God neither circumcision nor uncircumcision was the central issue. It was obedience to God's commands that was crucial.

20 Paul repeats his teaching concerning the acceptance of the providential ordering of one's race and circumstances. 21 Household slaves, except those in the Imperial household, were eligible for release after 7 years. The Christian slave was not to be distressed by his status. Here Paul does not demand that he must stay in his calling even if he is eligible to be freed – lit. 'But and if he has the power or right to do so'. He could become a freedman. Freeing slaves is encouraged, although it was accompanied by binding obligations to one's master who was now one's patron. 22 Paul develops this theme by explaining that when called by the Lord to salvation, the slave undergoes a liberation and becomes the Lord's freedman. Paradoxically, the freeborn citizen who becomes a Christian,

becomes Christ's slave. **23** Ransom money was paid for freeing certain slaves and Paul alludes to the cost of Christ's procuring their freedom. He commands freemen not to become slaves of men. While it may seem extraordinary, in the first century, Greek freeborn men did sell themselves into the household of Roman citizens, often holding the lucrative post of steward of a household. They could invest their owner's funds and run his business, legitimately accruing wealth. It was possible for them to buy their own way out of their voluntary slavery, and thereby gain Roman citizenship as freedmen, and for their offspring to secure Roman citizenship as freeborn children. It was not only wealth that counted in the Roman empire, especially in a Roman colony such as Corinth, but calling *i.e.* class or status. **24** Again Paul repeats that they remain in the situation in which God has placed them – lit. 'each in which he was called let him remain with God'. While the young sought to be upwardly mobile in order to gain wealth and status, those in the church needed to rejoice in the providential ordering of each Christian's life. The covetous, driven search for mobility was prohibited.

7:25–38 To marry now or to wait

In the first century, those who were betrothed to be married were commited to each other, with divorce the only means of renouncing it (*cf.* Mt. 1:1–9). The issue raised by some young men who were betrothed was whether or not to marry now, given the present distressing circumstances in Corinth. **25** Paul has no command from the Lord *i.e.* Jesus (*cf.* v 10), at least no word from Jesus' earthly ministry, on this matter which arose from unusual regional circumstances. In giving his response as one who *by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy*, he provides important pastoral and spiritual guidelines and does so within a wide theological framework on the nature of living in marriage. **26** Because of the present crisis in Corinth (see the introduction to ch. 7) it is a good thing for 'engaged couples' to remain betrothed and not proceed to marriage and its consummation, although should they decide to marry, no sin has been committed.

29–35 The theological setting. He explains that the time lit. 'has been shortened'. This has often been taken to mean that the end is imminent. The secular view of the indestructibility and the unchanging future of the world was the subject of first-century discussion. For the Christian the concept of time, *kairos*, had changed radically. Life now took a new perspective, so marriage, grief and making money must not be all-consuming. These all looked different with the new Christian clock, for the world in its present form was passing away, it was not indestructible. Within this theological framework, Paul expressed his concern that those who raised the issue should be free from life's burdens in the present distress. The task of every unmarried Christian man is to see how he can please the Lord – there was no concept of pleasing himself. **33** The task of the married man was to see how he could please his wife – Christian marriage has no place for self-centredness. **34** Clearly his time is divided between pleasing his wife and the Lord – marriage places additional obligations on him. The unmarried woman is no different in her calling, although it is expressed differently – she is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit (*cf.* 6:19–20). The married woman has a similar obligation not to please herself but her husband. **35** Paul's advice is motivated by his concern for their own welfare, not to restrict them, but in order for them to give *undivided devotion to the Lord.*

36–38 Factors influencing the decision. **36** The decision to proceed to the consummation of the marriage is governed by certain factors: (i) *If anyone thinks he is acting improperly towards* her. Possibly members of her family feel he should fulfil his promise and marry her; (ii) if their relationship has reached its full flowering – as now so then, young couples are more attracted physically to one another as the time of the marriage approaches. The translation of the clause by the NIV *if she is getting on in years* is unlikely for Roman law required a woman to marry up to the time of her fiftieth year. The term carries the idea of 'full flowering' of sexual feelings *cf.* also the next verse where he has control over his own will, *i.e.* sexual drives, and (iii) if he feels he ought to proceed, then he should. He is not acting improperly.

37 The decision not to proceed is also governed by certain factors: (i) he has settled the matter in his own mind, (ii) he is under no compulsion presumably from family or relatives, (iii) he has control over himself *i.e.* his sexual feelings, (iv) and has made up his mind not to marry, then this person also does the appropriate thing. **38** Even though there are the present difficulties in Corinth, the man who marries has done the right thing. Paul is not opposed to marriage (*cf.* v 7b). The man who does not marry has done better, given the present complexities. The decision to marry is rightly placed in the hands of young engaged men who have to judge for themselves and their situation. Paul lays down parameters for their decision-making.

7:39–40 The widow

Paul again repeats the binding character of

Christian marriage. A woman is bound to her husband, with the special exceptions of vs 13, 15. She is free to remarry if she is widowed, but her husband must be a Christian. Roman law required a widow to remarry within 18 months of her husband's death if she was not 60 years old. In Paul's judgment, in view of the present difficulties she is happier if she remains as she is. Her father or her eldest son would be 'lord' of her dowry and provide for her needs. Paul is convinced that he has the Spirit of God as he writes this.

8:1 – 11:1 Gospel obligations in a pluralistic world

8:1–13 Meat sacrificed to idols

This is the next issue raised by the Corinthians. For those Christians who live in societies where food is still offered to idols, either in their non-Christian homes, at dinners or in temples, there is a certain immediacy in this discussion. In these chapters, however, there are gospel obligations which are binding on all Christians. The apostle concludes with the command that all should become imitators of him as he is of Christ.

The introductory words *now about*, show that, as in 7:1, this section begins with a quotation from the letter which the Corinthians had sent to Paul. The verse suggests that the Corinthians wrote, 'We know we all possess knowledge', that is, knowledge about sacrifices and idols. Paul repeats the phrase *now about* in v 4 with a connective *so then*, which explains this knowledge. We can therefore assume that the knowledge referred to in v 1 was *we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one*, (4). It is possible that the whole of vs 4–6 could be the citation and that it reflects standard teaching by Paul about idols and gods and the true and living God to whom the Corinthians turned in order to become Christians (1 Thes. 1:9–10). Apparently some Christians were going into the temple which contained idols and eating the food offered there. By their example they were encouraging other Christians to do the same, or were at least in danger of doing so (10). Those who did this may well have argued the case on theological grounds: there is no problem in a Christian's participation in a feast since Paul himself taught that there is only one God and one Lord and that an idol is nothing. It would seem that some were defending their right to eat in an idol temple while others were uncertain, and the church sought clarification on this matter. Paul discusses how he dealt with his rights as a model of how other Christians should exercise theirs.

1 Paul tackles the problem by declaring the danger that knowledge will puff people up, whereas the Christian faith means relating to others in a loving way. Love builds people up, for it seeks to bestow some blessing on others. 2 He sends a warning to the Christians who think they know all about this issue and have resolved the matter to their satisfaction, (hence their decision to eat in the idol temple). They do not yet know as they ought, lit. 'as it is necessary to know'. 3 Some Greek manuscripts omit the two references to God in this passage. However, what is true of God's relationship with us is also true of the Christian's relationship with others. The man who loves is the one who really knows while the man who says he 'knows' does not necessarily act in a helpful way to others. This is the real issue because some Corinthians are not acting out of love but are simply exercising their rights.

4–6 is an important credal statement made in the context of religious pluralism and is as crucial to affirm now as it was then. There is only one true and living God and idols are nothing (*cf.* Dt. 6:4; Is. 40:25–26). 5 Yet Paul and others observed the great extent of the idolatry in Corinth where many gods were worshipped. Paul does not ascribe divinity to them as if they were legitimate expressions of God. On the contrary he says they are *so-called*. This phrase was used to describe something that was popularly, but erroneously, affirmed. The terms *gods* and *lords* were synonymous in pagan religious language. Paul uses them here to balance what he says in 6, 'but' (a strong negative statement) *for us there is but one God, the Father*, who is the Creator of all things and for whom the Christian exists. Our purpose in life is to serve him, and not simply to have him meet our needs so that we can pursue our own interests (*cf.* Acts 27:23). Christians are not simply theists. For them there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, and he is the agent of all that is created (*cf.* Jn. 1:3) and the one through whom we live. 7 But not all Christians firmly believe that an idol has no power. First-century worshippers would say of an idol, 'That is Athena', believing that the goddess was actually there. Christians were called atheists because they had no statues. The sacrificing of food to an idol was not a harmless custom for the weak Christian who, if he ate, felt defiled – a view still held by some Christians in the East today.

8 The confident Christians in Corinth would agree with the stated principle concerning food. 9 However, they are warned that *the exercise of* their *freedom*, better 'right', – the word here is the same used in 9:4, 5, 12, 15 – may be harmful to those weaker than they. This may well have been the right to participate in the feasts of the games, or on important civic occasions, one

of the privileges granted to the elite. The former is more likely since the nearby Isthmian games were not held while Paul was in Corinth, and thus the problem had not presented itself to him while he was actually there. We know that all the important people of Corinth were invited to three feasts by the president of the games. **10** Paul's fear is that a Christian, seeing other Christians eating in the idol temple, will give way to the pressure to conform, and thereby stumble. **11** He is destroyed in that he slips back into paganism as a result of those Christians who want to eat in the idol temple in order to make a statement that an idol is nothing. **12** It is not an exercise of their rights, but rather a sin against their brother and hence against Christ. Given the close relationship between the Lord and his children which Paul discovered at his conversion, to harm Christians is to harm Christ (Acts 9:1–4). **13** Paul lays down the first requirement pertaining to the imitation both of himself and of Christ (11:1). If the exercise of a right causes a brother to fall into sin, then it must be avoided at all costs.

9:1–14 Rights and ministry

Paul proceeds to demonstrate again a truth from his own ministry (*cf.* 2:1, 3). It also provides him with an opportunity to defend his ministry to those who pass judgment on it by explaining the reasons why he did not claim his rights as an apostle (see 9:3). He conducts this part of his argument mainly with a series of questions all of which require the answer 'yes'.

The effectiveness of his apostolic ministry in Corinth is clear, even though some now question whether he should return for yet another period of ministry (*cf.* 16:12). He is an apostle *i.e.* one who has seen the Lord (*cf.* Acts 9:17). The very existence of the Corinthian church is proof of the divine recognition of his ministry *i.e.* his *apostleship in the Lord* (2). **3** As his ministry has come under scrutiny by some of his critics the defence of the validity of Paul's apostleship which he has stated in general terms in vs 1–2 is spelt out in detail with a series of questions.

4 Paul lays out the rights of an apostle – the right to sustenance; **5** the right to be married (note, to a Christian); and the right of the wife to accompany her husband (a principle broken by some missionary heroes of the last century, *cf.* 7:3–5) as do the wives of the other apostles and the Lord's brothers (These latter were once sceptical, Mk. 3:31; Jn. 7:2–3, but now believing, Acts 1:14, and clearly were important witnesses to Jesus); **6** the right to be fully supported or as Paul asks, *Is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?* **7** These rights are as obvious as the right of soldiers to be paid, the right of vineyard owners to the harvest, and the right of shepherds to the milk.

8–9 The rights mentioned in v 7 are not merely secular conventions but carry the endorsement of the OT, citing Dt. 25:4, where even the ox is not to be muzzled. Jewish interpreters saw the ox as the representative of all types of labourers, human and animal, and saw that the law was directed towards man to obey. That is why it is written for us, because of the rights of the planter and the harvester of crops. They worked in expectation of benefitting from the harvest. **11** The spiritual sower (*cf.* 3:6), in this case Paul in Corinth, also has the right to that harvest. **12** But he has not exercised his prerogative with them. On the contrary, he disadvantaged himself and put up with anything *i.e.* any dislocation occasioned by his working night and day (*cf.* Acts 20:35). He did this in order not to put a stumbling block in the way of his hearers as he presented the gospel. This is Paul's second principle, which expands his point in 8:13, increasing its scope to benefit the non-Christian.

Although orators came to cities promising to bestow civic and educational benefits, (*cf.* commentary on 2:1–5), those who heard them knew that the bottom line was the potential of rich financial pickings for the speaker. The audience was interested only in the speaker's prowess in demonstrating his silver-tongued oratory, and not the subject of the speech which they themselves often nominated from the floor. In comparison Paul's overwhelming concern was the content of his message with its good news. He sought therefore to distance himself from any possible identification with secular speakers in order to gain a good hearing for his unique message.

13 Having discussed the secular conventions which Paul renounced because of the danger that they would be misunderstood, he also cites the entitlements of the sacrificing priests of the OT, and **14** the decree of the Lord Jesus that gospel preachers were entitled to be supported, lit. 'out of the gospel' (*cf.* Mt. 10:10). That very entitlement commanded by the Lord was set aside, because in the non-Jewish context Paul saw that claiming his rights would raise a barrier with the very people for whom the gospel was meant.

9:15–23 Paul's free gospel

15 The discussion of money in the secular world was a signal that money was being asked for, so Paul makes it clear he is not asking for back pay. He would rather die than be robbed of his boast of a free gospel. **16** He hastens to clarify this by revealing the divine constraint under which he operates (2 Cor. 5:14) and even pronounces

against himself should he fail to discharge his commission. 17 If he preaches the gospel because he wants to, he has a reward. If he preaches because he has to, he is simply discharging his role as a steward of the gospel (*cf.* 4:1). 18 What is Paul's reward for wanting to preach the gospel? Satisfaction that he can offer it free of charge. In a society where personal advantage, even with civic benefactions, was always accepted as the motivating factor, Paul's 'advantage' was seeing the unique gospel of the free grace of God being offered without cost to its hearers. His action demonstrated the very character of his message. He would not claim his rights.

19 Those who employed secular teachers felt they 'owned' them, especially if they operated as private tutors in households. Even though some of Paul's work was done within the framework of large households with their house churches, he witnesses to the fact that he was a free agent. Yet even though he has this liberty (*cf.* 9:1, his opening question) he does not use it. Like his Lord (Phil. 2:7–8), he chose to be a slave to all so that he might win some for Christ. Paul is the cross-cultural missionary *par excellence* and no slave to evangelistic conventions. His adaptability is seen in his sensitivity when preaching to the Jews, even though he is not under the law (20); to the non-Jews, making the necessary cultural adaptations in his missionary endeavours both in preaching (*cf.* Acts 17:22–31) and evangelistic contacts (21; see 10:30); and to the superstitious, like his Lord not quenching the smouldering wick (22)

Paul now sets out his third principle – sensitivity to the cultural context. *I have become* indicates that at a point in time he made this decision as a missionary strategist. He would be cross-cultural in his gospel presentation and life-style, and, *by all . . . means*, innovative in his approach. 23 His actions were solely for the sake of the gospel, and his motivation was to share in its blessings. Paul was undoubtedly a free apostle. Those who habitually orientate their life to share the gospel are those who experience most its refreshing freedom as they see it liberating others.

9:24 – 10:13 Running and not falling

Paul now begins to deal with the issue of the dangers of the sexual misconduct that was such a feature of feasts in the temple. He does this by citing first the example of his own self-discipline and then contrasting that with what happens to God's people when they set their hearts on evil things. His aim is to prevent the Corinthians from doing the same (10:6). 24 Paul draws imagery from the athletic events of the famous Isthmian games held near Corinth. He encourages them to become runners eagerly stretching forward towards the finishing line. 25 He reminds them of the strict dietary and training discipline athletes underwent in order to gain a crown, which in his day, was made of celery. In contrast the Christian race is one that holds out an imperishable reward. 26 Paul compares his own ministry to that of a runner who knows where he is running. He is also like a boxer, but not a shadow one (orators who demonstrated their oratorical prowess before crowds, and not in actual debates were derided as shadow boxers). 27 The opponent was his own body and its appetites. That is what Paul subdues, unlike the orators who boasted that their income entitled them to indulge their senses with riotous living at feasts, and were criticized for teaching virtue but living in exactly the opposite way. Paul is deeply conscious of the need to subdue his appetites, lest having fulfilled his preaching ministry, he yield to sexual and other temptations. These were a constant problem then and are also a danger among evangelists and Christian leaders in today's church. Here Paul has been pointing out the danger of stumbling by not laying aside sinful conduct (*cf.* Heb. 12:1).

10:1–13 Warning from Israel's history. The traditional chapter division fixed here by later Christians is unhelpful. It begins with *for*, connecting the discussion of Paul's possible disqualification from his ministry with those who suffered God's judgment in the OT. 10:1–13 illustrates the truth that the God of the Lord Jesus judged Israel for its idolatrous conduct. God will do the same to the Corinthians who insist on exercising their right to eat in idol temples unless they flee from idolatry, 10:14–22.

1–4 lays out the impeccable spiritual credentials of the children of God in the wilderness. They had experienced the clear guiding hand of God and witnessed the miraculous deliverance through the sea (Ex. 13:21; 14:22). The children of Israel entered into the experience of Moses as the agent of Israel's deliverance, and in the same way Christians enter into the experience of Christ as their deliverer (2). They were nourished by the same spiritual food (Ex. 16:15, 35) and sustained by spiritual drink from the rock (Ps. 78:15), which was Christ meeting their needs in the same way he completely meets the needs of the Corinthians (1:4–7, 30). The One who was there at the beginning and was the agent of creation (Jn. 1:2–4), and who upholds all things (Col. 1:17), was actively involved in the life of God's people in OT times just as he is involved in the lives of Christians today. The second person of the Trinity did not suddenly appear for the first time at the incarnation. 5 Yet the

Israelites' exclusion from the people of God resulted in their dying in the wilderness. They are a type or example to warn the Corinthians against repeating the same dreadful mistake.

Paul gives four prohibitions to the Corinthians which are derived from God's severe judgment of the children of God in the wilderness. (i) Idolatry is forbidden, and Paul cites Ex. 32:6, which would have appropriately described the riotous behaviour at dinner in an idol temple in Corinth (7). (ii) Sexual immorality (8), which was acceptable conduct at such dinners in the first century, is prohibited. The consequence of such behaviour for Israel was immediate exclusion from the believing community (Nu. 25:1–9). (iii) Testing or tempting God to act (9) also brought dire judgment (Nu. 21:5–6). There may have been some in Corinth who rationalized the exercise of their right to eat in the temple on the grounds that nothing had yet happened to them while they ate, and therefore nothing ever would. (iv) They were commanded not to grumble (10; Nu. 14:2). Some may have complained to the Lord because of the difficulty they experienced living in a society which endorsed religious pluralism; they were thereby led to deny the goodness of God and his providential ordering of their circumstances in the same way Israel did against the Lord and Moses.

11 The judgment which happened to them and which was recorded in the OT means that its warnings must be heeded by those who stand now at the *fulfilment of the ages* to come, *i.e.* the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham to bless all the nations and not simply Israel (Gn. 12:2–3). **12** Paul writes to those who *think you are standing firm*, having argued that because an idol was nothing (8:4), eating in an idol temple was perfectly acceptable (8:10). They are given a clear warning to take heed, because there is every possibility that they will fall, given the consistency of God as judge of Israel and the church. **13** These self-assured Christians are warned that all mankind faces the temptation to compromise and commit immorality – and they are not exempt.

10:14 – 11:1 Idol feasts and the Lord's Supper

14 Paul's beloved converts must avoid eating in the temple because of the danger of idolatry. **15** An appeal is made to them to think further on the issue, and Paul uses two analogies. The first relates to the Lord's Supper, and the second to the eating of OT sacrifices. **16** The cup of thanksgiving was the third cup in the Passover. Jesus, on the night prior to his death, reinterpreted the significance of this cup so that it pointed to the shedding of his blood on the cross and was the means of establishing a participation in the benefits of his death. He did the same with the bread which was broken to express the same participation. **17** In the same way, the fact that Christians partake of one loaf at the Lord's Supper points to the fact that they all belong to Christ, that they are *one body* in Christ. **18** The fellowship of priests with the altar in the OT is cited as the grounds for establishing the relationship in vs 19–20 (Lv. 3:3; 7:15). **19–21** Paul explains that pagan sacrifices are offered to demons (Dt. 32:17), and that it is not possible to drink from the Lord's cup and the demon's cup. It is interesting to note in this context that some vessels and cups found by archaeologists in Corinth have the names of particular gods on them. **22** The high point of the argument is that the Corinthians will rouse the Lord to jealousy. Are they stronger than he to survive such a confrontation?

Having exposed what is really taking place in the pagan sacrificial meals in which some Corinthians justified their participation, Paul uses their own argument to expose its unchristian character, (23–24). As in 6:12–13 the ethic that says that everything is permitted has been used as justification for the action of those who think they stand. **23** They argued '*Everything is permissible*' but Christian actions are based on what is beneficial to the person concerned. On this basis the conclusions in 10:19–22 show that what they have done has aroused the Lord to jealousy and failed to bestow any blessing on themselves. If everything that is done ought to build up others, then they have failed, in that they have been in danger of destroying their weaker brother (*cf.* 8:10–12). The actions of a Christian are to be constructive with regard to others; this 'building' analogy is unique to Christianity and reflects its demand that the needs of others determine conduct. In the same way God's actions towards us in Christ are for the purpose of meeting our needs. **24** The much-admired civic and personal benefactions and the patronage system of secular Corinth did not have the primary aim of meeting the needs of others; personal advancement came first, and any benefits to others were merely secondary. The radical Christian ethic is spelled out in terms of the good of others and never personal advancement. The Corinthians who insisted on their own right to eat in the idol temple regardless of the needs of other Christians, had failed to love their neighbour by putting his or her needs first.

In vs 25–30 Paul explains how to function in the midst of religious pluralism. Food sold in the meat market of Corinth could be eaten by Christians (25). The fact that it had been offered in the temple before being sold was

overridden by Ps. 24:1 which all pious Jews said before eating anything (26). If a non-Christian was extended an invitation to dinner and accepted, then the principle was to observe the etiquette of eating whatever was served by the host. No scruple is involved, for the same reason given in the preceding verse (27). The exception to this rule is where any person present draws attention to the fact that the meat has been purchased in the meat market. If the person believes it wrong for the Christian to eat, then one must desist from doing so, both for his sake and for conscience's sake (28). Paul makes it clear that he is speaking about the other person's conscience (24), and thereby emphasizes the point that the scruples and needs of the neighbour determine the Christian's actions.

The whole discussion is concluded in 10:31 – 11:1 giving the broad parameters within which Christians should operate in society. **31** First, whatever a Christian does, whether it is eating, drinking or any other action, it must be done to God's glory. **32** Secondly, neither *Jews* nor *Greeks*, *i.e.* those inside or outside the church, must be caused to stumble by the actions of any Christian. **33** Again Paul can draw attention to his own actions in support of this, for he seeks to please all, never looking for his own advancement, *but the good of many, so that they may be saved.* **11:1** He concludes with the command that the Corinthians must follow his example outlined in the discussion, which is an example drawn from Christ. The priority of others in terms of their need of the gospel and the concerns of the weaker brother must determine the actions of a Christian.

11:2 – 14:40 Orderly church life

11:2–16 Covering the head in worship

2 Paul commends the congregation for observing the traditions which he had delivered to them in days past. It is interesting that the issues raised are matters that Paul did not deal with while he was there. It is not a reflection on his competence, but rather on changes which developed after he departed. What Paul decrees is part of the apostolic tradition which is binding on the congregation (see v 16). **3** Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that Christ is the head of every *man* (more likely 'husband'), and the 'husband' is head of every *woman* (more likely 'wife', given the ambiguity of these words in Greek). It was the pagan custom for the priests of a cult who were drawn from the elite of society to distinguish themselves from other worshippers by praying and sacrificing with their heads covered. Is it that there were some among the minority of Christians from the social elite who wished to draw attention to their status by praying and prophesying with their head covered? He *dishonours his head*, *i.e.* Christ, who is his head, (*cf.* v 3). The dishonouring would be in drawing attention to his secular status when Christ is the one to whom attention should be directed when praying.

5 Every woman who prays or prophesies with head uncovered dishonours her head, *i.e.* her husband. It is as if she were shaved. The shaving of the head of the woman who disgraces her husband by commiting adultery was prescribed by Roman law which applied in the Roman colony of Corinth. **6** If a wife does not cover her head, by implication she is regarded as someone who refuses to recognize her relationship with her husband *i.e.* her marital status. For the wife not to cover her head in public was a disgrace. **7** The man is precluded from covering his head since he is the image and glory of God (Gn. 1:27a). The wife stands as the glory of her husband (Pr. 12:4). **8** This was the order in which male and female were created according to Genesis. **9** In Gn. 2:20b–23 the wife was created for the husband, and not the husband for the wife. **10** It is for this reason and also because of the angels (*cf.* Mt. 18:10), the wife must have the sign of authority on her head. **11** In the Lord, Paul teaches mutuality as in 7:4. **12** Paul explains this in terms of a woman coming from man, and man from the woman. But Paul asserts that everything comes from God. **13** As in 10:15 Paul calls upon the congregation to judge for themselves. In this case is it right for a woman to pray with her head uncovered? **14** In the first century it was believed that nature determined matters of culture. No doubt Paul also argues this on the teaching of the OT where the polarity of sexes was insisted upon. A long-haired man was a disgrace. It has sometimes been argued that there are ancient statues of males with long hair, but this is how the gods and not men were portrayed. **15** The long hair of a woman was seen as her glory and ancient authors mention the attention given to a woman's hair as her prized glory. **16** Paul concludes that if any want to contend this apostolic tradition, they need to take note that neither Paul nor the churches of God have any other practice.

Note. It needs to be remembered that one particular problem was that the Christian meeting, the *ekklēsia*, had a secular counterpart in the governing body of the city. That meeting was normally held in the theatre. What would happen when a Christian meeting, *ekklēsia*, was held in a private home where a woman had authority, and in which she did not cover her head? While it is a point of contention among commentators, the issue here seems to be not about men and women *per se* but about husband

and wife – this is a legitimate translation of both terms. It also makes sense of the statement of 'headship' (*cf.* Eph. 5:22–33 where the same words are used). It needs to be noted as well that it was not only men who prayed and prophesied in the apostolic church. Women did have a real role in worship. For a discussion of prophecies in the church see the section on ch. 14:1–25.

11:17–34 The problems in the Lord's Supper

17 If Paul has previously commended the Corinthians for observing apostolic traditions (v 2) he could not do so now as he gives commands to remedy abuses at the Lord's Supper (34). When they came together it seems it was not for the better but for the worse. Divisions among members (*cf.* 1:10–12) are also reflected in the meetings. In the secular *ekklēsia i.e.* the meeting of citizens for political purposes, they did not hide their divisions, and the Corinthian Christians behaved in a secular fashion on a number of matters when they met in their Christian *ekklēsia.* The enigmatic phrase *and to some extent I believe it* is how the NIV and other translators render it. It is surprising that Paul who is so well informed from Chloe's people should be only partly informed about a matter over which he sees judgment falling on some in the congregation. The clause can be rendered in Greek 'and I believe a certain report', which perhaps makes better sense. The word translated in other English versions as 'partly', which is an adverb, is also a noun in Greek meaning 'a report'. **19** It is not until divisions arise that those who have God's approval, *i.e.* who are genuine, lit. 'those who pass the test', can be known. (*cf.* 2 Cor. 2:9 where the genuine are those who have given heed to the apostolic instructions.) Divisions separated those faithful to God's word from the rest.

20 The second reason that Paul cannot endorse their conduct is that when they come together it is not the Lord's Supper they are eating. That undoubtedly came as a surprise to them, but Paul gives reasons why this is so. **21** Each one proceeds without any regard for others. Whether the behaviour in question was not waiting for others, or simply devouring one's own food during the dinner is uncertain. The word translated *goes ahead* can mean to do something before others or to devour one's own food during the meal. **22** Such actions result in the disgraceful situation of some being hungry and others drunk. Paul asks three questions which are meant to make them realize their guilt for this disgraceful conduct. The first is whether those who eat and drink so much have their own houses in which to feast. The second is whether they despise the church, lit., 'meeting' of none other than God for it is his church (*cf.* 1:2). The third question is whether it is their intention to humiliate *those who have nothing*, lit. the 'have-nots,' meaning those who do not have the protection of rich houses in times of crisis such as the present famine (*cf.* commentary on 7:26). Paul certainly cannot endorse or praise this inexcusable conduct. The reason they are guilty is spelled out.

23–25 Paul begins with a reminder that he is repeating the tradition received from the Lord which he had passed on to the Corinthians when he was with them. It recounts the actions and words of the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed. They were to break bread in remembrance of Jesus' death. They were also to drink the cup in remembrance of the new covenant which Jesus ratified in his blood (*cf.* the ratification of the old covenant with blood in Exodus and the promise of a new covenant in Je. 31:31, a covenant which was for the blessing of all the nations Gn. 12:3). **26** The Lord's Supper proclaims the *Lord's death* until his second coming. Paul repeats and alters the order of the words of Jesus to give emphasis to his actions. He does this in order to contrast Jesus' selfless giving of his life on their behalf with their self-centred actions which create divisiveness in his body, the church (*cf.* 10:17). He focuses on their failure to share their food at the supper to show how overwhelmingly generous Jesus' action on the cross had been toward them personally. They are behaving in this selfish way at the very remembrance feast which Jesus instituted on the night of his betrayal so that they might recall his death. Is not their behaviour at this remembrance a betrayal of him whose own supper they are celebrating?

27 In this particular context the unworthy eating of the bread and drinking of the cup has to do with their attitudes and actions towards each other, especially the needy who have suffered acute embarrassment. Attention is being drawn to their status and circumstances in the meal, in a community where these social divisions were meant to be abolished in Christ (*cf.* 1:30). They are therefore guilty of sinning against, or possibly on the grounds of, the body and blood of the Lord. **28** All must test or examine themselves before they participate. In this context, the examination has to do with attitudes of a party spirit and lack of compassion towards the 'have-nots'. **29** Failure to recognize the body of the Lord, *i.e.* the body of believers (*cf.* 10:16), can only invoke personal judgment. **30** Judgment has already occurred. Some are spiritually weak because of their actions, others are suffering illness and some have been removed by death. This points to the enormous importance which God attaches to his church and

reflects the same activity in the OT on his part in judging and removing those who disregard their commitment to the unity and needs of the believing community. **31** Passing judgment on their own actions would deflect divine judgment. **32** Lest the Corinthians believe that God's judgment is as uncaring as that of the pagan gods, he reminds them that the Lord's discipline is always remedial in this life, so that his people will not be condemned along with the world.

33 The phrase, *so then* signals the essence of what the Corinthians are being called upon to do. When they gather together they are to *wait for* one another or to share their meal, for the verb can mean either. **34** Those whose hunger is such that they cannot wait, are enjoined to eat at home. This will mean that they will gather not for the worse but for the better (*cf.* v 17). This seems to be an interim measure because Paul promises to deal with the matter further when he comes.

This statement is sometimes taken to mean that Paul has suspended the meal permanently and implemented a service such as we celebrate today. It is more likely that his intention is to eradicate the problems and the underlying attitudes which gave rise to them. It must be remembered that the citizens were experiencing a period of famine (7:26) in which the 'have-nots' were faring worse. It is also worth reflecting on the fact that the Lord's Supper can only really be that when those who participate do so with an attitude and actions towards others consistent with the self-giving attitude and actions of Jesus (*cf.* 11.20).

12:1–13 There is only one Holy Spirit

Just as conduct at the Lord's Supper was out of hand, so too was the way in which ministry was conducted in church. While the Corinthians had written asking for Paul's apostolic ruling on the specific matter of spiritual gifts, there is no reason for separating the issues in ch. 11 from those in chs. 12 – 14. Seen together, we find the meetings of Christians in disarray. In whatever way the reader reconstructs the problems which gave rise to a request for clarification from Paul – and it is like piecing together a discussion while listening to the speaker at one end of the telephone – they need to be related to Paul's summary of his final instructions in 14:39–40. He uses this method elsewhere (*cf.* 11:33; 15:58). They must *be eager to prophesy . . . not forbid speaking in tongues*, doing everything in the church in *a fitting and orderly way*. The problems appear to relate primarily to the priority of prophecy and exercising the gift of tongues in the Christian meetings. These were to be conducted in such a way as to reflect the character of the God whose meeting it was.

1 The Corinthians wrote concerning *spiritual gifts* – the Greek is ambiguous and can be rendered 'spiritual people'. The opening discussion would suggest that the Corinthians' question in v 1 related to the way in which those who possessed the Spirit exercised their ministry in the church meeting. Paul's first concern is to clear up their ignorance. **2** He reminds them how, when they were *pagans*, they *were influenced* and *led astray to mute idols* lit. 'were led astray as you were continually led'. Their rejection of the general revelation of God in their lives led them into idolatry and into the downward spiral of idolatrous practices (Rom. 1.21–23). *Mute* is used in the same way OT writers used it when pointing out to Israel the foolishness and futility of bowing down to handmade idols (Hab. 2:18–19). **3** Pagans believed that the gods were capable of influencing their objectives against others in areas of life such as athletic competitions, matters of the heart, business and politics. This was done in pagan worship through the use of curses against their opponents. Sometimes they were written on lead, deposited in the temple and wells and sworn in the name of a god. A curse tablet found in the temple of Demeter in Corinth read, 'Hermes of the underworld [grant] heavy curses'. *Jesus be cursed* can be translated 'Jesus [is] a curse' or 'Jesus [grant] a curse' for the two words are lit. 'anathema Jesus'. *Cf.* 16:22 'let him be anathema' where the verb is in the present tense. Were the Corinthian Christians using the name of Jesus as a curse against opponents in the same way pagans did with their gods? Is Paul saying that no person speaking by the Spirit of God curses others with 'anathema Jesus' in order to disadvantage them? Only those led by the Spirit will affirm that *Jesus is Lord*. Christians were meant to be using their gifts for the blessing and the welfare of others (*cf.* v 7).

Paul proceeds to discuss the fact that the many different gifts are from the one source, God, who has made them available for the common good (4–11). **4–6** From the same Spirit, Lord and God, comes a variety of gifts, services and activities – the church would do well to follow the example of Paul in using all three terms. **7** To each person is given the manifestation of the Spirit not for himself but *for the common good*. The 'welfare' of others in secular life was the object of benefactions, and Paul here uses the same word to stress that what each has been given is for others. In secular Corinth the elite paraded their gifts and abilities believing that it was these that gave them status and significance. This false notion appears, in some cases, still to exist after conversion and in ministry. **8–10** Paul outlines the different gifts,

services and activities of the Spirit – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, distinguishing spirits, and tongues or languages (both are possible *cf.* 13:1) and their interpretations. **11** All this is attributed to the Spirit, and their distribution to each person is declared to be the sovereign decision of the Spirit (*cf.* 4:7b).

12 Just as the gifts are diverse but are derived from the one Spirit (4–11), *so it is with Christ i.e.* the body of Christ (see v 27). **13** Baptism by the Spirit is into one body where racial origins or secular status make no difference. The source of their spiritual life is the Spirit (*cf.* the source of the people of God in the OT, 10:4).

12:14–31 There is only one body of believers

It is not possible to declare independence from the body of believers merely because individuals are unhappy with particular gifts given by the sovereign Spirit (15–20) or with the gifts of others, and therefore declare that they do not need particular ministries, (21–26). All Christians are part of one body and God has arranged this diversity.

15–21 Dissatisfaction with one's function cannot mean that one ceases to be part of the body. If the whole body consisted of one gift, how would it cope? God arranged all the parts of the body as he saw fit. If all were one part, there would be no body. The truth is that there are many parts, but one body. Those with gifts of perception and thought cannot be dismissive of those with more practical gifts. **22–24** Weak and unpresentable parts are treated with special honour and modesty compared with other parts of the body which need no special attention. God has integrated the members of the body and has bestowed additional honour on the parts that lack it. **25** The crux of the issue is God's intention that there should be no division, but rather equal concern for all (*cf.* 1:10; 3:3; 11:18).

27 The Corinthians are the body of Christ and each one of them is part of it. Some felt superior and as a result others were made to feel inferior in their ministry. They were tempted to withdraw, or actually withdrew, from any active role in the Christian meeting. Just as some Corinthians failed to recognize the body in 11:29, so here they exercised their ministry in a way which had a negative effect on other members. They showed partiality in their response to others – something which clearly happened in secular society. **28–30** Both the allocation of gifts to Christians and the priority given to them is God's. Apostolic functions, the ministry of prophets, the tasks of teaching, miracles, healing, help to those in need, administrative gifts and the gift of tongues are set out (28), together with the interpretation of tongues (30). It is clear that not all have each one of these gifts. **31** The Corinthians must eagerly desire the greater gifts. Which are they? These would presumably be prophecy and teaching, as they are listed in that order of importance in v 27. This is substantiated by 14:1, 39.

Lest the Corinthians seek gifts in the spirit of arrogance reflected in their attitudes in 12:1, Paul lays out *the most excellent way* for them in terms of their ministry together.

13:1–13 Gifts exercised in the context of committed relationships

1 The absence of love in the exercising of gifts ruins the person who speaks in tongues (or the languages) of men and angels. *I am*, lit. 'I have become', as hollow as the sound of a *gong* or *cymbal.* **2** The gift of prophecy whereby all revealed truth and knowledge are comprehended, and faith which moves mountainous problems, makes the minister of that gift nothing if love is absent. **3** If generosity overflows to the point of total self-giving and life also is surrendered to the flames, nothing is gained if love is absent. The absence of love in ministry means that I am changed for the worse – 'I have become hollow', 'I am nothing' and 'I gain nothing for all my effort', sharpens the motivations for ministry. Love must not be absent.

4–7 The presence of love affirms others and overcomes destructive aspects of our character. Patience, kindness and truth matter. Just as avoiding those sins in the Ten Commandments which deal with other human beings nurtures relationships, so too does love. Envy, boastfulness, self-assertiveness, anger and evil are avoided. Love provides both the stability and consistency in which life thrives.

8–13 The future of love is guaranteed. **9** In this transient existence our imperfect knowledge is reflected in our prophecy. **10** When perfection comes in heaven, then the imperfect will fall away. **12** Imperfect reflections will be replaced by true perception – imperfect mirrors distorted a proper reflection of the face in the mirror. Partial knowledge will give way to full knowledge, just as we are fully known by God. **13** Permanence is only given to faith, hope – the future comes to us from the hands of a God who will not fail us – and love. Love has the top place, for reasons that are clear in vs 1–7.

14:1–19 Prophecies, tongues and the church

The pursuit of love must be the priority in the Christian gathering. Repeating the statement in 12:31 and resuming the instruction eagerly to desire the greater gifts, Paul reveals that he has in mind the gift of prophecy. **2** He indicates why

this is so. Tongues are not directed to men but to God. 3 Prophecy on the other hand is directed to the people of God and meets three needs of the human heart – strength, encouragement and comfort. The Christian faith is unique in that it has used words which describe construction in its activity of seeking to fortify, encourage and comfort its members. 5 Paul's wish is to have all speak in tongues, but, he adds, given the choice, he would rather have them prophesy. The prophet is greater than the tongue-speaker unless he interprets so that the church may be built up. He repeats the edifying intention of the Christian gathering.

6 Paul is arguing with those who apparently put such an emphasis on tongues by taking himself as the example. Unless he brings some revelation, knowledge, prophecy or teaching, what good will his ministry achieve? He provides two examples. 7 Intelligibility is crucial in music for the playing of the flute or harp – the first century acquired a great love for the latter and its exponents filled the theatres with their extensive repertoires. 8 The trumpet needed to give the correct signals in order to get the troops ready for battle. 9 Paul applies the illustration: *so it is with you.* None can discern the tune or recognize the signal if the language is unintelligible. **10–12** Since Babel, languages are without number, and unrecognizable languages make one a foreigner and the speaker also a foreigner. *So it is with you,* Paul repeats (12). He commends their eagerness to possess spiritual gifts, and encourages them to seek those which build up the church.

In vs 1–19 Paul has argued why prophecy is to be more eagerly sought than speaking in tongues. Edifying or strengthening, encouraging and comforting the church are crucial aspects of meeting together as the people of God, and this occurs through the gift of prophecy.

14:20–25 Prophecies, tongues and unbelievers

20–22 The Corinthians are commanded to stop thinking childishly (*cf.* 13:11). While it is appropriate that they should be innocent of evil, they should think like grown-ups. This involves understanding what is written in the Law (Is. 28:11–12; Dt. 28:49) where Paul deduces that tongues are a sign for the unbeliever (but a negative one; it will confirm his unbelief!) and prophecy is for Christians. **23** If the unbeliever or an inquirer comes into church and all are speaking in tongues, then he will conclude that the group is insane. **24** With everybody prophesying however, the unbeliever or an inquirer will be affected. There will be conviction and judgment by all, **25** and his heart will be exposed, he will fall down in worship, and acknowledge God's presence.

14:26–36 In a fitting and orderly way

26 Every person has a hymn, a message of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All this must be done to edify the church. **32** It must be under control, for God is a God of peace.

33–36 deals with an aspect of the role of wives in the church. Some commentators get round the problem by stating that this section is a later addition and not by Paul. But every manuscript includes this passage. Three points need to be noted in seeking to understand the passage, (i) Wives prayed and prophesied in Christian gatherings (see 11:5). This was a common practice in all the apostolic churches (33b). The context is crucial *viz.* the evaluation of prophecy (v 35). (ii) The *law* requires the acknowledgement of the distinctive roles of men and women (34), a reference to Gn. 2:20–24 or 3:16. Paul has already cited the former in 11:8–9. (iii) The wife is to seek the elucidation of points at home, which could well mean that it is her husband who has given the prophecy (35). While there is no absolute certainty, the present writer takes the view that wives, in this public gathering, are not to engage in the public weighing of prophecy which involved the interrogation of its content.

14:37–40 Warnings and conclusions

37 The apostolic ruling which the Corinthians sought 'concerning spiritual people or gifts' concludes with a clear statement that anything Paul writes is of the Lord. The prophet and the spiritual person will know that 'what Paul says, Gods says' (Augustine). There are no grounds for relegating these chapters or any others to a situation in a peculiar place or time. **38** Those who ignore it, including prophets and those exercising spiritual gifts, must be or shall be ignored. **39** Prophecy is to be eagerly pursued because of its benefits to the church. Tongues are not to be forbidden but regulated as laid down in this chapter. **40** Paul's rulings are meant to achieve an orderly meeting. An aspect of the character of God is that he is a God of order (*cf.* v 33), and to reflect this, all things must be done in an appropriate and orderly fashion in his church. This injunction includes not only the matters touched on in these chapters but also those in ch. 11.

Note. Chs. 11 – 14 reflect the theological conviction that this is not 'my' or 'our' church but God's gathering, that Christ's action or self-giving is to be reflected in relationships and the meeting of needs; that there is to be the participation of men and women; and that the

building up in an orderly way of those who gather is a primary concern. These chapters should not be read for the purpose of pointing out the failures or deficiencies of other church traditions. It is easy to read them and not see their personal challenge. Paul calls for a greater commitment to the physical and spiritual needs at weekly Christian gatherings than most modern church gatherings allow. They must be uplifting for those who come. In the apostolic church there was no such thing as a congregation closed to non-believers. The challenge remains that Christian services must be such that the outsider can come in and worship and know that God is really among his people.

15:1–58 The resurrection of the Christian's body

This is not an issue the Corinthians wrote about. Paul heard that some were saying there was no resurrection of the dead (12). He anticipates that some will raise questions concerning the means by which the dead are raised and the nature of the Christian's resurrected body (35). Clearly the matter is connected with their conduct, for he commands them not to be misled and to stop sinning (34). As in 11:33–4; 14:39–40 this chapter concludes with commands, v 58 – *stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord*, and the reason given, *because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

What has the resurrection of the Christian's body after death to do with the works performed *in the Lord* in this life? Why do they need to be assured that they are not in vain? It is not the resurrection of Christ that was being denied, but the resurrection of the Christian's body over against the pagan doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

To the first-century mind the immortality of the soul was unquestionably true for most pagans. The resurrection of the body was absurd to them (*cf.* Acts 17:32). Some Christians appear to have seen eternal life in terms of the immortality of the soul. They also appear to have endorsed the implications which pagans had drawn. Popular paganism argued that the senses surrounding the immortal soul were given by Nature but could not be enjoyed beyond the grave. So if they had the money 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die' (32). How the Christian lived in this life was felt to be of little consequence, but having the assurance of immortality was seen to be the essence of the gospel and all that matters. This view of the Christian life still lives on and is not without its proponents both in the pulpit and pew. Paul strongly refutes this abberant view of the Christian's continuity apart from one's body by showing that the resurrection of Christ was at the heart of the gospel and the resurrection of the Christian's body was a logical consequence of it, and concludes with the ethical implications of this. He then proceeds to explain the nature of the resurrection body for the Christian (35–57).

15:1–11 The gospel and the certainty of Christ's resurrection

1 Paul reminds them of the gospel he preached and they believed, (*cf.* v 11). 2 It rescued them and unless they hold on to that which Paul had preached to them their belief is *vain*, *i.e.* empty. 3 Paul had not invented it but had been the one who transferred to them what he had received (*cf.* 4:1). Of first importance was the death of Christ for our sins which was true because the OT had discussed the work of the Messiah (Is. 53). 4 The Messiah's burial and resurrection on the third day was likewise the subject of the OT (Ps. 16:8–11 cited by Peter at Pentecost, Acts 2:24–28). 5–8 This OT passage was naturally substantiated by Christ's resurrection, which a large number of people now living could confirm. Peter, then the twelve apostles, five hundred Christians to whom he appeared at one time, James the Lord's brother, then all the apostles and finally Paul as a latecomer on the road to Damascus, all met him (Acts 9:3–5). 10 The intervention of God's grace had made Paul an apostle and he claimed to have worked harder than any other apostle, or rather the grace of God had achieved this. 11 That however was immaterial, for this gospel which Paul has just outlined was *what we* (apostles) *preach* and this was what the Corinthians believed.

15:12–34 Christ's resurrection and our resurrection

15:12–19 If Christ is not risen. With the use of six 'ifs' Paul explores the consequences of the belief of some of the Corinthian Christians who held that the body is not resurrected. 12 He begins by referring back to the fact of Christ's resurrection. How could some assert that there is no such thing as resurrection? 13 If, as the founders of the Areopagus in Athens believed, the resurrection of the body was an impossibility *per se*, then Christ's resurrection was impossible. 14 If Christ was not resurrected, the gospel is useless and their confidence misplaced. 15 Moreover, the apostles' testimony that God raised Christ is fraudulent. But God could not do something which in fact does not take place *i.e.* the resurrection of the dead. 16 No resurrection means no risen Christ. 17 No risen Christ means their faith is misplaced and their sins are not forgiven (*cf.* v 3). 18 Furthermore, Christians now dead who had been persuaded to

abandon their former religious convictions are lost – Paul however did believe that those who died without Christ were lost. **19** If the Christian faith is some mere panacea in this life, then given the cost of being a Christian in the pluralistic world of Corinth, Christians were the most pathetic people on earth. Paul has brought this false view to its logical conclusion. They should abandon their profession if there is no resurrection of the body.

15:20–28 If Christ has been raised. Paul now spells out the consequences of Christ's resurrection. **20** He affirms that it is true and also that Christ's resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of those who have died (*cf.* also 11:30 where death is now referred to as sleep and not the monstrous evil the pagan world perceived it to be). The *firstfruits* of any harvest indicates that there is more of the crop to come. **21** Man was responsible for death (Gn. 2:17), and the resurrection of the dead also came through a man **23** The process is an orderly one. Christ is the first, then at his appearing, Christians follow. **24** Then comes the end, the last event in this cosmic history, when Christ delivers into the hands of the Father the kingdom, having subdued all. **25** He will reign as the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth until all is subject to him. **27** Paul explains by citing the messianic Ps. 8:6 which points to the subjudication of all. He expounds the passage by dwelling on the significance of *everything.* That naturally does not include God himself who puts everything under Christ's feet. **28** When this is finally accomplished, Christ will bow the knee to God the Father so that God may be all in all. In so short a passage Paul has traced paradise lost and regained, and the recovery of the submission of all things to God as in the beginning of creation. And it is Christ's resurrection that guarantees this.

15:29–34 Resurrection, Christian baptism and ministry. Paul mounts further arguments against those who deny the resurrection of the body and the present consequence for Christian activity. He concludes with a sharp rebuke against those who are living out their misplaced belief. If there is no bodily resurrection, then Paul sees that both their baptism and his ministry are useless. **29** This is a difficult verse. Some have seen it as supporting the idea that Corinthian Christians were undergoing baptism on behalf of those already dead, presumably deceased members of their families. They have further argued that while Paul does not condone it, he is simply citing what they have done as an argument against their belief. Paul was no pragmatist. That is rather out of keeping with him as the pastor, and his incisive critical comment on their conduct throughout this letter. It would be a practice in conflict with his gospel.

Paul teaches in Rom. 6:3–5 that Christians are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life, and that they are united to him in his death and resurrection. That spiritual experience to which water baptism points is not simply a reference to 'the soul' but to the whole person, including his or her body. The early Greek Fathers concluded on this verse that Paul was asking what is the point of undergoing baptism at all, which was on behalf of bodies – the phrase *for the dead* lit. 'on behalf of the dead [bodies]' is repeated twice – if they will simply disappear.

30 Paul's second argument is with respect to his own ministry. His own activities put him in constant danger (*cf.* 2 Cor. 11:23–28). **31** He sees himself as dying *every day.* To what is he dying? The pagans argued that the senses were to be indulged in this life. They also accused those who disagreed with them that they were denying themselves self-fulfilment and the pleasures of this life. Paul appears to be arguing in the light of that view that daily he consciously denies himself. **32** He speaks of having engaged in ministry even to the point of fighting the wild beasts in Ephesus – a possible allusion to the provincial imperial cult of the veneration of emperors with which Paul as a Roman citizen appears somehow to have become embroiled. The cult was always accompanied with wild beast shows. He refers in 2 Cor. 1:8–11 to the difficulties experienced in Ephesus. On the Corinthians' premise, Paul suggests he was wasting his time. He should live like the pagans who argued that one should eat, drink and enjoy yourself in the body because those pleasurable pursuits will come to an end at death. He cites Is. 22:13.

33 He commands them not to be led astray and cites a popular saying drawn from Menander's *Thais* that 'Bad company corrupts good character'. What has this to do with the denial of the resurrection of the body? Those who taught the immortality of the soul and the corollary of indulging the senses said that their hedonistic life-style was the witness to their success. It was the ethic of the rich. They boasted of their licentious life. Paul is apparently concerned for the effect that such bad company may have on the Christian's character. **34** When Paul commands some of the Corinthians to come back to their senses and stop sinning, it seems he has this self-indulgent life style in mind. It was endorsed by Christians and justified on the grounds that there was no resurrection of the body. Such a pleasure-centred life meant that they had no place for making known the knowledge of God to others which Paul sees

as the obligation of all Christians (*cf.* 10:32 – 11:1). Paul believed that all would stand before the judgment seat of Christ and receive the rewards for acts done in the body whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10 *cf.* Rev. 14:13). That being the case he condemned the ethical misconduct of some in Corinth who denied the resurrection of their body to justify what they did. A slide in ethical conduct by a Christian amounts to a denial of the resurrection of his or her body and of accountability for what they have done.

15:35–44 Analogies of seeds and bodies

35 Paul responds by addressing those who ask these questions (*e.g.* 'how are the dead raised?') as 'fools'. On reflection the answers are obvious as his analogies show. Wheat has two modes of existence, the second is only realized if it dies in the ground. It is God who has determined the future form of each kind of seed, *i.e.* he has given it a distinctive 'body'. God has also created the animal order with different flesh. The same is also true of heavenly and earthly bodies. The glory of those bodies differs. The terrestrial bodies demonstrate this. The resurrection of the dead is no different. It is like seed sown in death and raised immortal. It undergoes a glorious transformation. Sown in dishonour and weakness it will be raised in glory and power. 44 Paul concludes that if there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

15:45–49 Analogy of Adam and Christ

45 The first man became *a living being* according to Gn. 2:7, and the last Adam, Christ, *a life-giving spirit* (*cf.* vs 22–23). 48 Adam's descendants share his nature, while those who are of heaven share Christ's. 49 Just as Christians share the likeness of Adam, so they shall bear the likeness of Christ. For the Christian there is a guaranteed continuity of existence with the resurrection of his or her body and its transformation into the very likeness of Christ (*cf.* Phil. 3:21).

15:50–57 Assurance of victory

50 Transformation is a necessity because *flesh and blood, i.e.* the earthly body *cannot inherit the kingdom*, nor can *the perishable inherit the imperishable.* 51 Paul tells them a secret, a mystery, *i.e.* something that previously in human history had not been known, but has been revealed to God's servant (*cf.* 1 Cor. 4:1). Not all of God's people will sleep in death, *i.e.* die, but it is absolutely certain that all shall be transformed. 52 Christ's coming will occur in an instant, the end being heralded by the trumpet call (*cf.* Zc. 9:14). Then the dead will be raised and God's people will be transformed. 54 When this happens, that which the prophet predicted shall come to pass – the swamping of death in victory (Is. 25:8). 55 Again Paul can quote the OT prophecy of Ho. 13:14 which itself is preceded by the promise that the Lord will ransom his people from the grave. Of the two questions asked in v 55, the second question is answered in v 56 and the first in v 57. 56 Sin was the cause of death (Gn. 2:17). Through the law comes the realization of sin's overwhelming power (*cf.* Rom. 7:7–14 where Paul explains in detail the statement he makes briefly here). 57 Christ invaded death's domain and robbed it of its sting. This is the great victory for which God is to be thanked.

15:58 Concluding instructions

The consequence of all this discussion is the command to stand firm and not to move away from the rock of the bodily resurrection of God's people. What they must not do now in that body, which is to be resurrected, is to be led away into sin (33–34a). Rather, they are *always* to be given *fully to the work of the Lord*, which in part means helping those who are ignorant of God (34b). This is the lifetime call to the ordinary Christian. That work will not be worthless and will mean that they will receive the Lord's reward for the good done in the body at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). Those who die in the Lord are pronounced blessed indeed, for they cease from their work in the Lord and their good works follow on behind them (Rev. 14:13). In contemporary Christianity there is a danger of investing the term 'eternal life' with the Greek pagan notion of the immortality of the soul, and of regarding the present moments of the Christian life as providing opportunities for personal advancement and aggrandizement.

16:1–24 Other business

16:1–4 Arranging the collection

This is the fifth matter about which the Corinthians wrote (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1). Paul attached great importance to money being collected for the needy Christians in Jerusalem. It had not only a philanthropic motivation, but it represented a unique gesture of solidarity by Gentiles to Jews. Normally, the Jews of the Dispersion sent gifts to fellow Jews in Jerusalem, but the fact that the Gentile churches collected money for Jewish Christians showed the nature of the gospel which could break down the decisive racial barrier. 2 The giving was to be systematic, setting aside on the first day of the week a sum appropriate to their income lit. as 'the person has been prospered', by the Lord. Systematic giving was preferred as Paul did not

want to have a collection taken up when he arrived. 3 Paul would then send the collection on to Jerusalem in the hands of people chosen by the Corinthians, having written letters of introduction for them. Accountability was demanded. Abuse of 'trust' funds had been so rife among the Jews that an escort was provided by the Roman authorities for the protection of funds being sent to Jerusalem. 4 Paul will travel with those who have the letters and money if he thinks it is appropriate. He speaks not of himself accompanying them, but of their accompanying him. He clearly sees himself as the apostle of the Gentiles going to the church in Jerusalem with the gifts of Christian Gentiles. The gift was finally taken (Rom. 15:26), although, as 2 Cor. 8–9 shows, the Corinthians appeared not to have followed his teaching about systematic giving in vs 1–4. How much time and energy might be saved in Christian work if God's people simply exercised the discipline of regularly counting God's goodness and setting aside resources for Christian sharing. Note also the care with which Paul handled money in order to avoid any allegations of impropriety, and his encouragement to Christians to do the same.

16:5–9 Paul's travel arrangements

5 Here he explains what was in his mind when he said he hoped to come *very soon* (4:19). 6 He is hoping to spend the winter with them in the expectation that they will help him on his way, *i.e.* provide them with the opportunity to be part of his future ministry. Elsewhere Paul speaks of support freely given by a church as partnership with him in the gospel (Phil. 1:5; 4:15). He desires to visit Rome and also to bring the collection to Jerusalem – hence the element of uncertainty. 7 That Paul was not returning immediately to Corinth resulted in some Corinthians becoming arrogant (4:18). It reflects their secular attitude, while he, for his part, as he thinks about the options, does so with the clear constraint *if the Lord permits.* 8–9 He is presently in Ephesus and will remain there until Pentecost, the Jewish festival celebrated some fifty days after Passover. The reason for remaining there is because of the great evangelistic opportunities which are accompanied by much opposition (*cf.* 15:32 and 2 Cor. 1:8–11). He was no faint hearted evangelist.

16:10–11 Timothy's proposed visit

10 Paul is also concerned that if Timothy, his tried and trusted fellow worker (Phil. 2:19–23) comes, he should be properly received. Given the hostility of some in the congregation towards Paul, he is concerned that some might resort to the secular conventions for expressing enmity, in retaliating against the apostle by mistreating his friend. 11 He calls for proper treatment. The sending of him on his way in peace may be a reference to the Jewish custom of *shalom* which involved a spiritual benediction as well as the provision of his needs as a traveller.

16:12–14 The return of Apollos

This is the final matter on which the Corinthians wrote. They had asked for Apollos's return. It is clear from 1:12; 3:4; 4:6, that in pressing for this the motives of some were clearly suspect – it was the alternative to having Paul return for an extended stay. In spite of all this Paul has urged Apollos to return to Corinth to minister. The response of Apollos says lit. 'and it was not at all the will that he now come'. He will come *when he has the opportunity*, lit. 'when the time is right'. This suggests that Apollos has judged that accepting the invitation at this time would not be in the interests of the congregation, given the tension between Paul and the church. It is interesting that Apollos was content for Paul to reply on his behalf. There is clearly no competitive spirit between Paul and Apollos and neither would the latter be flattered by the Corinthian church into going there, given their motives. Paul was to record later the attitude of Christian workers in Corinth who had succumbed to the secular competitive spirit (2 Cor. 10:12).

13–14 While these verses may not appear to be connected with the matter of Apollos, it makes sense to see the commands given here in the light of the Corinthians' wrong attitudes to gospel ministry. They are called upon to *be on your guard.* They clearly have succumbed to secular ways of thinking about Apollos and Paul (*cf.* 3:3–4). Standing firm in the faith of Christ crucified was as much the need of the Corinthians as it was of the messengers of the gospel (*cf.* 1:17b – 2:5). The call to be people of courage and to be strong involves resisting pressure to mould ministry according to the secular categories of polished and slick oratory (*cf.* Paul's own example, 4:8–16). The call to do everything in love may well be a rebuke to their divisiveness and jealousy over former teachers and the motives behind issuing the invitation to Apollos to return (*cf.* 1:10; 3:3; 4:6).

16:15–18 The godly example of the household of Stephanas

The large household was a social institution in Paul's day. It had an enormous capacity to further Christian ministry. 15 Already mentioned in 1:16, the household of Stephanas, who were the earliest fruits of Paul's ministry, clearly used their resources for God's people, *i.e.* saints, (*cf.* 1:2). If, as has been suggested, the Corinthians

were facing grain shortages (see discussion in ch. 7 and the meaning of 7:26), then here was a household which ministered on a day to day basis to those who had nothing (*cf.* 11:22). Their ministry would have included hospitality to Christian travellers.

16 Paul calls for submission to them and all who labour in Christian work. What the command to *submit* meant is uncertain, unless these were to be elders who ruled their own household and therefore had a proven track record of using their resources for others. **17** Certainly ministering to needs is the key, for Paul has experienced it in Ephesus at the hands of Stephanas as well as those of Fortunatus and Achaicus. Their arrival gladdened Paul's heart and they were able to fill the gap that Paul felt in his life, separated as he was from the Corinthian church. **18** He explains that they refreshed his spirit and they had done so also for the Corinthians. Ministry of this calibre must be acknowledged, lit. 'therefore recognize such'.

God's servants are to be no different from God, who sends times of refreshment to the hearts and minds of his people. The contemporary church needs such people who will service the needs of others with the gifts they have been given for this purpose. The congregation is not being asked to authorize such ministry but to acknowledge its existence.

16:19–22 Final greetings

19 Paul ends with greetings from churches in the province of Asia of which Ephesus is the capital – it implies his ministry has extended beyond that city. Former members of the congregation in Corinth (Acts 18:2–3), Aquila and Priscilla send their warmest greetings, lit. 'many'. They come with the greetings of those who were meeting in their house. **20** *All the brothers* may refer to a particular group, possibly Paul's co-workers whom he has supported financially by working (Acts 20:34). As the church in Asia has sent their greetings, he calls upon the Corinthians to greet each other as members of a holy brotherhood. **21** Up to this point a secretary has written this letter – shorthand was much in use in Paul's day, as were secretaries. Now Paul takes the pen and sends his own personal greeting. **22** Of course such greetings were not sent to the person who does not love the Lord; there can be no excuse for not responding in love to the incredible love of Christ. The opposite to a greeting or blessing was a curse or *anathema*. He invokes a curse elsewhere on those who preach another gospel (Gal. 1:8–9) and can do no less to those who do not love the Lord to whom the gospel bears witness. The Aramaic cry, *Come, O Lord*, is a prayer for Christ's return, (*cf.* 15:51–54). **23** The letter began with the greeting of grace (1:3) and appropriately ends with it, as indeed do all encounters between the Lord Jesus and his people. Paul adds his love in Christ Jesus to the congregation – again a remarkable testimony to God's grace that in spite of attitudes towards him, Paul's love, like that of Christ, has not changed, for he sees them *in Christ Jesus*.

Bruce Winter

2 CORINTHIANS

Introduction

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians

To understand 2 Corinthians it is necessary to know something of the whole course of events in the relationship between Paul and his converts in Corinth. What occurred before the writing of 1 Corinthians is described in the Introduction to the commentary on that letter. In what follows, a reconstruction of the sequence of events from the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians onwards is offered. (This reconstruction assumes certain decisions regarding the literary and historical problems involved. Readers who are interested in pursuing these matters are referred to the Introduction in the TNTC on 2 Corinthians.)

The writing of 1 Corinthians

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to clarify an earlier letter he had written (1 Cor. 5:9–11), to respond to news he had received from some of Chloe's household about Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10–12), to answer questions about his teaching in the letter the Corinthians had sent to him (1 Cor. 7:1), and to head-off some emerging criticisms of his own person and ministry (1 Cor. 4:1–18). He took the opportunity also to give instructions about 'the collection for God's people' (1 Cor. 16:1–4), to prepare the way for Timothy's visit to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10–11) and to advise the Corinthians that he himself planned to visit them on his way to Jerusalem after passing through Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:5–9).

Timothy's visit to Corinth

Not much is known about Timothy's visit to Corinth. However, by the time Paul began writing 2 Corinthians, Timothy had already returned (1:1), and the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians had passed through a very difficult period.

Paul's 'painful' visit

When Timothy arrived back in Ephesus he apparently brought disturbing news of the situation in Corinth. This made Paul change the travel plans he had outlined in 1 Cor. 16:5–9. Instead of journeying through Macedonia to Corinth and then on to Jerusalem, he sailed directly from Ephesus across to Corinth. It was his intention, after visiting the church there, to journey north into Macedonia and then return again to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem. By so doing he hoped the Corinthians would 'benefit twice' (1:15–16). However, when Paul arrived in Corinth he found himself the object of a hurtful attack (2:5; 7:12) made by a certain individual, and no attempt was made by the congregation as a whole to support Paul (2:3). It proved to be a very painful visit both for Paul and the Corinthians, and one which the apostle did not wish to repeat. So he changed his travel plans once again, and instead of returning to Corinth after the projected journey into Macedonia, he made his way straight back to Ephesus (1:23; 2:1).

Paul's 'severe' letter

Once back in Ephesus, Paul wrote his so-called 'severe' letter to the Corinthians. This letter is now lost. From references to it made by Paul in subsequent correspondence, it appears that it called upon the Corinthian church to take action against the one who had attacked him during the 'painful' visit, and so to demonstrate their innocence in the matter and their affection for him (2:3–4; 7:8, 12). It is not clear who carried the 'severe' letter to Corinth. It may have been Titus. In any case, it was from Titus, returning from a visit to Corinth, that Paul expected news of the Corinthians' response to this letter. Paul was fairly confident of a positive response. He expressed this confidence to Titus before the latter left for Corinth (7:14–16), and he may have even asked Titus to take up with the Corinthians the matter of the collection (8:6).

Paul meets Titus in Macedonia

Plans had been made for Paul and Titus to meet in Troas. When Paul arrived there he found a wide open door for evangelism, but because Titus had not yet come and because he was so anxious to meet him, he could not settle to his work. So he left Troas and crossed over into Macedonia hoping to intercept Titus on his way to Troas (2:12–13). When Paul reached Macedonia he found himself embroiled in the bitter persecution which the churches of Macedonia were experiencing (7:5; 8:1–2), and this only compounded his anxiety. When Titus finally arrived, Paul found great consolation (7:6–7), the more so when he heard of the

Corinthians' zeal to demonstrate their affection and loyalty to him by punishing the one who had caused him such hurt.

Paul writes 2 Corinthians 1 – 9

Paul responded to the good news received from Titus by writing 2 Cor. 1 – 9. He said how glad he was that their response to the 'severe' letter and Titus's visit had justified his pride in them, especially seeing that he had boasted about them to Titus before sending him to Corinth (7:4, 14, 16). He also went to great lengths to explain the changes to his travel plans (1:15 – 2:1) and why, and in what frame of mind, he had written them the 'severe' letter (2:3–4; 7:8–12). Although Paul was overjoyed because the Corinthians had acted so vigorously to clear themselves and to punish the offender, nevertheless he urged them now to forgive and restore him 'in order that Satan might not outwit us' (2:11).

Apart from expressing his relief and joy, Paul dealt with two other subjects at some length. First, he explained his apostolic ministry both in Asia (Ephesus) and in Macedonia (1:3–11; 2:12 – 7:4). Secondly, he gave detailed instructions and encouragement about the collection for God's people (chs. 8–9). The Corinthians had made a beginning 'last year' (8:10) when they wrote to Paul, and he had replied giving basic directions about this matter (*cf.* 1 Cor. 16:1–4). In fact, Paul had actually boasted to the Macedonians about the Corinthians' readiness to contribute to the collection, and he was now becoming anxious lest they failed to vindicate his boasting (9:1–4).

Further bad news from Corinth

After writing 2 Cor. 1 – 9, Paul received distressing news about another turn of events in Corinth. Men whom Paul called 'false apostles' (11:13) were levelling all sorts of accusations against Paul and his messengers. Apparently the Corinthian church had been deeply influenced by these men, had accepted their gospel (11:1–4) and submitted to their overbearing demands (11:16–20). All this caused a major crisis in the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians.

Paul writes 2 Corinthians 10 – 13

It is not certain whether Paul received information about the new crisis in Corinth before or after he sent off 2 Cor. 1 – 9. In any case, it was in response to this new crisis that Paul wrote 2 Cor. 10 – 13. It was written to answer the accusations of the false apostles and to dispel the suspicions they had raised in the minds of the Corinthians. It reads like a last desperate attempt by the apostle to bring the church to its senses, to secure again their pure devotion to Christ and to revive once more their loyalty to their spiritual father, Paul. In it he warns them of his planned third visit, when he would demonstrate his authority, if need be, though clearly he hoped the Corinthians' response to what he had written would make that unnecessary (12:14; 13:1–4, 10).

Paul's third visit to Corinth

According to Acts 20:2–3, Paul did travel to Greece after the time in Macedonia and spent three months there. We may assume that at this time he made his promised third visit to Corinth. Apparently, either as a result of what he wrote in chs. 10–13, or because of his own coming to Corinth for the third time, the problems in the Corinthian church were settled for the time being. This can be inferred from Paul's letter to the Romans which was written from Corinth during these three months. In that letter he wrote: 'Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem' (15:25–26). If the Achaians (who must for the most part have consisted of the Corinthians) had now contributed to the collection, obviously their misgivings reflected in 11:7–11 and 12:13–18 had been overcome. And if Paul spent three months in Greece, in a frame of mind which allowed him to write Romans, then the situation in Corinth must have improved markedly.

It would be gratifying to be able to say that after all these things the Corinthian church went from strength to strength. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Evidence from the *First Epistle of Clement* (written *circa* AD 95) indicates that disharmony had become a problem once more.

The opponents of Paul in Corinth

In the reconstruction of the course of events in Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth offered above, the opposition to Paul in Corinth consisted of two phases. In the first phase (reflected in chs. 1–7) the opposition emanated primarily from an individual offender; while in the second phase (reflected in chs. 10–13) it emanated from a group of people whom Paul called false apostles.

The offender of chapters 1–7

Traditionally the offending individual to whom Paul referred in chs. 1–7 has been identified as the incestuous person referred to in 1 Cor. 5. However, this view has been abandoned by most twentieth-century commentators on two major counts. First, Paul, who in 1 Cor. 5 called

so strongly for the excommunication of the incestuous person, could hardly have turned around and pleaded for his reinstatement in 2 Cor. 2. This is not a very compelling objection because it underestimates the effects of the gospel of forgiveness in the apostle's own life. Secondly, the offence Paul alludes to in 2 Cor. 2 is not immoral behaviour, but a personal attack upon himself and his apostolic authority. This is a far more weighty objection. However, the offender may have added to his earlier sin of immoral behaviour an additional offence, *i.e.* a personal attack against the apostle Paul and a rejection of his authority. The scenario could then have been as follows.

The Corinthians, when they received 1 Corinthians, did not straightaway carry out the disciplinary action against the incestuous person for which Paul called. So when Timothy came to Corinth he found the man undisciplined and unrepentant. When Paul heard this, he changed his travel plans and crossed over immediately to Corinth, intending to take the matter in hand. Once there he found himself the object of a bitter personal attack mounted by the offender, who was now guilty not only of the sin of incest, but also of attacking Paul and rejecting his apostolic authority. The church did not support Paul, so he was forced to retreat to Ephesus. From there he sent his 'severe' letter, demanding again that the Corinthians discipline the offender. This they finally did, and when Paul heard about it from Titus he wrote 2 Cor. 1–7, expressing his joy and relief and asking that the now presumably repentant offender be reinstated.

The false apostles of chapters 10 – 13

The second phase of the opposition involved a bitter personal attack upon Paul by those whom he called false apostles. The nature of the attack is reflected in Paul's spirited response to it in chs. 10–13. The crisis precipitated by these false apostles was far from resolution when 2 Cor. 10–13 was written.

The false apostles' criticisms of Paul. They accused him of being 'bold' while absent and at a safe distance, but of being 'timid' when present (10:1). He lived 'by the standards of the world' (10:2). While his letters were 'weighty and forceful', in person he was 'unimpressive' and his speaking amounted to nothing (10:9–10). They criticized Paul's claim to be an apostle, saying it was inferior to their own because he was not a trained speaker (11:5–6). They also attacked Paul's personal integrity in financial matters, insinuating that his refusal to accept financial support from the Corinthians (as they themselves obviously did) was both evidence that Paul did not really love his converts (11:7–11) and a smokescreen behind which he intended to extract an even greater amount from them for himself through the collection ploy (12:14–18).

The identity of the false apostles. From the various hints provided in chs. 10 – 13, it emerges that Paul's opponents were Jewish Christians who were proud both of their Jewish ancestry and that they were servants of Christ. If the demand for letters of recommendation to which Paul responded in 3:1–3 emanated originally from these men, it seems reasonable to conclude that they themselves bore such commendatory letters, most likely from Jerusalem. In that case, they would have had some affinity with the Cephas party which had already formed in Corinth and which would have favoured the Jewish form of Christianity associated with Peter.

Paul accused them of preaching another Jesus and a different gospel (11:4), a charge similar to that he levelled against the men who troubled the churches of Galatia (*cf.* Gal. 1:6–9). These were Jewish believers who sought to impose upon Gentile converts the obligations of the law and to make them submit to circumcision. However, there are no indications in 2 Corinthians that Paul's opponents in Corinth were trying to impose these things. There are other significant differences between Paul's opponents in Galatia and the false apostles in Corinth. The latter laid great stress upon oratory (11:5–6), not something which was expected of the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 4:13) nor presumably of those who represented them. In addition, the false apostles at Corinth seem to have stressed the importance of visionary experiences and revelations (12:1), displays of power to prove that Christ spoke through them (13:3) and the so-called marks of an apostle (12:11–13). These things also, as far as we know, did not feature as part of the Judaizers' approach. For all these reasons the false apostles should probably not be identified as Judaizers.

In the Greek world there was stress upon the importance of oratory and a fascination with wonder-workers who experienced visions and revelations (*cf.* Col. 2:18) and performed mighty works (*cf.* Acts 8:9–13). The false apostles in Corinth may have been influenced by the Greek world, or even accommodated their approach to the Corinthians who had been influenced by it. It is clear from 1 Corinthians that the believers in Corinth both prided themselves on such things and needed to be warned by Paul against placing too much importance upon them (1 Cor. 1:5; 4:8–10; 13:1–2). It seems then that Paul's opponents were either Jewish believers who had themselves been influenced by the Greek world and

incorporated into their own understanding of apostleship certain Greek ideas, or they were Jewish believers from the church in Jerusalem who had accepted ideas prevalent among the Corinthians so as to influence them against Paul.

Theological differences between Paul and his opponents. If we bring together the scraps of information which Paul provides about the teaching of his opponents, two major areas of theological disagreement between them and Paul may be discerned. The first relates to the gospel itself, and we have seen that Paul regards the message they preached as a different gospel in which a different Jesus was presented and by which a different Spirit was received.

The second area of disagreement was about the criteria for deciding who had the right to call themselves apostles of Christ. Such criteria were necessary because the title 'apostle' was claimed by individuals other than the Twelve in the early church. Paul's opponents embraced what may be called a triumphalist viewpoint. They expected an apostle to be personally impressive, have a commanding presence and a good speaking ability (10:10) and be authoritative in his dealings with those under him (11:20–21). His claim to be an apostle would rest upon visions and revelations of God (12:1) and would be supported by the performance of signs and wonders (12:11–13). He would act as a spokesman of Christ and be known as such because of the manifestations of power in his ministry (13:3–4). And on the more formal side, the apostle of Christ would have proper Jewish ancestry (11:22) and bear letters of recommendation (3:1), most likely from the Jewish leadership of the church in Jerusalem.

For the sake of the Corinthian church Paul felt obliged to point out that his own ministry did not lack commendation (3:2–3), knowledge (11:6) or authority (13:10). He pointed out also that he had experienced visions and revelations of God (12:1–5), that he did perform signs and wonders (12:11–13) and that he could show evidence that Christ spoke through him (13:3–4). However, it is patently clear that Paul rejected this whole approach to evaluating claims to apostleship and the triumphalist criteria involved. For Paul the marks of true apostolic ministry were its fruit (3:2–3), the way in which it was carried out (*i.e.* in accordance with the meekness and gentleness of Christ; 10:1) and the sharing of Christ's sufferings (4:8–12; 11:23–28). He who preaches the gospel of Christ crucified as Lord will exemplify in his ministry the weakness in which Christ was crucified as well as manifesting the power of the risen Lord (4:7–12; 12:9–10; 13:3–4).

We have here, then, two quite different ways of evaluating authentic ministry. The one is triumphalist and stresses only the manifestations of power and authority without any place for weakness and suffering. The other, while also affirming the importance of power and authority, insists that these do not belong to the apostle himself but depend wholly upon the activity of God who chooses to let his power rest upon his servants in their weakness and to manifest his power through the folly of gospel preaching (12:9–10; *cf.* 1 Cor. 1:17 – 2:5).

See also the article Reading the letters.

Further reading

P. Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, BST (IVP, 1988).

C. G. Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1987).

D. A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10 – 13* (IVP/UK/Baker Book House, 1986).

P. E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1961).

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Commentary

1:1–11 The preface

1:1–2 Greeting

1 In his opening greeting to a church in which his apostolic authority had been called into question, Paul describes himself as *an apostle of Christ*. For Paul, an apostle was one who had seen the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15:3–10; Gal. 1:15–16), had been entrusted with the gospel by him (Gal. 1:11–12; 2:7) and in whose gospel ministry the grace of God was evident (Rom. 1:5; 15:17–19; Gal. 2:8–9). It was on the Damascus road that Christ had commissioned Paul to be an apostle, and that commission was backed *by the will of God*. Those greeted are described as *the church of God in Corinth*, reflecting the fact that churches are not just assemblies of like-minded individuals with a religious bent, but communities which belong to God and enjoy a special relationship with him. Those greeted include *all the saints throughout Achaia*. Here *saints* carries none of the twentieth-century ideas of canonization, rather it reflects the fact that all believers are God's special possession. 2 Upon all these Paul invokes *grace and peace*. By *grace* he means God's care or help; help shown in the sending of his Son into the world for our salvation (*cf.* 8:9; Rom. 5:8) and in repeated acts of love, help and provision (*cf.* Rom. 8:32). *Peace* is primarily that objective peace which God won through Christ's death (*cf.* Eph. 2:13–18), the realization of which produces in us the awareness of well-being.

1:3–11 Thanksgiving

3 Following the custom of his time, Paul includes a thanksgiving after his opening greeting. Somewhat unusually, this thanksgiving is focused not upon some praiseworthy characteristic of the readers, but rather upon *the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort* who had comforted Paul in all his *troubles* (including physical hardships, danger, persecution and anxiety; *cf.* 1:8–10; 4:7–12; 11:23–29). The *comfort* he received was sometimes deliverance from his afflictions or anxiety and at other times encouragement in the midst of them. 4–7 Here Paul speaks of *comfort* as encouragement and strengthening grace in the midst of troubles. He says that we are comforted *so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God*. One human being cannot bring about divine deliverance from affliction for another, but it is possible to share with another the encouragement received in the midst of one's own troubles. (When Paul speaks of believers' troubles as *the sufferings of Christ*

which *flow over into our lives*, he probably means suffering endured on behalf of Christ and experienced as part of what the Jews called the 'birth-pangs of the Messiah', *i.e.* the period of tribulation which was expected to usher in the Messianic age.) Paul encourages his readers by pointing out that while his ministry may have been attended by many troubles it made it possible for them to share in God's comfort. **8–11** Here Paul speaks of comfort as deliverance from troubles. During his ministry in Asia he had *despaired even of life* itself. God sometimes allows this to happen so *that we might not rely on ourselves* but on him. Reliance upon God rather than upon one's own native ability is of fundamental importance in the Christian life, yet such an attitude does not come naturally. Very often suffering is needed to make us rely upon God. Paul testifies that while God used suffering to teach him this lesson, on that occasion he was delivered from *such a deadly peril.*

1:12 – 7:15 Paul's response to a crisis resolved

Following the greeting and the thanksgiving sections, Paul moves straightaway to respond to the news brought to him by Titus. Before expressing his joy and relief at the news of the Corinthians' display of loyalty to and affection for him, he deals with certain criticisms which could have marred their relationship.

1:12 – 2:4 Paul defends his repeated changes of travel plans

12 Paul begins by defending his integrity in general. In all his contact with the Corinthians he had acted in *holiness and sincerity*, not according to *worldly wisdom* but *according to God's grace*. The sort to thing Paul contrasts here is expressed more fully in 2:17: *Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. Worldly wisdom* is that which resorts to cunning (*cf.* 4:2) or cleverness with words (*cf.* 1 Cor. 2:1) to impress the hearer. A ministry according to God's grace is one which relies upon the power of God (*cf.* 1 Cor. 2:2–5) for its effectiveness. **13** Paul's general integrity extends also to his letter-writing: *For we do not write to you anything you cannot read or understand.* He did not write one thing but intend another. **14** He concludes by expressing the hope that the Corinthians would come to recognize that he and his colleagues were people of integrity whom they could boast of *just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.* Paul looked forward to rejoicing on the last day in what God had done in the lives of his converts, and he hoped that in the present they might feel they could boast of what God was doing in him.

15–16 Having defended his integrity in general terms, Paul goes on to justify the changes he made in his travel plans. It was with a sense of confidence in the Corinthians' pride in him that he changed the plans announced in 1 Cor. 16:5–7. He had made the changes so that they might *benefit twice* – from visits on his way to and from Macedonia. **17** The confidence in the Corinthians with which Paul changed his plans was apparently misplaced. They criticized him because of the changes, so that he had to ask: *Do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no?'* To make plans *in a worldly manner* implies a readiness to break commitments with little concern for other parties involved, changing 'Yes' to 'No' without any compunction. Paul's question is meant to evoke from his readers an emphatic denial that their apostle would act in such a way.

18–20 To defend his change of travel plans Paul draws his readers' attention to the nature of the message he preached to them: *As surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not 'Yes' and 'No'* adding that *no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ.* There is not arbitrary breaking of promises as far as God is concerned. And, Paul implies, just as God is faithful in fulfilling the promises of the gospel, so Paul, as a preacher of the gospel, may be trusted not to say one thing about his travel plans and then without real cause do another. **21–22** The reason for this is because *it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ.* Since it is God who makes Paul stand firm, the Corinthians may know that Paul will act with integrity. Paul adds, *He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit.* These are all ways of referring to God's endowing Paul with the Spirit, as both *a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come* (Paul's share in the coming glory of God) and the means by which God makes Paul stand firm as a person of integrity in the present. **23–24** Paul goes on to show that he had acted with integrity even when he failed to make the return visit he had promised. The reason for the change of plans was *in order to spare you.* Lest this allusion to disciplinary action be understood to mean that Paul exercised a spiritual tyranny over the Corinthians, he hastens to add, *not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy.* Because of their faith they have their own standing before God and in this respect are subject to no-one else. **2:1–2** The first of Paul's two promised visits turned out to be very *painful* because of the way in which he came under attack. If he had made another visit it too would

have been painful but for a different reason – he would have had to take disciplinary action against the Corinthians causing them grief, and there would have been none left to make him glad. **3–4** So instead of making the second promised visit, he wrote them a 'severe' letter, *so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice*. It was written *out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears* and must have contained some sort of rebuke to the Corinthians (*cf.* 7:8–9). However, his purpose in writing it was *not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you*. It takes real love to confront a difficult situation, even if some pain is involved, rather than side-stepping it. Paul avoided commending himself but was prepared to take the risk of being charged with doing so in order to set the record straight. If we are to resolve conflict, we too need to be prepared to do this, while avoiding mere self-justification. Greater issues are involved in conflicts among the people of God than our own reputations. Unless such conflicts are handled properly, only Satan gains the advantage (*cf.* 2:11).

Note. The word *conscience* is found more often in Paul's letters than in the rest of the books of the NT put together. Unlike the Stoics, Paul did not regard conscience as the voice of God within, nor did he restrict its function to judging one's past acts (usually the bad ones) as was the case in the secular Greek world of his day. For Paul the conscience was a human faculty whereby a person judges his or her actions (whether already performed or only intended) and those of others. It judges human action by the light of the highest standard a person perceives. Seeing that all of human nature has been affected by sin, both a person's perception of the standard of action required and the function of the conscience itself (as a part of human nature) are also affected by sin. For this reason, conscience can never be the ultimate judge of one's behaviour. It is possible that the conscience may excuse one for that which God will not excuse; and conversely it is equally possible that conscience may condemn a person for that which God allows. The final judgment, therefore, belongs only to God (*cf.* 1 Cor. 4:2–5). Nevertheless, to reject the voice of conscience is to court spiritual disaster (*cf.* 1 Cor. 8; 1 Tim. 1:19), but we can modify the highest standard to which it relates by gaining for ourselves a greater understanding of the truth.

2:5–11 Forgiveness for the offender

5 Before calling upon the Corinthians to forgive and restore the person who had opposed him, Paul reminds them that the offence had not grieved only him but the whole church in Corinth. **6** Nevertheless, *the punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him*. Here we learn that the church did finally carry out Paul's instructions and discipline the offender (*cf.* 7:11–12). **7–8** Paul was concerned for the offender himself, lest through the discipline inflicted he *be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow*. So he urged the Corinthians to reaffirm their love to the repentant offender. **9–10** He points out that he wrote not only to demand disciplinary action but also to test their obedience. They had proved to be obedient to his instructions and now he urges them to forgive the offender, assuring them that he also forgives him. **11** The forgiveness and restoration of the offender is essential *in order that Satan might not outwit us*, *i.e.* gain the advantage over the church by depriving it permanently of one of its members and by exploiting moral failure to cause the falling away of the guilty party. Paul's whole approach to the offender is a reminder to us that overt or 'notorious' sin on the part of church members should not be ignored or condoned. For the sake of the church itself, and for the honour of the name of God, disciplinary action must be taken. Paul's approach also reminds us that the purpose of such disciplinary action is the ultimate restoration of the guilty party. Those who preach reconciliation must also practise it. They must not content themselves with the disciplining of offenders but be ready to reaffirm their love to them once they have been brought to repentance.

2:12–13 Waiting for Titus

Some time after Paul's return to Ephesus following the 'painful' visit, and after he had sent the 'severe' letter, he made his way to Troas, where he expected to meet Titus and receive news from him concerning the situation in Corinth. When he arrived he found that *the Lord had opened a door* for him to preach the gospel. But because he did not find Titus there, he *had no peace of mind*, so he went on to Macedonia where he hoped to intercept him. The fact that Paul left behind an open door for preaching underlines the anxiety he felt as he awaited news from Titus. The relief Paul experienced when he finally met up with Titus in Macedonia is described in 7:5–16, but before he tells his readers about that he makes a long digression (2:14 – 7:4), in which he speaks about the nature of his ministry and how he was upheld during very distressing times.

2:14–17 Led in triumph

What Paul has been saying up to this point in the letter could be taken as a rather depressing account of his ministry. He has spoken of hardships suffered in Asia, criticisms of his integrity,

pain experienced in Corinth and his inability to settle to preaching in Troas. As if to balance this somewhat depressing account, Paul goes on to strike a positive note, describing how God always and in every place enabled him to carry on an effective ministry.

14 Despite the difficulties, Paul was able to say, *But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ.* The imagery is probably that of the Roman triumphal procession, and Paul pictures himself as a soldier led in triumph by God. In this context such imagery does not support a 'triumphalist' approach to ministry, because Paul has in mind victory through suffering. In the triumphal procession sweet-smelling incense was offered to the gods and Paul says that through us God *spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of* Christ. **15–16** Those who make the good news known are like a sweet-smelling *aroma* to God; to those who obey the gospel they are *the fragrance of life* but to those who disobey, *the smell of death.* Knowing that the preaching of the gospel has such serious implications for those who hear it and therefore knowing the heavy responsibility of those who preach it, Paul asks, *Who is equal to such a task?* (It is not until 3:5 that we find his answer: *Not that we are competent in ourselves . . . our competence comes from God.*) **17** Paul felt this heavy burden of responsibility because *unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit.* He refused to tamper with God's word (*cf.* 4:2) and remove its offence so that he could peddle it for personal gain. On the contrary, he spoke *with sincerity*, conscious of his accountability to God.

3:1–3 Letters of recommendation

Paul now answers criticism of his failure to produce letters of recommendation when he came to Corinth. The criticisms probably came from the false apostles and were voiced in the attack on Paul. **1–2** Paul responds by saying that it was absurd that *letters of recommendation should have been required of him in Corinth, because you yourselves are our letter.* The very existence of the church in Corinth was testimony to the validity of his ministry. **3** The church was *a letter from Christ.* Paul had been entrusted by Christ to write a 'living letter' upon the hearts of the Corinthian believers. For this ministry Paul had been entrusted with the *ink* of the Spirit. By the grace of God, the letter commended the very ministry by which it was produced. While there are some circumstances in which a faithful ministry is not rewarded by apparent results, such observations should not be used to excuse ineffective ministries in other circumstances. Normally, it is appropriate for our ministries to be judged by their results.

3:4–6 Ministers of the new covenant

4–5 Here Paul answers the question he asked in 2:16, by showing that his competence comes from God. This does not reflect an exaggerated humility, but rather a sober recognition of the fact that spiritual work can be accomplished only by the power which God supplies through his Spirit. **6** Paul's ministry under the new covenant was *not of the letter but of the Spirit.* The contrast here is between the law of Moses and the Holy Spirit, the primary features of the old and new covenants, respectively. *The letter kills* insofar as it pronounces judgment upon those who break the law. *The Spirit gives life*, because under the new covenant sins are forgiven and remembered no more, and people are enabled by the Spirit to live for God.

3:7–18 Two ministries contrasted

In this section Paul uses Ex. 34:29–32 (7–11) and 33–35 (12–18) to further contrast the ministries of the new and old covenants so as to demonstrate the superiority of the former. Paul's primary purpose is to highlight the glorious character of the ministry with which he has been entrusted and so explain why, despite so many difficulties, he does not lose heart (*cf.* 4:1).

7–11 Ex. 34:29–32 tells of the glory which attended the giving of the law, a glory reflected in the shining face of Moses, which struck fear into the hearts of the Israelites. Paul recognizes that the old covenant was accompanied by splendour, but he argues that the new covenant is accompanied by far greater splendour. The superiority of the new covenant is argued on three counts: *the ministry of the Spirit* is more splendid than *the ministry that brought death* (7–8); *the ministry that brings righteousness* is more splendid than *the ministry that condemns* (9); and the ministry *which lasts* is more splendid than that which *was fading away* (11). The ministry of the old covenant, in which the law condemned transgressors, faded away at the coming of Christ. The ministry of the new covenant is carried out in the power of the Spirit; it gives people a right standing before God, and it lasts because it will not be superseded by another.

12–18 Ex. 34:33–35 tells how Moses veiled his face after communicating God's law to the Israelites, so that they would not have to look upon its brightness. Paul interprets this as an attempt to conceal from the Israelites the fading nature of the splendour which accompanied the old covenant, and he contrasts Moses' lack of boldness with the boldness he himself has as a minister of the new covenant (12–13). He also sees in the veiling of Moses' face something analogous to the *veil* which lay over the minds of

many of his Jewish contemporaries, who could not properly understand the law of Moses when it was read in their synagogues (14–15). Believers, those who have turned to the Lord, have the veil removed from their minds (16), and so *with unveiled faces* they reflect (or perhaps contemplate) the glory of the Lord, and in so doing are *being transformed into his likeness* (18).

Paul's primary purpose in highlighting the superior splendour of the ministry of the new covenant was to explain why he was very bold and did not lose heart (12; *cf.* 4:1). He may also have wanted to use this argument to counteract the teaching of his opponents at Corinth, who placed great stress on their Jewish ancestry (*cf.* 11:21b–22).

4:1–6 The conduct of Paul's ministry

1–2 Because he was entrusted with such a great ministry, Paul says, *we do not lose heart*. For that reason also he *renounced secret and shameful ways*. Negatively, this involved a refusal to *use deception* or to *distort the word of God*, (*i.e.* mingling it with alien ideas; *cf.* on 2:17). Positively, it involved *setting forth the truth plainly*. While we need to strive to make the truth of God's word plain to people in the situations in which they find themselves, we do not need, any more than Paul did, to manipulate it to make the word of God effective. Presented in a straightforward way, and in reliance upon the Spirit, the word of God will achieve the results for which God sends it forth (*cf.* Is. 55:10–11).

3–4 The reference to those to whom Paul's *gospel is veiled* was primarily to his Jewish contemporaries who did not understand that their own Scriptures pointed to Christ (*cf.* 3:14–15) and whose *minds* had been *blinded* by the god of this age. However, it is clear from other references in 2 Corinthians that Paul in no way saw the activity of *the god of this age* (Satan) as restricted to the Jews (*cf.* 2:11; 11:3, 14). Those whose minds have been blinded fail to see *the light of the gospel*, and the gospel is all about *the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*. When Paul speaks of Christ as *the image of God* he may be referring to his humanity (*cf.* Gn. 1:26: 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness') or to his transcendence (wisdom was sometimes personified as the image of God; *cf.* Pr. 8:22–31; Col. 1:15–20). **5–6** If the gospel is about the glory of Christ, then Paul does not preach about himself (as others might do) but he preaches *Jesus Christ as Lord* and regards himself as a servant of those to whom he preaches. The basis of Paul's ministry is the privilege of having seen for himself *the glory of God in the face of Christ* (initially on the Damascus road). We can only preach to others the Christ we have met for ourselves.

4:7–12 Treasure in earthen vessels

7 Those who bear the glorious light of the gospel are compared to *jars of clay*, inexpensive and easily broken; and this serves to show that the power released through the preaching of the gospel *is from God and not from us*. **8–12** This principle is illustrated by a series of statements (*hard pressed on every side, but not crushed* . . .) and used to show that the power of God not only sustains Paul but works through him to bring life to others (*death is at work in us, but life is at work in you*). The references to *death* and *life* here are not to be taken mystically, but quite concretely, *i.e.* in the course of his ministry Paul was continually exposed to death (*cf.* 1:8–10; Rom. 8:36) but at the same time he experienced the power of Christ's life at work in him and through him.

4:13–15 The spirit of faith

Like the psalmist who maintained his faith in the midst of suffering and said, 'I believed; therefore I have spoken' (Ps. 116:10) so Paul says, *we also believe and therefore speak*. It was his confidence in God who raises the dead that enabled Paul to keep on preaching, knowing that it would bring benefit to his hearers and thanksgiving to God.

4:16 – 5:10 Paul's ultimate hope

16–18 Though Paul was outwardly *wasting away* (*cf.* vs 7–12) he did not lose heart, because inwardly he was being *renewed day by day*. And in any case, the outward troubles were but *light and momentary* compared with the weight and eternal character of the glory he was to experience as a result. Paul endured afflictions in the present visible world by keeping before him the glories of the yet unseen world.

5:1–10 It is in this light that Paul proceeds to explain what he looks forward to when *the earthly tent we live in is destroyed*. **1** How this verse is interpreted determines to a large extent how one understands the whole of 5:1–10. In the overall context of 4:16 – 5:10, the destruction of *the earthly tent we live in* refers to the destruction of the body in death. Paul envisaged his afflictions may so intensify that they would result in his death. Aware that the *earthly tent* could be so easily destroyed, he reminds his readers that *we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven*. An important factor in determining Paul's meaning here is the parallelism in the verse. What is *earthly* and threatened with destruction (1a) is to be replaced by something corresponding to it which is *eternal* (1b). If the former denotes the earthly body of the believer, it seems that the latter refers to another body, *i.e.* the resurrection body of the believer (*cf.*

Rom. 8:18–23). **2–5** Paul speaks of his longing to be relieved from the burdens he experiences in his earthly body. Not that he longs for a disembodied existence, as the gnostics did, but rather he looks forward to life in the resurrection body. This is what he means by saying, *we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling*. God has made us for this purpose and gives his Spirit to believers as a guarantee that his purpose will be achieved. **6–8** Up to this point Paul has spoken of the destruction of the earthly body being compensated by the provision of a resurrection body, but without any hint that the former might take place before the latter. Here, perhaps because of an increasing awareness that he personally might experience death before the general resurrection, he turns his attention to this matter. First, he affirms again his confidence in God which causes him not to lose heart (*cf.* 2:14; 3:4, 12; 4:1, 16), and then he acknowledges clearly that his present situation leaves something to be desired: *as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord*. What this means can be discovered from v 7, where Paul adds, *We live by faith, not by sight*. This suggests that to be *at home in the body* means that God is not accessible to our sight (and in that sense we are *away from the Lord*), but is accessible to us only *by faith*. He goes on to say that he would prefer *to be away from the body and at home with the Lord*, for in such a state the Lord would be accessible to sight, and no longer only to faith. Thus Paul seems to recognize that he will have to experience a disembodied existence if he dies before the second coming of Christ. He provides no clues as to what he thought the disembodied state might be like. What he does in vs 9–10 is stress something which is more important than that.

9–10 Ultimately what matters is not speculation about our future state, but a determination to be pleasing to God in no matter what state we find ourselves. *We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ*, and then we will receive what is due to us *for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad*. In this context *the things done while in the body* can refer only to what a person does in this life. We are accountable to the Lord for our actions, and we will be rewarded or suffer loss accordingly.

5:11 – 7:4 The ministry of reconciliation

In this central section of the letter Paul appeals to the Corinthians to be reconciled to God and to open their hearts to himself, their apostle. He clears the ground for these appeals by first responding to criticisms of the style of his ministry (5:11–15) and then by stating the theological basis upon which reconciliation rests (5:16–21). He then makes his appeals (6:1–13; 7:2–4) and intersperses between them a call for holy living (6:14 – 7:1).

11 Paul claims to act with integrity in all his attempts to persuade people about the truth of the gospel. He is motivated by a healthy fear of the Lord, and what he is lies open before God. **12** Anticipating that his opponents might say that he is just beginning to commend himself again, he says his purpose in explaining his motives is to enable his readers to answer their criticisms. **13** Further, he asserts that if he does appear to be out of his mind, that is something between himself and God, but when he uses intelligible speech, that is for the benefit of his hearers. **14–15** He argues he could not do otherwise than serve Christ, striving to do so with the utmost integrity, for the very love of Christ compels him. He is convinced that Christ died in his stead, and now he wants to live for him. We see here two aspects of Paul's motivation for ministry, each of which ought to be reflected in our own motivation as we serve the Lord. On the one hand, Paul is aware of accountability and so has a healthy fear (11), and on the other, he knows of the great love of Christ and so could not do otherwise than live for the one who died and rose for him (14–15).

16–17 One result of Christ's death and resurrection is that Paul has a new outlook: *From now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view*. Attributes and achievements which formerly he would have laid great store by, he now regards as unimportant (*cf.* Phil. 3:4–8). It also means that he regards Christ in a new way. In his preconversion days he judged Christ using worldly criteria and came to the wrong conclusion, but he does so no longer. Something of Christ's great significance is seen in the fact that *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation*, so that it may be said, *the old has gone, the new has come*! To be in Christ is to be participating already in the new creation. It is true that for the time being the old still persists and the new has not yet fully come (*cf.* Rom. 8:18–25; Gal. 5:16–26). However, in the present passage it is the newness of life in Christ now which is being stressed, not the tension involved in participating in the new creation while still living as part of the old.

18–20 Of this new creation in which believers already participate, Paul says, *all this is from God*, because it was God who took the initiative in Christ to reconcile us to himself, not counting our sins against us. Having reconciled us, God *committed to us the message of reconciliation*, so that through us as his ambassadors he appeals to others to be reconciled to him. They need to respond to that appeal so that they too may actually experience the reconciliation. This

is the language of evangelism, but surprisingly Paul addresses it to his converts (*we implore you*), something which becomes even clearer in 6:1–2, 11–13 and 7:2–4.

21 Before continuing his appeal to the Corinthians, Paul makes a highly compressed but extremely profound statement about the work of Christ: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us*. Various interpretations of this have been suggested: that Christ was made a sinner; that he was made a sin-offering; that he was made to bear the consequences of our sins. The first suggestion is rightly rejected out of hand. The second can be supported by appeal to Paul's use of sacrificial terminology elsewhere (*cf.* Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 5:7) and to the fact that in the Greek version of Lv 4:24 and 5:12 the word translated *sin* here is used to mean sin offering. The third interpretation is supported by appeal to Gal. 3:13, where Paul speaks of the death of Christ in terms of his bearing the consequences of our sins: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree".' This interpretation is further supported by the fact that the statement *God made him who had no sin to be sin* is balanced by the opposite statement, *so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*. If becoming the righteousness of God means that God has pronounced judgment in our favour and put us in right relationship with himself, then to become sin, as the opposite of that, would mean that God had pronounced judgment against Christ (because he took upon himself the burden of our sins; *cf.* Is. 53:4–6, 12) with the result that his relationship with God was momentarily, but terribly beyond all human understanding, severed (*cf.* Mt. 27:46) for us. It is then no wonder that the love of Christ was such a strong motivating force in Paul's life; and once we grasp the significance of the love of Christ for us, it will also be a strong motivating force in our own lives as well.

6:1–2 Paul appeals to his readers *not to receive God's grace in vain*, *i.e.* not let their response to the gospel be marred by entertaining criticisms of that gospel or of the one who brought it to them. To underline the gravity of his appeal Paul reminds them that this is now the day of God's favour and implies that they should not receive this favour of God in vain.

3–10 Paul insists that the way he has conducted his own ministry does not constitute a stumbling-block which might hinder their proper reception of the grace of God. Rather, in every way he has sought to commend himself as a servant of God, by enduring hardships (4b–5) and by acting with integrity (6–7), no matter whether his own experiences in the ministry were pleasant or painful (8–10). In all the ups and downs of life and ministry as Christians we need to act with integrity. If we do not, our own lives might become stumbling-blocks for those with whom we seek to share the gospel.

6:14 – 7:1 Paul digresses in order to urge his readers to have nothing to do with pagan worship but to live holy lives out of reverence for God. The appeal to *not be yoked together with unbelievers* means here not participating in pagan worship with unbelievers. This is made clear by the series of five rhetorical questions which follow in vs 14b–16, especially the last one: *What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?* (16b). Believers cannot participate in idolatrous worship because they are *the temple of the living God*, and God has said, *'I will live with them and walk among them'*. Because a person cannot both walk with God and participate in idolatrous worship, believers must separate themselves from idolatry. Paul stresses this by appealing to OT calls to have nothing to do with what is *unclean* and OT promises of God to welcome as a Father those who turn from idolatry (17–18). In the light of these promises Paul urges his readers to leave behind everything that contaminates and to concentrate on *perfecting holiness out of reverence for God* (7:1). This passage raises problems for the reader because its connection with what precedes and follows is not obvious, and it is difficult to understand why Paul inserted it at this point in the letter. It may be that Paul, deeply concerned to re-establish fellowship with the Corinthians, was reminding them that this could be achieved only if they ceased all involvement with pagan worship. Alternatively, he may have been warning his readers that if they were to join the opposition to him and his gospel, that would be tantamount to siding with Satan/Belial. It is of course possible that Paul had jumped from one subject to another, and that there is *no* logical connection. Most people who write letters do this occasionally, and we should allow that Paul might have done so here.

2–4 Following the digression of 6:14 – 7:1, Paul renews his appeal for full reconciliation between himself and the Corinthians, urging them to *make room for us in your hearts*. In doing so he stresses that nothing in his own behaviour towards them constitutes an obstacle to such reconciliation: *We have wronged no-one, we have corrupted no-one, we have exploited no-one*. Further, to support the appeal for full reconciliation, he assures them that he has a large place in his heart for them, that he has great confidence and pride in them (3–4a), and that having heard good news from Titus concerning their response to his 'severe' letter his *joy knows no bounds*. Here we see Paul practising in his relationship with the Corinthians the reconciliation

he preached to others. Our credibility as messengers of reconciliation depends in part upon whether we are people of reconciliation in our relationships with others.

7:5–16 Paul's joy after a crisis resolved

In this section Paul picks up again the threads dropped at 2:13. Having been unable to settle to evangelism in Troas without Titus, Paul had crossed over to Macedonia, hoping to meet up with his friend there. 5–7 In Macedonia Paul found himself *harassed at every turn* with *conflicts on the outside* and *fears within*. The *conflicts* were most likely heated disputations with either unbelievers (*cf.* Acts 17:5–14) or Christian opponents (*cf.* Phil. 3:2), while the *fears* were of either persecution (*cf.* Acts 18:9) or the spiritual losses that would be incurred if the Corinthians did not react positively to his previous letter. However, God gave Paul great comfort when Titus finally arrived. As well as the comfort of Titus's presence there was the good news he brought of the Corinthians' renewed expressions of longing and concern for Paul.

8–11 Paul tells of the regret he felt over the writing of the 'severe' letter, but that having learned of its effects he regrets it no longer (8). He is happy because the letter led to genuine repentance on the part of the Corinthians, producing much *earnestness*, great *eagerness* to clear themselves (of complicity with the offender's attack upon Paul), *indignation* (against the offender) and *alarm* (having realized what had happened), *longing* and *concern* (to restore their relationship with Paul; *cf.* v 7) and a *readiness to see justice done* (by carrying out disciplinary action against the offender). The result of this vigorous response was, Paul says, that *at every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in the matter.*

12–13a In the light of this response Paul is able to say to his readers that his essential purpose in writing the 'severe' letter *was not on account of the one who did the wrong* (*i.e.* it was not simply to get them to take action against the offender) *or of the injured party* (*i.e.* it was not just so that he himself might be vindicated), *but rather that . . . you could see for yourself how devoted to us you are.* Paul, therefore, concludes: *By all this we are encouraged.* This happy outcome underlines the importance of dealing with conflict situations in a godly way, rather than ignoring them and hoping that they might go away.

13b Paul further explains the reasons for his joy at meeting up with Titus. He was *delighted to see how happy Titus was*, how his spirit had been refreshed by the Corinthians. 14 Before sending Titus to Corinth, Paul had boasted to him of the Corinthians (probably about their real attitude as a congregation, despite their earlier failure to defend their apostle when he was maligned by the offender), and all Paul had claimed Titus had found to be true. 15–16 As a result Titus's own affection for the Corinthians had been enlarged, and Paul can say, *I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.*

8:1 – 9:15 The matter of the collection

Having spoken of his great joy and relief at the news Titus brought of the Corinthians' response to his letter, Paul proceeds to take up with them the matter of the collection which was being made among the Gentile churches to assist the poor Jewish believers of Judea. These had been hit hard by outbreaks of famine during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54), and the largely Gentile church at Antioch (Syria) had responded quickly by sending relief by Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:27–30). In Gal. 2:10 Paul tells how the leaders of the Jerusalem church, having recognized his apostolate to the Gentiles, urged him to continue remembering the poor, which he was eager to do. By the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (*c.* AD 56) he had already begun canvassing aid from the churches of Galatia, and the Corinthians had heard about it and asked to be allowed to share in this ministry (1 Cor. 16:1–4). And by the time 2 Corinthians was written (*c.* AD 56) Paul had contacted the Macedonian churches and they had *urgently pleaded* with him *for the privilege of sharing in the service to the saints*, and they had been extremely generous in doing so (8:1–5).

8:1–6 The example of the Macedonians

1–2 Paul uses the example of the Macedonians' remarkably generous response to the collection appeal to motivate the Corinthians to complete what they had previously shown themselves ready to do (*cf.* 9:1–2). The Macedonians, despite the fact that they themselves were undergoing *severe trial* and experiencing *extreme poverty*, expressed their joy in *rich generosity*. 3–5 They not only gave *as much as they were able*, but *even beyond their ability*, and that not merely because of the urgency of the appeal, but *they gave themselves first to the Lord.* 6 In the light of the Macedonians' response, Paul sent Titus to raise again the matter of the collection with the Corinthians.

8:7–15 The Corinthians urged to excel

7–8 Acknowledging that the Corinthians excelled in other graces, Paul urges them to excel also in the *grace of giving*. However, this urging is not a command to obey – generosity cannot be elicited by command – rather he is using the opportunity which the collection appeal affords to test the genuineness of their love.

9 To support this appeal for love in action, Paul cites the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who *though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.* It is not economic poverty that Paul has in mind here (the extent of the incarnate Jesus' poverty can be exaggerated), but rather the cost to our Lord in playing his part in the whole drama of redemption. It did include the relatively poor economic circumstances of his incarnate life, but that was only the beginning. There were also rejection, ridicule, persecution, betrayal and suffering, all of which culminated in the agony of Gethsemane and the cross. These things together made up the full price of our salvation. Just as Jesus' poverty here is not to be understood in economic terms, the riches which he makes available to believers are not to be understood as material prosperity in the here and now. It is salvation from sin and the blessings of the new age that constitute the riches which Christ by his poverty enables believers to enjoy. **10–12** Paul advises his readers, in respect of the collection, to finish now what they not only began to do a year ago, but then eagerly desired to do. He explains that *if the willingness is there* and they give according to what they have, it will be *acceptable* to God; they do not have to give beyond their means. **13–15** Paul seeks to prevent any misunderstanding about the collection. The Corinthians are not to be burdened so that others may live in ease at their expense. The relative affluence of the Corinthians at the present time should provide the needs of the poor Judean believers. And if at some future time the positions should be reversed, then *their plenty will supply what you need.* He finds an illustration of the sort of equality he has in mind in the experience of the exodus community. When God provided manna from heaven, 'he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little' (Ex. 16:18). The needs of all were met, no-one suffered want, no-one had an over-supply. The fact that Paul expected the relatively affluent Corinthians to supply the needs of the relatively poor believers in Jerusalem ought to caution us in the way we apply his teaching about giving today. We ought not to apply this passage equally to those who are well-off and to those who are not.

8:16–24 Commendation of those who will receive the collection

Paul here commends the three men who are to come to Corinth to administer the collection. **16–17** First, he commends *Titus*, highlighting his earnest care for the Corinthians and his willingness to accept the task. **18–19** Secondly, he commends *the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel* and chosen by the churches as their representative to carry the collection to Jerusalem. **20–21** Before commending the third of the brothers, Paul digresses briefly to say why he is taking such pains over the collection. It is to *avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift*, so that everything that is done will not only be right *in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.* **22** Finally, he commends *our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous.* **23–24** The passage concludes with a summary commendation of all three and an appeal that the Corinthians give proof of their love (for Paul) and the truth of his boasting about them (to the Macedonians) when the three men arrive. It is worth noting how important earnestness (or zealousness) was to the apostle, both when commending Christian workers and when encouraging believers generally. We might place other qualities higher on our list of priorities, but for Paul earnestness was among the most important (*cf. e.g.* 7:11–12; 8:7–8, 16–17; Rom. 12:11; 2 Tim. 1:16–17).

9:1–5 Be prepared and avoid humiliation

1–2 Paul acknowledges that in one sense it is superfluous for him to be writing to the Corinthians about participating in the collection, for they themselves had raised the matter with him initially (he referred to their enquiry about it in 1 Cor. 16:1–4). More than that, he had boasted about their readiness to the Macedonians in order to spur them on to participate also. **3–5** But now the crisis precipitated by the offender had intervened and Paul is concerned that when he comes with the Macedonian delegation to receive the Corinthian contribution they might not have it ready. For this reason he writes, *I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow*, adding that it would not be only him that would be ashamed if that were to happen; the Corinthians themselves would feel ashamed also. So he sends the brothers to *finish the arrangements*, so that their contribution will be *ready as a generous gift*, and *not as one grudgingly given*, as it would appear to be if it were hastily collected when Paul arrived.

9:6–15 An appeal to be generous

6 Paul encourages his readers to make the generous gift referred to in v 5, by reminding them of an agricultural truism: *Whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* The 'sowing' and 'reaping' in this context refer to the contribution the Corinthians are to make and the results of that contribution, respectively. (The hoped-for result is described in vs 12–14.) **7–11** They should not be reluctant in giving,

remembering that God loves a cheerful giver, and that as the one *who supplies seed to the sower* he is able to increase their *store of seed* so that they might sow generously, *i.e.* so that they *can be generous on every occasion*. This was addressed to the relatively well-off Corinthians; it would not have been appropriate to say the same things to the poverty-stricken Judeans for whom the collection was being made. 12–14 Paul describes the results of the anticipated contribution of the Corinthians as *supplying the needs of God's people* and *expressions of thanks to God*. Further, those who benefit will *praise God for . . . your generosity in sharing with them*, and *their hearts will go out to you*. All this reflects the purposes of the collection: first, that praise and thanksgiving should overflow to God for the work of his grace among the Gentiles; and secondly, that the love and unity between the Jewish and Gentile sections of the church should be enhanced. 15 Paul concludes his treatment of the collection with thanks to God *for his indescribable gift*, which strikes the same note as that sounded in 8:9.

10:1 – 13:14 Paul responds to a new crisis

There is a marked change in tone when moving from chs. 1–9 to chs. 10–13. In the former, the tone is basically that of relief and comfort, of confidence in God and in the Corinthians, despite the fact Paul felt the need to explain his changed travel plans and stress the integrity of his ministry. The tone of the latter is marked by satire and irony, spirited personal defence, reproach directed towards the Corinthians and bitter attack levelled at opponents who have infiltrated the congregation (see the Introduction for a discussion of the identity of Paul's opponents). Following the disciplining and reinstatement of the offender, it appears, Paul's opponents, the false apostles, began directly to influence the congregation and poison its members' minds against him. Finding his authority usurped and his apostleship called into question, Paul was forced, against his better judgment, to provide a strong personal defence and to mount a vigorous attack against his opponents. The crisis Paul faced in this situation was the most crucial in all his relationships with the Corinthians, and this fact colours both the tone and content of chs. 10–13 in which Paul made his response.

10:1–6 An earnest entreaty

1–2 Paul begins his response by making an appeal as one who is *'timid' when face to face with you, but 'bold' when away*. This is an allusion to the charge made by his opponents following his 'timid' departure at the end of the painful visit on the one hand, and his severe letter written 'boldly' from a distance on the other. He appeals to the Corinthians that they so act that he will not have to be *'bold'* towards them as he expects to be *towards some people* (his opponents) when he makes his third visit. He rejects his opponents' charge that he lives *by the standards of this world*.

3–6 Paul responds to this charge with an extended use of a military metaphor, asserting that while he lives *in the world* (*i.e.* participates in normal human existence with all its limitations), he does not *wage war as the world does* (*i.e.* employing merely human and doubtful means). On the contrary, he says, *the weapons we fight with . . . have divine power to demolish strongholds*. *Strongholds* is an allusion to the towers or raised ramparts used in ancient battles, but here it stands for *arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God*. It was by the proclamation of the gospel (which involved reasoning and arguing in an effort to remove false barriers thrown up against the truth) that Paul sought to overcome people's resistance and so to *take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*. The imagery here is that of a stronghold breached and those sheltering behind its walls taken captive. Paul's purpose is not only to demolish false arguments but also to bring people's thoughts under the lordship of Christ. Finally, he says he will be *ready to punish every act of disobedience* (to the gospel on the part of the opponents) *once your obedience is complete* (*i.e.* once the Corinthians acknowledge again Paul's authority and the truth of his gospel). A passage such as this reminds us that Christian ministry involves a battle for the mind. False arguments need to be demolished, so that people might yield to the truth of the gospel and find life under the lordship of Christ.

10:7–11 Paul responds to criticisms

7 Referring to his opponents, Paul asserts that he himself is just as much a servant of Christ as they claim to be (later he denies what, for the sake of argument, he here concedes, *i.e.* that his opponents are true servants of Christ; *cf.* 11:13–15). 8–11 Paul answers those who said that he boasted *somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave* him, and that this boasting was belied by his actual performance when present in person. They said he frightened people with *weighty and forceful* letters when he was absent and at a safe distance, but in person he was *unimpressive* and his speaking amounted to nothing. The allusions here are to his strongly worded letter on the one hand and his unimpressive performance when present in Corinth on the other. To those who make such criticisms Paul says, *What we are in our letters when we are*

absent, we will be in our actions when we are present. This is not only defence but also a warning that on his next visit he will take strong action against his detractors (*cf.* 10:6; 13:1–4).

10:12–18 Boasting within proper limits

12–15a Paul satirizes his opponents as those who commend themselves by comparing themselves with one another! As for himself he says he *will not boast beyond proper limits, i.e.* on the strength of his commission as apostle to the Gentiles by God and the work he had done at Corinth. **15b–18** It is Paul's hope that as the Corinthians' *faith continues to grow* (especially as the present crisis is resolved) his own activity among them will greatly expand so that he will have a base for ministry *in the regions beyond you.* There too he hopes to continue his policy of working where Christ is not known (*cf.* Rom. 15:20) because he does not want *to boast about work already done in another man's territory.* Paul ends with a reminder that it matters little what one says by way of self-recommendation. All that matters in the end is the commendation which the Lord himself gives (*cf.* 1 Cor. 4:1–5). It was with this awareness that he conducted his ministry and, he seems to imply, his opponents did not. It is not for us to boast about our own work for Christ.

11:1–6 The Corinthians' gullibility

1–2a Foreshadowing his speech in 11:16 – 12:13, Paul says *I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness,* explaining that it is the *godly jealousy* he feels for his readers that forces him to make it. **2b–3** Using the imagery of betrothal and marriage, he sees himself as the agent of God through whom his converts were betrothed to Christ, and he feels under obligation to ensure that they are presented as a pure virgin to him, *i.e.* to ensure that they remain truly devoted to Christ until he comes again. But Paul fears that *just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.* The serpent's seduction of Eve was not sexual, as some rabbinic texts suggested, but rather a beguiling of the mind by denying the truth of what God had said. The story of Eve aptly depicts the sort of danger the Corinthians faced, *i.e.* that their *minds* might be led astray. **4** Paul spells out the exact nature of the seduction he fears: the easy acceptance by the Corinthians of a different Jesus, a different spirit and a different gospel from those they received through his preaching. Paul does not tell us in what way they differed. However, we know that Paul's opponents prized highly evidences of power and authority, so it may be that they had induced the Corinthians to accept a Jesus, a spirit and a gospel in which there was no place for weakness, humiliation, suffering and death. Paul preached Christ crucified as Lord, and such a gospel differed markedly from this. **5–6** Paul turns from concern about the Corinthians to personal defence, arguing that he is not inferior to those '*super-apostles*' (an ironic reference to his opponents). Even if he, unlike them, is not a trained speaker, he does have knowledge (of the mystery of the gospel which his opponents have failed to understand properly), and this he sought to make *perfectly clear* to his readers (probably referring to his teaching ministry among them during his first visit to Corinth, as well as the instruction given in letters).

11:7–15 Why Paul refuses support

7–12 Paul responds to criticisms of his practice of working to support himself and having what he earned in this way supplemented by support from other churches. All this enabled him to serve the Corinthians without *being a burden to you in any way.* But it led to criticism on two counts. First, the Corinthians thought it was below the dignity of an apostle to do menial work; and secondly, they probably felt affronted because he had refused to accept assistance from them, especially when he accepted it from the Macedonian churches while working in Corinth. Paul's opponents could well have construed this as evidence that he did not love them. Paul calls God as his witness that he does love the Corinthians. Nevertheless, he will continue to keep himself from being a burden because he wishes to *cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us.* Paul's opponents wanted to consolidate their position in Corinth by saying that they carried out their mission on the same terms as Paul did. However, there was one crucial area in which their terms were different – they wanted a financial return. If they were *bona fide* apostles they need not have been concerned about this distinction, for most other apostles accepted remuneration (*cf.* 1 Cor. 9:7–14). It seems likely that Paul's opponents not only accepted remuneration but greedily extracted it (*cf.* 11:20), and this would have made them particularly sensitive to the odious comparisons which could be drawn between their behaviour and Paul's. If our ministries as Christians today are to have credibility, we too will need to act with integrity in financial matters. The gospel is brought into disrepute when its messengers are greedy for financial gain.

13–15 Paul now exposes the true character of his opponents as *false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.* He adds their deceitfulness need not surprise, for if *Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light,* it is little

wonder that *his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness*. Satan's attacks on the church are seldom direct. They are more often subversive, carried out by those within the church who misguidedly serve his ends. This is what Paul fears may happen in Corinth (*cf.* 11:3–4). Of those responsible Paul says, *Their ends will be what their actions deserve* (*i.e.* at the judgment of Christ they will receive what their deeds deserve; *cf.* 5:10).

11:16 – 12:13 The 'fool's speech'

Here Paul boasts of his Jewish ancestry, apostolic trials, visionary experiences and the mighty works he performed. He knows such worldly boasting is foolish, but in the circumstances where his converts have been swayed by the boastings of others, he feels compelled to boast a little himself.

16–19 At the outset, Paul asks his readers to receive him even as a fool, so that he may boast a little. In this *self-confident boasting*, he is fully aware that he is *not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool*; nevertheless he expects the Corinthians to indulge him in this foolishness, seeing that, Paul says ironically, *You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!* (a reference both to the fact they have put up with the boasting of Paul's opponents, and to their pride in their own wisdom). **20** To emphasize the breadth of their own foolish tolerance as far as the false apostles are concerned, Paul adds, *You even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face*. **21a** Paul concludes this paragraph with another statement filled with scathing irony: *To my shame I admit we were too weak for that!* The Corinthians had criticized Paul for his supposed weakness (*cf.* 10:10; 11:21). Now he throws that back at them and informs them that he is too weak to make such a display of despicable overbearing authoritarianism as that displayed by the false apostles. **21b–22** *Speaking as a fool*, Paul asserts that his own Jewish ancestry is just as good as that of the false apostles. **23–29** He claims that he is a better servant of Christ than they are because he has suffered far more than they have. To support this claim, Paul provides a list of his apostolic trials which may be divided into four sections: imprisonments, beatings and being near death, including a detailed explanation of what these involved (23b–25); frequent journeys, with a description of the dangers of travel (26); toil and hardship, with an account of the privations involved in these (27); and anxiety for all the churches, with an example of what caused it (28–29).

30–33 As a final example of *the things which show my weakness*, Paul narrates the story of his flight from Damascus, his first taste of persecution, which seems to have left an indelible imprint upon him. Unlike the trials list of vs 23b–29, which could be construed as triumphalist ('All these difficulties I have overcome in order to fulfil my commission'), the ignominious flight from Damascus contains little of which Paul felt he could be proud. By highlighting all these things which show his weakness and humiliation and not his strength Paul presents himself as a true servant of Christ. Jesus said that those who followed him would suffer persecution just as he did, and Paul shows that this was his experience as an apostle. By introducing this idea into the debate going on in Corinth about who were true apostles, Paul not only supports his own claim but also undermines the claims of his opponents.

12:1 Paul now goes on to boast about his *visions and revelations from the Lord*. He is conscious that there is *nothing to be gained* by doing so, but much to be lost if he does not. Evidently his opponents had criticized his claim to be an apostle saying that he had not experienced visions and revelations. Paul puts the record straight.

2–4 Of the many visions and revelations he had experienced (Acts 9:4–6; 16:9–10; 18:9–11; Gal. 1:15–16), Paul singles out one which occurred *fourteen years ago*, and therefore some years after his conversion. Paul felt himself *caught up to the third heaven ... to paradise* where he heard *things that a man is not permitted to tell*. He does not know whether this experience was *in the body or apart from the body*, and neither, therefore, can we. In the literature of both the Jewish and Gentile worlds there are parallels to the apostle's experience of rapture, and from these parallels three things may be learned of Paul's experience. First, the experience he spoke of was understandable to his contemporaries. Secondly, such an experience was believed to be awe-inspiring, and this explains in part Paul's great reticence in describing it. Thirdly, having had such an experience would place him on a level with the great heroes of faith, and by claiming such an experience Paul could completely outflank his opponents.

5–6 It is remarkable that Paul did not make maximum capital out of his experience. Instead, he seeks to separate himself from the Paul who had had that experience fourteen years ago. Having disclosed the bare fact in order to meet the criticism of his opponents, he quickly directs attention away from it and to his weakness as the only safe ground of boasting. Though he adds, to silence criticism, that if he chose to boast he would be speaking the truth. But in fact he refrains because he wants people's evaluation of him to be based upon what they see and hear of

him now, not upon some experience he had fourteen years ago 7 Instead of making capital out of his experience Paul immediately explains how he was kept from being too elated about it. It is important to recognize that in both the OT and the NT Satan has no power other than that allowed him by God, and that even his evil designs are made to serve God's purposes. In this case, the messenger of Satan was used by God *to keep me from becoming conceited*, clearly not what Satan had in mind. There has been much speculation about the nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh, but there is simply insufficient data to decide what affliction he suffered.

8–10 Paul *pleaded with the Lord* three times that the 'thorn' be taken away. His plea was not granted, but he was told, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* In other words, God promised Paul that in the midst of the weakness and frustration which this 'thorn' produced, he would find God's power all the more present. Having heard such a word from God, Paul is able to boast about weaknesses, not because he enjoys them but because he knows that the power of Christ rests upon him in his weaknesses. He then goes on to apply this word of God to other areas of his life in which he confronts weakness and suffering, for *when I am weak, then I am strong.* Paul's purpose in speaking in this way was not just to help his readers understand more about human weakness and God's power. His opponents had criticized his claims to apostleship on the grounds of weakness (*cf.* 10:10; 11:21), and they probably regarded the many persecutions and insults that Paul had experienced as inconsistent with his claim to be an apostle. By setting out the divine principle of power manifested through weakness, Paul at once defended his own claim to apostleship and neutralized the criticisms of his opponents. **11–12** Paul is conscious that what he has just said has been an exercise in foolishness, but the Corinthians themselves drove him to it. He says, *I ought to have been commended by you*, and if that had been done then he would not have had to commend himself. People do not need to indulge in the unpleasant act of self-commendation when their friends, or those to whom they have ministered, take positive action to defend their integrity when it is called into question unfairly. Paul reminds his readers that he is *not in the least inferior to the 'super-apostles'* in respect of *the things that mark an apostle*, for *signs, wonders, and miracles* had been performed by him among the Corinthians. In this respect they were no less favoured than those of other churches that he had founded. **13** The only respect in which they could be said to be inferior was, Paul says ironically, *that I never was a burden to you* (*i.e.* he never accepted financial support from them). The significance of this fact had been twisted and used against the apostle as evidence that he did not love the Corinthian believers (*cf.* 11:7–11). Paul refuses to take such criticisms seriously and responding with great irony says, *Forgive me this wrong!* He implies that it is a strange thing indeed that they should object to being *not* burdened or exploited by him (*cf.* 11:20).

12:14–18 Paul denies craftiness

14–15 Foreshadowing his third visit to Corinth, Paul tells his readers that he will not be a burden to them, *because what I want is not your possessions but you.* Thinking of his ministry to them as that of a parent to small children he adds, *After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.* For this reason he is willing not only to spend everything he has (his financial resources) but also to expend himself (to sacrifice his own life) for them. Following such a statement of his love and commitment to the Corinthians, he asks whether his abundant love for them is going to mean that he will be loved the less by them.

16–18 Paul here indicates why his love for the Corinthians may not be reciprocated. It is because his refusing to burden them financially had been horribly misconstrued by his opponents. So he confronts his readers with the charge levelled against him. Paul's opponents had suggested that he refused support only because he intended to use the occasion of the collection for the poor Judean Christians as an opportunity to benefit himself as well. So Paul asks the Corinthians whether he exploited them through any of the men he sent to arrange for the collection (*cf.* 8:16–24; 9:3–5), through Titus or the brothers sent with him. He concludes by asking, *Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course?* The question expects a positive answer. Both Paul and those he sent to Corinth acted in the same way, with complete integrity.

12:19–21 The purpose of the 'fool's speech'

19 Paul had felt forced to speak in this way because the Corinthians had been influenced by the boasting of his opponents, and he had to show that he was in no way inferior to those men. But his real purpose, he says, was *for your strengthening*; it is not to be mistakenly construed as mere self-defence. To strengthen their faith he must expose the false apostles and win back their allegiance to himself as their true apostle and to his gospel.

20–21 And he seeks their strengthening in the faith because he is afraid that otherwise, when he makes his third visit, neither he nor they will

find in one another what they desire. He might find them still caught up in sins they had indulged in earlier and of which they remain unrepentant (especially *impurity, sexual sin and debauchery*). They might find him acting with bold authority against them because of their sins.

13:1–10 Paul threatens strong action

1 Paul warns the Corinthians that if, when he comes on his third visit, they intend to charge him with any misdemeanours, then *every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.* The requirement that accusations must be supported by two or three witnesses is found in Dt. 19:15 and was incorporated by Jesus into his instructions to the disciples concerning church discipline (Mt. 18:16; see also Jn. 8:17; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28; 1 Jn. 5:8).

2–4 Paul also warns them that, since they are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through him, when he comes they will have their proof. It will not be the sort of proof they expect (visions and revelations, signs and wonders *etc.*); instead it will be the exercise of the power of Christ to discipline offenders. He reminds them that Christ *was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power*, and in like fashion he himself, though weak, will deal with them by God's power.

5–6 The Corinthians may have in mind to bring charges against *him*, and to test his claims to be a true apostle, but here Paul tells them to examine *themselves*, to ensure that they are *in the faith.* He reminds them that Christ Jesus indwells them (with all the moral implications of that fact; *cf.* 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19–20), that is, unless they fail the test! Paul then says, *I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.* This is somewhat surprising, for the context leads us to expect that Paul's hope would be that the Corinthians would be the ones to pass the test. The explanation is that by testing themselves and reaching the conclusion that they do hold to the faith, the Corinthians will at the same time be acknowledging that Paul has not failed the test. If they hold the faith and Christ indwells them, that is so because of what they received through the ministry of Paul, and that in turn proves that he is a true apostle, one who has passed the test.

7–9 Paul's prayer for the Corinthians is that they *will not do anything wrong.* His concern is the Corinthians' well-being and not his own reputation. His assertion that he could not *do anything against the truth, but only for the truth* is best understood as meaning that he could never act in a way that is contrary to the gospel or its moral implications.

10 Paul sums up the purpose of his letter: *I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority.* In chs. 10–13 Paul repeatedly threatened a severe use of authority (10:5–6, 11; 12:20; 13:1–4); nevertheless, what he says here makes clear that he hoped all along that it would not come to that (*cf.* 10:2; 12:19–21). Thus, we may say that the purpose of chs. 10–13 was to recall the Corinthians to their allegiance to Paul and his gospel, and so forestall a severe use of authority against them by him.

13:11–13 Final appeal and greeting

Paul's concluding encouragement for his readers is that they should *aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.* In context this means they should reject the different gospel brought by his opponents (11:4), recognize his rightful claims to be their apostle (10:13–18; 11:21–23; 12:11–13), make sure no immoral practices were allowed in their midst (12:19–21) and live in harmony with one another.

13:14 The benediction

The closing call for God's blessing is especially significant because it is the only place in the NT where God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are explicitly mentioned together in such a blessing. Paul highlights *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ* (*cf.* 8:9), *the love of God* (supremely demonstrated in reconciling the world to himself in Christ; *cf.* 5:18–21) and *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit* (*i.e.* participation in the Holy Spirit through being his temple and participation in the fellowship of believers created by him).

Colin G. Kruse

GALATIANS

Introduction

The significance of the letter

The letter to the Galatians deals directly with the most basic theological question faced by the first Christian generation: How does the gospel of Jesus Christ affect the Jewish/Gentile division? The first Christians were Jewish, and at the beginning it was assumed by them that the special character of their nation, and thus the ceremonial observances related to it, would be continued. When Gentiles began to receive the gospel in significant numbers, those assumptions were challenged, and it took a prolonged period of reflection, adjustment and struggle to understand God's purposes for Jew and Gentile.

No document is more important to uncover those struggles than Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia. The Christians in that area had become the object of intense missionary zeal by certain 'Judaizers' who were convinced that the gospel did not set aside the Jewish ceremonies and that, therefore, the Gentile Christians must become Jews if they were to receive God's promise given to Abraham. (Originally the Greek word 'to Judaize' was used to describe the adoption of Jewish ways by Gentile converts to Judaism.) Moved by the Judaizing arguments, these Galatians, who had initially been evangelized by Paul, began to observe the Jewish ceremonies. The apostle realized that such a turn of events undermined the very essence of the gospel of grace. His letter to them reveals Paul's deepest convictions.

As he develops his arguments in response to the teaching of the Judaizers, the apostle touches on a variety of fundamental questions, such as the nature of apostolic authority, justification by faith, the Abrahamic promise, sonship, the role of the law of Moses, freedom, the work of the Holy Spirit and sanctification. It is not surprising that this letter has played a major role throughout the history of the church, most notably at the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther leaned heavily on Galatians to attack the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation. While the precise focus of controversy between Paul and his opponents – should the Gentiles be circumcised? – may appear to be a distant concern to most Christians after the first century, the central issue is nothing less than the basis of our relationship to God. The answer given by the Judaizers, on the surface, called attention to the Jewish ceremonies, but their deeper commitment – dependence on 'the flesh' rather than the Spirit – can find expression in many other ways.

It is claimed by some modern scholars that this so-called Protestant understanding of Galatians is invalid. However, although Martin Luther and the other Reformers may have missed certain nuances, they were not mistaken to see in this letter God's answer to the issues of that day. Whatever else Galatians teaches, it certainly tells us in clear and vigorous language that our right standing before God can only be an act of grace received through faith in Christ. No church rituals and no human efforts can establish our justification. On the contrary, 'The righteous will live by faith' (3:11).



The situation of Galatia.

Historical setting

With regard to certain historical questions surrounding Galatians, there is very little doubt.

Few scholars seriously question, for example, that Paul was the author. Again, the text makes it quite clear that certain individuals were creating spiritual sedition in the Galatian community by preaching a false gospel that pressured the Gentile believers to observe Jewish ceremonies, particularly circumcision (1:7–9; 5:2–3, 7–12; 6:12–13). On the other hand, considerable debate exists regarding the date, the recipients, and the precise occasion for the writing of this important letter.

Many scholars today identify the recipients of this letter as the churches founded by Paul and Barnabas in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:1–23). They were located in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, in the interior of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The name of this province comes from a region to the north, where the race of Galatians (originally from Gaul) had settled, and a minority opinion holds that the churches in question were located in this area – an opinion that affects the dating of the letter. Appeal is made to Acts 16:6 in support of the view that Paul founded some churches there, but this text is at best ambiguous, and other evidence is not strong.

A more complicated but related question has to do with the dating of the letter. The basic point of the debate is whether Paul wrote Galatians before or after the so-called Apostolic Council in Jerusalem. This event, recorded in Acts 15, is dated by most scholars in AD 49 (certainly no earlier than 48). Paul apparently refers to this council in Gal. 2:1–10, but many have argued that his description conflicts with the Acts narrative, especially since he fails to mention the decree reported in Acts 15:22–29.

Some scholars avoid the problem by arguing that Galatians was written before the council. (This argument assumes that the letter was written to churches in the southern part of the province. The view that the churches in question were located to the north prohibits this dating, since Paul did not evangelize the northern region until *after* the council.) According to this early dating, Gal. 2 does not conflict with Acts for the simple reason that at the time of writing this letter the council had not yet taken place. Paul's comments, therefore, must refer to a different meeting (probably the one described in Acts 11:29–30). To other scholars this solution appears too easy, especially in view of the strong similarities between Acts 15 and Gal. 2. It is possible to argue that both passages refer to the same event and that the differences can be accounted for by recognizing the very different perspectives of the two authors. According to this view, Galatians must have been written after AD 49, and the preferred date is in the mid-fifties, while Paul was in Ephesus during his third missionary journey.

The controversy about the date of Galatians is not a mere scholarly game. Certain subtleties about the meaning of the letter – to say nothing about larger questions regarding the history of the early church – are indeed affected by one's view of its relationship to the Jerusalem council. The present commentary assumes Galatians was written in the mid-fifties. Nevertheless, since it is not possible to achieve certainty on the question, it would be unwise to interpret the letter in a way that depends heavily on how it is dated. In particular, an effort must be made not to give key explanations that would be rendered invalid by the adoption of an alternate historical setting. Fortunately, the *primary* thrust of Paul's argument is clear enough and does not revolve around our ability to identify the setting with precision.

Purpose and structure

What then is Paul's argument? The apostle is very explicit when he states that he was moved to write the letter because the Galatians were in the process of deserting the gospel (1:6–7). They had, in fact, returned to ritualistic practices reminiscent of their earlier pagan experience (4:9–10).

Because the individuals who were causing problems in Galatia appear to have undermined Paul's authority, the apostle devotes the first major section of the letter to defending the divine origin of his gospel (chs. 1–2; see especially 1:1, 11–12; 2:6–9). In the next two chapters, appealing to the OT itself, he demonstrates that God's promise to Abraham is received, not by the works of the law, but through *faith* (*cf.* 3:6–14). Finally, he finds it necessary, in chs. 5–6, to spell out the practical implications of this gospel of freedom (see especially 5:13–26). These three concerns, however, are subservient to his one great purpose: preventing the Galatians from abandoning the gospel of truth and becoming apostates.

The threefold structure just outlined reflects a common and traditional way of reading Galatians. Recent studies, without necessarily discarding this basic perspective, have attempted to define more precisely the literary character of the letter by examining rhetorical techniques in antiquity. Some scholars view Galatians as an 'apologetic' discourse (something like a judicial defence), while others view it as a 'deliberative' piece (intended to persuade an audience to do something). Another perspective, focusing more on the structure of letters rather than on speeches, sees Galatians as consisting of two main parts, a rebuke section (1:6 – 4:11) and a request section (4:12 – 6:10).

Additional suggestions have been proposed by specialists in this field, and the insights of sociological and anthropological research make further contributions to our understanding of the way Paul constructs his arguments. Since a consensus has not been reached on these matters, the present commentary uses a fairly traditional outline to indicate the structure of the apostle's logic. Whatever the precise literary pattern that may have influenced Paul's writing, it is of great importance to interpret each verse or passage in the context of that logic. (See also article Reading the letters).

Further reading

J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, BST (IVP, 1968).
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Commentary

1:1–10 Introduction

In all of his letters, the apostle begins with an introductory section, which normally includes an opening greeting and a prayer of thanksgiving. These introductions, to varying degrees, contain clues to Paul's concerns. That is certainly the case in Galatians, so special attention should be paid to its distinctives. See also article 'Reading the epistles'.

1:1–5 Opening

A superficial reading of these opening verses might suggest that we have here only one more example of Paul's standard greeting, though perhaps with some slight additions and variations. The basic format is familiar enough: it begins by naming the writer in v 1 (*Paul, an apostle*); then the recipients are identified in v 2 (*To the churches in Galatia*); finally, Paul's characteristic greeting is found in v 3 (*Grace and peace . . .*).

A second look, however, makes clear that this opening is rather unusual and that it serves as an important clue to the distinctive character of Galatians. For one thing, the recipients are described in very bare terms; in the other letters, Paul addresses the readers as 'saints' or uses an equivalent expression. The significance of this subtle omission will become clear in v 6.

One should also note how substantial this opening is in comparison with the other letters. (Only in Romans, where Paul had to explain his message to a church that did not know him, do we find a longer introduction.) Especially significant is the theologically charged v 4. Here

Paul stresses the self-sacrifice of Christ, a theme that anticipates several powerful passages (*e.g.* 2:20–21). He also rings the note of deliverance, which reflects his great concern with the contrast between slavery and freedom. This deliverance is given a strong 'eschatological' (*i.e.* to do with the end-times) colouring. By focusing on the *present evil age*, Paul reminds his readers that Christ's redemption brings in a new age as the fulfilment of God's promises. Finally, the apostle asserts that God's will is behind these events. The Galatians need to recognize that this message is not Paul's invention: for them to reject it is to reject the divine plan. In any case, the greatness of Christ's work leads to a doxology (an expression of praise) in v 5, something absent from the opening of every other letter.

The most important distinctive feature of the opening, however, is found in v 1, where Paul interrupts the flow of his greeting to make an emphatic denial: his apostleship does *not* have a human, but a divine, origin. Clearly, some individuals were challenging Paul's authority to speak as an apostle of Christ. The precise nature of those charges is a matter of some debate among scholars, but possibly he was being accused of preaching a peculiar message that contradicted the teaching of the church in Jerusalem. Paul will address this issue more directly beginning in v 11.

1:6–10 Occasion

Anyone familiar with Paul's letters to the churches would expect to see a thanksgiving immediately after the greeting (in the case of 2 Corinthians and Ephesians, 'Praise be to . . . God'). Not only is such a thanksgiving missing here, Paul actually replaces it with a rebuke, *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting* . . .(6). This feature is a very important clue to appreciating the character of Galatians. The opening had already alerted us to something unusual about this letter, but now we realize just how serious and urgent was the situation Paul needed to address.

In describing the Galatians' lapse, the apostle uses the language of military desertion (6) and political strife, *some people are throwing you into confusion* (7; the same verb is used in 5:10; Acts 15:24; 17:8, 13). His focus is very specific: the Galatians are in the process of abandoning the gospel's teaching of *grace*. He does not mean by that, however, a merely intellectual change. Their action is intensely personal: they are in fact abandoning the *one* who graciously called them to himself. This twofold idea of separation both from grace and from a person occurs explicitly in 5:4, 'You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace'. In view of these words, surely our own reading of Galatians must be more than a historical or intellectual exercise. All readers of this letter are confronted with matters that affect their eternal destiny.

What complicated matters for Paul, however, was that the error into which the Galatians were falling was not simply the result of a weakness among the believers. It had an external source. Certain Jewish Christians, unhappy with the way Paul freely invited Gentiles to come to God, had begun to visit the churches he had established. Their purpose was to 'Judaize' these Gentile believers; to persuade them that, after believing in Christ, they must take an additional step and become Jews through circumcision (see the Introduction).

The apostle considered these Judaizers not merely misguided Christians, but dangerous false teachers. Their message was not in any sense the gospel, but its opposite. Their mission was so destructive, in fact, that Paul was constrained to utter the harshest words found in any of his letters: placing an *anathema* on anyone who should preach a gospel other than what the Galatians had heard and received from him. The word *anathema* (used also in 1 Cor. 12:3; 16:22; and especially Rom. 9:3, which is reminiscent of Ex. 32:32) refers to God's own curse, and so the NIV properly translates it, *let him be eternally condemned* (8–9).

Such strong language would have shocked his readers, and so in v 10 Paul justifies his reaction by calling attention to his own motives. Apparently, the Judaizers had accused him of preaching circumcision when it suited him, so as to win human approval (see 5:11). Paul vehemently denies that he has any other motive than to please God; otherwise, he could no longer be regarded as Christ's servant. In any case, the very fact that he had placed a curse on the Judaizers should convince the Galatians that his actions are hardly driven by a desire not to offend people. Lightfoot paraphrases v 10 as follows, 'You charge me with a policy of conciliation. Yes; I conciliate God' (J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, 10th edn. [Macmillan, 1898], p. 79).

1:11 – 2:21 Paul's apostleship

It has been remarked that in this letter Paul needs to defend himself before he defends his gospel. There is a measure of truth in that analysis. The attacks on his message of freedom for the Gentiles were inextricably tied to questions that had been raised about his apostolic authority. Why should the Galatians listen to him at all? On the other hand, it would be a mistake to view chs. 1–2 merely as a personal defence. The autobiographical remarks are

always subordinate to his primary purpose of establishing 'the truth of the gospel' (2:5,14).

1:11–12 Main proposition

Here, as in 1 Cor. 15:1 and 2 Cor. 8:1, Paul begins a new and important section by using the verb 'to make known' (*gnōrizō*), which lends a somewhat formal, almost solemn tone to his statement. Interestingly, the parallel in 1 Cor. 15 introduces the comment that he 'received' the basic truths of the gospel (v 3), whereas here in Galatians he makes the opposite point, which indicates that his focus is somewhat different. The expression *the gospel I preached* (11) may be significant; because of Paul's unique ministry among the Gentiles, his preaching had a certain distinctiveness (note 'my gospel' in Rom. 2:16) that drew a particularly strong opposition from Judaizers.

What follows is a triple negative, confirming – if there was any doubt about it – that Paul is responding to some sort of accusation about the character of his message. The first of these negatives reads, literally, 'is not according to man'. It is a general denial, clearly explained by the next two negatives since no man either gave him or *taught* him this gospel, clearly it does not have a human origin. The point is further clarified by the contrasting clause, 'but by a revelation of Jesus Christ' (lit), which may mean either that Christ was the source of the revelation (so the NIV, *from Jesus Christ*) or, more probably, that Christ himself was revealed to him (as in v 16).

1:13–24 Substantiating evidence

Paul now proceeds to prove his claim. The proof seems to consist of two major parts. In the first place, he needs to give evidence for the claim itself (1:13–24): he must show that during the formative years of his ministry he did not receive training from the apostles. In the second place, he must deal with two subsequent events that probably had been used by the Judaizers as evidence against him (2:1–21).

1:13–14 Before his conversion. Here the apostle points out that his pre-Christian experience was characterized by two features that are incompatible with his present ministry. In the first place, he was fully committed to the persecution of Christians and the extermination of the church (a point detailed for us in Acts 9). Secondly, he was totally devoted to Pharisaism. The expression *the traditions of my fathers* probably refers not only to the general teachings of Judaism but more specifically to what is otherwise known as the oral law, an extensive set of regulations that distinguished the Pharisees from other Jewish groups (*cf.* also Mk. 7:1–13; Phil. 3:4–6).

Why does Paul mention these things? A common answer is that they prove Paul did not get his gospel from Jewish teachers. But whoever would have claimed that this is what happened? Certainly not the Judaizers! In a way, this information supports Paul's claim to speak with some authority about the nature of Judaism. It seems likely, however, that these verses are intended less as an independent proof than as a preparation for what he is about to say. In other words, his previous life demonstrates the need he had for a drastic conversion. Only a divine, gracious intervention can explain the change that came over him.

1:15–16a The revelation. In this powerful description of how God worked in his life, Paul alludes to God's very words to Jeremiah: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations' (Je. 1:5; *cf.* also Is. 49:1–6). There is little doubt that Paul saw his own ministry, not merely as comparable with Jeremiah's, but more than that, as integrally related to the work of the OT prophets, and in some sense even as its culmination. Now at last the message of salvation is breaking all national barriers. Light has fallen on the lands of the Gentiles, of whom the Galatians are part.

Especially significant, however, is the striking accumulation of terms in vs 15 and 16 that draw our attention to God's sovereign and gracious initiative: *was pleased* (first verb in the Greek); *set me apart from birth; called; grace; to reveal.* This strong emphasis on God's predestinating will is meant to leave no doubt whatever about the divine origin of the gospel Paul preached. In particular, it is not his own efforts but God's sole agency that is responsible for his apostolic office.

1:16b–24 After his conversion. The point of this paragraph is clear. Paul wants to establish that in the first years of his ministry, during which the distinctiveness of his preaching was being formed, he did not come under the prolonged influence of the other apostles. He tells us that *immediately* after his conversion, rather than consulting *any man* (lit. 'flesh and blood', a phrase that calls attention to the frailty of human beings), he spent three years in *Arabia*. The region in view, which was ruled by the Nabateans, may have included the city of Damascus at that time (*cf.* Acts 9:19–22). In any case, Paul's point is that he did not undergo a period of instruction under the Jerusalem apostles. When he did finally return to Jerusalem, his contact with Peter was very limited, and the only other important figure he met was James, the Lord's brother. How restricted his exposure to the early Christian

church in Judea was is confirmed by the fact that hardly anyone knew him personally – though they were very much aware of his conversion, a cause for glorifying God.

It is important to note the gravity of Paul's argument. In v 20 he goes so far as to give an oath (*before God*) that his testimony is true. This is a clear indication that Paul was responding to some very specific accusations. No doubt, the Judaizers were spreading stories to the effect that he had sat under the drawn-out instruction of the Jerusalem apostles as a disciple would normally do under a rabbi. It is also important to note that with v 24 Paul has completed his argument. During the first fourteen (possibly seventeen) years of his ministry, when the character of his preaching was established, he did not have the opportunity to be trained by a human source.

2:1–21 Two special cases

Having established that his early contacts with the disciples could not account for his apostleship, Paul now addresses two specific issues that may have been raised by his opponents.

2:1–10 Conference in Jerusalem. Because this passage is of great importance for reconstructing the early history of the Christian church, NT scholars have paid much attention to it. Detailed and technical arguments have been developed, aimed especially at determining whether the occasion to which Paul refers is the visit recorded in Acts 11:29–30 or the so-called Apostolic Council of Acts 15 (see the Introduction).

In the midst of this debate, it is easy to lose sight of the main question: what is the point of the narrative? There is good reason to believe that Paul is responding to a charge from the Judaizers that may have gone something like this: 'Paul at one point in his ministry was required to attend a meeting in Jerusalem, submit in private to the Three (James, Peter and John), and agree to obey their instructions, as is proven by his willingness to collect funds for the Christians in Judea.' If so, Paul may be dealing with this incident, not because he feels some obligation to record every contact he had with the Jerusalem apostles (that aspect of his argument was completed at the end of ch. 1), but rather because his opponents had brought it up and misused it. In other words, Paul needs to set the record straight.

The first point to be noticed is Paul's emphasis on the cause and purpose of his visit (2). The cause was *a revelation:* not obedience to a human command, but subjection to a divine instruction. The purpose was to inform the leaders about his ministry and thus make sure that his great apostolic efforts were not *in vain*. This is a remarkable comment (*cf.* also Phil. 2:16 and 1 Thes. 3:5, possibly alluding to Is. 49:4), and it tells us something about the tensions that must have been felt at the conference. At least from a human perspective, Paul seemed to think it was quite possible that the church in Jerusalem might make the wrong decision and destroy the ministry to the Gentiles. The apostle's confidence in God's will never became presumptuous. He understood the reality of sin and evil as well as the weight of his own responsibility. Though he was certain that God would fulfil his promises and perfect his work (Rom. 8:28; Phil. 1:6), that fact did not become an excuse for passively 'letting God' take care of the problem. Paul would continue to exert every effort in running his race (*cf.* Phil. 3:12–14), all the while depending on God's working (Phil. 2:12–13).

Secondly, notice that the apostle is frank about the struggle that characterized the meeting (3–5). There was a 'circumcision party' in the church – people that the apostle regarded as *false brothers*, whose real motive was to undermine the spiritual freedom that the gospel provides. Apparently wanting to make the Gentile Titus a test case, they must have insisted that he be circumcised. Paul does not explicitly tell us what was the initial reaction from James, Peter and John, but there is good reason to think that these leaders, perhaps worried about the unity of the church, may have considered yielding to the circumcision party. Because of his special calling, however, Paul understood in a profound way the implications of what was being discussed. Emotions must have run high, as the broken Greek syntax of these verses suggest. The apostle, at any rate, refused to yield to the false brothers even *for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with* the Gentiles. In short, the leaders did not compel Titus to undergo circumcision.

Thirdly, Paul devotes half of his narrative concerning the Jerusalem conference to explaining the outcome of the conference, expressed both negatively (6,10) and positively (7–9). In contrast to the claims of the Judaizers, the fact is that the Three did not impose changes on his ministry and message. True, these leaders wanted Paul to show concern for the poor in Judea, but that request was hardly at odds with his distinctive ministry, so he was all too happy to oblige. (There may well be some connection between this request and the collection that Paul discusses in Rom. 15:25–27 and 2 Cor. 8–9. It is worth noting, incidentally, that Paul saw no conflict between his preaching ministry and his efforts to meet the physical needs of the poor.)

More to the point, however, was the positive outcome. James, Peter and John showed him mutual respect and equality. Specifically, they *recognised* that God had given Paul a special apostolic gift to work among the Gentiles. There was some irony in this fact. Paul himself would not appeal to the Three as though he depended on their authority (that made no difference to the legitimacy of his ministry). The Judaizers, who had indeed appealed to that authority, however, turn out to be the ones violating the Jerusalem agreement by asking the Gentiles to be circumcised!

2:11–21 Conflict in Antioch. Just as the Judaizers may have appealed (wrongfully) to the Jerusalem conference in support of their charges, so it is possible that they sought to destroy Paul's reputation by exaggerating the dispute that arose in the Gentile city of Antioch. After all, if Paul had the audacity to rebuke publicly the great apostle Peter, did not that behaviour prove that Paul was out of line with the Jerusalem church? Was this not the clearest evidence that he was a disrespectful renegade who should not be trusted?

In response, Paul first gives a brief summary of the incident (11–14). He does not deny that he opposed Peter, but he also shows why that was the only right thing to do. The Jerusalem agreement had in effect recognized a distinction between the ministry to Jews, who could continue practising Judaism even after becoming Christians, and the ministry to Gentiles, who should not be forced to become Jews. But that agreement did not specify what to do if these two principles should conflict. (Note that the so-called decrees mentioned in Acts 15:23–29 also left this matter ambiguous. If that is the same meeting to which Paul refers in this passage in Galatians, the problem at Antioch could still easily be understood along the lines suggested here.)

Table fellowship stirred up precisely such a conflict. If the Christian Jew sat down to eat with the Gentiles, he would have been in danger of violating the ceremonial food laws. On the other hand, if he refused to eat with them, that behaviour would have undermined the principle that Gentiles should be fully accepted as Christians without becoming Jews. By not addressing this problem, the apostles had apparently left the matter to the conscience of the individual. Clearly, the Jewish Christians in Antioch did as a whole choose to commune with Gentiles, thus extending the significance of what the Jerusalem apostles had done. Peter, when he visited the city, was happy to fit into that arrangement, but the arrival of some individuals *from James* (12) posed a serious problem for him.

It is not at all clear just what was the relationship between these men and James: were they actually sent by him or was that only their claim? In any case, they were Judean Christians who did not have to deal with a strong Gentile presence day in and day out and so failed to understand the situation in Antioch. They would have naturally interpreted Peter's behaviour as a denial of Jewish identity and maybe even as some form of apostasy. Afraid of their judgment and its possible consequences, Peter began to keep his distance from the Gentiles. Naturally, the other Jewish Christians followed suit. If avoiding the Gentiles had been characteristic of Peter's behaviour all along as a matter of conscience, it is conceivable that Paul would not have objected. Peter, however, had earlier shown that he had no scruples about eating with Gentiles. His subsequent withdrawal suggested that the Gentiles could not be fully received as part of God's people. In a sense, he was forcing them to become Jews (14).

'A serious crisis had arisen. But God had not deserted His Church. The Church was saved through the instrumentality of Paul. ... To Paul had been revealed the full implications of the gospel; to him the freedom of the Gentiles was a matter of principle, and when principle was at stake he never kept silent' (J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* [Macmillan, 1921], p. 102). Accordingly, Paul took the extreme measures that were demanded by the situation. It was not that Peter and Paul had a doctrinal disagreement, as the Judaizers may have suggested (and as many modern scholars assert); it was that Peter's conduct was inconsistent with his principles, as Paul proceeds to explain in vs 15–21.

First, Paul points out that he and Peter, along with all other Jewish Christians, by placing their faith in Jesus Christ, had acknowledged that the Jewish law was unable to make them right with God (15–16). If that is so, it follows that Jews no less than Gentiles are sinners, with nothing in themselves to commend them to God. Because Peter fully recognized this fact, he no longer objected to relaxing the ceremonial laws and thus, one might say, he acted like a 'Gentile sinner' with regard to dietary rules and table fellowship (17a).

Secondly, Paul denies that this abandonment of Jewish observances makes the gospel of Christ an instrument of sin. Quite the contrary, it would be a serious transgression if Paul, having through the gospel set aside those observances, were to follow Peter's lead and reinstate them (17b–18).

Thirdly, in one of the most profound statements in his letters, Paul asserts that it is the law itself, paradoxically, that has led him to

this course of action: *For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God* (19). I am obeying the law, insists Paul, when I sever myself from it! It is the law itself that tells me to tear it down. How does the law do that? Perhaps the apostle has in mind the fact that Christ came under the curse of the law at the cross and that Christians have died with him (*cf.* v 20; 3:13; Rom. 6:1–4). More likely, he is anticipating the argument of 3:19–25. By its ministry of restriction and condemnation, the law leads us to faith in Christ, who in turn releases us from the curse and power of the law.

Fourthly, the apostle makes crystal-clear what has motivated him to speak so strongly (20–21). It is the value of the death of Christ, and therefore the principle of grace, that is at stake. If we live to God, it is only because we have been united with Christ crucified (see also 6:14). He gave himself for us, and he makes possible the life of faith. If the Judaizers were right – if we could receive righteousness by observing the law – there would be no need for grace, and Christ's self-giving would have been a waste.

3:1 – 4:31 Paul's gospel

There is some debate whether the last paragraph of the previous chapter (2:15–21) is a summary of Paul's words to Peter or whether the apostle has already shifted his focus and has begun to address the Galatians directly. It seems very likely that the section reflects, at least to some degree, Paul's speech in Antioch. But even if it is a near-verbatim quotation, Paul certainly has his mind on the Galatians' needs, and so the paragraph functions as a bridge to the central section of the letter. In chs. 3 and 4 the apostle must persuade them that it is righteousness through faith, not the observance of the law, that determines whether they are truly children of Abraham.

The doctrinal argumentation consists primarily of a long section that begins at 3:6 (or 3:7) and ends at 4:7. Both an introductory paragraph (3:1–5 or 3:1–6) and a subsequent section (4:8–20) seem to be appeals to the Galatians' own experience, although we should avoid too sharp a distinction between the intellectual and experiential aspects (*e.g.* 3:1–5 is not void of doctrinal content, while 3:26–29 focuses on what the Galatians have experienced in Christ). A concluding paragraph (4:21–31) appeals to the teaching of Scripture, though Paul's argumentation here is quite different from the way he uses the OT in 3:6–14.

3:1–5 Initial appeal

The strongly personal character of the appeal in these verses is apparent from the words *I would like to learn just one thing from you* (2). Paul's reflections on Christ's death, and particularly on the fact that the Galatians' conduct is a denial of the value of that death (2:21), make him break forth with a battery of questions formulated in highly emotional tones (1, 2, 3a, 3b, 4a, 5). Twice he calls the Galatians *foolish*; he suggests they have been hypnotized and are abandoning the Spirit. In short, their experience threatens to have been in vain in spite of the fact that through the proclamation of the gospel they saw Jesus crucified before their very eyes. (The verb translated *suffered* in v 4 may have the more general meaning of 'experienced' and thus be a reference to the powerful manifestations of the Spirit.)

It is of special interest to note the contrasts that Paul works with in this passage. In vs 2 and 5, he makes a distinction between *observing the law* (lit. 'the works of the law') and *believing what you heard* (lit. 'the hearing of faith'). The latter expression can be translated in different ways, such as 'the hearing that comes from faith', 'the hearing that is accompanied by faith' or, preferably, 'the message that produces [or calls for] faith' (see the similar expression in Rom. 10:17). Although these renderings have somewhat different emphases, all of them communicate the central idea: there is a sharp contrast between a life of Jewish observance and the act of believing the message of the gospel.

The same basic contrast is expressed by Paul differently in v 3: *beginning with the Spirit* versus 'finishing with the flesh' (lit). The NIV renders the second clause as follows: *trying to attain your goal by human effort*. This rendering captures accurately the thought but obscures the contrast between the words 'flesh' and 'Spirit', which is a recurring theme in the letter (see notes on 4:23, 29; 5:13, 16–26; 6:8, 12). The point to be noted here is that Paul is beginning to group a variety of terms that constitute two distinct, and even contradictory, systems. To the one belong works of the law, flesh, slavery, sin, death; to the other, faith, Spirit, inheritance and promise, freedom and sonship, righteousness and life. The first group characterizes the present evil world (1:4); the second reflects the coming of the new age, Jerusalem above (4:26).

By listening to the false gospel of the Judaizers, the Galatians were denying their own verifiable experience of having received the Spirit with all his power and wonders. They must understand that this move represents a backward step. Instead of living like children of the age to come, they have regressed to the elementary things of this world (*cf.* 4:8–10).

3:6 – 4:7 Basic arguments

The apostle now proceeds to give a carefully

reasoned set of arguments that centre on the relationship between the Abrahamic promise and the giving of the law. V 6 could be viewed as the end of the introductory paragraph or as the beginning of a new one. In either case, it serves as a bridging comment that highlights the real issue before the Galatians, namely, how to become a child of Abraham. As Paul demonstrates that the answer cannot be through law observance but through faith (3:4–14), another inevitable question arises: What then is the function of the law (3:15–25)?

3:6–14 The Abrahamic promise. The quotation from Gn. 15:6 becomes a key factor for Paul, and he will use that text again in Rom. 4 where he expands on the significance of Abraham. The point is simple: if God credited Abraham with righteousness because he believed, then surely the true children of Abraham are those who believe as he did (*cf.* Rom. 4:11–12). In addition, Paul quotes another statement from Genesis that focuses on the significance of Abraham's life for the Gentiles: *All nations will be blessed through you* (Gn. 18:18; 22:18; *cf.* Gn. 12:3; 26:4; 28:14). It is as though Paul's gospel of freedom was already being preached long before the coming of Christ.

Having identified the character of God's relationship to Abraham (6–9), the apostle moves on to develop a negative proposition in vs. 10–14: righteousness must come through faith rather than law because the law cannot justify. The central argument is in vs 11–12, and it is supported by a double quotation, one from Habakkuk and the other from Leviticus. The reference to Hab. 2:4 is usually rendered (with the NIV) *the righteous will live by faith.* (Paul's Greek, but not the corresponding OT Hebrew text, can also be translated 'the righteous-by-faith will live'.) This passage is fundamental to Paul's teaching. Indeed, that quotation serves as the very theme out of which the letter to the Romans is developed (Rom. 1:16–17).

Because the Hebrew text is most naturally translated 'the righteous will live by his *faithfulness*', some have argued that Paul is misusing the OT, which appears to be urging obedience to God's law. However, Hab. 2:4 is itself a very clear allusion to Gn. 15:6 (both passages use the key Hebrew roots for righteousness and faith/faithfulness). The prophet may have had in view the whole of Abraham's 'faith-full' life, including the patriarch's willingness to offer Isaac, but surely that life must be seen as an outworking of the initial act of faith. Though in ch 3 Paul does not develop the ethical implications of faith, it is clear from 5:13 – 6:10 (and from Rom. 6 – 8) that he regarded an obedient life (faithfulness) as inseparable from the faith that justifies. The apostle is not using Hab. 2:4 for purposes that contradict the original. One could even argue that his theology of faith and righteousness grew out of Habakkuk's dependence on the Abrahamic pattern.

Also problematic is the way that Paul seems to set Hab. 2:4 in opposition to Lv. 18:5, 'The man who does these things will live by them', with the inference that 'the law is not based on faith' (lit. 'the law is not from faith'). Without question, the apostle recognizes a basic contrast between the Mosaic administration and the ministry of the gospel (*cf.* 2 Cor. 3:6–18). But does that mean that he views the law in itself as opposing the principle of faith? Certainly not, as the very context of ch. 3, particularly v 21, makes clear. The focus of this whole passage is the role of the law to obtain the Abrahamic inheritance, righteousness and life (see especially v 18). The law would indeed contradict the principle of faith if the purpose of the law were to justify. In other words, it was the Judaizers themselves (very possibly appealing to Lv. 18:5 for their position) who brought law and promise into opposition by telling the Gentiles that in order to receive the Abrahamic promise they must submit to the legal observances.

In any case, Paul uses the contrast between these two texts (Hab. 2:4 and Lv. 18:5) as proof that the law cannot provide righteousness. The argument is further refined, however, by two other quotations, one in v 10, the other one in v 13. The first one comes from Dt. 27:26, which places a curse on everyone who does not fully perform the works of the law (in other words, the law curses rather than justifies). The second one comes from Dt. 21:23, which Paul takes as an anticipation of the curse-bearing work of Christ. We need not despair about the law's inability to justify and its power to curse. Christ, by his death, delivered (*redeemed*) us from that curse and thus brought to fruition the Abrahamic promise through the Spirit (14).

3:15–25 The place of the law. Having expressed himself rather negatively about the law, Paul may have sensed the need to expand on how that law fits into God's purposes. Just what is the relationship between it and the promise to Abraham? His answer focuses on the fact that the law is both *later* than the giving of the promise (15–18) and *earlier* than the fulfilment of the promise (19–25).

First, then, the apostle points out that the law covenant was given by God more than four centuries after the Abrahamic covenant had been established. (The word translated *covenant* usually means 'will' or 'testament', but was used by the LXX to render the standard Hebrew term for 'covenant'. Whether Paul intended a double meaning is difficult to tell.) His point is clear: it

is not conceivable that the later covenant could undo the earlier one. But that is in fact what the law would do if it could offer the inheritance on a basis other than that of a gracious promise. The teaching of the Judaizers in effect creates an unbearable conflict between the two covenants (17). The inheritance comes either by grace or by the works of the law; and since it comes by the former, it cannot come by the latter (18; *cf.* Rom. 4:5). In the course of the argument, Paul reminds the Galatians of something that they (and probably even the Judaizers) accepted, namely, that the promise to Abraham's seed finds its fulfilment in Christ (16). This point will become important in the argument that follows.

Secondly, Paul stresses that the law came earlier than, and in a sense prepared the way for, the fulfilment of the promise (19–25). The main point here is the temporary character of the Mosaic law. It was given for a period, until the coming of the seed, Christ (19). Once the reality of faith came in the person of Christ, the law's supervisory function ceased (25). Rather than contradicting the promise, the law served God's purposes by 'imprisoning' its sinful subjects, by guarding and restricting them much as in the Roman world, the *paidagōgos* (a slave charged with the supervision of children) corrected those under him. (The term *paidagōgos* occurs in vs 24 and 25, but is not translated literally in the NIV.) In other words, the Mosaic administration was subordinate to the Abrahamic covenant and in effect prepared its subjects for the manifestation of the gospel. This idea is further elaborated in 4:1–7.

The subordinate character of the law's function is brought out in a variety of ways in v 19. First, it was *added*, *i.e.* it was not the original covenant. Secondly, it was given *because of transgressions*, which may mean that the law was intended to restrain sin or, more probably, to bring transgressions to light (Rom. 3:19–20; 4:13–15; 5:13) and even to augment them (in the sense of Rom. 5:20; 7:7–11). Thirdly, it was *put into effect through angels by a mediator*, which suggests some inferiority to the Abrahamic covenant (the precise significance of v 20 is unclear, even after much scholarly discussion and many interpretations). In short, the law cannot impart life, cannot justify. Far from annulling the gracious character of the promise, the law furthers God's purposes and teaches us to die to that law (2:19) so that we may be justified by faith.

3:26 – 4:7 Conclusion: true sonship. The word 'sons' (Gk. *huioi*) is v 26 is a key term that had first been introduced at the very beginning of this important section (v 7, translated 'children' in the NIV). This is an important clue to understanding the logic of Paul's argument. We may think of vs 26–29 as a recapitulation of that argument. But just as a composer does not merely repeat a theme at the end of a symphonic movement, so here Paul is not content to speak of Abrahamic sonship. Instead, he takes the idea a step further: *You are all sons of God* (a concept he will expand in 4:1–7). Other prominent themes in the chapter are woven into this passage: the promise (14), inheritance (18) and faith in Jesus Christ (22). As an earlier commentator noted with reference to v 29: 'The declaration of verse 7 is now at length substantiated and expanded by 22 verses of the deepest, most varied, and most comprehensive reasoning that exists in the whole compass of the great Apostle's writings' (C. J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* [J.W. Parker and Son, 1854, p. 72]).

In addition, two other important points are brought up here for the first time. First, oneness in Christ. Of course, the notion that the gospel has undone the division between Jew and Gentile (*cf.* Eph. 2:11–18) lies behind everything that Paul is saying in this letter. In v 28, however, the apostle gives expression to that truth in powerful fashion, stressing that other divisions as well (slave/free, male/female) have no bearing on our standing before God. While this verse has been used and abused in the attempt to develop a Christian ethic, we cannot afford to ignore its great significance for the subject at hand. And especially in our day, when we have become very conscious of the destructive power of prejudice – whether based on ethnic identity, social standing, or gender – we should both rejoice in this gospel that countenances no spiritual preferences, and learn to conduct ourselves in a way that sets forth that truth before a confused world.

The second theme made explicit here is that of union with Christ. The idea is already suggested by Paul's emphasis on faith in Christ, but it is heightened by the reference to being baptized into and clothed with Christ (27; *cf.* Rom. 6:1–4; 13:14; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), by the statement that we are one in Christ (28), and by the summary comment that we belong to Christ (29). It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this doctrine for Paul's teaching; this is what gives coherence to everything he says about salvation. We begin to see more clearly why Paul spoke of Christ as the seed: we are Abraham's seed only insofar as we enjoy union and solidarity with *the* seed.

A superficial reading of 4:1–7 might suggest that here the apostle is beginning a new section. In fact, this is part of the conclusion to his doctrinal argument. It consists of an illustration

that clarifies what was said earlier about the supervisory function of the law. What is more important, the passage serves to bring to a powerful climax the doctrine of sonship.

The figure of the *paidagōgos* (used in the Greek of 3:24–25) gives way to that of *guardians and trustees* in 4:2. Because they are the ones really in charge, the son of the household is not much different from a slave in an important respect – the possession of the inheritance. The child has to wait for the sovereign disposition of the father on the appointed day. The Israelites are still primarily in view here (*those under law*, v 5), but Paul introduces a new term, *stoicheia* (*basic principles*, v 3; see also v 9), that allows him to extend the reference to the Gentiles as well. The point seems to be that just as the pagans are subject to certain elementary principles of ceremonialism, so in some sense were the Jews. (Alternatively, some scholars believe the term may refer to angelic and demonic powers; *cf.* Col. 2:18, 20.)

In any case, this slave-like condition remained until the time of fulfilment, when the Son of God became man and subjected himself to the same law so that he might liberate us and make us sons (4–5). At this point the apostle reintroduces the theme of the Spirit, with which he had initially appealed to the Galatians (3:3; *cf.* also 3:14 and possibly the reference to baptism in 3:27). Only now the significance of the Spirit is tied directly to the doctrine of sonship. Since we have received the Spirit of God's Son, our hearts are conscious that God is our Father and that we are full heirs. Note carefully the expansion of these ideas in Rom. 8:14–17, 26–27.

4:8–31 Further appeals

Although, strictly speaking, Paul has now concluded the doctrinal argumentation, he wishes to reinforce his teaching by appealing both to the Galatians' experience (8–20) and to the testimony of the law itself (21–31).

4:8–20 An appeal to the Galatians' experience. Vs 8–11 remind the Galatians of their life in paganism. This passage is something of a bridge to the next one (12–20), but it would be a mistake to view it as merely parenthetical and not to appreciate that it follows upon a strong statement (7). The point of this paragraph is the frightening fact that the Galatians, who in effect have tasted the coming age (4), were going back to slavery. The contrast is made most striking by the concept of 'knowing God': their earlier practices can be explained by virtue of the fact that they did not know God, but such conduct is inconceivable now that they know him. Paul then qualifies his words by pointing out that rather than saying that the Galatians *know God* it is more appropriate to say that they *are known by God* as he initiated and established the relationship. This brief paragraph ends with a statement full of pathos (11), which recalls 2:2 and 3:4 and which leads naturally to the more personal section that follows.

Vs 12–20 are not easy to understand. The passage is obscured by allusions to events with which the Galatians were quite familiar but about which we know nothing. Moreover, Paul's language is emotional and abbreviated. V 16 seems to suggest that there had been some communication between Paul and the Galatians after the Judaizing threat had made itself felt. Further, the words *You have done me no wrong* (12) are most naturally understood as a response to something that may have been said by the Galatians. On the other hand, the explicit reference in vs 13–15 implies Paul also has in mind their initial evangelization: 'At that time, even though I was not a Judaizer but had rather become like you, you, far from wronging me, received me very well'.

Even though it is difficult to sort out the details of this passage, its basic thrust is clear enough. The Galatians' attitude to Paul had changed markedly. If they would but remember his early contacts with them – both his sickness and their kind attitude towards him – they would surely reconsider their present behaviour. That behaviour, in some way, is the result of some individuals who want the Galatians to pay exclusive attention to them and thus to shut out Paul's influence (17). The Galatians should consider carefully the motives of these people (so v 18, a difficult statement that can be translated several ways).

Paul concludes this section with another poignant remark (19–20). His emotional distress in dealing with the Galatians can only be compared with labour pains. Then, with a deliberate mixing of metaphors, the apostle identifies their most basic need, namely, that Christ be formed in them. In other words, they must be transformed into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). Paul's pastoral heart is revealed in these words and in his intense desire to visit them so that he could speak to them face to face.

4:21–31 An appeal to the testimony of the Torah itself. Treating this passage as another appeal – and thus not as part of the basic argument – might suggest that the paragraph is not too important. Indeed, some view the irony of v 21 as evidence that Paul does not really mean what he is saying. The truth is, however, that the Hagar–Sarah story plays a very important role in Paul's effort to persuade the Galatians. Moreover, the specific distinction between Ishmael and Isaac will become crucial as the apostle elaborates his doctrine in

the letter to the Romans (ch. 9, especially vs 6–12). Still, it is proper to recognize that this Genesis story is not the *basis* of his view of justification, a doctrine that was clearly explained in the previous chapter. It may even be the case that the story had been brought up by the Judaizers themselves and so Paul had to respond to it (this suggestion cannot be proven, however).

Much discussion has surrounded the meaning of v 24, *These things may be taken figuratively.* Paul uses the Greek term *allēgoroumena*, and so a more literal translation might be, 'These things are written allegorically', or 'These things may be interpreted allegorically'. Paul certainly is not making use of the allegorical method made famous by Philo of Alexandria, which strongly downplayed (or even denied) the historical character of OT narrative and which served as the vehicle for formulating complex philosophical systems. In view of the somewhat specialized meaning that the term allegory has today in the minds of many (the corresponding Greek term could be used in several, more general, ways), it is probably misleading to use it in describing what Paul is doing in this passage.

On the other hand, there is no question that the apostle here sees something that is not part of what we usually call 'the historical meaning' of a passage. The author of the Genesis narrative, as far as anyone can tell, was not seeking to distinguish between two covenants, nor was he trying to depict the relationship between Judaizers and Gentiles. Is Paul then mishandling the OT?

It is important to keep in mind that throughout the history of redemption one can see clear patterns in the ways events unfold. Perhaps the most obvious is the pattern of 'testing resulting in disobedience', seen clearly in Adam, and the Israelites in the wilderness, then broken by Jesus in his temptation. Especially important is the distinction between natural and supernatural, *i.e.* what humans tend to do in their own strength versus what they depend on God's power to accomplish. That principle is communicated many times in the biblical history, and the story of Ishmael and Isaac is a particularly powerful example. Surely God was teaching his people to depend on him for their salvation. What could be more appropriate than to bring out that principle and apply it to the Galatian controversy?

Some scholars prefer to use the term typology (rather than allegory) to describe Paul's method here. The point is that history, far from being minimized in the interests of theology, is seen as embodying that theology and thus anticipating later events as fuller manifestations of the principle in view. Further, some suggest that even if the human author of Genesis did not have in mind what Paul does with the passage, the divine author did. This approach can easily be abused to justify all kinds of misinterpretations, but it is surely true that an omniscient God (to say nothing of his foreknowledge) clearly sees the implications of events in ways that contemporary humans cannot even imagine. For Paul, it could not be a coincidence that the Genesis story had such important points of correspondence with the Judaizing issue. These correspondences are presented in the form of contrasts, as follows: Hagar/Sarah; slave/free; Sinai covenant/(new) covenant; present Jerusalem/Jerusalem from above; Ishmael/Isaac; ordinary birth (flesh)/birth through promise/Spirit; persecutor/persecuted; cast away/heir.

Out of several interesting ideas implied by these contrasts, at least two require special attention. First, note the reference to the present Jerusalem over against the one from above (25–26). It is clear that Paul's thought is strongly influenced by an 'eschatological' or 'last-days' view of biblical history, according to which the coming of Christ is said to bring in the age to come. The point surfaced in 1:4 and undergirds such 'fulfilment' passages as 3:23–25 and 4:4 (*cf.* also 1 Cor. 10:11).

Secondly, note the contrast between flesh and promise/Spirit in vs 23, 29 (The NIV's rendering of the Greek 'flesh' as *born in the ordinary way*, expresses the idea correctly, but at the expense of the theological contrast.) That contrast was first brought up in 3:4 (see the comments there), so it is significant that this central section of the letter both begins and ends with such a reference. These terms are strongly related to the 'last-days' understanding of the gospel. The flesh – *i.e.* fallen human nature working in its own natural strength – is the distinguishing characteristic of the present age. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, inaugurates the coming age, so that Christians may even be said to be sitting in heaven (Eph. 2:6; *cf.* Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1–4). The ethical significance of this contrast is developed in 5:13–26.

5:1 – 6:10 Paul's commands

As is common in his letters, Paul follows up the doctrinal section with a set of calls to action. It is disputed whether this section begins at 5:1–2 or 5:13. Certainly, vs 1–12 include much doctrinal content, and the fact that the central issue in those verses is circumcision should not be ignored. There is, nevertheless, a noticeable shift of tone at v 2 (v 1 serves a bridging function and could easily be viewed as the conclusion of ch. 4). The matter is not of great importance.

More significant is the decision to describe

this section as 'Paul's commands'. Such a title highlights one of the more interesting problems arising here. How does Paul reconcile all of his negative statements about the law with the many commands included in the letter? Is there a basic inconsistency in Paul's theology when he seems to encourage the Galatians to fulfil the law (5:14) or when he says we should do things against which there is no law (5:23)? This issue should be kept in mind when making an effort to understand Paul's teaching.

5:1–12 Regarding circumcision

The solemn statement of v 2 (*cf.* 2:21), combined with the frightening language of v 4 (*cf.* 1:6), indicates not merely that circumcision has no positive value but that for the Galatians it is actually harmful. From one perspective, it is a matter of indifference whether one is circumcised or not (note v 6 and the parallels in 6:15 and 1 Cor. 7:19). However, for a Gentile to submit to circumcision as a sign of submission to the law would be 'pernicious and fatal in itself' (Lightfoot).

Paul supports his strong statements in two ways. First, in v 3 he argues that the initial act of circumcision implies a commitment to do everything the law says (*cf.* Jas. 2:10–11). Anyone who places confidence on his or her own works needs to understand that God demands perfection (Mt. 5:48). The Judaism of Paul's day, generally speaking, did not fully understand this concept. Much of rabbinic interpretation consisted of attempts to relax the strict demands of the biblical commands, with the inevitable result that people thought they could indeed satisfy God's demands by their efforts.

Secondly, in vs 5–6 Paul claims that the true Christian experience is characterized by faith. This is a faith of solid expectation: it eagerly awaits God's final demonstration of righteousness, when his truth will be vindicated and his people will receive the final verdict of 'not guilty'. It is also a faith generated and sustained by the presence of the Spirit; once again, Paul emphasizes the crucial role played by the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life. Finally, this faith is very much at work through the ministry of love (the Greek verb in v 6, *energeō*, 'work', is rendered weakly by the NIV, *expressing itself*). 'For the disclosure of the apostle's fundamental idea of the nature of religion, there is no more important sentence in the whole epistle, if, indeed, in any of Paul's epistles' (E. de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* [T. & T. Clark, 1921], p. 279). One must not think that Paul's opposing faith to the works of the law means that faith is passive. On the contrary, faith makes possible genuine work. This principle prepares the way for the commands in vs 13–26.

Before moving to them, however, Paul must issue still another personal appeal. To a large extent vs 7–12 are an attack on the opposition. The Judaizers are making the Galatians stumble. Their teaching, which acts like leaven, is incompatible with the divine calling. Paul is confident that they will be judged and even utters a wish that they be mutilated (possibly an allusion to the mutilating practices of pagans in Asia Minor, but very likely also a reference to castration, which, incidentally, disqualified Jewish men from becoming priests). In v 11 he also defends himself from the apparent charge that he was inconsistent and that, when it suited him, he supported circumcision (perhaps an allusion to his having Timothy circumcised; Acts 16:1–3).

The 'negativism' of these verses should not obscure what Paul's primary purpose is. He wishes to express his confidence in the Galatians. Their initial response to the gospel (*You were running a good race*, v 7; *cf.* 4:13–16) encourages him to believe that they *will take no other view* (10). The only reason they have faltered is the outside influence of the Judaizers, so the apostle takes comfort in the fact that there was good evidence for the genuineness of the Galatians' faith. (*Cf.* also the encouragement of Heb. 6:9–12 after the strong words at the beginning of that chapter.)

5:13–26 Regarding love

The one who called the Galatians in grace (8; *cf.* 1:6) called them to exercise the rights and enjoy the blessings of freedom (13a). Paul knows, however, that freedom can be turned into licence, and so he must make crystal-clear what are the lofty obligations of those who have been freed. In this passage the apostle goes into some detail as he describes both the abuse of freedom and its right use.

Freedom is abused when it becomes an excuse *to indulge the sinful nature* (13b; lit. 'a pretext for the flesh'). Paul is very specific about the type of conduct he has in mind. In vs 19–21 he even lists *the acts of the sinful nature* (lit. 'the works of the flesh'). These acts seem to be viewed as falling into four groups: sexual impurity, idolatry, dissension and intemperance. Most of the sins listed by Paul belong in the third category, and that suggests that the Galatians were particularly susceptible to sins involving personal relationships. That suggestion is confirmed by the emphasis that the apostle gives to this problem. In v 15 he talks about the danger that they may destroy each other by their mutual *biting and devouring*. And at the end of the paragraph he adds one final warning against conceit and envy (26).

The implications of such conduct should have been well known to the Galatians: the apostle had warned them on an earlier occasion *that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God* (21). It was truly ironic that these Christians, who were seduced by a message of law-keeping, should fall into behaviour that blatantly contradicted their faith. Their emphasis on the flesh – literally, through circumcision, but more importantly, through their dependence on their own effort – led them indeed to perform the works of the flesh in another sense. Our efforts to please God in our own strength result only in sinful behaviour. (See on 3:4.)

Paul also makes clear what is the right use of freedom: *serve* [lit. be slaves to] *one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'* (13c–14). The principle of a working faith (6) is now developed. And as he had listed the works of the sinful nature, so he specifies the kind of conduct that flows from communion with the Holy Spirit (22–23). It is worth noting that the fruit of the Spirit here consists primarily of attitudes and actions that enhance personal relationships, precisely the great weakness of the Galatians. The qualities of *joy* and *peace* probably refer not to subjective feelings but to the way we deal with each other. Even the term *faith* could be understood as 'faithfulness', again in personal relationships. There is also emphasis on *kindness* and *patience*.

But how can we achieve these goals? As Christians, we often wish we had quick formulas that would take care of our spiritual problems. The biblical material resists that kind of attitude. Yet if there is any passage that sounds like a formula for sanctification, it is Gal. 5:16, *So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.* As Paul goes on to explain in the following verse, the Spirit and the sinful nature (flesh) are mutually exclusive. Thus, if we are occupied in pleasing the former, we will not please the latter.

Notice, moreover, that Paul's commands (the 'imperative') are rooted in the facts of our Christian experience (the 'indicative'). The reason we may be encouraged in our spiritual life is that when we placed our faith in Christ we gave a fatal blow to the power of the flesh (24; *cf.* Rom. 6:1–4). So, if our life proceeds from the Spirit, it is only appropriate – indeed, it is incumbent upon us – to conduct ourselves according to his lead.

Finally, notice how this passage helps us to understand a little better Paul's teaching about the law. Although he earlier spoke very strongly against the use of the law as a means of gaining the inheritance, he does not question the value of the law as a revelation of what God's will is for us. If our life is ruled by the Spirit, we are not subject to the condemnatory power of the law and thus we need not fear it. It is, therefore, right for us to 'fulfil' the law (14), to perform those acts that the law does not condemn (23). Here is freedom indeed.

6:1–10 Regarding burdens

Having presented a lofty picture of the Christian life, Paul now addresses the very real possibility of sin (1). Although the principle of living by the Spirit is no mere idealism, the apostle knew perfectly well that believers will falter, and he may have feared that the Galatians would respond harshly to one of their own if he or she failed to meet the high standards just described. Accordingly, he points out that if they are *spiritual* (that is, having and being led by the Holy Spirit), they ought to respond *gently* (lit. 'with a spirit of gentleness'), always conscious that each of us is susceptible to temptation.

In vs 2–3 Paul continues the thought but generalizes somewhat. Restoring a believer who has sinned is but an example of the broader obligation that we have to bear each other's burdens. Anyone who balks at this obligation, thinking that he is above such weaknesses, only deceives himself. In a striking and ironic allusion to the Galatians' concern with the Jewish laws, Paul describes burden-bearing as a fulfilment of the law of Christ. Most likely, this notion is to be related to 5:14, the love commandment. Clearly, the wonderful freedom for which Paul had fought during his ministry and especially in this letter does not entail an abandonment of moral obligations.

Paul's concern that the Galatians should be conscious of the burdens and weaknesses of others, however, could lead to a sense of superiority and thus to sinful boasting. So in vs 4–5 he calls to mind the need and propriety of looking only at oneself for evaluation, *i.e.* one should look at the weakness of others only for purposes of compassion, not of comparison (*cf.* 2 Cor. 10:12–18). In that sense, each must bear his or her own burden. We might paraphrase: 'If you are intent on boasting just look at yourself; don't be like the Pharisee who compares himself to the publican, but rather use God's standard, and then you will find that boasting can only be in God' (*cf.* v 14; 1 Cor. 1:26–31).

With v 6 the apostle moves to another topic (though perhaps it does bear some relation to burden-bearing): namely, the responsibility to meet the needs of Christian workers. While it is possible that Paul has in mind more than finances (*all good things*), the verb *share* (Gk. *koinōneō*) is used elsewhere by Paul to speak of

financial contributions (see Rom. 12:13; 15:27; Phil. 4:15; the noun is used similarly in Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13). Stinginess in our giving, financial or otherwise, is like mocking God. But in fact God cannot be mocked (7), and if we devote our resources to satisfy the sinful nature (lit. 'sow to the flesh') rather than the Spirit, we will receive what is due to us (8; *cf.* 2 Cor. 9:6).

The apostle ends this section of the letter with a summary of how he hopes the Galatians will act (9–10). At every opportunity, we must make the effort to do what is good, and we should be particularly alert to meeting the needs of the Christian community. While there may be many discouragements along the way, we must take courage with the assurance that God will vindicate his people. At the appropriate time, we will certainly reap the fulness of God's own goodness.

6:11–18 Epilogue

This final paragraph conveys strong emotion, highlighted both at the beginning (11) and at the end (17). It was customary for Paul to add a note with his own hand (*cf.* 2 Thes. 3:17; possibly this was done as a safeguard against forgery, 2:2). However, pointing out the large size of his handwriting – a comment he makes nowhere else – adds considerable poignancy to the passage. It is unfruitful to speculate whether this remark tells us something about the state of his eyesight or about his social standing. Rather, it has an emotive purpose: 'The boldness of the handwriting answers to the force of the Apostle's convictions. The size of the characters will arrest the attention of his readers in spite of themselves' (Lightfoot).

Similarly, Paul clearly addresses the emotions of the Galatians when he appeals to *the marks of Jesus* that he bears on his own body (17). Perhaps alluding once again to charges of insincerity (see 1:10; 5:11), he reminds his readers and opponents that his claims are not vain. The wounds he has suffered because of his faithfulness to Christ are the clearest evidence that the Galatians need not doubt his motives. As some interpreters have pointed out, the battle with the Judaizers is continued to the very end of the letter.

That battle takes on a new twist, however, in vs 12–14 for here Paul makes explicit what has been only under the surface up to this point (*cf.* especially 4:17–18). In short, the apostle goes to the heart of the matter by unmasking the Judaizers' own motivation. The real reason they are intent on circumcising the Galatians is that, afraid of being persecuted, they want *to make a good impression outwardly*. The word *outwardly* is a translation of the literal phrase, 'in the flesh'. Through a powerful play on words, Paul calls attention to the fact that the rite of circumcision is performed on the (physical) flesh, and that is a clear indication that the Judaizers live in the realm of the flesh (as that term was used in 3:3; 4:23, 29; 5:13, 16–26; 6:8; in other words, opposed to the Spirit). In spite of their claims, their obedience to the law is at best selective – their true purpose is to boast in the fact that they have placed a mark on the flesh of the Galatian Christians.

At this point the apostle introduces one of the most important recurring themes in his letters: boasting in Christ. The clearest sign of unbelief is to be found in the tendency to boast in ourselves, when the only legitimate grounds for boasting is God (see especially Rom. 5:11; 1 Cor. 1:29–31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Eph. 2:9; Phil. 3:3). Here, Paul is more specific. He will boast only in the cross, the instrument through which Paul and the world have been severed from each other. As suggested by Col. 2:20, *the world* refers to external ordinances (*cf.* 4:9–10), but of course includes sin (5:24) and the old self (2:20; *cf.* Rom 6:6). Those who by faith are united with Christ partake of his death on the cross and are thus removed from the power of sin.

This confession of v 14 leads in the following verse to a repetition of the principle of 5:6, but now the conclusion is startling. In both passages, circumcision and uncircumcision are said to be of no value. What is valuable, according to 5:6, is faith working through love; here in v 15 it is the *new creation*, an idea developed in 2 Cor. 5:17. Once again Paul reminds us of the eschatological (fulfilment) character of the message of the gospel (see on 4:25–26). Even more remarkably, the same principle is repeated in 1 Cor. 7:19, but there, instead of faith or new creation, the valuable element is said to be 'keeping God's commands', a statement that helps us put in perspective Paul's 'negative' remarks in Galatians about the law.

In any case, this principle of the new creation (or faith working through love) is the true *rule* by which we should walk (16). The verb translated *follow* is the same translated 'keep in step' in 5:25. Clearly, Paul wants us to understand that the rule we should follow is the Spirit-led conduct described earlier. And that is hardly surprising, since the Spirit is the clearest manifestation of the new creation.

Those who so walk receive a very special benediction of *peace and mercy* (16), to which Paul adds, *even to the Israel of God*. The word translated *even* is literally 'and'. According to some, Paul is drawing attention not only to the church, but also to the ethnic nation of Israel as recipients of the benediction. But if that nation, composed of both believers and unbelievers, can truly enjoy *peace and mercy*, Paul would seem to

be contradicting the heart of his message: the true descendants of Abraham are those who believe in Christ and have been delivered from the law. The NIV is, therefore, most probably right in translating the word, *even* (or 'namely'; this meaning is not uncommon). If so, one can appreciate the power of this statement as an argument against the Judaizers: the true Israel lives by a different principle from that of submission to the Mosaic law.

The benediction of v 18 appears to be nothing but a variant of the usual letter closing. There is, however, a notable difference: the addition of the word *brothers* in an emphatic position, at the very end. This is quite unexpected and reveals the apostle's intensely pastoral heart. In effect, this one word softens the severity of the whole letter by stressing Paul's confidence that the Galatians are truly God's people and that, therefore, they will respond to the truth as they should (*cf.* 3:4; 5:10).

May every reader of this letter acknowledge the grace of Christ, the freedom of the gospel and the power of the Spirit. And may all of us attend to the circumstances in which God has placed us, so that our faith will indeed work through love in the lives of those around us.

Moisés Silva

EPHESIANS

Introduction

Ephesians is breathtaking in its theological grasp of the scope of God's purposes in Christ for the church. It is a pastorally warm letter and spiritually sensitive in its advice, peaceable in tone and readily overflowing into joyful worship. But it is also rather different from Paul's other letters. All except this one address some very specific situations in the churches to whom he wrote. Typically, they abound in local colour, they contain closely reasoned and rhetorically forceful teaching probing the theological dimensions of some central problem, and they combine this with carefully related application in the form of appeals to the readers. The apostle's sentences are usually short, often blunt.

In Ephesians, by contrast, what would normally be the 'teaching' part is largely taken up with the praise of God (1:3–14) and with a report of Paul's prayer for his readers (1:15 – 3:21 with important digressions at 2:11–22 and 3:2–13). This leads immediately into exhortation (chs. 4 – 6). Throughout the letter the sentences are usually very long and have a slightly liturgical sound. What is even more unusual is that the whole letter is so heavily dependent on Colossians: passage after passage can be explained as a rewriting of the key themes of Colossians, and about a third of its actual wording is taken over. How is all this to be explained?

Authorship

Although the early church uniformly supported the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, many modern scholars (including the most important commentaries by Schnackenburg and Lincoln) have disputed it. They have tried instead to explain the letter as the writing of a student and admirer of Paul's, bringing the apostle's gospel to his own later generation. The arguments hinge largely on the issues raised above, and on alleged subtle shifts away from a Pauline perspective to a later one. The issues are too complex to deal with at length here but are summarized in the commentaries by Caird (pp. 11–29) and Foulkes (pp. 19–49). Our own position is that Paul is indeed the author, and that alleged differences from the Paul of the other letters are either misunderstandings of Ephesians (some of the important ones will be raised in the Commentary), or are to be explained in terms of the special nature and circumstances of the writing of this letter.

The life-setting of the letter

While a prisoner in Rome (some time around AD 61–62), Paul had occasion to return a converted slave, Onesimus, to his Christian master Philemon living in (or near) Colosse. To cover the delicate situation Paul wrote to *Philemon*. He sent both this letter and the returning slave in the care of one of his co-workers Tychicus (Col. 4:7–9), and he used the occasion to write to the whole church at Colosse too, warning against false teaching on the horizon there. To get to Colosse, Tychicus and Onesimus would have naturally sailed to Ephesus, and then struck east for the Lycus valley along the main Roman road to the Euphrates. Paul had himself based his Asian mission (AD 52–55) in the great and thriving city of Ephesus (Acts 18:19 – 20:17; 1 Cor. 15:32; 16:8, 19; 2 Cor. 1:8–11), and so it would have been natural for him to write a letter to the church there and send that with Tychicus too (*cf.* Eph. 6:21–22 and Col. 4:7–9).

The letter we have bearing the name 'Ephesians' was, however, not written *primarily* to the 'saints in Ephesus' (1:1). Indeed, the words 'in Ephesus' are not found here in the earliest manuscripts, and 1:15 and 3:1–3 assume that Paul and the majority of his readers have heard reports of each other, but not necessarily more. The letter also ends without the customary personal greetings which we would expect in a letter addressed to Ephesus (*cf.* Rom. 16; Col. 4:10–17). These features have suggested to many that Ephesians was actually intended as a circular letter for the churches of the whole Roman province of Asia (including the seven mentioned in Rev. 1 – 3). Perhaps, more plausibly, it was written for the churches along or near the road Tychicus would have taken from Ephesus to Colosse, including Magnesia, Tralles, Hierapolis and Laodicea. (Ephesians may in that sense be the letter Col. 4:16 refers to as the 'letter from Laodicea'.)

The nature and purpose of the letter

Most of the unusual features of this letter can best be explained in terms of our understanding of its life-setting. Its purpose is not to face some particular false teaching in a specific congregation, but to encourage all the (mainly Gentile) churches of the area Tychicus was passing

through. What better way for Paul to do this than by celebrating the accomplishment in Christ of God's great purposes (1:3–14), and including a report of how he was praying for the readers, interceding that they might joyfully grasp the central message of the gospel and the wonderful privilege to which they had been admitted (1:15 – 2:10; 3:1, 14–21). It is not quite realistic to argue that the letter is un-Pauline because it substitutes prayer where Paul normally has teaching; the truth is rather that the letter teaches the core content of Paul's gospel in the *form* of a call to worship and prayer-report (and the digressions at 2:11–22 and 3:2–13 more fully explain the teaching implicit in these). The choice of a worship/prayer form for most of the first part of the letter itself dictates the more 'elevated' and liturgical style, which then not unnaturally extends throughout (and is similar to the style of Paul's prayers elsewhere). And if Paul had just written the letter to the Colossians, and had it still to hand, is it really surprising that he should remodel it for the more general readership?

The central message of the letter

Ephesians makes dominant a theme which was already important in Colossians, namely cosmic reconciliation in Christ (*cf.* Eph. 1:9–10, 20–23; 2:10–22, and 3:6 with Col. 1:19–20). The OT maintained that the universe was the creation of God who was one, without peer or rival, and all was initially in harmony with him (*cf.* Dt. 6:4., recited daily by Jews, and Gn. 1). According to Jewish understanding, however, the willing subjection of all things to God dissolved into a rebellion of competing claims. People became progressively alienated from God and then from each other, symbolized in the exclusion from the Garden of Eden, the murder of Abel, and the fiasco of Babel. God was still the Lord of the universe (as all from Jos. 3:11 to Josephus *Ant.* 14:24 affirm), he still gave it unity, and that unity came to clearest expression in Israel's obedience to the one God, following one law and worshipping in a single temple. 'The nations', however, were divided from God, and from Israel, by their worship of idols. And even Israel, called to express within herself the unity of creation, was marred by factions. She was divided within herself. At the root of all this, as far as Judaism was concerned, was the conflict between the Lord God, and the powers of Satan.

By contrast with what was going on at the time, the day of the Lord was seen as the day when God would subject all competing powers to himself and thus restore the universe to harmony. So, as Zc. 14:9 puts it, 'And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be one and his name one' (NRSV). The Messiah is thus a Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6) who even pacifies nature (Is. 11:1–9; 2 *Baruch* 73:1). When he comes all opposition will be torn down, Israel will be restored, all nations will come to revere the one God (*Tobit* 14:6; *Sybylline Oracles* 3:808), and they will worship him in the one temple in Jerusalem (Is. 2:2–4; 56:6–7; 60 – 62; Mi. 4:1–4; Zc. 8:20–23; 14:16–19; *Jubilees* 4:26).

All this could be called cosmic reconciliation. Ephesians teaches that this purpose has been *begun* in Christ and will be consummated in him. In him alienation has been destroyed and reunification begun: the old division of humanity into Jew and Gentile has been overcome (2:10–16); and the older alienation of humankind from God surmounted too (2:17–18). Christ has begun to 'fill' and unite the universe (4:10), bringing peace. But to say these things have begun in him is also to say they are experienced by those united with him, namely by believers. This leads to an awesome, majestic vision of the church. The universal church of Jews and Gentiles is the place Jesus fills (1:23); it is the place where the world and the powers are to see the cosmic reconciliation already under way (3:6–10). By union with Christ, the church is already the one heavenly temple (2:19–21), and it must above all strive to maintain that unity which witnesses to God's purpose (4:1–6). Paul's appeal in chs. 4 – 6 draws out how to live in a way that reflects God's new creation of unity, harmony and peace.

This note of cosmic unity in Christ has sometimes been confused with universalism (*i.e.* that God will ultimately save all his creatures, including the hostile powers). That is not indicated: 5:6 still anticipates the wrath of God on the persistently disobedient, and 5:5 warns of sins that exclude from the kingdom of God. What is being affirmed is that all of the new creation will be united in Christ, but parts of the old creation will not participate in the new one.

Later writers like Ignatius and Irenaeus stressed the institutional unity of the catholic church on earth, under bishops, elders and deacons. By contrast the emphases here are the regular Pauline ones on a single universal church of Jews and Gentiles as the historical manifestation of the heavenly temple, and world-wide reunification (as we shall see in the Commentary). Paul was in prison precisely for trying to strengthen the unity between the Jewish and Gentile churches (see on 3:13).

Two related features of the letter are also especially significant: the focus on 'the powers of this dark world' (6:12), and the emphasis on present salvation. C. Arnold has shown how prevalent magical beliefs and the associated fear

of spiritual powers was in Ephesus and the surrounding area. Colossians was written partly against such fears (Col. 1:13, 16; 2:8, 15, 18, 20) and so it is not surprising that Paul's letter to the Ephesians should take up this theme afresh. Arnold has shown there are much stronger allusions to such fears in Ephesians than is usually supposed, and that a major part of the letter's purpose is to counteract them by insisting on the greater power in Christ and in believers united with him (see on 1:19–23; 2:1–7; 3:9–10, 15–16, 20; 4:8; 6:10–17).

A number of scholars believe Ephesians distorts the genuinely Pauline tension between what we shall receive and be when the new age or new creation comes into being, and what we already experience of that in Christ. Ephesians, it is said, has too little about future salvation, seeming to assume that it is already virtually fully realized in Christ. The fact is, however, that Paul's emphases differ according to context. To the over-confident Corinthians he stressed the 'not yet'; to the Galatians, wondering whether they should embrace the law to ensure salvation, he stressed the 'already'. Colossians and Ephesians both stress the 'already' to encourage believers who are prone to fear the spiritual powers of the universe. If they are already saved from those powers, it is in the limited sense that they have been united with the victorious Christ in the heavenly places, and so brought decisively under *his* influence (2:1–9). Believers are now free to fight back, and do so from a strong position. The battle, however, is not over (6:10–20) even if the outcome is assured by our union with Christ (*cf.* Col. 3:1–4). The present is the evil age (6:12–13, 16), and our real redemption lies in the future (4:30; *cf.* 1:14; 4:13); hence the stress on understanding our *hope* (1:18).

The main challenge of Ephesians

This letter challenges the pietistic individualism and corresponding weak doctrine of the church that we so often find in evangelicalism. 'Don't look at the church,' we say, 'Look at Christ!'. Paul, however, expects the outsider to see Christ and God's unifying purpose for the world precisely in the church. The challenge for a fragmented and ever-dividing Protestantism today could barely be sharper: Ephesians calls us to build bridges not minefields. It is also a challenge for those who promote separate white and black churches, segregated rich, middle-class, and 'worker' churches *etc.* Such homogeneous groups may naturally get on better together, but how do they reflect the gospel of reconciliation? Ephesians challenges all of us to find better ways of making our local churches real communities of people whose lives and worship together *as a church* witness to the cosmic unity begun in Christ, and are deeply imbued with his presence.

See also the article Reading the letters.

Further reading

J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, BST (IVP, 1979).
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Commentary

1:1–2 Address and salutation

This basically follows the form of greetings and address in other Pauline letters. The words *in Ephesus* do not appear in our earliest manuscripts, but the grammatical construction left suggests that even earlier manuscripts had *two* place-names. A. Van Roon suggests they read 'to the saints in Hierapolis and Laodicea, who are faithful in Christ Jesus', but *Ephesus* and Laodicea (the two ends of the journey Tychicus would have taken) would more easily account for how the letter came to be known as Ephesians. (See the Introduction).

1:3 – 3:21 Paul's thanksgiving and prayer

1:3–14 Celebration of God's eternal plan

Paul opens the body of the letter with a eulogy to God (as in 2 Cor. 1:3–4 *cf.* 1 Pet. 1:3–5). This paragraph of joyful celebration (which, in the Greek, consists of a single long sentence) has neither the regular metre of Greek hymns, nor the line-by-line parallelism of Jewish psalms, but it is a carefully structured composition of six sections. It is best understood as a stately prayer, or call to worship, designed to lift the readers' eyes away from themselves, and from their fears, to the majesty and love of God revealed in his unfolding plan, and to the privilege of participating in it. The content (as with Paul's introductory thanksgivings in other letters) is deliberately selected to introduce the main themes of the letter; this section is thus a key to understanding the letter as a whole.

As in similar Jewish prayers, this eulogy opens by pronouncing God worthy of blessing (3a), and a description follows which expands and justifies it. This description falls into six sections (3b–4; 5–6; 7–8; 9–10; 11–12; 13–14), but they are not of equal prominence. Paul's Greek highlights three particular clauses as more central to the composition. He says God has *blessed us . . . with every spiritual blessing* (3b); *predestined us to be adopted as his sons* (5) and *made known to us the mystery of his will* (9).

The sections built around these clauses (3b–4; 5–6 and 9–10) actually provide the core of what Paul is saying. In each case the focus is on the Father's action (*i.e.* he is the subject of the verb), and the point is that God is to be seen as worthy of praise precisely because he has performed the actions concerned. In the other three sections, God is not the subject of the actions, rather the focus is on what 'we' (all Christians) have received *in* the Son (7–8; 11–12), or on what the readers have begun to experience through the Spirit (13–14; note the change to 'you'), as a consequence of God's action.

The concentration of past tenses has misled a number of interpreters into thinking that in Ephesians salvation is viewed as already complete. As we shall see, however, it would be truer to say that Paul celebrates the fact that *future* salvation has been inaugurated and assured in Christ.

3–4 The opening words are perhaps best rendered 'Blessworthy is . . . God', rather than 'Blessed be . . . God' (NRSV, NJB, REB) or *Praise be to . . . God,* and what follows gives the grounds for pronouncing him 'blessworthy'. Paul, however, is not arguing; he is beginning to extol God and implicitly invites his readers to do so too, so the alternative translations convey the right sense. Paul next identifies God as the *Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*, for it is precisely in the Son (and the gospel of what the Father accomplished through him) that the readers have truly come to know God, and begun to recognize him as worthy of blessing.

The first reason for acclaiming God 'blessworthy' is that he has so richly *blessed us* (3b). Paul is, of course, aware that he and his readers have not yet themselves experienced *every spiritual blessing*, hence his qualifications. We have received this blessing only *in the heavenly realms* and *in Christ.* That is, the blessings of the age to come (*cf.* 1:21), or the kingdom of God, have been decisively bestowed on Christ who reigns at God's right hand ('in the heavenly realms', 1:20–21), and so are assured to us, his people, through him. Moreover, as we are united with him (*cf.* 2:6), we already begin to participate in some of those hoped for blessings (we shall see which, and how, as we proceed through the letter).

This essentially future blessing, which we have begun to experience in Christ, is further assured on the grounds of God's election (4). Even before creation God chose a people (in Christ) who would stand before him holy and blameless in love. Note that the thought here is not primarily of the election of individual people to the church (though that may be implicit), *to be holy and blameless* before him in the world (as at Phil 2:15). The primary thought is rather that God eternally chose a people in Christ (*us, i.e.* the church), to be holy and blameless before him at the final judgment (as at Col. 1:22, which is in Paul's mind here), and so enter into the full blessings of the Messianic age, and new creation.

5–6 This section explores further the thought of v 4. Centrally, it reminds us that God's elective pleasure and will for his people is our future full adoption as *sons through Jesus Christ* (5). Paul believed there was a sense in which believers already enjoy 'sonship' to God, loving filial obedience inspired by the Spirit (*cf.* Rom. 8:14–15; Gal. 4:6). He saw this, however, mainly as a first instalment or foretaste of a much fuller kind of adoption to sonship. Thus he says creation awaits the revelation of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19), and we still 'wait eagerly for our adoption as sons' (Rom. 8:23), which will be brought about through the resurrection and new creation. Taken with Eph. 1:4 and 12–14, it is probably this latter 'new-creation' sonship that is meant here. In other words, God has elected the church for that full and glorious sonship to him that will result from our resurrection-transformation into the likeness of Jesus (in this full sense *through Jesus Christ; cf.* 1 Cor. 15:42–49; Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4).

Because this sonship is the result of God's gracious will, put into effect through Christ, it will redound to God's praise (6a). And because we are already united with Christ through the Spirit, that grace, including sonship, can be said to be already freely bestowed on us; providing this is qualified by the assertion, *in the One he loves* (*i.e.* Christ; *cf.* Mk. 1:11; 9:7; Col. 1:13).

7–8 This subordinate section develops v 6b. In our union with Christ we already participate in the benefits of the future redemption of the world from evil which God assured through Christ's atoning death. (*Blood* is a biblical metaphor for sacrificial atoning death [whether the death was through loss of blood or not; *cf.* Jon. 1:14] because originally it was the blood of the animal sacrifices that was actually offered). The particular benefit Paul singles out for special mention here (as Col. 1:14) is *forgiveness of sins* – not because this is the only part of the future blessing that we already experience now, but because it is at the root of the others. Until sins are dealt with, humankind is alienated from God and his benefits (see 2:1–3; 11–22; 4:17–19; 5:8–14). Indeed, Paul clarifies that the grace of forgiveness is also accompanied by those of spiritual *wisdom* and *understanding* which are at the heart of our walk with God as Father (and for the deepening of which he prays in 1:15–23; 3:14–19).

9–10 This section returns to the affirmation of what God has done, and so why he is 'blessworthy', and provides its climax. God has made known to us in both understanding and experience *the mystery* which has always been at the centre of his will. In Ephesians 'mystery' means something too magnificent to be fully grasped. The mystery God has made known to us is the central implication of what he 'set forth in Christ' (NRSV; against NIV) that is, in his ministry, death and resurrection-glorification. It is a mystery concerning 'the fulness of the times' which first and foremost denotes the times which follow the end of this age (the kingdom of God, and the new creation). But Paul believes 'the fulness of the times' is already anticipated where Christ is enthroned in the heavenly realms, and that believers share in that in him. The content of the mystery is God's intent 'that the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into unity in Christ' (correctly REB; NIV's *bring ... under one head, even Christ* rests on poor etymology, though, in the light of vs 20–23, it well expresses *how* Paul thinks God will achieve that unity). For the theological significance of this unity, and for its central importance for the letter, see the Introduction. Essentially then, God's 'blessworthiness' is affirmed on the grounds that he has shown us in Christ and in the church the beginnings of his master-plan to restore the cosmos to himself, and to the harmony lost through rebellion and consequent alienation.

11–12 Like the next section, these verses cease to focus on God's activity and (like vs 7–8) explore our participation in it all in Christ. They partly repeat the assurance that by union with Christ we are predestined to become trophies of God's grace, that evoke creation's praise of God (*cf.* 6a). This emphasis on fore-ordination does not eclipse real human choice and responsibility, as the appeals of the rest of the letter make clear, but assures us of God's overarching sovereign power and directing purpose at work in the believer (see Carson). The emphasis would have been particularly appropriate for readers from the Ephesus area who were especially prone to fear the decisive influence of other powers (see Arnold).

Most translations (notably NJB) and commentators see v 12 as distinguishing *we* Jews or Jewish Christians, *first to hope in Christ*, from *you* (13) Gentile Christians who came to faith later. But the 'we' throughout vs 3–10 refers to *all* believers (not just Jewish ones), and it does here too (see Lincoln). We should rather translate v 12, 'in order that we who have first [*i.e.* now] hoped in Christ, may *then* [*i.e.* at the final tribunal] be to the praise of his glory'.

13–14 The final section highlights the readers' participation in all this (hence the switch to 'you'). In Christ, having believed the gospel, they too were marked out as God's people. (See *e.g* Ezk. 9:4–6 and Rev. 7:1–8 for the idea of God putting his identifying mark on his people.) The *seal* used to mark them was nothing less than the promised gift of the Spirit. As at Acts 2, the promise in question is

principally that of Joel 2:28–29, but understood in a distinctively Christian way. Through this gift they received wisdom and illumination to perceive the implications of the gospel (1:17–20; *cf.* 3:5); inner strengthening in the gospel (3:16; *cf.* 6:17); access to, and the indwelling presence of, God and of Christ (2:18, 22; 3:16–17); the beginnings of the promised cosmic unity (4:3–4); inspiration to godly living and thankful worship (4:30; 5:18–20) and help in prayer (6:18). All these activities are what marks believers as God's people and are indispensable to ongoing Christian existence. The seal of the Spirit is not some second blessing – the *having believed* (13b) means effectively 'when you believed', *i.e.* 'once you had put your trust in [the gospel]' (NJB). These activities of the Spirit foreshadow in type and quality what he will do more fully in the new creation, and so the Spirit with whom God marks us with his stamp of ownership is also appropriately called the 'pledge', 'guarantee', even 'first instalment' of our inheritance (*cf.* Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5). But the blessings we receive now are just a foreshadowing: according to Paul we still await our *inheritance* in the final and total redemption of the world by God at the end of time. 4:30 re-emphasizes this, reminding us that we are sealed with the Spirit 'for the day of redemption' to come. Then God's purpose, begun in Christ, will be brought to consummation, and seeing it from beginning to end will evoke the creation's praise of the Creator.

1:15 – 2:10 Paul's report of his thanksgiving and prayer for his readers begins

1:15–19a Report of thanksgiving. It was conventional for Greek letters to begin with a statement of thanks to the gods, and assurances of continuing intercession. Paul regularly used this form, though he developed it in a distinctively Christian way. The thanksgiving itself (15–16), which is specifically for what God is doing in the readers and has therefore a different focus from the more general concerns of a eulogy, is short compared with his other letters (though Galatians has none at all), and remarkably devoid of personal details (*cf.* Col. 1:3–4 and Phm. 4–5, on which it is otherwise modelled). The prayer-report which follows is, however, unusually long, and much more extensively interwoven with teaching than normal. It stretches at least as far as v 23 (vs 15–23 are actually one compound sentence in Greek), more probably to 2:10, and it is further resumed in 3:1, 14–21. These unusual features are probably to be explained by the general purpose of the letter, and the intention that it should be read to several unrelated congregations.

Paul's regular prayer for his readers is, so he reports, for spiritual illumination (17), to know God more deeply, and to understand the nature of the Christian hope (18) and the nature of God's power already at work in Christians (19a). This last he exemplifies in two different ways: it is said to be revealed in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ himself (19b–23), and it is disclosed in *our* being brought from spiritual 'death' to 'life' in union with Christ (2:1–10).

15–16 The opening *For this reason* looks back to 1:14, and through it to the whole of 1:3–14. Paul gives thanks for the readers of Roman Asia because God has brought them to participate in salvation. He briefly gives thanks too for what he has heard of their faith and love (as in Colossians and Philemon), indicating that he sees these as fruits of God's grace. These verses are clear evidence that Paul was not principally writing to Ephesus (where he stayed for up to three years); he shows more detailed knowledge of the Colossian congregations in the thanksgivings in the letters addressed to them (and he tells us he never himself visited them: Col. 2:1) than he evinces here.

17–19 These three verses concentrate on the content of Paul's prayer. The prayer in v 17 for a *Spirit of wisdom and revelation* represents a typically Jewish way of speech; it means Paul prays that the Spirit they have *already* received will be experienced granting these things. Note the purpose of the request is not for special information, but deeper perception and knowledge of God himself (as he is revealed in Christ). Wisdom, illumination and revelation were indeed the most typical gifts Jews expected from the Spirit. *Power* is mentioned much more rarely (*cf.* Ex. 31:3; Dt. 34:9; Is. 11:2; *1 Enoch* 49:3; 1QS 4:3–5).

The prayer in v 18 is equally a prayer for spiritual understanding: the *heart* here is a partial synonym for mind, will and spirit, and means the centre of perception and decision. Although Paul above all NT writers sought to explain and argue his theology to the rational understanding, he clearly recognized that is but part of the task. The *heart* of a person needs not merely more refined theological concepts, but the work of the Spirit integrating these with their perception and so restructuring their will and life. Paul prays that his readers might be able to *know* (understand) the hope that lies ahead of them in this fuller sense. If it really dawns on them that God intends to make them with all the saints a wonderful *inheritance* for himself, that knowledge ('By his grace I'm to be a prince, not a frog') will transform them with joy and love. Israel is portrayed frequently as God's inheritance in the OT: see *e.g.* Dt. 4:20; Ps. 33:12; Is. 63:17; Je. 10:16. Here Paul applies it to the glorified church, and his prayer is that

they understand the hope which dominates his opening eulogy (1:14, 5–6, 12).

The third part of Paul's prayer (19a) is that the readers should understand the nature and strength of the power of God already at work in them. If believers look merely to what they see God doing in their own lives now, they may easily underestimate God's power, not least because it is manifest in cruciform love. The Ephesian readers, coming as they did from a background of strong magical belief, might have found the power of Diana more imposing and fearful than that of God. (Ephesian Diana was regarded as queen over both the heavenly powers, including the potent zodiacal powers, and the gods of the underworld; see Arnold.) This could have eroded their confidence in God, and undermined their determination in the spiritual conflict in which they were engaged. Paul knew that the spectacular scale of God's power in his people will only be fully disclosed at the end of this creation (so 1:5–6, 9–10, 14), but he could show the readers where to look in the present to see it displayed (1:19b – 2:10).

19b–23 The saving power of God revealed in the resurrection-exaltation of Christ. Because he is the truly representative Man, his resurrection and glorification are a picture of what God will accomplish *in us (cf.* 1 Cor. 15:45–49; Phil. 3:21). There is, of course, a difference: the authority invested in Jesus through his exaltation is unique, even though there is a sense in which we share in it (see 2:6). But this very difference leads Paul to another way of assuring the Ephesians of God's power in them, for he finishes by saying that the Jesus who is given all power is given by God *to the church*, which he fills (22–23). That, of course, means that the full authority and power invested in Jesus is at work in the church.

The assertions of both Jesus' resurrection and his exaltation to God's right hand (20) were traditional in the church, and the latter is phrased in the language of Ps. 110:1 (*cf.* Acts 2:34–36; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1 and Heb. 1:3, 13). It speaks of Jesus' enthronement as cosmic ruler who is given the place of honour in the heavenly circle (hence *in the heavenly realms*). Jesus has not been removed from earthly influence by ascension, precisely the opposite: he has been moved to the place of ultimate influence over matters on earth. Thus no other powers or potentates, in the world or in the heavens, whether good or evil, can compare; his authority, as the one at God's right hand, is over *all* (21). The original readers would have seen the point: none of the powers they were prone to fear could compare with Jesus.

Whereas in Ps. 110:1 God bids the heavenly Lord sit at his right hand '*until* I make your enemies a footstool for your feet', v 22a here insists God *has* placed all things under Jesus' feet. This is not failure to be realistic about the continuation of evil, but a switch from the language of Ps. 110 to that of Ps. 8:6. (Paul does the same at 1 Cor. 15:25–27.) Jesus is hereby portrayed as a second Adam who is given the task of exercising dominion over the cosmos. As such he is *head over everything* (22b), that is, ruler or master, a sense of 'head' well attested in biblical Greek and beyond. The point of what follows in v 22b is then best rendered by the REB: God 'gave him *as* head of all things *to* the church'. Paul could hardly have given a more dramatic portrayal of the power at work in the church but, to emphasize it further, he describes the church in two distinct ways.

First, he calls the church Christ's *body* (23a). In 1 Corinthians the church as Christ's 'body' includes its own ears, eyes and head (1 Cor. 12:16–21) – it is a whole body belonging to Jesus and intimately united with him (1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12). This is probably meant here too, not that the church is merely a headless torso, for which Jesus is himself the head; for v 22 describes Jesus as *head* of the cosmos, not the church, and uses 'head' in the sense of 'ruler', not anatomical part. But to describe the church as his 'body' so soon after describing Jesus as 'head' almost inevitably highlights at least the connotation of union between them (*cf.* 4:16; 5:23, 28 and the even more striking, 'he is the head of the body, the church' at Col. 1:18).

23 goes on to describe Jesus as the one who *fills everything in every way* (*cf.* 4:10). To 'fill' is a metaphor for 'become present to, and active in respect of' or 'extend influence, or rule, over'. As 'head' over all things, Jesus 'fills' them; he thus begins to fulfil the mystery spoken of in vs 9–10, he begins the task of subjugating rebellion and drawing all things into unity and harmony in himself. But, says Paul, it is supremely the church which is his *fulness* (*i.e* the thing he fills) – and he will explain this more fully in 2:1–22.

In sum, Paul prays that his readers will understand that the power at work in the church is the presence of that same power which will bring about the new creation, a new universe in total harmony, united under Christ. In her union with Christ the church has already received a foretaste of that end.

2:1–10 The saving power of God revealed in the church's salvation. It is unfortunate that a chapter division has been placed here, because there are good reasons to believe this section forms a single paragraph with 1:15–23. There Paul explained the power of God in the church as revealed in the resurrection of the representative Man Jesus, and God's

gift of him, as the exalted ruler of the cosmos, to the church. Here he wishes to draw attention to the same power of God, but now insofar as it is revealed in God's bringing us out of death into life. He begins v 1 with the direct connective 'and' (dropped in most translations), and it would appear that he intended to write 'and you, being dead in your transgressions and sins, he made alive with Christ . . .' (in parallel with Col. 2:12–13; 3:1–2). He was, however, diverted from this plain statement by the need to explain being *dead in your transgressions.* And having painted a bleak picture of his readers' former position (2) he needed to make it clear in v 3 that it was not just *you* but *we* who were all in the plight from which God mercifully rescued us. At last in vs 5–6 Paul takes up where he began, but now in the first person plural, 'And us, being dead in our transgressions, he made alive with Christ . . .'. Here is the further disclosure of the nature of God's power in the church that Paul prays his readers will comprehend, for it will assuredly give meaning to their lives, joy to their hearts, thankful worship to their lips, and strength to their fight.

1–3 *You were dead in your transgressions* is again a Jewish way of speech; its force is nicely illustrated by a midrash (Jewish commentary) on Ec. 9:5 which speaks of 'the wicked who even in their lifetime are called dead'. Those bound in sin are doomed to death, and so already belong to its realm; the very thing they think of as 'life' is but a foretaste of death, because it is without God (*cf.* Jn. 5:24; 1 Jn. 3:14 and 1QH 11:10–14). While Paul elsewhere teaches that this state of affairs is the result of sin, that is not the point here; rather the state *in your transgressions and sins* is what characterized their former existence. These things were the corrupt fruit of their 'death'. In v 2 Paul attributes this life marked by sins chiefly to two related factors – the influence of *this world (i.e.* the present fallen creation and the forces it generates in society, seen as standing in rebellion against God and in contrast to the 'new age' or 'new creation' awaited), and the influence of Satan, described here as *the ruler of the kingdom of the air.* The *aer* denoted the lower heavens, closest to the earth, and was often thought to be the abode of the evil spiritual beings. The idea of Satan being *at work in those who are disobedient* is found elsewhere in Jewish literature. For example in *The Ascension of Isaiah* he is said to have 'rejoiced in Jerusalem because of Manasseh and strengthened him in his leading to apostasy and in the lawlessness which was spread abroad in Jerusalem' (2:2–4; *cf.* 2 Ki. 21; 2 Ch. 33). This could all sound like a determinism to evil for which we are not responsible, but v 3 puts the blame equally fairly on our own rebellious nature with its corrupt desires and thinking. All this made us what Paul calls 'children of wrath' (NRSV correctly); that is, those condemned to suffer God's holy anger directed against sin.

4–7 What God in his love and mercy has actually done for us, then, comes as a stark and breathtaking contrast to the doom v 3 envisages, and so dramatically reveals the nature of the power of God at work in us. V 5 portrays it as a resurrection power that transfers us from 'death' to 'life'. This could be understood simply as a metaphor for a restored relationship (as Lk. 15:32), but probably means more than that. To say we have been *made alive* (the word commonly denotes resurrection) *with Christ* appears to be shorthand for saying, 'we *shall* be resurrected with Christ to new-creation life, and we may speak of that as though it were an already-accomplished event because first, the decisive event of the resurrection of the representative Man Jesus lies in the past and secondly, we already begin to participate in aspects of that new-creation life in our present union with him'.

The same must be said for v 6, which speaks of our having been exalted and seated with Christ in the *heavenly realms* (*i.e.* with Christ, on his throne, at the right hand of God: v 6 is modelled on 1:20). While Paul teaches that believers will be involved in the judgment and rule of the new creation (see *e.g.* 1 Cor. 6:2; *cf.* Rev. 3:21) he equally firmly insists we do not *yet* (1 Cor. 4:8). These verses are really not saying something very different.

A number of commentators have urged that Ephesians here breaks away from the real Paul, teaching that salvation is complete, the battle is over, and that believers already reign in the heavenly places. The writer (usually assumed to be a Pauline disciple) is then accused of being triumphalistic. But this fails to take seriously the emphasis on hope in 1:3–23; and it plays down 4:20 – 5:15, 6:10–18 and especially 6:12, which certainly depict present Christian existence as being in conflict with the pattern of our old sinful humanity, and with the powers of this age. Vs 5–6 are best understood as looking foward: what they say is now only fully true of Christ, but it can be affirmed of *us* in the secondary sense that he is our representative, that he is determinative for *our* future, and that we are united with him now by the Spirit. Similarly, the perfect tense *you have been saved* in v 5 (and in v 8) does not mean the writer thinks our salvation is already completed, but that our complete salvation has already been assured and revealed in Christ, and it is under way in us: we have truly begun to experience transfer from the realm of death to that of resurrection and life. These verses should be understood as a

fuller elucidation of the kind of assertion Paul makes in Col. 1:13; 3:1–4. V 7 (echoing 1:6–7, 18, 21) shows that it is the future that will disclose the salvation and grace now known only to faith.

8–10 This summary partly echoes the language of the debates in Galatians and Romans about justification by faith without commitment to the Mosaic law. The point Paul makes here, however, is a rather different, although complementary, one. He says that the salvation which we have already experienced, in our transfer from 'death' to 'life' in union with Jesus, is a dramatic disclosure of God's gracious power, precisely because it derives totally from him. It is not the product of, nor the reward given to, our works; it is *the gift of God* to faith. (Paul's Greek does not suggest he is saying that the faith too is purely God's grace, though that may be implied by other considerations.) This, Paul hastily clarifies, does not mean works are unimportant. But our former life and works only contributed to the predicament from which we needed to be delivered. By contrast, v 10 elaborates our salvation in terms of God's new creation of us in Christ (*cf.* 2 Cor. 3 – 5; 5:17; Gal. 6:15). We are thus, with Jesus, the firstfruits of the new creation and have been made so in order that we may indeed be able to do truly good works. This will be explained more fully in 4:17 – 6:20.

2:11–22 A digression: the church, cosmic reconciliation and unity: the new temple

Paul here breaks off the report of his prayer for his readers and therefore, in formal terms, vs 11–22 are a digression. In another sense, however, they are the theological heart of the letter; for the truths contained in them undergird and explain Paul's eulogy and prayer, and reinforce their message. If Ephesians is the crown of Paul's theological writing, 2:11–22 is perhaps the central jewel; but like a beautifully cut gem it has a depth and subtlety that is not easily summarized.

Structurally, the section is dominated throughout by a then-now contrast (which expands the earlier similar one in vs 1–7). It begins in vs 11–13 which stresses mainly the 'then' element (note the *formerly* of v 11, the *at that time* of v 12, and the contrasting *now in Christ* of v 13) and it is resumed in vs 19–22 which stresses mainly the 'now'. Vs 14–16 (with vs 17–18 recapitulating) provides the centre-piece and transition, and so divides the whole of vs 11–22 into three parts.

Paul's then-now contrast is spelled out principally in terms of the grand theme of past alienation (12, 19), exclusion (13), or hostility (16) and present reconciliation (16), unity (15–16), or peace (17). In brief, the passage tells us how God has begun the cosmic reconciliation which was his eternal plan (1:9–10). There are two important dimensions within this. Vs 11–15 focus primarily on how in Christ the great barrier between Jews and Gentiles was removed, and the Gentiles united with believing *Israel*. We might call this 'horizontal reconciliation'. Vs 16–22, have a different emphasis, however; they explain rather how both Jew and Gentile are brought *to God* (16–17), given access to him (18), and made into the heavenly temple indwelt by him (19–22). We may call this 'vertical reconciliation'. We shall have to note carefully how these are related (and how they are brought about) in the more detailed comments on the individual sections.

11–13 The first section calls the predominantly Gentile-Christian readers to remember their former status as those outside God's people. They were then what many Jews would call 'the uncircumcision'. Circumcision was the seal of the covenant with Israel, and so what distinguished Jews from the rest of the world. Judaism could thus refer to itself as *the circumcision*, meaning 'the covenant people of God', and dismiss the rest of the world, who stood outside the covenant, as 'the uncircumcision'. The point was not that Jews alone practised the minor surgical operation (other Semites did too), but its significance as a rite of entry into the Mosaic covenant.

Paul begins his description of the Gentiles' former position using the language any Jew might to point to their 'outside' status. It is equally clear, however, that Paul is not actually happy with this way of putting things, and feels he needs to qualify it by clarifying that Jews are only *those who call themselves 'the circumcision.'* For Paul, theirs is a circumcision merely performed by men, because, for him, their circumcision is often no more than an external surgical act, and the relationship to God it is supposed to symbolize has not become an internal reality worked by God. For Paul it is the household of *faith* whose relationship to God actually fulfils what circumcision is about (see Rom. 2:28–29), and this is most deeply true of Christians (Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11).

Paul returns to his main point in v 12. Formerly, as unbelieving Gentiles, the readers could have had no part in the Christ, for the Messiah is first and foremost the king of *Israel* (Rom. 9:5). They were alienated from the 'commonwealth of Israel' – the people of God who receive his blessing. Paul's choice of the term 'commonwealth' (with the NRSV against the NIV's less probable *citizenship*) suggests he is not thinking here of national Israel, but more

particularly of faithful Jews seen as living as a theocracy. The Gentiles' exclusion from the community of God's people meant they had no part in the covenants which promised the Messianic salvation. (The language here strongly echoes Rom. 9:4.) 'Hopes' and gods' they may have had in plenty, but these would have proved empty, for the Gentiles were without the true God and the hope he gave, and was now beginning to fulfil.

Now, *in Christ* (13), their situation has dramatically changed, and Paul chooses a common biblical metaphor to express the contrast. The imagery of the *near* and the *far away* originated in Is. 57:19, and it dominates Paul's description as far as vs 17–18 (where he actually uses the Isaiah wording). In v 13, however, he uses the language in a way that more closely reflects a special use of it in contemporary Judaism. The verb 'to make near' had become a term for making a non-Jew a proselyte, and so joining him or her to the congregation of Israel. This made the person concerned 'near' in two senses, both of which are attested in Judaism. He or she becomes 'close' to the rest of the people of God and 'close' to the God to whom the people are 'near'. They have access to the temple (the special place of divine presence) and to the God who was more generally present amongst his people. As we shall see, Paul is thinking of a transformed people of God and a heavenly temple, but otherwise his imagery in v 13 is similar.

14–18 take us to the very heart of Paul's understanding of the gospel of reconciliation. He begins in vs 14–15 with the horizontal dimension. Jesus is first said to be *our peace* in the sense that he joined the two great divisions of humanity (the uncircumcision and the circumcision) into one. He (in principle!) destroyed the *hostility* between Jew and Gentile, by removing the great *barrier* that separated them, and which inevitably became an occasion of mutual suspicion and animosity. The barrier in question was the Mosaic law with its detailed holiness code, which made it all but impossible for faithful Jews to live in close proximity with Gentiles.

Concerning these regulations the Letter of Aristeas (*c.* 100 BC) maintains, 'the legislator [Moses] surrounded us with unbroken palisades and iron walls to prevent our mixing with any of the other peoples in any matter, being thus kept pure in body and soul . . . worshipping the one almighty God' (139) or, again, 'And therefore, so that we should be polluted by none nor be infected with perversions by associating with worthless persons, he has hedged us about on all sides with prescribed purifications in matters of food and drink and touch and hearing and sight' (149). A literal barrier in the temple itself which prohibited Gentiles, on pain of death, from entering the inner courts where Israel worshipped, was merely the outward expression of the Mosaic requirements.

The enmity which the Mosaic law occasioned amongst sinful humanity, we are told, was destroyed *in his flesh* (15) – a reference to Christ's death on the cross which Colossians portrays as the putting off of the whole 'body of flesh' (Col. 1:22; 2:11–12; see v 16). It was destroyed when the Mosaic law, as a unity and as an indivisible covenant with Israel; was transcended and replaced by the conditions of the new creation and corresponding covenant inaugurated in Christ (*cf.* 2 Cor. 3:3–18). That this does not mean Paul is against the law should be clear enough from the rest of the letter (and note the specific use of the Torah in 5:31 – 6:3). Rather the good purpose which the Mosaic law served, in preserving Israel from the ungodly influence of other nations, gave way to the even higher purpose stated in v 15 and reflecting God's eternal plan (1:9–10). God wished to *create* one *new* humanity out of Jew and Gentile. For the centrality of this to Paul's theology see *e.g.* 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:28 and Col. 3:11.

16 now turns attention to the vertical dimension. So far we could almost get the impression (reflected in Marcus Barth's understanding of the whole passage) that the Christ-event leaves the status of Israel fundamentally unchanged: the Gentiles are merely added to her, and so blessed with her. That, however, is not Paul's point, for he goes on to affirm that the *one body* so created out of Jews and Gentiles was reconciled to God at the cross. This presupposes Israel too suffered an alienation from God through sin (*cf.* 2:3) that needed to be overcome at the cross; and that she only experiences that reconciliation as she participates in the new humanity, the one body of Christ, the church made of believing Jews and Gentiles. Of course, Paul's wording should not be pressed to mean that the universal church of Jew and Gentile was created first, and only then reconciled to God at the cross. His point is rather that Jesus at the cross stood as representative not only of the Jew but of Gentile humanity too, as the last Adam (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:45; Phil. 2:5–11). In the first instance it was uniquely *in himself* (15) that he made one new man out of the two; and subsequently it is only by union with him in one body that cosmic reconciliation is experienced. This means the church really is, for Paul, a third entity – neither Jew nor Gentile, but new humanity.

Behind the language of creating one new humanity lies the Jewish hope that at the end God would recreate the world more wonderfully

even than his first creation before the fall. As part of this God's people would be transformed and given resurrection bodies to match the world they came to live in, and so be a new sort of humanity living in total harmony with God and with each other. For Paul, exactly that is begun by Christ's resurrection, which is the pattern for ours, and is even beginning in us (see Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 15:45–49; 2 Cor. 3 – 5; Gal. 6:15; Phil. 3:21). But note that all this is true only *in himself*, in Christ; it is only the church in union with Christ that actually begins to experience this cosmic unity.

17–18 recapitulates the point in terms of a modified citation of Is. 57:19 and a further explanation. The words *he came and preached peace* refer neither to Jesus' incarnation and ministry nor to the ascended Christ through the apostolic preaching but are best understood as a summary of vs 14–16: they refer then specifically to the cross and resurrection. The words *and preached peace* echo Is. 52:7 but the rest approximately follows Is. 57:19. Originally this passage was applied to God's blessing of Jerusalem Jews (the *near*) and Diaspora Jews (the *far away*) but it is here understood to reach a new level of fulfilment in the Messianic 'peace' of reconciliation Christ brings between Jewish believers (the *near*) and Gentile believers (the *far away*), and between the new humanity thus created and God. V 18 takes this up in a metaphor taken from the temple legislation. In the OT, only the high priest, as Israel's representative, had immediate access to God in the sense that only he could enter the Holy of Holies, and then only on the Day of Atonement. Israel stood at a distance, and the Gentiles further beyond. But through Christ's death and resurrection, both now have immediate access to God through the gift of the Holy Spirit which brings the conscious presence of God to the individual.

In all this Paul does not explicitly state *how* the cross effects reconciliation between humankind and God. The very use of the word implies an estrangement or enmity on both sides which is healed. On humanity's side, hostility to God is occasioned by our rebellious reaction to his rightful and loving claim to our filial obedience. On God's side too one may speak of a certain element of estrangement from humankind; namely, his loving and holy wrath against our sin (2:3; 4:17–18; 5:3–6). It is the latter that Paul consistently, as here, believes is our most fundamental problem and to have been dealt with at the cross (*i.e.* before any of us believed and appropriated this reconciliation offered). This is why he consistently emphasizes the rich 'mercy' (4) and 'grace' (1:2, 6–7 *etc.*) of God. He does tell us *how* God accomplished this – he does not state that it is by substitutionary atonement (for which see the Commentary on Rom. 3:25; 5:9–11; 2 Cor. 5:19–21; Gal. 3:13). He seems rather to assume it (1:7; 5:2, 25–26) and in this letter appears more concerned to elaborate its consequences – restoration of relationship with God, and particularly the universal scope of the unity, harmony and peace God purposes in Christ.

19–22 A final image serves to underscore the glory of what God has accomplished in Christ for the former 'outsider' Gentile readers (picking up from v 13). They have been privileged to become fellow-citizens with 'the saints', that is, not with Jews or Jewish Christians, but with the rest of *God's people* and full members of God's heavenly city-temple *household.* Already in Gal. 4:26 Paul had upstaged the Judaizers by saying Christians belong not to the earthly Jerusalem, but to the heavenly one (*cf.* Phil. 3:20). The theological force of the assertion derives from the assumption that the age to come is already realized in heaven, and Jerusalem, as *she shall be* in the new creation, is waiting to 'descend' (see *e.g.* Rev. 21:1–4; and 21:10 – 22:5). To say we are already citizens of that temple-city is to say we *now*, in union with Christ, participate in that heavenly city radiant with the glory of God, and that it shall finally be revealed and displace all that we know of as reality in this age. For a similar view, namely that the church now participates in and manifests the worship of the end-time glorified congregation of the saints in the heavenly city, see Heb. 12:22–24. The idea of being members of the temple-city continues the theme of access to God introduced by v 18, because the heavenly city is filled with the radiant presence of God. Indeed, according to Rev. 22:5, he is its very light, displacing night and day.

In vs 20–22 we have essentially the same message but with a slight shift in the imagery. Believers are now portrayed as the very stones with which the heavenly temple itself is gradually being built. Much of Judaism expected a new temple in the Jerusalem of the age to come, and already certain parts of Judaism had come to think that God's *people* would constitute that holy dwelling-place of God (*cf.* Jesus' teaching in Jn. 2:19). This is the view expressed here, and it is said *already* to find fulfilment (as at 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16–17; 1 Pet. 2:4–10). Paul's readers are, he says, even now being built on the foundation of *the apostles and prophets.* The Greek syntax here, with one article governing both nouns (as at 3:5), suggests one foundational group, apostles functioning as prophets (*i.e.* bringing revelation), rather than two, though a separate group of prophets are also known at 4:11. Jesus himself is identified as the *chief cornerstone*, the one from which

the rest of the foundation is built outwards along the line of the proposed walls. The point would then seem to be that the temple is built out and up from the revelation given in Christ, through the revelatory elaboration and implementation of the mystery through the prophetic-apostolic figures (see 3:4–11, esp. v 5). But all is built on Christ, supported by Christ, and the lie or shape of the continuing building is determined by Christ, the cornerstone. An alternative interpretation makes Christ the 'keystone' (the last to be added, the one that holds together the whole arching edifice); but this depends on a later sense of the word translated 'cornerstone', and it does not really fit the image of a temple being built, for it would imply Christ has no place in it yet.

The last verse of the chapter reminds the readers of the enormous privilege that they are part of this whole construction. They are incorporated in the building, the one universal church, which God makes his dwelling by the Spirit. And they are incorporated in it precisely by union with Christ, in whom all things are being brought into the cosmic harmony and peace enabled by reconciliation inaugurated at the cross.

3:1 The prayer-report continued

After Paul's important digression (2:11–22), v 1 takes up again the report of his prayer for the Gentile churches (1:15 – 2:10). However, having introduced himself as the subject of the sentence, Paul breaks off into a second digression even before he gets to the main verb! The GNB does not tolerate this abruptness and smoothes it out by supplying the predicate 'pray to God' to complete the sentence (similarly REB), but Paul himself does not complete it until he returns to it and repeats its opening in v 14. (This is evidence that the letter is a real one, written in some haste, not a carefully planned theological update of Paul written in a later generation.)

3:2–13 A digression: elaborating Paul's apostolic ministry

Paul makes this sharp break from what he was about to say, because, having briefly introduced himself in v 1, he now feels he must expand that introduction before he proceeds. He has claimed to be Christ Jesus' man imprisoned (that is what is meant by *prisoner of Christ Jesus*, not that Jesus is the jailer!) *for the sake of you Gentiles* – this last thought is what calls for elaboration. It is his apostleship to the Gentiles that dominates vs 2–13, and largely expands and reorganizes the content of Col. 1:23–29. The section consists of three Greek sentences. Vs 2–7 take up the theme of the revelation of the mystery of cosmic reunification in Christ introduced at 1:9–10 and 2:20 – a revelation which spotlights Gentile inclusion (6). The second sentence, vs 8–12, concentrates more particularly on Paul's own role as apostle to the Gentiles, and on the remarkable grace that makes him (although *less than the least of all God's people*), the chosen bearer of a gospel of cosmic reconciliation. Finally, in v 13, Paul comes back to his sufferings on behalf of the gospel, the subject which sparked the digression.

2–7 The digression begins with Paul's virtual certainty that his readers will have heard of the commission God has given him. That he could expect this is more than reasonable. He himself had taken the gospel of Gentile inclusion from Jerusalem all round the Mediterranean as far as Yugoslavia (the Illyricum of Rom. 15:19), and intended to go on to Rome and Spain (Rom. 15:14–24). Furthermore he had been based for three years, AD 52–55, in Ephesus (Acts 20:31) from where his workers had taken his gospel at least as far east as Colosse and Laodicea, and probably to the other centres of the area too. Nevertheless, the fact that he speaks in this way is further indication he was writing a general letter to churches who had not met him, rather than to the Ephesians alone, who had not merely 'heard' of his ministry.

If the general sense of vs 2–3 is clear, the more precise meaning is difficult to ascertain (compare the translations!). Much depends on the phrase translated *the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you.* The NIV preserves some of the ambiguity of Paul's Greek: but does this mean (a) 'the *way* in which God entrusted me with the grace he gave me for your sake', *i.e.* that it was by revelation that he made the mystery known (so NJB); (b) 'the *outworking* of the grace he gave me' (so Caird); (c) 'the *commission* (or *responsibility*) of God's grace given (so NRSV; *cf.* GNB), or (d) 'the *plan* or *arrangement* of the grace God gave me', *i.e.* the conceptual content of the mystery (so NIV). The arguments are finely divided, but syntax and the relationship with vs 3–4 perhaps weigh marginally in favour of the first. Paul then, in vs 2–4, appears to assert that God entrusted him with the grace of the gospel for the Gentiles by revealing the mystery to him concerning which he has already written a little (namely chs. 1–2!), and that the readers can begin to grasp the significance of the heart of the gospel from what he says.

5–6 then transfer attention to the new content of revelatory truth involved. Paul's wording allows that there were hints of the gospel in the OT and Paul argues it roundly in *e.g.* Rom. 4; *cf.* Rom. 9:25 – 10:21. But that God should make

the Gentiles co-heirs, co-body members (Paul coins a new word to make the point) of a new people of God, and co-sharers of the promise of new creation in Christ, was decisively new. The three terms Paul uses all begin with the same prefix, meaning 'with', as here. Passages like Is. 2:1–4 were more usually understood to say that Gentiles might flock admiringly to restored Israel, and become proselytes or Jews. The decisive revelation of the mystery of the full Gentile blessing had only now been made, and it was given to God's *apostles and prophets.* In the commentary on 2:20 we noted a syntactical reason for thinking this may mean 'apostles functioning as prophets', though the syntax could allow the meaning 'apostles and prophets functioning as a unity'. The strongest argument for the latter is 4:11, but it has to be said we know of no prophets in the earliest church (other than the apostles) who were credited with such important revelation, and the context is specifically Paul's discussion of his *apostolic* commission. If we ask when the core of that revelation came to Paul, it was undoubtedly in the Damascus Road experience itself (*cf.* Acts 26:12–18; Gal. 1:11–12, 15–16) but the process by which it was revealed and established to a wider circle of apostles (5) took longer (*cf.* Acts 15; Gal. 2), and prophets may have been involved in that process. Some think Acts 15:28 suggests this.

6 finishes with the assertion that the Gentiles receive their blessing in Christ, through the gospel. **7** which is still part of the same Greek sentence which Paul started in v 2 and not a new paragraph as in the NIV and NRSV, now rounds off the paragraph by returning to the thought of God's grace and power given to Paul to be a servant of this gospel.

Note. The description of the *apostles and prophets* as *holy* has caused problems. Some have read it as a later early-Catholic restriction of the term 'the saints' which Paul regularly uses for *all* Christians. (The Greek word *hagios* can be an adjective meaning 'holy, separated to God for some particular use' or a noun meaning 'holy one', 'separated one' and hence 'saint'.) This, however, is not convincing, for Ephesians uses the broader sense throughout the letter (1:1, 4, 15, 18 *etc.*) Nor is it obvious that Paul here especially venerates the apostles compared with other believers, indeed in v 8 he describes himself as the least of all the saints! The explanation is probably to be found in the influence of Col. 1:26–27 where the wording is so very close, but where the mystery is said to be revealed to 'the saints'. When Paul, having reread the Colossian passage, changed its focus to speak of the revelation being made to the apostles, the word *hagiois* was simply retained, but here with different force – it now denotes the 'apostles and prophets' as 'separated to God' for their distinctive role as recipients of the central revelation.

8–12 take up and develop the theme of Paul's service of the gospel. His claim to be *less than the least of all the saints* goes beyond his earlier one to be least of the apostles because he had opposed the gospel and persecuted Jesus' followers (see 1 Cor. 15:9; but *cf.* 1 Tim. 1:15 where he is 'the worst of sinners'). Here it is deliberate exaggeration, to magnify the marvel of the grace of God that made him apostle to the Gentiles with a gospel concerning the unfathomable treasure of Christ, and with a significance of cosmic proportions. More specifically Paul has been given the task of bringing people to see the cosmic mystery at last revealed, and how God has chosen to work out his eternal purpose (9). The verb used means 'to enlighten' and assumes a fog of spiritual darkness to be dispelled. The langauge probably refers principally to conversion (*cf.* 5:8–14; Acts 26:17–18; 2 Cor. 4:4–6; 1 Thes. 5:4–5), but Paul envisages an ongoing sense realized in his own teaching ministry and intercessory prayer for his churches (see, *e.g.* 1:18; 3:18). The significance of this ongoing 'enlightening' is brought out in v 10, where God's whole purpose in Paul's preaching, teaching, and praying ministry is that *the church* should be built up to become the manifestation of God's richly variegated (the word used originally meant 'multi-coloured') wisdom to the *rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.*

What does this involve? The rulers in question are probably the whole host of heavenly beings; not merely God's angels nor merely the evil powers of 6:12 but both. They are the assembled witnesses before whom God vindicates his wisdom. He does this through a church which brings his wisdom to expression. That wisdom is his eternal purpose in Christ (11), which quite clearly is none other than his intent to unify all things in Christ (1:9–10). It is brought to expression in a universal church where Jew and Gentile live and worship as one body, in harmony with God and with brothers and sisters in Christ (*cf.* 6; 2:11–22). Paul's teaching and prayer in Eph. 1 – 2 is thus dedicated to emphasizing and encouraging such unity, as is his exhortation in chs. 4–6. He believes it to be a central, if not *the* central, witness to the gospel. In this he follows Jesus whose whole final testamentary prayer in Jn. 17 focused on the request that God keep the church in a unity of love which matches and witnesses to the unity of love between the Father and the Son.

13 brings us back to the claim of v 1, that Paul's imprisonment is 'for the sake of you

Gentiles'. His readers might be *discouraged* that God has allowed this apparent set-back, but Paul would rather have them see it as *your glory*. Why, after all, had he been arrested? It was because he stood for Gentile equality with Jewish believers in the one new-creation people of God, Christ's body. This infuriated Jews (and, alas, some Jewish believers), because it struck at their sense of spiritual privilege. And it was their violent antagonism that promoted the circumstances of Paul's arrest, imprisonment, and eventual martyrdom (see Acts 21 – 28). What is more, Paul had gone to Jerusalem fully aware of the dangers (Rom. 15:30–31), and bringing a collection from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem church, as a token of their love and indebtedness to the mother church for the spiritual blessing of the gospel they had received (Rom. 15:26–27). Paul hoped this would help to seal the unity between the two churches, which had constantly been under attack. Jewish Christians had indeed harassed his churches throughout his ministry (see *e.g.* 2 Cor. 10 – 13; Gal. 1 – 2, 6; Phil. 3) and a lesser man might simply have washed his hands of them. Paul, however, went to Jerusalem as apostle of the gospel to the Gentiles and of the gospel of cosmic reconciliation. He, a Jew, had devoted his life to bringing the Gentiles that gospel, and thought it worth any risk to foster their unity with the Jewish church. That was why his bonds were their *glory*. And if one looks to the final outcome for Paul, then, indeed, 'It is no exaggeration to say that Paul died a martyr to the cause of Christian reunion' (Findlay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 32). There is a deep challenge here for our Protestant churches today, who so easily split, and redivide again, over issues of 'the truth', often without realizing that in doing so we are compromising the central truth of the gospel of reconciliation and restoration of unity in Christ.

3:14–21 Paul's prayer-report completed and a doxology

Paul now takes up and completes the sentence broken off at v 1, and leads into the final part of his prayer-report which he began in 1:17. The theme here complements what has so far been said. In 1:17–23 the basic prayer was for the readers' deepened spiritual understanding of the central mystery of God's will; specifically that they may have a joyful grasp of the Christian hope, and a confident trust in God's saving, reconciling power in them, beginning to bring all things together into unity in Christ. Here the prayer is for the power to understand (and to know in reality) the fullness of the love of Christ. The more deeply that is known in the church, the more intensely will it reflect the unity, harmony, and vibrant Messianic peace that will finally be restored by God in the new creation.

This final part of Paul's prayer-report forms its climax. **14** Here we see Paul prostrating himself before God, on his knees with head bowed to the ground, as one making obeisance and bringing a matter of utmost urgency to a powerful king (the more usual position for prayer was standing). Paul certainly wanted to convey the impression of God's power. If he is called *Father* (see the comments on Mk. 14:36; Lk. 11:2; Rom. 8:14–17) we must remember this is not only a term of intimacy. In the east the father is the ruler over the family, the one to whom all questions of importance are related, and to whom the children (however old they may be) are expected to defer in obedience. When Jews spoke of God as a Father, they meant he ruled the world which owed him its obedience.

15 This sense of God's power is heightened by the addition 'from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name' (correctly NRSV, REB, GNB.) The NIV, by translating 'from whom *his whole family* in heaven and on earth', makes this a reference to the *one* family, the church (including past saints), but this would require a definite article in the Greek which is missing. 'Every family' rather than 'the whole family' is to be preferred, so v 15 is basically an affirmation of God as *Creator* of all groups of living beings (*cf.* 3:9; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–18), and as the one who sovereignly gives each its individual 'shape' and role. In Hebrew tradition, for God to give creatures their names is not merely to provide them with a label, but to determine what they *are*. The English reader may wonder why Paul uses the word 'family' here at all (Gk. *patria; against* NIV mg.; NJB and Bruce it cannot mean 'fatherhood'), but its appropriateness would be evident to the Greek reader as a word-play on *pater*, 'father'. The word means all those derived from a single ancestor, or (when applied to angelic beings) all of related kind.

16–19 Paul's prayer is made up of two (or perhaps three) requests. The first, in vs 16–17, is for God's mighty empowering by the Spirit in the *inner being* (the *heart* of v 17; see on 1:18 above). This is spelt out not in terms of charismata of one kind or another, but as *Christ* dwelling (more fully) in the readers, so that they will be rooted in and founded on love. By beginning v 17 with the words *so that*, NIV and NJB give the impression that Paul is saying the readers must first be strengthened by the Spirit so that then (subsequently) Christ may dwell in their hearts – but this is misleading. **17** rather *explains* the request: *i.e.* 'that is, that Christ

might dwell in your hearts'. This is not a prayer for mystical experience – far less that our human selves should be abolished so that we become 'channels only'. Paul's prayer is that Christ should dwell in us by or *through faith*; that is, that we should live our lives with fuller loving trust in him, being more and more deeply moulded by the Christ-event (as in Gal. 2:20; where the first part of the verse is explained in the second). It is this indwelling of Christ that strengthens the believer's life, and keeps him or her on a firm foundation – especially in times of trial (*cf.* Col. 1:11; Phil 4:12, and supremely in 2 Cor. 11:21b – 12:10).

The second request comes in vs 18–19a. It is a prayer for deep spiritual comprehension and a real knowledge of the love of Christ, which paradoxically is great beyond any human knowing. It is worth noting that the phrase *together with all the saints* is significant – Paul seeks not *solo virtuoso* knowledge of Christ's love, but the love that is known corporately and unites. Strictly speaking too, the wording of Paul's prayer in v 18 is not quite that we should grasp the four dimensions of Christ's love (as in NIV, REB, GNB). That may ultimately be what he means, but it simplifies what he says namely, 'to comprehend . . . what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and [or 'that is'] to know the love of Christ' (so NRSV; *cf.* NJB). In v 18, he does not actually specify what the four dimensions are of. In Judaism, the dimensions could be used to speak of God's unfathomable wisdom (see *e.g.* Job 11:5–9 for the four, and *cf.* Rom. 11:33–34, where it leads to a doxology as here; Col. 2:2–3), and that may be what Paul means here (*cf.* 3:10). But even if this is the case, the wisdom of God comes to focus in his uniting love in Christ, so the close connection with v 19a is assured. Alternatively (as NIV *etc.* assume) Paul may simply have missed out 'of the love of Christ' in v 18 because it would become explicit through the elaboration provided by v 19a.

19b either provides a third request, or (more probably) it provides the result of a full comprehension of Christ's love. For the sense of 'to fill' here see on 1:23. Where Christ's love is deeply known, there he is already exercising his rule, uniting the cosmos in himself in new-creation harmony with God.

The doxology formally closes and rounds off the first half of the letter with an invitation to thankful worship, just as it began (1:13–14). It provides a transition between Paul's prayer and teaching section and his consequent direct exhortations (chs. 4–6; *cf.* Rom. 11:33–36 which has a similar function). This doxology serves once again to remind the readers of God's immense and gracious power at work in them (*cf.* 1:19 – 2:6) – not to encourage selfish requests, but to promote confident hope in his new creation, and petitions that correspond with God's intent for the church in the present age. The doxology is strikingly unusual in bidding that glory be given to God through the *church* (21); but this is appropriate given the vision of the church in God's cosmic plan that Paul has given us. It is also an implicit invitation to the readers to ensure (insofar as in them lies) that the church will be of such character as to reflect God's glory.

4:1–6:20 Encouragement to live out the gospel of cosmic reconciliation and unity in Christ

The second part of the letter explores the application of the gospel of reconciliation and unity in the life of the church. Most of it comes in the form of a direct appeal, but this is built on the foundation of what has been said in the earlier chapters, and the content is regularly informed by what Paul has said in his opening thanksgiving, prayer-report and teaching. The recurrent theme of how to 'live' (Paul actually uses the Hebrew metaphor 'to walk') in the light of the gospel appears as a scarlet thread from 4:1 onwards (4:17; 5:2; 8, 15).

4:1–6 Opening appeal to a life that expresses new-creation harmony

Here Paul speaks of our calling as one to live together in a way that embodies the cosmic unity God has inaugurated. This passage thus sets the tone for the remainder of the letter, and provides the link with what has gone before. That link is made not only in the summarizing theme of unity in these verses but specifically in the 'therefore' (NIV *then*) of v 1 which (as at Rom. 12:1) grounds the appeal in the earlier teaching. (NIV has somewhat obscured this; but *cf.* the other major translations.) The passage consists of two parts: the appeal to unity (vs 1–3, partly expanding Col. 3:12–15) and a seven-fold confession emphasizing it (4–6).

1–3 By introducing himself here, again, as a *prisoner* for the Lord, Paul implicitly points to the level of commitment he expects of himself and of others. His readers will not have failed to note that he was a prisoner precisely because of his zeal for the sort of unity he now requests of them (see on 3:13). But first his appeal is the more general one to live in a way that is worthy of God's calling (see 1 Thes. 2:12; Rom. 12:1; Col. 1:10). The calling in question is to share in Christ's rule over the new creation (1:20–22; 2:6), and to be part of the heavenly temple (2:19–22). Such a calling carries its own responsibilities: Barth summarizes it thus – 'Royal princes are treated by their educators not with

the stick, but with an appeal to their rank and standing'. Perhaps he is right but the appeal here is not to the aristocratic qualities of imperious resolve, tenacity and authority. It is a call, rather, to the corporate humility, gentleness and patient, forgiving love that exemplifies reconciliation (2; *cf.* Col. 3:12–13). 3 (*cf.* Col. 3:14–15) then clarifies this as the appeal to a life that promotes unity.

The appeal is couched in urgent terms not easily translated into English: 'the imperative ... excludes passivity, quietism, a wait-and-see attitude.... Yours is the initiative! Do it now! Mean it! *You* are to do it! ... – such are the overtones in verse 3' (Barth). This is not a call for men and women to *build* God's kingdom; it is a warning to *keep*, stay within ('Maintain!') the unity God has already inaugurated in Christ (by the events of 2:11–22) and into which we are brought by the Spirit who brings us Christ and his benefits. The Spirit brings us the Messianic *peace* of God-given harmony as a uniting bond. It is a bond, however, that the author is well aware may be severed by the arrogance, falsehood, pride and selfish assertiveness he will address in 4:17 – 5:14.

4–6 reminds us of the centrality of the call to unity with a sevenfold repetition of the word 'one'. V 4 is reminiscent of Col. 3:15b, but spelled out in terms of the major themes of Eph. 2:14–17 (one body); 2:18–22 (one Spirit) and 1:11–14; 18–23 (one hope). This triad of unities seems to progress from the visible 'body' (the one church universal reconciling Jew and Gentile) to the invisible Spirit who gives it harmony and *peace* in Christ (3), and thence to the future hope of full cosmic harmony of which the Spirit is now received as but the first instalment (1:13–14). The second triad (5) could well be a traditional baptismal affirmation sparked by the last thought. (Faith in Jesus as the one Lord was regularly the focus of baptismal confession (*e.g.* Acts 2:34–39; 19:5), though there is no reason to assume it was confined to that occasion. For a Jew to confess Jesus as the *one Lord* was tantamount to confessing him as one with the Father, for Jews daily prayed the *Shema* (Dt. 6:4; *cf.* Rom. 10:9–12; 1 Cor. 8:4–6). V 6 naturally climaxes with the Judeo-Christian affirmation of the one God totally sovereign over and in creation. It is on this supposition that all hope for final cosmic unity is built (*cf.* Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:4b–6; Col. 1:15–20), and it points back to the God of 1:3–10.

It is worth noting that all this addresses unity both within the local congregation and, more especially, as a universal church. Many Christians have often been more keen to promote the loving harmony of a single congregation (even sometimes, alas, only of cliques within it!) than to deal with the divisions between churches.

4:7–16 Christ's victory gifts and growth towards Christ

In this exquisite section the appeal is implicit rather than explicit. Essentially it makes three points. First, the universal church is called to grow as a unified body (15–16) from the union *already* given in Christ (2:11–22) towards the full union with Christ in cosmic harmony that will characterize the passing of this age, and the appearance of the new creation (13, 15). Secondly, each Christian has a vital part in this (7, 16b) in accordance with the grace given by the ascended and liberating Christ (8–10). Thirdly, Christ has given certain types of leader (fundamentally those with different kinds of teaching gifts) to promote and direct such growth, and to ensure cohesive unity (11–13; 16a). The flow of thought in vs 11–16 (a single Greek sentence) is especially delicate.

7–10 The language and thought here is akin to that of 1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12:1–8 (v 7 is especially close to 1 Cor. 12:4–7 and Rom. 12:6). When Paul speaks of God's grace *given* in a variety of expressions *to each one of us* ('all believers'; as 'we' and 'us' elsewhere in the letter) he is not restricting the scope of what he says to the ministers of v 11. This leads him to a description of Christ as the giver of all such graces. He presents Jesus' resurrection-exaltation as bringing a new and greater fulfilment of Ps. 68:18. Jesus has taken captive the very powers that bound us (*cf.* Col. 2:15) and now liberally bestows on us the victor's gifts (rather than *receiving* gifts, as in the original).

9–10 could be taken in one of three ways. Either that the one who ascended on high also descended into Hades; or that the one who ascended is the one who earlier descended to incarnation and humiliation of the cross; or that the one who ascended also then redescended (in the Spirit) to bring his gifts to humankind. How do we decide?

The phrase 'the lowest parts of the earth' is probably rightly interpreted by the NIV and GNB, and especially the REB to mean 'the lowest level (of the universe; as seen from heaven), down to the very earth', and so we should exclude the first option. The third option is possible, but v 10 suggests that Christ ascends and fills the universe from heaven (see on 1:23 for this), rather than that he redescends from it to bring gifts. The second option is probably to be preferred; the point being that the one who ascended and now fills the world (and gives the different graces to us) is none other than the one who first descended in humility to incarnation and death for us (*cf.* 2:14–17). His coming (2:17) at the cross and resurrection brought us

the Messianic peace, blessings and graces we enjoy.

Note 8 While Ps. 68:18 speaks of the ascending one *receiving* gifts, Paul has exchanged this for 'he *gave* gifts to men', and explanations why he did so vary. Did Paul know a textual tradition that read *chalaq* (share, divide) instead of *laqach* (receive) – a transposition of only one consonant in Hebrew? Did he read *laqach* with the (plausible) sense 'take to, or receive for a person', either on general grounds or because he believed Ps. 68:18 was a metaphorical reference to the Levites, received by God *from* the people (so Nu. 18:6, 19)? Or does Paul reflect the rabbinic and targumic interpretation of Ps. 68:18, which says Moses ascended on high (to heaven) to learn the words of the law which 'he *gave* as gifts to men'? Certainty eludes us, but evidently 'gave' was a traditional understanding of either the sense of the verse itself, or at least of the implications of the ascending one's 'receiving' which the verse describes – and the latter is all that is required, for we must remember that Paul's focus is not primarily on the historical reference of the Psalm, but on its typological fulfilment in Christ and his gifts to the church.

11–16 V 11 exemplifies Christ's victory gifts by pointing to certain types of leader in the church. Paul is not restricting the fulfilment of Ps. 68:18 to these gifts (as NRSV implies): the 'This is why' which opens the citation shows that Paul regards all the different graces of v 7 as Christ's victory gifts too. The apostle is, however, deliberately emphasizing them for the way they control and shape the church's unified growth (12, 16).

This selection of leaders highlights particularly those who reveal, declare and teach the gospel. The specific mention, first, that Christ gave apostles and prophets corresponds with the *foundational* revealing function of the 'apostles and prophets' in 2:20 and 3:5 (and *cf.* 1 Cor. 12:28, also with 'teachers' as here). Paul wishes his readers to understand that their revelation of the gospel of cosmic reconciliation is the one that should continue to shape and unify the church and its teaching. But we are not free to deduce that Ephesians teaches that apostles and prophets will always be given to the church (as the Restorationist churches maintain), nor that the writer regards them merely as figures of the past, with evangelists and pastors replacing them (as many modern commentators). The latter two are mentioned because they are the form of church workers the readers have encountered. It was mainly Paul's co-worker evangelists, not the apostle himself, through whom the gospel was revealed to the readers outside Ephesus. And by the end of Paul's ministry the term 'pastor' was being used alongside 'overseer/bishop' and 'elder' as rough equivalents for 'church leader' (*cf.* Acts 20:17, 28 where 'elders' are called 'overseers' who 'pastor' the flock). The 'pastors' and 'teachers' here share a single definite article in the Greek, and this may suggest they are one group ('pastors who are also teachers'); but in this longer listing of different ministries it is more likely that the two groups with overlapping (*i.e.* teaching) functions are in view (and 'teachers' were a distinct group; 1 Cor. 12:28–29; Gal. 6:6). Shortly after Paul's time church leadership crystallized into a threefold ministry of overseer/bishop, elders and deacons. The absence of these terms from Eph. 4:11 remains strong evidence that the letter was written in Paul's day, not later.

12 These leaders are said to have been given for three co-ordinate purposes. Christ gave them to equip or complete the saints; to serve the church's needs, and to build up the body of Christ. Traditional Protestant interpretation (now reflected in all the modern translations including the NJB) has limited the function of the leaders to the first of these, arguing it is the equipped saints who then minister to the church and build it up, not the leaders. To propose that the latter are the subject of all three phrases is taken to be 'Catholic' and 'clericalist' interpretation. But while any 'clericalist' interpretation is clearly excluded by vs 7 and 16 (where the saints definitely have a part in the building up of the church), it is more probably the leaders' functions which are still in view throughout v 12.

According to v 13, the leaders are given to accomplish the tasks outlined in v 12 'until we all attain to the unity inherent in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God' (so REB). Paul is not describing some future historical period when the church gradually reaches unity of beliefs and organization, and becomes a mature church, as the NIV could be taken as suggesting. He anticipates rather the coming of Christ which will consummate the cosmic unity inaugurated at the cross (2:11–22). By faith, and in our knowledge of the Son, we already participate in this unity (indeed it is given to us to 'maintain' [4:2]), but we yet wait to see it fully realized. At Christ's coming, and only then, shall we, the universal corporate church, 'form the Perfect Man, fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself' (NJB) or, perhaps better, attain 'the mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ' (REB). The thought here is essentially that of Col. 3:4, but with added emphasis on the corporate existence of the universal church as a single body. The leaders are given to fulfil the functions of v 12 'until' Christ's coming brings his church to complete maturity. But that 'until' also has the

implications of 'towards'. What Christ will accomplish fully at the end, is the goal towards which, by God's grace, the leaders are already given to work.

By making v 14 a new paragraph, and by starting it with the word *then* (replacing a Greek word which means 'so that'), the NIV again suggests a future golden era for the historical church. But vs 14–16 are still part of the same single sentence begun in v 11, and the line of thought is more subtle. It is that Christ gave the leaders in the meantime to provide the direction the gospel and our hope point in. He gave them 'so that' we may no longer be trapped in the immaturity of infancy (prey to every pressure) but begin to grow up towards the anticipated maturity, that is, into the very likeness of Christ. While the imagery so far could almost suggest that the church grows towards an independent manhood *like* Christ's, the switch of imagery at the end of v 15 reminds the reader that Jesus is Lord (*head*) of the whole process, and the church is intended to grow into more intimate union with him. Paul closes the paragraph with a revised form of Col. 2:19, which attempts to sum up everything said so far. The whole body's growth ultimately comes *from* Christ, but the body grows as *each part* does its apportioned building work in love (reaffirming v 7, and clarifying that it is not just leaders who build the church). All along, that upbuilding and growth is held in unity and cohesion by *every supporting ligament* (echoing the role of the teaching leaders). All this poses a challenge for today: are our leaders trying to promote this sort of united growth of the whole of God's church together and do we want to follow?

4:17 – 6:9 Appeals to abandon the life of the old humanity and live according to the new-creation humanity revealed in Jesus

The material which follows takes up the appeals of Col. 3:5 – 4:2. In Colossians Paul couched his description of Christian life mainly in terms of a contrast between seeking the things which are above, and putting to death the earthly nature (Col. 3:1–6: to redress a different and unhealthy interest in heavenly things). In Ephesians the dominating contrast is that of 2:1–22; namely the 'then–now' contrast of former alienation and present new-creation unity and harmony. Although the language used in the heading here is actually found only at 2:15 and 4:22–24, this provides a master metaphor appropriate to the whole section. But the subsections highlight different emphases within the theme of new-creation life: 4:25 – 5:2 deals primarily with sins such as anger and falsehood which could cause dissension and alienation in the church; 5:3–14 warns believers not to get caught up in the darkness of the surrounding world (particularly its sexual mores) that once enveloped them; 5:15–20 contrasts the folly of that world with the wisdom of the new God-orientated life, while 5:21 – 6:9 examines how husband-wife, parent-child, and slave-master relations can reflect the cosmic unity God has inaugurated in Christ.

4:17–24 Put off the old and clothe yourself with new humanity! After an initial insistence that the readers put behind them their former Gentile way of life (17), this is painted in dark colours (18–19; *cf.* Col. 1:21; 3:7) to provide a sharp contrast with what they have heard in the gospel about Christ (20–21). He is the pattern for the new-creation humanity, and Paul reminds his readers that the gospel therefore included teaching on the need to put off the old sinful humanity, and put on the new (22–24; *cf.* Col. 3:8–10).

17–19 Compare these verses with the very similar Rom. 1:18–32 (esp. 1:21, 24). You may observe that here, as befits an appeal, there is greater stress on the human responsibility in abandonment to sin (*cf.* Rom. 1:24, 26, 28, 'God gave them over to . . .' with v 19 *they have given themselves over to* . . .). As with Romans the problem is traced to idolatrous thinking (the word *futility* in v 17 would immediately suggest this to a Jewish writer), culpable ignorance of God, and 'hardness of heart'. In Scripture this latter phrase means sheer rebelliousness, not emotional insensitivity (*cf.* the promise in Ezk. 36:26–27). This leads to further darkened understanding as God is displaced from the central position he should occupy. This in turn leads to failure of the human conscience and the downward spiral in sin (19). All is summed up in one of the key words of the letter: 'alienated' (18). (NIV *separated*; *cf.* 2:12 and Col. 1:21.)

20–24 contrast the readers' former Gentile life with what they were taught concerning Christ both in the initial proclamation, and in subsequent teaching. Note how vs 20–21 mirror Col. 2:6–7 which provides the basic sense here. What they learned about Christ was that he embodies *truth* (*i.e.* divine reality, light, and life), in contrast to the 'deception' (absence of divine reality, darkness and futility) which characterized their former existence (21–22). Paul's Greek is not easy here, and is literally 'you were taught in him, as [the] truth is in Jesus, to put off the old man/humanity corresponding to your former manner of life . . . and to put on the new man/humanity'. In other words, the readers were taught that Jesus embodies the truth, and that if they wished to live in it they needed to put off their former life and embrace one like his. According to Barth, the

'old man' to be put off is Adam and the 'new man', to be put on is Christ (as at Rom. 6:6; 13:14; *cf.* Gal. 3:27b). There is an important element of truth here, but both the Colossians parallel (3:1–4 and 8–10) and 4:24b–32 suggest a different nuance. Here Paul is not thinking of the representative heads of old and new creations as much as the different kind of human nature that characterizes each creation. Paul is encouraging the readers to be renewed in mind (contrast the futile mind and what it leads to in vs 17–19), and live according to the new-creation nature that God is already making in them. According to v 24, that 'new nature' is 'created in God's likeness', something Paul would hardly say of Christ! It is characterized by a holy righteousness that springs from and mirrors 'the truth' (with REB against NIV and NRSV).

Paul's original teaching was probably cast in the indicative – in union with Christ your old sinful humanity was crucified, and you were raised to new-creation life (*cf.* Rom. 6; 2 Cor 5:17; Col. 2:11–12, and most obviously Col. 3:9–10, the direct parallel); but such indicatives imply corresponding imperatives (as here; *cf.* Rom. 6): we are responsible to *live out* with all seriousness and energy what God is doing in us (*cf.* Phil. 2:12–13). Failure to do so would precisely be to live in the 'deceit' (22) of the old creation rather than in 'the truth' of the new (24; *cf.* 21).

4:25 – 5:2 Live in the truth patterned in Christ Jesus! If the new-creation humanity mirrors 'the truth' revealed in Jesus (21, 24) rather than the 'deceit' of the old, it inevitably requires Christians to speak the truth, not falsehood. But the truth revealed centres on cosmic reconciliation and unity, and so Paul adds that we should refrain from lies *for we are all members of one body*. That is, we are no longer alienated, independent beings, but people who now belong together in unity with others whom we must not rob of the truth according to which they will decide and act. The remaining teaching in the section focuses especially on the alienating sin of anger (26) and related sins (29–31). In place of these, believers are called to pattern themselves on the truth of God revealed in Jesus (4:32 – 5:2). The whole is substantially a rewriting of Col. 3:8–12.

26 introduces the main topic of the passage: anger. The NRSV's 'Be angry, but do not sin' entirely misses the force of the original. It is not an encouragement to righteous anger (indeed *all* anger is condemned in 5:31); it is a warning, 'If you become angry, beware! You are at sin's door!' If in the West anger is regarded as a sign of manliness, Jewish tradition was more aware of its divisive, satanic, and corrupting power (see the incisive criticism of anger and its dangers in *Testament of Dan* 1:18 – 5:2). Anger, and the related sins of vs 29 and 31, are the epitome of socially destructive and alienating sins, and so characteristic of the old creation. Theft (28) is another; for it is experienced not merely as the deprivation of property (akin to accidental loss) but as a defiling assault on one's private sphere and a destroyer of trust within the community. These things and others of their kind *grieve the Holy Spirit* (a telling allusion to Is. 63:10) in the sense that they oppose the very direction of his reconciling, unifying, new-creation work in the believer. In place of these socially destructive activities, Paul advocates corresponding ones that are cohesive, upbuilding, and pattern the new-creation existence epitomized and brought into being in Christ: the erstwhile thief should turn philanthropist instead (28); speech should not be used to befoul and tear down, but for good (29); in place of anger, the believer should show the forgiving character of God (32; 5:1) and the self-sacrificial love of Christ who died to atone for us (5:2).

5:3–14 Live in the light that shines forth from Christ Jesus! This section falls into two parts: vs 3–7, warning believers to have nothing to do with the sexual levity, promiscuity and greed of the Gentile world; and vs 8–14, characterizing these as belonging to the readers' former *darkness*, from which they have been converted, and which now, as *light*, they expose. The divine reality earlier referred to as 'the truth' in contrast to 'deceit' is thus now called 'light' in contrast to 'darkness' (*cf.* Ps. 27:1; Is. 9:2; 42:6; 60:1–3; 2 Cor. 6:14). A similar religious-ethical dualism was strongly developed at Qumran (and in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*). In Paul, 'light' normally stands specifically for salvation and new-creation realities inaugurated but yet to be fully revealed (see especially Rom. 13:11–14 and 1 Thes. 5:4–8 which are close parallels to this passage; also 2 Cor. 4:6; Col. 1:12).

3–7 The previous section warns mainly about sins that come to expression in speech, and the same applies here; talk about sexual sin is not to be entertained, 'not even to be mentioned' (correctly, NJB, REB, NRSV), far less joked about (4). This is not an invitation to prudishness, or to avoid genuine pastoral honesty, but is a warning against conversationally indulging a fascination which almost inevitably inflames to deeds. Perhaps no generation has suffered the ill-effects as strongly as western culture today. And Paul warns that these things belong to the old humanity under God's wrath (6; *cf.* Col. 3:6) and are excluded from the new creation (5; *cf.* 1 Cor. 6:9).

8–14 Note the fluidity with which the symbolic language of 'light' and 'darkness' is used

here: essentially it streams from Christ (14b) as transforming divine life – life which can be said to produce the *fruit* of truth and holiness (9; *cf.* Gal. 5:22–23). But the people transformed by it can also be called *light* (8), and their activities (when they truly correspond to the new-creation humanity) are also light in that they expose the Gentile standards as belonging to *darkness* (11, 13). V 14b appears to be a Christian baptismal hymn, drawing on Is. 26:19 and 60:1–2. It is added not to justify v 14a, but to sum up the whole call (2–14) to leave behind the realm of darkness and death.

5:15 – 6:9 Live in the wisdom the Spirit gives! To the call to leave deceit for the truth in Jesus (4:17 – 5:2), and to leave darkness for the light that streams from him (5:3–14), Paul now adds the call to abandon folly for the wisdom granted by the Spirit. That wisdom comes to expression especially in wise use of time, in heartfelt worship and thanksgiving, and in mutual respect and submission (15–21).

18–24 These verses are grammatically a single sentence (obscured by all translations). This means that the injunction to wives and husbands in vs 22–33 (along with the similar material which follows in 6:1–9) is presented as a typical example of the respectful, submissive wisdom that should characterize believers. Indeed, the verb 'submit' supplied in most translations at v 22 has no equivalent in Paul's Greek, but is understood from its appearance in the dependent participle clause 'submitting to one another' in v 21.

Although 5:22 – 6:9 is forged into a tight unity with 5:15–21, it has an independence of form and origin. Luther referred to the material as 'Household Rules', and they clearly had wider circulation in the church (see Col. 3:18 – 4:1; 1 Pet. 2:18 – 3:7). Similar tables are to be found in Judaism and in the ethical discussions of the Greek philosophers. The wording and content of the simpler form (preserved in Colossians) suggests an origin in Greek-speaking Jewish Christianity. While Greek tables addressed only the free male in how he should rule the wife, child, and slave; these, in Jewish fashion, address and protect the weaker parties too. The specifically Christian content of the Colossian table emerges mainly in the repeated 'in the Lord' (Col. 3:18), 'pleasing in the Lord' (Col. 3:20), 'of reverence for the Lord' (Col 3:22) (see also Col. 3:23–24). It is more fully elaborated in the Ephesians section which is a recasting and amplification of the teaching of Col. 3:15 – 4:1. The most dramatic elaboration is of the advice to husbands and wives which Paul uses to exemplify the unity of Christ and the church. Here the 19 words of Col. 3:18–19 have been expanded to 200!

A number of commentators have argued that the ethics of the tables were socially revolutionary, and find evidence for this in the request for reciprocal mutual submission (21), which is taken by them to mean husbands are to submit to wives, parents to children, and masters to slaves, as well as the reverse. If anything, however, the tables were socially conservative, patriarchal, and, given to confirm that Christians were not to undermine the more widespread understanding of social order (see Lincoln). The Colossians table (written perhaps only days before Ephesians) demands exactly the same types of outward submission and obedience that could be found almost anywhere in the ancient world. V 21 should not be taken to override this, but as a call to mutual submission *within* each hierarchical level, and of children to parents and slaves; slaves to masters (and their wives?), and wives to husbands. Had Paul really meant a *totally* reciprocal submission (which would be entirely unexpected in the ancient world) he would have needed to clarify that by saying at least once, and *explicitly*, that *e.g.* parents should submit to children.

To affirm that these tables were more socially conformist than revolutionary would be misleading, however; within the hierarchical social order they uphold they were radical and profoundly liberating. The slave, the child and the wife are specifically addressed (unusual in the ancient world): they are given their own calling to live before the Lord which is as responsible, honourable and important as the calling to live as master, parent and husband. The latter may be different roles, carrying greater social authority and responsibilities, but they are not *better* roles. This is assured by the coming of the Son in full submission to the Father, and to serve the church in giving himself for it. Indeed, the very social hierarchies the tables support are also recognized as ephemeral, and of secondary significance before the God who is impartial (9), and under the Lord to whom everything is to be done, and to whom both master and slave are *equally* responsible. The tables thus also confirm Gal. 3:28 and Col. 3:11 – and Ephesians brings a particularly radical new Christian understanding to marriage (see on 5:22–23).

15–21 The appeal to a life reflecting wisdom, not folly, is specified in three related ways. The first is well expressed in the NJB translation, 'Make the best [use] of the present time, for it is a wicked age' (16); and this is probably to be interpreted to mean that the powers of evil have a firm grip on humankind in this age, leading it into self-indulgent disobedience (so 2:1–3), but Christians are to order their lives and priorities to God's glory. 17 then provides a second

related specification: a life of folly is to be abandoned for one which seeks to discover and live by God's will.

18 provides the third specification, contrasting a life of drunkenness, with one filled with the Spirit. The contrast here is not between two sorts of inebriation: drunkenness was simply a regular, indeed proverbial expression of folly in Jewish Wisdom Literature, and contrasted with the Spirit who (equally proverbially) was seen as the source of wisdom and understanding (as at 1:17; 3:16–18). Being *filled with the Spirit* is not to be understood here in a distinctively charismatic sense (though it may include that), but in the light of the 'fill', 'fulness' language elsewhere in the letter (1:23; 3:19b; 4:10) as an ongoing active presence of the Spirit mediating Christ and new-creation life. V 19 onwards is part of the same sentence as v 18 and spells out what being filled with the Spirit entails: it comes to expression in corporate worship (19a), adoring song (19b), thanksgiving to God (20; *cf.* 1:3–14; 15–16; 3:20–21) and mutual submission (21). Ecclesiasticus (an example of Wisdom Literature from the second century BC) offers a good parallel to Paul's thought here, 'If the ... Lord is willing he [the man who studies the law] will be filled with the Spirit of understanding; he will bring forth words of wisdom and give thanks to the Lord in prayer' (Ecclus. 39:6).

22–24 The call for the wife to obey her husband (and that is roughly what the verb 'submit' means in this context; *cf.* 1 Pet. 3:5–6) was virtually a universal convention of Paul's world. But Paul reinforces the convention with the claim that the husband is the woman's *head*, which in 1 Cor. 11 is based in the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. 'Head' means master (see on 1:22); contrary to widespread claims, the word never meant 'source' in biblical Greek. The appeal is then further supported (and transcends convention) by the analogy Paul develops between marriage and the relationship between Christ and the church, with the woman being asked to submit to the husband in the way the church submits to her head, Christ (*i.e.* responding to his love, joyfully, and out of heartfelt desire, not grudgingly or under compulsion).

25–29 The charge to husbands to love their wives is also well reflected in the better conventions of the day, but Paul gives it radical new content through the Christ-church analogy. Christ gave himself for the church in love, and lovingly perfects the church (*washing* her clean with the *word*) for the day he will be more fully united with her. (The reference in v 26 is not to baptism.) Paul does not think the analogy carries through in every detail but as Christ sees the church as now having become his own body, by commitment to marriage union, and does everything lovingly and for her good, so should the husband for his wife (28). He should recognize that in loving her he is loving himself; for she is joined with him as *one flesh* (28–29; *cf.* 31).

30–33 Paul was perfectly aware of the literal meaning of Gn. 2:24, but he saw the mystery of cosmic unity in Christ, and especially the union between Christ and his body, as in a sense prefigured in the marriage bond. For him there is a typological relationship between creation *in* unity with God and redemption *into* unity with God. That original unity was nowhere better focused than in Adam's pre-fall union with Eve, and Paul holds that Christ's union with the church is its redemptive counterpart. The parallel was not accidental: as Lincoln observes, 'Christ had already been seen in Adamic terms in Eph. 1:22 ..., and so a text that refers to Adam's bodily union can now be claimed for Christ's union with the Church' (Lincoln, p. 382). But if Paul sees marriage as an illustration of the new-creation union, it must be noted that he also interprets marriage in the light of that Christ-church union – and thereby transforms the concept of the marriage relationship, and gives the world the highest ideal of marriage it knows.

6:1–4 The injunctions concerning parent-child relations follow quite clearly the wording of Col. 3:20–21. Paul only adds the commandment with a modified form of its attached promise (2; *cf.* Ex. 20:12) and the positive injunction that fathers (note the male responsibility) instruct and train their children in the Lord.

5–9 follows closely Col. 3:22 – 4:1 (see the Commentary there).

6:10–20 Final appeal: Fight the spiritual battle together!

It was common enough to end with an appeal that took up the central message of the letter, and pressed it to stir the readers' hearts and wills to support the writer. This is what Paul does here. The section must be read in the light of the whole of Ephesians, as a call to live out the gospel of cosmic reconciliation, not as an appendix for those with a special interest in demons and spiritual warfare. Note that Paul has chosen to recast his message in the form of a battle address: *i.e.* he addresses the whole church corporately as an army, not singular saints. Lone soldiers are easy to pick off! Note too that Paul has a particular sort of battle in mind: one to hold a strong position. His exhortation does not prepare soldiers to make a quick moving attack (and the Roman soldier's key attack weapons, the twin javelins, are missing), but to take a *stand* (11), to *stand your ground* (13) and to *stand*

firm (14). They hold the crown of the hill, as it were, and the enemy must weary itself in constant uphill attack. The strong position Paul has in mind will be clear to the reader: it is our union with Christ (2:5–6), the head over all things (1:22–23), far above all principalities and powers (1:21), and the resurrection power of God at work in us (1:19 – 2:7). Even the armour and weapons turn out to be a mixture of God's very own (*cf.* Is. 59:17) with those of his Messiah (Is. 11:4–5). And yet Paul shows no triumphalism here. The decisive victory won by Christ lies in the past and the very fact that believers now fight on Christ's side is clear testimony to that (see 2:1–6); but complete victory still lies in the future. In the meantime it is *the day of evil* (13) that appears to dominate the scene.

The passage falls into three sections: the call to don God's armour for the battle (10–13); the detailing of the armour (14–17) and the need for watchfulness, prayer and intercession (18–20).

10–13 *Be strong* perhaps fails to bring out the force of the passive verb ('be strengthened'), and the REB does better with 'find your strength in the Lord'. Certainly the emphasis is on God's great power for this fight, and hence Paul had made his readers' understanding of this central point in his earlier prayer for them (1:19 – 2:10). In addition to divine strength they will need the full armour (defensive and offensive) God provides, but this armour will turn out to be *of God* in the further sense that it is the armour he wears when he sets out in judgment and salvation (Is. 59:17). Only this sort of armour will be of use given the nature of the opposition: the devil and his powers (11).

Writing to an area which had strong associations with magic (see the Introduction, and on 1:19a), and knew myriad names for the powers, it is noteworthy that Paul does *not* launch himself into a detailed and speculative demonology. Instead he uses three general terms, and one ('cosmocrats of this present darkness') which may originally have had a more specifically astrological meaning. The first two terms are deliberately drawn from 1:21–22, and so the reader is reassured that Christ has far greater authority and power.

The careful reader of the letter will have no problem in understanding the nature of the fight against these powers, or the content of the devil's *schemes* (11). He seeks to alienate humanity from God by disobedience (2:1–3; 4:18b–19) and by ignorance and corrupted thinking (4:17b–18). He tries to separate people from each other through the alienating sins of greed (4:22, 23), falsehood (4:25), anger (specifically related to the devil in 4:27) and related sins (4:25–31). By referring to the cosmocrats as 'of this [present] darkness', Paul points back to 5:7–14; and depicts the powers as the influence to sin that characterizes this age and this creation, in contrast to the 'light' of the new creation to come. It may strike us as strange that these powers are located *in the heavenly realms*, but that phrase signifies the whole spiritual dimension from what 2:2 calls 'the air' to God's throne (and Christ's) in the 'highest' heavens.

13 reiterates the need for divine armour if the Christian is to stand against these powers in *the day of evil.* The NIV's *when the day of evil comes* might suggest the final upsurge of evil and tribulation that Jewish apocalyptic writing expected just before the day of the Lord. That thought certainly colours the language here, but for Paul the days are *already* evil (5:16); the fight is already on; the armour is needed *now* if the believer is to stand. So *in the day of evil* probably includes the present, but particularly those periods which seem to us most to share the terrible quality of 'the [final] evil day'.

14–17 A repeated 'Stand firm [together]' introduces the portrayal of the armour itself. Gentile readers would no doubt have thought of the Roman soldier, but Paul (as at 1 Thes. 5:8) has cast his description mainly in terms of God's armour in Is. 59:17 (and the description of God in *Wisdom of Solomon* 5:17–20 is even closer). Here, however, the Messiah's *belt of truth* and *breastplate of righteousness* are added, along with his powerful *word* which strikes judgment (Is. 11:4–5). All this strengthens Paul's assertion that it is the Lord who gives the necessary armour; armour that is fashioned by his grace in us. Note that the metaphors are not rigid: in 1 Thes. 5:8 the 'breastplate' is faith and love, while here it is righteousness.

14 begins with two ethical items; 'truth as a belt round your loins, and righteousness as a breastplate'. To judge by the order in which the armour is donned, the former piece of equipment is probably a reference to the leather apron tied on first under the armour (to secure clothing) rather than the buckled armour or sword belt (against NIV). Truth and righteousness are often taken as references to the gospel and to its offer of righteousness-by-faith. But the terms here (as in Is. 11:5; 59:17) denote quality of character, and they stand alongside 'holiness' at 4:24–25 and 'goodness' at 5:8–9. Paul is saying that the church's basic equipment in the spiritual battle is integrity and righteous living, and they are effective because these qualities bear the stamp of Jesus and the new creation he brings (see on 4:17–24).

15 literally 'having fitted your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace' (note the allusion to Is. 52:7), has been taken by the NRSV,

NJB, and GNB to mean 'with the readiness to spread the good news of peace'. But Paul's point seems rather to be that the footware provides preparation or readiness for battle. What soldiers need in a holding battle is the good grip provided by nails driven through the sole, so that the front lines are not sent reeling and slithering by an enemy charge. Paradoxically it is a deep spiritual understanding of the *gospel of peace* (see on 2:14, 17) that provides the church with this firm grip that is the 'preparation' or 'readiness' for the battle Paul has in mind. Hence the REB, 'let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace, to give you firm footing'.

16 introduces the large door-shaped shield of wood and leather. In battle this could be locked together with others to form a wall in front, and a roof overhead. The leather was well soaked with water before battle, and that tended to put out the sizzling incendiary arrows that would flare up and burn purely wooden shields until the bearer dropped them in panic. The fiery darts Paul has in mind would include anything from direct occult attack to devilish persecution, but above all the steady rain of temptations to fear, bitterness, anger, and division that could break up the unity of the church. These darts are to be countered with faith. Faith in this letter is the radical openness to God that allows Christ's full indwelling, and brings a deeper grasp of his unfathomable love (*cf.* 3:17). *Take up the shield of faith* thus suggests a deliberate and positive holding on to the God revealed in the gospel; firm and resolute dependence on the Lord which quenches the fiery attempts of the enemy to harm and to spread panic.

17 To put on *the helmet of salvation* (*cf.* Is. 59:17), in the context of this letter, is to assure our hearts of our union with Christ – that we are already seated with him and so secure in him (*cf.* 2:5–8). We hold the strong ground; we are only called to 'stand'. The final piece of armour mentioned is *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* This too appears to be an allusion to Is. 11:4, where the powerful word of the Messiah effects judgment (and *Wisdom of Solomon* 5:20 [echoing Is. 16:4–5 and 59:17] talks of 'stern wrath' as the Lord's 'sword'). Here, then, the church is given a weapon not merely of defence, but one to strike back against the powers that attack. To strike back with truth when we are personally tempted to evil; to strike back with truth when the church is attacked by false teaching; to strike back with truth when the powers seek to pervade the world around us with alien philosophies and ethical teaching; and finally to strike vigorous blows for freedom with the fearless proclamation of Christian truth such as Paul encourages in vs 19–20. But one thing above all must be remembered about this 'weapon of offence': the word of wrath of Is. 11:4 has become the gospel of peace, and uniting love, in Christ. And we are fighting the spiritual powers not human enemies (12). Our use of *the sword of the Spirit* has to reflect this, else it will become a weapon of darkness, enmity and division instead.

18–20 Technically this is not a separate sentence, but a series of clauses built around the two participles 'praying' and 'keeping alert', together with their dependent clauses. The whole construction qualifies the *Stand firm, then*, of v 14. It should not be taken to mean either that prayer is a seventh piece of armour, nor specifically that prayer is the *means* of donning the six, but that prayer will be closely associated with them. Theological grasp of the gospel (14–17) that does not result in prayer, like Paul's for the readers in 1:15–23 and 3:14–21, is a dead carcass. Prayer warriors with no real grasp of what the gospel is all about (the gospel of peace and cosmic restoration in Christ), may be spirited, but no more useful on the field than a soldier without weapons. Spiritual understanding of the gospel combined with an alert prayerfulness is the combination Paul seeks. Such prayer will be guided by the Spirit who gives access to God (*cf.* v 18 recalls 2:18), and the one who prays thus will pray not merely for himself or herself, but for the saints and for the bold progress of the gospel (19).

6:21–24 Postscript

21–22 are virtually word-for-word the same as Col. 4:7–8 (see the Commentary there). The final words are a prayer wish that refocus the main theme of the whole letter: for Messianic 'peace' that embraces the whole community, expressed in love and faith, and for deepening of this in grace.

Max Turner

PHILIPPIANS

Introduction

Paul, Philippi and the church there

The Philippi to which Paul went in the course of his missionary work was a significant place in a number of ways. Not only was it an important city in the Roman province of Macedonia, but it had the special status of being a Roman colony (Acts 16:12). This meant that it was like a little piece of Rome abroad. The Latin language was used; Roman law controlled local administration and taxes; many aspects of public life went on as in Rome itself and most of the officials had the same titles as in Rome.

The known history of Philippi, however, goes back a long way. Before 360 BC a small Thracian village stood on the site. The city itself was founded and its name given to it by Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, as he realized the strategic nature of the site. Philippi came into the hands of the Romans in 168 BC after the battle of Pydna. In 42 BC Antony, after he and Octavian had defeated Brutus and Cassius, settled some of his disbanded veterans there, and thus made Philippi a Roman colony. Then in 30 BC, when Octavian had defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the famous battle of Actium, he sent further 'colonists' from Italy to Philippi, to make room nearer home for the settlement of his own war veterans. The strong consciousness of the privileges of Roman citizenship in Philippi is seen in Acts 16:20–21, 35–39 and is probably reflected in the letter in 1:27 and 3:20.

Paul's preaching of the gospel in Philippi represents for us what was probably the first apostolic work of evangelization in Europe. For the apostle it would have meant working in a strategic centre of a Roman province which had not previously heard the gospel. According to the record of Acts 16:9–10, Paul went there (together with Silas and Timothy) in response to a vision in the night in which he saw 'a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."' As the story of Acts 16 unfolds we read that in Philippi Paul found no synagogue, but on the Sabbath he discovered a 'place of prayer' by the riverside, where a group of women gathered. One of these women, Lydia, 'a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira', appears to have been the first convert, and she opened her home to Paul.

We see something of the pagan background in Philippi when we read of 'a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future' and who 'earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling'. Paul and Silas were condemned to prison through the anger of the slave-owners when, with the evil spirit exorcized from the girl, they saw that 'their hope of making money was gone'. The pretext for the condemnation of Paul and Silas was that they, as Jews, were throwing the city into an uproar and advocating customs which, their accusers piously said, were 'unlawful for us Romans to accept or practise'.

The partnership in the gospel, the persecution and the largely Gentile background of the Philippian Christians (all of which are brought out in the letter) are thus seen in this record in Acts 16 of Paul's first visit to Philippi.

Although we do not have many details, it is clear that from that first visit to Philippi Paul left behind a devoted group of Christians. On Paul's third missionary journey recorded in Acts we read of his spending time again in Macedonia (Acts 20:1), and that most probably would have involved a visit to Philippi. Then after a time in Greece, he was back in Macedonia, and Acts 20:6 tells us specifically that Paul set sail from Philippi to return to Jerusalem.

The time and place of the writing of the letter

It is completely clear from reading 1:12–26 that Paul was in prison when he wrote. Philippians, together with Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians, have been called his 'prison letters'. In 2 Cor. 11:23 he speaks of having been frequently in prison. From the record in Acts we know that he had sustained periods of imprisonment in Caesarea and in Rome, and on the basis of what we read in such passages as Acts 20:18–19; 1 Cor. 4:9–13; 15:31–32; 2 Cor. 1:8–10; 4:8–12; 6:4–10; 11:23–27, it is thought that he may well have been imprisoned in Ephesus also. Reasons have been put forward to support each of these places – Caesarea, Ephesus and Rome – as the likely place of Paul's imprisonment when he wrote to the Christians at Philippi.

The most important arguments for *Caesarea* being the place where the letter was written are:

1. Acts 23:25 speaks of the imprisonment at Caesarea being in the praetorium of Herod

(NIV, 'Herod's palace'), and the letter speaks of the fact that Paul was 'in chains for Christ' becoming clear through the whole praetorium (NIV, 'palace guard') as well as to others (1:13).

2. The two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 24:27) would have given time for the communications between Paul's place of imprisonment and Philippi that the letter implies (see below).

3. In Phil. 1:7 Paul writes of a defence that he had made, but he was still in prison. It was certainly the case in Caesarea that he made a defence of himself before Felix, and then continued confined for those further two years.

4. In this letter Paul makes no mention of the collection for the poor in Judea which was so important at earlier stages in his work. When he was in Caesarea those gifts had already been delivered in Jerusalem, and so in Philippians he could write of 'gifts' without alluding to this collection.

There is some strength in these arguments. Over against them it must be said that in Caesarea Paul was not facing the immediate possibility of execution, but a journey to Rome to stand on trial before the emperor, because of his 'appeal to Caesar' (Acts 25:11). The alternatives of death and release of which he writes specifically in 1:20–24 – and in the case of the latter the hope of a visit to Philippi (see 2:24) – were not really alternatives before him during this time in prison in Caesarea.

If we accept the probability of an imprisonment in *Ephesus*, we could recognize the strength of the following arguments for that being the place of the writing of Philippians:

1. The letter indicates at least four journeys between Philippi and the place of Paul's imprisonment: the first took news of his situation, then Epaphroditus came to Paul from Philippi, a message went back to Philippi to tell of Epaphroditus' illness, and subsequently news was received of the Philippians' concern for him (2:25–30). The journey from Philippi to Ephesus would have taken some seven to ten days, and so it would not have been difficult for all those journeys to have been made.

2. Acts 19:22 tells us that Timothy was sent from Ephesus to Macedonia, and this would fit in with Phil. 2:19–22.

3. From the passages mentioned above as arguing for Paul's imprisonment in Ephesus, it would seem that he did indeed face the threat of death there (*cf.* Phil. 1:20–23). It is, however, questionable whether Paul would have faced a long imprisonment in Ephesus, and imprisonment of the time needed for such situations to develop as are described in 1:12–18.

4. When Paul was in Ephesus he certainly contemplated, and indeed fulfilled, the hope of travelling to Macedonia and Greece. On the other hand, it is asked whether Paul could have written 2:24 from Rome, as it seems that at that time his eyes were turned westwards and he did not expect to come further east again (see Acts 20:25 and Rom. 15:18–29).

5. There are thought to be greater similarities between this letter and Paul's earlier letters rather than his later ones. In particular the problems of the Judaizers that he deals with in Galatians and Romans continued to concern him.

6. It is thought that such passages as 1:30 and 4:15–16 view the first preaching of the gospel in Philippi as much more recent than the eleven or twelve years that would have been involved if Paul was writing from *Rome*.

If the letter was written from Ephesus, its date of writing would have been about AD 54–55. If it was written from Caesarea, it would have been between 57 and 59. While there seem much greater strengths in the arguments for an Ephesian rather than a Caesarean origin of the letter there remain strong arguments to favour the traditional view that the letter was written from *Rome:*

1. In Rome, as long as Paul awaited trial before the emperor, there were the two possibilities that lay before him, acquittal and release, or being condemned to death. These are the two alternatives of which Paul writes in 1:19–26.

2. Although journeys between Rome and Philippi would have taken longer than between Rome and Ephesus, they need not have taken longer than seven or eight weeks each.

3. Although when Paul thought of going to Rome, he had in mind going further west to Spain (Rom. 15:23–28), there is evidence to suggest that while in Rome the apostle's thoughts were turned back to the lands east of him where he had laboured already, and where the churches that he had founded were in great need of help from him.

4. While there are similarities between Philippians and earlier letters of Paul, there are also conspicuous differences, and even in the time of the letters to Timothy and Titus the church was still in danger of the Judaizers' legalism.

5. Although explanation can be given to the 'praetorium' (1:13) and 'Caesar's household' (4:22) in relation to Ephesus (or even Caesarea), both expressions would more naturally be used in Rome.

6. The absence of any mention in Philippians of the collection for the Jerusalem Christians has been mentioned above as an argument for a Caesarean origin rather than an Ephesian one. It is also a strong argument for Rome, if Caesarea

is ruled out, as the place of writing. From 2 Cor. 8:1–5 and 9:1–4 we see the involvement of Macedonian Christians in that whole undertaking, and so silence in relation to it would suggest it was a thing of the past.

If we settle for Rome as the most likely place for the letter to have been written, we should probably date it about AD 62, towards the end of the period of Paul's imprisonment of which Acts 28 speaks. For our understanding of the letter, however, the location is less important than the appreciation of the fact that it was a letter written out of the experience of sustained imprisonment.

The reasons for writing

As we read the letter to the Philippians we realize that there were a number of reasons that prompted Paul's writing:

1. He wanted to acknowledge the gifts that his friends in Philippi had sent to him (4:10, 14–18).

2. He wanted to give news of his own situation, and especially to give the assurance that his imprisonment had by no means involved a setback for the gospel (1:12–26). He also wanted to tell them of his plan to send Timothy with further news (2:19–24), though he had the hope that he would be free to come himself.

3. He needed to explain why he was sending Epaphroditus back, when the Philippians had apparently intended that he should remain with Paul and help him in whatever way he could (2:25–30).

4. News had come to him that there was party spirit and potential disunity in the church at Philippi, and the apostle wanted to urge them to live and act and witness in the unity of the Spirit (1:27; 2:1–11; 4:2–3).

5. Paul also realized that there was a danger of the Philippians being influenced in the direction of Jewish legalism, and so he wanted to make it abundantly clear to them that this would be a basic contradiction of the gospel (3:1–11).

6. He seems also to have been aware of the dangers of a wrong idea about reaching perfection (3:12–16), and of the pressures of materialism on the Christians at Philippi (3:18–21).

7. His writing was also an opportunity to encourage Christians to suffer bravely, to live in single-mindedness and to trust their lives to their Lord in all things and under all circumstances (1:27–30; 2:12–18; 3:17–21; 4:4–9).

The theology and themes of the letter

Most of the letter deals with practical issues of Christian living rather than with Christian beliefs as such. As in all Paul's letters, however, what he says as instructions about discipleship is related to things at the heart of the Christian faith, such as the centrality of the cross (3:18), the work of the Spirit (1:19) and the Christian hope (1:6, 10; 3:20). There are sections of the letter, however, where strong and clear statements are made about the person of Christ and about the way of salvation in Christ. In 2:5–11 the facts of Jesus being of the very nature of God and yet becoming truly and fully human are unambiguously stated. Paul says that after Christ's stooping to our humanity and going even to death on the cross, 'God exalted him to the highest place' and uses words of that exaltation that are taken from an OT passage that speaks of every knee bowing before God and every tongue acknowledging him (Is. 45:23).

In 3:4–10, as Paul compares his pre-Christian ambitions and the life that he found in Christ, he makes clear that 'righteousness' (being in the right with God) is not possible by one's own acts of obedience to the law or faithfulness in outward observances. It is possible only through Christ, by a 'righteousness' that is entirely God's gift and grace, and made available by the suffering and death and resurrection of Christ.

In what is said about Christian living there are certain dominant notes in the letter:

1. *Joy.* The noun 'joy' or the verb 'rejoice' are used sixteen times in the letter. Paul speaks of joy in prayer (1:4), joy in the fruit of his work (4:1) and joy in suffering, even facing death (2:17). He rejoices where there is unity and fellowship (2:2), finds joy in the gifts of his friends (4:10) and has joy when he knows that others are preaching Christ (1:18). He encourages his readers to rejoice in their faith and in their relationship with the Lord (1:25; 3:1; 4:4), and in their receiving and welcoming a brother in Christ (2:28–29).

2. *Fellowship and unity.* Paul writes with gratitude for the Philippians' partnership in the gospel from the beginning (1:5), as they shared in God's grace enabling the defence and the confirmation of the gospel (1:7). It was a fellowship 'of giving and receiving' that he had known with the Philippian Christians (4:15). He encourages them to continue 'standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel' (1:27, NRSV). It would make the apostle's joy complete if they were 'like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose' (2:2). He wanted to be sure that the church at Philippi was not allowing its fellowship to be marred by selfishness, pride or party spirit (2:1–4). Where there was disagreement between members, help needed to be given so that the unity and fellowship and witness of the body was not spoilt (4:2–3).

3. *Paul's spiritual ambition.* No letter shows this more vividly. We see the completeness of Paul's commitment to Jesus Christ, and his single-minded desire to know him and make him known. This is shown most clearly in 3:7–14, but alongside that passage we should set Paul's hope and longing expressed in 1:20 that he would never be ashamed, but with courage make sure that Christ would be 'exalted in [his] body, whether by life or by death'. In 4:11, 13 he can speak of his contentment in any circumstances, any deprivations, any difficulties, as long as Christ strengthened him to bear them and Christ was being glorified through them.

How the letter came to be written

Those who examine the NT documents closely ask questions that belong to literary and historical criticism: Is this the genuine work of the one whose name it bears? Was it all written as a letter as it purports to be? In the case of this letter these are fairly academic questions. No serious doubts are felt about Pauline authorship except by a tiny minority of scholars. There are three questions, however, that deserve brief attention.

1. Might 2:6–11 have been an early Christian hymn, taken up and quoted by the apostle as appropriate to his letter? These verses, with the humiliation and exaltation of Christ as their theme, are rhythmic in form, and scholars have arranged them in six stanzas of three lines each. We have highly poetic passages in some of Paul's other letters (like 1 Cor. 13), but these verses read rather like a quotation, deeply relevant to the purpose of the section but not originally composed for it. We have other examples of hymns or credal fragments being used in NT letters (*e.g.* Eph. 4:4–6; 5:14; 1 Tim. 1:17; 3:16; 6:15–16; 2 Tim. 2:11–13). This appears to be a similar but longer example of such a quotation. There are words here not used elsewhere by Paul, some are not found anywhere else in the NT. If the hymn were composed by someone other than the apostle himself, this would also account for the incarnation and the work of Christ being described in a somewhat different way from that with which we are familiar from Paul's other writings. On the other hand, we cannot rule out the alternative that Paul himself was the author. We should certainly see 2:6–11 as a hymn in praise of Christ, perhaps by Paul, perhaps by someone else, but if so, taken by the apostle and made his own and appropriate to its context in this letter.

2. In the midst of 3:1 we have a sudden break in subject matter that some have suggested is best explained as an indication of a completely different letter being inserted into the one that we have been reading up to this point. There is certainly a break in the argument, but there are other examples of that kind of thing in Paul's letters. If this were part of another letter set into an earlier one, it is hard to see where the interpolation ends. A more probable explanation would seem to be that whether fresh news came to hand from Philippi, or the apostle's mind was turned to this ever-pressing problem, he saw fit to warn his readers afresh of the menace of those who substituted law for grace as a means of acceptance with God. Having done this, he then moved to the final things that he wanted to say to the Philippians.

3. Some have asked whether 4:10–20 might belong to an earlier letter on the grounds that Paul would hardly have waited so long to acknowledge the gift brought from Philippi by Epaphroditus, and in any case he might have been expected to express this gratitude early on in his letter. There is some strength in this argument, but against it we can say that there may have been an acknowledgment of the gift in an earlier letter, of which we do not have a copy, and here Paul's gratitude is simply repeated. We should also be aware of the sensitivities involved in the way that Paul needed to express appreciation and at the same time to emphasize the fact that he was not dependent on their gifts (see the notes on 4:10–20). Because of these sensitivities we could understand why Paul left this delicate subject to the end of his letter. The probabilities would seem, therefore, to point against interpolation theories about the writing of Philippians.

We have in Philippians, as R. P. Martin puts it, 'a window into Paul's personal and pastoral character', and also 'a case-study of one early Christian congregation with whom Paul cherished fond and enduring relationships' (R. P. Martin, *Philippians*, NCB [Oliphants, 1976], p. ix).

While the letter to the Romans has gripped people's minds down the centuries and enabled them to see the wonder of the gospel of salvation in Christ, this letter to the Philippians has brought inspiration and courage to many facing hardship and persecution for the sake of the gospel, and so has made an incalculable impact on the lives of men and women.

Further reading

J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians*, BST (IVP, 1984).
R. P. Martin, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1987).
————, *Philippians*, NCB (Oliphants/Eerdmans, 1976).
G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (OUP, 1976).
G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC (Word, 1983).

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Commentary

1:1–11 Introduction

The pattern of letter-writing in NT times was to give the names of the writers and readers at the beginning, then there was a greeting, followed usually by a thanksgiving and a prayer (see the article Reading the letters). This was often done very conventionally, but for Paul what is said about the writers and readers and in greeting is lifted above the conventional by the thought of their life in Christ. Then thanksgiving and prayer come from the apostle's heart, praise for the working of God in people's lives, and prayer for those blessings that Christians then and now so deeply need.

1:1–2 Greeting

1 This is really Paul's letter and from v 3 the first person singular is used, but the apostle graciously links Timothy's name with his (as in 2 Corinthians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philemon). Timothy had been with Paul when he first preached the gospel in Philippi, and he had continued to have a close association with the Philippian Christians (see on 2:19–23). Both are *servants of Christ Jesus* – the word is literally 'slaves', as they reckoned themselves to belong, body, mind and spirit, to Christ and wanted to be subject to him in everything. The recipients are called *saints*, which means those set apart for God and called to live in holiness (*cf.* Rom. 1:7), and that life was *in Christ Jesus*. This phrase, or its equivalent, appears many times in this letter, indicating that Christ is the very environment of the Christian's life. Believers live and move within the orbit of his will, his grace, his presence. We find life united by faith to him, and we cannot live as we should apart from him (*cf.* Jn. 15:1–11). Paul stresses that he is writing to *all* the Christians at Philippi, and this repeated emphasis (see 1:4, 7–8, 25; 2:17, 26; 4:21) suggests that there was the danger of

factions among them (*cf.* 2:1–4). He mentions, in particular, their *overseers and deacons*, perhaps because they were in danger of being slighted (*cf.* 1 Thes. 5:12–13), or perhaps because they had organized the gifts for Paul (4:14–18). *Overseers* (or 'bishops') and 'elders' are names used sometimes in the NT for the same people (see Acts 20:17, 28 and Tit. 1:5–7); eldership was their place in the community, oversight their responsibility. *Deacons* are not often spoken of (see 1 Tim. 3:8, 12–13), although the term *diakonos* in the Greek is often used more generally for a 'minister' or 'servant'. Possibly the work of deacons is to be traced back to Acts 6:2, where the seven were appointed to 'serve' (Gk. *diakonein*) in a way like the later deacons.

2 The greeting is, as in several other letters (*e.g.* Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3), a combination of the Greek and Hebrew traditional greetings, but with a depth of Christian meaning. *Grace* is undeserved favour that reconciles us to God through Christ (Eph. 2:4–9), supplies all our needs (2 Cor. 12:9) and gives us the privilege of service (Eph. 3:8). *Peace* in the Bible is more than the absence of conflict. It is complete well-being, involving reconciliation to God and to our fellows (Eph. 2:14–18) and the blessing of inner peace (4:7). Like grace, it comes from *God our Father* through *the Lord Jesus Christ*.

1:3–7 Thanksgiving and confidence

3–4 Paul joins praise and prayer, as he encourages others to do (*cf.* 4:6). He includes *all* the Philippian Christians and is joyful as he prays.

5 His great joy was because of their *partnership in the gospel* from the time when it was first preached among them, when Lydia opened her home to him and his colleagues (Acts 16:14–15). *Partnership* is the usual NT word for fellowship, but fellowship is not just the comfortable experience of Christians enjoying one another's company. It is fellowship in the task of making the gospel known to others (*cf.* Mk. 8:35), as it is also expressed in Christian giving (see 4:10, 14–18 and 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13). It should be a characteristic of all of us who have come to know the good news of Christ that we are involved in partnership with those who are making it known to others.

6 Paul is *confident* as he prays, with a confidence not based on the Philippians' own abilities or past achievements, but on the power and love of God and because God can be relied upon to bring what he begins *to completion*. When we see that God has begun a good work in people's lives, we can be sure that it is his purpose to continue – that can always be our confidence in praying for our fellow-Christians. Notice how here also (as often in his letters) Paul saw his life and work in the light of the coming *day of Christ Jesus*. The time of that day is unknown to us, but what matters for us and all people is how our lives and our work will appear when we see our Lord face to face. Paul's constant concern was that he and his fellow-Christians might be presented before God mature and unashamed in that day (*cf.* 2 Cor. 1:14; 5;9–10; Eph. 5:27; Col. 1:28).

7 What has been said in v 5 about partnership in the gospel is spelled out a little more here. It was a matter of sharing God's grace in the work of the gospel, fellowship with Paul *in chains* for the gospel, and it involved both *defending and confirming it*. The task of defence involves the obligation of all Christians, to be 'prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15), and also helping to make people more sure of the gospel's truth and power (*cf.* Lk. 1:4; 1 Cor. 1:6).

1:8–11 Prayer

A great deal can be learnt from Paul's prayers (*cf.* Eph. 1:17–23; 3:14–21; Col. 1:9–12). From the things he asks for, the Philippian Christians (and we no less) could learn the greatest gifts to ask for themselves. Here those gifts are love, discernment, purity of life and righteousness.

8 To place great emphasis on the truth of his words Paul says *God can testify* (*cf.* Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23; 1 Thes. 2:5), and he speaks not of his own love but *the affection of Christ Jesus* in him.

9 They knew the love of God for them and in them, but Paul prays that their love *may abound more and more* (*cf.* 2 Cor. 9:8; 1 Thes. 3:12). Love, however, needs to be more than blind enthusiasm. It needs to be guided by *knowledge and depth of insight* (*cf.* Col. 1:9), 'the gift of true discrimination' (NEB), a sensitivity to the truth of God and the needs of others, and the understanding of one's situation.

10 The insight needed is to *be able to discern what is best*, or the words might be translated as 'testing things that differ'. In any case, discrimination is what matters, and real wisdom is not just a matter of the mind, but it has its consequences in life and character. The ideal and goal of our Christian living should be no lower standard than to be *pure and blameless* (*cf.* 2:15), and again *the day of Christ* is in view. The first of the two adjectives used suggests 'sincerity' or 'transparent character', while the second can either mean 'not stumbling' (*cf.* Acts 24:16) or 'not causing offence' (*cf.* 1 Cor. 10:32) or perhaps both.

11 The Christian life is intended to be fruitful not only in activity, but in character (*cf.* Gal. 5:22–23), and this verse reminds us that the means to this is the living Lord *Jesus Christ* and

the goal is nothing other than *the glory and praise of God* (*cf.* Eph. 1:6, 12, 14).

1:12–26 Paul's circumstances

Paul knew the concern of the Philippian Christians for him, and so he sent news of himself. He was able to tell how his imprisonment had meant the advance of the gospel, how in the place of his imprisonment Christ was being proclaimed (if from a variety of motives), and how he viewed the possible issues of his confinement, release and further service or death. With reference to the past, the present and the possibilities of the future he could say *I rejoice.*

1:12–14 The results of Paul's imprisonment

12–13 Behind the words *what has happened to me* lies all that it meant for one who had been free to range far and wide preaching the gospel, to be confined and, as probably was the case, chained day and night to Roman soldiers. He does not dwell on his own sufferings, but rejoices in the progress of the gospel. The word 'praetorium', translated 'palace guard' or 'palace' (mg.) by the NIV, was originally the praetor's tent in the camp. It then came to be used for the governor's residence in a provincial centre (as in Jerusalem, Mt. 27:27). (There would also have been a praetorium in Ephesus and Caesarea [Acts 23:35], so this letter could have been written from either of them.) We can imagine the soldiers who guarded Paul returning to tell others that he was *in chains for Christ*, and being doubtless moved by the spirit with which he bore his imprisonment.

14 Paul's example also inspired his fellow-Christians to *speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*

1:15–18 Different motives for preaching Christ

15–17 After all he was able to say thankfully about the advancement of the gospel through his imprisonment, it is sad that Paul had to point out that there were those preaching Christ *out of envy and rivalry, out of selfish ambition*, even with the desire to make things more difficult for him in his imprisonment. We do not know the circumstances. It is clear that Paul did not challenge the content of the preaching, but its motivation. Perhaps these were leaders of the church in the place of Paul's imprisonment before he came, and now they were jealous of his reputation because of his apostolic labours, and they were determined to outdo him and only too ready to cause him anguish.

18 Paul was determined not to be provoked or to allow the matter to become one of personalities – all that mattered to him was that *Christ is preached.*

1:19–26 Christ exalted by life or death

19 Paul faced imprisonment and the threat of death and, from fellow-Christians, animosity and provocation, and yet he was confident that all would turn out well (*cf.* Rom. 8:28). Humanly speaking he relied on the prayers of his friends, and in answer to them the unfailing help of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word translated *help* indicates both a generous provision and an undergirding strength. The assurance of *deliverance* is of the kind described in 2 Tim. 4:18, 'The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom.' Jb. 13:16 (and its context) seems to be in his mind. 'Paul has no confidence in his acquittal by an earthly court. Like Job he is sure of vindication when his case is presented in the heavenly court of appeal' (G. B. Caird, *Paul's letters from Prison* [OUP, 1976]).

20 The word translated *eagerly expect* means straining forward with outstretched head, and its prepositional prefix implies a turning aside from all other interests. Paul has one supreme ambition: that Christ might be *exalted* in his *body*, living or dying; that Christ might be seen by others more clearly and in his true greatness.

21–23 Paul can rejoice in either of the two alternatives he weighs up. Yet he says *I am torn between the two* – it was 'like two equally strong external forces pressing in on him [vice-like] from both sides' (G. F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* [Word Books, 1983]). To go on living in this world is constant enjoyment of Christ himself and further fruitful toil in his master's service. To die is sheer gain, as for the believer there is nothing between death and the realization of the immediate presence of Christ. There is not necessarily any contradiction between thinking of death as 'sleep' (as in 1 Thes. 4:13–15) and as departing to be with Christ. It may be only our limitation of thinking in terms of space and time that makes it impossible for us to understand at all fully what lies beyond the gateway of death. The Greek word for *depart* is used for a ship weighing anchor or for striking camp; the corresponding noun is in 2 Tim. 4:6.

24–26 Paul contemplates the alternatives, and although he does not say he knows which God will grant, he begins to feel that he is being called to remain in the world for further service. For him it was more advantageous to go to be with his Lord; for others it was more advantageous (even *more necessary*) for him to continue in this life. *Progress*, growth in faith and overflowing joy, is what he sought for others (*cf.* 1 Tim. 4:15), just as he determined to press on himself in his great calling (*cf.* 3:12–14). Finally, Paul speaks here of wanting their *joy in Christ Jesus* (*lit.* their 'boasting') to *overflow*. For all of

us as Christians our greatest joy and pride and boasting should be in Christ Jesus (*cf.* 1 Cor. 1:31).

1:27 – 2:18 Instructions concerning Christian living and fellowship

Paul has told of his own circumstances. Now he has important things to say that bear on the lives of the Philippian Christians. They are called to suffer and should count it as a privilege and so endure with courage. In their trials and in every aspect of their common life they must stand united. Pride hinders unity and fellowship, and the only remedy for selfishness and faction is to look long and often at Christ himself until his way of thinking and acting is theirs. He is their example and their Saviour, but his salvation must be worked out in lives of obedience, lives that will shine as lights in the world and that will be the apostle's joy in the day of Christ.

1:27–30 The call to live a life worthy of the gospel

27 Paul may come back again to Philippi or he may not. What matters, he stresses, is that they live *in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*. In all ages – and not least today – the greatest hindrance to the advance of the gospel has been the inconsistency of Christians. The gospel has its greatest influence when the lives of Christians commend it, and that gives us our special responsibility. The Greek word translated *conduct yourselves* is the one from which our word 'politics' comes and the word often conveys the idea of fulfilling one's duty as citizen. In Philippi, as we have noted, Roman citizenship was prized, but the Philippian Christians had the responsibility to live individually and corporately as heavenly citizens (*cf.* 3:20). Paul often speaks of the need to stand firm in the face of opposition and difficulty (*cf.* 1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 5:1; Eph. 6:11–14; 1 Thes. 3:8; 2 Thes. 2:15).

28 Reliance on the power of God is the way to avoid *being frightened* by those who oppose them. The word used here is used of startled horses; 'never be scared' is Moffatt's translation. Their fearlessness, moreover, will show their enemies that Christians are not fortified by merely human courage, and so to oppose them is to fight against God (*cf.* Acts 5:39) and to take the path that leads to destruction (*cf.* 2 Thes. 1:4–8). Perhaps as he wrote, Paul recalled the voice of God in his own conscience indicating this when he persecuted the Christians (Acts 26:10–14). At the same time, the evident presence of God with them will assure the Philippians themselves that they are God's and blessed with his salvation.

29 Behind the words *it has been granted* is the thought of a gift of grace, as for Christians it is a privilege to believe but also (by that strange contradiction of the world's standards) to suffer for Christ (*cf.* Mt. 5:11–12; Acts 5:41).

30 The Greek word translated *contending* in v 27 is the word from which we have 'athlete'; behind the word *struggle* here is the word that gives us 'agony' (*cf.* Rom. 15:30; Col. 1:29; 2:1; 1 Thes. 2:2). The calling of the Philippian Christians, and ours, is to accept that toil and struggle that marked the apostle's life.

2:1–4 Appeal for unity through personal humility

These verses bring us the strongest possible appeal for Christian unity, the kind of appeal that many Christians seem prone not to take very seriously today. In v 1 Paul gives four reasons for such unity; in v 2 four ways to describe it; in v 3 two negatives to avoid and two positives to follow; and in v 4 a negative and a positive.

1 The word translated *encouragement* can mean 'comfort' (RV) or 'appeal', and so it may mean either that the comfort found in Christ should be shared with others, or that we have his appeal to unity (*e.g.* Jn. 15:1–11; 17:20–23). If we know the blessing of his *love*, we should show that to others without reserve or discrimination (*cf.* 1 Jn. 4:7–12). The next phrase can mean *fellowship with the Spirit* or the fellowship that the Spirit gives us – either is strong ground for living in unity. Then if we know in Christ *tenderness and compassion*, such should mark all our relationships with others.

2 There are no great differences between the four phrases here, but we should note that twice there is reference to the mind or to thinking, and this is an emphasis found elsewhere in the letter. The apostle knew well that thought and attitudes are the basis of speech and action and so direct the whole course of a person's life (*cf.* 2:5; 3:15; 4:8). This perhaps needs underlining in an age when there is great emphasis on feelings and experience. In Rom. 12:2 Paul speaks of transformation of life taking place 'by the renewing of your mind'.

3 *Selfish ambition* (the word, used also in 1:17, can mean 'party spirit') and *vain conceit* are inevitably enemies of fellowship and hindrances to unity. There are realistic ways of overcoming them. One way is by the practice of humility (*cf.* Eph. 4:1–3), considering *others better than* ourselves, which means seeing the strengths and gifts of others and our own weaknesses, failures and limitations (*cf.* Rom. 12:10).

4 It is also very practical to make a habit of thinking and speaking of the *interests of others* rather than boring people by constantly dwelling on our *own interests* (*cf.* Rom. 15:2–3; 1 Cor. 10:24, 33; Gal. 6:2).

As Christians we often justify or rationalize

our divisions. Cranfield makes this wise comment on the kind of unity for which Paul was concerned, and the way to pursue it: 'Such unity will only come when Christians are humble and bold enough to lay hold on the unity already given in Christ and to take it more seriously than their own self-importance . . . and to make of those deep differences of doctrine, which originate in our imperfect understanding of the Gospel and which we dare not belittle, not an excuse for letting go of one another or staying apart, but rather an incentive for a more earnest seeking in fellowship together to hear and obey the voice of Christ.' (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The First Epistle of Peter* [SCM, 1950], pp. 75–76).

2:5–11 The example of Christ

The best way that Paul can encourage his friends in Philippi to live in humility, and so to have true fellowship and unity, is by reminding them of the example of Christ. As he speaks of the humiliation that Jesus accepted and then his exaltation as Lord of all, perhaps using an early Christian hymn (see the Introduction), we have a very important statement of what was believed from the beginning of the life of the church about the true humanity and the deity of Christ. To take this in we need to pay very careful attention to the specific words that are used.

5 *Your attitude* could mean personal attitude or that which is expressed in relationships. 'Have this mind among yourselves' is the RSV translation, and the NEB has 'Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus'.

6 Powerful words are used here. The participle *being* comes from a stronger verb in the Greek than the normal verb 'to be'; this is followed by a noun that is well translated by the NIV as *in very nature*. Jesus was truly God before he became a human person. Then, without ceasing to be God, he was willing to lay aside the glory of being equal with God. That was not *something to be grasped* (see note below on the precise meaning here). There is perhaps an intended contrast with Adam in Gn. 3 as the temptation to which he fell was wrongly to seize what he thought would make him 'like God'.

7–8 So he *made himself nothing*. Literally it says 'he emptied himself', not of his deity but of his glory; 'he made himself of no reputation' (AV). Then when it says that he was *made in human likeness* and *found in appearance as a man* that does not merely mean similarity without the reality of our human nature. He was indeed truly human, as Paul says in Rom. 8:3 and Gal. 4:4, but the expression 'leaves room for the thought that the human likeness is not the whole story' (F. W. Beare, *The Epistle to the Philippians* [A. and C. Black, 1959]). He stooped lower still *and became obedient to death*. He lived a life of utter obedience (*cf.* Rom. 5:19; Heb. 5:8–9; 10:5–14), 'even to the extent of dying' (Phillips). That death, moreover, was *death on a cross*, a death of unimaginable pain and utter shame, a curse in the eyes of the Jews because of what the law said in Dt. 21:23 (see Gal. 3:13). What crucifixion meant to Romans is expressed in Cicero's words, 'Far be the very name of the cross, not only from the body, but even from the thought, the eyes, the ears of Roman citizens.'

9–11 In consequence of his humiliation and self-sacrifice, Jesus was given by the Father *the name that is above every name*. That does not mean a specific name or title as such, though 'Jesus is Lord' is the right and proper Christian profession (*cf.* Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). It means that *God exalted him to the highest place* of honour, and it is most significant – especially when people would say that the Christ of the NT is less than God – to realize that in vs 10–11 the words that are used in Is. 45:23 of God are used of Jesus, to express his honour and rule and authority over all creation (*cf.* Eph. 1:20–22; 4:8–10; Rev. 5:13). Finally, however, we need to notice that this is *to the glory of God the Father*, *i.e.* the glory to which Christ has been raised is in no way independent of the Father (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:28). All these tremendous statements, we should remind ourselves, have in their context the most practical purpose of persuading the Philippians to put aside disunity, discord and personal ambition.

Note. There are many ways in which the words of v 6 (he *did not consider equality with God something to be grasped*) have been understood. There are two main alternatives: either *equality with God* means the same as *being in very nature God* or it can be understood as speaking rather of the glory and honour of a position alongside God the Father, the title to lordship over the universe. Jesus 'did not think to snatch at' this (NEB). It would, in fact, finally be his by the Father's appointment, but beyond a human cradle and a human grave and the resurrection, and because he submitted to go the Father's chosen way by humiliation to exaltation. If *equality with God* is understood as essentially the same as *being in very nature God*, indicating that the divine nature was inalienably his, then we can understand the apostle as saying either 'he did not cling to' those 'prerogatives as God's equal' (Phillips); or he did not have to seize hold of them – it was not a matter of their being grasped; or equality with God was not something to be taken advantage of. Perhaps the last of these is the most probable, both because of the meaning of the Greek words used and because it fits in with the teaching of the whole paragraph. The way appointed by the Father

was giving not getting, sacrifice and humiliation not taking the advantage of one's position. This is the way Jesus went and the way we are called to follow him.

2:12–18 The practical outworking of salvation

12 The example of Christ is not only one of humility; it is also one of obedience (8). To such obedience, whether or not Paul is with them (*cf.* 1:27), the Philippians are called. *Work out* here has the sense of bringing to completion. It is not a matter of working *for* salvation. We could never do that. The very word *salvation* (which means 'rescue') signifies that we cannot save ourselves (*cf.* Jn. 15:4–5; 1 Cor. 15:10; Eph. 2:5, 8), but we can and must live lives that show God's saving power that we have made our own.

13 We have our part to do, but that is made possible by God's work in us (the Greek word used here, and often by Paul for God's power, is that from which we have our word 'energy'). He gives both the desire and the strength to do what is pleasing to him.

14 Moreover, it is not just what is done that matters, but the spirit in which we do it, 'free of murmuring and complaining' (NJB). This has a constant application to the Christian's life and work.

15 The highest standards must be set if Christians are to live out their faith within a society that is morally warped and spiritually perverted. This description is taken from Dt. 32:5 but is tragically apt for much of western society today. Each expression of Christian living here is worth pondering. *Blameless* means above criticism. *Pure* means thoroughly wholesome in character and single-minded. Believers are described as *children of God*, as it is not only their privilege (Jn. 1:12) but their responsibility so to live in the world as those who belong to God and show the family likeness. The expression *without fault* is used of the requirement of animal sacrifices in the OT. It is also used of the Lord himself in a moral and spiritual sense (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19), and it is the Christian's standard. *Like stars* (lit. 'light-bearers') indicates that Christ is the light (Jn. 1:8–9; 8:12) and we are to reflect that to others.

16 The word used here could mean 'hold on to' (NIV mg.) or *hold out*. We are to hold fast to the word, but above all to offer it as *the word of life* for a perishing world (Jn. 3:16; 6:68; Acts 5:20; 2 Cor. 2:15–16). Paul thinks of his life as running a race and as toiling to the point of weariness, but with his spiritual vision fixed on the Lord whom he looks forward to seeing face to face and having his approval.

17–18 The thought of death as the possible outcome of his imprisonment comes to the apostle again. That death would be an offering to God, but he thinks of it just *like a drink offering* poured out on the much more significant *sacrifice* – the Philippians' faith and the quality of their life and service produced by that faith. (For the first of these offerings *cf.* 2 Tim. 4:6 and for the second Rom. 12:1.) Paul had come to the point of rejoicing whatever the circumstances, whether life or death, and he wanted his friends in Philippi to take the same attitude.

2:19–30 Future plans

Paul turns now to speak of his two fellow-workers, Timothy and Epaphroditus, of his plans for them and of his hope of being able to come to Philippi again. In the process he speaks of these two men in deeply affectionate terms and gives glowing testimony to their devoted and selfless service.

2:19–24 Commendation of Timothy

We have seen that Timothy was with Paul when he wrote this letter (1:1) and that he had shared in the first preaching of the gospel in Philippi (Acts 16:1–11). Most of Paul's letters mention him, often because he has special responsibilities delegated by the apostle.

19 Paul says tactfully that his first desire with respect to Timothy's mission was that he might be cheered by news of the Philippian Christians. Doubtless, however, he had also in view a ministry that Timothy would have in Philippi, and in preparation he speaks of Timothy in terms of highest commendation. Notice also how Paul says *I hope in the Lord Jesus* and how frequently that phrase, or its equivalent 'in Christ', is used by Paul. Paul tried to submit all his hopes and plans for the future to the Lord to whom his life was united (*cf.* 1 Cor. 16:7; Jas. 4:13–15).

20–21 Paul says that he had no-one else quite like Timothy, with such a *genuine interest* and spiritual concern for the Philippian Christians, and sadly the apostle adds that when he thinks of others around him whom he might send, 'they are all bent on their own ends, not on the cause of Christ Jesus' (NEB). 2 Tim. 4:9–13 reflects a similar situation. It is always a challenge to us to consider whether we have that 'genuine interest' in other people or whether we want people to serve our own ends.

22 Timothy's worth had been proved in Philippi and the apostle himself, more than anyone else knew that worth, *because as a son with his father* he had served (lit. 'slaved', – *cf.* 1:1) in the furtherance of the gospel.

23–24 Paul wanted news from Philippi through Timothy. Timothy was also to take news of Paul to Philippi, and so it was necessary

for him to wait until the outcome of Paul's trial was known, whether it was to be release or death (*cf.* 1:23–24). Paul appears to have had an increasing hope that it would be release, and so he would be able to *come soon* to Philippi.

2:25–30 Explanations about Epaphroditus

25 We have no knowledge of Epaphroditus except what is in this paragraph and in 4:18, where it is said that the Philippians sent their gifts to Paul through him. He was thus their *messenger* (it is the word *apostolos* that is used, but in a sense different from the foundation apostles of Christ; *cf.* 2 Cor. 8:23), but was also sent with the intention that he should stay with Paul and care for his needs. Notice the partnership involved in the words *brother, fellow-worker and fellow-soldier.* Many Christians are redoubtable workers and soldiers in the cause of Christ, but not all work well with their fellows.

26–28 Something had happened that made it wise for Paul to send Epaphroditus back to Philippi rather than keep him at his side. He had been critically ill, but by the mercy of God (mercy to Paul too as he saw it) he had recovered. The report of the seriousness of his illness had gone to Philippi and news had come back of the anxiety of his friends there. This caused *distress* (a very strong word in the Greek, used in the NT otherwise only of our Lord's anguish in Gethsemane in Mt. 26:37 and Mk. 14:33) to Epaphroditus and brought into his heart a longing for those at home. So Paul recognized that it was best for him to return.

29–30 Paul, however, was sensitive to the situation. There was a possibility of the Philippians misunderstanding the reason for their messenger's return. So he called on them to receive Epaphroditus with a warm-hearted Christian welcome, not just as one of their own fellowship returned from abroad but as one to be highly honoured for the faithfulness and costliness of the service he had given. We do not know how it was that *he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life.* It may have been simply by identifying himself with Paul the prisoner. It may have been that 'he fell ill on the road and nearly killed himself by completing the journey while he was unfit to travel' (Caird *Paul's Letters from Prison*). The word *risking* is literally 'gambling', and there may be an intentional play on the name of Epaphroditus (as there is on the name of Onesimus in Phm. 11). Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of gamblers, and a gambler hoping to win might call to her, *epaphroditus* (Hawthorne *Philippians*). This man gambled his life in serving Paul, but it was a risk for God's sake, and he won.

3:1–21 Spiritual ambitions

It seems that Paul was about to close his letter here as he uses a word that might be translated 'finally'. Then, whatever the reason (see the Introduction), he feels that he must give a warning about those who wanted all Gentile converts to become Jews. This leads him to speak of his reliance on Jesus Christ alone for acceptance with God and to speak of his greatest ambitions for his spiritual life and also for the lives of his Christian friends at Philippi.

3:1–3 Warning against the circumcision party

To understand what is being said here and in the next few verses we need to go back a little into the life of the early church. The first believers in Jesus were Jews, and as loyal Jews they saw the law as of vital importance and emphasized the covenant that Israel had with God, the sign of which was circumcision. These first believers were sent out with a world mission (Acts 1:8), but it was hard for them to reach out to non-Jews (note Acts 10) and it was some time before a true mission to Gentiles began (Acts 11:20). Paul, as apostle to the Gentiles, believed that if non-Jewish people turned to the Lord in repentance and faith they were to be accepted as members of God's people, without the necessity of their becoming Jews and of males being circumcised. There were Jewish Christians, however, who in Antioch (Acts 15:1) and in Galatia insisted that these Gentile Christians should become Jews. So the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 was called, and to deal with the same issue Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. Years later this was still a problem, and so to write about it was a *safeguard* for the Philippians.

1–2 Paul was so incensed against those who pressed for Gentiles to become Jews that he called them *dogs*, the name that Jews gave to Gentiles. These people, however, were more deserving of the name than any Gentile because of the way that they liked to 'prowl round the Christian congregations, seeking to win Gentile converts over to Judaism' (Beare, *Philippians*), and so such converts needed to *watch out* for them. They were 'evil workers' (NRSV), turning people aside from truth and freedom (Mt. 23:15; 2 Cor. 11:13; Gal. 1:7–9). Because circumcision had no spiritual value they were just *mutilators of the flesh.*

3 When the spiritual value of circumcision is no longer there, the practice becomes only an external rite, a matter of *confidence in the flesh. It is we who are the circumcision*, says Paul. While some think that he may have been speaking just of Jewish Christians, the evidence is that Paul, and the NT writers generally, take up all the

titles and privileges of the people of God from OT days and apply them to Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile (*e.g.* Eph. 2:11–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–10).

3:4–7 Paul's previous life and aims

4 Paul argues now that he could have the same *confidence, confidence in the flesh*, as these people who wanted to make all Christians become Jews. He could list one by one the things that he formerly, as a devout Jew, thought gave him a credit account with God.

5–6 He lists seven things that he counted as gains in the deeply religious life that he had lived before he met with Jesus. (i) He was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth as the law required (Gn. 17:12). (ii) He was born and bred an Israelite, a member of the people of God. (iii) He could name his tribe, Benjamin, the tribe of Israel's first king, and one that had remained faithful when others did not. (iv) He was not only a true Jew, but a *Hebrew*, an Aramaic-speaker (*cf.* Acts 6:1; 22:2; 2 Cor. 11:22), son of *Hebrew* parents, not like so many who had lost the use of their native tongue. (v) Strict in observing the *law*, he was a devout *Pharisee* (Acts 23:6; 26:5; *cf.* Gal. 1:14). (vi) His *zeal* was shown in what he did to persecute the Christians (Acts 8:3; 9:1). (vii) He could say that as far as the external demands of the *law* were concerned, the Mosaic law by which he had tried to live, he was *faultless*. That, however, was a matter of *legalistic righteousness*, of trying to be right with God on the basis of obedience to the law.

7 Now he reckoned all these gains as one great loss. 'All such assets I have written off because of Christ' (NEB). He had come to see them as a false basis of confidence and even a hindrance to him. He goes on to describe the infinitely better way he had found.

3:8–14 The old renounced; Paul's new ambitions

Because of his meeting with the risen Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9), and also because he came to realize that he had not really kept the law (Rom. 7), Paul had been led to a 'radical transvaluation of values' (Hawthorne, *Philippians*).

8 Because he had found the way of acceptance with God in Christ, Paul reckoned all those things on which he had relied before as *loss*; he decided that all was 'far outweighed' by the single 'gain of knowing Christ' (NEB). He had not only counted all those things as loss but he could say that for Christ's sake *I have lost all things* – his place in Judaism, among the Pharisees, probably his own home even. Yet he did not grieve, as everything else was 'useless rubbish compared with being able to win Christ' (Phillips).

9 Now his desire is to be accepted on the basis of the *righteousness* which is God's gift, offered on the simple condition of believing (*cf.* Rom. 3:21 – 4:25; Gal. 2:15 – 3:29; Eph. 2:4–9), laying aside that so-called *righteousness* of his own works on which he had relied before.

10 More than that, he wants to live in the knowledge of Christ, that is (as Christian baptism signifies, see Rom. 6:1–4) being identified with Christ crucified and risen. This means knowing *the power of his resurrection* in daily experience (*cf.* Rom. 8:10–11; 2 Cor. 4:10–11; Eph. 1:19–20) and *sharing* his *sufferings* by dying to the self-centred life that is natural to us and being willing to face difficulty and hardship that the gospel of salvation may go out to all people (*cf.* 2 Cor. 4:7–12; Gal. 6:17; Col. 1:24–25). These two realities must always belong together in any genuine Christian life.

11 In the light of his new great ambition and longing, Paul thus hopes *somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.* These words come strangely to us after what we have read. Does not attaining to the resurrection depend on faith alone? Could the apostle be in doubt about his final salvation? He never lacked the assurance that he was a child of God, accepted by God (Rom. 8:15–17; Gal. 4:6–7), yet he was never complacent or presumptuous. Faith must endure to the end (Mk. 13:13; Heb. 3:14). We should read Paul's words here as an expression not so much of doubt, as of humility.

12–13 It seems that there were in Philippi those who thought that they had reached the goal of Christian perfection, that they had 'arrived'. Paul recognized the call to Christians to aspire to the highest standards (*cf.* 2:15; Eph. 4:13–16), as Jesus himself said 'Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48), but he never claimed to have reached that perfection. Rather he will *press on*, and the word that he uses means literally 'pursue', the word by which he described his persecuting of the early church (6). He wanted *to take hold of that* great purpose for which Christ had taken hold of him when he confronted him on the Damascus road years before. There are ways in which Christians should remember the acts of God in the past, but Paul knew that he must not dwell on the past; its failures and sins have been forgiven, and its achievements in the service of Christ must not allow him to rest on his laurels. He wanted rather to be found *straining towards* what lay ahead, and to express this he uses another very strong word, applicable to an athletic context or a chariot race; every fibre of his being was set on the goal and purpose of his Christian life.

14 There was a *prize* to be won, though we cannot be sure whether Paul saw the prize as Christ himself (*cf.* v 8), 'God's call to the life above' (NEB), or the 'crown of life' (Jas. 1:12; *cf.* 1 Cor. 9:25), the gift of God's grace to those who faithfully persevere in their calling to the end.

3:15–17 An example to be followed

15 Being *mature* or 'perfect' (it is essentially the same word in the Greek original) is a matter of thinking in the way of which Paul has been speaking. He trusts that if his Philippian friends think differently, the Spirit of God will reveal the true way and they will be open to that.

16 What is vital always is that we should live by the truth that we have already recognized and accepted. What is translated here *let us live up to* has the sense not just of individually following on but of keeping in line with others. 'In choosing this verb Paul once again stresses the importance of harmony and mutual co-operation in spite of whatever divergence of opinion may exist' (Hawthorne, *Philippians*).

17 Here, as in other places in his letters (*e.g.* 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thes. 1:6; 2:10; 2 Thes. 3:7, 9), Paul speaks of his own example as one to be followed. This might seem presumptuous, but we need to realize that before there was a NT for Christians to use, it was vital that there should be role models. It was as much necessary for Paul to live the kind of Christian life that others could follow as it was for him to preach a pure gospel for them to believe. J. B. Phillips paraphrases this verse, 'let my example be the standard by which you tell who are the genuine Christians among those about you'. Our situation is not exactly the same today, as the NT is people's basic guide to Christian life-style, but it is still the case (as Paul puts it in 2 Cor. 3:1–3) that the Christian is called to be like 'a letter from Christ', 'known and read by everybody', including many who would not turn to the Scriptures.

3:18–21 Call to a heavenly citizenship

From the thought of his own great ambitions fired by the love of Christ, and from the thought of those with a misguided concept of perfection, Paul turns to think of others within the community of the Christian church whose lives he can only contemplate with pain and grief.

18–19 In two ways the cross is at the very centre of Christianity. It is central because we believe that through the death of Christ on the cross we have the way of forgiveness and acceptance with God and thus of eternal life. The cross is also central for our understanding of discipleship. Jesus calls us to take up the cross and follow him (Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23), and Paul knew that he must accept '*the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death*' (10). It seems clear that it was in this second way that these people of whom Paul writes were *enemies of the cross of Christ*. Instead of accepting a self-denying way of discipleship, they had made their physical desires *their god*, boasted in what was in fact shameful, and set their minds on *earthly things*. This meant that instead of finding in the cross both their salvation and way of life, they were on a path that could lead only to *destruction*.

20 The thought of those whose lives are dominated by the desire for *earthly things* leads the apostle to say that true Christians know that their life and *citizenship* is even now *in heaven* with Christ (*cf.* Eph. 1:3; 2:6; Col. 3:1–4). Philippians could be proud of their citizenship in a Roman colony (see the Introduction), just as we all have an earthly citizenship which has its privileges and its obligations. But they, and we, have to value above all the gift of a heavenly life and citizenship, and we live in hope of our future inheritance that we will receive in its fulness in the future. Thus *we eagerly await* the reappearing from heaven of our *Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ*.

21 Christ's coming will mean the transformation of our *lowly bodies* to be *like his glorious body* (*cf.* 2 Cor. 4:16 – 5:4; 1 Jn. 3:2) by the power of God to whose working there can ultimately be no limitation or hindrance. The body that we have is not despised, but it is a sign of our present *lowly* condition (the same word is used in Mary's song in Lk. 1:48). Now our bodies are subject to pain and suffering and weakness; then they will be raised to be immortal and imperishable (see 1 Cor. 15:35–54).

4:1–23 Instructions, thanks and greetings

Paul's final paragraphs include appeals, personal messages and the acknowledgment of the Philippians' gifts to him. His grateful remembrance of those gifts leads him to speak of his dependence on the Lord and of the spiritual blessings that come from generous giving. He goes on to say that he has learnt to live as contentedly with little as with much, enabled in all things by the Lord who will also surely supply fully all their needs.

4:1–3 Appeal to stand united

The word *Therefore* that begins this paragraph indicates that Paul's appeal here is based on what has gone before – the danger from those who wanted to make all Christians become Jews and his disappointment with the worldly-minded.

1 The words here show the depth of Paul's

feeling as he wrote to his friends in Philippi. Twice in the verse he uses the word which literally means 'beloved'. He rejoices in them. He sees them like a crown on his head (*cf.* 1 Thes. 2:19). He loves them and longs for them (*cf.* 1:8). More than anything else, he encourages them to *stand firm in the Lord* (*cf.* 1:27), like soldiers determined not to be made to retreat whatever the forces against them.

2–3 Having dealt earlier in general terms with divisions and party spirit in the church (2:1–5), Paul felt he must deal specifically with one quarrel that was marring their life. We know nothing otherwise of *Euodia* and *Syntyche*, but Paul speaks in warmest commendation of them as *women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel*, women who had had a ministry indeed. Yet he has to entreat them to *agree with each other in the Lord* and to ask one of his trusted colleagues (unnamed, unless we should read *yoke-fellow* as a proper name, Syzgus, as the NIV mg.) to help them to be reconciled with each other. When Paul criticizes, he seeks also to affirm and commend. He mentions Clement specifically, but he is aware of all his *fellow-workers*, and the greatest thing that he can say of them all is that their *names are in the book of life*. For this 'book of life' compare Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Dn. 12:1 and Rev. 21:27, and remember the words of Jesus when he told his disciples to rejoice not so much in their achievements in his service but in God's grace that their names were 'written in heaven' (Lk. 10:20).

4:4–7 Call to joy and prayerfulness

4 Yet again the theme of joy comes out in this letter as the apostle calls on his readers to *rejoice ... always*, and he says *in the Lord*, repeating that phrase yet again: 'stand firm in the Lord' (1), 'agree ... in the Lord' (2), now *Rejoice in the Lord.* The whole of Christian living is a matter of that relationship with the living Lord Jesus, in the atmosphere of his presence and all-enabling grace.

5 There is a quality of life which is to *be evident to all* in a Christian's life and relationships. The NIV translates Paul's word as *gentleness*, the NJB has 'good sense', Knox translates it 'courtesy' and the RSV 'forbearance'. From these varying translations we can get the idea. The nearness of the Lord that motivates this quality could mean his nearness at all times to the believer, the nearness of his coming or both.

6 Anxiety is to have no place in the lives of Christians because *in everything* there can be *prayer*, prayer in its various forms and modes, *petition*, *requests*, but above all *thanksgiving*. This is because praise is always due to God and because faith is quickened when we remember in thankfulness what God has done for us in the past. There is an echo here of the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 6:25–34; 7:7–11). 1 Pet. 5:7 is similar as it says, 'Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you', and as J. A. Bengel (*New Testament Word Studies*, vol. 2 [Kregel Publications, 1978], p. 447) aptly puts it, 'Anxiety and prayer are more opposed to each other than fire and water.'

7 When prayer replaces worry, *the peace of God, which transcends all understanding* comes in, and that peace acts as a sentry guarding the Christian's mind and emotions from being overwhelmed by the sudden onrush of fear, anxiety or temptation. This reality Christians should prove in their daily lives.

4:8–9 Hold to the true and lovely

It is sometimes said that the qualities of character mentioned here are not distinctively Christian but such as have been honoured in many cultures and societies. That may be so, but the Christian has a special obligation to demonstrate them and has the enabling of the Spirit to do so.

8 Eight words are used for the things that should fill the Christian's thought-life. As they are 'taken into account' (as the word translated *think* means), they will shape attitudes and direct words and actions. They are the things that are *true* and honest, worthy and *noble*, just and *right*, *pure* and holy, *lovely* and beautiful, *admirable* and pleasant to hear about. The word translated *excellent* was the best word that classical Greek ethics had for virtue, and lastly there is the thought of what is worthy of praise and commendation.

9 *Putting this into practice*, in other words, living by what they know and acknowledged, would result for the Philippians in the kind of life that Paul had sought to model (see on 3;17). Not only would the peace of God be found, but also his unfailing presence (*cf.* 2 Cor. 13:11; 2 Thes. 3:16).

4:10–20 Paul's attitude to the gifts from Philippi

In this paragraph the apostle feels the need to do two things: to express appreciation for the gifts sent from Philippi, and yet at the same time, very sensitively, to emphasize the spiritual principle of dependence on the Lord rather than on human help. He does this so exquisitely that these verses have been called 'one of the gems of literature' (Beare, *Philippians*).

10 Paul rejoices in their gifts. They represented a fresh blossoming (NEB) of their earlier ministry of giving to him – for a long time they had *had no opportunity to show* their concern for him.

11–13 Their gifts had been a joy and encouragement to him, but he was not relying on them, nor, by writing like this, was he soliciting further gifts. He could honestly say that he had learnt the secret of contentment with outward circumstances, whether he had little or much. He knew that his Lord would not fail to give him what was necessary and to strengthen him to face every situation. In writing these things Paul uses two words that had significant religious and philosophical use in those days. The word translated *content* (Gk. *autarkēs)* means 'self-sufficient'. It was regarded by the Stoics as high virtue to be detached from outward circumstances and to have resources in oneself to meet every situation. Paul uses the word in the sense of his being independent of circumstances, but his all-sufficient resources were, he said, *through him who gives me strength*, the living Lord Jesus. The other word, translated *I have learned the secret*, was used in the mystery cults for initiation into a secret. Paul's secret of living was an open secret, available for all who would walk the way of Christ. It was the secret of contentment, since to know Christ and to be called to serve him was 'unsearchable riches' (Eph. 3:8). How far we know the secret of contentment and to what degree we are proving the sufficiency of Christ for all the demands of our lives are always challenging questions for us as Christians.

14–16 In spite of what he says about this basic spiritual principle of dependence on God, Paul wants to affirm that he appreciated the kindness of the Philippians. It supported him in his *troubles*. He speaks of that time of 'the beginning of the gospel', words which have been understood in a variety of ways but which the NIV rightly takes as *the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel*. Paul had set out from Macedonia, the province in which Philippi was situated, and gone to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1). While he was there, the Philippian Christians *sent* him *aid again and again*. Notice also how he speaks of the partnership that existed between them, a sharing *in the matter of giving and receiving*. Real fellowship is a two-way process.

17–18 Christian giving also brings blessing to those who give. The Philippians' giving, Paul says, *may be credited to* their *account*. In saying this he uses a metaphor from business transactions. It was a matter of *full payment*. We can be sure that Paul, in using such language, would have repudiated the least thought of earning anything from God. Everything received is a gift of God's grace. All we do for the Lord or for others is out of love and gratitude. What is done for others is accepted as done for the Lord (Mt. 25:40) and can be described as a *sacrifice, pleasing to God*, fragrant as incense (*cf.* Ex. 29:18; Ezk. 20:41; Jn. 12:3; 2 Cor. 2:16).

19 The Lord is no-one's debtor. The measure of God's giving is infinitely greater than that of any human giving. God's promise is to supply all that he sees we need, and not only out of but *according to* [in the measure of] *his glorious riches in Christ Jesus*.

20 Praise and glory is due to *our God and Father* now and *forever and ever* (lit. 'to the ages of the ages'), for all eternity.

4:21–23 Concluding greetings

21–22 Paul began his letter according to contemporary custom, but enhanced by the realization of what the writers and readers were because of their Christian calling, and he ends it in the same way. It is said again that the readers are *saints* (see on 1:1). They are *in Christ Jesus*, and because of that they are truly *brothers* and sisters. So greetings were sent, and included among those who sent them were *those who belong to Caesar's household*. Who precisely these people were depends to some extent on the place where the letter was written (see the Introduction on the time and place of writing). However, whether that was Rome or not, the probability is that they were not actually members of Caesar's family, but 'persons employed in the domestic and administrative establishment of the Emperor' (Beare, *Philippians*). Even so, it is significant that there were by this time loyal Christians in the imperial service.

23 The letter closes as it began with the prayer, which embraces every other petition, for *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*, present, indwelling, always quickening the human *spirit*.

Francis Foulkes

COLOSSIANS

Introduction

The church at Colosse

Colosse was a small, relatively unimportant city in Roman times (a 'small town' according to the contemporary writer, Strabo) although it had a thriving wool industry in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. It was situated in the Lycus valley about 100 miles (160 km) east of Ephesus and, together with Laodicea and Hierapolis, belonged to the Roman province of Asia.

The Christian community at Colosse came into existence during a period of vigorous evangelism, linked with Paul's ministry at Ephesus (AD 52–55), recorded in Acts 19. Paul was helped by several co-workers who planted a number of churches in the province of Asia. Among these were the congregations of Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis, which were the fruit of Epaphras's evangelistic efforts (1:7; 4:12–13). Epaphras, a native of Colosse (4:12), who may have become a Christian during a visit to Ephesus, was 'a faithful minister of Christ' and as Paul's representative (1:7) he had taught the Colossians the truth of the gospel.

Paul often refers to the non-Christian past of the readers which suggests that most of them were Gentile converts. They had once been utterly out of harmony with God, enmeshed in idolatry and slavery to sin, being hostile to God in mind and godless in their actions (1:21; *cf.* vs 12, 27). They had been dead because of their sins and 'the uncircumcision of . . . [their] flesh' – a statement which indicates they were both heathen and godless (2:13).

God, however, had effected a mighty change in their lives: he had reconciled them to himself in an earth-shattering event, namely, Christ's physical death on the cross (1:22). He had delivered them from the tyranny of darkness and transferred them into a kingdom ruled by his beloved Son (1:13). They now possessed redemption and the forgiveness of sins (1:14; 2:13; 3:13).

The Colossians had a hope so secure that it was stored up for them in heaven (1:5; *cf.* v 23) where Christ was seated and where their thoughts and hopes were to be focused (3:1–4; *cf.* 1:27). As Gentiles who had previously been without God and without hope they had been united to Christ in his death, burial and resurrection (2:11–12, 20; 3:1, 3). He was the same person praised as the exalted Lord of creation and reconciliation in the magnificent hymn of 1:15–20, and God's anointed one who was at the centre of the mystery (1:27). As members of his body they had his life within them and could look forward to the day when they would share in the fulness of his glory (3:4).

Because the congregation had received Christ Jesus the Lord (2:6) when they accepted the gospel at the hands of Epaphras, they were to conduct their lives as those who had been united to Christ in his death and resurrection. As they lived under his lordship they were to be full of thanksgiving, grateful to God because of his mighty actions on their behalf (2:7; 3:15–17; 4:2; *cf.* 1:3, 12).

The picture is therefore drawn of a Christian congregation obedient to the apostolic gospel and for which the apostle could give heartfelt thanks to God (1:4–6). He knew of their 'love in the Spirit' (1:8) and was delighted to learn of their orderly Christian lives and the stability of their faith in Christ (2:5).

Authorship

The letter makes clear that the apostle Paul is the writer, not only in the opening greeting (1:1), but also in the body of the letter (1:23) and at its conclusion (4:18). The character of Paul, as we know it from other letters, shines throughout this one. There was no dispute over the authenticity of Colossians in the early period. The letter is included in the earliest known canonical list of the NT books (early second century AD) compiled by Marcion, as well as in the Muratorian canon (late second or early third century). However, the Pauline authorship has been challenged on a number of occasions in the last 150 years. The arguments concern the language and style of the letter, and the supposed differences between Colossians and the theology of the main Pauline letters.

As to the language and style, many expressions are special to Paul while the differences can be explained by the particular situation which prompted the letter. Unusual terms, for example, appear as catchwords of the Colossian 'philosophy' or as part of the author's answers to their special problem.

The supposed theological differences between Colossians and the generally accepted Pauline letters are in the areas of Christology (the person and work of Christ), ecclesiology

(the nature of the church), eschatology (teaching about the end times) and tradition. There are differences of emphasis: for example, the stress is upon realized rather than future eschatology (on the blessings already experienced through the Spirit rather than the end times – though the latter is present, *e.g.* at 3:4). These differences are best interpreted as being called forth by the circumstances at Colosse (see the comments on 2:11–12; 3:1–3). The so-called 'theological developments' are in line with the apostle's earlier teaching and are no reason for rejecting the apostolic authorship of the letter. The close connection between Colossians and Philemon, especially the number of people associated with Paul being mentioned in both letters (4:7–17; *cf.* Phm. 2:23–24) and the particular mention of Onesimus as 'one of you' (4:9), suggests both letters were written at the same time. There is no reason to doubt that the author of the letter was Paul.

Occasion

Epaphras had paid Paul a visit in Rome (see below) and informed him of the state of the churches in the Lycus valley. While much of the report was encouraging (1:8; 2:5), one disquieting feature was an attractive, but false, teaching that had recently been introduced into the congregation and which, if it went unchecked, would overturn the gospel and bring the Colossians into spiritual bondage. Paul's letter was written as a response to this urgent need.

The threat to faith and the 'Colossian heresy'

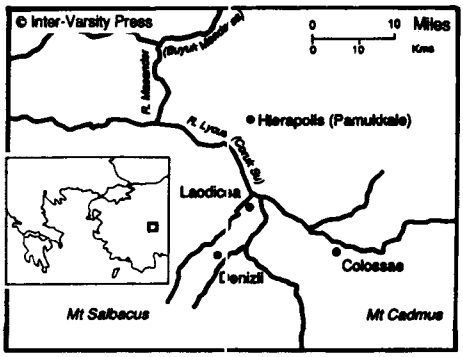
Nowhere in the letter does the apostle define the 'heresy'; its chief features can be detected only by piecing together and interpreting his positive counter-arguments. Recently several scholars have questioned whether these counter-arguments point to the existence of a 'Colossian heresy' at all. They prefer to speak in terms of 'tendencies' rather than a clear-cut system with definite points, and suggest that the young converts were under external pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their Jewish and pagan neighbours. But in the light of 2:8–23, with its references to 'fulness', specific instructions about self-discipline ('Do not handle!' *etc.* v 21), regulations about food and holy days, unusual phrases which seem to be catchwords of Paul's opponents and the strong emphasis on what Christ has *already achieved* by his death and resurrection, it seems appropriate to speak of a 'heresy' which had just begun to make some inroads into the congregation.

The teaching was set forth as 'philosophy' (2:8), based on 'tradition' (an expression that denotes its antiquity, dignity and revelation) which was supposed to impart true knowledge (2:18, 23). Paul seems to be quoting slogans of the opponents in his attack on the teaching at: 2:9, 'all the fulness'; 2:18, delighting in 'false humility and the worship of angels'; 2:21, 'Don't handle!' *etc.*; and 2:23, 'self-imposed worship', 'humility' and 'harsh treatment of the body'. Further, observation of these taboos in the 'philosophy' was related to obedient submission to 'the basic principles of the world' (RSV 'elemental spirits') (2:20). How are these unusual features to be understood?

Scholars do not agree completely about the nature of the teaching. Basically, the heresy seems to have been Jewish, because of the references to food regulations, the Sabbath and other rules of the Jewish calendar. Circumcision is mentioned (2:11) but did not appear as one of the legal requirements. But what kind of Judaism? It does not seem to have been the more straightforward kind against which the Galatian churches had to be warned, but was one in which self-discipline and mysticism featured and where angels, principalities and powers played a prominent role in creation and the giving of the law. They were regarded as controlling the lines of communication between God and humankind, and so needed to be placated by keeping strict legal observances.

A number of important suggestions have been made as to the nature of the Colossian 'philosophy'. These include a pagan mystery cult (M. Dibelius) and a combination of pagan elements and a gnosticized form of Judaism, *i.e.* one based on special 'inside knowledge' (G. Bornkamm). (The 'worship of angels' [2:18] has been regarded as a pagan element in the false teaching, but should be understood as 'the angelic worship [of God]'; see the Commentary.) Other theories include 'Sectarian Judaism of a gnostic kind (Lightfoot) and a set of beliefs combining a number of Jewish features (S. Lyonnet). Recent scholarship, however, considers that the false teaching, which advanced beyond Epaphras's elementary gospel, was connected with ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety (as found, *e.g.* at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true 'fulness'. 'Humility' (2:18, 23) was a term used by the opponents to denote self-denying practices that opened the believer to visions of heavenly mysteries and mystical experiences. The 'mature' were thus able to gain entrance into heaven and join in the 'angelic worship of God' as part of their present experience (2:18).

In a similar way today men and women sometimes believe that if they order their lives by a series of set rules and regulations, then God



The situation of Colosse in the Lycus valley.

will be pleased with the service they render and proper claims may then be made upon him. These rules and ordinances may turn up in different areas of life – in the social, moral, political and religious spheres. A sense of achievement or even joy is felt when the rules are kept, while feelings of failure or shame are experienced if the required standards are not met. But the whole effort is self-centred, focusing on human merit. Even believers can lapse into legalism, thinking that it would be right to repay God, if only in a small way, for the gift of salvation he has provided in his Son. Alternatively, some may think it necessary to follow rules of a religious kind in order to grow as a Christian and to become holy. But the whole enterprise cuts at the very heart of Christ's saving work, especially his death on the cross. The error is similar to those of the false teachers at Colosse.

Paul's handling of the Colossian philosophy

Paul issues a strong warning to the Colossians to be on their guard lest the false teachers carry them off as spoil (lit. 'kidnap') from the truth into the slavery of error by their 'philosophy and empty deceit' (2:8). Although they had set forth their teaching as 'tradition', Paul rejects any suggestion of divine origin. It was a human invention ('the tradition of men') and in reply to it he sets it over against the tradition of Christ – not merely the tradition which stems from the teaching of Christ, but that which finds its embodiment in him (2:6). Jesus Christ is the 'image of the invisible God' (1:15), the one who incorporates the fulness of the divine being (2:9). In a magnificent passage in praise of Christ as the Lord in creation and reconciliation (1:15–20), he claims that Christ is the one through whom all things were created, including the principalities and powers which figured so prominently in the Colossian heresy. All things have been made in him. He is the agent of all creation and its ultimate goal (v 16).

Those who have been incorporated into Christ have come to fulness of life in the one who is master over every principality and power (2:10). Christ Jesus is the sole mediator between God and mankind. It would be foolish for the Colossians to be misled by the false teachers into thinking it was necessary to obey the angelic powers who controlled the lines of communication between God and man. That way was now controlled by Christ who by his death is revealed as conqueror of the principalities and powers (2:13–15).

In his reply to the false teaching Paul expounds the doctrine of the cosmic Christ more fully than in his earlier letters. Hints had previously appeared in Romans (8:19–22) and 1 Corinthians (1:24; 2:6–10; 8:6), but a more detailed exposition is given in Col. 1:15–20 and 2:13–15. The apostle's criticisms of the advocates of the philosophy with their wrong notions and odd behaviour are penetrating, even devastating (see the Commentary on 2:16–23).

Place and date of origin

The traditional view that Paul wrote Colossians during his imprisonment in Rome is more likely than that he penned the letter in Ephesus or Caesarea. No other imprisonment in Acts seems a real alternative (there are difficulties in assuming it was during the Caesarean imprisonment, Acts 24:27). The greetings from colleagues in ch. 4 suggest they had direct access to Paul, and this is consistent with the Roman imprisonment of Acts 28:30. Also the reference to Onesimus (which brings into account the letter to Philemon) is best understood in the context of the imperial capital even though some have argued that the distance between Colosse and Rome makes a Roman origin unlikely. Any supposed progression in Paul's thinking does not help us in dating Colossians.

If the Roman suggestion is accepted then the most likely dating is fairly early in Paul's (first) Roman imprisonment, *i.e. circa* AD 60–61. Those supporting an Ephesian alternative place the letter around 54–57, or even earlier, 52–55.

Further reading

R. C. Lucas, *The Message of Colossians*, BST (IVP, 1980).
N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1986).
R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, NCB (Eerdmans, 1981).
P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians*, WBC (Word, 1982).
———, *Understanding the Basic Themes of Colossians, Philemon*, QRBT (Word, 1991).

Outline of contents

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Commentary

1:1–2 Paul's greeting

Paul begins his letter to the Colossians in the same way as many ancient letter writers did, with three details: the sender's name, that of the readers and a greeting. (See also the article Reading the letters). There are, however, important differences between Paul's letters and others in the ancient world. (See general article 'Reading the epistles'.) First, the apostle mentions his own name and his credentials in relation to the circumstances of each letter; secondly, he addresses the readers in Christian terms and, thirdly, the opening greeting is not a pious wish but an expression of his deep concern for them in relation to God's grace and peace.

As *an apostle of Christ Jesus,* Paul had been directly called and sent by the risen Lord Jesus to be his authorized agent to proclaim the gospel and to establish churches. He belongs to *Christ Jesus* and here mentions his apostleship, not because it was under attack in Colosse (as it had been in Galatia and Corinth; Gal. 1:1, 10–12; 1 Cor. 9:1–3; 2 Cor. 11:10–13), but in order to spell out his calling and ministry at the beginning and so draw attention to the official character of his letter to the community. An apostle had the authority to teach (*cf.* 1 Tim. 2:7) and to deal pastorally with the congregations in his care (2 Cor. 13:10). Both Paul's calling and ministry were *by the will of God,* an expression which stresses that they were due to God's grace alone and that Paul had a special responsibility within the divine purpose for Gentile congregations (*cf.* Eph. 3:1–13). *Timothy* is mentioned (*cf.* 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1), not as a joint author of the letter, but because he had been in Paul's company for much of his Ephesian ministry and was with Paul now as he wrote. The Colossians are described in magnificent language: *the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse.* Like God's people Israel, who had been chosen by him and appointed to his service (Ex. 19:6), they are 'holy ones' because they have been set apart for God and his service. As a result their lives (and ours) should be marked by godly behaviour. They are *faithful brothers* and sisters for as *believers* they have been brought together into a living fellowship in Christ (on the theme of being 'in Christ' see 2:6–15). *Brothers* (which means 'brothers and sisters') speaks of the close relationships that exist between Christians as members of God's family. As those who have been adopted and as an outworking of Christ's love for them, the Colossians are to show brotherly and sisterly love to one another. The greeting *grace and peace to you from God our Father* indicates Paul's sincere concern for the Colossians that they may understand and appreciate more fully the grace of God in which they already stand and the relationship of peace that God has established with them (*cf.* Rom. 5:1–2).

1:3–8 Thanksgiving for faith, love, hope and the gospel

The apostle follows his usual custom by expressing his thanks to God for his readers. In this thanksgiving paragraph he uses a variation of a feature of the more personal Greek-style letters of the day. This passage sets the tone of his letter and introduces some of its main themes as Paul shows his pastoral and apostolic concern for these Christians. Unlike many thanksgivings which express gratitude for personal benefits received and may be self-centred, Paul's thanksgivings are to God for what he has done in the lives of *others*. He spells out his thanksgiving to God for the Colossians' Christian growth and follows this with a prayer for their progress in knowledge and godly behaviour (1:9–14). The mention of his prayers for them would no doubt have helped to strengthen the ties of fellowship between him and these Christians of the Lycus valley whom he had not met (2:1).

3 *We always thank God . . . when we pray for you. We* is not a formal expression referring to Paul alone or even suggesting that he stood at a distance from the Colossians; rather, it includes Timothy and perhaps others (at 1:23 when Paul's own ministry is emphasized the singular '*I*' occurs). It may also indicate a regular gathering together by the apostle and his colleagues to pray for these Christians. *Always* indicates how often they gave thanks. It does not mean every moment of the day but is explained by *when we pray for you, i.e.* 'regularly', perhaps morning, noon and evening (the customary three times of prayer) and whenever else they prayed. (Similar expressions such as 'continually', 'at all times' and 'day and night' mean the same.) 4 The ground for Paul's thanksgiving was the readers' *faith and love*, both of which Paul had heard about from Epaphras (8). *Faith* is mentioned first, for without it there would be no Christian life (*cf.* Rom. 10:9). *Faith* lives and acts *in Christ Jesus*, for Christians are in union with him, and it proves it is real by 'working through love' (Gal. 5:6). This *love* was being shown by the readers to Christians generally, especially those at Colosse and the other churches of the Lycus valley. It is through love that Christians serve one another and these believers knew something of this service.

5 Both *faith* and *love* are based on *hope* (these three graces are linked at Rom. 5:1–5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5–6; 1 Thes. 1:3; 5:8) which here means 'the content of hope', 'the thing one hopes for'. It is fully secure, kept for them *in heaven* where no power, human or otherwise, can touch it. Though hidden from their view, this *hope* is centred on Christ (1:27) and will be revealed when he returns (3:4). That is why Christians are to direct their minds towards heaven and to let their thoughts about Christ rule their lives (3:1–4). Paul was telling the Colossians nothing new for they had *already heard about* this hope in *the gospel* when they were converted. As *the word of truth* the *gospel* is completely reliable. It is God's word and is like his character: it also stands opposed to the 'gospel' of the false teachers.

6 Paul goes out of his way to stress the powerful and almost personal character of the gospel: it has made its triumphal progress, coming to the Colossians and taking up a sure place in their lives. *All over the world* (which does not mean everywhere or to each person under heaven, but in the large cities and towns, *e.g.* Damascus, Tarsus, Antioch, Cornith and Ephesus, which served as centres of outreach), the *gospel* has been *bearing fruit and growing*. This phrase is used in the OT of human growth (Gn. 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7) and of Israel's population increase (Je. 3:16; 23:3); in the NT it is used to describe the seed (*i.e.* the word) in the parable of the sower (Mk. 4). Like that seed the *gospel* 'bears fruit', producing a crop of good deeds (*i.e.* godly actions) in the lives of believers (*cf.* Phil. 1:11), and it 'grows' as the number of converts increases. The Colossians *heard* this message of God's *grace* in Christ and came to know its reality when they were converted.

7–8 *Epaphras* was the evangelist who had brought the gospel to the Colossians. He had carefully instructed them in it and they had committed themselves as disciples to its teaching (2:6–7). Paul writes warmly of *Epaphras* who had been chosen by God and set apart for his service. As Paul's *dear fellow-servant* he was the apostle's reliable associate who guaranteed to the church at Colosse that they had received the true apostolic gospel. He had acted as Paul's representative when preaching at Colosse (*on our behalf*, v 8). *Minister* ('servant'), a favourite term of Paul's, originally meant one who rendered service of a lowly kind. It is used of Christ himself (Rom. 15:8), Paul (2 Cor. 11:23; Eph. 3:7) and the apostle's associates in his missionary activity (1 Cor. 3:5; 1 Tim. 4:6), including Epaphras who is *a faithful minister of Christ*. He had recently visited Paul in Rome and told him how the churches in the Lycus valley were getting on. The community's life was filled with a *love* generated by the Holy Spirit, enabling it to come to the help of all the saints (Christian believers).

1:9–14 A prayer for knowledge and godly conduct

As Paul spells out the content of his prayer for the Colossians, he introduces many of the major

issues of the letter. These verses tell the readers what he thinks is important and, by implication, they urge the Colossians to respond in a positive way. Put simply, Paul's prayer is that they might know God's will and have the power to do it. The close links between the thanksgiving of vs 3–8 and the intercessory paragraph of vs 9–14 show that Paul was a true pastor: he was grateful to God for the Colossians' progress, but he also wanted them to grow in their understanding and godly behaviour and to deal with the false teaching that was making inroads into the church. He may also have wanted his readers to use this prayer as a model for their own praying to God. It is certainly one of the finest in his letters (*cf.* Eph. 1:17–19; 3:14–19) and has served as a pattern for later generations of Christians.

9 From the day he learned of their progress as Christians the apostle not only offered constant thanksgiving to God the Father; he prayed for them as well. Knowing that the one whom he asked gave richly and abundantly (Phil. 4:19; *cf.* Rom. 15:13; Jas. 1:5), Paul and his colleagues consistently prayed that the Colossians might receive 'fulness' (a term apparently used by the false teachers) of blessing from God's gracious hand: *asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will.* The apostle will be satisfied with nothing less than their full Christian maturity. The *knowledge* for which he prayed is distinguished from other knowledge, for it consists in *wisdom and understanding* of every sort, on the spiritual level. God's *will*, which is usually broader than his personal will for the individual Christian's life, sometimes describes his electing and saving plan (Eph. 1:5, 9). Here it has to do with the readers' full obedience which would be visible in their actions (*cf.* Rom. 12:1–2).

10 Although there is a heavy emphasis on knowledge and wisdom (which includes an intellectual element to enable the Colossians to oppose error), this *knowledge* for which Paul prayed was to lead to right behaviour: *in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord. Live* literally means 'walk' and Paul often uses the term to describe the Christian life (Rom. 6:4; 8:4; Gal. 5:16; Eph. 4:1; Phil. 3:17). The Colossians are to *live* in a manner that is worthy of the one whom they confess as *Lord.* Adding to the point the apostle prays that they will *please him in every way*, an expression that describes not a frightened attitude in the presence of a superior, but behaviour that honours the Lord because it arises out of glad obedience to him. Elsewhere Paul mentions the need for Christians to please God (or, others as a result of their obedience to him) rather than pleasing themselves (Rom. 8:8; 15:1–3; 1 Cor. 7:32). Here it is to occur in every sphere; *in all things.* Paul then spells out more precisely what is involved in living *a life worthy of the Lord* (lit. 'walking worthily of the Lord'). Believers are to bear fruit *in every good work.* The gospel has borne fruit by producing godly actions in the Colossians' lives (6) and Paul now prays that they may be fruitful in everything that they do. Believers are also to grow *in the knowledge of God.* As they respond to that personal relationship with God which they already have, so the relationship will grow and their understanding of him will deepen. **11** *Being strengthened with all power* indicates how they are to live in a way that is worthy of the Lord. The standards set before the Colossians are high, far higher than those of the false teachers, and it might seem that they could not be achieved. But this is not the case. Paul heaps up terms for power and strength to stress that: nothing short of God's almighty power at work within them will enable them to live in a way that is pleasing to him; *his glorious might* is more than adequate for the Colossians' needs; and this strength will be given to them day by day as they confront varying situations (the present tense *being strengthened* suggests the ongoing strengthening by God). The outworking of his divine power is not in spectacular miracles but is for *great endurance and patience*, particularly in the face of opposition. By enduring patiently as they suffer, Christians show that they have their hope set on God.

12–14 Finally, Paul prays that the Colossians will *joyfully* give *thanks to the Father* for this also pleases him in every way. 'Thanksgiving' in Paul's letters refers to a thankful attitude of mind which is expressed outwardly and often publicly. By us mentioning what God has graciously done in his Son, other Christians are encouraged to praise him also; and as thanksgivings increase so God is glorified (2 Cor. 1:11; 4:15). Joyful thanksgiving is an activity Christians should regularly engage in. There are good grounds for doing so. In fact, the regular offering of thanks to the Father is a mark of a true Christian.

12 The Almighty One has acted on their behalf and already fitted them for an eternal *inheritance.* This language is full of OT echoes and recalls the promise first given to Abram (Gn. 13:14–17) which was later renewed to Israel (Nu. 26:52–56). The inheritance to which Paul refers belongs to a higher plane and a more lasting order than the land of Canaan, for it is *in the kingdom of light, i.e.* in the realm of the light of the age to come, in heaven itself. It belongs to a spiritual dimension, unable to be ravaged by war, famine or the like. This inheritance is the 'hope laid up in heaven' (1:5; *cf.* 3:1–4) and is none other than the Lord Jesus himself. **13–14** explain the meaning of v 12, emphasizing the

remarkable change God had brought about at the time of the Colossians' conversion. Like others, they had been under the control of the evil one and belonged to his terrible rule, *the dominion of darkness.* Their circumstances are described in 1:21: they were separated from God, hostile to him and doing evil deeds. But God *rescued us* (*us* includes Paul and other believers too) from that tyranny of darkness. He freed those in slavery (as at the exodus) and transferred them into *the kingdom* where his beloved *Son* rules. This change of dominion is vividly described in terms of 'light' and 'darkness'; the Colossians are now 'children of light' (*cf.* 1 Thes. 5:5) and are to live accordingly. The *kingdom of the Son he loves* is a reference to the kingdom of God or God's rule in the present time before the second coming of the Lord Jesus. **14** In this kingdom where Jesus Christ is Lord there is *redemption*, that is, freedom for those in spiritual bondage (the price paid is the death of Jesus; Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:18). This *redemption*, which is a present possession of the Colossians, is closely linked with *the forgiveness of sins.* 'Redemption releases from the power of sin and forgiveness from its guilt' (D. Guthrie).

1:15–20 Jesus Christ, the Lord in creation and reconciliation

At the end of v 14, with its reference to the forgiveness of sins, the language changes from that of prayer and thanksgiving into a magnificent passage (sometimes called a 'hymn') in praise of Christ as the Lord in creation and reconciliation. This paragraph is central: themes from it are taken up and applied throughout the rest of the letter (*cf.* 1:19 with 2:9, and 1:20 with 2:15). Although the passage praises Christ, surprisingly the names 'Jesus', 'Christ' and 'Lord' do not appear within it; it simply begins, 'He is . . .'. However, it is clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one to whom these words of praise refer. They can apply to no-one else. There has been considerable debate whether Paul here introduced an existing 'hymn' into his letter. This is possible but if he did so he has certainly woven the rest of the letter around it, and the focus on the supremacy of Christ is intended to strengthen the readers and correct the wrong views of the false teachers. Whoever wrote it, the passage perfectly suited the apostle's purposes in writing to the Colossians.

1:15–17 Lord in creation. **15** *The image of the invisible God* indicates that the very nature and character of God have been perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ; in him the invisible has become visible. No-one has ever seen God, but God the only Son has made him known (Jn. 1:18). Humanity as the climax of creation was made in God's image (Gn. 1:26–27). From all eternity Jesus, in his very nature, has been the image of God. The English word *image* may suggest a copy that is less than perfect; the Greek original, which is a term of revelation, does not imply this. Jesus, who is perfectly like the Father, reveals who he is in all his goodness (*cf.* Pr. 8:22). If a person wants to know what God is like then he or she should turn to the Scriptures and find out all about Jesus, for he shows us perfectly what the Father is like.

The firstborn over all creation. In the OT *'firstborn'* occurs 130 times to describe one who is supreme or first in time. It also refers to one who had a special place in the father's love: so 'Israel is my firstborn son' (Ex. 4:22). Although *'firstborn'* can speak of one who is the first in a series (*cf.* v 18; Rom. 8:29), this cannot be its significance here; the context makes it plain that Jesus is not the first of all created beings for ('because') he is the one by whom the whole creation came into being (16). Unfortunately the English word *'firstborn'* does not draw attention to this notion of supremacy or priority of rank. As the *firstborn* Christ is unique, being distinguished from all creation (*cf.* Heb. 1:6). He is both prior to and supreme over that creation since he is its Lord.

16 Christ's unique position over creation is then explained: *For by him all things were created.* He clearly cannot be part of the creation itself since *all things* have been made by him. The passive *were created* indicates that God is Creator, while *by him* suggests that Christ is the instrument. (If it is read as 'in him' then he is the sphere in which creation takes place and it depends wholly on him.) Paul's language comes from Gn. 1 and the OT Wisdom Literature where wisdom is called the 'craftsman' (Pr. 8:30). For Paul that 'craftsman' is not a figure of speech, but the personal, heavenly Christ who met him on the Damascus road. *All things* is expanded in a parallel sentence to *things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.* Then, with special reference to the false teaching at Colosse, Paul stresses that even the spiritual powers and authorities, whether good or bad, are all subject to Christ as Creator. Four classes are listed, *thrones, powers, rulers* and *authorities*: from the highest to the lowest all were created in him, through him and for him. The teaching that Christ is the ultimate goal of all creation (*all things were created for . . . him*) has no parallel in the Jewish Wisdom Literature or indeed any other Jewish source. And it needs to be remembered that the one who was crucified as a common criminal, that is Jesus Christ, is the very person to whom the whole of creation, and therefore history as well, moves.

17 Because Jesus exists *before all things*, one could not rightly say, as the second-century

heretic Arius did: 'There was once when he was not'. As the pre-existent one (Jn. 8:58) Jesus is Lord of the universe. The emphatic *he* corresponds to the solemn 'I' of the OT which refers to Yahweh, the LORD himself. *In him all things hold together.* The whole of creation is established permanently in him alone. He is the sustainer of the universe and the unifying principle of its life. Apart from his *continuous* sustaining activity (indicated by the tense of the Greek verb) all would fall apart (*cf.* Heb. 1:2–3). Although there are similarities with the language of Stoicism here, Paul's statement is different from the all-embracing world-soul of the Stoics. All men and women, whether they recognize it or not, are totally indebted to the Lord Jesus as Creator and Sustainer. For not only has he made every person who enters the world; he also sustains their lives daily, giving life and breath to each one. Those who are 'in Christ', and therefore know him in a personal way, should express their gratitude to him as Creator and Sustainer by living godly lives. Those who have not honoured him or given him thanks (Rom. 1:21) are urged to repent and turn to him in faith.

1:18–20 Lord in reconciliation. The attention now shifts from the realm of creation to Christ's relationship with the church and his lordship in reconciliation. Elsewhere in his letters Paul uses the picture of the church as a body to refer to the two-way relations and duties of church members (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–27) where the 'head' of the body has no special mention or honour; it is counted as an ordinary member (1 Cor. 12:21). In Colossians and Ephesians, however, the relationship which the church, as the body of Christ, bears to him as the 'head' is emphasized. **18** With the words *he is the head of the body, the church,* the centrality of Christ in relation to his people is stressed. His headship points to a close personal and living relationship with them in which he rules over his people in the way that the head of a body exercises influence over its various parts. Headship also refers to their total dependence on him for life and power. *Church* is not some universal congregation, scattered throughout the world, to which all believers belong, but a heavenly assembly, gathered around Christ. Even as they go about their ordinary daily tasks, all Christians are members of this gathering in heaven, because of their fellowship with him. Christ is *the beginning* in the sense that he is *the firstborn from among the dead, i.e.* the founder of a new humanity. The resurrection age has burst forth and as the first who has risen from among the dead (here *firstborn* means first in a series) he is the 'firstfruits' who guarantees the future resurrection of others (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). The 'hymn' had previously spoken of Christ's primacy in creation; it now mentions his primacy in resurrection. In both new creation and old *the supremacy* now belongs to him alone.

19 The reason for this primacy is spelled out: Jesus Christ is 'the place' in whom *God* in all his fullness *was pleased* to take up residence. All God's qualities and activities – his Spirit, word, wisdom and glory – are perfectly displayed in Christ. Further, this indwelling in Christ 'in bodily form' (*cf.* 2:9) is not temporary but permanent. Since Christ is the one mediator between God and the world of humanity and has brought the Colossian Christians into a relationship with his Father, they need not fear those supernatural powers under whose control human beings were supposed to live. Neither need we be afraid of the same or similar powers in the present day.

20 The climax of the paragraph comes with the references to reconciliation and peacemaking through Christ's death. The opening words of the paragraph had stated that all things had been created in, through and for Christ. He is their Lord in creation. What is not spelled out, however, is what has happened to all things *since* creation: the unity and harmony of the cosmos have suffered a serious breach, needing reconciliation (*cf.* Gn. 3). It was God's good pleasure to *reconcile all things* through Christ (2 Cor. 5:19). Heaven and earth have been brought back to the order for which God made them. The universe is under its Lord, and cosmic peace has been restored. Reconciliation and *making peace* (which includes the idea of pacification, *i.e.* overthrowing evil) are used synonymously to describe the mighty work which Christ achieved in history through his death *on the cross* as a sacrifice (Rom. 3:25; 1 Cor. 11:25; Eph. 1:7). The *peace* which Christ has brought may be 'freely accepted, or . . . compulsorily imposed' (F. F. Bruce). The principalities and powers over whom God has triumphed (2:15) did not gladly surrender to God's grace. They were 'pacified'. They continue to exist, opposed to men and women (*cf.* Rom. 8:38–39), but they cannot finally harm the person who is in Christ and their overthrow in the future is assured (1 Cor. 15:24–28; see on 2:15). Further, it cannot be assumed from this verse that all sinful men and women have freely accepted the peace achieved through Christ's death. Although all things will *finally* unite to bow in the name of Jesus and to acknowledge him as Lord (Phil. 2:10–11), it is not to be supposed that this will be done gladly by all, and to suggest that v 20 points to a universal reconciliation in which every person will finally enjoy the blessings of salvation is unwarranted.

1:21–23 Reconciliation accomplished and applied

Speaking directly to the readers (*you*) Paul points out that Christ's peace-making work, which involves the reconciliation of the universe, has particular reference to them. 21 *Once you . . . But now* (22). A sharp contrast is drawn between their pre-Christian past and their present standing in Christ. The serious nature of their previous situation only serves to emphasize the wonder of God's gracious, mighty action of reconciling them, *i.e.* of making them his friends. Prior to their conversion they *were alienated*, completely out of harmony with God, trapped in idolatry and slavery to sin. They had been opposed to God in their thinking, and this naturally found visible expression in their *evil behaviour* (lit. 'doing evil deeds').

22 *But now* sounds like a trumpet blast. God has acted mightily on their behalf: he has brought them into a new relationship with himself and made changes in their attitudes. All this was achieved by *Christ's physical body through death*, a deliberate expression which shows plainly that Jesus truly became man (against a false teaching that he only seemed or appeared to be a man) and that he really died. It was at great cost that the death of the Son of God took place on the cross. God's reconciliation of the Colossians had as its aim their preparation for the final day when they would stand before him: *to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.* As men and women who are forgiven and reconciled they are declared blameless (*cf.* Rom. 8:33–34), without fault or stain (*cf.* Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Phil. 2:15) on that final day.

23 Their continuing in the faith shows how real that faith is; so the passage concludes with a condition. If it is true that the saints *will* persevere to the end, then it is equally true that the saints *must* persevere to the end. Like a building set on a sure foundation and erected with strong supports, the readers are to remain true to the gospel, and not to shift from the fixed ground of their Christian *hope*. The claim of Paul's *gospel* (which focused on this *hope*) to be the true message of God is shown by its universal appeal. It has already been preached in representative towns and cities of the empire – Paul does not mean that every single individual has heard.

1:24 – 2:5 Paul's mission and pastoral concern

Having mentioned that he is a servant of the gospel (23), Paul describes his God-given ministry to Gentiles, including the Colossians, by means of several pictures (24–29). Although he has not met most of the readers (2:1), he identifies with them by sharing in Christ's afflictions on behalf of the church (24) and so he can write to them in the way that he does.

24 As an apostle, Paul rejoices in his sufferings on behalf of the Colossians, indeed, on behalf of Christ's *body, the church* as a whole. These sufferings are part and parcel of *Christ's afflictions* – not his death on the cross or redemptive sufferings which are 'finished' – but the *afflictions* of his people which he endures. The expression *Christ's afflictions* is to be understood against an OT and Jewish background with its notion of the afflictions of the end time. These were called the 'birth-pangs of the Messiah', those pains and woes which would occur before the arrival of God's anointed ruler, the Messiah. In the NT they occur between the first and second comings of Jesus. The exalted Christ is in heaven and before his return he suffers in his members, not least in the life of Paul himself (Acts 9:4). These *afflictions* have been limited by God; the quota will be complete when the end comes. All Christians take part in these sufferings; it is through them that we enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 1 Thes. 3:3, 7). Suffering with Christ is essential if we are to be glorified with him (Rom. 8:17). Through the sufferings he endures in his own flesh, Paul contributes to the sum total, to *what is still lacking*. The more he suffers the less the Colossians have to.

25–27 Paul's ministry is a *commission* given to him in accordance with the gospel-plan of God. He is a steward (1 Cor. 4:1) who has been entrusted with this commission (1 Cor. 9:17). He is not able to withdraw from this solemn responsibility, but must fulfil it obediently. As a steward of God's mysteries he is expected to be found trustworthy (1 Cor. 4:2). His special task was to make *the word of God* known. *In all its fulness* suggests 'bringing it to completion' for Paul's preaching, particularly as directed to Gentiles, was contributing to the ultimate fulfilment of God's saving purposes revealed in his word (*cf.* Is. 55:11). The message itself was none other than God's *mystery*, his 'open secret', previously hidden, *but now*, in the light of his decisive action in Christ, it has been revealed (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3). *Glorious riches* indicates the *mystery* is magnificent in every way: it partakes of God's own character (hence 'glory') and in it God has showered his blessings upon men and women, especially *Gentiles*. The content of the mystery is *Christ in you* Colossians. Christ had been preached by Epaphras to them as Gentiles. They received him as Lord and he now lives in them. As members of his body they have his life within them and with it a sure and certain hope (3:4).

28 In their missionary preaching Paul and his colleagues worked energetically to *proclaim* – an important word used of the gospel or some element in it (1 Cor. 9:14; Phil. 1:17–18) – Christ as Lord. Their evangelistic outreach was not carried out by some superficial preaching of the saving message of Christ to the world; instead, by regularly *admonishing* and *teaching* each person (these verbs along with *proclaim* are in the present tense) the apostolic band set out to make disciples of men and women, building them up in pastoral situations. Three times Paul writes *everyone* ('each one'), emphasizing that Christian teaching is for all (not some spiritual elite) and that apostolic work had to do with the individual care of souls (*cf.* 1 Thes. 2:11–12). Their responsibilities were not finished with the conversion of men and women, so they made it their aim to present *everyone perfect in Christ* on the final day when the quality of their ministry would be tested. Their concerns were for well-established and settled congregations whose members were strong in faith. Paul's evangelistic and pastoral goals provide models for those engaged in a truly apostolic ministry today. **29** *To this end* Paul expends all his energies in his ministry for the gospel. *Labour* denotes intense effort, while *struggling*, possibly a stronger word, was sometimes used of fights and athletic contests. Paul gladly acknowledges that the strength for this effort comes from above. God, who had shown his mighty power by raising Christ from the dead, is powerfully at work in him as he toils energetically.

2:1 *I want you to know.* Having spoken in general terms of his apostolic service (1:24–29), Paul addresses the Colossians directly. He aims to strengthen bonds with them and informs them that his *struggle* for the gospel had special reference to them and the other Christians in the area too, even though he had not met most of them previously. (The churches at Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis had been founded by his colleague, Epaphras; 1:7; *cf.* 4:12.)

2–3 The purpose of his apostolic activity was that their lives might be strengthened. *United in love* suggests that as love binds them all together so they would attain to full understanding and knowledge. But the verb could mean 'instructed' as in the LXX. Since the context emphasizes knowledge and wisdom, and Paul was less concerned about the need for the Colossians' unity than their instruction in the faith over against false teaching, 'taught' or 'instructed' is better. *Love*, in all its breadth, then refers to the foundation of the Christian life. *The full riches of complete understanding:* the same word for 'riches' is used in 1:27 for spiritual wealth, but here the wealth consists of an informed conviction which results from insight, *i.e.* the ability to distinguish the true from the false. Thus they will come to a deeper personal knowledge of Christ. Probably with a side-glance at the false teaching Paul encourages the readers to look to Christ as the only 'place' where these *treasures of wisdom* are available. *Hidden* does not mean 'concealed' but 'deposited' or 'stored up' (*cf.* 1:26). To search for other sources of knowledge apart from Christ is useless.

4 Now for the first time the danger facing the church is expressly mentioned. *No-one* is used generally meaning 'anyone', rather than indicating a particular person who was the source of the false teaching, while the danger might come through *arguments* that seem to be true but are really false. **5** Paul is physically absent from the community; if he were present he would deal with this threatening situation in person. However, the Spirit of God has united both him and the Colossians to Christ (*cf.* 1 Cor. 5:3–5). Because both live with Christ, Paul is *present . . . in spirit* with them. He encourages them with the good reports he has heard: the well-ordered Christian behaviour of the community, together with the firmness of their dynamic *faith* which was directed to Christ alone, were grounds for the apostle's *delight.* These words of praise indicate that the congregation was basically sound and that the false teaching had not made significant progress.

2:6–15 The remedy for error: Christ in all his fullness

6–7 These verses occupy a central place in the letter, serving as a kind of hinge. They summarize what has already been written and provide the basis for the attack on the false teaching (8–23). *Christ Jesus* whom the Colossians had *received as Lord* when they were converted is Lord of creation and redemption (1:15–20), and at the centre of God's mystery (1:27). *Received* is a technical term meaning to 'receive a tradition' and here indicates that they welcomed both the person and the authoritative teaching about him. The Christian life demands that they continue as they have begun, so the readers are urged to *continue to live* (lit. 'walk'; *cf.* 1:10; Gal. 5:16) *in him.* Doctrine and behaviour, theology and ethics, go together. **7** To encourage them in their Christian growth they are reminded that God has firmly *rooted* them in Christ, and that he is continuing to build them up in him (*cf.* 1 Cor. 3:6–11) and strengthening them in *the faith* they *were taught* (note the passive verbs). God is even now mightily at work and so, as they live under Christ's lordship, they are to be *overflowing with thankfulness.* Christ Jesus is more than sufficient to meet the dangers from

the false doctrine. Let them see that their way of life and thought conform continually to his teaching.

8–15 Paul issues the first of several warnings (8) and then sets out a positive explanation of God's work in Christ and the Colossians' union with him in his death, burial and resurrection (9–15). **8** The Colossians are to be on their guard so that they are not carried away from the truth into the slavery of error. *Takes you captive* means 'kidnap', and the method these false teachers would use is their brand of philosophy (see the Introduction) which was seductive and misleading. As *tradition* it had the appearance of dignity, authority and revelation, but Paul rejects any suggestion of divine origin: it is simply human. The Greek word *stoicheia* (*basic principles*) may refer to the 'principalities and powers', those demonic, personal forces which oppress men and women. Worst of all, this teaching stood opposed to Christ. Today legalism, justification by works or any teaching that devalues Christ's saving work on the cross, can be used by the powers of darkness to hold men and women in spiritual slavery.

9–10 Two reasons are given as to why this *philosophy* is opposed to Christ. First, he is the one in whom the whole *fulness* of the Godhead dwells bodily, and the false teaching did not recognize this. *Fulness* was probably a slogan of the false teachers to describe the eternal God who could only be reached by mediators. In later gnostic thought (based on 'inside knowledge') Christ was seen as the last in the line of mediators. But Paul states that all the *fulness* of the divine being or Godhead dwells directly in Christ and that this indwelling is permanent. The expression *in bodily form* (which could mean 'actually' or 'in concrete reality', as opposed to mere appearance) is best understood as 'taking on a bodily form' and referring to the incarnation. Fulness is to be found only in Christ, not by cringing before the 'elements of the universe' or by observing their regulations. **10** Secondly, this false teaching is opposed to Christ because the readers have *already* been filled in him, *i.e.* in their union with Christ they have received fulness of salvation. So they do not need to stoop down before the spiritual powers of the universe or to observe their rules to attain this fulness, as the false teaching demanded. The one in whom these believers are complete is *the Head*, *i.e.* the ruler *over every power and authority* (*cf.* 1:18).

11 The theme of union in Christ continues as Paul describes how the readers are linked with the gospel events, *i.e.* Christ's death, burial and resurrection (11–13). The reasons for the introduction of *circumcision* here are not clear: it does not seem to have been demanded by the false teachers (as in the Galatian churches), for if it was we would have expected it to be criticized in vs 16–23. Perhaps the Colossians were confused about the issue. *The circumcision done by Christ* is a figurative way of referring to his crucifixion, while 'the putting off of the body of flesh' is best understood as describing his violent death (though some take it as a reference to putting off the Christian's old nature). The Colossians *were also circumcised in him*, that is, they died with Christ in his death. In contrast to Jewish circumcision, theirs was *not . . . done by the hands of men*; it was a divine work in which God himself made the change from the old life to the new.

12 As the burial of Christ (1 Cor. 15:4) set the seal upon his death, so the Colossians' burial with him in baptism shows that they were truly involved in his death and laid in his grave. A real death has taken place; so the old life should be a thing of the past (Rom. 6:4). Christ's resurrection has *already* occurred; the Colossians too have been raised with him as *a past event*. The believer's share in the risen life of Christ finds clear expression in Colossians and Ephesians (*cf.* 3:1; Eph. 2:6), while *the power of God* is that same power which brought Christ back from the dead and which now energizes all the members of Christ's body.

13–14 The standpoint now changes: no longer are the Colossians viewed as having been joined with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. Rather, Paul contrasts their pagan past with the present. *Dead* points to the state of separation from God as a present condition of those outside of Christ. This dreadful condition had been caused by their *sins and the uncircumcision of their sinful nature*. *Sins* are acts of rebellion against God, while *sinful nature* speaks of a permanent state of disobedience; the Colossians had been both heathen and godless. But now because of the death of Christ God has made them alive in him. He has graciously forgiven all 'our' trespasses (those of Jews and Gentiles alike) and therefore the cause of spiritual death has been done away. God has not only removed the debt; he has also destroyed the document on which the debt was recorded. (*Cheirographon, the written code*, means an 'IOU', a note that refers to a debt written in one's own hand as proof of obligation.) The Jews had agreed to obey the law, and in their case the penalty for breaking the contract meant death (Dt. 27:14–26; 30:15–20). Paul also assumes that Gentiles were committed, through their consciences, to a similar obligation, to the moral law insofar as they understood it (*cf.* Rom. 2:14–15). The obligation had not been paid by either group so it *stood opposed to us*, because of its accompanying regulations. The debt was

impossible to pay, but God dealt with it; he had blotted it out and cancelled the bond by nailing it to the cross. This is a vivid way of saying that because Christ was nailed to the cross, our debt has been completely forgiven.

15 The word of the cross was a message of hope for those who lived in fear of evil, supernatural powers. These principalities, who had possessed that *written code*, had kept us in their grip. Using the picture of a conqueror's triumphal procession in which captives of war were displayed to magnify the victor's glory, Paul states that God defeated and disarmed the evil *powers* of their authority. In making *a public spectacle* of them he ('God' rather than 'Christ') exposed to the universe their utter helplessness, leading them 'in him' (*i.e.* 'Christ', rather than 'in it', *the cross*; see the NIV mg.) in his triumphal procession so that all the world might see the greatness of his victory.

2:16–23 Freedom from legalism

In a paragraph that alludes to the teaching and catchwords of the philosophy, Paul sets out 'a charter of Christian freedom'. Bad theology leads to bad practice! The mistaken ideas about 'fulness' and the work of Christ (which the apostle corrects in vs 8–15) have corresponding errors on the practical side. Paul's criticisms of these wrong practices and the false teachers themselves are devastating.

16–17 In the false teaching it was believed that the Colossians would progress as Christians to 'fulness' by keeping certain Jewish food taboos and rigidly observing their special days. These severe regulations of a self-denying kind are, however, *a shadow of the things that were to come.* Christ and his new order are the perfect reality to which these earlier commandments looked. The *reality* has already come and the things of the shadow have no binding force; they are no longer a norm for judgment. Any demand today to abstain from certain foods or to keep religious festivals as a requirement for growing as a Christian brings down upon it the same severe criticism. 18 Against the false teachers who boasted in their special spiritual experiences, Paul's criticisms are sharp. The rejection of the false teachers' claims by the apostle are difficult to understand because of our partial knowledge of the practices. *Do not let anyone . . . disquality* ['condemn'] *you* (*cf.* v 16): Paul quotes slogans of the false teaching which were the basis of the teachers' position and proud manner. *Humility* here means 'self-denial' and describes fasting and other bodily disciplines which were self-denying practices in Jewish, mystical piety that were supposed to open the way for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries. *The worship of angels* refers not to worship directed to angels but 'the worship [of God] which angels perform'. *Goes into great detail about what he has seen* (lit. 'things which he beholds upon entering') is the third slogan from the 'philosophy'. The false teachers apparently claimed to have joined in this angelic worship of God as they entered into the heavenly realm and prepared to receive visions of divine mysteries. They were therefore asserting their spiritual superiority on the grounds of these heightened experiences. *His unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.* Paul's criticism is sharp: this attitude and outlook are dominated by the flesh. The teachers' boast was that they were directed by the mind; Paul's answer is 'Yes, but it is a mind of flesh!' To the suggestion that they were acquainted with divine 'fulness', the response is that all they are full of is their own pride! 19 The most devastating criticism is that by using their own private religious experiences as the basis of their authority they were in fact rejecting Christ as their *Head.* He is the source of life and nourishment by which his body lives and the source of unity through which it becomes an organic whole.

20–21 If the Colossians were to fall victims to the false teaching and voluntarily place themselves under rules and regulations, such as *Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!* which were imposed by the principalities and powers, then this would be to go back into slavery again, a bondage to the very powers of the universe from which they had been freed when they died with Christ in his death. Not all Christians are free from superstition, which can exert more influence than their faith. 22 The matters covered by the taboos were perishable objects of the material world (like food and drink) which passed away when consumed. Further, these taboos, which had a Jewish flavour to them, were merely human inventions (lit. 'according to the regulations and doctrines of men'; *cf.* Is. 29:13; Mk. 7:7) that frustrated the pure teaching of God with its liberating message. 23 *Such regulations*, like those mentioned in v 21, carry a reputation for *wisdom* in the spheres of voluntary *worship, humility* and severe *treatment of the body.* But they lack the reality and this *wisdom* is a facade for true wisdom which is found in Christ alone (2:3; *cf.* 1:15–20). The aims of these *regulations*, while appearing to be good and involving considerable self-discipline, were without any value whatsoever. The taboos left untouched the problems of sensual indulgence.

3:1–4 Seek the things above

This short paragraph occupies an important pivotal position in the letter (*cf.* 2:6–7). Containing both statements and encouragement, it concludes the section where Paul attacks the

'philosophy' of the false teachers and provides the true alternative to the false teaching. The passage draws together themes previously mentioned (2:11–13, 20) and provides the theological basis for the words of encouragement that follow.

1–2 As the positive counterpart to 2:20, this verse affirms that the Colossians have already been raised with Christ. They now share in his resurrection life, so their lives are to be different. Their interests are to be focused on Christ; their minds, aims, ambitions, in fact their whole outlook, are to be centred on that heavenly realm where he rules and where their lives truly belong. A continuous, ongoing effort is required (lit. 'keep on setting your minds/hearts') for such a focus does not come automatically. The godly man or woman will regularly assess whether their ambitions and life-style are consistent with the ultimate goal to which God has called them, *i.e.* heaven itself where he rules. This realm above is to be sought diligently (and in contrast to any false seeking of heavenly experiences by the promoters of the Colossian 'philosophy') for this is where Christ is, seated as king in the place of honour. (On Christ's ascension to *the right hand of God*, see Acts 2:33–35; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20.)

3 The grounds for Paul's appeal to *set* their *minds on things above* (2) are twofold. First, they *died* to that old order with its spiritual powers (2:20), its self-denying and enslaving regulations, visionary experiences and useless self-centred worship; and secondly, their new *life is . . . hidden with Christ in God. With Christ* because they have been joined with him in his death and resurrection, and *in God* for Christ himself has his being 'in God' and those who belong to Christ have their being there too. Centred in God means that their hidden life is secure, unable to be touched by anyone. 4 Their new life *in Christ* is not visible to others and, in some measure, is hidden from themselves. It will be fully evident only when Christ, who is that life, appears at his second coming. Indeed, the day of the revelation of the Son of God will be the day of the revelation of the sons and daughters of God. That disclosure will take place *in glory* for it will involve the sharing of Christ's likeness and the receiving of the glorious resurrection body.

3:5–11 Put away the sins of the past

In urging them to be heavenly minded (1–2) Paul does not suggest that Christians are to be living in the clouds! Rather, setting their minds on the things above will result in a concrete obedience to the following: *put to death, therefore* (5), *rid yourselves* (8), *do not lie* (9) and *clothe yourselves* (12). In fact, the whole section from 3:5 to 4:6, a piece of early Christian instruction, flows out of 3:1–4. The believer who is truly heavenly minded will be of maximum earthly use! The warfare between flesh and Spirit still continues until the last day and we are urged by the apostle to press on in our Christian lives, as we all long for the final adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

5 *Put to death* recalls their union with Christ in his death (2:20; 3:3; *cf.* 2:11–12): they have died with him, *therefore* they are to deal a death blow to evil habits and thoughts. Two lists, each of five sins (*cf.* also v 8), similar to those found among pagan moralists and in the anti-pagan arguments of the Jews, are followed by five graces in v 12. The five sins which belonged to their pagan past are associated with their *earthy nature* (lit. 'the members which are upon earth'). Paul practically identifies these members with the sins committed by them as he describes first the outward expressions of sin (*sexual immorality*) and then the inward cravings of the heart ('ruthless *greed*'). The danger of *greed* is especially emphasized as a 'gross sin' for it is equated with *idolatry*. Such a person, instead of focusing his or her whole life on the things above, where Christ rules as King, is seeking the things below, and therefore worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). Paul knew the special deadliness of this sin (Rom. 7:7–8; *cf.* Mt. 6:24). Perhaps it is so dangerous because it may assume so many respectable forms. After all, are not those things we do not have but earnestly desire simply 'necessities'? We deceive ourselves into making idols of our own demands.

6 Here, as often elsewhere, the list of pagan sins is set within the context of God's judgment. *The wrath of God* (*cf.* Rom. 1:18–32) describes his holy anger against sin and the judgment that results. It has nothing to do with spiteful reaction or outburst of passion. Nor is it an unchangeable process of cause and effect. Rather, it is the outworking of God's holiness against all unrighteousness. *Is coming* indicates that God punishes sin in the present as well as on the final day.

7–8 Using a 'once–now' contrast, the readers are shown how their present behaviour is to be different from their pagan past. Formerly their lives were characterized by the very vices on account of which God's wrath is coming. (On the term *walk* to describe the Christian life, see on 1:10.) 8 They are to get *rid* of (lit. 'put off') their old, repulsive habits, including evil speech, like a set of worn-out clothes: *anger* and *rage* destroy harmony in human relationships. *Malice* is a general term describing an evil force that wrecks fellowship. *Slander* here means the insulting of human character but elsewhere can

mean blasphemy against God (Rom. 2:24; 1 Tim. 6:1). *Filthy language*, as the last in the series, is emphasized: it ought to be stopped before it comes out of their mouths.

9 Two reasons are given for this abandonment of evil ways. First, they *have taken off* their *old self with its practices. Your old self* speaks of the whole personality of an individual when ruled by sin (*cf.* Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22); at the same time it points to that person's belonging to the old, sinful humanity in Adam. The *practices* include the two lists of vices in vs 5 and 8. Since these have been *taken off* in Christ's death, the Colossians are to have nothing to do with false speaking and the other repulsive habits mentioned.

10 The second reason is that *the new self* has been put on in place of the old. *The new self* means the new nature which each of the Colossians had put on when they were joined to Christ in his resurrection. The phrase means literally 'the new man' and signifies also a corporate figure referring to the new humanity in Christ (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). The image of the Creator serves as the model or pattern for the renewal of the new person – a renewal that has in view the readers' progressive increase in true knowledge, which includes their ability to recognize God's will and command (*cf.* 1:9). *The image of its Creator* (*cf.* Gn. 1:27), in the light of 1:15 where Christ is praised as 'the image of God', means that God's re-creation of humanity is 'in the pattern of Christ, who is God's Likeness absolutely' (C. F. D. Moule). There is a similar idea in Rom. 8:29 (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:49) where the Christian's change is '*into* the image of Christ'. **11** Within this new humanity there is no inferiority of one class to another. Men and women of completely different origins are gathered together in unity in Christ, sharing a common allegiance to their Lord. Christ is all that matters; he lives in all members of his body, regardless of race, class or background, giving them life and power.

3:12–17 Put on the graces of Christ

With the imperative *clothe yourselves* (12) the positive appeal begins. The introductory *Therefore* shows that this section, which stands in contrast to vs 5–11, also follows on from 3:1–4. A fivefold list of virtues (12) contrasts with the two fivefold lists of vices (5, 8) of the preceding paragraph. Having spoken of the new nature in v 10, Paul indicates what he means by this.

12 As *God's chosen people* who have already put on the 'new person', the Colossians must *clothe* themselves with the graces which show them to be different. *God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved* are special titles which were used of Israel as God's own possession in the OT (*e.g.* Is. 43:20; 65:9) and of Christ in the NT ('Chosen One', Lk. 23:35; 'Holy One', Mk. 1:24; Lk. 4:34; 'My Son, whom I love', Mt. 3:17). Their use here underlines the point of the Christian's similarity to Christ. It is Jesus who is the chosen one. What a remarkable privilege it is, then, that we are addressed in the same way as Christ! This is a powerful motive to behave in a Christlike way.

The five graces, with which believers are to be clothed, are elsewhere seen as characteristics of God or Christ (*e.g.* Ps. 25:6; Je. 33:11; Mt. 9:36; 2 Cor. 1:3) and show how they, as God's elect, should behave in their dealings with others, particularly fellow-Christians. Three of these, *kindness, gentleness* and *patience*, are listed as the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22.

13 As a result of their being clothed with *patience* they are to show continual forbearance toward *each other.* When legitimate complaints within the community arise, the readers are urged to *forgive . . . one another.* Paul employs a special verb for *forgive* ('cancelled the debts' in the parable of the two debtors, Lk. 7:42) which is used elsewhere of God's gracious giving or forgiving (Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 2:12; Eph. 4:32). The present tense makes it clear that this forgiveness is to be unceasing, even unwearying (note Jesus' teaching, Mt. 18:22). The ground and motive for this response are of the highest order: *as the Lord forgave you.* Christ's mighty work of reconciliation (1:22) is the basis on which that forgiveness of sins is provided, while the full impact of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is set forth as a pattern of the life-style to which the believer 'conforms'.

14 If each of the graces previously mentioned is seen to be characteristic of God or Christ, then this is especially so of *love* (*cf.* 1 Cor. 13:4 for the notion that love clearly reflects the character of Christ). *Over all these virtues* may convey the idea of 'on top of all the other "articles of clothing"' (C. F. D. Moule). In Gal. 5:6 'love' is the motive power of faith and in 1 Cor. 13:13 it is the supreme Christian grace. *Which binds them all together in perfect unity* (lit. 'Which is the bond of perfection') may suggest that *love* is the link which unites and binds together all the previously mentioned graces of v 12. The words 'of perfection' probably, however, denote purpose: love is the bond that leads to perfection. It binds together the members of the congregation (rather than the graces of v 12) into unity in the body of Christ so producing perfection. This interpretation accords well with Paul's concerns for the readers' corporate life.

15 This verse has been a favourite with Christians for it is claimed that Christ's peace will act as a kind of umpire within our hearts,

giving us some private and inward peace of the soul when we need guidance or help in making a decision. But *the peace of Christ* does not refer to a private and inward peace of the soul. Instead, it is the peace he embodies and brings (*cf.* Jn. 14:27) and is equivalent to salvation. Further, it is not a question of Christ's peace 'acting as an umpire'. Rather the verb means to *rule*; Christ himself, who is the Lord of peace (*cf.* Eph. 2:14; 2 Thes. 3:16), is to be present and ruling in their midst. He is to control every area of their lives as they relate to one another. Since the Colossians are said to have been *called* into this *peace* (through the gospel), then it must also describe the realm or sphere in which they, as members of Christ's body, now live.

16 In a letter which emphasizes the person and work of Christ, Paul refers to *the word of Christ*, rather than 'the word of God' (1:25) or 'the Lord's own word' (1 Thes. 4:15). *Of Christ* could mean that Christ himself is the speaker when his word is proclaimed, but it probably refers to the message that centres on Christ, the word of truth, *i.e.* the gospel (1:5). That *word* is to have its gracious and glorious way in their lives, individually and as a community. The rich indwelling of Christ's word (*cf.* Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 6:16; 2 Tim. 1:5 for the indwelling of God himself, the Holy Spirit and faith) would occur when they came together, listened to this *word* as it was expounded to them and bowed to its authority. They are to teach and warn one another in a thoughtful and tactful way, activities that would take place in Spirit-inspired *psalms, hymns* and *songs* as the Colossians praised God with their whole being. *Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* is a broad expression and includes OT psalms, liturgical hymns as well as spontaneous Christian songs.

17 The paragraph is summed up in a way that covers every aspect of life. Every activity is to be done in obedience to the *Lord Jesus* and is to be accompanied by the *giving* of *thanks to God the Father through him* (note the threefold reference to thanksgiving in vs 15–17). *In word or deed* does not refer to the liturgical practices of 'preaching' and 'the Lord's Supper' in a context of worship, but explains the comprehensive *whatever*. If the rich indwelling of the word of Christ in the readers' lives is to be shown in mutual teaching and warning, as the Colossians thankfully sing to God, then it should also show its powerful presence overall.

3:18 – 4:1 Behaviour in the Christian household

This paragraph deals with relationships within the Christian household. Similar advice is found in Eph. 5:22 – 6:9; 1 Tim. 2:8–15; Tit. 2:1–10; 1 Pet. 2:18 – 3:7. This 'house-table', as it has been called, may have formed part of a larger section of doctrinal and ethical teaching – an early Christian catechism, easily learned by heart and given to new converts. These verses regulate behaviour patterns within the Christian household and follow on from v 17. The paragraph contains many references to *the Lord*, indicating that the whole of life, both thought and conduct, is to be submitted to the Lord Jesus Christ. No area of life stands outside his control; so there is no final distinction between the sacred and the secular. A life ruled from above where Christ is reigning (3:1–4) is a life in marriage, parenthood and everyday work. Three pairs of instructions are addressed successively to wives and husbands (18–19), children and parents, especially fathers (20–21) and finally slaves and masters (3:22 – 4:1) – from the closest relationship to the most distant. In each case wife, child or slave is mentioned first and addressed as a responsible partner who is expected to do 'what is fitting in the Lord'.

18 The *wives*, as free and responsible agents, are asked voluntarily to *submit* themselves to their husbands since this is entirely proper (*fitting* has a Stoic ring to it but the motivation is entirely Christian). *In the Lord* means within the new fellowship of those who own Christ as Lord. Submission points to the wife's calling to honour and affirm her husband's leadership and to help him exercise his role within the family. It is not an absolute surrender of her will, for Christ is her absolute authority, not her husband. Nor is there any suggestion that the wife is naturally or spiritually inferior to her husband. **19** The parallel is the husband's duty to love his wife. He is commanded to *love* her and this is not simply a matter of his having affectionate feelings or being sexually attracted to her. Rather, it involves his unceasing care and loving service for her entire well-being. (*Cf.* Eph. 5:25–33 where Christ's love for the church is to be the model for the husband's love for his wife.) Christlike, sacrificial leadership by the husband will keep the ultimate good of his wife in view at all times. He, like godly leaders in other spheres, will seek to lead by serving. Accordingly, husbands are not to be embittered against their wives, whether in thought, word or deed.

20 Christian children are addressed as responsible members within the congregation (which is noteworthy) and urged to *obey* (which is a stronger word than *submit* in v 18) their *parents in everything*. This will be an expression of their obedience to Christ as the following words show: *for this pleases the Lord.* **21** At the same time, parents, especially *fathers*, are not to irritate or provoke their children lest they

become discouraged or think that it is useless trying to please their parents within the life of the home. There should be firm, loving guidance, not slavery (*cf.* Eph. 6:4).

3:22 – 4:1 The longest set of instructions is to slaves (*cf.* Eph. 6:5–9), perhaps reflecting the social custom of the churches (on slavery in the first century see the letter to Philemon). Paul makes no social comment on this first-century custom but gives special encouragements to Christian slaves. The teaching in this section applies equally to work done today and shows that a worker's motivation and his standards of workmanship are to be the best possible, since they are done for the sake of Christ. **22** Christian slaves are to accept their position as slaves and *obey* (*cf.* v 20 in relation to 'children') their *earthly masters in everything.* Their service is not to be superficial or performed so as to attract attention; instead, they are to serve *with sincerity of heart, i.e.* conscientiously and out of pure motives. **23–25** As they engage in earnest work for their masters so in that very action they are serving their heavenly Lord. They are to keep their final goal in view: a slave might normally expect punishment from an earthly master at the end of the day. This Master is different for he gives as his gracious *reward* an eternal *inheritance* of life in the age to come. At the same time they should realize that with this judge there is *no favouritism*; his judgment on disobedience is as sure as the reward for faithfulness. **4:1** A brief but solmen warning is addressed to *masters.* They are not commanded to free their slaves, but to treat them justly and fairly. The motivation for this is basically the same as the slave's motive for obeying his master: both alike have a greater *Master in heaven.* Both owe obedience to that heavenly Lord. So their relationships with each other are to be understood in the light of this.

If Paul's clear teaching about the privileges of, and demands upon, the Christian household were taken seriously by twentieth-century Christians, then personal relationships within families and households would truly be a foretaste of heaven. In the meantime others, seeing how these Christians love one another, may well be attracted to the one whom they own as Lord.

4:2–6 Final words of encouragement

This short paragraph, with its encouragement to prayer and thanksgiving (2–4) and its directions as to how the Colossians are to behave in their relationships with outsiders (5–6), concludes this section of the letter.

2–4 Paul often urges his readers to pray and intercede regularly (*cf.* Rom. 12:12; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6) and he asks them to pray for him in his costly work of spreading the gospel (Rom. 15:30–32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; 1 Thes. 5:25). He clearly attached great importance to the mutual prayers of himself and his converts. He has already assured his Colossian readers of his constant petitions for them (1:9–14); he now closes by urging them to pray regularly for him. **2** They are to *devote* themselves to prayer. Particularly is the cry *Maranatha* ('Our Lord, come') to be on their lips and in their hearts as they look forward expectantly to Christ's glorious coming (3:4). Thanksgiving, the outward expression of gratitude to God the Father for having acted so graciously and decisively in his Son on their behalf (*cf.* 1:12–14), is to accompany this petition. **3–4** Paul requests them to bring him and his co-workers (*us*) before the throne of grace, praying that *God* would *open a door for* the gospel *message* (*cf.* 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12) and therefore for the messenger, which may well involve his release from prison. As apostle to the Gentiles Paul has the great privilege of making known the previously hidden divine purpose, the 'open secret' (1:26–27; 2:2–3). He now asks the Colossians to pray to the living God to enable him to set forth that divine *mystery* in a plain and clear manner.

5–6 Turning to general principles of Christian conduct, Paul urges his readers to behave wisely towards non-Christians. Here wisdom, which has to do with a knowledge of God's will (1:9) and walking worthily of the Lord (1:10), is essentially practical and realistic. So, they are to be tactful yet bold in their Christian witness as they *make the most of every opportunity. Make the most* (lit. 'buy up') suggests an intensive activity, a buying which exhausts the possibilities available because they recognize that their time is limited. **6** As those who are to behave wisely *towards outsiders*, they are to let their words be both gracious and wise just as Paul desires for his own speech. They are receiving God's *grace*: let that *grace* be evident in the words they speak. *Seasoned with salt* meant 'witty' in pagan usage but here suggests language that is not dull or flat but is interesting and well chosen (the rabbis sometimes used 'salt' to mean 'wisdom'). Christians need to respond with the right word to those who ask questions, perhaps in connection with their beliefs and behaviour. The response should be appropriate (*cf.* 1 Pet. 3:15): 'every one is to be treated as an end in himself and not subjected to a stock harangue' (G. B. Caird).

4:7–18 Personal greetings and instructions

Paul ends his letter in the usual way with personal greetings and instructions. The paragraph includes a reference to the messengers who will

carry his letter to Colosse (7–9) and a series of greetings from associates who are acquainted with the Colossian church (10–14), together with his own greeting, brief instructions and final salutation (15–18).

7 *Tychicus* will inform the congregation of the apostle's personal situation (note the similar wording in Eph. 6:21–22). He is a specially *dear brother* and valued colleague to Paul who had rendered 'reliable' service to him, the Colossians or to Christ (*cf.* 1:7 of Epaphras). *In the Lord* could mean 'in the Lord's work', or else be a reference to the fact that he performs his task as one 'in the Lord', *i.e.* as a Christian. 8 Paul is *sending* Tychicus *for the express purpose* of giving the Colossians all the apostle's news and of impressing his teaching on the congregation in order to strengthen them (see on 2:2).

9 *Onesimus*, a native of Colosse, is the same person mentioned in the letter to Philemon. He too is given a warm commendation by Paul: *our faithful and dear brother.* Along with Tychicus, he will inform Paul's friends of all that has happened. (For a description of Onesimus's circumstances see the commentary on Philemon.)

10–11 Three Jewish Christians send their greetings. *Aristarchus*, a native of Thessalonica and Paul's travelling companion (Acts 19:29), is his *fellow-prisoner* which probably means he was actually in prison with Paul rather than that he was a 'prisoner of Christ' in a figurative sense. *Mark, the cousin of Barnabas* whom Paul had refused to take on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–41) after his defection on the first journey (13:13), is clearly on friendly terms with Paul again (*cf.* 2 Tim. 4:11). The mention of *Barnabas* suggests he was well known at Colosse. We have no knowledge as to whether the *instructions* about Mark came from Paul or from someone else (such as Peter or Barnabas) nor whether Paul is confirming them. *Jesus Justus* is otherwise unknown to us. These first three are the only Jewish Christians who have remained faithful *fellow-workers* of Paul *for the kingdom of God.* Often in Paul's letters the phrase *kingdom of God* has a future reference (*e.g.* 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 15:50), but Rom. 14:17 shows that it has a present side to it (*cf.* Col. 1:13) and this is its significance here.

12–14 Three others, who are Gentiles (*cf.* v 11), send their greetings. *Epaphras* is specially mentioned: Paul stresses the close relationship between his own ministry and that of Epaphras. As a native of Colosse he had been the evangelist in his home town (as well as at Laodicea and Hierapolis) and had been engaged in the same struggle for the gospel as Paul (2:1; *cf.* Phil. 1:30). This found particular expression in his urgent prayers for the Colossians that they might (lit.) 'stand forth perfect ["perfect" touches on a key issue at Colosse] and be filled with everything that is God's will'. This maturity, which is a perfection expected on the last day, is further defined by 'filled with everything that is God's will'. Epaphras wants them to make progress here and now and come to fullness in Christ on the final day. Only here do we learn that *Luke* was a *doctor.* It is mainly on the basis of this verse, which separates him from the Jewish Christians mentioned in v 11, that Luke is regarded as a Gentile Christian. In 2 Tim. 4:10 *Demas* is said to have left Paul for 'this world'.

15–18 In this last section greetings are sent to various people. The Colossians are asked to convey Paul's greetings to *the brothers at Laodicea, i.e.* the church there (*cf.* v 16). Perhaps Paul wished to cement relations between the two congregations. *Nympha* is probably a woman, so the NIV's *the church in her house* would be correct. **16** This verse provides important evidence for the public reading of Paul's letters in church and the exchange of letters between churches. If the so-called 'heresy' was threatening the whole area it would have been helpful for the Laodiceans to know Paul's response sent to Colosse. *The letter from Laodicea* is now lost but was presumably written by Paul to that church. **17** *Archippus* was a member of Philemon's household, perhaps Philemon and Apphia's son, who devoted himself to the service of the gospel (see on Phm. 2). What *the work* he is to *complete* was is unclear though some have claimed it was the ministry of preaching.

18 Having finished dictating, Paul takes up his pen and adds a personal greeting in his own handwriting. *Remember my chains* is an appeal for continued prayer that is touching in its brevity and simplicity. He then concludes with his usual greeting, *Grace be with you.*

Peter T. O'Brien

1 THESSALONIANS

Introduction

Thessalonica was one of the towns in Macedonia (the northern part of modern Greece) visited by Paul and his companions, Silas and Timothy, during his second missionary campaign (Acts 16 – 18). The town was the capital of the Roman province, a commercial centre situated on the major highway, the Via Egnatia, with a mixed population including Jews. After being forced to leave Philippi, Paul spent a brief time here, and he gained a number of converts from Jewish and Greek attenders at the synagogue and established a church. Opposition from Jews who did not respond to the message forced the missionaries to leave sooner than they would have wished (Acts 17:1–9). Paul went southwards into Achaia and stayed briefly in Athens and then for a longer period in Corinth. From Athens he sent Timothy back to visit the church (1 Thes. 3:1–6), and it was probably from Corinth that he wrote to them. 1 Thessalonians, therefore, was written within a matter of a few months or so from the time when the readers had first heard the gospel, and it should be read as a follow-up letter to new converts.

Nothing is known about the church during this brief period between its foundation and the composition of the letter apart from the allusions which it contains. The impression given is of a church which was free from groups preaching a different version of the gospel (contrast Galatia) and which was making good progress in developing in faith and love. Paul was concerned about whether the church could stand up to attacks from outside, but this was more because of its recent foundation than because of any basic weaknesses.

The major area in which Paul felt the need to give instruction was regarding the future advent (or parousia) of the Lord Jesus. It was not that there was any false teaching; rather the Thessalonian Christians had failed to appreciate properly the significance of Paul's teaching about the parousia and about the resurrection of the dead.

The problems and needs which lie behind the letter are thus those of a church in its infancy, facing opposition from outside and lacking in the detailed teaching that Paul would have given if he had been able to stay longer with them. The letter suggests that the future coming of the Lord had played a fairly prominent part in Paul's preaching, and he certainly refers to it with remarkable frequency in the letter (1:9–10; 2:19; 3:13; 4:13 – 5:11; 5:23). Otherwise, the letter reflects the typical characteristics of Paul's thought, including the distinctive use of the phrase 'in Christ' (and similar phrases) to describe the nature of the Christian life. Some of Paul's most characteristic ideas, notably the doctrine of justification by faith, are absent, but this may be simply because nothing in the situation required the use of teaching which is particularly associated with polemic against a Jewish emphasis on the works of the law.

The letter is universally accepted as genuine. It has been argued that it has a peculiar shape, and attempts have been made to explain it as a combination of two or more documents or as a document which has been subjected to interpolations, but these theories are undoubtedly more ingenious than convincing. The letter makes admirable sense in its present form.

1 Thessalonians has the usual pattern of Pauline letters in that it begins with a greeting (1:1) followed by a report of how Paul remembers the church in his prayers. He thanks God for the way in which the continuing Christian life and witness of the church testify to the reality of the positive response of its members to his initial preaching of the gospel (1:2–10). This report has the effect of confirming that the church is in good health and thus of providing the readers with encouragement to carry on in the way they are doing. Then Paul comments on the character of his missionary work in the town, claiming that he and his companions acted uprightly and lovingly in every way (2:1–12). This may suggest that the opponents of the church were engaged in slandering the missionaries. Despite this opposition, the church had given a warm response to the gospel (2:13–16). The continuation of hostility to the church since Paul's departure had worried him so much that he had wished to go back to see how things were; instead he had sent Timothy as his representative, and the latter had now returned full of enthusiasm for the healthy state of the church (2:17 – 3:13). Thus the first part of the letter is concerned with the good progress of the church despite opposition and helps to strengthen the ties between the absent writer and his readers.

In the remainder of the letter Paul gives the

church the kind of teaching and practical advice which he would have liked to share with them in person. First, he encourages the readers to live holy lives – with special reference to the avoidance of sexual immorality – and to continue to grow in love (4:1–12). Secondly, he comforts those who were fearful about the fate of those of their number who had died by telling them that when the Lord returns, the resurrection of the dead will take place, so that those who 'fell asleep' in Christ will come with him and be reunited with those who are still alive. Believers need not worry about when this will take place; if they are truly 'awake' as Christians, they will not be taken by surprise like the unbelieving world (4:13 – 5:11). Finally, Paul encourages the communal life of the church by commending brotherly love and the use of spiritual gifts (5:12–24), and he closes the letter with personal greetings (5:25–28).

Further reading

J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians*, BST (IVP, 1991).
L. Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1977).
————, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1977).
F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (Word, 1982).
I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, NCB (Eerdmans, 1983).

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Commentary

1:1 Opening greeting

Paul names himself and the two friends who had shared with him in founding the church at Thessalonica and who were now with him. *Silas*, or 'Silvanus' (RSV, the longer form of the same name), was a Jewish member of the Jerusalem church and a Roman citizen (see Acts 15:22–31). *Timothy* had joined Paul and Silas when they passed through Lystra in Asia Minor early in their missionary work (Acts 16:1–5). Despite the use of the 'we' form throughout most of the letter (contrast 2:18; 3:5; 5:27), it is generally thought that Paul himself was the real author writing on behalf of the group of missionaries.

The church was a small group of believers who met in a home or perhaps in a handful of homes. Paul frequently says that Christians are 'in Christ' or 'in the Lord' or do certain things 'in him'. This expression means that they are in a close relationship with Jesus and that their conduct is determined by him as their crucified and risen Lord. Here Paul adds the name of *God the Father* (*cf.* 2 Thes. 1:1), indicating that Christians are also closely related to him and stand under his authority. The spontaneous way in which the Father and Jesus are named together shows how Paul saw Jesus as the Son who shared with the Father as the source of spiritual blessings.

Grace and peace come from the Father and Jesus (2 Thes. 1:2). (See also the article on Reading the letters.)

1:2–10 Opening thanksgiving

Paul begins most of his letters by telling how he expresses thanks to God for what he is doing in the lives of the readers. This prayer-report makes clear his own love and concern for his friends and also serves to encourage them in their Christian lives. Its theme is the steadfastness and energy with which the readers have maintained their original faith and so become a

witness to other people. The three foundational Christian qualities of *faith, love* and *hope* (*cf.* 5:8; 1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4–5) had given rise to hard effort and *endurance* despite an adverse situation.

4–5 This evidence confirmed the fact that God had *chosen* the readers. This phrase indicates not only that God had called them through the preaching of the gospel (2:12) but also that they had responded to him with faith (2:13). The human words expressing the gospel would have been useless had they not been accompanied by the power of the Spirit and by a consequent sense of conviction and assurance on the part of the preachers. These factors had convinced the hearers of the truth of the gospel and enabled them to accept it and live it out, as their subsequent behaviour demonstrated.

6–8 The missionaries, like Jesus himself, had been strongly attacked, but they had stood up to the opposition without giving in. So too the readers had welcomed the message, despite adversity, with the sort of *joy* that could be due only to the work of *the Holy Spirit* in their lives (*cf.* Rom. 5:5; 14:17; Gal. 5:22). This made them an example to other Christians in the two Roman provinces of *Macedonia and Achaia* that covered roughly the area of modern Greece. News of their conversion had spread right through this area, partly through evangelistic work by the readers themselves and partly by other people talking about them. *Everywhere* is a broad term for all the places where Christians were to be found. Paul obviously would tell in one place what was happening to believers in another (part of the confirmation of the truth of the good news (3:6) was to tell how God was changing the lives of people in many different places), but in this case he did not need to do so.

9–11 The response of the Thessalonians to the gospel is summed up in three phrases that doubtless reflect the language of the early preaching. First, they had abandoned *idols*. The appeal to do so was a necessary part of the message to Gentiles, as opposed to Jews (*cf.* Acts 14:15; 17:22–31). Secondly, they had turned to *the living and true God* to serve him. Because some people abandoned idolatry merely out of a belief that either there were no gods or they were not interested in mankind, the Christian message had to stress the positive alternative. Thirdly, they had pinned their hope on *Jesus* as the one and only deliverer from future judgment. Jesus, however, was no mere man to have such a role. He had been *raised from the dead* by the power of God, and by this act God was declaring him to be his Son (*cf.* Acts 17:31; Rom. 1:3–4). Jewish preaching to Gentiles (which the Christians naturally took over) covered the two previous points; this was the distinguishing feature of the Christian message.

2:1–16 The behaviour of the missionaries in Thessalonica

The main part of the letter begins by taking up the topic mentioned in 1:5–6. Missionaries, and indeed all Christian witnesses, are peculiarly vulnerable to criticism, and therefore must make all the more effort to live, and to be seen to live, in a way that is not open to criticism. Paul's conduct as a missionary in Thessalonica seems to have been criticized in his absence, apparently by people outside the congregation, and he now defends himself from various possible accusations.

So many wandering religious and philosophical teachers travelled around the Roman world making what they could out of their hearers, that it was necessary for the missionaries to stress that their motives and methods were quite different from those of the less scrupulous of their rivals. The criticisms and the response to them made here can be paralleled in the writings of some of the ancient philosophers who felt that they too were being unjustly accused. Basically the missionaries were charged with exploiting their followers and living at their expense. All their appeals to the new converts were regarded as ways of deceiving them into paying the missionaries high respect – and high fees or presents.

1–2 Paul appeals to the readers' own recollections of the missionaries' visit ('you know' or 'you remember' are key phrases: 1–2, 5, 9, 11). They could see for themselves that the missionary work had not been *a failure* (literally 'empty'), in the sense either that it had been hollow and lacking in content or that it had led to no profound results. Rather, it had been a courageous act in the face of opposition at Philippi (Acts 16:19–40) and in Thessalonica itself (*cf.* 1:6; 2:14–16; 3:3–4).

3–6 A further demonstration of the true nature of the evangelism lay in the fact that it was not based on *error* regarding the gospel. Nor did it arise from *impure motives*, such as ambition or greed (rather than, but not excluding, sexual immorality), or attempt to *trick* the hearers into acceptance of the message (*cf.* the dubious missionaries in 2 Cor. 11:13). Rather, the missionaries had been, as it were, tested by God before being approved for enrolment in his workforce, and their motives were continually under his scrutiny. They were, therefore, very conscious of the need to keep to God's standards and so they rejected dubious means of persuasion (*e.g.* altering the gospel to make it more acceptable).

Their aim was to please God and not their audience, not because they were indifferent to their audience and its needs, but rather because

their criterion was not whether they succeeded on a human level. Therefore, they did not make use of *flattery* or put forward false motives to *cover up* a real motivation which was *greed* to get money from their converts. Another possible charge was that they were looking for *praise* from people inside and outside the church. It was true that the *apostles* or missionaries might have claimed certain privileges as a matter of right, such as the right to be obeyed by their converts and to be maintained, as regards their material needs, by the churches. Here probably the former of these entitlements is principally in mind. (For Paul's repudiation of the latter see 2 Thes. 3:9; 1 Cor. 9:4–14; 2 Cor. 11:7–12) The missionaries could have at least stood on their authority (although to have done so would have been contrary to the principle enunciated by Jesus, Lk. 22:24–27), but they had not done so.

7 In fact they had been *gentle* (Gk *ēpioi*; the better MSS have *nēpioi*, 'babes', but accidental duplication of the letter *n* from the end of the previous word probably led to the insertion of this less appropriate word). Missionaries or pastors must be like a father in their care for their converts (11), but here the image of the *mother* (Gk 'nurse', but a mother is in fact meant) brings out more strongly the element of tender care required in a parental attitude.

8 This attitude is described in terms of an affection which expresses itself in a desire to give gifts. The greatest gift from a Christian point of view is *the gospel of God*, but from a human point of view it is to share one's inmost being with somebody, as two lovers might wish to do.

9 The desire to show love rather than to burden the converts was to be seen in the hard work done by the missionaries. They had worked not only in the daytime but also at night (no doubt at tent-making or leather-work; Acts 18:3) in order to earn money for their keep while they were preaching. The help from Philippi (Phil. 4:16) was not enough on its own. Paul relates his policy of working with his hands (*cf.* 4:11; 2 Thes. 3:7–10; Acts 18:3; 20:34) here primarily to his desire not to be dependent on his converts or to make money out of them rather than to making opportunities to meet people in the workshop or to showing that he was not ashamed of honest toil (though see 2 Thes. 3:8).

10–12 Paul sums up his argument by appealing to the readers' own experience that the missionaries had lived uprightly and treated them in a fatherly manner. Their main concern had been to encourage a way of life that was fitting for people called by God into his kingdom and to the hope of sharing in his glory.

13 That the missionaries' visit was not a failure (1) was also to be seen in the way that the hearers received the message. Paul's message was frequently denounced as being simply his own, human ideas, and therefore he was grateful when people recognized that he was really teaching a message that came from God himself (*cf.* Gal. 1:11–12). This message had an inherent power to change the lives of those who heard it.

14–16 The proof of this was to be seen in the way in which the converts had shown the same spirit as that of the early Christians in Judea who had suffered violent attacks from their fellow-countrymen, the Jews. In just the same way the Thessalonians had suffered at the hands of their own fellow-countrymen, both Gentiles and Jews (Acts 17:5). Paul was a Jew himself, and therefore he felt a special bond to his own people, longing that they might turn from their blindness and accept Jesus as the Messiah. But he also knew all too well that the rejection of Jesus would lead to God's rejection of those who rejected him, and therefore he speaks here of the wrath of God coming fully and finally upon the Jews for the last and worst of their sins in a long history of rejecting the messengers of God. Note that Paul is writing here about a specific group of Jews, and does not contradict the hope expressed in Rom. 9 – 11 that the Jewish people will turn to God; response to the gospel saves people from the wrath of God.

2:17 – 3:13 Paul's continuing concern for the church

Having left Thessalonica earlier than he had wished, Paul wanted to return as soon as possible, but had been prevented by what he calls satanic opposition (*cf.* 2 Cor. 12:7). One possibility is that in view of the trouble there had been with the city rulers Paul himself was forbidden to return to the town, and nothing had happened to change that position. It seems that some unjustifiable criticism of Paul was abroad, and so he emphasizes the strength of his longing to revisit them and encourage them. He pictures himself as appearing before Christ on the day of judgment, bringing with him this church as the proof that he had been faithful in his calling as a missionary. The church would be like a *crown* symbolizing his effective missionary work, and therefore its continuing existence was vital. Equally, his converts were the source of his joy for their own sake – just as a teacher may take a genuine pleasure in the success of a pupil not merely because he or she has had a share in ensuring that success but above all because of what it means to the pupil.

3:1–2 Every effort to come himself having failed, Paul agreed to the proposal that he stay on himself in Athens (some 500 km or 300 miles from Thessalonica) and send one of his colleagues instead. (*To be left alone* probably

implies that Silas also left him at this point.) So Timothy was sent in Paul's place – as he often was to other churches. Paul emphasizes – again perhaps in self-defence against any detractors – that Timothy was in every way his *brother* or colleague, a man of proven worth. The description of him as *God's fellow-worker, i.e.* a person who is a colleague of God in the work of the gospel (*cf.* 1 Cor. 3:9), caused problems for scribes, and some of them changed the text to 'God's servant' (so NIV mg.). Paul means that God himself is seen as co-operating with Christian workers in *spreading the gospel of Christ*, a phrase which includes both initial evangelism and the nurture of the church. Timothy's visit would have had the effect of strengthening the church so that they would resist temptation and hostile pressure more firmly. (Note how the same effect is ascribed to the Lord himself in v.13.) *Encourage* conveys the senses both of stimulating people to action (the older Bible versions have 'exhorting') and of giving them comfort.

3–4 Knowing that some difficult circumstance lies ahead may help us to face it with greater fortitude. The readers knew that pressure from outside was to be their lot because Paul had already reiterated the point, no doubt by referring to his own experience and that of the churches in Judea (2:14).

5 Having sent Timothy to them, Paul was desperately concerned to know whether they were maintaining their *faith*. It was possible that Satan had tempted them to such an extent that the church had been destroyed, and all the labour that had been spent on it had been in vain. Although no temptation is so great as to be irresistible (1 Cor. 10:13), believers do not always resist it successfully. Belief in the power of God to preserve his people did not save Paul from concern and prayer for them.

6–8 Timothy's *good news* (a word used elsewhere of preaching the gospel) took away all of Paul's fears. He was so overjoyed that he wrote this letter as soon as possible after Timothy's return. The two fundamental Christian characteristics of *faith and love* were alive and well in Thessalonica (and continued to develop: 2 Thes. 1:3). The church was filled with a desire to see Paul. This showed that the readers had not turned aside from the gospel and did indeed belong to God's chosen people (1:4). They were *standing firm* in reliance on *the Lord* and so could face up to all opposition (*cf.* Eph. 6:10). Timothy's report had come when Paul himself was feeling oppressed by his own difficult circumstances and the pressures upon him and was therefore not fully 'alive'. The missionary whose task was to encourage others (2) was himself encouraged and revived by the news of the church.

9 Paul writes of the feelings of *joy* which he expressed *in the presence of our God*, just as when the Israelites celebrated their festivals in the presence of the Lord (Dt. 12:12, 18). Joy can be simply an expression of our own feelings of happiness; for Paul it was an occasion for giving thanks to God, who was its source.

10 Paul still prayed *most earnestly* (a particularly strong Greek expression) that he might be able to revisit the church. He had a very human desire simply to be with them, and he longed to help them to overcome any continuing weaknesses in their faith. Although they had stood firm, they were not perfect, either in Christian knowledge or in behaviour. This letter is Paul's attempt to supply in writing what he could not give them in person. Sending a letter, of course, dealt only with the second of Paul's reasons for wanting to visit the church. At the time of writing, therefore, he was still longing and praying for the possibility of a visit to the church. His prayer was eventually answered (Acts 20:1).

11–12 From telling his readers about his prayers, Paul turns to actually praying. Instead of addressing God directly in the second person, *e.g.* 'O God, clear the way for us to come to Thessalonica', Paul expresses his prayer in the third person, 'May God clear the way for us to come to you' (*cf.* Nu. 6:24–26; Ps. 20:1–5). The prayer links God as Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (*cf.* 1:1, and, in reverse order, 2 Thes. 2:16). The first petition voices Paul's desire to revisit the church, and the second expresses his longing for their growth in *love* and holiness – the theme developed in the instruction that directly follows the prayer (4:1–12). Their love must expand beyond the church to include *everyone else* (*cf.* Gal. 6:10 in reverse order). Paul cites himself as an example (*cf.* 1:6; 2 Thes. 3:7–9; Acts 20:35) – not to give information to the Lord, but because this prayer also functions as a means of instructing the readers as to how they should pray and how they should live.

13 Paul wants the readers to be *blameless and holy* to meet the Lord when he comes in judgment. He is not praying that they will grow and develop so as to be blameless at some future point when the Lord comes. Rather he believes that the Lord can come very soon (not immediately, to be sure, as 2 Thes. 2 indicates), and therefore he prays that God will make their hearts firm in these qualities now and that they will continue in this state right until the Lord's coming. At the judgment which will take place when Christ comes (2:19; *cf.* 1:10), they need not fear the wrath of God (1:10), but it will be nevertheless a time of assessment and reward or loss. The solemnity of the occasion is stressed by the description of Jesus coming *with all his*

holy ones. These are either believers who have died and who come with living believers to meet the Lord (4:16–17) or the angels who accompany the final coming of God (Zc. 14:5) or of the Son of Man (Mk. 8:38) and add to his glory. (2 Thes. 1:7 supports this second interpretation.)

4:1–12 Encouragement to ethical progress

In the first of three sections of instruction Paul deals with ethical behaviour, in particular holiness (4:1–8) and brotherly love (4:9–12).

1–2 The motive for Christian living is to *please God* (*cf.* 2:4) by doing his will. The readers were already doing this, and so Paul's purpose here is simply to encourage them to do what they are already doing all the better. For *In the Lord Jesus* see 1:1 note. *Instructions* has a military flavour; there was a definite lifestyle associated with the gospel, and Christians were commanded to live by it.

3 To do God's *will* involves, among other things, being *sanctified.* This peculiarly Christian word refers to the ongoing process of becoming increasingly free from sin and filled with love. To be sanctified means to belong to God and to show the same character as God. Its opposite is impurity (7), conduct which is immoral and defiling.

One aspect of holiness (there are many others of equal importance) needed to be stressed, complete avoidance of *sexual immorality.* This phrase refers to all kinds of sexual intercourse other than that which takes place within the marriage relationship.

4–5 The NIV has interpreted v 4 in terms of sexual self-control. It takes the Greek word *skeuos*, literally a 'container', as a metaphor for a person's body, here in its sexual aspect (possibly as a euphemism for the sexual organ), and the verb *ktasthai* to mean 'to gain mastery over' (a rare but attested usage). Some other translations interpret the verb as 'to take' and the 'container' as a woman, so that the instruction is to 'learn to acquire a wife' (NIV mg.; similarly, RSV). Although 'container' is used for human beings (both male and female) in 1 Pet. 3:7, this is unlikely to be the force here, and in any case it comes near to regarding a woman as simply a sexual object. On either rendering, sexual life must be conducted honourably. Holiness does not exclude sexual activity but controls its character. The opposite way of living is characterized by *lust*, physical desire which does not take account of persons as persons and behaves as it pleases without self-control.

6 Sexual immorality is further seen to be wrong in that it can involve taking advantage of other people. To commit adultery is to attempt to break up an existing relationship and bond of love within a marriage, and can fairly be described as wronging a brother. Another, less likely, view of this verse is that Paul introduced the fresh topic of taking advantage of a brother in business (an alternative translation of 'in this matter'; *cf.* RSV mg.).

The heinousness of such conduct is brought out by Paul's reminder that judgment by the *Lord* (*i.e.* Jesus, fulfilling God's role in Ps. 94:1) faces sinners.

7–8 But judgment is not the only motive for upright living. God did not call us on the basis of uncleanness, as though this was a state to be maintained, but he called us in a way that involves his activity in making us holy. Therefore, to disregard this particular instruction is to disregard God himself who gives his Spirit to us to make us holy.

9–10 Now Paul turns to a positive instruction about the need to strengthen and increase their brotherly love (Gk *philadelphia*) for one another (*cf.* 3:12), as God had instructed and impelled them to do. Their love in fact already extended beyond their own church to Christians in other places, probably in giving hospitality and material help to others.

11–12 Some people in the church were taking advantage of this brotherly love to live off charity without doing any work themselves (*cf.* 2 Thes. 3:6–15). These idlers may have been influenced by their belief that the second coming of Jesus was near; if so, they reasoned, why bother working? Paul instructs them to make it a matter of honour to avoid being busybodies, to look after their own affairs in a responsible way, and to be prepared to do an honest day's work. This would prevent them losing the respect of other people.

4:13 – 5:11 Instruction and encouragement about the second coming of Jesus

The second coming of Jesus had formed an important part of Paul's teaching during his visit, but it had led to misunderstandings. Timothy brought two questions to Paul. The first concerned the fate of Christians who had already died when the Lord returned (4:13–18), and the second was about the danger of the living being taken unawares by the Lord and somehow not participating in the event (5:1–11).

4:13 Evidently the readers thought that people who *fall asleep* (*i.e.* those of their number who had already died and any others who might die) before the second coming would remain in their graves and not take part in the event. This would suggest that either they had not heard of the resurrection of the dead (which is not very likely, since the resurrection of Jesus was part of the primitive gospel), or they had not under-

stood properly what they had been taught. Lacking full knowledge of the Christian hope, they were like non-Christians, 'without hope and without God' (Eph. 2:12).

14 The basic answer to the problem is the fundamental piece of Christian teaching that *Jesus died and rose again.* It follows that the God who raised Jesus will bring with him the people for whom he died, and who died believing in him. Paul says nothing as yet about the dead being raised to share in this event, but it is obvious that, if they are going to share in it, they must be resurrected in order to do so. In fact, so far from their being left out of the glorious events associated with the second coming of the Lord, they will have precedence over those still living. (Paul speaks of *we who are still alive*; this use of words indicates that he reckoned with the possibility that the Lord would come in his own lifetime, but did not necessarily regard this as a foregone conclusion.)

15–18 Confirmation of this statement is given by reference to *the Lord's own word*, which is best understood as teaching of Jesus akin to Mt. 24:30–31 rather than a revelation from the risen Lord to a prophet or to Paul himself. (Paul also refers to it in 1 Cor. 15:52.) The command, the angelic voice and the trumpet are interpreted as means of rousing those who are asleep in death and raising them to be with the Lord (Jn. 5:25–29). They rise *first, i.e.* before those Christians who are still living are caught up to be with the Lord and go to *meet the Lord in the air.* The picture is that of a group of citizens going out from a city to meet a visiting dignitary and accompany him back. This implies that the Lord returns with his people to the earth. (They certainly do not stay permanently on the clouds playing harps!) This language was probably never intended to be understood absolutely literally; it is describing things that go beyond words. The important thing is that believers, whether the dead or the living, are from then *with the Lord for ever.*

5:1–5 The other question about the second coming was one that arose out of the readers' worry that they might not be prepared for the event when it happened: might it not take them unawares? So was it possible for Paul to say something about when it and associated events would happen? Paul replied that he did not *need to write* any more to them than he had already taught them, namely that *the day of the Lord* (*cf.* the day of the Son of Man, Lk. 17:24, 30) would resemble the arrival of a burglar in that it would be unexpected and unwelcome, just as Jesus had said (Mt. 24:43; Lk. 12:39–40). People might think they are living in security with nothing to disturb their worldly existence, but then *destruction will come on them suddenly* (*cf.* Lk. 21:34). Here Paul is following what Jesus said by way of warning. But the particular point that he needed to make here was that this language of warning about a threatening event was for unbelievers, not for believers. The thought of the day of the Lord is associated not only with judgment but also with the dawning of *light*, which symbolizes divine revelation and righteousness. Believers are people who already live in the light; they are no longer in the darkness of sin and ignorance. Consequently, for them the day of the Lord will not come like a searchlight which reveals the sins committed under cover of darkness and which makes unbelievers want to hide or run away. On the contrary, they will welcome the fuller light of that day, and they will not be like people taken unawares because they will not be doing the kind of things that lead to judgment.

6–11 Nevertheless, it is possible that even believers may be tempted to live like unbelievers. What they need in that case is not information about when the day is coming (in the fond hope that they can quickly put their lives in order at the last minute) but strong commands to live as people who belong to the day. They must not do what other people do at night – whether carousing or sleeping – but must be *alert* and ready for the Lord. Let them in fact be like soldiers who are on watch, and let them (Paul follows up the comparison further) arm themselves with the three basic Christian characteristics (see 1:3). The most important of these in the present context is *the hope of salvation*, and it rests on the conviction that believers have not been destined by God for the wrath that faces sinners but to receive salvation, here understood primarily as the future experience of deliverance from wrath. This deliverance is possible because of the death of Jesus for them. Paul does not explain here how it produces this effect, but elsewhere it is clear that Jesus has borne their sins and endured judgment on their behalf (Rom. 3:24–26; 2 Cor. 5:19–21). Consequently, they will share his life – and this will be true both for faithful believers who are still alive when he comes and for those who died trusting in Christ. With this hope before them, the readers should help one another by offering mutual encouragement and doing whatever else would help to make their faith strong.

5:12–24 Instructions for life in the church

A third section of teaching gives what appear at first sight to be rather general instructions for the readers' life together in the church. Paul gave similar teaching to other congregations (see especially Rom. 12), but here it is directed particularly to the situation at Thessalonica. The teaching can be divided roughly into five

sections (12–13, 14, 15, 16–18, 19–22) followed by a prayer (23–24).

12–13 The first section deals with the attitude of the church generally to its leaders. No specific title is used for them (later, words like elders, bishops and deacons became more common), and they are described in terms of the things that they did They were involved in what was hard work (a term used for Christian work generally by Paul himself and missionaries but also by local leaders). They were *over* the congregation – a phrase that may refer to exercising authority or to showing concern and care (especially if they were wealthier people who gave of their resources to the congregation; *cf.* Rom. 16:1–2), and they warned people who needed direction. They thus exercised authority in the church, and it was necessary to remind those subject to their authority to recognize the leaders' position and to show them proper esteem coupled with love. *Live in peace* may suggest some danger of division between the leaders and the other believers.

14 This may be connected with the next point, the need for spiritual direction for some people in the church. It is noteworthy that Paul here urges the church in general (note the repetition of *brothers* in v 14) and not just the leaders to care for the rest of the congregation. Paul may especially have had in mind a group in the church who needed direction but were refusing to heed it. These were people who were *idle* (so NIV; the word usually means 'disorderly', but it can refer specifically to being idle and in the context this meaning is more likely; see 4:11; 2 Thes. 3:6–13). The *timid* or 'fainthearted' may be the sad and dispirited people in 4:13 – 5:11. The *weak* may be those who were assailed by hardship or temptation and found it difficult to resist; they needed people to stand alongside them and sustain them. Those who give such help may need to be *patient* to put up with people and their awkwardness and even their opposition to being helped.

15 That retaliation took place in the church is indicated by the next command, not to return evil for evil, but rather *always* to show kindness even when you have been treated unkindly. Note that this was not confined within the group of believers but it was to be shown *to everyone else* as well. This attitude went beyond the morality of the time and was characteristically Christian (Rom. 12:17, 19–21; 1 Pet. 3:9; *cf.* Mt. 5:38–42, 43–48).

16–18 A series of brief, staccato commands indicates the basis for Christian living. They are quite general and would apply to any group of believers. Christians have grounds for joy in both their experience of salvation and their hope of what God will do in the future, but they need to express that joy; there is a right and proper place for the expression of joyful emotion. Christians must also pray – here probably in the sense of making requests to God, since the next command is about the need to be thankful. Common to the three commands is the stress on fulfilling them all the time and in all circumstances; this does not mean, for example, that one prays uninterruptedly but that one prays regularly and frequently. Such a life is made possible, Paul adds, because God intends it to be so; he wants his people to be joyful, prayerful and thankful, and he makes it possible for them to be so.

19–22 Another brief set of statements is concerned principally with the Spirit and his gifts. What is set out in detail in 1 Cor. 12 – 14 is stated here summarily. The Spirit is powerful and active like fire in the congregation (*cf.* Rom. 12:11; 2 Tim. 1:6 for the metaphor). Gifts for ministry were being exercised, but some people were trying to suppress them (we don't know just how), but it is wrong to do so. In particular, Paul stressed the need to value the utterances of prophets. Possibly the church had had a bad experience of them (*cf.* 1 Jn. 4:1–3), and instead of exercising discernment between true and false prophecies was clamping down on the whole activity. The church should rather *test everything, i.e.* assess the utterances of prophets (1 Cor. 12:10; 14:29). It should *hold on* to what was valuable and reject whatever was wrong in the prophetic teachings. (Vs 21–22 could be understood in a more general way, but they have a narrower application in this context.)

23–24 Finally, Paul expresses a prayer for the readers (*cf.* 3:11–13). *God himself* is personally concerned for them. He is the source of spiritual blessings, here summed up as *peace*, and therefore it is right to pray that he will enable those who are called 'saints' to become more and more saintly in their whole being. Paul is thinking of an ongoing process, and the ideal result will be that, at whatever time the Lord returns, he will find his people completely *blameless* so as to be *whole*. *Spirit, soul and body* is a way of saying 'completely' by reference to three aspects of a human being – life in relationship with God, the human personality and the body through which one acts and expresses oneself. Although the Christian life demands human effort, in the last analysis it depends on God himself who is faithful. Those who trust in him are trusting that he will preserve them right to the end – and they have every reason to believe that he is trustworthy.

5:25–28 Closing requests and greetings

A letter in ancient times naturally concluded with personal greetings and requests. Here they are very much concerned with the Christian life and witness of the writer and the recipients. Paul frequently asks his readers to pray for his colleagues and himself (2 Thes. 3:1–2); this was one way in which they shared in his mission, and the missionaries for their part depended upon such support. The readers were to greet one another with a Christian sign of affection. By giving this instruction, Paul was indicating that, despite his absence from them, he would be associated with them in their greeting. The *kiss* functioned as a sign of affection and respect and the word does not necessarily convey any sexual overtones.

27 At this point Paul himself probably took the pen from his secretary and stressed that the letter must be read by everybody in the congregation. It was presumably read (in place of a sermon?) when everybody was there, so as to substitute for Paul in his absence. Paul wanted to be sure that his message reached everybody for whom it was intended.

28 Paul always closed his letters with a benediction which was similar in wording to the opening greeting. The normal secular greeting (Acts 15:29) was replaced by a Christian wish which takes us to the heart of the gospel, to the person of Jesus as the Lord and as the source of divine favour.

I. Howard Marshall

2 THESSALONIANS

Introduction

The language and contents of the second letter are so close to those of 1 Thessalonians as to suggest that it was written not long afterwards. It follows the same general pattern. From chapter 1 it appears that the situation of opposition from outside must have worsened. The pungency of Paul's language may also suggest that he himself was the object of particular attack from people outside the church (*cf.* 3:2). This increase in opposition may have been part of the reason why a group developed in the church who believed that they were living in the very last days. They claimed support for this belief from some kind of statement which purported to come from Paul himself. Paul repudiated this statement (or, more probably, the questionable inferences drawn from it), and argued that various events had still to happen before the return of the Lord. In the final part of the letter we find evidence that some members of the church were taking advantage of the hospitality of others and living in idleness at their expense. Although no explicit connection is made, it is hard not to believe that the 'apocalyptic' excitement reflected in chapter 2 contributed to this situation. It called forth strong words of censure from Paul who firmly believed that, where possible, Christians should work for their living.

These points determine the structure of the letter. As in 1 Thessalonians, the opening greeting (1:1–2) is followed by a prayer-report which also functions as encouragement and teaching: the church was still suffering from opposition, but was bearing it steadfastly, and Paul assures the believers that God will judge those who oppose them and prepare the church to share his glory when Christ comes (1:3–12). The centre of the letter is teaching about the return of Christ, directed against the people who were asserting that the last days (in the sense of the final period of time) had begun. Paul teaches that a period of satanic opposition to God on an unparalleled scale will precede the return of Christ; meanwhile, the church, conscious that it was the object of God's gracious choice, and dependent on his strengthening, must hold firm to the end (2:1–17). Finally, there is exhortation. The church is asked to pray for Paul, and attention is drawn to those Christians who had abandoned their daily work and were living off their good-natured friends. Paul strongly condemns this idleness and the consequent nuisance-value of the idlers (3:1–16). There is a brief closing greeting (3:17–18).

These comments on 2 Thessalonians have been made in terms of the ostensible historical context of the document as a genuine letter from Paul to the church at Thessalonica. On this view of the situation we have to assume that in the period after the writing of 1 Thessalonians a kind of 'apocalyptic fervour', whose origins can perhaps be detected in 1 Thessalonians, developed further in the church. Paul does not deal with it in terms of castigating directly or indirectly a group of opponents, as in some other letters; rather he writes to believers who may have been misled by a misinterpretation of his teaching.

Such a situation appears to be quite plausible. Yet many commentators disagree. They detect a sharp contrast between the emphasis on the nearnesss of the second coming in 1 Thessalonians and the stress on the 'not yet' in 2 Thessalonians. This fact then alerts them to other peculiar features which they detect in the letter – the lack of personal, concrete allusions, the peculiar repetition of phrases form 1 Thessalonians, some differences in language and thought amd so on. Numerous scholars think that these differences are incompatible with the traditional understanding of the letter as Pauline. They judge attempts to solve some of the problems by arguing that the letters were written in reverse chronological order, or that they are compositions of fragments originally written in a different order, to be inadequate. The only solution which will do justice to these peculiarities, so it is argued, is that the letter is a later composition by another writer who wished to use Paul's name to correct his teaching or false inferences from it, perhaps even to claim this letter alone was authentic (*cf.* 3:17) and that 1 Thessalonians was to be rejected. One major weakness of this view is that its supporters have not offered a convincing and plausible reconstruction of the circumstances in which such a letter could have been composed – and directed to Thessalonica in particular. Again, the language used to refute the claim that the day of the Lord had already arrived is so cryptic that it is hard to envisage a later writer expressing himself in this fashion if he wanted to persuade his readers. Although it must be granted

that there are some oddities in the language, structure and thought of the letter, it is fair to say that the difficulties in regarding the letter as written by someone other than Paul are greater.

The message of the letters

Both letters contain ample teaching about the gospel and the character of a young church which can be developed to show how Christians should live and witness today. Nevertheless, some contemporary Christians who are conscious of a long – and lengthening – period of church history rather than of their days being numbered may feel that the framework of Paul's theology with its stress on the future coming of the Lord and above all on the sense of its nearness, with all the implications that this has for Christian living, is unrealistic. Yet Christians today may too easily assume the permanence and independence of their own collective existence in a secure universe and fail to realize that at every moment they depend upon the Lord's mercy and live in the light of his coming. If God shattered the time-space framework of the universe by coming into it in the person of his incarnate Son, surely he can and will bring human history to a consummation by a future intervention to establish his everlasting reign in justice, peace and love. Paul also makes it plain that Christians are not meant to spend their time doing nothing and waiting for the Lord to come. Rather, they must prepare for his coming by showing the qualities of Christian living, faith, love and hope.

Further reading

J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians*, BST (IVP, 1991).
L. Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1977).
————, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1977).
F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (Word, 1982).
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Outline of Contents

1:1–2 **Opening greeting**
1:3–12 **Opening thanksgiving**
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Commentary

1:1–2 Opening greeting

The greeting is, as might be expected, very similar to that in 1 Thessalonians, but here Paul speaks of God as *our* Father, and explicitly names the Father and the Lord Jesus as the source of grace and peace. (See also the article on Reading the letters.)

1:3–12 Opening thanksgiving

Paul begins a letter of encouragement to a church facing hostile pressure from people outside with a prayer-report. It begins with words reminiscent of 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3 and shows that the church was growing in basic Christian qualities, so that his thanksgiving was no empty formality. Rather, it gave him grounds to speak highly of them among other churches for their steadfastness in coping with persecution. Thus Paul used them to encourage other churches in a similar position.

Then Paul disgresses further from his prayer-report to comment on the significance of the situation. God's righteous judgment in the present time is seen in the twofold outcome of persecution. The two results are intertwined in vs 5–10.

On the one hand, God's judgment is seen in the fate of those who persecute his people (vs 6, 8, 9). At the coming of the Lord Jesus they will be repaid with the treatment they gave to others. In this way God vindicates his own people against their oppresssors and also makes it clear that those who *do not obey the gospel* come under judgment. It should be noted that God's people must not avenge themselves on those who attack them (Rom. 12:17–21), and that God's action is not one of taking vengeance but of upholding justice. God cannot be accused of acting unjustly or ungraciously towards them. Those who are judged are those who have

rejected a gospel whose content is, 'When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son' (Rom. 5:10); they have refused the loving offer of God. The traditional language of *blazing fire* (Ex. 3:2; Is. 66:15) expresses symbolically the coming of God in judgment against both Gentiles who (wilfully) *do not know God* and Jews who (also wilfully) *do not obey the gospel. Everlasting destruction* is linked with exclusion from the Lord's presence and from sharing in his glory (*cf.* Is. 2:10. Paul, as elsewhere, applies an OT text about Yahweh to Jesus).

On the other hand, there is vindication of God's people (5, 7, 10). If they stand up to persecution, he considers them worthy to enter his kingdom (in the future, as in 1 Thes. 2:12), and he regards it as only just to grant them relief from their sufferings, along with the persecuted missionaries (see 3:2), at the parousia of Jesus. God's blessings are thus associated with Jesus when he comes with his angels (*cf.* 1 Thes. 3:13). He will be surrounded by his holy people and glorified by them (later it is shown that they share in his glory; see v 12; 2:14). They will be filled with admiring wonder, sharing in the occasion precisely because they accepted and believed the witness to the gospel given by the missionaries.

11–12 The digression serves to indicate the motivation for Paul's petitions to God about the readers. Since steadfastness in the Christian life depends upon the continual gracious action of God and the faith of his people, Paul continually prays that God will enable his people to demonstrate the reality of their faith in action and so make them worthy of his calling. Such conduct will lead to praise being offered to Jesus, and his people will share in the glory and honour given to him. It is possible that Paul here describes Jesus as both God and Lord (but note that NIV relegates this interpretation to the mg.; *cf.* Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:11).

2:1–17 Instruction about the day of the Lord

The major teaching section of the letter is difficult to understand for two reasons. First, it is Paul's reply to problems that had arisen in the church due to misunderstandings of his teaching, and, secondly, the language which he uses is cryptic for people who do not know what he said orally to the readers (5).

1–2 The problem was centred on the coming of the Lord Jesus, which figured so centrally in 1 Thessalonians. Paul had taught that it was near, possibly within his own lifetime, and that it would involve the gathering together of God's people from all over the world to remain with him from then onwards (*cf.* 1 Thes. 4:17; Mk. 13:27). Now some people were saying that *the day of the Lord has already come.* For them the 'day' was an extended period which would culminate in the coming of the Lord, and probably they saw their present persecution (1:4–5) as the last stages of opposition to the kingdom of God. Their teaching was unsettling to people, causing excitement as well as uncertainty, and no doubt distracting people from normal living. In support of their claim they said that Paul himself had taught it, though he was not certain whether they were citing a prophetic oracle, a piece of oral teaching or a letter. The words *supposed to have come from us* are often taken to suggest that a forged letter of Paul was around. It is, however, improbable that people produced letters in Paul's name at this time, and it is more likely that the phrase refers to any of Paul's utterances from which people might have drawn false inferences.

3–4 Paul's reply is essentially to repeat his oral teaching (v 5) that the day of the Lord cannot come before certain other events have taken place. Much of what he says echoes the teaching of Jesus in the discourse recorded in Mk. 13, and like Jesus he warns strictly against being misled by false teaching (Mk. 13:5). It may be that people were being misled about the time of the Lord's appearing or they were mistaking an impostor for the Lord (*cf.* Mk. 13:6, 21–22). Other things must happen first, especially *the rebellion* and the revealing of *the man of lawlessness.* These two probably belong together; what the man of lawlessness does constitutes the rebellion. *Rebellion* was used in Jewish literature especially for opposition to God (1 Macc. 2:15), and the thought of a great outbreak of evil against God in the world generally was a familiar theme. An apostate church is not the primary thought here. *The man of lawlessness* is a Hebrew form of expression for 'the lawless person' (v 8), and suggests, again, opposition to God. A man (possibly an 'incarnation' of Satan) is probably in mind, and he may be the same as the 'antichrist' (1 Jn. 2:18). To say that he *is revealed* suggests that his coming is an evil parody of the coming or revelation of the Lord. Already at this point Paul assures his readers that this man is doomed to destruction before describing what he will do. Basically he will oppose all religions and God himself, and make himself an object of worship (*cf.* Dn. 11:36 for the language; it is not necessarily a prophecy of the same person). That he will sit (or will attempt to sit) in *God's temple* is variously interpreted. It may mean he will sit in the Jewish temple (destroyed in AD 70) or in a future rebuilt temple. Alternatively the temple may be a metaphor for the church. More probably, however, the imagery, which is drawn

from Ezk. 28:2 and reflects the stories of Antiochus and Pompey who both entered the Jewish temple, is to be taken metaphorically of the totalitarian claims of the rebel.

5–7 From Paul's previous teaching the readers should *now* be able to recollect why the rebel has not yet appeared. He will be revealed at the proper time but presently there is something (neuter in v 5, but masculine in v 7) *holding him back* (or possibly 'holding sway'). At present, to be sure, rebellion against God is active, but in a hidden way, and this will last only until the restraining force is removed. Then, it is implied, the rebel will act openly – and the Lord will come to defeat him. But what is the restraining force? Some have taken it to mean the Roman emperor (or the forces of law and order typified by him). Others think that it refers to Satan or some other evil force which is presently in power, but will step aside when the rebel comes. Another interpretation is that it means that God himself, through some heavenly agency or the Christian gospel or the church, restrains the power of evil. (Jewish literature referred to the holding back of Satan and the evil powers by a heavenly being until the end of the world; *cf.* Rev. 7:1–3; 20:1–3.) Although no solution is free from difficulty the latter one causes the fewest problems. *Till he is taken out of the way* obviously does not refer to God being forced off the scene but to his withdrawal of whatever it is that restrains the power of evil until the moment for the final showdown.

8 When the Lord appears, the rebel will be destroyed. OT imagery is used to express the power of the Lord (Is. 11:4). Calvin suggested that *the breath of his mouth* was simply his word. In any case, a literal battle is not being described. *Splendour* (Gk *epiphaneia*) is a word used for the powerful coming of God in judgment (*cf.* 2 Sa. 7:23).

9–12 Paul's last point, however, takes us back to the rebel and constitutes an important warning. His *coming* (Gk *parousia*) will be a satanic parody of the real thing with all kinds of impressive accompaniments (*cf.* Rev. 13:13) that imitate the power of Christ and his followers (*cf.* Rom. 15:18–19) – but they are false and deceptive. These happenings will lead astray people who are on the way to destruction, because they have closed their minds to the truth of the gospel which alone can save them and so they are open to receiving nonsense. The sad fate of the lost is thus ultimately their own responsibility. What God does is to confirm them in their evil ways by making them impervious to the truth which they have rejected and open to persuasion by lies. The end of it all is judgment, and again it is emphasized that this comes when people throw in their lot with evil and reject the truth. There can come a point when a person who has rejected the gospel is no longer able to turn away from a headlong course leading to destruction.

13–14 There is a warning here for Christian believers not to start out on the path that leads to disaster. It is, however, overshadowed by an eloquent statement of Paul's conviction that this should not happen to the readers. Any uncertainty about their own salvation should be overcome by a recollection of their Christian status. Paul puts his remarks in the form of another prayer-report (vs 13–14). He thinks of his readers as people *loved by the Lord, i.e.* Jesus, the one who is to come in judgment on unbelievers. He is associated with the Father who *chose you to be saved. From the beginning* places this act in the distant past (*cf.* Eph. 1:4) and has the effect of suggesting that a plan made so long ago is not going to be lightly altered now. The plan is brought to pass by God's action, here called *sanctification* (*i.e.* the setting aside of the readers as God's people and his transformation of their lives by the power of his *Spirit*), and by the faith of the readers in the gospel (contrast v 12). In order that these two complementary processes might begin, God *called* the readers in and through the preaching of the gospel (*cf.* 1 Thes. 1:4–5; Gal. 1:6–7). The final purpose of the call is that believers may be given a share in the glory of Christ (*cf.* Rom. 8:17, 30).

15 On the basis of their Christian standing Paul encourages the readers to stand firm in their faith – not only in face of persecution (1 Thes. 3:8) but also in face of false teaching. They must hold fast to what they have been taught by Paul, both during his visit to Thessalonica and in his letters. Here Paul is probably drawing a contrast between the correct interpretation of his teaching and the false inferences which had been drawn from it (2:2). What Paul taught was literally 'traditions' (RSV), a word which brings out the fact that Paul's teaching was based on what he himself had been taught, the common faith of the early Christians (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15:3).

16–17 The future of the Thessalonian Christians depended not only on the work of God and their own response but also on the prayers of their friends. Paul backs up his exhortation with a prayer, expressed in the third-person form (*cf.* 1 Thes. 3:11–13). It conveys incidentally that Jesus (named first) and the Father are the joint source of spiritual blessings. It reminds the readers that God loves them and so has given them encouragement and hope for the future – despite the fearful events mentioned earlier in the chapter. It asks that God will continue to encourage them in their hearts and make them resolute in acting and speaking in ways which demonstrate the reality of their faith.

Paul's teaching in this chapter was meant to

warn his readers that the end was not as near as they thought and to encourage them to stand fast despite the dreadful event that still lay ahead. Its message to Christians today is that they should not be concerned to identify 'signs of the end' but should be alert to the moral and spiritual issues which arise in times of persecution and temptation to abandon faith in the Lord and his coming.

3:1–16 Instructions for life in the church

A series of general instructions for the church in its mission and life follows. There are two main topics, prayer for Paul's mission (vs 1–5) and the danger of idleness (vs 6–16).

1–5 *Finally* is not necessarily a sign that the letter is about to close immediately, but marks a transition to a new topic. Paul repeats his request for prayer (*cf.* 1 Thes. 5:25). Here it is motivated by the continuing need for the gospel to spread swiftly and victoriously like a runner racing in a stadium. This picture was already applied to God's word in Ps. 147:15. The word is *honoured* when people receive it with faith and thanksgiving. A further matter for prayer is that Paul himself might be rescued from the opposition of perverse and evil people (*cf.* Rom. 15:31); he probably has Jewish opposition principally in mind (*cf.* 1 Thes. 2:16). The rather obvious comment *for not everyone has faith*, which indicates why there is opposition to the gospel, prepares the way for Paul's statement that the readers themselves need, and will receive, the strength to cope with their own problems. Behind the various forms of opposition for the readers Paul sees the figure of Satan, *the evil one*. With this affirmation of God's faithfulness to his people in mind, Paul can express his confidence that the readers will do what he commands. *The things we command* may be Paul's instructions in general or perhaps his specific request to them to pray for him. Then follows yet another third-person prayer which is for the readers to show in their lives the same kind of love as God shows and the same steadfastness as Christ showed.

6–10 The second section moves to a topic which had arisen previously in 1 Thes. 4:11–12; 5:14. It makes clear that the problem of certain members of the church living in idleness off the generosity of others went back to the time when the church was founded (10). Evidently there were people who were living on the poverty line and relied on the gifts of the richer people. The belief that the day of the Lord had come may have encouraged their attitude. This way of life was giving the church a bad name, and therefore Paul speaks out strongly against it. V 6 begins with a sharp command (*cf.* 1 Thes. 4:11), backed up by the authority of the Lord, that the church members must avoid those whose conduct is unworthy. The latter are not to be deprived of their place in the church, but there is to be a certain distancing from them so that they recognize that their conduct is not acceptable or in accord with the established teaching of the church handed on by Paul (1 Thes. 4:1–2). That teaching was illustrated concretely in the way of life of Paul and his fellow-missionaries whose conduct is here put forward as an example to follow. The missionaries did not live in a disorderly or idle manner (*cf.* 5:14 note), and they had not therefore needed to receive gifts of food from people in the church. (NIV *without paying for it* suggests that they did pay for it. More likely Paul means that they did not ask for or receive free gifts of food from the church but went to the shops and bought what they needed.) It should be needless to say that this does not mean that the missionaries rigidly refused to accept hospitality when they were offered it. Rather, they had worked hard to avoid being a nuisance to other people (*cf.* 1 Thes. 2:9). This was despite the fact that Paul believed strongly and taught that churches had an obligation to provide for their teachers (1 Thes. 2:6b; 1 Cor. 9:4–6, 14; Gal. 6:6). For the sake of the situation in Thessalonica Paul gave up this privilege. There were thus more reasons than one why Paul worked with his hands while carrying on his missionary work. His example matched the instructions which he gave (the tense used suggests 'repeatedly'). Although the command has the form of an instruction to the well-off not to give to the idle hungry people, it is primarily meant as a warning to the latter. It is worth repeating that the proverb-type saying applies to people who are unwilling to work, not to those who have no opportunity, and is therefore *not* an argument against welfare provision for the unemployed.

11–12 The curious form of v 11, *We hear that* . . . is really a way of speaking directly to any people in this category without naming names. (Paul probably knew who the persons were.) The NIV brings out well the deliberate play on words *not busy* . . . [*but*] *busybodies*. Instead of working themselves, they were keeping other people back from their work. They are very sharply commanded – again on the authority of the Lord – to avoid being nuisances to other people (NIV, *settle down*; *cf.* 1 Thes. 4:11), and to work hard so as to be able to buy what they need. It has been nicely summed up: 'Stop fussing; stop idling; stop sponging' (William Neil).

13 Then by contrast Paul addresses the rest of the church and, despite the danger of their being taken advantage of by the idlers, tells

them not to *tire of doing what is right* (*cf.* Gal. 6:9). In this context it must mean that they are not to give up on caring for the needy even if sometimes people take advantage of them.

14–16 Nevertheless, despite Paul's repeated instructions in this letter, it was possible that some people might continue in a way of life that was out of harmony with the gospel. In that case, discipline was to be used as a last resort. An offender was to be *warned*, a somewhat vague expression, which does not go so far as indicating that the person was to be struck off the church roll. (Perhaps it was more like the referee taking a player's name at a football match.) There was to be no fellowship with such a person. In the light of 1 Cor. 5:9–11 this most probably refers to exclusion from the common meal which was an especially significant part of the church's life. Such exclusion, however, was meant to be remedial, to make people feel a sense of shame and lead to their repentance. It is emphasized that the act of disciplining must not lead to the intrusion of any spiteful and hostile attitudes; the persons being disciplined are brothers (and sisters) and the aim must be to 'admonish' (rather than *warn*) them. The procedure is thus one to be carried out as far as possible in a spirit of love, for the good of the offender, but at the same time the church's ethical life is not to be compromised.

It is striking that Paul concludes a section which deals with an incipient cause of tension in the church with a benediction or prayer for God to give his blessing to the readers. The language reminds us of 1 Thes. 5:23, but, here, as elsewhere in this letter, he replaces 'God' with *the Lord* (*i.e.* Jesus). *Peace* is an appropriate wish here; it includes, but is not confined to, the absence of strife and disorder.

3:17–18 Closing greeting

Following normal custom Paul takes the pen from his scribe to write *this greeting*. These words are in themselves the actual greeting: *cf.* GNB, 'With my own hand I write this: Greetings from Paul'. The greeting in Paul's own hand is a distinctive mark that the letter is his and therefore the teaching and instructions in it carry his authority (*cf.* 1 Thes. 5:27; 1 Cor. 16:21–23; Gal. 6:11 for similar comments). It is most unlikely that it is meant to distinguish this letter from forgeries, for who would forge Pauline letters at this early date?

18 The closing benediction is identical with 1 Thes. 5:28 with the addition of *all*: neither followers of mistaken teaching nor idlers are excluded from the grace of the Lord.

I. Howard Marshall

THE PASTORAL LETTERS

Introduction

The persons addressed

Although these letters are generally known as the Pastoral Epistles this name has been used only since the eighteenth century. The description is rather a matter of convenience than of accuracy, since the letters are not manuals of pastoral care. Timothy and Titus were both close associates of Paul, and these letters addressed to them are the only such letters included in the NT. There is no knowing how many other such letters, if any, the apostle wrote. The one to Philemon is in a class of its own.

Timothy is mentioned not only in Acts but also in many of Paul's other letters. It is probable that he was converted to the Christian faith during Paul's first missionary journey. He was closely associated with the apostle on the second and third journeys. In Phil. 2:19–20 Paul speaks warmly of Timothy's care and concern. It is small wonder, therefore, that two personal letters are preserved addressed to Paul's well loved companion

It is strange that Titus is not referred to at all in Acts, but he is mentioned in Gal. 2:1,3, where we learn that he was a Greek, and in 2 Cor. 8:23, where Paul describes him as his partner and fellow-worker (*cf.* also 2 Cor. 12:18). Of Paul's two companions, Titus appears to have been the stronger personality, for in 1 and 2 Timothy there are various allusions to Timothy's rather timid nature.

Authorship

All three letters are said to have been written by the apostle Paul. There is no evidence from the early church to the contrary. But since the early nineteenth century many scholars have disputed that Paul wrote the letters as we now have them. There have been two main types of alternative theory, one treating the letters as fictional and the other claiming that some genuine Pauline material has been included. Both these theories necessarily regard the letters as pseudonymous, that is, ascribed to the apostle but written by someone else. It is generally held by those claiming non-Pauline authorship that this procedure was quite acceptable in those days and would not have incurred moral blame. But this is disputable. What then are the reasons which have led to theories of non-authenticity?

1. The historical references in the letters

These presuppose that Paul had recently visited Ephesus and Crete. The problem arises because it is difficult to fit these allusions into the Acts story. It is assumed by some that Paul was released from the imprisonment mentioned at the end of Acts, and that the events referred to in the Pastorals happened after that release. Paul must then have been rearrested at a later date and ultimately martyred. Many scholars, however, reject this view because there is no supporting evidence for it outside these letters. Attempts have been made, therefore, to fit the historical references *into* the Acts history, but this is by no means straightforward. Those who do not find either of these reconstructions convincing simply treat all the historical references as fictional and make no further effort to relate them to the Acts story.

2. The mention of church officials

It is claimed that the references in the letters to 'overseers' (sometimes translated 'bishops') and 'elders' reflects a period later than the apostolic age. Again there are wide divergencies in the various theories. It is difficult to be sure what these titles signified at different stages in the church's early history, and the Pastorals do not make any real distinction between them. The argument, therefore, is inconclusive. But would the real Paul have needed to give instructions to his personal assistants about the qualities needed for church officials? If we regard these letters as semi-public, there is no difficulty in supposing that Paul wished to emphasize in writing what he must already have instructed his assistants to do.

3. The references to false teaching

Some suppose that these references belong to the period of developed heresies in the second century and cannot, therefore, relate to the time of Paul. But the evidence does not support such a theory, for there is no relationship between the myths and genealogies referred to in the Pastorals and the later gnostic heresies. Paul's main concern was to warn his colleagues not to waste their time over these false teachings. If, as is supposed by some scholars, these letters were written to answer the second-century heresies, why are there not more direct references to the

type of error then prevalent? A fair conclusion would be that the false teaching supplies no guide to the dating of the Pastorals.

4. The doctrinal position

The doctrinal position reflected in these letters is said not to conform with that of the apostle Paul. This conclusion is reached by comparing the theology of the other letters of Paul and the theology of the Pastorals. It is claimed that there is so much that is chartacteristic of the other letters which is absent from the Pastorals that to attribute them to Paul is out of the question. There is, however, a fundamental weakness in this argument. It takes no account of the difference in the people addressed or in the purpose of the various letters. Paul must not be expected to include the sum total of his theology in every letter he wrote. There is nothing in the Pastorals which conflicts with the theological position reflected in the other Pauline letters. The absence of such themes as the righteousness of God or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit must be considered against this background. What is less easy to explain is the occurrence of what appear to be stereotyped statements introduced by some such expression as 'This is a faithful saying', which occur nowhere else in Paul's letters. But does this rule out Pauline authorship? To do so it would need to be demonstrated that Paul would not have used such statements, and the evidence is simply not sufficient to prove this.

5. Language and style

Arguments based on language are generally thought to be conclusive against the authenticity of these letters. Yet even here there are different ways of weighing the evidence. Admittedly, many new words are used in these letters which occur nowhere else in Paul's writings and there are several which do not occur anywhere else in the NT. The important question is, however, whether Paul would or would not have used them. Since there are contemporary examples of the use of all but a handful of the words, there is no reason why Paul could not have used them. Arguments based on word usage are inconclusive.

Rather more stress has been placed on style, and again various methods have been used to determine this. Some have appealed to the use, or lack of use, of words such as prepositions, while others have resorted to word frequencies or sentence length. Generally speaking, any statistical calculations of style are seriously hampered by the smallness of the sample available in the pastoral letters. Some scholars who on other grounds are favourable to Pauline authorship incline towards some kind of 'secretary hypothesis' to account for the change of language.

Even if these lines of evidence are assumed to be sufficient to conclude for non-Pauline authorship, there is still the problem of what prompted anyone to write these letters in Paul's name and what led him to choose three. So far no satisfactory account has been given, and in its absence it would not seem unreasonable to adhere to the traditional view that Paul wrote these letters to his close associates for a specific historic purpose.

Date

The date of the Pastorals is inextricably bound up with their authorship. If Paul did not write them, then almost any date between the fifties of the first century and the beginning of the second century is possible. As we have seen, some scholars conclude that these letters were written so late that Paul could not have composed them. In their view, the date of these letters resolves the question of authorship. But if Paul was the author, perhaps using a secretary, then the most likely date for their composition is the mid-sixties (the exact years are disputed), when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. On this view, it is common to hold that Paul was released from the imprisonment mentioned at the end of Acts but was shortly rearrested and finally martyred, and that some of the events referred to in the Pastorals took place during this brief period of liberty. Certainly, 2 Timothy sounds as if it was written by someone who knew that his time was short.

Purpose

Of the three letters it is easiest to set out the purpose of 2 Timothy, for this letter was clearly written while Paul was awaiting the result of his trial. It is an urgent request to Timothy to try to reach him while there was still time. There are some personal requests in 2 Tim. 4 relating to a cloak, some books and parchments. The whole letter is an encouragement to Timothy to carry on his work of ministry.

In 1 Timothy the purpose seems to be to give some guidance on such matters as the choosing of church officers and the resisting of false teaching. Paul states his purpose in 1 Tim.3:14–15. He clearly intended to provide Timothy with necessary guidance should he not meet him again soon. In Titus a similar situation is in view, for as Timothy was left with the responsibilities at Ephesus, so Titus had an even more demanding job in Crete. The letter would, therefore, have helped to strengthen Titus's hand in carrying out his difficult task.

Canonicity

There is strong evidence for the use of these pastoral letters in the early church. The parallels in the church writers are no more than allusions, but this is equally true of some of the other Pauline letters. Some parallels exist between these letters and *1 Clement*, which would support their use before AD 95, although some scholars dispute this conclusion. Certainly, Polycarp seems to have quoted from two of them, and after his time there is strong support not only for their use but for their authority.

Two lines of evidence are, however, often cited to dispute the early canonicity of these letters. One is the fact that Marcion excluded them from his canon (mid-second century AD). Since Tertullian states that Marcion 'cut them out', it seems reasonable to maintain that he knew of them but disapproved of them. From Marcion's canon, it is clear that he was highly selective. The other line of evidence cites the fact that the pastoral letters do not appear in the Chester Beatty papyri. The evidence for the use and authority of these letters is so strong, however, that doubts raised from this kind of evidence are insufficient to outweigh the opinion that these letters were preserved and treasured at an early date as genuine letters of the apostle Paul.

Theology

Although some of the great Pauline themes are missing from these letters, there are many doctrinal passages which are wholly in line with Paul's theology. They have a high view of God, especially seen in the remarkable doxology in 1 Tim. 1:17. His Fatherhood is mentioned, as is his role as Saviour (1 Tim.4:10; Tit. 1:3; 2:10, 13; 3:4) and as righteous Judge (2 Tim 4:8).

The references to Christ are equally in line with Paul's usual teaching: his humanity (1 Tim.1:15), his patience (1 Tim.1:16), his saving work (2 Tim.1:10; Tit.2:13; 3:6), his mediatorship (1 Tim.2:5–6) and his resurrection (2 Tim.2:8).

There is less reference to the Holy Spirit than in most of Paul's letters, but his work is not passed over. The predictive work of the Spirit is mentioned in 1 Tim.4:1, and he is said to have entrusted the truth to Timothy and to be dwelling within him (2 Tim.1:14). He is responsible for the work of regeneration and renewal (Tit.3:5).

The Pastorals make clear that salvation is the result of the divine mercy mediated through faith (1 Tim.1:16). There is in fact nothing in these letters which is contrary to Paul's teaching elsewhere.

See also the article Reading the letters.

Further reading

J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* BST (IVP, forthcoming).

————, *The Message of 2 Timothy*, BST (IVP, 1973).

D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1990).

G. D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, NIBC (Hendrickson, 1988).

1 TIMOTHY

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Commentary

1:1–20 Paul and Timothy

1:1–2 Personal greeting

Paul begins, as in his other letters, with a reference to his apostleship. He establishes his authority by mentioning his special calling by God. Paul did not appoint himself and was not, therefore, writing on his own authority. He knew himself to be *an apostle of Christ Jesus*, using a form of wording which stresses that Jesus was Christ, *i.e.* Messiah. He expresses God's part in it in a strong manner, *the command of God*, showing Paul as a man under orders. Note how Paul refers to God as *Saviour*, a thought which appears elsewhere in these personal letters.

The description of Timothy as *my true son in the faith* points to the intimate relationship between the two men and suggests also that it was through Paul that Timothy became a Christian. The linking of *grace* and *peace* in the opening of Paul's letters is normal, but here he includes *mercy* as well (as in 2 Timothy). Paul speaks of God as *Father* (so familiar in his other letters) and of Jesus as *Lord*, which echoes the words of an early Christian confession (*cf.* Rom.10:9).

1:3–11 The gospel and its counterfeits

3–7 First, Paul reminds Timothy of the occasion when he left him at Ephesus with a particular task, which involved commanding others not to teach false doctrine. Wrong doctrines were already being circulated at this early stage in the church's life, and this is a reminder that in every age truth is challenged by counterfeits. There is much about false teachings in this letter and in the one to Titus. Whereas these were specific to the times, they throw light on certain principles which are still relevant today in dealing with some types of wrong teaching. Whatever is meant by *myths and endless genealogies* (4), it is clear that Paul regarded them as the very opposite of the serious content of the gospel. In view of the fact that in Tit. 1:14 Paul mentions 'Jewish myths', it is probable that he had in mind mythical histories, like the Jewish Book of Jubilees. Note the contrast between *controversies* and *God's work*. There was an unproductiveness about the false teaching which was the opposite of true faith. Paul draws attention to certain characteristics about the people who were promoting this teaching – their lack of meaning and their unsuitability to be teachers (6–7). What strikes us is the irrelevance of their teaching. Sandwiched in the centre of this passage (5), we find Paul's statement about the nature of Timothy's task (to produce *love*) and his advice on the nourishing of it (purity, *a good conscience* and *faith*). The test of a good discussion is not that we have enjoyed a verbal battle but that it has promoted mutual understanding and love; sincere, openhearted and based on faith.

8–11 In v 7 Paul mentions the desire of these false teachers to be *teachers of the law* and this leads him to discuss the nature and purpose of the law. Paul concedes here (as in Rom. 7:12) that the law is good, although elsewhere he makes clear that it cannot lead to salvation. The main function of the law is to condemn *lawbreakers* (9–11). The negative side of the law is most prominent. The various types of offenders mentioned are all those against whom the law can operate, as they have committed specific offences. Paul singles out extreme

examples, but at least no-one could deny the point he makes – that all these offences are *contrary to . . . sound doctrine.*

Although the law has been superseded by the gospel, Paul does not deny that it has a continuing function. He gives a positive definition of *sound doctrine* as that which *conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God* (11). This means either that the gospel consists of a glorious theme or that it is provided for by a glorious God. The emphasis here seems to fall on God rather than on the gospel, but the divine origin of the gospel is undeniable. This is fully in line with Paul's view of the gospel in his other letters.

1:12–17 Paul's personal experience of Christ

Paul wants Timothy to know how highly he regards his calling to the service of Christ. This would have been an encouragement to him. Paul's letters are full of sudden outbursts of praise to God. This thankfulness was spontaneous. Here is a realization of God's mercy against the background of the past. Once a blasphemer and a violent man, Paul rejoices that God has chosen him for his service (12–13). The book of Acts provides the commentary here, for it describes Paul's ruthless persecution of the Christians before his dramatic conversion (Acts 8 – 9). He never forgot the wonder of God's choice of him. The word used here for *service* is very general and covers the many aspects of the apostle's work. His recollection of what he had done through *ignorance and unbelief* served to heighten his awareness of the mercy and grace of God. What struck him was the abundance of that mercy. It reminds us that God does not hold our past against us when we are *in Christ Jesus.*

Some have found difficulty in Paul's appeal here to *a trustworthy saying* (15), since he does not use this phrase outside the pastoral letters. There is, however, nothing here which is at variance with Paul's teaching elsewhere. The fact that *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners* is at the heart of the gospel. But when Paul refers to himself as *the worst of sinners* (16), is he being over-dramatic? There is no need to think so in the light of the previous mention of his violent persecution of the church. His appreciation of the mercy of God was deepened by his own experience as a persecuter of God's people. Those who are most conscious of their previous opposition to God usually become the most vocal in their understanding of God's *unlimited patience.* Such people become exhibits of what God can do. The apostle could not have realized the full extent to which God's mercy to him would lead others to faith in Christ, but he shows some glimpse of it. The *trustworthy saying* still *deserves full acceptance* as a concise summary of the main thrust of the gospel.

The sudden doxology in v 17 is worth noting, for it has several significant features. Only here does Paul call God *the King eternal* (lit. 'King of the ages'). The phrase may have come from the Jewish idea of the two ages – the present age and the age to come. The other adjectives used, *immortal* and *invisible*, draw attention to the exalted nature of God, and the description *only* points to his uniqueness.

1:18–20 A charge and a warning to Timothy

Paul now addresses a personal word to Timothy described as *this instruction.* The word used conveys a sense of urgency and is in the context of a military metaphor. But what were *the prophecies once made* about Timothy? Probably the allusion is to predictions regarding him which preceded his call to the ministry, perhaps given at his commissioning. It is clear that Timothy's ministry had the support of other Christians apart from Paul himself. The *fight the good fight* metaphor is paralleled in other letters (*cf.* Eph.6:10–18), and finds another echo in 2 Tim. 4:7. Paul was aware that the Christian life is a spiritual conflict. For *faith and a good conscience* (19) *cf.* v 5.

The change of metaphor from a fight to a shipwreck is striking (19–20). The case of the two men mentioned is sad, for the shipwreck was caused by a definite rejection of faith. But what does Paul mean by handing them over to Satan? This is admittedly difficult, but the best solution seems to be to regard the church as God's domain and the unbelieving world as Satan's. Those who do not believe forfeit any right to remain in the Christian community. But Paul leaves the door open for them if they can be *taught not to blaspheme.* Some have seen this allusion as meaning the infliction of physical disaster, after the parallels in Acts 5:1–11 and 1 Cor.11:30. But it is better here to think of moral and spiritual discipline. Paul addresses the same kind of question in 1 Cor. 15. Church discipline today is anything but uniform. Some church leaders may be too authoritarian; others seem to exercise no discipline at all. Paul's emphasis is on the church's responsibility for its erring members and also for the general good of the whole body.

2:1–15 Worship and women

2:1–8 Public worship

Paul is here concerned that the right approach should be made to public worship, especially to public prayer. He uses a number of words to

denote prayer (1), but there is not a great deal of difference between them. Two important considerations which stand out are the inclusion of thanksgiving and the wide scope of the subject-matter. Not only is Paul anxious to include everyone, but draws special attention to those exercising authority (2). What is significant is that Paul makes no distinction between those rulers that are just and those that are not. He sees it as a Christian duty to pray for those whose actions affect every citizen. But the purpose of the prayer is that Christians *may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness* (2). There are many cases, however, where the environment has been anything but peaceful but where in spite of this much godliness has developed.

There is an unexpected interjection in vs 3–7 in which Paul makes a theological statement. The connection between universal prayer and the statement about God's desire that *all men* might be saved is not at first clear, but the link seems to be in the relation of the *everyone* in v 1 and the *all men* in v 4. But does this statement support universalism? It could be argued that what God wants must surely come to pass. But it is important to remember that both the OT and the NT speak of God's 'desire' or his 'will' in quite varied ways, determined by the context. Sometimes God's 'will' cannot be distinguished from his decree: what he wills to happen, happens. At other times God's 'will' is his command (*e.g.* 1 Thes. 4:3). At still others, it refers to his stance. The God who cries, 'I take no pleasure in the death of anyone ... Repent and live!' (Ezk. 18:32) is also the one of whom it is said that he wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

It is of course possible to array these statements in some sort of contradictory pattern. In fact, they are part of a consistent biblical picture in which God is presented as simultaneously utterly sovereign and distinctly personal. To set his sovereignty over against his personal interaction with us his image-bearers is to destroy the biblical portrayal of God. In the context of 1 Tim. 2, Paul is anxious to stress divine compassion towards all people irrespective of race, status or condition. Probably he is combatting a tendency towards elitism that tries to limit God's compassion inappropriately. Whatever Paul and other NT writers say about election, certainly it is integral to early Christian preaching that God desires all to come to a knowledge of the truth.

A second statement of a theological nature immediately follows (5–6). The first part emphasizes the unity of God in a way that would gain the support of both Jews and Christians. But the second statement is specifically Christian in drawing attention to the unique mediatorship of Jesus Christ. The mediator idea is not prominent in Paul, but it comes to the fore in the letter to the Hebrews. Here it is linked with the idea of Jesus giving himself as a *ransom* (6), reminiscent of the words of Jesus in Mk. 10:45. The ransom metaphor is drawn from the slave market, where a slave could obtain his freedom if someone paid the ransom price. Presumably, the *proper time* referred to here is the fullness of time mentioned in Gal.4:4. When Jesus came to bring salvation to humankind, it was the turning point of world history.

Paul's reference to his appointment as a *herald* (7) echoes his constant awareness of the special commission which he had received. The additional reference to his position as a *teacher ... to the Gentiles* points to a strong personal conviction of his special place in God's plans.

In the concluding sentence (8) Paul returns to the theme of public prayer, drawing attention to three important conditions. First, the lifting up of *holy hands* suggests a believing approach, true holiness being attainable only through the righteousness of Christ. Secondly, true prayer cannot exist side by side with anger. Thirdly, prayer and disputing do not go together. Our attitude to others does affect our approach to God.

2:9–15 Advice to Christian women

Since this section follows immediately after the section on public worship, it has been suggested that the discussion about women must be regarded in this light. It seems probable, however, that Paul is thinking of the behaviour of women in a wider context, but the connection with the previous section must not be overlooked.

Paul first considers the matter of dress and ornaments (9–10). It seems that some women were drawing too much attention to themselves by the way they dressed. Bearing in mind the greater freedom that women had as a result of the gospel, there was no doubt need for advice on the way they were to present themselves. Paul urges modesty, decency and propriety, which are all against extravagance. Advice is given about such practical details as hairstyles, jewellery and dress. Paul is not against any of these things, but urges the greater value of a godly life. In other words the *good deeds* are to be more eye-catching than the outward appearance.

The second matter with which Paul deals (11–15) has given rise to much debate, since some have claimed that he is anti-women. But a careful understanding of what he teaches does not support this. If we suppose that women,

newly emancipated through faith in Christ, had begun to dominate men and were in danger of bringing the church into disrepute, Paul's advice becomes more intelligible. Women must first learn *in quietness and full submission* (11). Had Paul experienced unruly interruptions in public worship by women? The prohibition of women teaching men (12) seems to belong to the same context, although Paul here appeals more to what is appropriate and cites the Genesis story of creation.

Two facts are brought out – Adam's priority and Eve's weakness in being deceived. The first (13) points to God's creative act in forming man before woman, although Paul does not here refer to the fact that Eve was intended as man's helper and in no way inferior to him. According to Genesis it was Eve who was first tempted and fell (14), but Adam cannot be absolved of all responsibility. Indeed, in Rom. 5 Paul places the introduction of sin into the world firmly on Adam. Nevertheless, he here sees some significance in the part Eve played in the fall and implies that all women have somehow inherited this disadvantage.

It is v 15, however, which poses the most difficulty. Paul transfers his thought from Eve to women in general. But what does he mean by the words *women will be saved through childbearing*? If no more is meant than that in spite of Eve's part in the fall, childbearing by women will not be adversely affected, this would fit in well with the Genesis account. But the addition of the words *if they continue in faith* are then perplexing, for it cannot be supposed that Christian women are promised any greater safety than others. Another possibility is that the childbearing refers to the special childbearing seen at the birth of Christ, in which case Paul is saying that through Christ will come salvation to women. The difficulty here is that women are in no different position from men as far as the basis of their salvation is concerned, although it may be that Paul only mentions women here because he is reflecting on Eve's part in the fall.

The linking of *faith, love and holiness with propriety* is worth noting, since it provides a concise summary of Christian living. These qualities are certainly not confined to women. The application of these biblical truths to present-day church life causes much dispute. If we say that Paul was culturally conditioned, so that if he were writing today he would emphasize only the equality of the sexes, we make God's revelation dependent on transitory fashion – changing from year to year. And who can tell what Paul would write were he here today? If, on the other hand, we insist on a precise application of each feature of first-century practice, we run the risk of being irrelevant to modern life and even ridiculous. Our task is carefully to discern the basic biblical principles which do not change and apply them sensitively to our present situation, bearing in mind that it is better, in the last resort, to appear ridiculous than to be disobedient to God's loving purposes.

3:1–13 Requirements for church officials

3:1–7 Qualifications of overseers

The word *overseer* is not to be identified with 'bishop', although the later bishops exercised the role of oversight. The idea of an authoritative office such as seen in the role of bishop throughout Christian history does not belong to NT thought. Paul was writing of those whose job it was to supervise, but who did not possess an independent authority. There is no suggestion that there was only one bishop in each church and certainly no suggestion that an overseer, as happened in the case of the later bishops, would supervise several churches. But why does Paul cite a *trustworthy saying* (1)? Since this appears to be a commonly known saying, he was probably here using it to underline the importance of the overseer's office for the benefit of those who were underestimating it. Paul sees the work as a noble task.

Such an office needs the right kind of people to fit it. It must be remembered that the early Christians came from numerous different backgrounds, and this accounts for the seemingly elementary character of some of the requirements, especially the negative ones in v 3. There are conditions about the personal life of prospective candidates. They must be *temperate, self-controlled, respectable* (2). They must be *above reproach*. All these qualities are to be expected in any serious Christian person but especially so in Christian leaders, for anyone whose moral and spiritual qualities do not commend them to their contemporaries are not going to have much influence as Christian ministers, and if they do, it is likely to be destructive.

In addition, the minister's domestic life is equally important – he must be the *husband of one wife* (2) and must *manage his children well* (4). The former requirement would exclude any bigamists, but it is best to interpret the words as a condition that the minister must set a high example in marital relationships. Paul is not here dealing with the problem of those who were polygamists before they became Christians. It must nevertheless be recognized that positions of responsibility within the Christian church require people whose example others can follow.

The second requirement about managing his own family is especially worth noting since Paul

seems to see the home as in some way typifying the church (5). Unruly homes do not offer the right kind of training experience for ruling the church. This is a principle which has often been overlooked when choice of prospective ministers has been made.

Further requirements are mentioned in vs 6 and 7. A *recent convert* is excluded, because of lack of Christian experience. It is worth noting that in the similar list in Titus this requirement is omitted, presumably because the church was so recent that it would have been difficult to apply. Where possible it is clearly undesirable for new Christians to be given too much responsibility until they are established. Paul especially mentions the danger of conceit. *The same judgment as the devil* is probably the best way to take the words which literally mean 'the judgment of the devil', which could possibly be the judgment meted out by the devil. The NIV translation is to be preferred in view of the stress here on pride. A new convert in an exalted position may be tempted to fall into the same conceit as the devil did.

Another requirement is a *good reputation with outsiders.* Paul knows the danger of appointing officials whom their contemporaries will not respect. A great deal of damage has been done by those whose inconsistent living has been noticed and criticized by the non-Christian world. But what is meant by *the devil's trap*? It seems best to understand this as the trap that the devil sets for those who do not match up to their Christian commitment, rather than the trap into which the devil himself fell, *i.e.* pride.

3:8–13 Qualifications of deacons

Paul mentions deacons in conjunction with overseers in Phil.1:1, and it is clear that the two offices were closely connected. Indeed the list of desirable qualities stated here is akin to that for overseers. Again, worthiness of the respect of others is of utmost importance, as are sincerity and general moral standards. Since candidates for both offices must be those *not indulging in much wine*, this suggests that excessive wine drinking was a problem among the people of Ephesus. Of greater importance is that the deacons must be of sound faith (9), a point often overlooked in appointments to the lesser Christian offices. For Paul the theological position was crucial. The testing referred to in v 10 is presumably by the Christian assembly to ensure that the necessary qualities are evident.

V 11 looks like an interlude, and some have suggested that it points to an order of deaconesses. Although such an order is not impossible, the primary reference is probably to deacons' wives (as the NIV). These must be serious in mind and careful in speech lest they detract from their husband's work. The remaining requirements for deacons are closely paralleled in the section on overseers. Does the *excellent standing* (13) mean standing in the sight of the Christian community, or in the sight of outsiders, or in the sight of God? Of these the second seems most likely, not in the sense of providing for future promotion, but in exerting influence. This accords best with the reference to their assurance of faith.

3:14–16 God's household

Here Paul breaks off his direct instructions to describe the nature of the church, putting his teaching into perspective. It is highly likely that Paul had already given the gist of these instructions to Timothy, but he wrote them down so as to give Timothy support during his absence. The use of the *household* metaphor to describe the church echoes v 5 and explains why Paul is concerned that an official should govern his family well. He now enlarges on the illustration by introducing a double metaphor – *pillar and foundation* (15).

Paul is not here laying more stress on the church than on the truth. If the meaning is that the church's job is to bear witness to the truth as well as combating the false teachers, the word translated *foundation* must be understood in the sense of a 'bulwark' set to defend the truth.

The introduction here of what appears to be a hymn is unexpected. But it sums up what Paul describes as *the mystery of godliness* (16). He uses the word *mystery* in the sense of a secret which has now been revealed, but nowhere else does he link it with godliness. In view of his stress on service, he must have in mind the practical aspects of godliness. He assumes that the greatness of the mystery will be self-evident.

There is some question about the opening of the hymn since some texts read 'God' instead of *He*. The gist of the hymn is clearly related to Christ although he is not mentioned. It may be that he was referred to in an earlier part of the hymn, now lost. The first line points to the incarnation. There is also some dispute about the meaning of the second line (*was vindicated by the Spirit*). This could refer to the human spirit of Jesus (in which case the words should be translated 'in the spirit') and the statement would then point to his vindication by God at the resurrection. This would provide a good parallel with the first line. Less probably it could speak of the Holy Spirit as the agent in the vindication.

The third line is also difficult. It could be understood to refer to the glorification of Jesus, although this thought occurs in the sixth line. It could also refer to the triumphant Christ showing himself to the fallen angels, but this does not

fit the context so well. It is not unlikely that a parallel was intended between lines 3 and 6, in which case the former interpretation is to be preferred. Certainly, lines 4 and 5 belong together, the preaching among the Gentiles and the believing in the world both refer to the apostolic ministry illustrated in Acts. It has been suggested that line 5 could be understood as 'throughout the world', but this is less likely. The concluding line *was taken up in glory* could refer to the ascension, but this would be strange after the reference to preaching. Perhaps all that is intended is to end with the glory of the Christ who is preached.

4:1–16 Approaching threats

4:1–5 The nature of the threats

There is here another prediction about false teachers, who are to come *in later times* (*i.e.* later than the apostle's own time). We note first that the Spirit is the revealer of these (1). He brings to mind the teaching of Jesus (*cf.* Mk. 13:22). Paul himself had previously been led by the Spirit to expect false teachers (*cf.* 2 Thes. 2:1–12). There is a connection here with the hymn just quoted in that the false teaching will challenge its substance. Paul connects the opposing teaching with deceiving spirits and demons, and sets out in the clearest possible way the contrast between the Spirit mentioned in 3:16 and 4:1 and the Satanic activity described immediately afterwards.

What is said about the false teaching here is threefold (2–3). First, it comes through hypocritical agents. They are propagating falsehood instead of truth, although the suggestion is that they think they are advancing truth. Their consciences are so hardened that they have ceased to be able to distinguish between the two. The second feature is the prohibition of marriage, and the third is the insistence on certain food restrictions. These features were common among groups which stressed the value of abstinence as a means of salvation. Paul's answer to this gives a positive rebuke to those who refuse what God has intended. Marriage is an ordinance of God, and foods are provided by the Creator. Believers should receive it all with thanksgiving (4). This is in harmony with the Jewish requirement that before the eating of food there should be a benediction. Any teaching which involves a niggardly view of God is to be rejected. If *the word of God* and *prayer* in v 5 refer to the saying of grace before meals, the reference to the word would be to the use of Scripture in the grace. But the allusion may be to the creative word of God in Gn.1.

4:6–16 How Timothy is to deal with the threats

What Paul advises Timothy has relevance for all servants of God called on to deal with wrong teaching, although the advice here is of special value for dealing with errors similar to those Paul is countering. Timothy is to point out to the Christian brethren what Paul has just said about the approaching threat (6). In order to do this effectively Timothy must draw on his knowledge of the truth. (For an echo of this *cf.* 2 Tim. 3:15, where his early training is mentioned.) To this must be added the value of the tuition he has received from the apostle. Paul assumes that Timothy will know how to deal with the false teachers. He thinks it necessary to warn Timothy about wasting his time with myths and tales which have no basis in truth (7). Clearly, Timothy will require wisdom to distinguish between what he needs to point out and what he needs to avoid. Paul makes a comparison between physical and spiritual exercise as a comment on training in godliness (8). Although the value of the former is recognized (was Timothy inclined to neglect it or to make too much of it?), it is surpassed in value by godliness, which has a future as well as a present value.

A problem arises over the *trustworthy saying* in v 9, for it is not certain whether this relates to v 8 or v 10. V 10 contains the more theological statement and could well have formed a proverbial saying. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the second half of v 8 has the nature of a proverbial statement and that v 10 is really a development of this. The two verbs *labour* and *strive* are both strong verbs and suggest that godliness deserves the utmost effort in its pursuit. When Paul says that God is *the Saviour of all men* and then singles out believers in a special way, he seems to be using the word *Saviour* in the sense of both preservation and spiritual salvation. In 2:3–4 Paul stresses the universal scope of salvation, but here he focuses on the need for faith for its realization. The theme of hope in God is a frequent one in Paul's writings. Here the basis of the hope is *the living God*, which is reassuring since there is no possibility of any change in him.

The remainder of this section is directly addressed to Timothy. Irrespective of his personality, there is to be a note of authority in his teaching (11). The apostle is clearly anxious for Timothy's teaching to convey the same kind of authority as his own. But he recognizes there may be a problem owing to Timothy's youth (12). But youth need be no hindrance provided the behaviour inspires confidence. Paul gives guidance here in five areas. *Speech* is important

but must be linked with *life*, that is a combination of right words and right actions. Add to this combination of outward qualities, the inward qualities of *love, faith* and *purity* and this sums up the *example* of an acceptable Christian life.

V 13 recommends three public activities. The *reading of Scripture* is presumably public reading with a view to instruction of the hearers, few of whom would have been capable of reading for themselves. This practice carried on the procedure of the synagogue, where public reading of Scripture formed an important part in Jewish worship. The word translated *preaching* represents the Greek word for 'exhortation', while the word for *teaching* is in all probability related to the passing on of Christian doctrine. All three of these activities are of the greatest relevance to the Christian pastor.

Following these positive recommendations there comes a negative one – *Do not neglect your gift* (14). The *gift* (*charisma*) is connected with the endowment of Timothy by the Holy Spirit at his setting aside for service. While this took place at the laying on of hands, the most important aspect was the gift itself. There may be a suggestion here that Timothy was not making the fullest use of his spiritual gifts, but since the word is in the singular it is best to suppose that his gift of ministry is particularly in mind. The laying of hands on Saul and Barnabas at the commencement of their missionary labours (Acts 13:1–3) furnishes the background for the present statement, since it was also connected with prophecy and the Spirit. Timothy is reminded of the occasion when he was set aside for ministry and is urged to take courage from it (see also 2 Tim.1:6).

In vs 15–16 Paul suggests ways by which Timothy can develop the gift mentioned in v 14. Paul puts emphasis here on wholeheartedness. The word translated *be diligent* could mean meditate, but the more usual meaning is 'practice', which draws attention to the value of persistence, an echo of the idea of athletic training alluded to in v 6. The Christian minister cannot avoid being in the public eye, and whatever progress or otherwise that he makes will be witnessed. Paul is expecting Timothy to make real progress.

The watching and persevering of v 16 reemphasize the same point. Paul is not urging self-examination but constant alertness, both in life and doctrine. The two things belong together. Right doctrine without a godly life is of no value; while a godly life without right doctrine is not possible. Paul was aware of the danger of neglecting his own salvation (*cf.* 1 Cor.9:27). If the minister does not take care to persevere, others are unlikely to be influenced by him.

5:1 – 6:2 Instructions about various classes

5:1–2 Various age groups

A general principle is here set out which applies to people of different ages. Timothy is to treat other people as he would members of his own family. This principle excludes the idea of superiority and promotes a more natural approach. The verb *rebuke* used here is a strong one implying censure, and this is to be avoided with older men. Paul adds a caution about the younger women, where the maintenance of purity in relationships is essential.

5:3–16 Instructions about widows

5:3–8 Needy widows. Paul is concerned first about widows with no means of support. At a time when there was no welfare state the alleviation of poverty was a real problem and Paul recognized that the Christians had a responsibility in this. But if a widow had a family to support her it would clearly have been wrong for the church to intervene. Indeed, family support is pleasing to God. Social responsibility is seen as a religious requirement. The teaching here is in line with the fifth commandment, requiring the honouring of parents. In v 5 Paul is describing a needy widow of a particularly devout kind who is prepared to rely on God. This description is no doubt intended to contrast vividly with the pleasure-loving widow of v 6.

Paul was aware that there were widows who lived for pleasure. He certainly did not expect the church to provide for such a life-style, particularly if any element of immorality is implied by the words. The idea of being *dead even while she lives* is paradoxical, but the deadness is spiritual. Timothy is to give clear instructions in such matters so as to help such women to avoid blame. In this essentially practical issue Paul is not only concerned for the individual but also for the impact of a bad example on the believers as a whole (7–8). Failure of Christians to provide for their own families is seen to have disastrous consequences – a denial of the faith and an example worse than unbelievers. In no stronger terms could Paul have expressed the importance of social responsibilities within Christian families.

5:9–10 Widows in Christian work. It is not clear whether there was a distinct order of widows which performed specific duties, but the statement here about the enrolment of widows over sixty might suggest that. The age limit is somewhat perplexing, since Paul surely did not mean that no widows under that age were entitled to the church's help. The

enrolment must have been for some kind of specific Christian work. The past experience required is of an essentially practical kind. It reflected on the vital social impact of Christian women in the early church.

5:11–16 Younger widows. The younger widows presented a different problem because of the possibility of re-marriage. This excluded them from the official list mentioned in v 9. There is no suggestion here that any younger widow who was poverty-stricken would not qualify for some help. Paul seems to be thinking of those who offer for Christian work (as *dedication to Christ* suggests; v 11) but who would be placed in a difficult position if they wanted to marry. This is the understanding of *their first pledge* in v 12, that is their commitment to some kind of Christian work. If they forsook this to marry they would incur censure (*judgment*). The twin dangers of idleness and gossiping may be connected with their visiting programme (13). In other words, they could not be trusted with confidences, although why young widows are specially singled out for this warning is not clear.

The positive advice for younger widows to marry and to devote themselves to domestic responsibilities (14) may seem to contradict Paul's preference for the unmarried state (*cf.* 1 Cor. 7:8–9), but it should be remembered that these widows would have been classed among those who could not 'control themselves'. Again Paul's major concern is to avoid reproach on the church. The reference to the *enemy* (14) and to *Satan* (15) points clearly to the possible results of the younger widows acting in an unwise way. Satan is ever ready to seize opportunities to slander God's work.

Paul again states here what he has already said in vs 4 and 8 to the effect that relatives should help widows, rather than that the church should be burdened (14–16). The responsibility for helping widows in the family was not necessarily left to women (as v 16 might imply). Some of the ancient scribes realized the difficulty and emended the text to include the men.

5:17–20 Elders

This is the first mention of elders in this letter, but it is clear from the context that they are church officials and not simply men of advanced age. The term is sufficiently wide to include both overseers and deacons, already mentioned in 1:3. The *double honour* (17) is somewhat perplexing. It would seem that some kind of remuneration is in mind, and the *double* could stand for generous provision. On the other hand, the use of the word honour may suggest that more than remuneration is in mind, and that respect as well as salary is included. The quotations (18; one from Dt.25:4 and the other paralleled in Lk.10:7) are intended to support the idea of reward for work done, a principle which has not always been followed in the history of the Christian church. This linking of an OT quotation with a saying of Jesus is significant since it reflects the high regard in which the teaching of Jesus was held.

Yet Paul recognizes that more than financial support is needed. An adequate moral standard must also be maintained. But care must be taken over any accusations (19–20). The *two or three witnesses* are to ensure some kind of protection against false accusation from a single individual. This advice follows the normal Jewish practice. Where evidence for malpractice is forthcoming it must be presented publicly, *i.e.* before the whole church. Paul again shows his concern for the reputation of the church. Discipline is not only for the benefit of the individual but to provide a warning for others.

5:21–25 Personal advice to Timothy

The charge in v 21 is expressed in a surprisingly strong manner. Why the solemnity? Perhaps Timothy was not too strong at doing things without *partiality* or *favouritism*. Perhaps he was too weak to take the advice in vs 19–20. In the light of a similar strong charge in 2 Tim. 4:1 (but without reference to angels) we may wonder why *angels* are mentioned here. It is possibly an allusion to the belief that angels watched over human affairs (see *e.g.* Mt.4:6, quoting Ps.91:11–12; Mt.18:10).

The warning against *hasty* laying on of hands (22) could refer to the ordination of elders or to the restoring of those who have had to be disciplined. The second part of the verse suggests that those who lay hands on unworthy people share the responsibility for their unworthiness. The personal advice to Timothy to keep himself *pure* reinforces this, for purity is required of those who lay the hands as well as those on whom the hands are laid.

The advice about purity is immediately followed by advice about drinking wine (23), and this may suggest that Paul may have been afraid that Timothy would get caught up in the ascetic practices of the false teachers. There may be, however, no connection between this verse and the preceding one. The reference to water-drinking is possibly because Timothy's ailments had been caused by contaminated water or perhaps because he was under tension. We do not know. Paul does not advise against drinking any water and suggests the supplementing of *a little wine*. Timothy's health was evidently not robust.

It would seem that vs 24–25 follow from v 22. Paul mentions two different aspects of sins.

Some sins are easily recognizable, and no-one is surprised at the subsequent judgment on them. Others are described as those which *trail behind them.* These sins may not be at once apparent but will nonetheless be revealed later. The judgment here is most probably the judgment of God rather than the judgment of Timothy and others. The setting of *good deeds* in contrast to *sins* is intended to highlight the need for caution in assessing good deeds as well as sins.

6:1–21 Miscellaneous instructions

6:1–2 About slaves and masters

In the early history of the church there were many Christian slaves and some Christian slave owners in the communities, and it was essential that right relationships should be maintained where both slaves and masters were on equal terms within the Christian fellowship. On the one hand, some Christian slaves continued to serve under non-Christian masters, and these were required to treat those masters with *full respect.* As so often in this letter, the concern is to maintain both the honour of the name of God and of the Christian doctrine. In these early times any action or attitude which caused others to think less of what the church stood for was to be avoided.

It was perhaps even more difficult for Christian slaves with Christian masters to strike the right balance, since they were also Christian brothers and sisters. But Paul suggests that in such cases the slave should give better service because a brother in Christ was to benefit from it. On the other hand, it was possible that the slave himself would also benefit. This is not to deny that the system itself should have been challenged, but in those days it was not immediately practical to overturn it.

6:3–5 About false teachers

Paul cannot leave the subject of those who are leading others astray, and he comes back to the theme here. He assumes that there will be a clear dividing mark between what is *false* and what is *sound.* This is salutary in any age where there has been a blurring of understanding of Christian doctrine. Paul has no place for compromise. His description of the false teachers is specific – they are conceited, they lack understanding, they have an unhealthy interest in controversies, and they are thoroughly evil in their speech and attitudes (4). He could not have been more devastating. What he says illustrates a universal principle – that teachers without adequate understanding or moral calibre are not likely to maintain sound doctrine. Further, where godliness is seen as a means of financial gain, it will never lead to truth. But the matter of gain is a theme of its own and Paul comes to this next.

6:6–10 About money

The important element in v 6 is contentment. Godliness in itself brings great satisfaction. The Christian gospel provides an adequate basis for contentment. This translates the idea of gain into spiritual terms and provides a fitting introduction to the discussion of money. The reference to food and clothing (8) echoes the words of Jesus in Mt.6:25–34 in a passage on worry, the antithesis of contentment. Material possessions are seen in their true light, only in view of their irrelevance either at entry to or departure from this world (7). There is a parallel here to Jb.1:21.

The quest for riches brings with it *temptation, a trap* and many *harmful desires* (9). Looked at in the light of death the whole process of seeking riches looks foolish. The consequence of *ruin and destruction* (*i.e.* irretrievable loss) shows the futility of the pursuit of wealth for its own sake. When Paul describes the love of money as *a root of all kinds of evil* (10), it is important to draw a distinction between money itself and the love of it. As a commodity there is nothing wrong with it, but when it becomes the object of overriding desire it leads to evil. There is no suggestion that love of money is the sole or even main cause of evil. Paul's concern here is to point out the spiritual risks involved in money-grabbing. This is what he means by wandering from the faith. Paul does want us to see, however, that wherever any kind of evil occurs, money easily gets mixed up with it. Illicit sex becomes the business of prostitution; the problem of drug abuse is as strongly empowered by money as it is by addiction; the love of power is inevitably tied to the deployment of wealth, and so on. It is significant that Paul speaks of those concerned as having *pierced themselves* with griefs. The results are seen as self-inflicted – the inevitable result of loving the wrong thing.

6:11–16 About seeking the right things

Here is Paul's solemn charge to Timothy himself. There is both a negative and a positive side (11). The fleeing *from all this,* although primarily referring to the seeking after wealth, probably includes all the previous advice about what to avoid. The positive side is expressed in spiritual terms. The six words of v 11 sum up the character of the Christian of which Timothy is to be an example. Paul adds to this another positive appeal – the Christian life involves a fight (12). When Paul urges Timothy to *take hold of the eternal life to which you were called* he is thinking more of the final enjoyment of that eternal life rather than of its initial acceptance.

It is perhaps surprising to find a reference to Pontius Pilate in v 13, but the historic event of the trial of Jesus provides the best example of the kind of *good confession* which Paul wants to see in Timothy. The fact that he gives a *charge* shows how seriously he regards the matter of Timothy's behaviour. *This command* has given rise to various suggestions. Some see it as referring to some kind of baptismal or ordination charge, but this does not fit the context. It may refer to the advice of vs 11–12 or to the whole of Paul's advice to Timothy in this letter. The reference here to the *appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ* (14) gives a future aspect to the preceding statement. The idea of being *without spot or blame* at that appearing can be paralleled elsewhere in Paul's letters (*cf.* 1 Cor.1:8; Phil. 2:15–16; 1 Thes.3:13; 5:23).

The insertion of a doxology at this point (15–16) is typical of Paul. But there are features here which are unusual. The use of the word *blessed* is not found elsewhere in Paul's letters outside the Pastorals. Indeed the whole doxology has the appearance of a Christian hymn which Paul is quoting. The description of God as *only Ruler* is unexpected as the word *Ruler* usually refers to a prince rather than a king, but here it clearly carries a unique meaning as the word *only* shows. Since *King of kings and Lord of lords* occurs in Rev.17:14 and 19:16, it may have been a well-known Christian expression. There are parallels in the OT (*cf.* Dt.10:17, Ps.136:3). The use of the word *immortal* for God has already appeared in 1:17. Is Paul implying that no-one else has immortality? He seems to mean that God alone is inherently immortal, whereas all other immortality is derived. The idea of God as living *in unapproachable light* is probably derived from Ps.104.2, but Paul may have had in mind the vivid description of God's glory in Ex. 33:17–23, since Moses was informed that he could not see God. The combining of *honour* and *might* ('power') in a doxology is also found in Rev. 5:13.

6:17–19 About wealth again

The previous section concerned those desiring to be rich, but this concentrates on those who are already rich. Paul points out two dangers – arrogance and dependence on money. It is too easy for those who have material possessions to imagine that money will secure anything, and a true hope in God is ousted. There is no suggestion here that riches themselves corrupt or that people should not enjoy what God has given. But recognition that everything has come from God would deal with the dangers. The positive demands on wealthy people are clear – there must be goodness and generosity, qualities which normally accompany each other.

The statement in v 19 is reminiscent of the teaching of Jesus in Mt.6:20. There is here a mixture of metaphors between treasure and a good foundation. But the contrast is clear between life propped up by material resources and true life which will continue in the age to come.

6:20–21 Concluding words to Timothy

Timothy has already been charged to guard what has been entrusted to him. Paul evidently feels it is of such importance that he must underline it. Again he warns against getting involved with the false teaching. The words *falsely called knowledge* may echo the claim of the teachers to special 'knowledge' in the same way as the later Gnostics. The words translated *opposing ideas* was used by the later heretic Marcion to describe his teaching. But it was no doubt similarly used at a much earlier date, and certainly the false teaching alluded to in Colossians shows that similar teaching was current in Paul's lifetime. The fact that Paul describes the false teaching as a wandering from the faith shows it to be a false trail. It is noticeable that the concluding greeting *Grace be with you* is in the plural, which may suggest others besides Timothy were included. But it was not unknown for the plural to be used for an individual.

2 TIMOTHY

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1:1–18 Encouragement to be faithful

1:1–2 Greeting

There is a slight difference between the opening of this letter and that of 1 Timothy. Here Paul refers to his apostleship as by *the will of God*, a fact which he is never tired of repeating. When he adds *according to the promise of life*, the words have a double meaning, referring to a future hope as well as to a present reality. The description of Timothy as *my dear son* adds a note of particular intimacy.

1:3–5 Thanksgiving

Whereas it was normal in letters to include a thanksgiving, here alone in the Pastorals does Paul do so. His mention of his *forefathers* shows the importance he attaches to the Jewish heritage through which the Christian faith came. It is typical of the apostle to assure his readers of his constant prayers for them. It may seem somewhat exaggerated for him to claim to do this day and night, but see Acts 20:31 for a similar all-inclusive claim. There is no denying the importance that Paul attached to prayer. Included in his thanksgiving is remembrance of Timothy's tears and a recollection of his sincere faith. Those tears of Timothy speak of his strong attachment to the apostle, which is clearly returned by Paul himself. A reunion is highly desirable. Where emotions are strong, *tears* and *joy* can exist side by side.

Paul was evidently acquainted with Timothy's mother and grandmother, for he knew of their faith (5). Although it is not impossible that Jewish faith is meant, it makes better sense of the context if Christian faith is in mind. We may at least conclude from 3:14 that Timothy's home environment was not only devout but well governed by understanding of the Scriptures. Nevertheless, Paul is convinced that Timothy should not rely on parental faith but possess a faith of his own.

1:6–10 Developing the gift

Although Paul uses a metaphor drawn from the fanning of the embers of a waning fire to encourage Timothy to develop his gift, we may not infer from this that Timothy's faith was on the wane. Paul may have been thinking that he needed stimulating to put to the fullest use the *gift* received at his setting aside for the ministry. This gift was clearly connected with the Holy Spirit, as v 14 shows, and was therefore more than a natural gift. It is worth noting that even with the gift of the Spirit some human co-operation is needed if the flame is to be fanned. That Timothy was of a timid disposition seems clear from v 7, whereas the Spirit brings *power, love* and *self-discipline*. The Spirit does not turn a timid man into a powerful personality, but he provides the resources necessary for each situation.

The next section (8–10) shows something of the application of the last. Timidity is apt to foster shame and Paul warns against this. The appeal to Timothy to join him *in suffering for the gospel* is a poignant reminder that Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter. The mere mention of the gospel leads the apostle to reflect on God's power and salvation. He connects up several themes here – God's power, salvation, holy living, God's purpose and grace. The statement that it is *not because of anything we have done* is characteristic of Paul's awareness that salvation is all of grace. Timothy is reminded that suffering in the cause of such a truth is to be expected, but it will be by *the power of God* not in one's own strength.

Paul develops the idea of grace (9–10). It is centred *in Christ Jesus*; it is of ancient origin (*before the beginning of time*); it is revealed through the incarnate Christ who has destroyed death. Paul is clear that all this has come about, not by human efforts but by the free favour of God. His concept of the gospel is rooted in God's provision of *life and immortality*. These

wonderful provisions of God have become clear through the gospel, which has thrown light upon them.

1:11–12 Paul's personal testimony

Why should Paul need to remind Timothy of his commission to preach the gospel? He has also mentioned this in 1 Tim. 2:7. It may be that the reminder is intended to encourage Timothy. If the great apostle, with his clear sense of mission, has nevertheless been called on to suffer, Timothy must not be surprised if the same happens to him. V 12 is a great affirmation which has proved an inspiration to many. Having urged Timothy in v 8 not to be ashamed, Paul now affirms that he himself is *not ashamed* of his suffering. He is buoyed up by the conviction that God is *able to guard* what Paul has entrusted to him. His assurance here is based on his personal knowledge of God. Paul leaves no room for lack of assurance. His conviction here amounts to a virtual certainty.

But what has Paul *entrusted* to God? The Greek speaks of 'my deposit'. Some have seen it to relate to what God has entrusted to Paul, *i.e.* his commission or his doctrine, and this would be in agreement with the use of the same word in v 14. But the preceding passage would be better served by regarding Paul's 'deposit' as something Paul is entrusting to God, *i.e.* himself and the success and continuation of his mission, everything in fact that is dear to him. The words *for that day* must refer to the day when Paul knows he must give account of his stewardship. He was living and working in the light of the final day of reckoning, but was sure that he could entrust the result to God. This was intended to bring real encouragement to Timothy.

1:13–14 A charge to Timothy

Paul is conscious still of the threat of the false teachers and is mindful of giving Timothy support to combat the threat. The most urgent thing is for Timothy to *keep* (lit. 'hold') *as the pattern of sound teaching*, defined as *what you heard from me*. Paul need not be implying here that this amounts simply to passing on his own teaching, for he makes clear elsewhere that teaching was passed on to him (*cf.* 1 Cor.15:3). Timothy's task is to *guard* the deposit in the sense of keeping it safe. Paul is acutely aware that this can be achieved only through the help of the Spirit, who is the true guardian of the truth.

1:15–18 Paul and various associates

His reliance on Timothy reminds the apostle of his experience with certain others, some of whom had not proved so dependable. He assumes Timothy will be aware that *everyone in the province of Asia* had *deserted* him. Such widespread desertion must have been traumatic for Paul. The special mention of *Phygelus and Hermogenes* (15) may suggest that these were the ringleaders.

Onesiphorus had been much more encouraging. Paul speaks of him in the past tense, and it is not clear whether he was still around, since the reference is to *the household of Onesiphorus*. But there is no need to separate Onesiphorus from his household. Paul mentions several ways in which this man helped him, and especially he mentions that he was not ashamed of Paul's chains and had actually searched hard for him in Rome. Twice Paul prays for mercy for him (16, 18), the second time relating it to *that day*, which must refer to the judgment day of Christ. In view of the reference to Onesiphorus's help at Ephesus, it would seem that he was a consistent helper of the apostle.

2:1–26 Special advice to Timothy

2:1–13 An appeal to Timothy

2:1–7 A call to be strong. In some ways Timothy is to contrast strongly with those who have deserted the apostle. The idea of being strong occurs in Eph.6:10. In view of the opposition to the gospel, a strong approach is always necessary. But the strength is *in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*, which means with the support of God's unmerited favour, not in reliance on natural ability. It is not clear what Paul has in mind when mentioning *many witnesses*. Some see a reference to the witnesses at Timothy's ordination, but the translation *in the presence of* is not the most natural understanding of the Greek preposition used here. It is more likely that the reference is to the many witnesses who could testify to the kind of teaching that Paul had given to Timothy. The instruction to entrust it to other teachers is important for our understanding of the development of the early church. Specially selected men who possessed the two qualities of faithfulness and ability to teach were to be set apart for the task of handing on the teaching. Paul intended that this important task should be properly regulated.

The three illustrations which follow (3–6) are designed to encourage Timothy to persevere even if the task is difficult. The military metaphor shows the duty of singleness of purpose; the athletic one the need for abiding by the rules; and the agricultural one the certainty of some reward for the hard work involved. All three metaphors, drawn from everyday life, complement each other. Paul urges such reflection on this because experience would throw further light on it, as the Lord gave insight (7).

The following words suggest that Paul is here speaking from his own experience. The passage of nearly two thousand years has not blunted the sharpness of these everyday parallels.

2:8–10 Reflections on suffering for the gospel. In v 8 Paul gives a very brief summary of his gospel. It consists of three elements: *Jesus* was the *Christ*, God's anointed one, the Messiah; he was *raised from the dead* (a statement which naturally involves his death); he was *descended from David.* The only other place where Paul mentions this fact is Rom. 1:3. It may have been included here to draw attention to the fulfilment of God's promises. As an isolated statement it would be inadequate as a summary of the gospel, but Timothy would be well able to fill in the gaps.

Paul sees his own chains as contrasted with the unchained character of God's word (9). By this he must mean that in spite of his own chains, the gospel will nevertheless be preached by others. When in v 10, Paul states that the reason for his endurance is *for the sake of the elect*, he sees his own sufferings against the background of those who would come to faith in Christ as a result of the preaching of the gospel. Perhaps his reference to *the salvation that is in Christ Jesus* is intended to distinguish it from the kind of salvation offered by the false teachers. The words *in Christ Jesus* not only define the salvation as Christian, but also show it to be the possession of all those who are in Christ. Note that elsewhere Paul links salvation with *glory* (*cf.* 2 Thes. 2:13–14).

2:11–13 A trustworthy saying. It is clear that the saying here quoted consists of the following verses, since these verses are in rhythmic form. They look like part of a Christian hymn (*cf.* 1 Tim.3:16 and 6:16–17). But what is the connection between this hymn and the preceding verses? Possibly it follows on from the thought of future glory. The four sections of the hymn speak of a future which will offset the present sufferings. The 'dying with him' is reminiscent of Rom.6:8, which uses the expression of baptism. The linking of dying with living represents the Christian's identification with Christ's death and resurrection.

The second statement about endurance connects with v 10 and brings the assurance of future victory. The thought is exactly parallel to Rom.8:17. The warning about disowning him and being disowned by him echoes the warning of Jesus in Mk.10:33. The concluding statement, however, is reassuring. Christ's faithfulness is not dependent on our faithfulness, because he cannot act contrary to his own nature. This hymn therefore ends on an optimistic note, based on the character of Christ. If, as suggested above, this is part of a fuller hymn, we cannot guess what the missing parts contained. But Paul was content to quote that part which served his immediate purpose of reassuring Timothy.

2:14–26 Becoming an approved workman

The *these things* in v 14 must be more than the truth of the hymn in vs 11–13. It includes all the teaching that Paul has given Timothy in this letter. That Paul treats this injunction very seriously is seen in the words *before God.* The apostle is deeply conscious that quibbles about words are a waste of time and wished to warn Timothy against this. It is not always recognized that trivial debates are harmful, but Paul uses a strong word here (*ruins*), which emphasizes the disastrous effect on others. V 15 is a gem of positive advice to the person of God. The aim is to produce an *approved* workman (*i.e.* approved by God). This requires effort – yet no-one can do more than his or her best. There are two requirements – an unashamed approach and a right handling of the word of truth. The latter will reinforce the former. The Greek verb translated *correctly handles* really means cutting a straight road and suggests straightforward exegesis. This must be the aim of all true teachers of the word. 'Reading into' the text what is clearly not there is of help to nobody but is depressingly common.

The thought of a right understanding of the word leads Paul to reflect again on those who deviate from it (16–19). The threatening alternative teaching, described as *godless chatter* and compared to *gangrene* in its effects, must be avoided. The example of *Hymenaeus and Philetus* is cited and the gist of their error stated – *that the resurrection had already taken place.* It is noteworthy as an unusual instance in the Pastorals of specific false teaching being mentioned. In spite of the harmful effects of this kind of teaching, Paul stresses the positive truth that *God's solid foundation stands firm.* A question arises about the identity of the *foundation.* Is it the church as a whole, the Ephesian church in particular, or the whole truth of God, including his saving work? The third possibility is to be preferred, although elsewhere Paul uses the metaphor in relation to the church. It would seem that the inscriptions referred to in v 19 are from Nu.16:5,26, although the second is not a precise quotation and could come from Is. 52:11. The 'seal' is used elsewhere by Paul as a sign that something is true (*cf.* Rom. 4:11; 1 Cor. 9:2).

The illustration in vs 20–21 continues the building metaphor in v 19. But Paul now concentrates on the utensils used in a great house. The various materials out of which they are made stand for different purposes, some noble,

others ignoble. The application here is somewhat confused, for wooden vessels are as necessary as golden and in fact are more frequently used. But Paul thinks of Christian workers as precious in God's sight. Yet what does Paul mean by cleansing from ignoble use? Perhaps the best explanation is that Paul is still thinking of Hymenaeus and Philetus (*cf.* 1 Cor. 5:7 for a parallel use of the verb meaning to purge or cleanse). Here Paul is looking at the situation positively. Note the descriptions, *holy, useful* and *prepared*, which show the characteristics of *an instrument for noble purposes.* Paul clearly has a high view of the ministry.

The last paragraph of this section (22–26) points out the general nature of the behaviour of the servant of God. Again the negative (*flee evil desires*, avoid *foolish arguments*) is linked with the positive (*pursue righteousness* and other virtues). Paul has already made a similar contrast in 1 Tim. 6:11. Here he expresses a corporate aspect *along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart, i.e.* all who profess to be Christians. Again Paul urges against quarrelling (24), and again adds positive advice which includes attitudes (kindness and lack of resentment) and ability (gift of teaching). A gentle approach is urged towards those who oppose, in order to bring about a positive result. Paul knows that gentleness cannot produce repentance but that God can grant this if a conciliatory attitude is adopted. He expresses the desired result in a positive form (to lead them *to a knowledge of the truth*) and also in a negative form (*to escape from the trap of the devil*).

The concluding statement (26) has led to much discussion. The Greek is not clear because two different pronouns are used meaning 'him' and 'his'. If no distinction is intended, both would refer to the devil. But another interpretation is possible in that 'his will' may refer to the will of God, who is also seen to have taken captive those who escape from the devil. But this is difficult because it implies that those who escape one snare fall into another. A third possibility is to take the word in the sense of being taken captive by the devil to do God's will, thus distinguishing the pronouns. But this seems a strange idea and the first interpretation is to be preferred.

3:1–17 Predictions and charges

3:1–9 Predictions concerning the last days

1–4 Paul not infrequently mentions the *last days*, by which he seems to mean the time immediately preceding the consummation of this age. But elsewhere in the NT the last days represent the beginning of the Christian era (see Acts 2:17–21; Heb. 1:1). There is clearly a close connection between the present and the future since although in this passage Paul speaks of the false teachers in the future, he has previously referred to them in the present. He is most concerned about the moral degeneracy which sets in as a consequence of wrong teaching. In the list which occurs in vs 2–4 there is a mixture of wrong actions and wrong attitudes. The contrast between the first and the last words in the list brings out vividly the difference between love of self and love of God. This list shows, in fact, the disastrous consequences of self-centredness. There are several words here which point to arrogance – *boastful, proud, abusive ... brutal ... conceited.* The worst feature is that these people claim some *form of godliness*, pretending to be religious but having no intention of putting their beliefs into practice. The mere form without the power is highly damaging. It is no wonder that Paul urges Timothy to have *nothing to do with them* (5). This shows that he is thinking of a problem which is imminent.

6–7 After the list Paul comments on other features which will need noting. The methods of these false teachers are insidious as the striking expression *worm their way into homes* shows. Moreover their selection of gullible people as recipients is characteristic of most false teachers. Here *weak-willed women* are singled out who are *loaded down with sins.* This suggests that the women concerned were so stricken in their consciences that they would turn to anyone for help, although clearly not motivated towards the good. These women seem to have had a desire for knowledge, but were incapable of arriving at the truth. It may be supposed that they were seeking sensational experiences. The false teachers are not themselves able to pass on knowledge of the truth, since they are deficient in their own understanding of it. The picture Paul paints here is relevant in any age in which false teachers are operating.

8–9 The reference to *Jannes and Jambres* (8) is interesting since they are referred to nowhere else in the Bible, although they do occur in the Targum of Jonathan on Ex. 7:11. (The targums were interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, written in Aramaic, though probably most were composed later than Paul's letter to Timothy.) By Paul's time it was presumably common knowledge that two of Pharoah's magicians bore these names. The similarity between these magicians and the current false teachers is that both opposed the truth and are consequently to be rejected. As in the case of all false teachers there is an assurance that their supposed progress is no more than illusion. Their ultimate folly will become *clear to everyone*, even if there may be an interval of time before this happens.

Paul is convinced that error cannot triumph in the end.

3:10–17 Further charges to Timothy

In this section Paul's references to Timothy stand in strong contrast to the description of the false teachers in the preceding section. This is brought out by the emphatic pronoun *You.* Timothy is first given an historical reminder (10–12). He has had the advantage of observing Paul's teaching and his manner of life. The fact that Paul notes that Timothy knows all about his teaching should caution us against drawing any unwarranted assumptions from the absence of some of Paul's great themes from the Pastoral Letters, as if this could be an argument against his being the author. It is worth noting moreover that the reference to those spiritual qualities (*faith, patience, love, endurance*) which Paul had shown are the very qualities that he has already urged on Timothy himself (*cf.* 1 Tim. 6:11). As to his sufferings, Paul cites the incidents on his first missionary journey, presumably because it was at that time that he first made Timothy's acquaintance. Timothy would vividly remember what Paul had had to endure and it is not impossible that the experience had been a powerful factor in persuading Timothy to become involved in the work of the gospel. When Paul says *Yet the Lord rescued me from them all*, Timothy would know from personal observation how true that was.

From a reference to his own experience of persecution, Paul assures Timothy that anyone who sets out to live a godly life will be persecuted (12). In this he is doing no more than repeating the teaching of Jesus. Paul knows that impostors will continue in this age. It is of the nature of deceivers to go *from bad to worse* (13). Once the process has started it is difficult to stop. Those who deceive others end up deceiving themselves. This is true at all stages in the development of false teaching.

Again Paul draws a strong contrast between these imposters and Timothy, who is given encouragement to prevent him from being deceived. Basically he must continue in what he has learned and knows from personal conviction (14). Such advice is applicable to every Christian leader. Naturally the source of the imparted knowledge is important – Timothy had not only had the advantage of learning much about the Christian gospel from the apostles, but he had been taught the Scriptures since his earliest years. This emphasis on the Scriptures is important here because Paul himself based so much on the testimony of Scripture. He is not expecting that Timothy will rely simply on what he has learned from Paul, without backing it up from Scriptures. There is a reminder here that a good reliable background of instruction is indispensable for the minister of the gospel.

It should be noted that in v 15, Paul uses the expression *the holy Scriptures*, drawing special attention to its sacred character, presumably in contrast to the secular sources of the false teaching which he has just mentioned. An important aspect is the function of Scripture to *make wise for salvation.* This could be abundantly illustrated from the many times in which Paul in his letters appeals to Scripture in his expositions of God's work of salvation in Christ.

V 16 sets out a clear statement about the character of Scripture and its usefulness. But the precise meaning has been much disputed. Some have questioned whether the Greek word *graphē* necessarily refers to Scripture. It could mean any writings. But the use of the term in the NT to denote Scripture is well established. But does the term refer to the whole of Scripture or to only a part? The use of the word *all* is determinative. If *all* here means 'every' it would be possible to understand it of separate parts of Scripture. But parallel uses in the NT suggest that 'all' is the correct translation. That being so, Paul is assuming that Scripture in its entirety is *God-breathed.* But why does he need to inform Timothy of this? It would seem better to suppose that the main point of the passage is not so much the inspiration of Scripture as its profitableness. Timothy would know of its inspiration, and this would enhance its usefulness. The four functions of Scripture cover a wide range from imparting doctrine to challenging behaviour and training in righteousness. These functions are still the valid purpose of Scripture and are vital in equipping *the man of God*, a term which stands particularly for all Christian teachers, but is applicable to every Christian worker. Note the significant stress on thoroughness in preparation for the work of God.

4:1–22 Paul's farewell to Timothy

4:1–5 A concluding charge

In view of the fact that he is facing the end of his life, Paul wants to express himself with the utmost solemnity. The charge is connected with three facts – the reality of the judgment of Christ, the certainty of his return and the establishment of his kingdom.

The content of the charge is set out in v 2 and consists of five commands, all of which are as applicable to ministers of the gospel today as they were to Timothy. Paul begins with preaching because he recognized that this is basic (*cf.* Rom.10:14). The need for being constantly prepared suggests that the man of God must always be on duty. The other three

commands (*correct, rebuke and encourage*) are complementary to each other. There is a combination of severity and gentleness here. The whole work demands patience and care. Paul intends Timothy to have a clear picture of the demands of Christian service. The picture is completed in v 5, where four other charges are given. Timothy is to show presence of mind in all situations and a willingness to accept hardship. The Christian ministry is no bed of roses. The work of an evangelist is essentially to preach the gospel, while the concluding words call for dedication to all the various aspects of ministry.

Vs 3 and 4 are something of a digression in Paul's thought. He fits in a final warning about the false teachers. He is aware that many will not want sound teaching, hearing only what they want to hear – hence *the itching ears*. Paul once again mentions the *myths* which these people will circulate.

4:6–8 A personal testimony

This section connects with the last as the word *For* shows. What Paul is about to say is intended to be an example to Timothy. He uses the same metaphor of *the drink offering* as he had already used in Phil. 2:17. It is a vivid image of the apostle about to pour out his life-blood for the sake of Christ. He senses that the end is near. He quickly changes the metaphor of sacrifice to those of conflict and the running track (7). In both cases he knows tasks are nearly finished. But there is a great confidence here. Paul is in no way ashamed of what he has done. The words *I have kept the faith* are in parallel with the other two affirmations, which suggests that the *faith* here is the deposit of Christian teaching which Paul had already entrusted to Timothy. He might also mean that he had been loyal to his trust.

V 8 has a triumphant ring about it. Paul has no doubt about the *crown*. He is probably thinking of the laurel wreath earned by those who competed in athletics races. The description of it as *of righteousness*, however, shows the spiritual nature of the prize he will be awarded. The righteousness is not achieved by Paul himself but is something given. Because God is *a righteous Judge* he cannot bestow anything that is not righteous. The *day* here is the final day of Christ's appearing. It points to what Paul elsewhere calls 'the judgment seat of Christ'. He sees this future day as applicable to all Christians, whom he assumes will long for that glorious event.

4:9–18 Personal remarks

In the next section (9–13) Paul infers the possibility of seeing Timothy again, in spite of being aware that his end is near. He is still hoping Timothy will manage to come to him. His desire to see Timothy is heightened by the movements of his other associates. Saddest of all is the brief comment about *Demas* having deserted him. This man was one of Paul's close associates when he wrote Col. 4:14. We must presume that the going was too hard for him and the pull of the world too strong. Of the others mentioned here, the reference to *Luke* is significant as he is now Paul's sole support. Both he and *Mark*, as well as Demas, are mentioned in Colossians. There is a poignancy about the request that Timothy should bring to him his *cloak*. Does this suggest that he was cold in his imprisonment? There is also particular interest in the *scrolls* and *parchments*. What these were it is impossible to say. They may have been OT texts, or perhaps Paul's personal papers, or some of each.

Vs 14–15 are a warning against *Alexander the metalworker*. This man may be identified with the Alexander mentioned in Acts 19:33–34 or in 1 Tim.1:20. Paul refers here to the great harm he had done, which is further defined as opposition to Paul's message. The last part of v 14 echoes the words of Ps. 62:12.

The third section (16–18) is a reference to Paul's present position. *The first defence* must have been a preliminary examination. Since Paul gives no further information, it is impossible to pin-point this occasion. What concerns him most is the fact that no-one came to his support. There are some parallels here with Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea, but there is no mention in the Acts record of him having been forsaken then. It is better to suppose that an earlier trial in Rome is intended. If this implies that the Roman Christians did not come to his assistance, this may have been because they were not sufficiently aware of the position, or else were hesitant to get involved. Since the apostle speaks of being deserted, he evidently felt that he had been badly let down.

In contrast to the desertion of others, he was encouraged by the fact that the Lord stood by him. This reflects something of the spiritual resources which supported Paul in his trouble, and they can serve as an encouragement to all God's servants when suffering for his sake. In Paul's case he claims to have received courage to proclaim the gospel even at his trial. When he says *so that . . . all the Gentiles might hear it* a difficulty arises. Clearly, if he is referring to his trial, *all* the Gentiles did not hear, if the words are taken literally. He may, however, mean the words metaphorically in the sense that with the preaching of the gospel at the centre of the empire all the Gentile world was 'within earshot'. The words translated *that . . . the message might*

be fully proclaimed literally mean 'that the proclamation of the message might be fulfilled'. Paul may have been thinking that when he preached at Rome, his own mission of preaching was accomplished.

Some have seen the *lion* from whom Paul was delivered as the emperor Nero, but this is a common metaphor for danger and probably no more is intended. Elsewhere in the NT the lion is symbolic of Satan (1 Pet. 5:8). Paul ends on a confident note which leads him into a spontaneous doxology. In view of what he has already written, the rescuing *from every evil attack* cannot be supposed to mean that he expects release, but must be taken in a spiritual sense. This would be in harmony with his reference to God's *heavenly kingdom*. There is here a strong contrast between Paul's present tribulations under an earthly kingdom and that more enduring and victorious heavenly kingdom to which he looks forward.

4:19–22 Final greetings

Paul mentions a number of his close friends. *Priscilla and Aquila* were especially dear to him for he had lodged with them in Ephesus (Acts 18). *Onesiphorus* has already been commended in 1:16. *Erastus* is mentioned as an associate with Timothy in Acts 19:22. *Trophimus* is twice mentioned in Acts – in 20:4 at Miletus and in 21:29 in Jerusalem. Since Trophimus was an Ephesian, it is probable that he intended to accompany Paul on his recent journeys but had been prevented from doing so through illness. It seems that Timothy was not aware of this and needed to be informed.

There is another urgent call to Timothy to hasten to Paul's side (21). It may be that the reference to the approaching *winter* is due to the fact that shipping would stop over the winter period. Nothing is known of the four people mentioned in v 21. In the final benediction (22) the first part is directed to Timothy in the singular, while the grace is to Christians generally in the plural.

TITUS

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1:1–4 Greetings

This is a considerably longer greeting than in either 1 or 2 Timothy. It is in fact more theological. Only here does Paul specifically describe himself as *servant of God*, although he does elsewhere call himself 'servant of Jesus Christ'. The more usual *apostle of Jesus Christ* is nevertheless added and then developed. Here Paul gives as the purpose of his apostleship a combination of *faith* and *knowledge*, in the sense of furthering both (2). His task was to proclaim the gospel and he recognized that both faith and

understanding were the appropriate response. The *knowledge* needs further qualification, for only that which leads to a godly life is here in view. Further, both faith and knowledge have a future reference (*hope of eternal life*) as well as a present reality.

Why does Paul insert here the statement, *who does not lie*, in reference to God? Titus would surely have been in no doubt about this. His intention must be to underline the reliability of God's promises. The further words *before the beginning of time* draw attention to the fact that those promises are grounded in God's eternal purposes. Linked with this eternal view of God's purposes is the appointed time of the bringing of *his word to light*, that is at the incarnation. The words here are reminiscent of the opening of John's gospel. Paul can never get away from the importance of *preaching* (3) in spreading the news of God's action, nor from the privilege he felt in being called to serve God in this way. The description of Titus as *my true son in our common faith* (4) suggests that he was a close associate of the apostle, although he is not mentioned in Acts. He is, however, mentioned in both 2 Corinthians and Galatians.

1:5–9 The appointment of church officers

The instructions given to Titus run parallel to those given to Timothy in 1 Tim. 3, but there are some significant variations, which arose from the different situation in which Titus was placed in Crete. His task was twofold – to *straighten out what was left unfinished* and to *appoint elders* (5). It is not clear what Paul had left incomplete, unless he means the appointment of elders. Paul gives no indication how many were to be appointed, but he had evidently already instructed Titus on this matter. He is more concerned about the qualifications required (6). What stands out is the need not only for moral blamelessness (mentioned twice) but for a stable home-life. Presumably if a person could not keep his own children in order, he would be regarded as inadequate for the leadership of the church. The word translated *believe* may carry the meaning of 'faithful' (AV). It is surely unlikely that Paul meant to disqualify church leaders whose children have yet to profess faith.

The switch from *elders* in v 5 to *an overseer* in v 7 is important since there seems to be no essential difference between the two offices. The elder exercises the function of oversight. There is a mixture of wrong attitudes and wrong actions which would make a person ineligible for office (8–9). It is noticeable that Titus is not advised against the appointment of new converts as Timothy is at Ephesus, possibly because the community in Crete was established more recently. If v 7 gives the negative side, the positive is found in vs 8 and 9. The qualities mentioned are those which should be evident in a committed Christian. The emphasis on hospitality is worth noting since so much depended on it in the early church. V 9 makes clear how important a grasp of *sound doctrine* is for those who exercise leadership over others in the church. It is only possible to refute false teachers if the true doctrine has been well understood. In Paul's view there should be no blurring of the issues.

1:10–16 How to deal with the false teachers

Again there are a few differences between this section and the passages in 1 and 2 Timothy dealing with the false teachers. There is here a clearer stress on the Jewishness of the teaching. The circumcision group and also Jewish myths are mentioned (14). Nevertheless, the most evident characteristics of the false teachers are the emptiness of their talk, the tendency to deceive, the ruinous results and the money motive (10–11). The position in Crete was aggravated by the character of the people, expressed in v 12 by one of their own poets, who is generally identified as Epimenides, a sixth-century BC philosopher.

In view of the difficult character of these people, Paul advises strong action. *They must be silenced* (11); they are to be rebuked *sharply* (13); and Titus is *to pay no attention* to them (14). Paul does not believe they are worth arguing with, but Titus should concentrate on rebuking them in order that they may become *sound in the faith*. This is a positive approach which is still of great value when dealing with those who deviate from the truth. V 15 furnishes a further comment to assist Titus, for those of corrupt minds will not recognize purity. Once the mind is corrupted the conscience swiftly follows suit. Paul realizes that false teachers are subtle in that they give every appearance of being religious (*they claim to know God*), but their actions give the lie to this (16). It may be thought that Paul speaks in a particularly derogatory way of them in the second part of v 16, but this shows his horror of those who lead others astray. The importance of a right understanding of Christian doctrine could not be more strongly stated.

2:1–10 Instructions for various groups

2:1–3 About older people

Here Paul again uses the figure of *sound* or healthy *doctrine* (*cf.* 1:9). This is in contrast to the 'diseased' teaching of the false teachers. The

word translated *in accord with* draws attention to the fitness of the teaching, suggesting that the false teaching was out of line in this respect. Paul then proceeds to give examples of what he means by fitting teaching. It is essentially practical. *Older men* must show by their lives that their behaviour agrees with their doctrine (2). This involves behaviour which will earn the respect of others. But to this idea Paul adds the need for being *sound in faith, love* and *endurance*, a combination which occurs elsewhere in the Pastorals and in other Pauline letters (*cf.* 1 Thes.1:3). In giving advice about *older women* Paul concentrates on the need for a serious attitude of mind (3).

The prohibition of slander and excess of wine reflects the contemporary situation in Crete. The fact that Paul uses a word (*addicted to much wine*) which suggests bondage to excess of wine suggests the problem was more acute among the women of Crete than in the corresponding situation in Ephesus (*cf.*1 Tim.3:8,11), where a milder expression is used. On a positive note, older women are to be good teachers in the home.

2:4–8 About younger people

Paul sees it as the task of older women to instruct the *younger women.* This clearly needs tact to avoid the impression of interference. The instruction focuses on love to *husbands and children.* This cannot be taken for granted, espeically in our modern age when the divorce rate is rapidly rising and when the care of children so often comes second to careers. The qualities required in younger women are those appropriate to the domestic scene, where self-control, purity and kindness are of such great value in a Christian home (5). As elsewhere Paul assumes that the Christian wife should be submissive to her husband. The whole subject is dominated by religious motive, to avoid any affront to the word of God. In a fuller discussion of the husband–wife relationship (Eph. 5:22–33, see commentary) Paul sets the wife's submission in the context of the husband's sacrificial love. Then, and now, the ideal relationship involves self-giving of each to the other. Where submission or sacrificial love are abandoned or compromised marriages suffer or collapse completely.

When dealing with *young men*, after urging self-control (a requirement for any age) Paul places most emphasis on the *example* of Titus (7). As a minister of the gospel, great responsibility rests on him to show *integrity* and *seriousness*, especially in the manner of speech. Again there is a strong religious motive, *i.e.* that others may not have cause to speak ill of Christians.

2:9–10 About slaves

Paul dealt with the subject of slavery in 1 Tim.6, and what he says here is similar. The word translated *to be subject to* is stronger than the word 'obey' and reflects the social set-up of the time. Christian slaves have an added responsibility, that is to try to please and not to be argumentative with their masters. The fact that the slaves are urged not to steal suggests that they were particularly open to this temptation. Paul sees the possibility for slaves to commend the gospel by their attitude, a possibility which is of course equally applicable to every Christian. The Greek word translated *make attractive* is used of the setting of jewellery to display it in the most attractive way.

2:11 – 3:8 The doctrinal background for Christian living

2:11–15 Grace as a teacher

It is characteristic of Paul to switch to a theological note when dealing with behaviour, since doctrinal considerations are never far away in his discussions. Here he uses the term *the grace of God* to sum up all God's actions on our behalf. In a concise statement Paul draws attention both to the incarnation and to the atonement and links them to the second coming. The appearing of *salvation* points to the first coming of Jesus, but in what sense must *to all men* be taken? Does Paul mean that everyone is saved? If the appearing is regarded as a historic fact, it is certainly true that the coming of Jesus has had a universal significance. The probable meaning is that God in his grace has made possible the offer of salvation to all people. But the scope of God's grace is not the main thrust, which is that Christian behaviour issues from the grace of God. Hence the force of v 12. The restraint of *ungodliness* is a major purpose of God's grace. Indeed it is impossible to live in a self-controlled manner apart from God's grace. Self-control cannot be achieved merely from self-effort. This at once distinguishes Christian ethics from Stoicism which exalted self-determination.

In this passage Paul connects the present with the past and future. The present task is seen in v 12 – the demand for godly living in this age. But in v 13 the focus falls on the future. The *blessed hope* and the *glorious appearing* are clearly not yet, although they have a specific impact on the present. Paul shows a nice balance between Christians' glorious future expectations and their present responsibilities. The expectation of the return of Christ is basic to Paul's doctrine about the future. It is significant here that Paul speaks of *our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ*, for the linking of God and Jesus Christ in the

same expression suggests that Paul is convinced of the deity of Jesus, a thought which is in harmony with the most probable understanding of Rom. 9:5. Some separate God from *and Saviour*, but this is not the obvious meaning of the Greek text. Another possibility is to take 'Jesus Christ' as an explanation of the 'glory', in which case God and Jesus would not be so clearly identified. But it is more natural to link 'Saviour' with Jesus in view of the subsequent statement.

In v 14 Paul looks to the past, to the historic act of redemption which forms the basis of the Christian position. He comes to this when reflecting on what Christ has already done for us. In 1 Tim. 2:6 Paul mentioned that Christ gave himself as a 'ransom', and here he follows up a similar idea, using the verb derived from the noun. Redemption is a favourite theme of the apostle. It conveys the idea of deliverance from slavery, in this case summed up as *all wickedness*. Paul sees the work of Christ as doing something *for us* which we could not do for ourselves. Deliverance is from sin in the fullest sense. But for Paul deliverance is double-sided; not only *from* sin but *to* a life of purity. The metaphor of cleansing is another favourite device of Paul for explaining the work of Christ. The Christian is a cleansed person (see Eph. 5:25–26). The idea of the people of God as a very special possession for Jesus Christ is vividly brought out here. For a similar expression *cf.* Ex.19:5. The Christian objective to do what is good is strongly motivated by the thought that it is essentially because we belong to Jesus Christ in a special way.

V 15 is a kind of conclusion to the practical instructions, although Paul has not yet finished with his theological reflections, for he comes back to them in ch. 3. Titus is reminded of the need to exercise authority in order to back up the teaching. The authority is based on the apostolic teaching and should enable Titus to resist attempts by others to despise him.

3:1–2 Christians in the community

Presumably Titus had already instructed the people about their responsibilities towards the state authorities, for he is instructed to *remind* them. But perhaps the Cretans had tended to forget that subjection to the authorities was expected from Christians. Paul recognizes that political disobedience, except on matters of conscience, would bring the gospel into disrepute. The thrust of v 2 is that behaviour should commend the gospel. The outsider should receive an impression of good law-abiding citizenship. Note especially the qualities of consideration and humility, which are not usually to the fore in social relationships.

3:3–8 The gospel contrasted with paganism

Frequently in Paul's letters he contrasts what Christians were before their conversion with their new potential in Christ. V 3 draws attention to the past. The list of vices which are here enumerated as typical of pre-Christian experience may seem somewhat exaggerated. But there is evidence of these weaknesses in the pre-conversion experience of all Christians and traces still remain thereafter. Foolishness points to a lack of spiritual understanding; disobedience and deception are seen in human beings' relationship to God, and the whole life-setting is summed up as slavery to passions and pleasures. It is important to recognize the naturalness of this pre-Christian life-style in order to see more vividly the change that Christianity brings. The climax is reached in the multiplication of hate, which serves as a foil against which the love of God is described.

In the theological statement in vs 4–7 Paul brings out what *the kindness and love of God* have done to counteract the increasing hatred of the natural world. The primary focus of God's love is on the coming and mission of Christ, but in this context the stress is on the Christian's experience of that love. In speaking of God as *our Saviour*, Paul may be contrasting God with the emperor, who in the contemporary world was sometimes given the title Saviour. But in the light of 2:11–14 it is more likely that his mind is throughout on Christian salvation. In v 5 Paul roots salvation in the *mercy* of God and not in human effort (righteousness here stands for that which is achieved through the works of the law), consistent with his teaching elsewhere (especially in Romans).

There is much debate about the expression *through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit* (5). This combination of terms presents the twofold aspect of Christian salvation. Regeneration is the entry into a new life and renewal is the effecting of the new life itself. The first can be understood as relating to conversion and the second to the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. There is much to be said for understanding *rebirth* here in the sense in which it is found in the teaching of Jesus (Jn.3:5). There has been a difference of opinion over the interpretation of the *washing*, since not all see this as a reference to conversion. It could refer solely to baptism, in which case both terms could refer to what is effected at baptism by the Holy Spirit. Or it could be taken as referring metaphorically to spiritual cleansing.

V 6 is clearly an allusion to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As Paul reflects on his own experience and that of his associates

(note the words *on us*) he is struck by the generosity of the gift. The Spirit is never given in a stinting manner. This verse highlights the threefold activity of God, Jesus Christ our Saviour and the Holy Spirit.

Paul concludes this brief theological statement by a reference to justification. It is typical of Paul to stress that justification is through grace, for this is a favourite theme of his. This refers essentially to our new standing with God and points to our future. It is another of Paul's themes to draw attention to our inheritance, and here he concentrates on *eternal life*. He calls this a *hope*, in the sense of something which is certain.

This section ends with the formula about the *trustworthy saying* (8), which must relate to the theological statement just considered. But this is followed by a direct request to Titus to stress *these things*, which is best taken as referring to the whole of what Paul has written in the letter. He is most anxious to achieve a practical result – a careful devotion to *doing what is good*. The implication is that a sound theological basis is indispensable for right actions. There is some ambiguity about the meaning of *these things* at the end of v 8. If they are the same things as in the earlier part of the verse they would refer to the essential truths of the gospel. But if they are meant to contrast with the unprofitableness of the false teaching they may be the good deeds of the believers. Since the stress in v 9 is on foolish controversies, it would seem the former view is most likely.

3:9–11 More warnings

There is an echo here of the warning given in 1:10. Paul cannot close without a further warning. Since he stresses the unprofitableness and uselessness of the false teaching, it is likely that he sees it as a contrast to the positive teaching he has just given. He tells Titus, as he has told Timothy, to *avoid* wasting time on such useless arguments. But he draws a distinction between the teaching and the people involved. Every pastor must be concerned about people, especially those who are causing trouble in the community, and these must be warned. But Paul considers a double warning to be sufficient. Those intent on divisive activity are seldom likely to respond beyond this. Such a person, in Paul's view, is bound to have a warped mind.

3:12–15 Concluding remarks

Clearly *Artemas* or *Tychicus* was to replace Titus in Crete. Paul mentions his intention of wintering at Nicopolis, which is generally thought to be a city on the west coast of Greece. No reason is given for the choice of such an out of the way place. *Zenas* is not mentioned elsewhere in the NT. *Apollos* is known from Acts and 1 Corinthians as an associate of the apostle. Evidently in some way Titus must have been in a position to give these two men some material assistance in their travelling. Paul then addresses the Cretan Christians generally and stresses again the value of good works. It is not clear whose *daily necessities* are in mind. It is possible that cases of need are meant, in which instance the call is to works of charity. This would make sense of the last part of the verse (not living *unproductive lives*). The concluding greetings are very general and the concluding grace unusually brief.

Donald Guthrie

PHILEMON

Introduction

The letter to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters and is more closely related to the ordinary private and personal letters of the time than others addressed by Paul either to communities or groups of communities. This does not mean, however, that it is simply a piece of private correspondence. Like the apostle's longer letters it is a means of early Christian missionary work and a substitute for Paul's personal presence.

Occasion

The letter is addressed to Philemon who is described as Paul's 'dear friend and fellow-worker' (1). Others mentioned in the greetings are Apphia, who was probably Philemon's wife, Archippus, Paul's 'fellow-soldier' (and possibly the son of Philemon and Apphia) and the church community (*ekklēsia*) that assembled in Philemon's house (2).

The occasion of the letter to Philemon can be worked out from its contents, though not all the details are clear. A slave named Onesimus had wronged his owner, Philemon, who was a Christian living at Colosse (vs 1–2; *cf.* Col. 4:9, 17). It is not certain how Onesimus had offended but it is usually assumed on the basis of v 18 that he had stolen his master's money and then run away. It is possible, however, that the words, 'if he has done you any wrong or owes you anything', simply indicate that Onesimus had been sent to fulfil some commission and had overstayed his leave.

In the Roman world of Paul's day slaves sometimes ran away. They joined groups of robbers, attempted to disappear in the subculture of large cities, tried to flee abroad and be absorbed into the work-force, or sought refuge in a temple. Onesimus came into contact with Paul, perhaps as a fellow-prisoner, who took an interest in him and this led to Onesimus's conversion (10). The apostle clearly grew to enjoy his company (*cf.* v 12) and benefited from his ministry (11, 13). He dearly wished to keep Onesimus with him so that he might take Philemon's place at his side in the service of the gospel. He had no right, however, to retain Onesimus. This would not only have been illegal according to Roman law, it would also have involved a breach of Christian fellowship between himself and Philemon.

So Paul sent Onesimus back to his master Philemon together with an accompanying letter. Using gentle language and carefully chosen words Paul requested that Philemon might welcome his slave just as he would receive Paul himself (17), that is, as a 'dear brother' (16). He did not want the reconciliation between master and slave to collapse because of any demand for compensation, so he asked that any outstanding debt arising from Onesimus's action might be charged to his own account. After all, did not Philemon owe his very self to Paul, since the latter was responsible for his conversion (19)? The decision was to be Philemon's entirely, so Paul refused to command or coerce him in any way (14). The apostle was confident that his friend would respond in a godly manner and believed that he 'will do even more than I ask' (21). These words are tantalizing but as we read between the lines we conclude that the 'more' of which Paul speaks is Philemon's willingness to return Onesimus to Paul for the service of the gospel (21).

An alternative interpretation is that of S. C. Winter (*NTS*, 33 (1987), pp. 1–15), who suggests that the letter was written to the church at Colosse, not to an individual, and that Onesimus was in prison with Paul because he had been sent there by Archippus on behalf of the congregation. Paul requested that Onesimus be 'manumitted' (his freedom purchased) and released from his obligations in Colosse so as to remain with Paul in the work of ministry (Winter). But there are considerable difficulties with this interpretation regarding the supposed public nature of the letter, the circumstances of its composition and the nature of Paul's request (see the Commentary below).

Authorship, place and date

Paul's authorship has rarely been questioned in the past. The letter obviously breathes the genuine apostle as he tenderly deals with a difficult, personal and social situation.

The letter was sent from the same place as that to Colossians and of the three possibilities – Rome, Caesarea or Ephesus – the balance of probability lies in favour of the first. The most likely placing of the two letters is fairly early in Paul's (first) Roman imprisonment, *i.e.* AD 60–61.

The New Testament and slavery

No NT writer comments on the origins of slavery. Also, no theological support for slavery, or justification for human beings owning other human beings, is presented in the NT even though direct evidence is provided which shows that some early Christians were slaves and others were owners of slaves. Further, no revolutionary programme was suggested by Paul or others to deal with the evils of slavery or its total abolition. Instead, the focus is upon transforming personal relationships within the system.

In 1 Cor. 7:21–24 Paul mentions, not the wider issue of slavery, but the possibility of manumission of Christian slaves. Although many claim that the apostle was urging Christian slaves to take their freedom, it is more likely that he was encouraging them to live according to their new status in Christ (the 'calling') which is more fundamental than any social, legal or other change.

The letter to Philemon, like the rest of the NT, does not specifically address the broader question of slavery. Rather, in vs 16–17 Paul deals with the issue of brotherly love in the body of Christ. The relationship of slave to owner, within the existing structures, is to be conducted in the light of belonging to the same Lord. That relationship has now been transcended. Onesimus's earthly freedom may be rightly desired and valued; but what is of ultimate significance is that he has accepted God's call and followed him (*cf.* v 16 and 1 Cor. 7:21–24), whether he is a slave or not. The letter to Philemon is moving in the realm of personal relationships where the institution of slavery could only wilt and die.

See also the article on Reading the letters.

Further reading

N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, TNTC (IVP, 1986).
R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, NCB (Nelson, 1981).
P. T. O'Brien, *Understanding the Basic Themes of Colossians, Philemon*, QRBT (Word, 1991).

Outline of contents

1–3 **Paul's greeting**
4–7 **Thanksgiving and intercession for Philemon**
8–20 **Paul's plea for Onesimus**
21–25 **Final remarks and greetings**

Commentary

1–3 Paul's greeting

1–2 Paul follows the pattern found elsewhere in his letters (see on Col. 1:1) with its mention of author (and his associate), recipient(s) and a greeting. *A prisoner of Christ Jesus* is a reference to Paul's actual imprisonment from which he hopes soon to be released (22) rather than to a metaphorical bondage. So at the outset mention is made of the apostle's situation: he is in prison for the gospel (13). *Of Christ Jesus* means 'for Christ's sake'. Paul associates *Timothy* with him in the address, not as a co-author, but because he had been in the apostle's company for much of his Ephesian ministry and may have met Philemon there. The latter is described as *our dear friend and fellow-worker*, terms that indicate that he was a specially valued colleague of the apostle in the ministry of the gospel. The letter is addressed specifically to him. Although *Apphia, Archippus* and *the church that meets in your home* are included in Paul's greeting (*cf.* v 25), this is due to his courtesy and the body of the letter (vs 4–22 are in the singular) is addressed to one person, Philemon. *Apphia* may have been Philemon's wife. *Archippus*, as *a fellow-soldier*, had apparently played an important part in assisting Paul in his missionary labours and had faithfully stood at his side through persecution and trial – perhaps even imprisonment. He was a resident of Colosse, possibly a son of Philemon and Apphia (though we have no certain means of knowing), who was given a special encouragement to fulfil the ministry he had received in the Lord (Col. 4:17).

3 Paul's greeting indicates a prayerful concern for Philemon and his Christian friends that they may understand and appreciate more fully God's grace in which they stand and the peace he has established with them (*cf.* Rom. 5:1–2).

4–7 Thanksgiving and intercession for Philemon

Paul's thanksgiving paragraph (4–6) is the shortest in his letters and is more closely related to the ordinary private and personal letters of the time. Vs 4–7 are designed to prepare the way for the specific matter with which the letter is primarily concerned, namely, the request concerning Onesimus.

4 Giving thanks is uppermost in Paul's mind as he begins the passage. It is to the one true *God* that he offers his thanksgiving and, stressing the consciousness of a personal relation to him, he adds the pronoun *my* (*cf.* Rom. 1:8; Phil. 1:3). The one thanked for Philemon's progress is the God of the psalmists, known to Paul through Jesus Christ as 'Father' (3). *Always* suggests regular rather than unceasing thanksgiving and is explained by the following *as I remember you in my prayers.*

5 Paul has received good reports (*I hear* is a present tense) about Philemon's *faith* and *love* which cause him to give thanks to God. Information probably came from Epaphras (Col. 1: 4, 7–8) and possibly from Onesimus. Faith (faithfulness) and love have been sometimes taken as directed towards both the Lord Jesus and all God's people. Alternatively love and faith have been intimately linked (and rendered as 'piety' or 'godliness') in an attitude which is shown to the Lord Jesus on the one hand and God's people on the other. It is better perhaps to see here a 'chiasmus' (a b b a pattern) in which Philemon's love is directed to all God's people and his faith is in the Lord Jesus. Paul normally places faith before love. But here, because of the situation which called forth the letter, his attention is focused on Philemon's *love* (*cf.* vs 7, 9). This leads on to his friend's *faith* (shown by one who is *in the Lord Jesus*) which in turn directs one's thoughts to the range and comprehensiveness of the *love*, that is, it has been shown in the past to all God's people.

6 Paul's thanksgiving leads directly on to his request – a petition concerning Philemon's generosity. It is as if Paul could not give thanks for his colleague without interceding for him. The verse is difficult to interpret, so the following suggestions are tentative. *Sharing* (Gk. *koinōnia*) is understood in an active, general sense meaning 'generosity' or 'liberality'. *Your faith* points to the source from which the kindness comes, while the word *active* is better rendered as 'effective'. His faith had already been *active*; Paul now wants it to be 'effective' in relation to Onesimus. *Every good thing* refers to every blessing which belongs to Philemon as a Christian, while *a full understanding* (lit. 'in a knowledge') here conveys both the ideas of understanding and experience. The final phrase, (lit. 'into Christ'), probably refers to being united with him and is therefore correctly rendered as *in Christ.* It was the apostle's great desire that Philemon might understand and experience the treasures that belonged to him as a believer. So his request is that Philemon's generosity might lead him effectively (that is, he wished that his colleague's liberality might result in some action in the case of Onesimus). This would, in turn, help Philemon into a deeper understanding and appreciation of all the blessings that belonged to him (and all others who are incorporated) in Christ.

7 Turning to the language of direct address Paul tells Philemon why he has been refreshed and comforted. The latter's love has been concretely shown to the Colossian Christians and Paul can identify with these fellow-believers (some of whom he had not met; *cf.* Col. 2:1) for he states that *joy and encouragement* given to them is also received by him. When Christians go out of their way to show love and concern to others, it has a profound effect creating warmth and gratitude.

8–20 Paul's plea for Onesimus

In a carefully structured paragraph where he weighs his words, Paul makes his plea for Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave. He begins with a brief description of his situation (8–12).

8 Philemon's fine Christian character, mentioned explicitly in the preceding verses (*therefore* shows the close links), meant that Paul could speak openly and affectionately. Their personal friendship probably began at the time of Philemon's conversion when Paul was the instrument God used (19). His responsibility as apostle to the Gentiles also enabled him to speak boldly in Christ. *What you ought to do* (lit. 'what is fitting') points to what is proper for Philemon, as a Christian, to do in the circumstances concerning Onesimus. Paul does not spell out the content of this. He only indicates that he might have given a command in the matter.

9 Instead, he bases his appeal (Gk. *parakalō*) on other grounds, namely, Philemon's *love.* Twice this term has been used in the previous paragraph to denote Philemon's love shown concretely to the saints and it is most natural to take it in the same sense here, rather than of love as a principle or even Paul's love. Precisely because he knows of Philemon's generosity Paul is able to entreat rather than command and he looks forward to his friend's love being shown once again, this time with reference to Onesimus. Behind the request stands one who is both an 'ambassador' (which appears more likely than *an old man*) and *a prisoner of Christ*

Jesus, that is, one who shares in Christ's sufferings right now. So it is a powerful plea.

10 Paul now mentions his request and therefore his specific purpose for writing the letter. Philemon, not the congregation, is the person addressed (*you* is singular) and the plea is for one converted through his ministry while in prison and who has become very dear to him – Onesimus. The imagery of spiritual parenthood is also used in relation to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:15), Timothy (1 Cor. 4:17) and Titus (Tit. 1:4) who were converted through the gospel.

11 As a Phrygian slave – and they were proverbial for being unreliable and unfaithful – Onesimus had previously been *useless* to Philemon. But a great change had occurred and Paul describes this by a once-now contrast. This mighty transformation took place in Onesimus's conversion to Christ as Lord and he might now be called *useful*, a description that truly fits his name, for Onesimus means 'profitable' or 'useful'.

12 Paul sends back to Philemon with the accompanying letter the one who had become very dear to him. Indeed, so attached to Onesimus was he that he speaks of him as *my very heart*. It is as though the apostle is performing an act of self-sacrifice in returning him to his master. Some have suggested that 'send back' means Paul is referring Onesimus back to Philemon for a 'decision' in the hope that he will be allowed to return to Paul.

13 He briefly describes what happened before he wrote his letter and sent Onesimus back. *I would have liked* expresses Paul's desire or personal preference for retaining Onesimus with him. He had rendered faithful service to the apostle and it had been the latter's wish for him to continue to give it in place of the absent Philemon. The expression *take your place* is one of delicate tact for Paul assumes that Philemon would have wished to perform this service for him (especially ministry in the gospel) had it been possible.

14 But however much Paul was inclined to keep Onesimus he would do nothing without Philemon's consent. At the very least it would have involved a breach of Christian fellowship. He did not wish to coerce his brother or intrude into his decision. *Spontaneous* refers to a decision freely reached, while *not forced* shows Paul refrained from applying any outward pressure that would force Philemon to act in a particular way. Paul's courtesy and tact is a lesson to all who have delicate relationships to manage. The decision is Philemon's.

15 An additional reason is given for Paul's decision not to detain Onesimus: he might have acted contrary to God's hidden purpose. The passive *he was separated* points to the hidden action of God as the person responsible for what was done. Philemon's attention is thus turned from individual wrongs Onesimus may have incurred to God's providence which has made these wrongs work for good (*cf.* Gn. 45:4–8). If (note *perhaps*) God's hidden purpose lay behind this incident, then the divine intention was that Philemon should receive Onesimus back in a new relationship (as a Christian brother) *for good*.

16 For the first time in the letter *slave* is used of Onesimus. But this is immediately qualified: no longer *as a slave* but *as a dear brother*. Paul has chosen his words carefully; he is not stating that Philemon is to receive Onesimus back as a freed man and no longer as a slave, or that he is to free him immediately on his return. But whether Onesimus remained a slave or not, he could no longer be regarded *as* a slave. A change had been effected in him independent of his possible freedom. He is *a dear brother* and is addressed in exactly the same way as Philemon (7, 20) for he too is a member of the body of Christ. The relationship of slave owner to slave should be conducted in the light of belonging to the same *Lord*.

Paul is not really dealing with the question of slavery as such or the resolution of a particular instance of slavery. Instead, he treats here the issue of brotherly love. Although Onesimus's earthly freedom may be of positive value, in the last analysis it is of no ultimate significance to him as a Christian as to whether he is slave or free. What matters is to have accepted God's call and to follow him (1 Cor. 7:21–24).

17 Although Paul mentioned the fact of his request of Philemon for Onesimus in v 10, only here does he spell out its content and come to the real point of the letter. He bases his appeal on the close tie that exists between himself and Philemon – as *a partner*. This refers neither to a partnership in business transactions nor to special ties of friendship. Rather, his and Philemon's 'fellowship' is with God's Son, Jesus Christ, into which both have been called (1 Cor. 1:9). This relationship has drawn them together in common activities so that *partner* may have the added nuance here of 'co-worker'. Paul not only intercedes on behalf of Onesimus; he also identifies himself with him: *welcome him as you would welcome me*.

18 The apostle now guards against any possible hindrances to Philemon's favourable reception of Onesimus. He does not want the reconciliation to collapse because of any demand for compensation. Philemon is asked to let any outstanding charges resulting from Onesimus's flight or absence be debited to the apostle's account. 'Put that on my bill!' he says. As a father

for his son (*cf.* v 10) Paul declares he is prepared to stand good for any damages.

19 As a parenthesis he includes his own promissory note or IOU: *I will pay it back.* Then, picking up the thought of v 18, he reminds Philemon that it is he who is indebted to the apostle for it was through him that Philemon had been converted. The latter therefore owed his spiritual life to Paul and that was a far greater debt than Onesimus had incurred and for which Paul would be responsible. The message is plain. Philemon will understand that Onesimus experienced the same grace of God when he was converted. He should receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ and not be angry with him even though there may have been good grounds for it.

20 Paul concludes the body of his letter by strengthening his request and expressing the wish that Philemon may refresh his own heart in Christ.

21–25 Final remarks and greetings

In the final brief sentences of the letter Paul assures Philemon of his confidence that the latter will do what is right and then announces that he plans to visit him (21–22). A short list of greetings (23–24) and the benediction conclude the letter (25).

21 Paul is confident of Philemon's *obedience*, not to his own apostolic authority, supposedly hidden under his request or appeal to the latter, but to the will of God. He has already prayed (6) for Philemon's deeper understanding of God's will and the performance of it in love. There had been clear evidence of this obedience in the past, demonstrated so concretely in his continuous generosity when he refreshed the hearts of the saints (7). Paul now expects it to be shown once again. In fact, he believes that Philemon *will do even more than I ask*, a hint, but no more than this, that Onesimus may be returned to him for the service of the gospel.

22 The mention of the *guest room* suggests Paul regarded his imprisonment as temporary. He hopes to come in person and visit Philemon and if this occurs it will be because God has graciously answered the prayers of this house-church. The announcement of this hope gives a certain emphasis to his intercession for Onesimus as it will enable him to see for himself how things have gone.

23–24 Those who send greetings are also mentioned in Col. 4:10–17, while the conclusion (25) is the same as at the close of Galatians.

Peter T. O'Brien

HEBREWS

Introduction

At first glance, Hebrews appears to be one of the most difficult NT books to understand and relate to our modern world. Numerous OT quotations and allusions fill its pages and much detail about Israel's priesthood and sacrificial system dominates the argument. By the time some readers get to the comparison between Christ and Melchizedek in Heb. 7, they feel totally lost and wonder about the relevance of it all! Added to this, many feel unsettled by the warning passages (*e.g.* 2:1–4; 3:7 – 4:11; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:14–17), which seem to undermine the certainties established by other passages and suggest that believers can 'fall away' from Christ.

The argument is complex, but Hebrews is a gold mine for those who want to dig deeply. There is much treasure here to enrich our understanding of God and his purposes. Every carefully structured section contributes to the development of a central theme, providing distinctive insights into the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the nature of our salvation. Although many OT texts are employed, some sections of Hebrews are based on the exposition of a single text, with others being used in a supportive role. In this way we are shown how to interpret the OT in the light of its fulfilment and can understand how the two divisions of the Christian Bible link together. Since the writer regularly relates his insights to the needs of those first addressed, we can learn how to apply his argument to our contemporary lives. Hebrews demonstrates that effective warning and encouragement are grounded in good theology.

What kind of literature is this?

Is Hebrews really a 'letter' in style and format? It certainly ends like many NT letters (13:18–25), with specific encouragements and instructions for those addressed. Moreover, several of the passages of warning or appeal throughout the book show a personal knowledge of the situation of the original readers and an overwhelming concern for their welfare (*e.g.* 5:11 – 6:3; 6:9–12; 10:32–39; 12:4–13). Yet the book begins in a formal way (1:1–4), with no word as to who the author is or to whom he is writing, and with no hint of the relationship between them. The writer offers no prayers for his readers at this point and no expression of thanksgiving (*cf.* the introductions to most of Paul's letters).

Hebrews is an orderly and systematic treatment of the person and work of Christ, based on the exposition of certain key passages from the OT. For example, Ps. 8:4–6 is central to the argument of 2:5–18, Ps. 95:7–11 is expounded at some length in 3:1 – 4:13, Ps. 110:4 is the key text in 4:14 – 7:28, and Je. 31:31–34 is foundational to the argument in 8:1 – 10:39. Each text is used to show how OT ideals and institutions find their fulfilment in Christ. So, is Hebrews more like a theological essay or treatise?

Considering its rhetorical style (particularly references to the writer as one 'speaking' to his audience, *e.g.* 2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32) and the use of OT passages as a basis of the argument in most major divisions of the work, it appears to be more of a sermon or homily in written form, with some personal remarks at the end. This is consistent with the writer's own description of his work as 'a word of exhortation' or 'word of encouragement' (13:22). The same expression is found in Acts 13:15 to denote a sermon following the Scripture readings in the Jewish synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. Hebrews was written by a preacher with great pastoral sensitivity, desiring to apply his scriptural insights to the needs of a particular group of Christians for whom he was concerned.

See also the article Reading the letters.

Who wrote it?

The earliest copies of the NT place this document amongst the letters of Paul, but Hebrews itself makes no claim to Pauline authorship. The second-century writers Clement of Alexandria and Origen confirm that Paul was widely regarded as the author in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Yet they note how much Hebrews differs from Paul's writings in content and style. They propose that Paul was somehow responsible for the work but that someone else actually composed it. Acceptance of Hebrews as Pauline was not widespread in the western church until the fifth century. After this, the tradition remained virtually unchallenged until the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when it was widely questioned again.

Present-day scholars generally agree that

arguments against Pauline authorship are decisive. Apart from major differences of style, Hebrews develops a portrait of Jesus as high priest and his work as the fulfilment of OT sacrificial ritual that finds very little parallel in Paul's writings. At the same time, many typically Pauline themes and arguments are lacking in Hebrews. Even when similar themes are discussed, they are treated differently. And Paul, who makes so much of his status as an apostle and eyewitness of the risen Christ (*e.g.* Gal. 1:11–16; 1 Cor. 15:8), could hardly have written that he received the message of Christ in a second-hand way, 'from those who heard him' (2:3).

In the western church, the second-century writer Tertullian suggested Barnabas as the author of Hebrews and this solution has often appealed to scholars. As a Levite from Cyprus, this 'Son of Encouragement' (Acts 4:36) may well have been responsible for this 'word of encouragement' (13:22) which deals so exhaustively with the theme of sacrifice, priesthood and worship. As a Jew from the dispersion, he quite possibly had intimate contact with the Hellenistic and philosophical teaching of Alexandrian Judaism with which the writer of Hebrews seems to have had some acquaintance.

Martin Luther was the first to propose Apollos as the author and this theory has also attracted some support. As a highly educated Alexandrian Jew, Apollos was eloquent, had 'a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures', and operated in the same missionary sphere as Paul (Acts 18:24–28). He could well have written a work such as Hebrews.

However, in the end it must be said that the evidence in favour of Barnabas or Apollos or any other candidate is not decisive. Indeed, we do not need to know the identity of the author to appreciate his work and accept its authority. Hebrews itself indicates that the human authorship of Scripture is of secondary importance. So, for example, acknowledging David as the writer of Ps. 95, Hebrews insists that the Holy Spirit was the primary author (4:7; 3:7). Again, the human authorship of Ps. 8 is not mentioned (2:6) and is not relevant to the understanding of it as divinely inspired, prophetic scripture. Similarly, we should be willing to accept that it matters little whom God used to write Hebrews.

When was it written?

When Hebrews was written, the readers had been Christians for some time (5:12) and had experienced a notable period of persecution (10:32–34). Some of their original leaders appear to have passed away (13:7) but Timothy was still alive (13:23). Perhaps several decades had elapsed since the beginning of the Christian movement. The first allusion to Hebrews in early Christian literature is found in the letter by Clement of Rome, which dates from around AD 96 or a little later. But there is reason to believe that Hebrews was written well before then.

The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the cessation of the sacrificial system took place in AD 70 but there is no reference to that state of affairs in Hebrews. Although most of the ritual details which figure in Hebrews are taken from the OT account of the tabernacle, the ritual of the temple was the ritual of the tabernacle and our author writes as if that ritual were still going on (*e.g.* 9:6–9; 10:1–4). Some allusion to the events of AD 70 would surely have strengthened his argument that the first covenant is now 'obsolete and ageing' (8:13). Consequently, it seems best to conclude that Hebrews was written some time in the decade before AD 70.

What was the situation of the first recipients and why was Hebrews written?

A survey of the passages of warning and encouragement reveals something of the situation of those addressed. At least some of their number were in danger of drifting from the gospel and the salvation it offers (2:1–4). More specifically, they were in danger of hardening their hearts in unbelief, turning away from the living God, and missing out on the heavenly 'rest' promised by God (3:7 – 4:11). Symptomatic of this spiritual disease was their unwillingness to progress to a deeper understanding of the Christian message and its implications, together with an unwillingness to share that understanding with others (5:11–14). Some were withdrawing from the regular gathering of the believers for mutual encouragement (10:24–25).

The problem, however, was not simply one of retarded spiritual growth. The writer speaks in glowing terms of the faith, hope and love they had expressed in former times, when they were publicly exposed to insult and persecution (10:32–34). He calls for a renewal of that zeal in every respect (6:11–12; 13:1–19). Those who were in danger of throwing away their confidence in God and shrinking back from such commitment were growing weary and needed every encouragement to persevere in faith and endure hardship, so that they might obtain what was promised (10:35–39; 12:1–13). Perhaps they were worn down by continued hostility from unbelievers and their hope was weakened by the delay in the return of Christ (10:35–39).

Turning to the passages which expound theological themes, we can discern something more about the needs of the readers, and the writer's purpose in addressing them. Hebrews begins with an emphasis on the superiority and finality of the revelation that has come through the Son of God (1:1–14). The readers are urged not to drift from the message that surpasses even what was 'spoken by angels' (2:1–4). It is a message about eternal salvation, achieved by the Son of God in his suffering and heavenly exaltation (2:5–18). In a variety of ways, the writer is keen to point out that Christianity is the fulfilment of everything revealed by God to Israel in the Law and the Prophets.

As an encouragement to the readers to hold fast their faith, the writer then begins to develop the idea that Jesus is 'a merciful and faithful high priest' (2:17–18; 4:14–5:10). This portrayal of Jesus as high priest continues in ch. 7, where it is argued that 'perfection' could not be found in the method of approach to God associated with the traditional Jewish priesthood. Ch. 8 goes on to establish that Jesus' superior priesthood inaugurates the new covenant promised in Je. 31:31–34. Jesus' death and heavenly exaltation are presented as the fulfilment and replacement of all the sacrificial rituals of 'the first covenant', providing an eternally effective forgiveness for sins and the certainty of receiving 'the promised eternal inheritance' (9:1 – 10:18).

This central section of Hebrews is argued with such earnestness and is driven home with so many specific comparisons between the provisions of the Mosaic law and the achievement of Christ that it is likely that the readers were predominantly Jewish Christians. Although the title 'To the Hebrews' goes back to the second century, it was probably not part of the original text. However, most commentators argue that it points us in the right direction. At least some of the recipients of the letter were tempted to drift back into Judaism or were unwilling to sever the last ties with their ancestral religion. Perhaps there was pressure from Jewish sources to do this or perhaps it was simply the temptation to return to the comfortable security of the old ways that motivated them. From the writer's perspective, to slip back into the religion of the OT is actually to turn away from the living God (3:12), since God's Son has inaugurated the perfection of the new covenant (9:11–15) and achieved the realities which the OT only anticipated (10:1).

Having said this much, it is difficult to be certain about the exact location of the first readers or about the precise form of Judaism from which they turned to Christ. They seem to have been Jews of the dispersion, rather than Jews from Palestine. Their Scriptures were most probably the OT in Greek, rather than in Hebrew. The expression 'Those from Italy send you their greetings' (13:24) probably means that certain Italian believers were with the writer and wanted to send a message to those located somewhere in their homeland. More specifically, it is arguable that the recipients were a Jewish section of the Christian community in Rome.

As noted previously, the earliest known quotations from Hebrews occur in a letter written by Clement of Rome. Also, the reference to persecution in 10:32–34 (without bloodshed, 12:4) could be related to the trouble in Rome when Claudius became emperor. The Roman historian Suetonius records that the Jews were 'constantly indulging in riots at the instigation of Chrestus'. It is commonly understood that these riots resulted from the introduction of the message about Christ (represented by Suetonius as 'Chrestus') into the Jewish colony in Rome. Acts 18:2 mentions two Jewish Christians, Priscilla and Aquila, who were amongst the Jews expelled from the capital by Claudius in AD 49. Hebrews could have been written some decades later to a group of such people in Rome, when anti-Christian persecution was on the increase again.

At one level, Hebrews continues to function as a *warning* about the consequences of withdrawing from Christian fellowship, disowning Jesus and abandoning hope in him. On the positive side, it functions as an *encouragement* to endure in faith, hope and love, whatever the struggles and difficulties we may face. The writer seeks to promote such perseverance by fixing the gaze of his readers upon Jesus (3:1; 12:2–3). As Son of God and high priest of the new covenant, he is the ultimate revelation of God and his purposes and the one who alone can bring us to share in his heavenly rule.

What is the structure of the argument?

Detailed study of the structure of Hebrews reveals a carefully balanced and intricately woven pattern of themes. Albert Vanhoye, who has made the most significant contribution to this area of research, observes that the writer regularly announces the theme of a new section as he draws the previous section to a conclusion. These 'announcements of theme' are found in 1:4; 2:17; 5:9–10; 10:36–39; 12:12–13. Certain 'hook words' link the beginning of the new section with the preceding one. In each main section of the argument there are 'characteristic terms' which may be largely confined to that portion of the book. Finally, there are specific indications of the end of each segment. The

book can thus be divided broadly into sections as follows.

As the brief but profound introduction to Hebrews concludes (1:4), the writer indicates that the next main section will involve a comparison between the Son and the angels. 'Angels' is a characteristic term of the argument from 1:5 to 2:16 and only occurs elsewhere in the book at 13:2. 'Angels' is also the hook word linking 1:4 with 1:5 and the word that signifies the end of the whole section (2:16). In the middle of the section there is a call (2:1–4) to respond appropriately to the message brought by the one who is greater than the angels.

In 2:17 the writer announces that the theme of the next section (3:1 – 5:10) will be Jesus as a merciful and faithful high priest. 'Faithful' is the characteristic term of the first subdivision (3:1 – 4:14) and is also the hook word linking 2:17 with 3:2. 'High priest' is also a hook word, a term that begins and ends both subdivisions (3:1; 4:14; 4:15; 5:10), and is a characteristic of the whole section. After a brief comparison between the faithfulness of Jesus and the faithfulness of Moses (3:1–6), the writer provides a lengthy exhortation to the readers to maintain their faith in Jesus (3:7 – 4:14). The sympathy of Christ as a heavenly high priest enables him to be merciful towards the sins of his people and to provide them with help to endure in faithfulness (4:15 – 5:8). His sympathy (4:15) for their situation was acquired during his earthly period of suffering (5:8) and testing.

In 5:9–10 the theme of the third main section of Hebrews is announced: Jesus the perfected high priest in the order of Melchizedek and source of eternal salvation. Before the writer engages in an exposition of these great themes, he warns the readers about becoming sluggish and unwilling to grow into maturity in Christ (5:11 – 6:20). Clearly the intention is to motivate them to take note of the teaching that follows and to apply it to their own situation. This leads to an explanation of what it means to call Jesus high priest 'in the order of Melchizedek' (7:1–28). In broad terms, chs. 8–9 show how the 'perfecting' of Jesus as high priest, in his suffering, death and heavenly exaltation, leads to the perfection of the new covenant for believers. Then the writer develops the notion that Jesus is 'the source of eternal salvation' in 10:1–18. For the sake of simplicity, it is not appropriate to go into detail here about all the key words and subdivisions in these chapters. The central section of Hebrews concludes with a call (10:19–39) which draws out the implications of the preceding teaching.

Faith and endurance is the theme of the fourth main section (11:1 – 12:13) and this is announced in 10:36–39. Faith is the focus in the first subdivision of this section (11:1–40), with endurance being more the emphasis in the second (12:1–13). The fifth section of Hebrews (12:14–13:17) is not so easy to tie down in terms of the criteria used previously. However, its appeals clearly have to do with removing all obstacles to faith and endurance and pursuing a godly life. The announcement of theme in 12:12–13 suggests that it is a challenge to 'make level paths for your feet'. More generally, we may give it the heading Appeals for a God-honouring life-style. Some personal requests and greetings form the conclusion to the work as a whole (13:18–25).

Further reading

R. Brown, *The Message of Hebrews*, BST (IVP, 1982).

D. Gooding, *An Unshakeable Kingdom, The Letter of Hebrews for Today* (IVP, 1989).

D. Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1983).

F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1990).

P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977).

W. L. Lane, *Hebrews*, 2 vols., WBC (Word, 1991).

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Commentary

1:1–4 Introduction: God's final word

We live in a world where many people doubt that God can be known and where there are many conflicting philosophies and religious viewpoints. Even amongst professing Christians there are sometimes claims of further revelation that contradict or claim to go beyond Scripture. However, Hebrews leaves us in no doubt about the fact that God *spoke* decisively to Israel *through the prophets* and that he has fully and finally revealed his character and will *by his Son* (1–2). The OT revelation came *at many times* throughout Israel's history and *in various ways* such as dreams, visions and angelic messages. But the ultimate revelation has come *in these last days* of human history, through Jesus Christ. The writer will go on to suggest that the OT was a preparation for, and the foundation of, this ultimate revelation (*e.g.* 8:5; 10:1). Indeed, God continues to speak through the OT Scriptures to Christians in a whole range of circumstances (*e.g.* 3:7–11; 12:5–6). However, to emphasize the finality of the revelation through Jesus Christ, the writer points to his surpassing greatness as the Son of God.

As the one who was with God from the beginning, he was the one through whom God made *the universe* (Gk. *aiōnas*, 'ages' or 'worlds', is similarly used for the whole universe of space and time in 11:3). Moreover, the Son has been appointed to possess and rule over all that he was originally instrumental in making: he is *heir of all things* (2, *cf.* Ps. 2:7–8). Though many deny his authority and continue to reject him, he must ultimately triumph. As *the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being*, the Son reveals in his person, not merely in his words, what God is really like (3). He continues to sustain the creation and order the events of history by the same *powerful word* that brought everything into existence in the first place (3).

Since the object of divine revelation has always been fellowship between God and human beings, Hebrews soon makes it clear that the Son's role was to provide *purification for sins* (3). This anticipates the argument of 2:14–18 and later passages, which speak about the need for the Son to share fully in our humanity, to suffer and die, so that he might fulfil the high-priestly role of making atonement for our sins. In other words, God's final word to us is not simply the perfect revelation of his character in Jesus Christ but also his saving work, making it possible for us to enjoy everything promised by God for his people *in these last days*.

The sequel to his atoning work was his sitting down *at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven* (*cf.* Ps. 110:1). So significant is the heavenly enthronement of the Son of God that Hebrews here makes no mention of the resurrection and ascension which made it possible. Rather, as the introduction comes to a close, the writer indicates that he is about to draw out the implications of that enthronement. He will establish the absolute superiority of the Son over the angels, those supernatural beings thought by Israel to be closest to God (4).

1:5 – 2:18 The Son and the angels

It would help to read through this whole section of Hebrews, to see how the pieces fit together,

before focusing on the details. Those to whom the letter was sent apparently had some difficulty in sorting out the relationship between Christ and the angels, but there is no way of being certain about the exact nature of their problem. From 2:5–9 it would seem that the Son's becoming 'a little lower than the angels' at the time of his birth needed some justification. How could he be greater than the angels and share fully in our humanity? Why did the one greater than the angels have to suffer and die, as the Christian gospel proclaims? The nature and purpose of what is technically called the 'incarnation' continues to be a much debated issue in our own time and Hebrews offers distinctive insights on the subject at this point.

From 2:1–4 it appears that the original readers held the popular Jewish belief that angels were involved in the giving of God's law to Moses (*cf.* Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). They needed to be assured of the superior status and character of the one who was the agent of the new revelation. Likewise, many people today need to be convinced that Jesus Christ is more than a prophet or an angelic messenger. No greater revelation of God has been given or can be expected. Hence the danger of disregarding the message of salvation that has come from him.

In 2:5–18 we are shown that the Son's earthly work was to achieve salvation from sin and its consequences, enabling believers to share his glory and honour in 'the world to come'. The greatness of our need and the incredible grace of God in meeting that need are stressed. The idea of Christ's heavenly rule comes to the forefront again, to assure us that everything will finally be placed 'under his feet' (2:8) and that, despite the obstacles, true disciples will reign with him.

1:5–14 The Son's superiority to the angels

The scriptural texts cited in this section have the effect of reinforcing and expounding some of the important themes already raised in the introduction (1–4). In particular, reference to the heavenly enthronement of the Son (3) quite naturally leads to an explanation of his position with regard to the angel world. Ps. 110:1 provides the framework in which these various OT texts are to be understood. It is alluded to in v 3 (he 'sat down at the right hand' of the Majesty in heaven) and is quoted in full in v 13. Thus, the subject of Christ's enthronement and heavenly rule is the focus of this section. Jesus used Ps. 110:1 to point to the exalted, heavenly status of the Messiah or Christ in OT expectation (*e.g.* Mk. 12:35–37; 14:61–62), and it was then regularly employed by the earliest Christians to make such claims about the resurrected Jesus (*e.g.* 10:12–14; Acts 2:34–36; 1 Cor. 15:25). There are further allusions to this key text in 8:1 and 12:2.

5 Ps. 2:7 is quoted because it is a prophecy applicable to the Messiah as Son of David and Son of God. The theological basis of this extraordinary claim is God's special promise to David and his dynasty in 2 Sa. 7:14, which is also quoted. When the sons of David were enthroned as God's earthly representatives in Jerusalem, they enjoyed a special relationship of sonship with God. Jesus is the one who ultimately fulfils these scriptures because he is the eternal Son of God (as in 1:2–3), whose resurrection and ascension restored him to the place of all authority and power in the universe, at the Father's 'right hand' (*cf.* the use of Ps. 2:7 in Acts 13:33).

6 No such promises were ever made to the angels. Their task has always been to *worship* God (*cf.* Dt. 32:43; Ps. 96:7). Consequently, they must worship the Son who sits at his right hand. Sharing fully in our humanity, he became for a little while 'lower than the angels', but is now 'crowned with glory and honour' (2:9). The introduction of God's firstborn *into the world* (Gk. *oikoumenē*, as in 2:5) is best taken in the context as a reference to Christ's entrance into what for us is still 'the world to come' (2:5). This happened when he ascended to the 'heavenly' realm.

7–9 The Greek text of Ps. 104:4 suggests that the angels were created to carry out God's commands with the swiftness of *winds* and the strength of *fire*. They are part of the created order and must be subservient to the Son, for he shares with the Father in the divine rule (*throne*) that *will last for ever and ever*. Ps. 45:6–7, which celebrates a royal wedding, is used with reference to Christ, the king of Israel, who supremely fulfils the ideal of sharing in the *righteousness* and *joy* of God's eternal *kingdom*.

10–12 The eternity of Christ and his rule is again stressed in Ps. 102:25–27. This is contrasted with the perishable creation which he founded and will one day roll up *like a robe*. Hebrews takes the Greek text of both these psalms to mean that the Father addresses his Son as *God* and *Lord*. Ps. 110:1 may have inspired this interpretation, since the Lord there addresses someone else as 'my Lord' and invites him to sit at his right hand.

13–14 Returning to the text which appears to have been the starting point for his reflections, the writer uses Ps. 110:1 to insist that the angels do not exercise the authority and rule of the Son. As *ministering spirits*, they are meant to serve his purposes and execute his commands. Indeed, they serve God by serving *those who will inherit salvation*. Angels are higher than we are in the order of creation (Ps. 8:4–6), but they are

commissioned to help us in ways beyond our understanding, so that we may reach our heavenly inheritance (*cf.* 13:2).

2:1–4 A call to hold fast to the Son and his message

This paragraph draws out directly the practical consequences of the previous chapter. It is the first of several warning passages, revealing the writer's concern about the situation of at least some of his readers. Positively, the encouragement is to *pay more careful attention . . . to what we have heard* (1). Negatively, the warning is not to *drift away*, like people in a boat that has lost its moorings and is moving rapidly towards a waterfall. How people drift from Christ remains to be explored in later chapters. Here the point is simply to stress that drifting has disastrous consequences.

The message Hebrews has in mind is the gospel of salvation which was *first announced by the Lord* (*i.e.* Jesus) and was confirmed *by those who heard him* (3). The writer and his readers were not part of the first generation of Christians, but they certainly received the gospel from those who were. When the message was given to them by those who had received it from Jesus, God testified to its supernatural origin *by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will* (4).

The gospel is of greater significance than *the message spoken by angels* to Israel at Mt Sinai. It is the message delivered by the Son of God himself, concerning eternal salvation and how it is to be obtained. If *every violation and disobedience received its just punishment* under the terms of that earlier revelation, how can there by any *escape* for those who *ignore* or neglect the terms of God's ultimate revelation (2–3)? The judgment facing those who turn their backs on Christ must be greater than any punishment experienced by Israel in OT times. The writer says more about this in 10:26–31.

2:5–18 The Son's humiliation and exaltation

Having indicated that the message of the Son is about salvation, the writer proceeds in this section to explain how that salvation was accomplished and what it means for us. The theme of Christ's enthronement and heavenly rule is resumed and we are shown why the Son had to become for a little while *lower than the angels* before being *crowned . . . with glory and honour*. Ps. 8:4–6 is the key text, with three other OT quotations being used in a supportive way (*cf.* 2:12–13). Jesus is the man who 'fulfils' Ps. 8, by suffering death and being exalted to God's right hand. Hebrews then explores the implications of this 'perfecting' of Christ for us (2:10–16). The Son had to share our humanity, to suffer and to die, so that we might share in his *glory*. In 2:17–18 this teaching is expressed again in terms of the Son's calling to be *a merciful and faithful high priest*.

5 The *world to come* recalls Israel's hope for a glorious 'age to come', involving the renewal of creation or the establishment of 'new heavens and a new earth' (*e.g.* Is. 65:17–25), sometimes associated specifically with the work of the Messiah (*e.g.* Is. 11:1–9). Elsewhere, Hebrews speaks about the promised 'rest' of God (4:1–11), the hope of a 'heavenly country' (11:16), or 'the city that is to come' (13:14). These different images are used to describe the new world-order, which will be subject to the Son of God, *not to angels* (*cf.* 1:13). However, Hebrews implies that the coming age has actually been set up by the enthronement of Christ at the right hand of God. Its benefits are being experienced in advance by believers (*e.g.* 2:4; 6:4–6; 12:22–24), as they await the return of Jesus to bring them into the full enjoyment of the salvation he has already won for them (*e.g.* 9:28; 10:36–39).

6–8 Ps. 8:4–6 is quoted to explain how the Son secured his Messianic rule. In their original context, these verses celebrate the exalted position of human beings in God's creation. However, the psalmist speaks in ideal terms, since sin, death and the devil prevent us from exercising dominion in this world as God intended (*cf.* Gn. 1:26–31 and 3:14–19). Complete dominion is promised to the Messiah in Ps. 110:1 and Hebrews takes that text as a clue to the ultimate meaning and application of Ps. 8:4–6. The Son's role is to fulfil the destiny of the human race. *Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.* How can we be certain that the world to come will be subject to him?

9 The writer takes *made a little lower than the angels* as a reference to the humiliation of the Son of God, experienced when he came to share fully in our humanity (*cf.* 2:14–18). Note the introduction of the human name *Jesus* at this point in the argument. *Crowned with glory and honour* refers to the heavenly exaltation he experienced *because he suffered death*. The ascension of the crucified Messiah to God's right hand is the assurance that God will eventually *put everything under his feet*. Death was the pathway to such glory for him but, *by the grace of God*, it is also the means of salvation for us. The following verses go on to explain what is meant for him to *taste* [experience] *death for everyone*.

10 God's plan for humanity was fulfilled through the one man, Jesus Christ (*cf.* Rom. 5:12–21). It was supremely *fitting* for God, as the one who created all things for his own purposes, to bring *many sons to glory* in this way.

Jesus is the head of a great company of people, destined to share in his honour and glory. They are variously designated in this passage as *sons* (10), *brothers* (11–12), *children* (13) and *Abraham's descendants* (16). Jesus is the *author* (Gk. *archēgon*, as in 12:2) *of their salvation*, or perhaps more accurately 'the pioneer of their salvation'. He certainly accomplished something unique on behalf of others (9) and is rightly called 'the source of eternal salvation' in 5:9. But the writer also wishes to stress that Jesus is in some respects the leader who acted like a trail blazer, opening up the way for others to follow (*cf.* 6:20; 12:1–3). Three times we are told that he was made *perfect* (Gk. *teleiōsai*, *cf.* 5:9; 7:28). There is no sense in which he was morally imperfect, but by his suffering and temptation, his death and heavenly exaltation, he was 'qualified' or 'made completely adequate' as the saviour of his people. The implications of this profound teaching will become clearer as the argument progresses.

11–13 As the 'perfected' saviour, Jesus *makes men holy* or 'consecrates' a people to God (*cf.* 10:10, 14, 29; 13:12). Hebrews uses three OT texts to show how this happens. Ps. 22:22 speaks about the proclamation of God's deliverance by someone who had experienced terrible suffering and rejection. These words apply supremely to Jesus as the resurrected and ascended Lord, proclaiming the victory achieved through his death. In so doing, he gathers around him and sustains *the congregation* or church of his spiritual brothers and sisters (12). Is. 8:16–18 speaks about Isaiah and his disciples being united by their trust in God, thus becoming signs and symbols to unbelieving Israel. Hebrews takes a sentence from Is. 8:17 (*I will put my trust in him*) as a pointer to Jesus' faithful reliance on the Father in the carrying out of his earthly ministry (13). Is. 8:18 is then used to identify the church as *the children* given to Jesus by God. His persistence in faith, even to the point of death, makes it possible for them to have faith. Faith binds the family of Christ together.

14–16 To achieve the salvation of his *children*, and to draw them to himself as the community of faith, the Son had to share fully *in their humanity* (lit. 'blood and flesh'). The purpose of this 'incarnation' (becoming human) was that he might die and *by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil.* This recalls the teaching of Gn. 3 about Satan's role in the rebellion of humanity against God and the imposition of death as the divine penalty for sin. Hebrews indicates that the devil continues to hold people *in slavery* because of their *fear of death* (15). We can only be released from Satan's power and freed to serve God by the forgiveness or cleansing made possible by Jesus' death (*cf.* 9:14–15, 27–28; 10:19–22). He removes the threat of judgment and condemnation for those who trust in him and gives the assurance of life in the world to come. The writer brings his extended comparison between Christ and the angels to an end when he says *surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants* (16). This last expression does not refer to humanity in general, nor to national Israel in particular, but to all who have 'fled to take hold of the hope offered to us' in Jesus, who are 'the heirs of what was promised' to Abraham (6:17–18).

17–18 The title *high priest* is given to Jesus for the first time, as the writer announces the theme of the next major division of his work (3:1 – 5:10). This first mention of Jesus' high priesthood is linked very closely with the teaching that *he had to be made like his brothers in every way* (17). Only because he shared our nature, experienced human frailty and *suffered when he was tempted*, is he able to provide the appropriate help to *those who are being tempted* (18). However, the climax of his earthly struggle was his death, by which he was able to *make atonement for the sins of the people* (17). This expression is the first indication that Jesus fulfilled the role of the high priest on the annual Day of Atonement (*cf.* Lv. 16), offering a sacrifice to cleanse his people from the defilement of sin, and placate the anger of God (*cf.* 7:27; 9:11–12, 24–26; 10:1–14).

3:1 – 5:10 Jesus as a merciful and faithful high priest

In this major segment of the argument the themes raised in 2:17–18 are expounded and applied to the situation of the original readers. The focus is firstly on the faithfulness of Jesus as 'the apostle and high priest whom we confess' (3:1–6). This is developed by contrasting Jesus with Moses, who was the key figure in the establishment of Israel as God's 'house' (household or family) at the time of the exodus. The writer's argument would have had special point for Jewish Christians tempted to drift back into Judaism, where Moses and the revelation he brought to Israel were held in such high regard. But the passage has a wider application because of the positive things that are said about Jesus.

The warning that follows (3:7 – 4:13) draws attention to the unbelief and rebellion of the Israelites who left Egypt under Moses and failed to enter the promised land. Christians are also on a journey towards an inheritance or 'rest' provided by God. Therefore, the writer encourages his readers to persevere in faith, 'so that no-one will fall' by following the example of

the Israelites in the wilderness (4:11). Faith in the word of God is the key. Mutual exhortation is necessary to prevent the hardening of hearts in unbelief against that word. Only in this way can the promised 'rest' be entered and enjoyed. Supremely, we are assured of the 'mercy' and 'grace' that Jesus offers, as the 'great high priest who has gone through the heavens' (4:14–16). The comparison between OT priesthood and the priesthood of Christ that follows supports this claim (5:1–10). Once again, Hebrews demonstrates the surpassing greatness of the person and work of the Son of God.

3:1–6 The faithfulness of Christ

Holy brothers suggests a family relationship between true believers, men and women alike. They are pilgrims *who share in the heavenly calling* (1) to reign with Christ in 'the world to come' (2:5). The greatest encouragement to press on in the journey of faith is to *fix your thoughts on Jesus.* Thus the writer exposes very simply the central concern of his 'word of encouragement'. Christians are to focus on Jesus as *the apostle*, sent by God to be the ultimate revelation of his character and will, and as *high priest*, making possible an eternal relationship with God. Such teaching is designed to encourage the weary, to challenge the sluggish and the disobedient, and to reassure those who are doubting and drifting.

2–5 Jesus' faithfulness to God as *the one who appointed him* is compared with the faithfulness of Moses. Such faithfulness invites us to trust Jesus completely. The writer alludes to Nu. 12:7, where Moses' foundational role as the revealer of God's will to Israel is highlighted. However, Jesus is *worthy of greater honour than Moses* because, as the Son of God, he was actually *the builder* of the *house* or 'household' in which Moses served. It was through his Son that God 'made the universe' (1:2) and through his Son that he saved and established the community of faith (3–4). Moses' role in *God's house* was to act as a *servant* and as a witness (Gk. *eis martyrion*) to *what should be said in the future.* Even the system of worship Moses was told to inaugurate was a preparation for, and an anticipation of, the realities that would come with the Messiah (*cf.* 8:5; 10:1).

6 The Son now rules *over God's house.* This comprises all true believers from the beginning of human history to the present – all who are saved or perfected by the work of the Son. However, a note of warning is sounded by the words *if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.* This forms a bridge to the passage that follows, where the possibility of turning away from Christ is discussed. 'Confidence' would be a better rendering of the Greek (*parrēsia*) than *courage* here. The sacrifice of Jesus gives us 'confidence to enter the Most Holy Place' (10:19; *cf.* 4:16). Right of access to God is his gift to us in Christ and is not to be discarded for any reason (10:35–36). We need to *hold on* to it and exercise it so that we may persevere in doing the will of God and obtain what he has promised. Similarly, there is an objective *hope* given to us in the gospel. This should continue to be our *boast* or basis of exultation.

3:7 – 4:13 A call to faithfulness

Ps. 95:7–11 offers a serious warning about refusing to listen to God's voice, becoming hardened in unbelief and missing out on the *rest* which he has promised his people. The writer is quite passionate in his exposition of the psalm passage because he is clearly worried about certain tendencies in the group he is addressing. So the danger of 'drifting' from Christ, briefly mentioned in 2:1–4, is exposed more fully. Nevertheless, despite the seriousness of the warning, the power of Scripture to challenge and change believers is emphasized. God sustains his people through the words that he has spoken to them and through the ministry of encouragement they can have to one another.

The rest that Christ secured for his people is interpreted in terms of Gn. 2:2. It is the *Sabbath-rest* into which God entered after finishing *the creation of the world.* The land of Canaan, where Joshua established the Israelites in his time, was an anticipation of this ultimate rest for the people of God. With a further warning not to miss out on that rest, the writer makes a concluding statement about the power of the word of God to expose and judge the human heart.

7–11 *The Holy Spirit* is acknowledged as the one who spoke 'through David' in the writing of Ps. 95 (3:7; 4:7). The Spirit continues to speak to subsequent generations of Christians through this Scripture, warning them to make each day a fresh 'Today' in which to hear his voice and live. Those who left Egypt with Moses had God's words of promise and warning ringing in their ears, but they hardened their hearts and would not respond with faith and obedience. *Rebellion* and *testing* are translations of the Hebrew names Meribah and Massah (Ex. 17:1–7; *cf.* Nu. 20:1–13). At the beginning and end of their desert wanderings, the Israelites showed themselves to be particularly unbelieving at these places. They *tested and tried* God in the sense that they went as far as they could in provoking him to judge them (9). The forty-year period in the wilderness was an expression of God's anger with *that generation*, but it was also an opportunity for them to experience his

gracious *ways*, again and again (10). Since they refused to repent and trust him, he *declared on oath* in his anger that such people could not enter his *rest* in the land that he had promised to their forefathers as an inheritance (11; *cf.* Nu. 14). That privilege would only be extended to their children.

12–13 The writer wants his fellow believers (*brothers* will include 'sisters') to have such a care for one another that *none* will be lost. A commitment to understand and help others in the local church is required. The greatest danger is that someone in the congregation might have *a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.* Like the Israelites mentioned in Ps. 95:7–11, professing Christians sometimes turn away from God in apostasy (Gk. *apostēnai*), that is, in deliberate and persistent rebellion. This may be provoked by suffering or persecution or by the pressure of temptation, but the root cause is always unbelief. Expressed another way, *you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.* Sin is an active, aggressive power that must be resisted. If you *harden your hearts* against the word of God (8), sin will have its way and *you may be hardened* (13). For further comments on apostasy, see the notes on 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:15–17. The antidote is to *encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today.* Such encouragement will be on the basis of Scripture, following the writer's own example (Gk. *parakaleite*, 'encourage', recalls the description of the book of Hebrews as *logos paraklēseōs*, 'word of exhortation', in 13:22). It may take place in the more formal context of Christian gatherings (*cf.* 10:24–25) or in the daily informal contacts that Christians have with one another. Either way, a word-based ministry to one another is the key to faithfulness and perseverance. It is not a responsibility of church leaders alone, but a duty of each Christian.

14–15 By God's grace, believers *have come to share in Christ* and all that he offers. This is parallel to the statement that 'we are his house' (6): the blessing has already been conferred! However, as in v 6, the idea of a further condition or fact is introduced in v 14. We demonstrate that we truly belong to Christ if after all we *hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.* It is faith that provides the underlying foundation for such confidence. Persevering faith is a mark of true conversion (*cf.* Mk. 13:13). Faith is not a good work that saves us but the means by which we hold on to the promises of God and remain in the relationship he has made possible for us through his Son. Those who abandon their *confidence* in Christ and turn away from him show that they were never genuinely 'sharers in Christ'. Consequently, the writer stresses again the need to heed God's voice every day and not to be hardened in unbelief (15).

16–19 With a series of compelling questions, the implications of Ps. 95:7–11 are further drawn out. Those *who heard and rebelled* were the ones who experienced firsthand the goodness of God in bringing them out of Egypt. They had every encouragement to persevere in faith during their journey to the promised land. But they disqualified themselves from entering *his rest* because they persistently *disobeyed* him. That disobedience was *because of their unbelief.*

4:1–2 *The promise of entering his rest* has been conveyed to us in the gospel. Our situation is so like that of the Israelites in the wilderness that the writer can say *we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did.* They received the promise of entering the promised land (*e.g.* Ex. 3:7–10; 34:10–14) and were called to live by faith in that word of God. In that sense they had the gospel preached to them or were 'evangelized' (2; *cf.* Gal. 3:8–9). Therefore, as long as the promise remains, *let us be careful* (lit. 'let us fear') *that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.* There is always the possibility that some member of the group might fail to attain the promised rest for the same reason that the Israelites under Moses fell short of obtaining their inheritance: *the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.* The NIV mg. presents an alternative reading that is well attested in some ancient manuscripts: *because they did not share in the faith of those who obeyed.* This probably refers to the fact that the majority did not share the faith of Joshua and Caleb when it came to the point of entering the land of Canaan (Num. 14). Both readings indicate that hearing the message with faith is essential for salvation (*cf.* Rom. 10:14).

3–5 *We who have believed* enter the *rest* of which Ps. 95:11 speaks. Since the Israelites were already established in Canaan when David wrote the psalm, its warning about missing out on God's rest must refer to something beyond that material possession. Gn. 2:2, where the related verb 'rested' is found, is used as the key for unlocking the meaning. The rest promised in the psalm is a share in the 'sabbath' of God's own rest, following his work in creation (see below on 4:9–11). In the argument of Hebrews, God's rest is equivalent to the 'heavenly country' (11:16), the 'heavenly Jerusalem' (12:22), the 'kingdom that cannot be shaken' (12:28), and other such descriptions of the Christian's inheritance. From one point of view, that rest already exists for us in the heavenlies and can be 'entered' now, by faith (3; 12:22). It has been in existence since the creation of the world. From

another point of view, we are on a pilgrimage to 'the city that is to come' (13:14), and we wait to be ushered into 'the world to come' (2:5). Hebrews presents the same tension between 'now' and 'not yet' that is found elsewhere in the NT. Jesus has made it possible for us to enjoy certain blessings in the present, as an assurance that we will possess everything promised to us in the end (*cf.* Eph. 1:13–14).

6–8 The rest that the Israelites experienced in the time of *Joshua* was an earthly anticipation of the ultimate, heavenly rest. Hebrews goes on to argue that the way into that ultimate inheritance has been secured by the Lord Jesus Christ (*e.g.* 6:19–20; 9:15; 10:19–22). A long time after the conquest of Canaan, Ps. 95 designated another day as the day (*Today*) to *hear his voice* and enter God's rest. This proves that David had in mind a rest beyond the enjoyment of life in the land of Israel. If Joshua had given the people their ultimate rest at the time of the conquest, *God would not have spoken later about another day.* The hope of God's people is a heavenly rest, not the re-establishment of the Jews in the land of Israel. The fundamental promises of the old covenant are fulfilled in a transformed way by Christ.

9–11 God intends his people to share in his own *Sabbath-rest.* This involves resting from the work that is committed to us at present (*cf.* Rev. 14:13), *just as God did from his.* However, we are not to think of God's *rest* as the rest of inactivity. Scripture makes it clear that he continues to uphold, direct and maintain his creation, having completed the work of establishing it (*e.g.* 1:3; Ps. 104; Jn. 5:17). The image is rather one of freedom from toil and struggle, to enjoy with God the satisfaction and perfection of his work in creating and redeeming us. Put another way, we will be liberated from all the trials and pressures of our present existence to serve God without hindrance and to live with him for ever (*cf.* Rev. 7:13–17). There is, therefore, need to *make every effort to enter that rest.* Since faith is the means by which we enter God's rest (3), the writer is clearly restating the warning about hardening our hearts in unbelief. He is not saying that we secure our salvation by good works. On the other hand, if faith is genuine, it will be expressed in obedience. So our concern should be that *no-one will fall* by following the *example* of the *disobedience* of the Israelites, as highlighted in Ps. 95:7–11.

12–13 This segment ends with a reflection on the *word of God* (Gk. *ho logos tou Theou*) and what it can achieve. There is no ground in the context for identifying this with the personal Word of God mentioned in Jn. 1:1–14. Most obviously, the expression refers to the gospel, which is described in v 2 as 'the message they heard' (Gk. *ho logos tēs akouēs*). The gospel brings the promise of salvation as well as the warning of judgment (*cf.* 2:1–4). However, it is also clear that Ps. 95 can function as the voice of God, calling us to faith and warning us about hardening our hearts. This scripture is the particular *word of God* that the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to hear in chs. 3–4. So what is said in vs 12–13 can apply as much to the preached word as to the word of God written in Scripture. In language recalling Is. 55:11, the word of God is said to be *living and active,* implying that it achieves the purpose for which it is uttered by God. However, Hebrews does not suggest that everyone who hears the message will automatically believe and enter God's rest. The metaphor of the *double-edged sword* is used to paint what initially appears to be a rather frightening picture. God's word *penetrates* to the deepest recesses of our being, opening us up and judging *the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* It is the 'critic' (Gk. *kritikos*) by which all are judged. Indeed, confronted by the word of God, we are confronted by God himself, and *nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.* When the writer says *Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes* of God, the image is that of an animal with its head thrown back and neck bare, ready to be sacrificed! Put simply, we cannot hide our faces from the one *to whom we must give account.* If the word of God has its dissecting and exposing effect in our lives now, we will not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and come utterly unprepared to face him on the day of reckoning. In the final analysis, then, this passage suggests that the negative or judging function of the word of God can be a help to us in pursuing the journey of faith.

4:14 – 5:10 The compassion of Christ

High priest is a hook word, linking the argument in 4:14 with the beginning of the previous section (3:1; *cf.* 2:17), and introducing a new segment. It is also a characteristic term in 4:14 – 5:10, where the focus is particularly on Christ as a *merciful* high priest. Jesus' exaltation and entrance into heaven is the basis for a call to *hold firmly to the faith we profess* (14). His human experience qualifies him to be sympathetic and merciful to those who *approach the throne of grace through him* (15–16). In 5:1 the writer gives a general definition of the role of the high priest in the OT. He then shows how important it was for a high priest to be able to *deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray* (2–3), and insists that one must be *called by God* to this office (4). Then, in reverse order, he applies the same criteria to Jesus, highlighting the similarities and differences in his high-priesthood. Jesus' calling by God was to be *a*

priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek (6). Learning to trust and obey God in the midst of suffering (8), he acquired an understanding of our situation and a compassion that makes him a perfect high priest (7–8; *cf.* 4:15–16). In general terms, then, Jesus is described as the high priest who became *the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him* (9).

Readers need to keep in mind that the doctrinal segment (1–10) is included to support and give strength to the exhortations that precede it (4:14–16). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the large central section of Hebrews (7:1 – 10:18) concludes with similar exhortations (10:19–23). This proves that the writer's teaching on Jesus' high-priesthood is fundamentally designed to encourage endurance in the struggle against sin and unbelief. We are urged by these passages to take hold of all the spiritual resources available to us in Christ.

14 The great incentive to *hold firmly to the faith we profess* is the knowledge that Jesus is *the Son of God* and *a great priest who has gone through the heavens.* As *the Son of God*, he is the ultimate revelation of God and the one in whom God's purposes for the universe are completed. As the ultimate *high priest*, he was faithful to God in the face of suffering and temptation, enduring death to 'make atonement for the sins of the people' (2:17). In his ascension, he passed *through the heavens* and went into God's presence, 'to appear for us' as our representative (9:24). On the annual Day of Atonement (Lv. 16) the Jewish high priests offered sacrifices outside the tabernacle or temple and then entered the inner tent or sanctuary to intercede for the people on the basis of the offerings they had made. In many different passages, Hebrews suggests the fulfilment of this ritual in the death of Jesus, his ascension into heaven and his work of intercession at the right hand of God (*cf.* especially 7:25–28; 9:11–12).

15 The preceding verse might suggest the remoteness of Jesus from the struggles of his people on earth. But our heavenly high priest is able *to sympathise with our weaknesses* because he *has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.* The Greek perfect tense (*pepeirasmenon*, 'has been tempted') implies that the exalted Christ carries with him his earthly experiences of resisting sin: he continues to know what it was like to be tested *just as we are.* But Jesus' knowledge of our *weaknesses* does not come from having actually sinned (*cf.* 9:14; Jn. 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Jn. 3:5). He was made like us 'in every way' (2:17; Gk. *kata panta*) and has been tempted as we are *in every way* (Gk. *kata panta*) (4:15). However, to be tempted is not to sin. Jesus was like Adam before he rebelled against God: he had no history of sin and had the freedom not to sin. This did not make him any less human! Indeed, only he who resisted temptation to the end knows its full weight. As Jesus struggled to do the Father's will in the face of every difficulty (5:7–8; 12:2–3), he proved himself to be a man with a difference and the only one who could possibly save us from the power and penalty of sin.

16 The challenge to *approach the throne of grace with confidence* is based particularly on the teaching that Jesus is able to *sympathise with our weaknesses.* He is enthroned with God as the heavenly ruler, whose *throne* or rule is characterized by *grace.* The idea of 'approaching' or 'drawing near' to God is quite prominent in Hebrews (7:19, 25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22). The old covenant provided limited access to God through the sacrificial system at the tabernacle or the temple. But the high-priestly work of Jesus introduces 'a better hope' by which we 'draw near to God' (7:19). Coming to God through Jesus means receiving by faith the salvation he makes available to us (7:25; 12:22–24). Continually drawing near (the literal meaning of the present tense of *proserchōmetha* here and in 10:22), will mean expressing that new covenant relationship with God directly in prayer, seeking *mercy* for past failures and *grace to help us in our time of need.* This approach to God for *help* in running the Christian race is to be *with confidence* (Gk. *meta parrēsia*, *cf.* 3:6; 10:19), in spite of the frankest recognition of our sins.

5:1–4 Certain qualifications for high-priesthood under the old covenant are highlighted here as a basis for explaining more fully how Jesus can be the high priest of the new covenant. High priests were *selected* and *appointed* to act as mediators between the people of Israel and God. They were to *represent them in matters related to God*, specifically, but not exclusively, in offering *gifts and sacrifices for sins.* On the Day of Atonement, the high priest was *to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people* (*cf.* Lv. 16:6; 11–14). This was an indication that the high priest was *subject to weakness*, like the rest of the community, and in need of cleansing from sin. Such a ritual should have encouraged him to *deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray.* The Greek verb translated 'to deal gently' means literally 'to moderate anger'. The comparison and contrast with Christ is clear: Jewish high priests were at least to control their anger when dealing with those who sinned, but our high priest will actively *sympathise with our weaknesses* (4:15). From a statement about the general function of the high priest in the Israelite community and a comment about a necessary quality in his ministry, the writer turns to his calling. The

honour of such an office is given by God alone: one must be *called by God, just as Aaron was* (*cf.* Ex. 28:1; Lv. 8:1; Nu. 16–18).

5–6 In reverse order, the qualifications for priesthood mentioned in vs 1–4 are now applied to Jesus. *Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest* but was appointed by God to this role, as indicated in Ps. 110:4. However, before Hebrews quotes that verse, the words of Ps. 2:7 are cited. This recalls the argument of ch. 1, where Ps. 2:7 is taken to affirm the absolute supremacy of the Son of God over the whole creation, including the angels (1:5). Ps. 110:1–3 similarly asserts the triumphant rule of the Messianic king who sits at God's right hand. However, Ps. 110:4 adds the unusual perspective that the Messiah will be *a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.* Joining these psalm citations together, Hebrews again links the idea of Jesus as *Son* and *high priest* (*cf.* 4:14), but makes it quite clear that his priesthood belongs to a different order from that of Aaron and the levitical priests. Jesus fulfils the role and function of the Jewish priesthood as high priest *in the order of Melchizedek.* The application of Ps. 110:4 to Jesus is explored more fully in Hebrews 7.

7–8 These verses explain how our heavenly high priest is able to 'sympathise with our weaknesses' without ever having sinned (*cf.* 4:15). Although Jesus was severely tested in the course of his whole life on earth (lit. 'in the days of his flesh'), his experience in the Garden of Gethsemane may be particularly in view here. Mention of his *prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death* recalls the anguish of Jesus as he faced the cross and appealed to have 'the cup' of suffering taken away from him (*cf.* Mk. 14:34–36 and parallels). The terror of being forsaken by his Father in death (*cf.* Mk. 15:34) must have especially pressed upon him on that occasion. So Jesus prayed for deliverance from the approaching crisis, but then willingly submitted to the Father's will so that he might become *the source of eternal salvation* for others (9). That second stage of Jesus' experience in Gethsemane is probably reflected in the statement that *he was heard because of his reverent submission* (Gk. *eulabeia* can also be translated 'godly fear'). The answer to his prayer of submission was strength to endure the bitter ordeal facing him and then the triumph and glory of his resurrection. Son of God though he was (8; *cf.* v 5), he experienced the temptation to swerve from doing the will of his Father because of the suffering involved. He needed to learn what *obedience* to God involved in practical terms, in the conditions of human life on earth, so that he could sympathize with those similarly tested and teach us by his own example how far God ought to be submitted to and obeyed (*cf.* 12:1–11; 13:13).

9–10 Learning *obedience from what he suffered*, Jesus was *made perfect* ('perfected') *i.e.* 'qualified' or 'made completely adequate' as the saviour of his people (*cf.* 2:10). More specifically, he was perfected as the *source of eternal salvation.* Every experience of testing prepared him for a final act of obedience to the Father in his sacrificial death (*cf.* 10:5–10). By this means he achieved a salvation from sin, death and the devil, enabling those who trust in him to share with him in the life of the world to come. The idea that Christ establishes a pattern of obedience for others to follow is suggested by the words *for all who obey him.* However, this expression does not indicate that salvation is to be earned by obedience. Salvation is God's gift to us in Christ, but those who look to him as the unique *source of eternal salvation* will want to express their faith in ongoing obedience as he did (*cf.* 12:1–4). Faith in Christ commits us to share in his struggle against sin.

5:11 – 10:39 Jesus the perfected high priest in the order of Melchizedek and source of eternal salvation

As the heading suggests, this central section of Hebrews is really an exposition of the themes announced in 5:9–10. After calling attention to the need for progress in understanding and obedience (5:11 – 6:20), the writer demonstrates how Jesus fulfils the role of 'high priest in the order of Melchizedek' (7:1–28). Here Ps. 110:4 is the key text, with Gn. 14:18–20 being used in a supportive role. The perfecting of Christ as our heavenly high priest is mentioned in 7:26–28, as a bridge to the next two chapters, where the writer examines more fully what it meant for Christ to be 'perfected'. Here Je. 31:31–34 comes into focus, and the implications for us are considered. The idea that Christ is 'the source of eternal salvation' is developed in 10:1–18, with Ps. 40:6–8 being used to explain how Christ fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah.

This section ends with another appeal (10:19–39), highlighting the practical consequences of the writer's complex doctrinal arguments. It is interesting to note how this passage expresses again some of the warnings and encouragements of preceding passages (particularly 4:14–16 and 5:11 – 6:20). As you read through the section as a whole, and then examine more carefully the meaning of its various parts, keep in mind that the exhortations reveal the purpose of the theological teaching.

5:11 – 6:20 A call to learn and progress

Before launching into the argument of chs. 7–10, the writer offers both warnings (5:11 – 6:8) and encouragements (6:9–20). His teaching about Christ's high-priestly work will not be grasped or applied by those who have become *slow to learn* and unwilling to work out the deeper implications of their faith. Anyone who continues to avoid such *solid food* can never be *mature* as a Christian (5:11–14). Indeed, resistance to spiritual growth may lead people to *fall away* or completely rebel against God, because they are hardening their hearts against God (6:1–8).

Despite the seriousness of the warning, the writer is persuaded about the reality of the commitment of those he addresses. But he wants *each* of them to show the *same diligence* that they did in the past, working out the implications of their Christian hope in everyday living, and persisting in faith and patience to the end (6:9–12). Having reached a certain level of maturity, some seemed to be unwilling to press on any further. To renew their confidence in God, the writer reminds them that God confirmed his promise to Abraham with an *oath* and that he has similarly guaranteed the high-priesthood of Jesus in Ps. 110:4. The hope that this offers us is like *an anchor for the soul, firm and secure* (6:13–20). Only unbelief will cause people to miss out on what has been achieved for us by our great high priest.

11–14 The readers have become *slow to learn* or more literally 'dull with respect to what is heard'. Despite their initial enthusiasm as Christians, a certain sluggishness has crept in and the writer fears they may now be unwilling to work out the deeper implications of the gospel and respond with faith and obedience (*cf.* 2:1–4; 3:1 – 4:2, where the key issue is responding to what is heard). One sign of this developing slackness is their unwillingness or inability *to be teachers*. After a certain *time*, anyone instructed in the faith ought to be able to explain it to others (*cf.* 3:13; 10:24–25; 1 Thes. 5:11, 1 Pet. 3:15). If people want to be taught *the elementary truths of God's word all over again*, when they should be communicating basic Christian teaching to others and desiring *solid food* for themselves, a serious case of arrested spiritual growth has developed. As in the physical realm, *milk* is the appropriate food for an *infant* but *solid food is for the mature*. The writer equates spiritual milk with what he describes as (lit.) 'the first principles of the oracles of God' (Gk. *ta stoicheia tēs archēs tōn logiōn tou Theou*). This could mean that the readers needed some guidelines for interpreting the OT ('the oracles of God') from a Christian point of view. More specifically, the expression may be a parallel to what 6:1 describes as *the elementary teachings about Christ* (Gk. *ton tēs archēs tou Christou logon*). *Solid food* will involve a deeper understanding of fundamental biblical truth (as in chs. 7–10). A spiritual *infant* is virtually defined as someone *not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness*, that is, teaching which can motivate them to righteousness (*cf.* 12:11). Furthermore, immature Christians have not *trained themselves to distinguish good from evil* by the constant practice of responding to God's revelation.

6:1–3 Although the writer has accused the readers of immaturity and has insisted that *solid food is for the mature* (5:14), he intends to feed them solid food so that they might *go on to maturity* (lit. 'be borne along to maturity')! They need the insight and commitment that solid food can bring. When he says *let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ*, he does not mean 'abandon completely the basic truths listed'. Progress is made by *not laying again the foundation* of elementary teaching but by building on this foundation. It is interesting to note that *the elementary teachings* mentioned here are not distinctively Christian. Practically every item could have been endorsed by orthodox Judaism. However, each item acquired a new significance in the light of Christian teaching about Jesus as Israel's Messiah. So the impression is given that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation for expounding Christian truth. The solid food of Hebrews is a development of biblical themes such as *repentance from acts that lead to death* and *faith in God, resurrection of the dead* and *eternal judgment*, in the light of teaching about Jesus as Son of God and high priest of the new covenant. *Instruction about baptisms* (plural) may refer to Jewish ceremonial washings (*cf.* 9:10) and their fulfilment in Christ. *The laying on of hands* was a Jewish practice, associated with prayer, which was adapted in various ways by the earliest Christians (*e.g.* Acts 8:17; 9:17–18; 13:3). Under pressure of persecution, converts from Judaism must have been tempted 'to give up more and more those features of faith and practice which were distinctive of Christianity, and yet to feel that they had not abandoned the basic principles of repentance and faith, the realities denoted by religious ablutions and the laying on of hands, the expectation of resurrection and the judgment of the age to come.' (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, [Eerdmans, 2, 1990], p. 143).

4–6 The stern warning of these verses (echoed in 10:26–31; 12:15–17) is for those who *fall away* or commit apostasy (*cf.* 3:12), because they cut themselves off from the only sacrifice

for sins under the new covenant and the only hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Such people are *crucifying the Son of God all over again*, rejecting him as deliberately as his executioners did, and *subjecting him to public disgrace*, openly putting themselves in the position of his enemies. Nothing is impossible for God, but he offers us no hope of reclaiming those who take a continuous and hard-hearted stand against Christ. As noted in connection with 3:12–13, those who harden their hearts against God may reach a point where they are 'hardened' beyond recall. The writer does not accuse his readers of being in this position, but the fate of apostates is something they and we should not forget. In its context, this passage stands as a warning about where sluggishness could lead.

But can genuine Christians become apostate? Hebrews certainly suggest that those who fall away may have every appearance of being truly converted. They have *once been enlightened*, indicating a decisive entrance of the light of the gospel into their lives. They have *tasted the heavenly gift*, which may mean receiving Christ himself and all the spiritual blessings he offers. 'Tasting' implies experiencing something in a manner that is real and personal (not merely 'sipping'). They have *shared in the Holy Spirit* (lit. 'having become partakers of the Holy Spirit'), so that their rebellion involves insulting the Spirit of grace (10:29). Finally we are told that *they have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age*. This suggests a decisive experience of the benefits of the new covenant. However, those who have enjoyed such a relationship with God cannot presume on that relationship, believing themselves to be immune from the possibility of apostasy. Promises like Jn. 10:28–29 and Phil. 1:6 are a guarantee that God will keep his children faithful to the end. Hebrews has its own way of encouraging confidence in God's ability to sustain us in our faith. But we all need to be challenged to make our 'calling and election sure' (2 Pet. 1:10), and this is the practical and pastoral significance of the warning passages in Hebrews.

We may wish to say that those who are truly regenerate will never fall away, but the genuineness of the new birth is proved by persistence in faith. The writer of Hebrews is clearly confident that a true work of God has taken place in the congregation he addresses (6:9; 10:39). 'But this does not exclude the possibility that some of their number are rebellious at heart and, unless there is a radical change, will find that they have reached the point of irremediable apostasy.' (P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 212). It is possible to get caught up in the spiritual experience of a group without being genuinely converted. Sometimes people show all the signs of conversion but drift away from Christ after a time and demonstrate that they were never truly God's children. More specifically, the writer has in view those who see clearly where the truth lies, conform to it for a while, and then, for various reasons, renounce it. Continuance is the test of reality. Those who persevere are the true saints and a passage like this will be used by God to sustain them in faith.

7–8 Jesus used the parable of four 'soils' to explain different responses people have to the gospel (Mk. 4:1–20 and parallels). Hebrews only refers to two possibilities. The good soil that *drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God.* This refers to those who persist in hearing and obeying the word of God. By God's grace they are spiritually fruitful. The bad soil *that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed.* It never responds to cultivation and *in the end it will be burned.* This describes the fate of those who harden their hearts in unbelief and turn away from God (*cf.* 10:26–31). The writer provides no middle ground for the sluggish and the slack. He wants his readers to be sure that they all fit into the first category!

9–10 Words of encouragement now follow the stark warnings of vs 4–8. The writer is *confident of better things* in the case of his *dear friends*. More particularly, he is suggesting that, as a group, they fit into the category of the good soil in v 7. Such people receive the blessings of God *that accompany salvation.* His confidence is partly based on the recollection of their past and present behaviour and partly on the justice of God. The *work* and the *love* they have shown *him* was done lit. 'for his name'. It involved ministering and continuing to minister to his people (Gk. *tois hagiois*; 'to the saints'). A remarkable example of this is recorded in 10:32–34. When the writer says *God is not unjust; he will not forget* such things, the focus is not simply on reward for services rendered. God knows the reality of their spiritual lives and if he so motivated expressions of genuine Christianity in the past he can be relied upon to do so again in the future. The motif of God's faithfulness is further developed in vs 13–20.

11–12 The writer's earnest desire that *each* one of his friends should persevere as a Christian comes out again. Their faithfulness to Christ and practical concern for one another in testing times were inspired by a compelling *hope* (10:34). Now, when their greatest enemy seems to be sluggishness, they need to show the *same diligence* (lit. 'zeal'), to keep hope fully alive *to the very end.* A lively hope is the basis for effective

Christian living in every context. Those who have this motivation will not be overwhelmed by sluggishness (Gk. *nōthroi* is used here as in 5:11, but without qualification). In fact, they will become imitators of *those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.* Such language anticipates the argument of 11:1 – 12:13.

13–15 The basis of Christian hope is not wishful thinking about the future but the solemn *promise* of God. The foundation of God's saving activity in the world was the particular promise made to *Abraham* in Gn. 12:1–3 and repeated at various stages to the forefathers of Israel in different forms (*e.g.* Gn. 15:1–21; 26:2–4; 28:13–15; Ex. 3:6–10). God would multiply the *descendants* of Abraham, making them into a great nation, establishing them in their own land, and would *bless* them so that they might become a source of blessing to all nations. On one particular occasion, God confirmed the truthfulness of this promise *with an oath* (*cf.* Gn. 22:16, 'I swear by myself, declares the LORD'). Hebrews notes that Abraham was encouraged by this to wait patiently for *what was promised.* God began to fulfil his promise in Abraham's lifetime, but the ultimate blessing came in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

16–18 In human affairs, *the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.* So God used this particular form of speech *to make the unchanging nature of his promise very clear* to those who were *the heirs of what was promised.* He used *two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie*, namely his promise and his oath, to give the greatest possible encouragement to his people to put their trust in him. It is clear from what follows that *we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us* in Jesus are the ultimate heirs of what was promised to Abraham (*cf.* Gal. 3:26–29).

19–20 These verses must be read in the light of 7:20–22, where it is argued that God confirmed the high-priesthood of the Messiah in Ps. 110:4 with an oath similar to the one used in Gn. 22:16. Since Jesus is the promised high priest *in the order of Melchizedek*, he has become 'the guarantee' of the blessings of the new covenant (7:22). Those who rely on him can actually enter *the inner sanctuary behind the curtain*, where he has gone before us and has *entered on our behalf.* Jesus is literally our 'forerunner', opening the way for us to follow! *The inner sanctuary* of the tabernacle and later the temple represented the presence of God with his people on earth (*cf.* Ex. 26:31–34; 1 Ki. 8:6–11). Hebrews uses this language to refer to the heavenly sanctuary, where God is enthroned in all his glory. We can approach him with confidence right now because Jesus our heavenly high priest has offered the perfect sacrifice and sits at God's right hand (*cf.* 4:14–16; 10:19–22). However, the imagery in 6:19–20 also conveys the idea that our destiny is to live for ever in God's holy and glorious presence. We can literally go where Jesus has gone. Thus, the heavenly sanctuary is another way of describing 'the world to come' (2:5), the 'Sabbath-rest for the people of God' (4:9), and 'the heavenly country' or 'city' (11:16; 12:22–24; 13:14), which has been the ultimate hope of the people of God throughout the ages. This hoped-for goal has been achieved and opened up for us by our Saviour. Jesus as our *hope* has entered the sanctuary and remains there as *an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*

So the antidote to spiritual apathy and apostasy is the renewal of *hope*. Hope is the motivation for faithfulness and love. The basis for our hope is the promise of God, confirmed with an oath. Since the saving promises of God have already been fulfilled for us in the death and heavenly exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ, this gives us every encouragement to believe that those who trust in Jesus will share with him in the promised eternal inheritance.

7:1–28 The eternal high priesthood of Christ

Several indications have already been given that Jesus is 'high priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek' (*cf.* 5:6, 10; 6:20). That theme is now fully developed as the writer comes to the heart of his message and begins to feed his readers the 'solid food' that promotes spiritual maturity (*cf.* 5:11–14). The first part of this chapter deals with the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek in Gn. 14, focusing on the significance of Melchizedek's priesthood in that context (1–10). The second part of the chapter takes up the specific promise of Ps. 110:4, about the Messiah being a priest like Melchizedek, and applies it to the Lord Jesus (11–28). *Perfection* was not possible under *the Levitical priesthood*, but Jesus' high-priestly ministry replaces the whole OT system of approaching God and 'perfects' believers in a relationship with him (11–19). The significance of the *oath* confirming the Messiah's priesthood is explored (20–22) and then the implications of the promise that he will be priest for ever are outlined (23–25). The chapter concludes by showing how *such a high priest*, in contrast with the high priests of the old covenant, *meets our need* as sinners (26–28). Ch. 7 is the third stage in the development of the idea that Jesus is the high priest of the new covenant (*cf.* 2:17–18; 4:14 – 5:10).

1–3 Ps. 110:4 is the key text in this chapter. To indicate what the psalm meant by *a priest for*

ever in the order of Melchizedek, Hebrews goes back to Gn. 14:18–20, highlighting only certain features of the Genesis narrative. Melchizedek's name means *king of righteousness* and the fact that he was *king of Salem* (derived from Heb. *šālôm*, 'peace') means that he was *king of peace.* In name, at least, he anticipated the Messiah's reign of righteousness and peace (*e.g.* Is. 9:6–7; Heb. 1:8–9). Most importantly, he is identified as *priest of God Most High*, who *blessed* Abraham and received a tithe (*a tenth of everything*) from Abraham, the great forefather or patriarch of Israel. Moreover, in the record of Scripture, Melchizedek is *without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life.* He appears from nowhere and disappears without trace. He has no predecessors and no successors. Since the legitimacy of a man's priesthood in the ancient world depended on such things, the silence of Scripture at this point is unusual. Melchizedek is *like the Son of God* in the sense that he foreshadows his unique and never-ending priesthood. In technical terms, he is a 'type' or pattern of Christ. Ps. 110 envisaged the appearance of another king of Jerusalem ('city of Salem'), exercising a priesthood like Melchizedek's, not apparently based on physical descent from any known priesthood, but nevertheless divinely appointed. Hebrews proclaims Jesus Christ as the promised priest-king, who reigns *for ever* to bless his people (*cf.* 5:4–6; 7:13–17).

4–10 Taking up the matter of the tithe paid by Abraham to Melchizedek, Hebrews notes that the law of Moses required *the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people* (*cf.* Nu. 18:21–32). However, Melchizedek, who *did not trace his descent from Levi*, collected a tithe *from Abraham*, the forefather of Levi! Indeed, so great is Melchizedek that he *blessed* Abraham, the one to whom God had given *the promises* concerning his saving purposes (*cf.* Heb. 6:13–14). Since *the lesser person is blessed by the greater* (7), this puts Melchizedek in a very significant position. The tithes paid to the Levitical priesthood were collected *by men who die*, but Abraham paid a tithe to one who *is declared to be living* (8). That is, in the biblical record, Melchizedek is represented as one who had no *end of life* (3), and this suggests that his priesthood was superior. It could even be said that *Levi*, and therefore the Levitical priests, paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham. This prepares us for the argument in vs 11–19 that the priesthood of Jesus is superior to and supersedes the Levitical priesthood and its ministry.

11–12 When Ps. 110:4 spoke about the need for *another priest to come – one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron*, the inference was that there was something lacking in the existing priesthood. In fact, the priesthood descended from Aaron and exercised by some of the Levites was unable to provide *perfection.* For the first time, the language of perfection (applied to Christ in 2:10; 5:9; 7:28) is applied to the situation of believers. The law of Moses *made nothing perfect*, but in Jesus Christ *a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God* (19). This last reference suggests that the perfecting of believers involves 'qualifying' them to draw near to God or enabling them to enjoy the certainty of a new covenant relationship with God. More will be said about this important concept later. In simple terms, Christ's sacrifice deals with the problem of sin in a way that the Levitical priesthood and the law of Moses could not. Indeed, the law and the priesthood were so connected that *a change of the priesthood* meant that there had to be *a change of the law* as well (12). Here it should be noted that the writer of Hebrews views the law essentially as a set of sacrificial and priestly regulations for the maintenance of Israel's relationship with God. The limitations of the system as a whole are outlined in chs. 9–10.

13–17 Only certain people were authorized to serve at the altar, according to the Mosaic law (*e.g.* Lv. 8–9; Nu. 1:47–54). Jesus *our Lord* belonged to the tribe of *Judah*, and in connection with that tribe *Moses said nothing about priests.* So, if Jesus is a priest, he must belong to another order. In dealing with this objection, the writer notes again the prediction of Ps. 110:4 that the Messianic priesthood would be *in the order of Melchizedek.* A descendant of Levi became a priest *on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry.* Jesus became *a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek*, on the basis of *the power of an indestructible life.* This last expression is best understood as a reference to Jesus' resurrection and his heavenly exaltation. He clearly functioned as high priest of the new covenant on earth, when he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. But he had to be brought to life again to function as *a priest for ever*, serving in the heavenly sanctuary, at the right hand of God (*cf.* 8:1–2).

18–19 *The former regulation* is the law establishing the OT priesthood on the basis of proper ancestry and physical purity. It *was weak and useless* because death prevented those priests from *continuing in office* (23) and their own weakness made it continually necessary for them to sacrifice for their *own sins* as well as for the sins of the people (27). Indeed, *the law made nothing perfect* (see note on 7:11–12), because it was only 'a shadow of the good things to come' (10:1). The regulation establishing the OT priesthood was *set aside* when God inaugurated

a new priesthood and provided a sacrifice to end all sacrifices (*cf.* 10:5–10). *A better hope is introduced* with the high-priestly ministry of Jesus, *by which we draw near to God.* The certainty of a once-for-all cleansing from sin and of the possibility of continuing in an eternal relationship with God is at the heart of this *better hope.*

20–22 The promise establishing the priesthood of the Messiah was confirmed with an oath: *the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind* (Ps. 110:4). An oath attached to a promise makes 'the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear' (6:17). So the eternity of Jesus' priesthood is established. *Because of this oath* it can also be affirmed that *Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.* When the writer takes up the theme of this *better covenant* in later passages, he describes Jesus as the 'mediator' of a new covenant (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). This means that he inaugurates the covenant blessings predicted in Je. 31:31–34 (quoted in 8:8–12). The word *guarantee* (22) suggests even more: Jesus' priestly ministry continues to vouch for the fact that those blessings are readily available. The *better covenant* is the basis for the Christian's *better hope.*

23–25 The uniqueness and eternity of Christ's priesthood has really been the heart of the argument in this complicated chapter. There were many priests under the old covenant, because *death prevented them from continuing in office.* However, since the resurrected and ascended Jesus *lives for ever,* he has *a permanent priesthood.* He remains the same (*cf.* 1:8–12; 13:8) and his priestly office and work are absolute and unchangeable. The word *therefore* at the beginning of v 25 introduces the logical consequence to all this. Here is the practical application of the writer's teaching about Jesus as priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus is *able to save completely those who come to God through him.* The idea of 'approaching', 'drawing near', or 'coming' to God is prominent in Hebrews (*cf.* 4:16; 7:19; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22). Fundamentally, it expresses the idea of a relationship with God. The OT priesthood and sacrificial system only imperfectly provided for such a relationship, but Jesus is able to *save completely* those who relate to God through him. The language of salvation here implies deliverance from the alternative, which is the judgment of God (*cf.* 2:1–4; 9:27–28; 10:26–31). In fact, Christians can look to Jesus for help at every stage in their earthly pilgrimage, *because he always lives to intercede for them* (*cf.* Rom. 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1–2). The image of the heavenly intercessor is used to emphasize Christ's willingness and ability to go on applying to us the benefits of his once-for-all sacrifice (*cf.* 2:18; 4:14–16; 10:19–22). However, the image should not be pushed too far. Jesus sits at the right hand of God, claiming the fulfilment of the covenant promises for his children, not begging for their acceptance before the Father's throne!

26–28 Jesus meets our need as high priest firstly because he is *holy, blameless, pure.* These three adjectives recall the teaching about his sinlessness (4:15) and explain why his sacrifice was so perfect, needing no repetition. He remained obedient to God through a lifetime of testing. As a faultless high priest, he sacrificed for the sins of God's people *once for all, when he offered himself* (27; *cf.* 9:14). This is a new thought, explaining exactly how he made 'purification' (1:3) or 'atonement for the sins of the people' (2:17). Note the emphasis on the *once for all* nature of his sacrifice here and in 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10. Unlike the high priests of Judasim, *he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people.* The perfection of his sacrifice is associated with the perfection of the victim. Jesus also meets our need as high priest because he is now *set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.* His heavenly exaltation means that he *always lives* to apply the benefits of his saving work to us (25). The law of Moses appointed *men who are weak* as high priests, but the oath of Ps. 110:4 appointed the Son to be high priest of a different order. He was qualified to fulfil this role or *made perfect for ever* (28; *cf.* notes on 2:10; 5:9) by means of his obedient life, his sacrificial death and his entrance into the heavenly presence of God (as vs 26–27 suggest).

8:1–13 The mediator of the new covenant

In chs. 8 and 9 the writer shows how the 'perfecting' of Jesus makes it possible for us to enjoy the benefits of the new covenant. Je. 31:31–34 is quoted in full here, and later in an abbreviated form (10:16–17), demonstrating the centrality of that text to the argument of the central section of Hebrews. Before the writer begins his reflection on Jeremiah's prophecy, he notes that the sphere of Jesus' present ministry is *the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man* (1–2). This leads to a further comparison between Jesus' priesthood and the priesthood of those who *offer the gifts prescribed by the law* and serve at a sanctuary that is only *a copy and shadow of what is in heaven* (3–5). The superiority of Jesus' ministry is tied up with the fact that it is focused on the heavenly sanctuary. His ministry is also superior because it establishes the new covenant (6–12), making the first one *obsolete* (13). Christians need to understand how the prophecy of the new covenant is fulfilled because it is the basis of our relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

1–2 The writer's main *point* is that we have the sort of high priest described in the last chapter, one who sat down at the right hand of *the throne of the Majesty in heaven.* This last expression is a reverent and solemn way of describing God as the majestic ruler of all things. Christ shares in that heavenly rule but also *serves* in a priestly role (Gk. *leitourgos* means that he is lit. 'a minister' or 'a servant'), as outlined in 7:25. The heavenly throne room can thus be pictured, as a *sanctuary* or 'holy place', which is *the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. The true tabernacle* is the heavenly reality upon which the tabernacle in Moses' time was modelled (*cf.* v 5). Although God showed Moses the pattern to follow, the result was only a 'man-made sanctuary' (Gk. *cheiropoiēta*, lit. 'made with hands', 9:24). The tabernacle *set up by the Lord* is not man-made, and is 'not a part of this creation' (9:11). With this imagery the writer indicates that the purpose of Jesus' entrance into heaven 'was to appear for us in God's presence' (9:24). His ministry on earth equipped him for this heavenly service.

3–5 The general principle that *every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices* (*cf.* 5:1) means that Jesus must have *something to offer.* It is clear from 7:27 that 'he offered himself', but the writer does not develop that theme until later. He merely insists again that Jesus' priesthood is of a different order. In fact, *If he were on earth he would not be a priest*, since there are already those who offer *the gifts prescribed by the law.* Some readers with a Jewish background may have considered that there was something lacking in Christianity because it offered no elaborate ceremony in an earthly sanctuary. Hebrews makes the opposite point. Christ introduces the ultimate, spiritual realities to which the old covenant ritual pointed, fulfilling and replacing the whole system prescribed in the law of Moses. The levitical priests only operated in a sanctuary that was *a copy and shadow of what is in heaven* (5), whereas Christ serves in *a true tabernacle* (2). Ex. 25:40 is used to support the argument that the earthly tabernacle was to be the shadowy outline of a heavenly model.

6 The writer seems to change tack at this point, leaving aside the imagery of priesthood, sanctuary and sacrifice, and identifying Jesus as *mediator* of a better covenant. However, a connection between priesthood and law or covenant was established in 7:11–12, and the theme of Jesus' high-priestly ministry is closely linked with the fulfilment of the promises of Je. 31:31–34 in chs. 9–10. Jesus inaugurates or mediates the benefits of the new covenant by means of his death and heavenly exaltation (*cf.* 7:22; 9:11–15; 10:12–18). This covenant is *superior to the old one* because it is *founded on better promises.* Those promises are recorded in the long quotation from Jeremiah that follows.

7–9 At the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC, Jeremiah's words indicated that *God found fault with the people.* When he promised a new covenant, the implication was that there had been something wrong with *that first covenant*, established at the time of the exodus from Egypt. The essential problem was with the people – *they did not remain faithful to my covenant* (9) – and so the judgment of the exile followed. Hebrews goes on to show that part of the problem was the ritual, which was designed to help the people 'until the time of the new order' (9:10), but which was limited in its effect. It should be noted here that the new covenant is made *with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.* Nothing is specifically mentioned about the way Gentiles come to share in its blessings (*cf.* Gal. 3 – 4; Rom. 9 – 11). However, it is quite clear that anyone who has confidence in Jesus Christ and what he achieved will share in the fulfilment of God's promises to his ancient people (*e.g.* 3:14; 4:3; 5:9; 7:25).

10–12 God's willingness to re-establish his special relationship with Israel is expressed in the key words *I will be their God and they will be my people.* However, in renewing the covenant he promises, *I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts*, to give them the desire and the ability to please him (10). Hebrews views the fulfilment of this promise in Jesus' cleansing of the hearts of his people from a guilty conscience, so that they may 'serve the living God' (9:14; *cf.* 10:19–25). God also promised through Jeremiah that every member of the new covenant community would know him directly and personally, *from the least of them to the greatest* (11). Hebrews implies that this promise is fulfilled in the direct approach to God 'with confidence' that Jesus makes possible (4:16; 7:25; 10:19–22; *cf.* 12:22–24). Finally, the word *For* in v 12 shows that the basis of these promises is the assurance of a decisive cleansing from sin: *For I will forgive their wickedness, and will remember their sins no more.* It is clear from chs. 9–10 that Jesus' sacrifice achieves the fulfilment of that foundational promise (*e.g.* 9:14, 26, 28; 10:10, 14).

13 The need for the priesthood, sanctuary and sacrificial system of the old covenant is now removed. This makes it possible for believers of every race and culture to draw near to God through Jesus. Although God says nothing specifically about this in the prophecy of Jeremiah, *by calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete.* So the ritual provisions of the old covenant are at the heart of *what is obsolete and ageing* and *will soon disappear.*

9:1–10 The limitations of the old covenant

This chapter develops the contrast between the old and the new, the earthly and the heavenly. In 9:1 the writer announces two aspects of *the first covenant* which he then treats in reverse order: its *earthly sanctuary* (2–5) and its *regulations for worship* (6–10). The earthly nature of the Mosaic sanctuary and its ritual limited its effectiveness as a means of relating to God. Indeed, the whole system was only a symbol of what the new covenant would bring. Its rituals could not *clear the conscience of the worshipper*, but concerned only fleshly externals, being in force until *the time of the new order*. Although this section may not at first appear to be relevant to the Christian reader, it provides a basis for the argument in the rest of the chapter, where wonderful perspectives on the person and the work of the Lord Jesus are unfolded.

1–5 The sanctuary of the first covenant was *earthly* or 'worldly' in the sense that it was made by human hands (*cf.* 8:2; 9:11, 24) and provided only a shadowy outline of the heavenly or spiritual realities now made available through the ministry of Jesus Christ (*cf.* 8:5–6; 9:11–12). The writer dwells on the features of the *tabernacle* constructed by Moses in the desert. But much that is said here could also apply to the later temple in Jerusalem, which was modelled on the tabernacle. Preparing for the argument of vs 6–10, the writer brings out as strongly as possible the distinction between the two divisions in the sanctuary, the *Holy Place* and *the Most Holy Place*. Each room contained furniture necessary for a variety of rituals, together with symbols of God's past dealings with Israel and of his continuing presence with them. The most important item in the inner sanctuary was *the gold-covered ark of the covenant*. The covering of the ark was called *the atonement cover* or 'mercy seat' and this was the focus of the annual Day of Atonement ritual. Here the blood of sacrificed animals was sprinkled by the high priest to make atonement for sins (*cf.* Lv. 16:14–17). *The cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the place of atonement*, pointed to the invisible presence of God, who was thought to be 'enthroned between the cherubim' (1 Sa. 4:4; *cf.* Ex. 25:17–22).

6–7 The focus now shifts from the contents of the tabernacle to the services that took place there. The first covenant required that the people approach God through their representatives the priests. These men regularly entered the *outer room* or first tent *to carry on their ministry*. This included the daily trimming of the lamps (Ex. 27:21), the weekly replacement of the breads (Lv. 24:5) and the daily sacrifices (Ex. 29:38–46). The unique role of the high priest was to enter *the inner room, and that only once a year*, on the Day of Atonement. Entrance into the Most Holy Place was *never without blood*, which the high priest offered *for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance* (*cf.* Lv. 16). This ritual made it perfectly clear that God could only be approached on his own terms.

8–10 The writer claims special insight from the *Holy Spirit* into the meaning and purpose of these OT provisions. *As long as the first tabernacle was still standing*, there was no decisive revelation of *the way into the Most Holy Place*, meaning the way into the true, heavenly sanctuary (*cf.* 9:12; 10:19–20). *The first tabernacle* normally describes the outer tent of Israel's earthly sanctuary. However, here the expression is apparently used to refer to the whole system of sacrifice and priestly ministry associated with the tabernacle and the temple. So the outer tent is *an illustration* (Gk. *parabolē*) *for the present time*. At a literal level, the outer tent obscured the way into the second tent. At a symbolic level, the tabernacle and all its ritual stood in the way of direct and permanent access to God. In certain respects the law foreshadowed and prepared for the ministry of Christ. But when the new covenant was inaugurated, the inadequacies of the old covenant cult became glaringly obvious. A particular weakness of the worship of that earthly sanctuary is then emphasized. Gifts and sacrifices were offered which were (lit.) 'not able to perfect the worshipper with respect to conscience' ('to perfect', as in 10:1; *cf.* 10:14; 11:40; 12:23). The rituals actually left the participants feeling guilty for their sins (10:2), because they were externally oriented regulations (10, lit. 'fleshly ordinances'). They were imposed *until the time of the new order*, until 'Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here' (11). The ability of Christ to cleanse the conscience is stressed in 9:14 and 10:22. With this removal of the burden of guilt, liberating us to serve God with confidence and gratitude (9:14; 12:28), Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant is fulfilled.

9:11–28 The achievement of Christ in his death and exaltation

Following on from the first half of the chapter, it could be said that this section is about 'the heavenly sanctuary' and its 'regulations for worship'. Jesus Christ is the high priest who ascended into *the Most Holy Place* in the heavenly realm (11). By the blood he shed on the cross, he *obtained eternal redemption* for those who rely on him. Right now, this means that our consciences can be cleansed from the defilement of sin and we can worship acceptably and *serve the living*

God (12–14). Ultimately, Christ's sacrifice makes it possible for *those who are called* to *receive the promised eternal inheritance* (15). So the shedding of his blood inaugurates the new covenant, with its promise of a once-for-all and decisive forgiveness of sins (16–23). He entered into heaven *to appear for us in God's presence* (9:24–25), having dealt with the problem of sin *by the sacrifice of himself* (26). When he reappears from the heavenly sanctuary, he will bring the full experience of salvation *to those who are waiting for him* (27–28). Thus, with the application of several OT concepts and images, this passage has much to teach us about the benefits of Jesus' saving work for us, now and in the future.

11–12 With the appearance of Christ as *high priest of the good things that are already here*, the things foreshadowed in the OT have become a reality! The writer explains this first by showing more precisely how Christ fulfilled the role of the high priest on the annual Day of Atonement (*cf.* 7:26–27; 9:7; Lv. 16:1–19). The high priests passed through the outer tent into the *Most Holy Place*. There they sprinkled on the place of atonement the blood of animals sacrificed outside the tabernacle and interceded for the people. Jesus, on the other hand, passed through *the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.* His priestly ministry opens the way into the heavenly sanctuary or *heaven itself* (24; *cf.* 8:1–2). After he had been crucified as a sacrifice for our sins, he ascended 'through the heavens' (4:14), to sit at God's hand and 'intercede' for us (7:25). He did not enter the heavenly presence of God by means of *the blood of goats and calves* but by means of *his own blood.* And since his sacrifice was so perfect he entered the Most Holy Place *once for all*: his crucifixion and heavenly exaltation need not be repeated. Indeed, he has obtained *eternal redemption.* The word 'redemption' suggests liberation at the price of his life. A similar expression in 9:15 is translated *a ransom to set them free* and it is clear from the context that this liberation is from the judgment and guilt produced by sin. So *eternal redemption* is another way of speaking about the once-for-all and standing offer of forgiveness promised in Je. 31:34.

13–14 Outlining the practical consequences of Christ's death, the writer compares the effect of offering animal blood or sprinkling *the ashes of a heifer* (*cf.* Nu. 19). These rituals were for the benefit of those who were *ceremonially unclean*, to *sanctify* them by making them *outwardly clean* (lit. 'for the purification of the flesh'). Those who were defiled could be restored to fellowship with God in the sense that they were able to participate again in the worship of the community. The fundamental truth that blood 'purifies' and 'sanctifies', even if only at a ceremonial level, provides the basis for the *How much more* argument that follows. *The blood of Christ* is a way of speaking about his death as a sacrifice for sins. This was uniquely effective because *he offered himself unblemished to God.* Once again the writer alludes to Jesus' life of perfect obedience to the Father, culminating in the cross (*cf.* 5:7–9; 7:26–27; 10:10). *Through the eternal Spirit* most likely refers to the power of the Holy Spirit upholding and maintaining him (*cf.* Is. 42:1), though some would take it to mean his own spirit, highlighting the interior or spiritual quality of his sacrifice. The blood of Christ is powerful enough to *cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death.* God requires repentance from such acts (6:1, lit. 'dead works'), sins that defile the conscience and bring his judgment. But those who repent need to be cleansed from such defilement and only the death of Jesus can do this (*cf.* 9:9 with 9:14). The purpose of cleansing in the OT was that the people might be consecrated again to God's service. The new covenant promise of a renewed 'heart', based on a decisive forgiveness of sins (Je. 31:33–34), is echoed in v 14. Only the cleansing provided by Christ can set us free to *serve the living God* in the way that Jeremiah predicted. The nature of this 'service' or 'worship' (Gk. *latreuein*) will be discussed in connection with 12:28.

15 The link between Jesus' high-priestly work and the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy is further explored. By means of his death, Christ is *the mediator of a new covenant* (*cf.* 8:6; 12:24). First, he died *as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.* As noted in connection with v 12, his death is the price of liberation from the judgment and guilt produced by sin (*cf.* Je. 31:34). The focus is on redeeming those who sinned *under the first covenant*, as promised in Je. 31:31–32. Indeed, Jesus' sacrifice is retrospective in its effect and is valid for all who trusted God for the forgiveness of their sins in ancient Israel (*cf.* 11:40). But we also know that, by the grace of God, he tasted death 'for everyone' (2:9) and he is able to save all who 'come to God through him' (7:25). Secondly, on the basis of his death, *those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.* Just as the old covenant promised the land of Canaan as an inheritance for God's people, so the covenant inaugurated by Christ opens the way to an *eternal inheritance.* This is equivalent to 'the world to come' (2:5), the 'Sabbath-rest for the people of God' (4:9), 'the heavenly Jerusalem' (12:22) and other such descriptions of our destiny as Christians. Jesus has opened the way to his inheritance for us by dealing with

the sin that keeps us from drawing near to God.

16–22 The idea of an inheritance leads the writer to a play on words. The Greek word *diathēkē* is first employed in the technical and legal sense of *a will* (16–17). In ordinary human affairs, for the benefits of a person's will to be operative, *it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it.* The same word is then used to refer to the *covenant* which God made with Israel in Moses' time (18–20). There was no need for the covenant-maker to die in this case but *the first covenant was not put into effect without blood.* The writer draws attention to the ceremony mentioned in Ex. 24:1–8, when Moses sprinkled the altar and the people with sacrificial blood and called upon them to obey everything that God had commanded. Thus, the relationship with the Lord was sealed and confirmed with *the blood of the covenant* and the sanctified status of the nation was proclaimed. Hebrews adds other details from OT cleansing rituals to indicate the comprehensive way in which blood was used for purification under the first covenant (21). This leads to a concluding observation (*the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood*) and a fundamental principle (*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*). Although blood was largely used for ceremonial cleansing (13), these rituals pointed to the more profound needs of God's people for release from the power and penalty of sin.

23–24 *The copies of the heavenly things* – the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies – had to be purified with sacrificial blood. Israel's sanctuary was *man-made* and only *a copy of the true one*, which is *heaven itself* (24; *cf.* 8:5). When the writer says *the heavenly things themselves* needed to be purified *with better sacrifices than these*, he can hardly mean that heaven is defiled by human sin, otherwise God would have to leave it! However, he may be suggesting that the sacrifice of Christ had cosmic significance, removing a barrier to fellowship with God that existed at the level of ultimate reality and not simply in human hearts. The simple message behind the writer's tabernacle and Day of Atonement imagery is that Jesus *entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence* (*cf.* 7:25). He makes it possible for us to have access to God now and in eternity.

25–28 The *better sacrifices* mentioned in v 23 are in fact the single and unique offering of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice does not need to be repeated *again and again*, after the fashion of the high priests in their yearly ritual. It is wrong to suggest that his sacrifice needs to be continually presented to the Father, either in heaven or on earth. Jesus did not have to *suffer many times since the creation of the world*: his self-offering is sufficient and final for all history – past, present and future. In vs 26 and 28 the writer uses the expression *once for all* or *once* (*cf.* 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) to stress the decisive and complete nature of Jesus' high-priestly work. In fact, his appearance signals *the end of the ages*, the time of fulfilment or the last days (*cf.* 1:2). The purpose of his coming was *to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself* (26). Put another way, it was *to take away the sins of many people* (28, lit. 'to bear the sins of many'; *cf.* Is. 53:12). So there has been a final settlement of the problem of sin by the action of Jesus at one point in human history and this gives a solemn significance to the present. There is 'a fearful expectation of judgment' for those who spurn the Son of God and his sacrifice (10:26–31). But for those who trust in him and eagerly await his second coming, there is the prospect of *salvation* – rescue from judgment and the enjoyment of *the promised eternal inheritance* (15).

10:1–18 The benefits of the new covenant

As the central doctrinal section of Hebrews draws to a close, the writer continues to explain the benefits of the new covenant. Once again he forcefully outlines the limitations of the law and its provisions for approaching God (1–4). Ps. 40:6–8 is then used to establish that the whole sacrificial system is replaced by the perfectly obedient self-offering of Christ (5–10). In contrast with the priests of the old covenant, who stand daily at the altar to offer repeatedly *the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins*, Jesus sits at God's right hand, his sacrificial work completed (11–14). The result of this for believers is that *we have been made holy* and *he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.* These terms are used to describe the sort of relationship with God predicted in Je. 31:33–34. The writer quotes these verses in abbreviated form (15–18), to signal that the argument begun in ch. 8 has come to an end. Since Christ's sacrifice is so effective, there is no need for any other sacrifice for sin. The forgiveness promised by Jeremiah is available, making possible the renewal of heart and mind that is fundamental to the new covenant.

1–2 When the writer describes the law of Moses as *only a shadow of good things that are coming*, he means that it foreshadowed the blessings of the new covenant that Jesus would bring. The ritual of the law pointed to the need for the ultimate *realities* of Christ's high-priestly ministry. There is a sense in which we still wait to enjoy the complete salvation that has been achieved for us (9:28; *cf.* 13:14). Nevertheless, many of its benefits can be experienced in advance (*e.g.* 9:14; 10:19–25). The inadequacy of the OT ritual is highlighted by the fact that the

same sacrifices were *repeated endlessly year after year.* As noted in 7:11, 19 and 9:9, the law could never *make perfect those who draw near* to God in that way. The perfecting of believers has to do with the cleansing of their consciences from the guilt of sin, so that they might be wholeheartedly consecrated to God and his service (see notes on 10:10 and 10:14). If the sacrifices of the first covenant had achieved this end, *would they not have stopped being offered?* However, the worshippers continued to have (lit.) 'a consciousness of sin' (NIV, they *felt guilty for their sins; cf.* 9:9). They were not *cleansed once for all,* as one may be through trusting in the effectiveness of Jesus' sacrifice (*cf.* 9:14; 10:17–18).

3–4 Although the Day of Atonement ritual assured Israel that the Lord could forgive sins, the ceremony had to be repeated year after year. The effect of this was to provide *an annual reminder of sins* – a reminder that sin is a hindrance to fellowship with God and brings his judgment. By contrast, God himself promises that under the new covenant, 'their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more' (Je. 31:34; *cf.* v 17). Sin was not dealt with decisively until Jesus died on the cross, *because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.* God required animal sacrifices to teach Israel to look to him for cleansing and to show the need for a penalty to be paid for sin (*cf.* Lv. 17:11). But it was the destiny of the Messiah to pay that penalty by means of his death and so provide salvation, even for those who sinned in OT times (*cf.* 9:15).

5–10 The words of Ps. 40:6–8 are attributed to Christ when he *came into the world* because they find absolute fulfilment in his life. David the psalmist went further than many other OT writers in emphasizing the powerlessness of sacrifices in themselves to please God. The four technical terms that he uses – *sacrifice, offering, burnt offerings and sin offerings* – describe the different types of sacrifice commanded by the law. But the whole system was designed to encourage and make possible the willing self-offering of the people to God, as indicated by the words *I have come to do your will, O God.* In the *body* that was prepared for the Son of God, he lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father, culminating in his death as an unblemished sacrifice (*cf.* 9:14). He came to set aside the ancient sacrificial system and bring about the obedience to God which was always the intention behind the rituals. He found the Father's will expressed in Scripture (*it is written about me in the scroll*), and *by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* His once-for-all sacrifice (10) brings the once-for-all cleansing from sin that the law could not provide (2). Such cleansing makes possible a definitive consecration or santification of believers to God, which is the meaning of the expression *we have been made holy* (Gk. *hēgiasmenoi esmen*; perfect tense). In this way the writer suggests the fulfilment of the promise that God would write his laws *in their hearts* and *on their minds* (16; Je. 31:33). Such dedication to God and his service is achieved for us by Jesus Christ, in whom heart-obedience was perfectly expressed.

11–14 Some of the ideas expressed in 9:25–28 and 10:1–4 are now restated. The priests of Judaism were involved in daily *religious duties,* involving the repeated offering of *the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.* However, Jesus offered *one sacrifice for sins,* which is effective *for all time.* This contrast is reinforced by the picture of the Levitical priest who *stands* at the altar, offering repeated sacrifices, and Jesus who *sat down at the right hand of God,* because his sacrificial work was completed. As in Ps. 110, the Messiah's kingly role is combined with his priestly function, and so his heavenly enthronement means that he also *waits for his enemies to be made his footstool* (*cf.* Ps. 110:1). This anticipates the teaching of vs 26–31, where it is revealed that the coming judgment will 'consume the enemies of God'. But the positive implication of Christ's enthronement is that *by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy* (14). As noted previously, the 'perfecting' of believers involves qualifying them to draw near to God or enabling them to enjoy the certainty of a new covenant relationship with God (*cf.* 7:11–12, 19; 9:9; 10:1; 11:40; 12:23). Fundamentally, this means the forgiveness of sins and the cleansing of consciences, making possible the consecration to God's service of *those who are being made holy* (see note on v 10), and finally their participation in 'the promised eternal inheritance' (*cf.* 9:15).

15–18 *The Holy Spirit* who inspired the prophets in the first place, continues to speak through their writings to believers in every generation (*cf.* 3:7). Through the prophecy of Je. 31:33–34 (quoted here in an abbreviated form), the Holy Spirit specifically *testifies to us* about the things mentioned in the preceding verses. Jeremiah's promise of a decisive forgiveness of sins indicates that a time would come when there would be *no longer any sacrifice for sin.* But closely attached to this is the promise of renewed *hearts* and *minds,* helping to define the perfection and sanctification about which the writer has been speaking (10, 14).

10:19–39 A call to hold fast to the benefits of the new covenant

This section concludes the major division of Hebrews which began with the appeal in

5:11 – 6:20. After several chapters of complex doctrinal argument, the writer draws out the practical implications, repeating some of the warnings and encouragements previously given. A close link between good theology and faithful Christian living is thus demonstrated. The basis of our *confidence* as Christians is the fact that we have access to *the Most Holy Place* because of the death of Jesus and the fact that he reigns as *a great priest over the house of God.* This should inspire us to *draw near to God* with the faith that takes the promises of the new covenant seriously, to *hold unswervingly to the hope we profess*, and to consider how best to *spur one another on towards love and good deeds.*

The warning that follows (26–31) parallels in many ways the teaching of 6:4–6 about the sin of apostasy. The *how much more* argument also recalls 2:1–5. If those who rejected the law of Moses experienced God's judgment, how much more severely must those who reject the Son of God and the blessings of the new covenant be punished? His unique sacrifice provides a single basis for forgiveness. To abandon that is to abandon all hope of salvation. However, as in ch. 6, warning is followed by encouragement to persevere (32–39). The readers are reminded of the *suffering, insult* and *persecution* they experienced not long after they became Christians. The *confidence* they displayed at that time and the care they showed for one another must be maintained. With a quotation combining Is. 26:20 and Hab. 2:2–3, the writer stresses the need for persevering faith, so that we may receive what God has promised. This prepares us for the development of the theme of faith and endurance in the next main section of the argument (11:1 – 12:13).

19–21 These verses summarize in very simple terms the doctrinal argument of chs. 7–10. There are two things that *we have* as Christian brothers and sisters, and on this basis the writer makes his threefold charge in 10:22–25. First we have *confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus.* The word translated *confidence* is found in four important contexts in Hebrews (3:6; 4:16; 10:19; 10 35). God gives this confidence to us through the gospel. Fundamentally, it is a confidence of free and open access to God (*confidence to enter the Most Holy Place*), based on the unique sacrifice of Jesus (*by the blood of Jesus*). There is an intimate connection between Christ's entrance into the heavenly sanctuary and our own (*cf.* 4:14–16; 6:19–20). He has opened *a new and living way* into God's presence for us, *through the curtain, that is, his body* (lit. 'his flesh'). The *curtain* in the earthly tabernacle was the means of access to *the Most Holy Place* for the high priest. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus' sacrificial death was the *curtain* or means of access to the heavenly sanctuary for him and for all who trust in him! The second thing that *we have* as Christian brothers and sisters is *a great priest over the house of God.* It is clear from 3:6 that 'the house of God' means the people of God. Our *great priest* makes it possible for us to draw near to God together and to share the hope of living for ever in his presence (*cf.* vs 22–23). But this allusion to our common experience as Christians means also that we have responsibilities to one another (*cf.* vs 24–25).

22–25 There are three exhortations in these verses, showing how we are to respond to the great doctrinal truths of the preceding chapters. They are in the present tense in Greek, indicating that we are continually to express faith (22), hope (23) and love (24–25). The call to *draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith* specifically recalls 4:16 and the writer's teaching more generally about approaching God through Jesus (see note on 7:25). We are to enjoy the benefits of his sacrifice and heavenly rule by confidently praying for mercy and help in time of need. *A sincere heart in full assurance of faith* is a heart that demonstrates complete trust and devotion, fulfilling the promise of a new heart for God's people in Je. 31:33 and Ezk. 36:26–27. What makes this possible is *having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.* The inauguration of the old covenant was associated with the sprinkling of the Israelites with blood (9:18–20). Jesus' blood was shed to inaugurate the new covenant and it is applied to our hearts, to cleanse our consciences from guilt, when we believe the gospel and put our trust in his sacrifice for the atonement of our sins (*cf.* 9:13–14). *Having our bodies washed with pure water* is probably a reference to baptism as the outward sign of the 'sprinkling' of our hearts.

The call to *hold unswervingly to the hope we profess* (lit. 'let us hold fast the confession of hope without wavering') recalls 4:14. It is a reminder that our salvation is yet to be fully realized (*cf.* 4:1; 9:28; 10:37–39; 13:14) and that our lives are to be controlled by *the hope we profess.* The relationship between faith and hope will be explored in ch. 11. The basis for maintaining a confession of hope is that *he who promised is faithful.*

The third call in this paragraph is *let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.* Since we share in the benefits of Christ's high-priestly work as Christian brothers and sisters, we have a responsibility to minister to one another in love (*cf.* 3:12–13; 12:15–16). Two clauses in v 25 explain how we can provoke one another to godly living (these clauses are not separate as in the NIV). Negatively, we can care for one another by not giving up

meeting together. The writer uses a term for their meeting (Gk. *episynagōgē*, 'assembly') that is parallel in sense to 'church' and suggests a formal gathering of some kind. A few of their number are *in the habit* of neglecting this responsibility. The warning about apostasy that follows (26–39) implies that people who deliberately and persistently abandon the fellowship of Christian believers are in danger of abandoning the Lord himself! Positively, we can provoke one another to love and good works by meeting together to *encourage one another.* As in 3:13, such encouragement is best understood as involving a form of exhortation based on Scripture, following the writer's own example in his 'word of exhortation' (13:22). The urgency of this is underlined by an allusion to the nearness of Christ's return and the final judgment (*and all the more as you see the Day approaching*).

26–28 These verses take up the allusion to God's judgment at the end of v 25 and develop the warning about rebelling against God found in earlier passages (*cf.* 2:1–4; 3:7 – 4:11; 6:4–8). The NIV translation *if we deliberately keep on sinning* rightly conveys the sense of the present participle 'sinning' in Greek. However, it would be a mistake to think that this merely referred to the sinful behaviour which is sadly evident in all of our lives. The context and the parallel with previous passages indicate that the writer has on view the specific sin of apostasy or continuing rejection of Christ. If, through the gospel, people have *received the knowledge of the truth* and then turn their backs on that truth, *no sacrifice for sins is left.* There is no alternative way of forgiveness and acceptance with God apart from the death of his Son. To abandon that once-for-all sacrifice for sins is to abandon all hope of salvation. All that remains for such people is *a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.* Their fate is the same as those who never turned to Christ or who actively opposed the gospel! Even under the first covenant, anyone who *rejected the law of Moses* in deliberate rebellion *died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses* (Dt. 17:2–7). How much more severely must someone be punished who renounces and opposes the provisions of the new covenant?

29–31 The awful nature of apostasy is described in three parallel clauses. The person who turns away from Christ has actually *trampled the Son of God under foot*, treading him with contempt by denying his true nature and identity. Such a person has also *treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him.* Christ's death inaugurates the blessings of the new covenant and brings us into a *sanctified* or holy relationship with God (*cf.* 10:10; 13:12). To abandon that relationship is to treat his blood as *unholy* (Gk. *koinon*, 'common, unclean') and not as the sacred means chosen by God to achieve our salvation. The person who turns away from Christ has also *insulted the Spirit of grace.* The Spirit of God brings us to trust in the grace of God, and to take hold of the benefits of Christ's work for ourselves (*cf.* 6:4–5). The Spirit also distributes God's gracious gifts, confirming the truth of the gospel (*cf.* 2:4). The inevitability of the punishment awaiting apostate Christians is then suggested by two quotations from the OT. It is God's role to *avenge* or *repay* sin of every kind (Dt. 32:35). But God has specifically revealed that he will *judge his people* (*cf.* Dt. 32:36), vindicating the true by removing the false. *It is a dreadful thing* to fall into God's hands when he is acting like that in judgment.

32–34 As in ch. 6, a severe warning is followed by words of encouragement and hope. Here we are given some helpful insights into the experience of the first readers, not long after their conversion (*after you had received the light*). They are called to *remember* what they 'endured' (*you stood your ground*, Gk. *hypemeinate*). Similar words are then used in v 36 and in 12:1, 2, 3 and 7 to emphasize the need for continuing endurance. Their experience of persecution is described with an athletic metaphor: it was *a great contest in the face of suffering* (*cf.* 12:1–3). They suffered themselves, being *publicly exposed to insult and persecution*, and shared in the suffering of others, standing *side by side with those who were so treated.* In the Introduction it was argued that this persecution, which involved no bloodshed (12:4), could be related to trouble in Rome when Claudius became emperor. Their sympathy with those in prison and their joyful acceptance of the seizure of their possessions was made possible by their certainty about God's promises. They *knew* that Jesus had made it possible for them to inherit *better and lasting possessions* (*cf.* 13:14) and this controlled their thinking about the present and its values.

35–36 This recollection of their faith, hope and love in earlier days becomes the basis for an appeal not to *throw away your confidence.* Confidence of free and open access to God, which is given *by the blood of Jesus* (19; *cf.* 4:16), must be held fast and openly expressed (3:6; *cf.* 4:14; 10:23). The confidence in God which the readers previously demonstrated must not be abandoned or lightly discarded, no matter what difficulties they might now be facing. It will be richly rewarded (*cf.* 6:10). Salvation does not depend on human effort, since it is totally the work of God. But, as long as salvation remains a promise, we need to *persevere* (lit. 'you have need of endurance') in faith, in order to do God's will and *receive what he has promised.*

37–39 A special encouragement to persevere in faith is found in the assurance that Christ will return and *not delay* in fulfilling his saving plan. The writer quotes from Hab. 2:3–4 in a form that depends on the Greek translation of the OT (the LXX). That version makes the subject a person, rather than a vision or revelation as in the Hebrew text and the English versions. In Hebrews, the implication is that Jesus Christ is the one *who is coming* and who *will not delay*. The introductory words (*For in just a very little while*), which probably come from Is. 26:20, emphasize the point and suggest that the readers had a problem about the need to wait patiently for Christ's return. This would have been especially the case if they could see more persecution and suffering on the horizon. The writer has also transposed the order of the sentences in Hab. 2:4 to make it clear that the person who lives by faith (*my righteous one*), rather than *he who is coming*, may be tempted to shrink back. God will *not be pleased* with *those who shrink back* in unbelief: they will be *destroyed* in the coming judgment. However, the writer ends the chapter on a positive note by suggesting that his readers are *those who believe and are saved* (lit. 'who have faith which leads to the preservation of the soul').

11:1 – 12:13 Faith and endurance

After the warning passage in 6:4–8, the writer encourages his readers to persevere (6:9–12), concluding by encouraging them to 'imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.' The same pattern is found at the end of ch. 10. A warning about the consequence of rejecting Christ is followed by encouragements to maintain 'confidence' and 'persevere' in faith, in order to 'receive what he has promised' (10:25–39). Then, in ch. 11, various models of faith from the OT are given. Climaxing this honour roll of faith is the portrait of Jesus as 'the author and perfector of faith' (12:2–3). Believers are to look to this 'great cloud of witnesses,' and particularly to Jesus, for encouragement to endure opposition and hardship of every sort (12:1–13).

Although 11:1–40 is a well-defined and carefully constructed unit, 12:1–13 is closely connected to it. The link between faith and endurance which is made in ch. 11 becomes the basis for the call to endurance in 12:1–13. As already noted, Jesus' endurance of the cross and its shame is presented as the supreme example of faith. In this whole section, the writer emphasizes the similarity between the situation of believers in OT times and Christians waiting for the fulfilment of God's purposes. Nevertheless, it is clear that the work of Christ offers a greater certainty to us of obtaining what God has promised.

11:1–40 A celebration of faith

Faith is first defined (1–2), not comprehensively but in a way that prepares for the argument of the section as a whole. The doctrine that the universe was formed *at God's command* is shown to be foundational for the sort of faith the writer is encouraging (3). Moving systematically from Genesis to Joshua, he then highlights the role of faith in the lives of individuals who were central to the saving purposes of God (4–31). Particular attention is given to Abraham and Sarah (8–19) and Moses (23–28). Then follows a brief review of sacred history from the period of the judges to the Maccabean revolts of the second century BC (32–38), focusing on the trials endured by those who remained faithful to God. The final two verses compare the situation of OT believers with that of Christians (39–40), forming a bridge to the following chapter.

In a world where people dismiss faith as 'wishful thinking', or simply identify it with the beliefs and practices of a particular religion (*e.g.* 'the Muslim faith'), it is good to have a comprehensive picture of the faith that actually pleases God. Hebrews shows the link between faith, hope, obedience and endurance, illustrating that it is more than intellectual assent to certain beliefs. God-honouring faith takes God at his word and lives expectantly and obediently in the present, waiting for him to fulfil his promises. Such faith brings suffering and persecution in various forms.

1–2 Here we discover the essential characteristics of faith from the writer's point of view. Faith deals with things future (*what we hope for*) and things unseen (*what we do not see*). The NIV translation (*being sure of what we hope for*) puts the emphasis on faith as an expression of our confidence in God's promises. However, it is also possible to translate, 'faith is the substance [*hypostasis*] of things hoped for' (AV), or 'faith gives substance to our hopes' (NEB). Such a rendering suggests that *what we hope for* becomes real and substantial by the exercise of faith. This does not mean that the gospel is true simply because we believe in it! Rather, the reality of what we hope for is confirmed for us in our experience when we live by faith in God's promises. Again, faith is being *certain of what we do not see*. It is the means of 'proving' or 'testing' invisible realities such as the existence of God, his faithfulness to his word and his control over our world and its affairs. If this definition seems abstract, its meaning becomes more concrete in the illustrations that follow. For such faith *the ancients were commended* (2, Gk. *emartyrēthēsan, cf.* vs 4, 5, 39). In the record of Scripture, God testified to their faith, and so made them 'witnesses' (12:1; Gk. *martyres*) of true faith for us.

3 The writer begins where Genesis begins, because faith in God as the Creator of everything that exists is fundamental to the Bible's view of reality. *By faith we understand that the universe* [Gk. *aiōnas*, as in 1:2] *was formed at God's command.* If God is in control of nature and history, past and present, every generation of believers can trust his promises about the future, no matter what it may cost them. When the writer says *what is seen was not made out of what was visible*, he alludes to the definition of faith in v 1. Faith discerns that the universe of space and time has an invisible source and that it continues to be dependent on *God's command* (lit. 'God's word'). Such faith is based on the revelation he has given us in Scripture.

4–6 Moving on through the pages of the OT, the writer notes that Abel's faith was expressed when he *offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.* The difference was not in the substance of the sacrifices (Gn. 4:3–4), but in the attitude of the two brothers (as implied in Gn. 4:4–7). Cain was told that his offering would be acceptable if he did what was right (*cf.* Pr. 15:8). But God testified to the righteousness of Abel and to the faith that motivated him when he *spoke well of his offerings.* Abel *still speaks* in the sense that he witnesses to the faith that pleases God. Enoch's experience of being *taken from this life, so that he did not experience death* was the sign that he was *commended as one who pleased God.* Gn. 5:22 and 24 insists that he 'walked with God' and Hebrews takes this to mean that his life was characterized by faith. For, *without faith it is impossible to please God* (6). This generalization corresponds with the two elements in the definition of faith given in v 1. Anyone who *comes to* (lit. 'draws near to', as in 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 12:22) *God must believe that he exists* (be certain of what is not seen) and believe *that he rewards those who earnestly seek him* (trust that his promises will be fulfilled).

7 When Noah was warned about *things not yet seen*, he was told about the approaching judgment of the flood (Gn. 6:13–22). He reacted to this word from God *in holy fear* or 'reverent submission' (the corresponding noun is used to describe Jesus in 5:9). Expressing his faith by the building of an ark, he saved his family and *condemned the world.* Noah became *heir of the righteousness that comes by faith* in the sense that his righteous behaviour (Gn. 6:9; 7:1) was clearly shown to be the outworking of his faith.

8–10 Abraham is really the centre of attention until v 19, partly because he is such an excellent model of faith and partly because of his significance in the outworking of God's plan of salvation. The promise made to Abraham about *a place he would later receive as his inheritance* (Gn. 12:1) is first recalled. On the basis of this promise, he *obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going.* Abraham's faith was immediately expressed by obedience to God's call. The motivation for that obedience was the hope of obtaining the *promised land.* So he lived *like a stranger in a foreign country*, dwelling in tents with those who were *heirs with him of the same promise.* When the writer describes Abraham as *looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*, he portrays his ultimate goal as the heavenly country or heavenly city mentioned in 11:13–16; 12:22–24 and 13:14. Waiting for God to provide them with an earthly inheritance, the patriarchs came to realize that this life is not an end in itself but a pilgrimage towards a future that God alone can construct for his people.

11–16 God's second promise to Abraham was that he would give him numerous descendants and make them into a great nation (Gn. 12:2; *cf.* 13:16; 15:5). Although Abraham was *past age* and *as good as dead*, and *Sarah herself was barren*, by faith he was enabled to *become a father.* The ground of his confidence was the word of God and he trusted that God would be *faithful* to his word (*cf.* 10:23). So the birth of Isaac was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise about offspring (*cf.* 6:15). But Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all died without receiving the land of Canaan as an earthly inheritance. *The things promised* were only seen and welcomed *from a distance* (13). When they admitted to being *aliens and strangers on earth* (*cf.* Gn. 23:4; 47:4, 9), they made it clear that they were *looking for a country of their own.* If they had been yearning for Mesopotamia, their place of origin, they would have had time to return and make their home there. *Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one.* As in v 10, the writer draws a close connection between the faith of Israel's forefathers and the faith of Christians. We are all pilgrims on a journey of faith, bound for the inheritance God has provided for us. Learning to trust God in their situation, the patriarchs looked to a reward that was beyond their earthly inheritance. They did not have the same clear promise of a heavenly homeland that we do but God delighted in their faith and, through Jesus Christ, *he has prepared a city for them* (the heavenly Jerusalem mentioned in 12:22–24).

17–19 Abraham's faith was further tested when he was asked by God *to sacrifice his one and only son* (Gn. 22:1–8). Since God had specifically declared that his offspring would be reckoned *through Isaac* (Gn. 21:12), there seemed to be no hope if Isaac died. However, *Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead.* He expected to return from the place of sacrifice with Isaac (Gn. 22:5) because he knew that the fulfilment

of God's purposes depended on Isaac's survival. He trusted that God would resolve the problem. When Hebrews concludes that Abraham received Isaac back from death *figuratively speaking* (Gk. *en parabolē; cf.* 9:9), the meaning may be that this event prefigures the resurrection of God's one and only Son.

20–22 Isaac's faith was particularly exhibited in his old age, when he blessed his two sons *in regard to their future* (Gn. 27:27–40). In God's providence, and contrary to Isaac's natural preference and intention, God's saving plan would be fulfilled through the line of Jacob, the younger son. Jacob's faith was similarly expressed *when he was dying* and *worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff* (Gn. 47:31). Jacob blessed the two sons of Joseph, bestowing the greater blessing on the younger (Gn. 48:8–20). Again, *when his end was near*, Joseph spoke in faith about the fulfilment of God's promises in *the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt* and asked for his bones to be buried in the promised land (Gn. 50:24–25). In these three incidents, the patriarchs looked beyond their own deaths to the reward that God had promised his people.

23–28 In this section faith is portrayed as a force sustaining God's people in times of opposition and affliction, enabling them to overcome fear and temptation and to fulfil his purposes for them. The attitude of Moses' parents is highlighted first. They displayed no fear of Pharaoh's *edict* about the killing of Hebrew baby boys and hid Moses *for three months after he was born* (23; *cf.* Ex. 1:22 – 2:2). Faith in God is incompatible with fear of hostile forces.

When Moses grew up, he demonstrated his own faith by refusing *to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter* (24; *cf.* Ex. 2:5–12). Like Abraham, he rejected earthly comforts and security in order to serve the living and true God. He could have enjoyed *the pleasures of sin for a short time* (25), and all *the treasures of Egypt* (26), but his goals were different. In fact, when he refused to accept his status in the Egyptian court, *he chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God.* For Moses there was a greater wealth to be experienced in suffering *disgrace for the sake of Christ* (lit. 'the reproach of the anointed'). Identifying with God's anointed people, Moses experienced the stigma and reproach supremely suffered by the Messiah (12:2–3; 13:13; *cf.* Ps. 89:50–51; 1 Pet. 4:12–16). Moses exemplifies faith as it is defined in v 1, because his secret was *looking ahead to his reward* (*cf.* v 6) and persevering *because he saw him who is invisible* (26–27). Moses feared God rather than the king of Egypt! Believing that a terrible judgment on *the firstborn* of Egypt would most certainly take place, Moses obeyed God's command and *kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood* (28; *cf.* Ex. 11 – 12). The blood on the houses of the Israelites meant that *the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.* Moses' faith was an essential element in God's saving plan for his people.

29–31 The faith of the Israelites, as they *passed through the Red Sea as on dry land,* was inspired by the promises of God that Moses brought to them (*e.g.* Ex. 14:13–14). When the Egyptian forces followed, they were not motivated by faith and were overwhelmed by God's judgment. Two final instances of faith are then given from the period when the Israelites invaded the promised land. *The walls of Jericho fell* because the Israelites acted in response to God's strange command and *marched around them for seven days* (Jos. 6). The faith of *the prostitute Rahab* was expressed in her willingness to show hospitality to the Israelite spies (Jos. 2:8–11). She feared the God of Israel, rather than the king of Jericho, and was *not killed* when God's judgment fell on *those who were disobedient* in that city (Jos. 6:22–25). As a woman, a Gentile, and an open sinner she joined the company of those who were saved by faith.

32–38 In this summary passage the writer specifically mentions four judges (*Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah*), one king (*David*), with *Samuel and the prophets*, as examples of faith. He then describes what was accomplished by such faith in the political and military sphere (33–34), with a particular allusion to Daniel (*who shut the mouths of lions*; Dn. 6:22–23) and the three who were thrown into the Babylonian furnace (*quenched the fury of the flames;* Dn. 3:25–28). The supreme achievement of faith is victory over death in resurrection (35). Certain women *received back their dead* in this life (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 17:17–24; 2 Ki. 4:17–37). Others had to endure torture and *refused to be released* from imprisonment, so that they might obtain the *better resurrection* to eternal life. Some vivid examples of this occur in the Apocrypha, written after the period of history recorded in the OT (*e.g.* 2 Macc. 6:19, 28; 7:9, 11, 14). Images of persecution and imprisonment pile up to convince the first readers of Hebrews that their experience has been one with that of believers in former generations (36–38; *cf.* 10:32–34), to encourage them to persevere in faith.

39–40 A fitting conclusion to ch. 11 and a transition to the call of ch. 12 is provided by these verses. *These were all commended for their faith* in the sense that God testified to their faith and made them witnesses of true faith for others (*cf.* v 2; 12:1). *Yet none of them received what had been promised* (v 13). Although they saw the fulfilment of specific promises in this life (*e.g.* 6:15; 11:11, 33), none of them experienced the blessings of the Messianic era and of the new

covenant. In his gracious providence, *God had planned something better for us* in the sense that their enjoyment of perfection through Jesus Christ would only be *together with us.* The writer's point is to stress the enormous privilege of living 'in these last days' (1:2). On the perfecting of believers, see notes on 10:14. The ultimate benefit of Christ's work for us is a share in the promised eternal inheritance.

12:1–13 A call to endurance

The theme of this passage is the need for perseverance or endurance through trials, as indicated by the use of similar terminology in vs 1, 2, 3 and 7 (*cf.* 10:32; 36). Developing the image of an athletic contest, the writer urges his readers to look to the *great cloud of witnesses* in ch. 11, for encouragement to *run with perseverance* the race of faith (1). As a climax to his presentation of the great heroes of faith, the writer recalls the endurance of Jesus in the face of extreme suffering, *shame* and *opposition*, and relates this to the situation of his readers (2–4). This leads to a meditation on the way God *disciplines* his children through hardship, based on Pr. 3:11–12 (5–11). The challenge is for us to recognize the meaning and purpose of God's discipline in our lives and to respond with trust and willing submission. A final appeal for endurance is made in language that stresses the need to strengthen those who are weak or exhausted and tempted to abandon the race (12–13).

1 The appeal to *run with perseverance the race marked out for us* suggests that the Christian life is more a marathon than a short sprint. We are not to picture the *great cloud of witnesses* in ch. 11 as spectators in an amphitheatre, cheering us on in the race of faith. It is 'what we see in them, not what they see in us, that is the writer's main point' (J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Clark, 1924], p. 193). They are *witnesses* (Gk. *martyres*) of true faith for us because God 'witnessed' (Gk. *emartyrēthēsan*, 11:2, 4–5, 39) to their faith in the pages of the Bible. They demonstrate the nature and possibilities of faith for believers in every generation. As contestants in the race, we are to look to their example for encouragement. We are to *throw off everything that hinders* – any association or activity that handicaps us – *and the sin that so easily entangles* (the writer is concerned here with sin itself, rather than with particular 'besetting sins'). Otherwise, we may miss out on the prize, which is God's gracious gift of eternal life to all who complete the race.

2–4 The greatest encouragement comes when we *fix our eyes on Jesus* (*cf.* 3:1). The NIV describes him as *the author and perfecter of our faith* but the word 'our' does not occur in the original. Faith in an absolute or general sense is meant (he is 'the author and perfecter of faith'). Jesus is the perfect example of the faith we are to express. The word translated *author* (Gk. *archēgon*, as in 2:10) literally means that he is pioneer or leader in the race of faith. However, the context also suggests that he is the *author* or initiator of true faith since he opens the way to God and enables us to follow in his footsteps. When he *endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*, he achieved faith's ultimate goal. He is faith's *perfecter.* As the one who has realized faith to the full from start to finish, he has fulfilled God's promises for all who believe, giving faith a perfect basis by his high-priestly work. Jesus *endured* because he looked beyond the shame and suffering of the cross to *the joy set before him.* We are to have the same perspective and to be encouraged by his endurance of *opposition from sinful men* not to *grow weary and lose heart.* In view of their past experience, this encouragement would have had special relevance for the first readers (*cf.* 10:32–34), though they had not yet been called upon to resist *to the point of shedding your blood.*

5–8 But why must God's people suffer insult, rejection and persecution at all? Surely these experiences are enough to make them doubt God's love and lose heart? The writer anticipates such questions when he charges the readers with having forgotten Pr. 3:11–12. *That word of encouragement* addresses believers in every age as *sons* or 'children' of God (*cf.* 2:10–13). It assures them that sonship and suffering go hand in hand, *because the Lord disciplines those he loves.* Christians are called to *endure hardship as discipline*, recognizing this as a practical proof of their special relationship with God (*God is treating you as sons*). *Discipline* (Gk. *paideia*) sometimes involves rebuke and punishment, as the text from Proverbs declares. But it also involves the positive teaching and training that loving parents will give to their children in a whole range of circumstances, to bring them to maturity. Indeed, in ordinary human experience and in relation to God, those who are not disciplined are *illegitimate children and not true sons.*

9–11 When disciplined appropriately by *human fathers*, we *respected them for it.* How much more should those who are disciplined by their spiritual father (*the Father of our spirits*) learn to *submit* to him and *live*! For God's discipline is necessary to keep us on track to eternal life. Parental discipline is limited to our childhood years (*for a little while*) and may not always have been wisely administered (*as they thought best*). But God, in his infinite love and wisdom, consistently throughout our lives

disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. God's holiness is his distinctive life and character. He will share this ultimately and completely with everyone whom he brings into his kingdom. Meanwhile, he uses various trials to sustain faith and produce a *harvest of righteousness and peace* in those who have been *trained* or 'exercised' by his discipline. In other words, by his grace, we can begin to share God's holy life and character here and now.

12–13 The call to *strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees* recalls the image of an athletic contest. It is a challenge to abandon fear and despair and not become exhausted in the race of faith (*cf.* Is. 35:3–4). The quotation from Pr. 4:26 ('*Make level paths for your feet*') is a warning about following the way that God has provided, not swerving to the right or left. It is particularly important to help those who are spiritually *lame* to keep to the right pathway, so that they may not be tripped up and permanently *disabled, but rather healed.* In other words, Christians have a responsibility to care for one another and to encourage one another not to fall by the wayside. The practical implications of all this are revealed in the following section.

Appeals for a God-honouring life-style (12:14 – 13:25)

The conclusion to Hebrews offers a now familiar blend of warning and encouragement. However, the stress here is not simply on the need to persevere in faith and obtain what God has promised. God's plan for us to 'share in his holiness' (10) lays upon us the obligation to 'be holy' in the present (14). Thus, the moral implications of Christian faith are set out and explained by the writer. Negatively, the example of Esau is used to warn about the danger of missing out on the grace of God (15–17). Positively, the wonderful assurance that 'we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken' becomes the basis for a call to gratitude and acceptable worship (18–29). This is to be expressed in the sort of obedient life-style outlined in 13:1–17.

Those to whom Hebrews was first sent are encouraged to remember their former leaders and 'imitate their faith' (13:7). This is later echoed by the call to obey current leaders and 'submit to their authority' (17). Between these appeals, the language of sacrifice is reintroduced (8–16), to highlight once more the uniqueness of Christ's suffering and its consequences. Instead of being 'carried away by strange teachings', they are to remain faithful to Jesus. As they take their stand with him, 'outside the camp' of Judaism, they must be willing to bear 'the disgrace he bore' and set their sights on 'the city that is to come'. Their religion is not to be tied to any earthly sanctuary or cult but will involve confessing Christ in the world and sharing what they have with others.

A personal request for prayer is followed by a prayer-wish for the readers, asking God to equip them 'with everything good for doing his will' (18–21). Then, with a challenge to bear with his 'word of exhortation' and the promise of a possible visit, the writer concludes his work with some brief greetings (22–25).

12:14–17 A final warning against failure

To *live in peace with all men* means, first and foremost, maintaining harmony in the Christian community (*cf.* 13:1–3, 7, 16–17). The related challenge is to *be holy* (lit. 'pursue holiness'). It is clear from v 10 that God must work in our lives to make it possible for us to 'share in his holiness' (*cf.* 13:20–21), but v 14 insists that we have a part to play. We must seek that practical holiness of life (Gk. *hagiasmos*, 'consecration, sanctification') which flows from a genuine dedication to his service and obedience to his will. Apart from such holiness *no-one will see the Lord* (*i.e.* experience eternal life). The implications of v 14 are drawn out in the following verses.

15 Christians are to be watchful about the spiritual welfare of others in the church, taking care that *no-one misses the grace of God* (lit. 'falls short of God's grace'). God's grace is always available 'to help us in our time of need' (4:16). Those who fail to depend on it and respond to it will not enter his heavenly kingdom (*cf.* 3:12–14). Indeed, they may become a *bitter root* that causes trouble for the whole congregation and defiles many. Such imagery recalls Dt. 29:18, where Moses warns about the bitterness that can be spread throughout the community of God's people by one rebellious member.

16–17 Esau is singled out as a dramatic example of someone who turned his back on the grace of God and *for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son* (Gn. 25:29–34). There is no doubt that Esau was *godless*, but Genesis gives no hint that he was *sexually immoral* (Gk. *pornos*). This term could be used quite generally, without reference to Esau, as part of the writer's call to practical holiness (*cf.* 13:4). Alternatively, it could be used in a metaphorical way, to describe Esau's apostasy as a 'prostitution' of his relationship with God (*cf.* Dt. 31:16; Jdg. 2:17). After such a wholesale rejection of the grace of God, when Esau wanted to *inherit* the blessing of the firstborn son, *he was rejected* (Gn. 27:30–40). Hebrews mentions nothing about Jacob's deceit but implies that Esau could *bring about no change of mind* (lit. 'he found no opportunity for repentance') because of his earlier apostasy.

12:18–29 Responding to the call of God

Characteristically, the writer turns from warning to encouragement, reminding the readers of the privileges that are theirs by God's grace. Yet such privileges demand an ongoing response of faith and obedience. When Israel gathered at Mt Sinai, to hear the voice of God, it was a terrifying occasion (18–21; *cf.* Ex. 19), moving the people to beg *that no further word be spoken to them.* Christians, on the other hand, have come by faith to *Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem,* where God is in the midst of a *joyful assembly* of angels and the perfected saints of all generations (22–24). The emphasis here is on acceptance because of *Jesus the mediator of a new covenant* and his atoning death. So we have no reason to *refuse him who speaks* or to *turn away from him who warns us from heaven* (25–27). Certainty about sharing in God's unshakeable kingdom should motivate us to a life of gratitude and acceptable worship (28–29).

18–21 The Israelites approached God at Mt Sinai to hear the terms of his covenant and discover what it meant to serve him as a holy nation (Ex. 19:5–6). Hebrews highlights the physical terrors that were part of that event. But the central and most significant phenomenon was *a voice speaking words* (Ex. 19:16–24). So awesome was this encounter with God that those who heard him speak *begged that no further word be spoken to them* (Ex. 20:18–19). Even Moses the mediator trembled with fear (*cf.* Dt. 9:19).

22–24 *Mount Zion,* which could be understood as the ultimate goal of God's people when they left Egypt, is the point to which Christians already *have come.* However, *the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God,* rather than any earthly destination, is meant (*cf.* Gal. 4:26; Rev. 21:2). Men and women of faith in OT times looked forward to this city (*cf.* 11:10, 13–16), but those who *have come* to God through Jesus Christ (the same verb is used in 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6) are now part of that heavenly scene. This is a vivid way of saying that we have secured the promised eternal inheritance through faith in Jesus and his work. In that heavenly city are *thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,* united in celebration with *the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.* Here is a vision of the ultimate, completed company of the people of God, assembled around Christ in the heavenly places (*cf.* Eph. 2:6–7; Rev. 7). We may now enjoy membership of that *church* by faith. If our names are written on the roll of the heavenly city, we will one day enjoy the full rights of citizenship. God is there as *the judge of all,* suggesting that scrutiny or judgment must take place first (*cf.* 9:27). However, this heavenly church consists of *the spirits of righteous men made perfect,* indicating that they are those *made perfect* for ever by the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ (10:14). As *mediator of a new covenant,* his *sprinkled blood* provides complete cleansing from the defilement of sin (9:13–15; 10:22). Abel's blood cried out for vengeance (11:4), but Jesus' blood *speaks a better word,* assuring us of forgiveness and acceptance. *All* must face the judgment of God, but those who trust in the atoning power of Jesus' death can look forward to acquittal and life for ever in God's presence.

25–27 The note of warning here seems rather abrupt after the assurance of vs 22–24. But the writer's point is that the God who spoke at Sinai (*who warned them on earth*) continues to call us from the heavenly Jersualem (*who warns us from heaven*). No artificial distinction is to be made between the God of the OT and the God of the NT! Since God graciously speaks to us of forgiveness and acceptance through the blood of his Son, we must *not refuse him who speaks.* If the Israelites did not escape God's condemnation when they turned away from him, *how much less will we* (*cf.* 2:1–4)? When God spoke from Sinai, the whole mountain trembled violently (Ex. 19:18). Hg. 2:6 promises that, when it is time for the final judgment and the end of this world-order, God will shake *not only the earth but also the heavens* (26). All that will remain is *what cannot be shaken* (27), namely the *kingdom* that Christ shares with those who continue to trust in him (28).

28–29 The proper response to God's gracious offer of *a kingdom that cannot be shaken* is to *be thankful.* Such gratitude is the basis and motivation for true and acceptable *worship.* The Greek verb here (*latreuein*) may also be translated 'to serve', as it is in 9:14. Christian worship cannot be restricted to prayer and praise in a congregational context. As ch. 13 illustrates, we are to worship, or serve, God by faithfulness and obedience in every aspect of our lives (note particularly 13:15–16; *cf.* Rom. 12:1). However, the writer also insists that acceptable worship is characterized by *reverence and awe,* and supports his challenge with a description of God as *a consuming fire.* This alludes to Dt. 4:24 (*cf.* Dt. 9:3; Is. 33:14), where the Israelites were warned not to indulge in idolatry, but to remain faithful to the Lord and to serve him exclusively, lest they provoke him to anger. The certainty of God's grace must never blind us to the truth that a terrible judgment awaits the apostate.

13:1–17 Worship and everyday life

The readers are challenged to persist with the sort of practical expressions of love and patient

faith previously commended (*e.g.* 6:10–12; 10:32–36). Following on from 12:28–29, the passage suggests that an important dimension to our worship is serving others in the way that God directs (16). However, it is also true that we serve God by offering him praise through Jesus Christ, in every area of our lives (15). When the writer turns again to show how Christianity fulfils and replaces the way of worship associated with the tabernacle (10–14), it becomes clear that traditional ways of thinking about 'religion' must be radically transformed by the gospel.

1–8 We serve God by loving other believers *as brothers*, entertaining *strangers* (a ministry sometimes rewarded in surprising ways, as in Gn. 18 – 19), remembering *those in prison* or those *ill-treated* as if sharing their experiences, upholding *marriage* and avoiding sexual immorality. God is also honoured by those who keep *free from the love of money* and are *content* with what they have. The secret of such contentment is learning to trust God for what is needed (as the quotations from Dt. 31:6 and Ps. 118:6–7 indicate). The readers are also encouraged to please God by remembering the life-style of those *leaders* who first brought them the gospel and by imitating *their faith*. Leaders come and go, but Jesus Christ, whom they trusted and followed, is the same *today* as he was *yesterday*. He will also remain the same *for ever* (*cf.* 1:8–12), the ultimate foundation for Christian faith and obedience.

9–10 A negative note is struck with the warning not to be *carried away by all kinds of strange teachings*. The writer only refers specifically to *ceremonial foods* which are *of no value to those who eat them*. Certain foods, and maybe some kind of ritual meal, were being presented to the readers as helpful for the nourishment of their spiritual lives. Yet, it is by God's *grace*, and not rules about food, that *our hearts are to be strengthened* (*cf.* Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8; Col. 2:16, 20–23). Food laws are among the 'external regulations', now surpassed and outmoded by the work of Christ (9:10). With the insistence that *we have an altar*, the writer returns to the pattern of argument that dominated the central chapters of this book: the high-priesthood, sacrifices and sanctuary of the OT find their fulfilment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. *Altar* is another cultic term used in a shorthand and figurative way for the sacrifice of Christ. Those Jewish priests who *minister at the tabernacle*, and who are authorized to benefit from its sacrifices (*e.g.* Lv. 7:5–6; Nu. 18:9–10), *have no right to eat* from the altar of the new covenant. They, along with anyone else attached to that way of worship, are pursuing the 'shadow' instead of the reality (8:5; 10:1). The writer of Hebrews does not here draw the inference that Christians may, even metaphorically, 'eat' from their 'altar', or sacramentally benefit from Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. It is remarkable that there is no treatment of the Lord's Supper in this context, even at the level of correcting false views of the community meal.

11–14 A further reflection on the ritual of the Day of Atonement leads the writer to a significant observation: the bodies of sacrificial victims were burned *outside the camp* (Lv. 16:27). To leave the area where the Israelites were encamped in the desert, even for this sacred duty, rendered a person unclean and necessitated a rite of purification before the camp could be re-entered (Lv. 16:28). So when Jesus *suffered outside the city gate* of Jerusalem, his offering was unclean and unholy according to those traditions! Yet, paradoxically, it is his sacrifice that makes the people *holy* under the new covenant (12; *cf.* 10:10). The death of Jesus marks the end of a whole way of thinking about religion and worship. Christians who have been cleansed and consecrated to God by the sacrifice of Christ must no longer take refuge in holy places and ritual activities but must *go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore* (13; *cf.* 12:2–4). For the first readers, this meant breaking decisively with Judaism and identifying with the one who was regarded as cursed because of the manner of his death (*cf.* Gal. 3:13). The place of Christian service or worship is the uncleanness of the world, where there is unbelief and persecution! Yet nowhere in this world will we find out hopes fulfilled because *we are looking for the city that is to come* (14; *cf.* notes on 4:3–5; 12:22–24).

15–17 The passage draws to a close with two further explanations of what worship means under the new covenant. *Through Jesus*, Christians are continually to offer to God *a sacrifice of praise*. In language borrowed from Ho. 14:2 (LXX) this sacrifice is described as *the fruit of lips that confess his name*. In other words, it is a sacrifice consisting of praise, publicly acknowledging the *name* or character of God. This might take place when Christians meet together to encourage one another (*cf.* 10:24–25), or when they confess Christ before unbelievers in the world. *To do good* and *to share with others* is also acceptable worship, for *with such sacrifices God is pleased* (*cf.* Jas. 1:26–27). *Such sacrifices* cannot be regarded as cultivating God's favour, since Christian worship is meant to be an expression of gratitude for the love that he first showed us (*cf.* 12:28). Although the writer is obviously concerned about practical expressions of fellowship amongst believers (*cf.* 10:32–34; 13:1–3), there are also many opportunities for serving the needs of those outside

the Christian fellowship. Instead of reverting to Jewish ways of thinking or being influenced by strange teachings from other sources, the readers are urged to obey their current leaders and *submit to their authority* (17). They are to do this recognizing the special responsibility of Christian leaders and the need to encourage them in their God-given role.

13:18–25 Personal messages and final blessing

For the first time the writer speaks of himself in the first person singular, pointing to his own example as a leader and asking the readers to pray that he might be able to visit them again soon (18–19). The note of pleasing God is sounded once more in the closing benediction (20–21). The focus is first on what *the God of peace* has done in bringing back from the dead *our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep* (*cf.* 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4). The exalted Lord Jesus is the one who remains for ever as the ultimate leader and guide of God's flock (*cf.* vs 7–8). Jesus' resurrection confirms that his *blood* was effective in establishing *the eternal covenant* by which we experience God's peace and share in his kingdom. So we can confidently ask God to equip us with *everything good for doing his will* and depend on him to *work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ.* Acceptable worship in all its dimensions can only be offered through Christ, by God's enabling.

The writer has previously acknowledged that he has things to say that are 'hard to explain' (5:11) and he now urges his readers to bear with what he has written (22). Considering the vastness of his themes, he has only expressed himself briefly, and his work is essentially a *word of exhortation* for their encouragement. News of Timothy's release suggests that they might soon be able to visit the readers together (23). This verse indicates that the writer was probably linked in some way with Paul and his missionary team, although there is no real basis for the tradition identifying him with the apostle. The writer joins his final greetings with *those from Italy*, implying that he was in the company of Italian Christians, perhaps in some other country, wishing to encourage fellow-believers back home. *Grace be with you* is a conventional form of farewell in NT letters (*e.g.* Rom. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:13) but is particularly appropriate for Hebrews, with its continual stress on the grace of God shown to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

David Peterson

JAMES

Introduction

The letter of James has not always been appreciated in the church. In fact, Martin Luther called it 'a right straw epistle' (referring to 1 Cor. 3:12), because it did not sound like Paul nor mention Luther's chief concern, salvation by grace. However, the letter of James is extremely important to the church today.

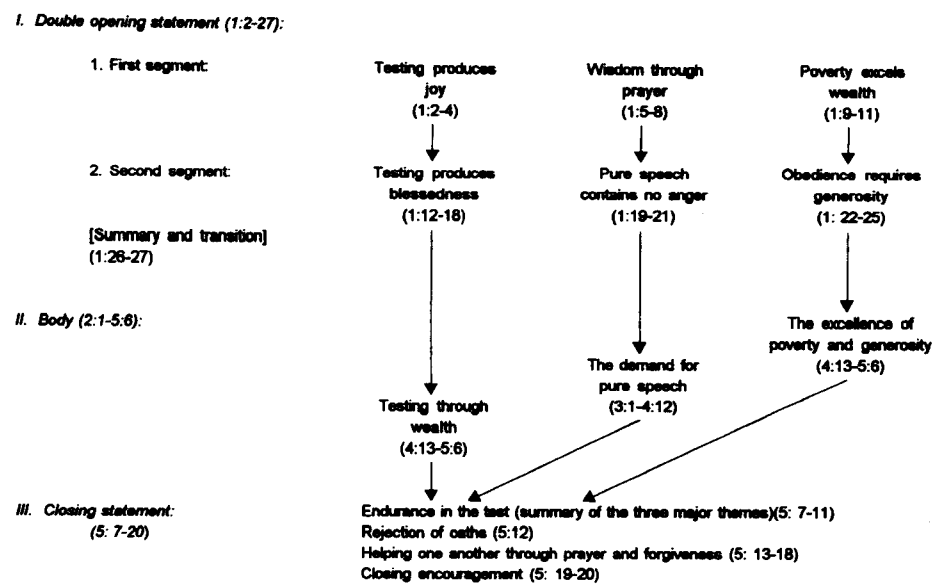
The first point to note is that it was written to a church under pressure. Christians were not being martyred, but they were suffering economic persecution and oppression and the church was breaking under the pressure. There are two ways in which church members may respond to extreme pressure. They can either pull together and help each other or they can compromise with the world and split apart into bickering factions. James wanted his readers to do the former but it was the latter that was actually happening as people struggled to 'get ahead' in the world. These problems make the letter very relevant for the church today.

Secondly, the letter is filled with the teaching of Jesus. No other letter of the NT has as many references to the teaching of Jesus per page as this one does. It is not that James quotes Jesus directly, although he sometimes does (see in 5:12), but he normally simply uses phrases and ideas which come from Jesus. His readers would have memorized much of the Lord's teaching, so they would recognize the source. Most of these phrases come from the teaching of Jesus now in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5 – 7) or Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Lk. 6). There is no better example in the NT of a church leader taking the Lord's teaching and applying it to church problems. The letter of James, then, becomes a model for the modern church on how to apply the teaching of Jesus.

The letter claims to be written by 'James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ'. There are several Christian leaders to whom this could apply. James the son of Zebedee, however, was executed between AD 41 and 44 (Acts 12:2) and James the son of Alphaeus (Acts 1:13) is so unknown that if he was the author he would have surely identified himself more clearly. In truth there was but one James in the early church who was well enough recognized to be able to use such a simple greeting and that was James the son of Joseph, the brother of the Lord. This is the man who was personally visited by Jesus after the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7), and it was probably at this time that he was converted. He was with the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 1:14), and soon rose to leadership in the church, being the major leader of the Jerusalem church by AD 50 (Acts 15:13–21; the fact that he spoke last indicates that he was viewed as the main leader) and continuing until after Paul's last visit (Acts 21:18). While James led the Jerusalem church, Acts portrays him as concerned for church unity, being willing to negotiate compromises among Christian groups (*i.e.* those for and against Paul). The reference in Gal. 2:12 does not contradict this picture, for it does not indicate that James knew anything about either Paul's activities or those of his messengers; it only shows why the messengers were seen as important. James was reportedly martyred after the death of Festus in AD 62, the high priest, Annas the Younger, taking advantage of the absence of a Roman governor to carry out the execution.

Many scholars do not believe that James the son of Joseph wrote this letter, either because it appears to address a church too settled for the mid-first century or because the quality of its Greek is too good. Furthermore, Jas. 2:14–26 appears to be contradicting Paul in Rom. 4 and Gal. 4. We can only respond briefly to these issues, but we note first of all that by AD 50 the church in Jerusalem was 20 years old, fully old enough for any of the problems noted in the letter of James. The problems themselves are not those of physical persecution and martyrdom, which happened more towards the end of the first century, but those of economic persecution and the oppression of the poor, which fits the period in Jerusalem before the war of AD 66–70. As for James and Paul, we will argue in the commentary that because they use terms differently the contradictions between them are more apparent than real. James may, however, be arguing against a distortion of Paul's teaching, which means that the letter must have been written before Galatians (*c.* AD 50) and Romans (*c.* AD 56) were circulating widely, or else James would probably have quoted Paul's own teaching against those misusing Paul's slogans.

The quality of the Greek in the letter of James presents a real problem. A Galilean peasant like James would certainly have known Greek, but it is unlikely that he would have been able to write the high quality Greek of this



Structural diagram of the letter of James.

letter. Perhaps the clue is to be found in two facts. First, the letter is addressed to 'the twelve tribes scattered among the nations'. James was looking on the church as a whole as 'the Israel of God' (*cf.* Gal. 6:16), but an Israel scattered in the world. It is not to the Christians gathered in Jerusalem that the letter was written, but to those scattered outside. The form James used was that of a literary letter rather than an actual letter. Actual letters were written for a particular church or person and sent to them. A literary letter was published like a book or tract and intended for a much broader, general audience. Therefore, the letter of James reflects more the church in Jerusalem than the churches who would receive copies of the letter.

Secondly, there are several places in which different Greek words are used for the same idea (*e.g.* 'patience' in 1:3 and 5:7; 'desire' in 1:14 and 4:3). Also several parts of the letter appear to be carefully structured outlines for sermons like those preached in Jewish synagogues (*e.g.* 2:1–13; 2:14–26). In other places we find short sayings used to join parts together. It looks, then, as if sermons and sayings of James (and perhaps of Jesus as well) were edited together to form the letter. Unlike, for example, Galatians the letter of James does not look like a work dictated at one time.

The letter, then, is probably a collection of the sayings of James edited together into a unity. James himself may have requested someone with good Greek to put the letter together, perhaps to have something to share with the many Christians from the Greek-speaking world who were visiting Jerusalem, or else after his death the church had the letter written in order to preserve some of the central teaching of this major figure. The latter picture is the more likely. This must have been done soon after James's martyrdom, for the letter uses James's simple self-designation, not the fancier titles used for him later in church history.

The letter is basically in five parts. Part one is a two-part introduction which brings up three themes. The first is testing or trials and the reason why people fail when tested. The second is wisdom and the control of the tongue. The third is wealth and its use in acts of charity. As in 1 Jn. 1:1–4, James discusses each of these ideas and then goes over them a second time.

Part two takes up the theme of wealth and charity and presents two sermons, one discussing discrimination on the basis of wealth and the other pointing out that any faith that does not result in good works, especially charity, is not saving faith at all.

Part three discusses the use of the tongue, particularly in relation to teachers who seem to have been gathering groups around them and criticizing others. James attributes this to demonic influence, while pointing out that God's wisdom or Spirit produces peace and unity in the church.

Part four returns to the theme of testing. The wealthy in the church community are tested by their wealth. Will they use it just the way that the world does, or will they go to God and seek

his direction? The wealthy outside the church are condemned to hell, not just for their persecution of the poor, including Christians, but also for their heaping up of treasure on earth and living in luxury while others are starving.

Finally, James has a concluding section to his letter. His summary calls his Christian readers to patience. He then takes up the topics which were thought to be necessary at the end of Greek letters: oaths and health (see the Introductions to the articles on Colossians and Philemon). Finally, he tells his readers why he has written: it was to turn Christians who have erred back to the truth. He does not want to criticize, but to cover sins by bringing people to repentance. This call to repentance characterizes the letter and unifies the church, for it was James's goal to speak to a church under pressure and call it to stand together against the force of the wagging tongue within and the pressures of the world without.

See also the article on Reading the letters.

Further reading

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D. J. Moo, *James*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1985).
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Commentary

1:1 Greeting

James begins by identifying himself as the author and then addressing the readers. For himself he uses the simple designation *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.* This is, of course, an honourable title in that Moses is repeatedly designated the 'servant of the LORD' in Joshua and Revelation, as is Joshua himself in Judges. But it is at the same time a simple title, one which any Christian could use. James goes beyond the OT usage in adding *and of the Lord Jesus Christ* to *servant of God.* This shows the movement in the early church to recognize the equality of Christ with God.

The readers are *the twelve tribes scattered among the nations.* The phrase *the twelve tribes* probably does not mean that the readers were all Jews, but that James thought of them as the people of God, the true Israel, whether they

were Jews or Gentiles (so also Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9). The readers are scattered just as the Jews were scattered during the exile, which probably indicates that the readers were not living in the Holy Land. There is, however, another use of 'scattered'. 1 Pet. 1:1 uses the same term to indicate that since becoming Christians his Gentile readers were no longer at home in their native countries; their real home was heaven.

1:2–27 Opening words

Having addressed his readers, James introduces the themes of his letter. As in many Greek letters intended for publication, he doubles his opening, introducing his main themes first in 1:2–11 and then again (with an advance in development) in 1:12–27 (*cf.* 1 Jn. 1:1–4).

1:2–11 First part: testing, prayer and wealth

1:2–4 Testing. The Christians James was addressing were facing *trials of many kinds.* These trials were not severe persecution (and certainly not illness, for which different terms are used), but rather low-level persecution such as social rejection and economic boycotts. This was happening simply because they were Christians. Although the trials were painful, James calls the believers to rejoice, not because the pain is pleasant but because they should have a perspective which looks beyond the present life to eternal reward. The *pure joy* is not a present happiness, but joy in anticipation of God's future.

The reason they could rejoice is that this testing of their faith would produce perseverance or patience. Perseverance is an important Christian virtue, mentioned often by Jesus (Lk. 8:15; 21:19; *cf.* Mt. 10:22) and Paul (Rom. 5:3–4; 8:25; 2 Cor. 6:4; 12:12). For those readers who knew their Scripture, as James certainly did, the importance of this virtue is underlined by the fact that Abraham is the first person in Scripture to be tested (Gn. 22:1) and God rewarded his faithfulness. Furthermore, Job was also tested by Satan, and in the stories about Job circulating in first-century Judaism he was the supreme example of perseverance. Surely these Christians could expect a similar reward.

Perseverance itself, however, has an effect. It is like holding a fine steel sword blade in the fire until it is thoroughly tempered. In this case the sword is the believer, the fire is testing and the 'tempering' is that the believer becomes *mature and complete, not lacking anything* (4). The Greek term for 'mature' is also often translated as 'perfect'. This is the virtue that Noah exhibited in Gn. 6:9 (translated 'blameless' in the NIV). This is what Jesus intends when he calls his followers to be 'perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt. 5:48). It indicates a character like God's. This type of maturity is produced by holding fast to the faith and Christian virtue while in the fire of persecution. The impurities in one's character will be burned off. The end result will be not just maturity, but completeness, which means that not a single part of a God-like character will be lacking. If this is the end result of the readers' trials, difficult as they may be, there is indeed something to rejoice about.

The structure of these verses is that of a 'chain saying' (a produces b which produces c *etc.*). It must have been a traditional saying in the church, for we find versions of it in Rom. 5:3–6 and 1 Pet. 1:6–7.

1:5–8 Prayer. But what is a person supposed to do if they are not 'mature and complete'? What if one fears failing the test? Paul's answer would have been that they should live, or be led, by the Spirit (*e.g.* Gal. 5:16–18, 25). James's answer is for them to ask God for wisdom, because divine wisdom is the power which James believes counteracts evil in human life. Such a prayer would not be useless, for God is a generous giver. Nor is his generosity hemmed in by a critical spirit: 'What? You again! What did you do with what I gave you last time?' Far from having that attitude, God simply gives to all who ask, time after time.

Yet there is one requirement if we are to receive wisdom: the asking must flow out of faith in, or rather commitment to, God. The 'doubting' James warns about is not that of a person who wonders whether or not God will answer this particular request, or that of an introspective doubter who struggles with faith. Instead it is that of a person who is *double-minded*, a phrase with a close equivalent in the Psalms (Ps. 12:1–2), and which is the opposite of trusting God from one's whole heart (Dt. 6:5; 8:3). In other words, this kind of a doubter is the person who is not wholly committed to God, but 'plays safe' by praying. Their real interest is in advancement in this world, but they also want to enjoy some of God's blessings now and go to heaven when they die. Such a person will not get wisdom, James says. In fact, such a person will not receive anything at all from God.

1:9–11 Wealth. Having spoken of single-minded devotion to God and rejoicing in testing, James turns to an example of such a person. *The brother in humble circumstances* is encouraged to see himself from God's perspective and *take pride in his high position.* The world views this person as poor (the term 'humble' has behind it a Hebrew concept of the humble or oppressed poor). God has, however, declared them rich. God's view is the truer one and so the

person can rejoice in its reality even when their outward circumstances have not yet changed.

In contrast the rich person should *take pride in his low position.* This is probably a deliberately ironic statement. The term 'rich' (Gk. *plousios*) in James is used only for non-believers. James does know of some wealthy Christians (2:2; 4:13), but he speaks of them without calling them 'rich'. While the verse might mean that a rich man could properly take pride in having been humbled by God and brought to associate as an equal with poor Christians, it is more likely that James is saying that if the rich person looks at the same future as the 'humble' brother, the only thing he has to take pride in is his 'low position', or his passing away. In this age the wealthy man is indeed honoured and courted (as in Ps. 73), for he seems so exalted, but when viewed in the light of God's future, even if he should live to old age, the span of his life and all its apparent glory will be as short-lived as a flower blooming at dawn and withered by the sun before noon; there will be nothing left. (The picture is drawn from Is. 40:6–8.) James takes up the fall of the rich again in 5:1–6.

This 'reversal of fortunes' theme is often found in Jewish literature (*e.g.* 1 Sa. 2:1–10; Lk. 1:46–55). When God acts, the low are raised up and the high are brought down. Joseph goes from prison to prominence; Nebuchadnezzar goes from throne to field. God declares his values, and human values are negated. This is how it will be at the end of the age. James wants his readers to rejoice in this coming reality.

1:12–27 Second part: testing, gifts, and listening and doing

In the second part of the opening the three themes are again discussed in order, but James does not simply repeat himself. Instead he advances to a new aspect of each theme.

1:12–15 Testing. James returns to the theme of testing by giving a promise. *Blessed* or happy is the person *who perseveres under trial.* How can that person be counted happy? They cannot be from the world's perspective, but they can from God's. God has promised a *crown of life*, that is life itself (as in Rev. 2:10), for such a person has shown that they do indeed love God by standing the test. This is like Abraham, who persevered in the test and then received God's promise (Gn. 22:15–18), for God can say, 'Now I know that you fear God' (Gn. 22:12).

Not everyone will prove genuine when tested. Those who fail or who want to give in when tested may do so by blaming God: 'God is tempting me'. (The terms 'test', 'trial', and 'tempt' are all the same word in Greek.) This is precisely what Israel did in the wilderness; they complained that it was God's fault and blamed him (Ex. 17:2, 7). In fact, they did this ten times (Nu. 14:22). The believers James was writing to are not to do this, he says, because first, 'God ought not to be put to the test by sinful people! (This is a better translation than *God cannot be tempted by evil.*) This is precisely what was taught to Israel in Dt. 6:16.

The second reason why the believers are not to blame God is because he does not *tempt anyone.* How could James have written that when Gn. 22:1 says 'God tested [or tempted, again the same word] Abraham'? The answer is that beginning in the OT and continuing in Judaism between the testaments such stories as those of Abraham were interpreted as having left out the real cause of the test, the devil. (*E.g.* 2 Sa. 24:1 says, '[God] incited David', while 1 Ch. 21:1 says, 'Satan ... incited David'.) Therefore in the inter-testamental book Jubilees the Gn. 22 account about Abraham is recast in a form similar to Job. Because of this interpretive tradition in his world, James, who in 2:21 cites Gn. 22 explicitly, could say that the real cause of testing is not God. The OT story is true, but it is a simplified form of reality.

Yet James does not want people to blame the devil either (although he mentions him in 4:7), but to take the responsibility squarely on their own shoulders. It is *desire* within one which makes the test a test. This *desire* is what the Jews called the 'evil impulse' in people, or what psychologists call 'drives' or what Paul in Rom. 7 calls 'sin'; it is quite simply the undifferentiated 'I want'. Like a prostitute it entices, and gives birth to sin, and sin ends the process with death. This desire – sin – death chain sets the stage for the next section.

1:16–18 Gifts. In contrast to the evil things brought about by desire, God will only give a good and perfect gift. One example of such a good gift is the wisdom mentioned in v 5, the parallel section. In v 17 God is pictured as *the Father of the heavenly lights* or the Creator of the universe. But unlike the moon and other heavenly lights which he created, God himself does not change. He is always the same. So if he gives good today, he will not give evil tomorrow. His goodness is seen in that *he chose* (it was not an accident) to *give us birth*, meaning new birth, by means of the gospel (*the word of truth*). His goal was to make us *firstfruits* of all he created. The firstfruits were viewed as the best of the harvest, so God is making redeemed human beings the apex of all creation. Here we see another chain: God – word of truth – birth. Desire and the devil lead to death. God, by way of contrast, produces life.

1:19–27 Listening and doing. What will be the result of this life or wisdom from God? It will be a controlled tongue. Human anger,

whether called 'righteous anger' or not, does not produce God's type of righteousness. Therefore, the wise person will be slow to open his or her mouth and even slower to express anger. Indeed, James argues, a humble acceptance of the gospel (*the word planted in you*) will mean that one will get rid of all angry expression (as 3:9 and 4:1–2 show, it is the angry outburst, not the inward feeling, which is the issue) and all other types of evil, even if they are fully accepted by the world.

James, moving to his third topic, points out that it is not enough simply to know Scripture or godly teaching. Knowledge alone is useless. It is even worse than useless, for the person who thinks that knowing the Bible makes one godly is self-deceived. Instead, it is *obeying* the teaching that makes one godly. What is the source of teaching for James? *The perfect law that gives freedom* is what one should obey, and that is the OT as interpreted by Jesus along with Jesus' other teachings. As Jesus also said, it is not the hearing of his words but the obeying of them that brings a blessing (Mt. 7:24–27).

This means that one can tell truly godly people by their lifestyle. If people have uncontrolled tongues (and so are often exploding in anger or quarrelling), all of their religious practices are worthless. They really do not love God in their hearts. The type of piety which God looks for has two characteristics, which are the two sides of the same coin. First, it cares for the poor (the orphans and widows are two of the four major categories of the poor in the OT). Secondly, it is not *polluted by the world*, which means that it is not seeking security or advancement in terms of what is valued by people in the world. Because it does not love the world, there is no need to hold on to money. Therefore such people can be generous and give freely.

2:1–26 Testing through generosity

The previous verse made generosity an issue, and so has moved the reader into the first major topic of the letter, the call for generosity and how it tests the reality of faith. James handles this topic in two parts. Each is probably the summary of a single sermon, for they both follow the pattern of the types of sermons preached in the synagogue.

2:1–13 Partiality and love

The first sermon deals with generosity of behaviour. James argues that if a person's behaviour demonstrates partiality, then that person is living more like the persecutors of the church than like Jesus. After stating the principle he develops the theme through a theological argument and two biblical quotations before coming to his closing summary.

2:1 Principle. James begins his sermon by noting that Jesus is *our glorious Lord.* The claim of commitment to such a person ('faith in' him, as a more literal translation would put it) is incompatible with partiality. God himself is totally impartial (Dt. 10:17; Gal. 2:6). Commitment to the one who perfectly incarnated such a God and now is the glorious resurrected Lord is therefore incompatible with any type of favouritism.

2:2–4 An example. James goes on to give an example of what he means. By comparing James's picture of the differences in clothing and posture with Jewish sources we discover that the scene is that of a church court (as in 1 Cor. 6:1).

The picture is of two believers who have a dispute. One is wealthy. James does not call him 'rich', for he uses that term only for non-Christians, but he notes that he has a *gold ring* on his finger and is wearing *fine clothes* (*lit.* 'shining', meaning bleached white rather than off-white homespun). The other man is poor. He comes in wearing *shabby clothes* (*lit.* 'filthy'). They are all that he has to work and sleep in, and they are worn and heavily soiled. The wealthy man is offered a seat while the poor man is told to stand or else to sit on the floor.

Before the arguments are even begun everyone can see that it is not a fair trial. Jewish law demanded that both parties either sit at the same level or stand. It also demanded that if one were rich he either dress the poorer man as he dressed, or dress himself in shabby clothes like the poorer man. If the church accepted and responded to the economic differences between these two men they would be showing favouritism. What is more, they would have become *judges with evil thoughts.* The church that claims the glorious Jesus Christ as its Lord would have become an unjust, partial judge!

2:5–7 Theological argument. James begins his discussion of such favouritism towards the wealthy by referring to the words of Jesus. God has chosen the poor, he says, to inherit the kingdom. This comes from the Sermon on the Plain (Lk. 6:20). God shows a special interest in the poor in the OT (*e.g.* Dt. 15; Ps. 35:10; Pr. 19:17) and Jesus makes them the focus of his gospel proclamation (Lk. 4:18). James makes it clear that the poor he is talking about are the economically poor, for they are poor only *in the eyes of the world.* Before God they are *rich in faith.* Therefore not all poor people are included in the blessing, for not all are chosen for salvation (*to inherit the kingdom*) but only *those who love him.* The irony is that the church is judging as the world does, not as God does. It has failed to see that the man in shabby clothes is in fact rich in God's eyes, and it has by

its actions *insulted the poor*, insulted the very ones God has chosen as his heirs.

By insulting the poor the church has favoured the wealthy. But it is the rich outside the church who are their oppressors. This picks up on an OT theme of the rich oppressing the poor (Je. 7:6; 22:3; Am. 4:1; 8:4), which is precisely what was going on in James' day. What is more, the rich dragged Christians into court, knowing that the secular courts would be favourable to them, for no-one liked Christians. To add insult to injury they were *slandering the noble name* which had been named over the believers at their baptism. Perhaps this is a reference to how in court they might have sneered that 'this follower of that accursed Galilean' could not be in the right. Such were the rich. Yet the Christians are becoming like them when they discriminate against the poor in their own gatherings. The Christians have become the persecutors.

2:8–11 Scriptural argument. The scriptural argument comes in two parts. First, James cites the *royal law*. The reference is to Lv. 19:18, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. But why is this the royal law? While some believe that it is because this law is the principle to sum up all duties to neighbours (Mk. 12:31), it is more likely that the title refers to its being Jesus' summary of duties and therefore the law of the King. After all, the term 'law', not 'commandment' (which would fit better if a single summary commandment were the issue) is used, and the kingdom is mentioned in 2:6. It is, then, the King's law (the OT as reinterpreted by Jesus) that is being kept or broken. One is indeed *doing right* not to break it.

Favouritism, however, is certainly not loving one's neighbour as oneself. In fact, it is not loving one's neighbour at all. Therefore to show favouritism or partiality is to break the law of the kingdom and to stand before Christ the King as a lawbreaker. This is a serious situation indeed.

'But,' the reader may respond, 'partiality should hardly be seen as so serious a sin. Have I not kept so many other of Jesus' commandments?' James notes that it only takes the breaking of one law to constitute the person a criminal. As an example he takes a second scriptural passage, Ex. 20:13–14 (or Dt. 5:17–18), deliberately citing adultery first and murder second. Take a person who is perfectly faithful to his wife, but who murders. That man is a criminal, even though he only broke one commandment. The same God gave both commands. The choice of commandments is deliberate. By showing favouritism to the wealthy and denying justice to the poor the church may deprive the poor man of his living, thus in effect killing him. That may also be the way the rich kill the righteous poor in 5:4–6. The OT penalty for either murder or adultery was death. Execution is just as severe whether one is put to death for one crime or for many.

2:12–13 Concluding appeal. One should, then, speak and act as a person going to be judged according to the *law that gives freedom*. Speaking and acting cover all of a person's behaviour. No aspect of life will be exempt from judgment. The standard will be the law of the kingdom, which is the OT as interpreted by Jesus, and Jesus' own teaching. (In James's day the NT had not yet been written.) This is not a burdensome standard, but a law that sets us free to serve God. Yet in his teaching Jesus makes it clear that freedom is not licence to do anything we wish. All will stand before him and answer for their obedience or lack of it (Mt. 7:15–23; Lk. 6:43–45).

Two proverbs, *Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful* and *Mercy triumphs over judgment*, perhaps coming from Jesus himself, close the section and make a bridge to the next. The OT clearly teaches that God is a God of mercy (Dt. 4:31) and that he commands his people to act in the same way (Mi. 6:8; Zc. 7:9). Jesus said, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy' (Mt. 5:7). He also said, 'In the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you' (Mt. 7:2). Therefore in not being merciful to the poor they are heaping up strict judgment for themselves. They are not showing mercy in the worldly sphere; they will not receive mercy in the eternal sphere. That mercy triumphs over judgment is also the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 6:14–15; 18:21–35). By showing mercy to others now (which means exhibiting the character of God) they will discover that their own judgment has been reduced. Their cause is not hopeless nor is there any need for them to pile up their own judgment.

2:14–26 Generosity and faith

The previous verse has bridged into this discussion, for the term for 'mercy' is related to that for giving to the needy. One form of mercy is charitable giving. Therefore, if one is not supposed to discriminate against the poor, the question arises as to how one should treat them? The answer is, with mercy, that is, with charitable giving. This idea introduces another sermon, a sermon on the relationship of works, mainly charitable deeds or generosity, to faith.

2:14 Principle. James states the principle very simply: *What good is it . . . if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?* In other words, if a person states that he or she believes all of the right doctrines, but their life does not show

obedience to Christ, what good is this type of faith? The answer, which is implied in the question, is, 'No good at all'.

In case we have missed the point, James adds, *Can such faith save him?* In Greek the way you state a question implies the expected answer. In this case the answer James expects is clearly, 'No, it cannot save him'.

2:15–17 An example. James adds an example to make it very clear what he is talking about. He paints a picture of a Christian brother or sister in real need. It is not that they do not have nice clothes, but that they do not have enough clothing to keep warm and decent. It is not that they do not have any food for the rest of the week, but that they do not have anything to eat today.What does their fellow-Christian do? He or she says a prayer. The *Go, I wish you well*, is a blessing, 'Go in peace'. The *keep warm and well fed* makes this blessing specific. It is pious. It is full of faith – God will provide. It is very religious. It is theologically correct. What it lacks is the going to their own wardrobe and pantry and getting out their own clothing and food and sharing it with their unfortuante brother or sister. Because of this James says that such a prayer is totally useless. And, he concludes, so are all forms of faith which are not accompanied by action. We may believe that Jesus is Lord, but if we do not obey him that belief is just empty words. We may believe that God loves the poor, but if we do not care for them our faith is dead.

2:18–19 Theological argument. Such a strong example as he has given calls for a defence. James now gives it. He brings in an imaginary person to argue with him. This opponent treats faith and deeds as if they were separate gifts of God. *You have* [the gift of] *faith; I have* [the gift of] *deeds.* James replies that faith which is not seen outwardly through a person's deeds is no different from no faith. It cannot be seen or experienced. It is purely imaginary. Instead, says James, he will demonstrate his commitment to Christ, that is his faith, through his deeds.

The opponent is then imagined to protest, 'I believe that God is one'. This is the basic creed of Judaism from Dt. 6:4–5, recited twice daily by every pious Jew. It is the faith that Abraham is said to have discovered. And it is the basis of Christianity as well (Mk. 12:28–34; Rom. 3:30; also implied in Paul's speech in Acts 17:22–31). Surely such orthodox belief is enough. No it is not, replies James, for the demons themselves believe as much. Satan's own troops are fully orthodox, fully believing the truth; in fact, in the gospels they give a far fuller confession of Christ than the apostles (*e.g.* Mk. 1:24; 5:7). And unlike the person who claims to believe without showing any outward deeds, they act consistently with their belief – they shudder. They shudder because they are in rebellion against God and know that they are going to hell. Perhaps, James implies, those who claim to have faith without deeds should be shuddering as well.

2:20–25 Scriptural argument. James now offers to give scriptural proof of what he has been arguing. He uses strong language like that of Jesus (Mt. 23:17) or Paul (Gal. 3:1), which was typical of the debates of his day. The evidence that he brings forward is that of Abraham and the story in Gn. 22:1–19. Abraham was *considered righteous* or 'declared to be righteous' in Gn. 22:12, when God says, 'Now I know that you fear God'. This was on account of his deed in preparing to offer Isaac. In other words, Abraham's decision to follow God and put his trust in him was so firm that when faced with the greatest of tests he followed through and resolutely obeyed, whatever the cost.

There is, however, more than this in the text. The phrase *what he did* in the NIV should be 'from his works [or deeds]'. Notice that it is 'works' (plural) and not 'work'. James is not thinking of the one deed of Abraham. In Jewish eyes the offering of Isaac was the end of a long string of obedience beginning in Gn. 12:1. Their question was, Why did God command the offering of Isaac and then not make Abraham actually do it? Their answer was that since Abraham had been obedient so many times before, including, according to their stories, being great in his care for the poor, God righteously rewarded his works in Gn. 22 by sparing Isaac. The release of Isaac comes, not after a single deed, but after a lifetime of obedience.

James now observes that faith and actions (or deeds or works) cannot be separated. Faith which is only in the mind is not yet complete. It becomes complete when it results in a decision of the will and is carried out in action. In this Paul and James agree. Paul is against 'works' in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3 – 4 but the works he is against are 'works of the law', which are those ritual actions such as circumcision, dietary rules and sabbath-keeping which marked out a Jew from a non-Jew. People did not have to become Jews to be counted right with God. Yet when it comes to righteous deeds, Paul does not believe that one will go to heaven without them, as he points out in 1 Cor. 6:9–10 and Gal. 5:19–21. That is because for Paul faith is not mere belief in orthodox doctrines, as it was for James's imaginary opponent, but commitment to Christ. And commitment always does something – it obeys. And that is just what James is saying here, faith becomes true faith or complete when

it is joined to obedience to Christ.

Now James quotes Gn. 15:6 and sees it fulfilled in Gn. 22. Paul, in Rom. 4:3 and Gal. 3:6, also quotes Gn. 15:6, but Paul is interested in pointing out that God made this statement *before* Abraham was circumcised. James wants us to know that Abraham's *later* actions showed that God's declaration that he was righteous was accurate. Abraham did indeed live his faith and was in fact righteous. To this James adds a paraphrase of either 2 Ch. 20:7 or Is. 41:8, Abraham was *God's friend.* Friends must agree together, and by obeying God all his life, Abraham showed himself a true friend, one who lived in harmony with God.

A person, then, *is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.* Paul uses the term 'justified' to mean God's declaration that a sinner has been acquitted. This was a new meaning for the term. James uses the word in its original sense (the one found in the Greek OT), that a person is declared to be just or righteous. This declaration, he argues, does not come about because of what is unseen in a person's heart, but because of what is seen in a person's deeds.

James now turns to a second scriptural passage, the story of Rahab in Jos. 2. This prostitute had heard about God's deeds and believed in them in her heart. But that was not enough to save her. It may well be that many other people in Jericho believed the same things. Rahab, however, *acted* on what she believed by protecting the Hebrew spies. Because her faith translated into action, she was delivered. In Jewish eyes she was considered the mother of all who turned to Judaism from paganism, the first example of a convert.

2:26 Concluding appeal. James's summary is short and clear. Faith without deeds (or works) is like a corpse, a body without the spirit or breath. Such a thing is dead, useless, fit only to be buried. Such a faith will not save a person. True saving faith is that which results in works or deeds of obedience to God.

3:1 – 4:12 Testing through the tongue

One of the ways by which a person's commitment to Christ is tested is in their use of their tongue. And one of the first problems that may happen in a church which is being persecuted is that the believers may begin to argue with each other.

3:1–12 The evil in the tongue

The first point that James needs to make is that the tongue is a powerful tool for evil. He does this through a long, careful argument.

The tongue is the chief tool of the teacher, so that is where James begins. *Not many of you should presume to be teachers* means more accurately 'not many should become teachers'. Many want to be teachers and leaders of the Christian community. That, James argues, is a dangerous impulse which can lead to conflict within the church. One reason is that even if the desire to become a teacher is motivated by the best of reasons, the teacher *will be judged more strictly.* James includes himself among the teachers here, and he reminds us of Jesus, who condemned Jewish teachers (Mt. 23:1–33; Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47) and said that even our casual words would be judged (Mt. 12:36). Furthermore, Jesus taught that people are responsible for what they know (Lk. 12:47–48). The teacher claims to know and set himself or herself up as an example for the church, since in NT times the teacher taught by life and example more than by word. How responsible must such people be on the day of judgment!

Everyone sins or *stumbles*, and the easiest place to stumble is in the use of the tongue. How easy it is to let a critical word slip out! If a person really has their tongue totally controlled so that they do not sin in that area, they are in fact so self-controlled as to be perfect, since the tongue is the last part of the body to get under control.

James gives a series of examples that illustrate this fact. A horse (one of the most powerful 'machines' of James's day) is controlled by a bit in its mouth. A ship, the largest moving vehicle of his day, is controlled by a rudder, which in those times was shaped like a tongue. The tongue is also powerful, as its boasting illustrates.

James shifts his direction of argument at this point and compares the tongue to a spark which can set a forest on fire. The source of such a spark is hell itself. James is not speaking of the tongue as the God-given source of language. He is thinking, rather, of the tongue as something corrupted by the fall. Many, if not all, sins begin with a word. It may be spoken outwardly or silently 'spoken' inwardly.

Unfortunately, powerful as it is, the tongue is hard to tame. James states the general truth about the ability of people to tame animals and compares it to their inability to tame the tongue. (He is not implying a scientific observation that all species of animals have been tamed.) Yet with all of this skill there is no human being who can control his or her own tongue. Even the most perfect saint experiences times when he or she wishes they could take back into their mouths words they have just spoken.

The tongue, then, is restless. Restlessness is a characteristic of the demonic world and evil, while peace is a characteristic of God and his good kingdom. The tongue is always wanting to say something; often poison that produces

death. The murders committed on behalf of a tyrant come about when he issues orders. We experience something similar on the personal level when we speak evil and realize that it has brought death to us rather than life.

James adds some more examples. In church (and he is writing to believers) we use our tongues to praise God. But then we speak evil of ('curse' in his words – any speaking against a person can be in effect a curse) other people, and they are made in God's image (Gn. 1:26–27; 9:6). In James's day the king or emperor would set up his statue in the cities of his realm. If anyone insulted or cursed the statue, they were treated as if they had cursed the emperor to his face, for the statue was the image of the emperor. Therefore the insulting of a person, made in God's image, is like insulting God himself. This duality, two different and contradictory words coming out of the same mouth, is a type of hypocrisy.

James gives two examples to drive his point home. The first is drawn from the land of Israel where in the dry Jordan Valley one might see, in the distance, a stream flowing down the valley wall on the east side. One journeys to it hoping for water. Sometimes the water is fresh and good. Sometimes it is full of minerals (salt) and is undrinkable. But one thing is sure, the two types of water will not flow out of the same spring. Likewise one does not get a different type of fruit from a tree or vine than that which grows according to its nature. The implication of this argument is that if we are speaking insults or curses, that is our nature. Our praises of God are a cover-up, a type of hypocrisy.

3:13–18 The antidote for the tongue

James has left us in a desperate place. Who can control his or her tongue? How will we get free from this terrible power and come to perfection? That is the same cry that we may have felt at the end of 1:4. James's answer is the same as it was there: we need not our own power, but God's divine wisdom.

James begins his discussion by showing the difference between a person who has divine wisdom and one who does not. The truly wise person is characterized by a *good life*, meaning a way of life that is good according to the teaching of Jesus. That person will also show the *humility that comes from wisdom*. A better translation here would be 'meekness'. One of the problems in the churches which James knew was that teachers were attacking one another and being aggressively defensive. Meekness is the opposite of this aggression. Moses is the chief example of a meek person (Nu. 12:3). In the story in which he is called 'meek' (or 'humble') he was being wrongly attacked by two other leaders. Instead of retaliating (after all, he had had visions and revelations from God beyond anything they had had), he humbly said nothing, not even defending himself. In the end God stepped in and defended him. That lack of a need for self-defence is James's example of a person full of wisdom.

Some of the teachers (and others) who were having arguments in the churches James knew, however, were quite different from this. They were characterized by *bitter envy* and *selfish ambition*. They probably called their envy 'zeal', as Phinehas was zealous (Nu. 25:10), but while zeal is good, this zeal was not really from God's spirit, for it was not characterized by meekness. This was disguised envy. What James describes as *selfish ambition* they may have called 'standing for the truth' or 'keeping our group pure'. The term James uses for it could also be translated 'party spirit', for they were forming groups or parties rather than standing for the unity of the whole church. To call these attitudes 'God's wisdom' and thus to boast about them is to deny reality, the truth of God. This was not how Jesus acted. This, states James, is certainly not God's good gift of wisdom. The spirit which inspires such behaviour is not from heaven, but *earthly*. It belongs to the world and this age. It is also *unspiritual*, a term which Jude uses about those who 'do not have the Spirit' (Jude 19). Nor is such a spirit of false wisdom simply of this world, but it is in fact *of the devil* or 'demonic'. Claiming to be inspired by God these people in their envy and ambition are really inspired by the devil. James summarizes by pointing out that envy and ambition do not come alone, but they lead to *disorder* (a characteristic of demons we first saw in 3:8) and *every evil practice*, which a study of church history would demonstrate.

The only true protection against this false wisdom and the evil in the tongue is God's wisdom. James gives a list of the characteristics of this true wisdom which is very similar to the one that Paul gives for the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). It is *pure*, which means that the person is sincere in obeying God, not having any twisted motives in their desire for holiness. It is *peace-loving* (Pr. 3:17; Heb. 12:11), meaning that it produces peace in the church. It is *considerate* or 'gentle' (Phil. 4:5; 1 Tim. 3:3), which means that it is non-combative. It is *submissive*, which speaks of a person who is willing to learn, be corrected, or will otherwise gladly respond to godly leadership. It is *full of mercy and good fruit*, which refers to the charitable giving that is so important to James. God, of course, is always merciful and giving, so those filled with his wisdom will be that way as well. Finally, it is *impartial and sincere*, which means that the person

has a heart which is set solely on following God, unlike the 'double-minded' person of 1:8. The term *sincere* means that there is no falseness or play-acting in the person's actions. As the person is to one's face, so they are when one's back is turned.

James sums up this whole paragraph with a saying which sounds like a proverb. Some scholars believe he may have got this saying from Jesus. *Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.* This is the solution to the problem noted in 1:20; human anger does not produce God's righteousness, but peacemaking does. This is what Jesus said as well, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God' (Mt. 5:9). They are God's sons because they are acting like their true Father, producing the type of righteousness of which God is proud. This is very different from the anger and struggle of merely human ways of producing what human beings call 'right'. God's way of doing things requires his wisdom, his Spirit.

4:1–10 The source of evil and its cure

The purpose of James's discussion of the tongue and wisdom appears in this next section. There were struggles in the Christian community James was writing to. Each person wanted their own way and their own advantage. James makes it very clear that these struggles are not from God and calls on those involved to repent and be forgiven.

James paints a picture of the church as he saw it: *fights and quarrels, battle, kill and covet.* The 'kill' probably refers to killing with words rather than literal murder, but the whole picture is familiar to anyone who knows the modern church. All of these fights and battles were certainly justified by those involved, perhaps as 'striving for the truth'. But James writes of them just as they are in God's eyes. He traces the origin of these conflicts, not to his readers' love of God, but to *your desires*, the evil impulse that we have already learned about in 1:14–15.

All of their arguing is fruitless: they do not get what they want, *because you do not ask God.* 'But we *do* pray!' might be their response. 'You pray, but it is not effective, for your motives are wrong.' They are not seeking God's will or God's wisdom, but their will: 'God bless my plans.' Their motive is their desires or *pleasures.* God's goal is not to give human beings what their own impulses demand; his goal is that human beings will learn to love what he loves. It is not that God does not want people to have pleasure, but that he wants to train them to take pleasure in what he knows is truly good. As with Christ, crucifixion comes before resurrection for God's people (Gal. 5:24).

In claiming to trust in God and yet living according to their own desires these people are *adulterous.* The term is literally 'adulteresses', not that they were all women, but that the church is the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19, 21) as Israel was God's bride (Is. 1:21; Je. 3; Ho. 1 – 3). To go after another lover is to be unfaithful to God, so *friendship with the world is hatred towards God* (*cf.* Mt. 6:24; 1 Jn. 3:15). It is not that it is hard or painful to serve both God and 'desire' or 'the world'; it is impossible. The person who tries to become *a friend of the world* is actually God's *enemy.* They may be an orthodox-believing and church-going enemy, but they are nonetheless an enemy.

At this point James cites Scripture, but there is no known occurrence of this saying. He must either be citing the general sense of Scripture, or else a book he knows about but which is now lost. The NIV says, *the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely* which seems to refer to the human spirit and its tendency to envy. While this is true enough, it does not seem to fit the context. Better is the translation, 'God jealously longs for the spirit he made to live in us'. That means that God gave to each person their spirit. He jealously longs for pure love in return (*cf.* Ex. 20:5–6). Scripture does not speak emptily about this jealousy of God, as Israel found out from painful experience when she tried to serve both God and Baal.

James's argument might drive people to despair because of their sin. James claims, however, that God offers *more grace* rather than condemnation, to the believer who repents. To back this up James quotes Pr. 3:34, also quoted in 1 Pet. 5:5: God does give grace to the humble (*i.e.* the repentant).

James next shows us what such humility looks like. *Submit yourselves, then, to God.* The main part of repentance is to stop doing what one was doing and start obeying God. *Resist the devil.* The devil is the ultimate source of testing or temptation (Mt. 4:1–11; Mk. 8:28–34; Lk. 22:31; Jn. 13:2, 27), and to refuse the call of desire is to resist him. When resisted he flees; he may threaten disaster, but it is all a lie. It only has power if believed. *Come near to God* says James. This sound like Mal. 3:7 and Zc. 1:3. The picture is that of a person coming to offer sacrifice in the temple and coming near to God in the ceremony. *Wash your hands.* This is another OT picture (Ex. 30:19–21), illustrating the removal of sinful practices. *Purify your hearts.* Purification is mentioned in the OT (Ex. 19:10), but this is the making of the heart pure. The *double-minded* is the person who tries to serve both God and the world (see 1:8). To purify the heart is to be devoted to God alone. These actions should be accompanied by a

mourning for one's sinful state. Repentance consists of sorrow for sin plus a turning from sin and, where possible, making restitution for the damage caused by one's sin. Finally, James include promises within his call to repentance. God *will come near to you. He will lift you up.* God will not leave a humble heart mourning. He will accept the repentance and respond with his love, raising the person up from their mourning into the warmth of his love.

4:11–12 Concluding appeal

Having called for repentance, James concludes his section on the tongue and community harmony with another appeal. Christians are not to *slander one another.* A better translation might be 'speak evil about' or 'say bad things against' because 'slander' often implies in English that the things said are untrue and the Greek word does not imply this. As far as James is concerned, whether the things said are true or not, critical words divide the community and are not in order. Paul would agree (2 Cor. 12:20) as would Peter (1 Pet. 2:12; 3:16).

James says such criticism is judging the law. How can this be? Lv. 19:18, cited by Jesus in Mk. 12:31 and expanded in Mt. 7:12, states that one is to love one's neighbour as oneself. It is hardly loving to criticize another. Even more important for James, however, is the fact that in criticizing another the person is setting himself or herself up as a judge. The judge sits over the law, not under it. Furthermore, only God has the right to judge (Ps. 75:6–7; Jn. 5:22–23, 30), so the person who criticizes his or her fellow-Christian is in fact pushing God aside and taking the role of judge to which only God has the right. How can such a person not expect to receive God's judgment in return?

4:13 – 5:6 Testing through wealth

Having finished the topic of the tongue, James shifts to his final issue: the testing which comes through wealth. Those who have wealth have a responsibility. They may believe that they are only making business decisions, but in fact they are being tested by God. Those who fail the test will receive the consequences. James presents this theme in two sections, each introduced by 'Now listen'. The first deals with Christians, members of the church, who are failing the test. The second deals with the non-Christian wealthy people, whose failure is both more extreme and more serious.

4:13–17 The test of the wealthy

The first group addressed consists of wealthier Christians. As usual, James carefully avoids calling them rich, but it is obvious that they have some possessions, for they can engage in foreign trade. Their plans are normal plans: travel to a certain city, sell the goods they brought with them and perhaps purchase others, and make money. Is this not the way business is done?

James's criticism is that they are in fact carrying on business just the way every other merchant does. As Christians they should be well aware of not only the uncertainties of the future, but also who controls it. While the picture of the brevity of life is drawn from the OT (*e.g.* Jb. 7:7, 9; Ps. 39:5–6), the idea of the foolishness of planning without taking God's values into account is Jesus' teaching in Lk. 12:16–21. James's point is not simply that they ought to preface all of their plans with, *If it is the Lord's will.* That would be a lip-service to God. Instead, he wants them to seek God's plan and follow God's will in their use of money. This appears in his comment that they *boast and brag*, or, better translated, 'boast in their pride'. What type of pride is this? 1 Jn. 2:16 uses the same term for 'the boasting of [or pride in] what [a person] has and does'. They are laying plans that God did not make, claiming an ability to control life which they do not have, and boasting about the good deals they will make. This is no more and no less than love of the world.

A one-line proverb drives the point home. These people are in the church and certainly each one *knows the good he ought to do.* Why not consult God and ask him what ought to be done with the money? Perhaps they do not do this out of fear that God would ask them to share it with others. They do not do that good, so they are sinning. There is no theft or immorality or other crime staining their hands. They are just honest businessmen, but they sin just as much in failing to do the good they could as if they actually committed evil acts. In either case God's teaching is being ignored.

5:1–6 Testing by the wealthy

James now turns to the wealthy outside the church. These people are not only failing the test of having wealth, but they are also the source of some of the pressure on the church as they take advantage of poor Christians, either because they are poor or because they are Christians, or both. For them James does not have an appeal; he has condemnation. Like the OT prophets he announces their doom.

If the Christian should live in anticipated joy, rejoicing despite testing because of the reward that is coming (1:2), the rich should live in anticipated wailing, for their judgment is just as sure as the reward is for the Christians. James looks at their wealth from the perspective of the future and sees their great stores of possessions *rotted* or *corroded.* If he were writing today, he might have added something about inflation.

He is simply applying Jesus' words of Mt. 6:19: worldly wealth is at best temporary.

But is is not just that they will not have their wealth in eternity. The 'corrosion' of their wealth is evidence that they did not need it. It will *eat your flesh like fire* in that, like the rich man in Jesus' parable in Lk. 16:19–31, they will be cast into the fire of hell because of their failure to obey God and share. They have stored up wealth for 'a rainy day', but these are *the last days.* The end of the age came in Jesus. Now the final judgment has been announced. It is time to put treasure in heaven, not store it on earth.

Far from giving, these people have done even worse in that they have *failed to pay the workmen* who harvested their fields. It may be that they wanted to wait until grain prices rose or that they did not feel the workmen had done a good enough job. The OT says that workmen are to be paid each evening (Lv. 19:13; Dt. 24:14–15), but even in the OT employers found ways to avoid this rule (Je. 22:13; Mal. 3:5). This was certainly being done according to the law of the land, so no human judge would hear the complaints of the workers. The workers, however, appealed to heaven, and the heavenly judge heard their cry. The term *Lord Almighty* reminds the readers of Is 5:9 and the action that God took against the wealthy there. God does not hear and then do nothing; he hears and acts with awesome power.

Returning to the theme of Lk. 16:19–31, James comments on the luxury of the wealthy. For them, each day was like a *day of slaughter* (or feasting), for in places without refrigeration one eats one's fill of fresh meat whenever an animal is slaughtered, since the rest will have to be dried or salted to be preserved. Underneath the picture is James's dark implication that 'the day of slaughter' is *their* day of slaughter, God's day of slaughtering his enemies (Is. 30:33; 34:5–8).

Again James make a final comment. These rich have *condemned and murdered innocent men* (or the righteous). He is not speaking of literal murder, for the Greek term translated 'condemned' indicates that the courts are involved. Nor does he mean that the righteous were executed. He is probably thinking of lawsuits in which the rich took away the wages or land of the poor. Left without adequate resources, the poor Christians starved or, weakened by poor food, died of diseases. James point out that the poor *were not opposing* the rich. There was no cause for this action by the rich. Another, and probably better, interpretation is 'and do they not oppose you?' These victims of the rich oppressors may be dead, but like the souls of the martyrs in Rev. 6:10, they are now in the very presence of God calling out for justice. That justice will not be long-delayed.

5:7–20 Conclusion

The body of the letter is now finished and James is ready to conclude. A Greek letter normally had several different parts in its conclusion. First, there would be a summary. Then came an oath, a health wish, and a statement about why the letter had been written. All of these appear in this conclusion, although in a Christianized form.

5:7–11 Summary on patient endurance

The Christians are being oppressed by the rich. What are they to do? They could act on God's behalf and bring his justice by force of arms if necessary but James has already said that human anger does not produce God's righteousness (1:20). The Christians are instead to *be patient* or 'endure patiently' until Christ returns. This is the same virtue which is called 'perseverance' in 1:2–3. Let that virtue mature in you, is what James is saying. Farmers, of course, have to have this virtue. In Israel they waited for the autumn rains before planting and then had to wait and hope that the spring rains would come and bring the grain to maturity before harvest.

Christian waiting is not waiting for something, but for someone. Twice James mentions *the Lord's coming* and once says *the Judge is standing at the door.* The NT frequently refers to Christ's return as 'near' (Rom. 13:12; Heb. 10:25; 1 Pet. 4:7). While most of the writers probably expected this to happen within their lifetime, it is a tension that is always 'in the air', for no-one knows when it will be, next second or next century (Mk. 13:32).

The theme of the tongue is picked up again and summarized. The real issue is that they are not to *grumble against each other.* If they do, ignoring the instructions in 4:11–12, they will receive what they give (2:13). Referring to Christ as *the Judge* is an ominous warning, especially if he *is standing at the door.*

The prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord, namely the OT prophets, also suffered at the hands of the wealthy and powerful. Yet now kings such as Ahab and Manasseh are forgotten or reviled, while prophets such as Elijah and Isaiah are honoured on earth (and even more so in heaven; *cf.* Mt. 5:11–12). There was in the case of the prophets something worth enduring for. The example of Job, not a prophet, but a righteous man, is tacked on to this. In the OT story Job is not very patient, for he complains a lot, but in the Jewish stories that were circulating in James's day, Job is represented as a perfect example of patient endurance. In fact, one of these stories *The Testament of Job*, uses perseverance as the theme for the whole book.

James's readers would have recognized the story.

The point is that God has not forgotten the Christians James is writing to. He cites Pss. 103:8 or 111:4, noting God's compassion and mercy. God is not trying to make life hard for his believers, but is instead showing his mercy in assisting them to develop character and put their investments in heaven, where they will last forever.

5:12 Oaths

The summary is finished. In a Greek letter one would now expect an oath certifying that what had been said in the letter was true. Instead James quotes Jesus (Mt. 5:33–37) and argues that Christians ought not to take oaths. It is not that the oath is in itself wrong, but that it divides speech into two levels. Some statements are sworn to and thus must be true, while others are just normal speech and may not be. Jesus said that people would be judged for *every* word (Mt. 12:36). All words are to be true. Everything is to be open and honest. Since God hears all words, it should be for the Christian as if all statements were an oath sworn before God.

5:13–18 Prayer for health

The next topic in the conclusion of a Greek letter was normally to wish, by the gods, that the recipients would be in good health. James does something better. He reminds the Christians of the provision God has made for their healing. This is not new teaching to his readers, but a reminder of standard Christian practice.

Like all Christian teachers, James divides the evil a person may experience into two categories. The first includes the term 'suffer' and means those unpleasant experiences that come from outside, either the hardships experienced in spreading the gospel or persecution by evil people. These are what James has been discussing under the heading of 'tests' or 'trials' and has concluded in 5:7–11. Those suffering in this way should pray, not necessarily for deliverance, but for the ability to endure patiently. Those who are having a good life should also pray, but their prayer should be *songs of praise.* This leaves the second group of people experiencing evil, the sick.

The sick are to *call the elders of the church.* When a person is so ill that he or she cannot go to church, they want the people with the most faith in the church to come and pray. Normally, when the illness is not major, the rule is 'pray for each other'. The elders will act just like the disciples in Mk. 6:13 who must have learned it from Jesus, and anoint the sick person with oil as they pray, so their prayer is not only heard, but physically felt. The important fact is that the prayer is to the Lord and the anointing is done *in the name of the Lord.* It is the Lord, not the power of the prayer or the oil, who will *raise him up.* And that is just how James promises that the Lord will respond to *the prayer offered in faith.* This is not a 'hope so' or 'maybe' prayer, but a prayer which shows secure confidence that God will heal because the elders have first listened to God and have received this confidence in their hearts. It is close to Paul's gift of faith in 1 Cor. 12:9. Such prayers take time; they are not a quick ritual or routine.

James discusses the connection that sometimes exists between sickness and sin. All sickness does not have to do with sin (Jn. 9:3), but sin can cause sickness (1 Cor. 11:30). If sin *is* involved, then this root needs to be dealt with before moving on to the fruit of the root, the sickness itself. James assures his readers that such sins will be forgiven. God will not withhold forgiveness to prolong the sickness. In fact, James argues that it would be better to take care of sin before it causes severe illness. *Confess your sins to each other.* No elder is needed for this as each believer is a priest. There is value in confessing sin out loud and receiving from another believer the assurance that it is forgiven.

It may be that a reader of the letter will say, 'That is fine for elders, but I am just an ordinary Christian. How can I pray for anyone's healing? How can I hear their confessions?' Yet as believers we are *righteous*, so our prayers are *powerful and effective.* Elijah, James notes, was also an ordinary man but, like the believers here, he had an extraordinary God who heard and answered prayer. Elijah was an important figure, not only in the OT, but also in Jewish legends. In those legends he is often associated with prayer. That is why even though prayer for rain is not mentioned explicitly in 1 Ki. 17:1 or 18:16–46, James, along with the Jews of his day, assumes that it was involved.

5:19–20 Purpose statement

James closes by stating exactly why he has written this letter. The principle he states is the one he is following. Some of his readers had indeed wandered *from the truth*, as we have seen from the problems in the church. This phrase is used for serious departures from the faith (*cf.* Is. 9:16), not an occasional slip into sin. If it happens to a believer, *someone should bring them back*, as the 'spiritual' are supposed to do in Gal. 6:1. Rather than condemnation, restoration is the goal. And that is what James hopes will happen.

Such restoration has a wonderful result. It is not just that *a sinner* is turned *from the error of his way* and so there is less sin in the world, but that the person is also saved from death, meaning

eternal death (1 Jn. 5:16–17; Jude 22–23), although physical death could, of course, also result (Acts 5:1–11). *A multitude of sins* are covered over. Pr. 10:12, quoted in 1 Pet. 4:8, says that 'love covers over all wrongs' or 'love covers a multitude of sins'. By 'cover' these authors presumably mean 'atone for', since a frequent OT image is that of the blood of an offering 'covering' sin. The opposite of love is hatred which spreads rumours and stirs up strife. For James love acts through bringing the person as gently as possible back to repentance. That repentance will be accepted by God, who will forgive the sins. Then the forgiven person can continue on the right way, rejoicing in their tests, for they know that their reward is coming.

Peter H. Davids

1 PETER

Introduction

Who wrote 1 Peter?

The writer says he is 'Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ' (1:1), and was a 'witness of Christ's suffering' (5:1). He is writing with the help of Silas (Silvanus) from a place he calls 'Babylon', where his 'son' Mark is with him (5:12–13). As well as this direct evidence that Peter the apostle was the author, the letter frequently alludes to the life and teaching of Jesus (see below). The verdict of F. H. Chase is that 'No Epistle has caught so much of the spirit of Jesus' (*Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings, vol. III, p. 780).

Many early authors referred to the letter and quoted from it, but in recent years five main reasons have been put forward for suggesting that the apostle Peter was not in fact the author.

First, Peter is described in Acts 4:13 as 'unschooled', and the style of Greek in which the letter is written is said to be too good for a Galilean fisherman to have used. Also, quotations are taken from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek rather than the Hebrew version of the OT.

The style is, however, not so 'educated' as some would like to make out and in places it is much more the language of ordinary people. There is evidence that in Peter's time Greek, as well as Aramaic, was spoken in Galilee, and as a fisherman living in Capernaum on one of the great trade routes he would have had to speak Greek regularly. The fact that his own brother's name, Andrew, is a Greek one suggests that from boyhood Peter would have grown up with this language. Some thirty years' work of evangelism and teaching in a church which contained an increasing proportion of Gentiles would have made him more fluent in Greek and prepared to quote the LXX as his 'Authorized Version'. It is not certain, but Silvanus (5:12 may have acted as Peter's amanuensis (*i.e.* composing the letter from thoughts Peter shared with him). If he did, then his background as a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37) of some breeding could well have affected the style and language.

Secondly, from the language of 4:14–16 some have built a case to suggest that the letter was written at a time when the very fact of being a Christian was a crime, and this is known not to have been the case until long after Peter's death.

Peter's argument in chs. 2 – 4 is, however, that Christians must take care to live an innocent life, so that, if they are falsely accused, such slanders will be without foundation. The book of Acts (*e.g.* 13:50; 14:5, 19; 16:19–24; 17:5, 13; 18:12–13; 19:23–29) shows that from the earliest days misunderstanding, personal prejudices and rejection of the gospel could lead to persecution 'because of the name of Christ'. 4:14–16 need have no further legal implications than similar phrases in Mt. 10:22 and Acts 5:41. In fact, what Peter says about the role of the state in 2:13–14 suggests that he did not expect persecution from that quarter. The relationship between the church and the authorities indicated in the letter is basically the same as in Acts.

Thirdly, some object because the letter contains ideas found in Paul's writings especially in his letter to the Ephesians.

This argument is only valid if the theory is accepted that the two apostles disagreed and were never finally reconciled. The basic teaching in the early church was fairly standard, and it would have been strange had there been no similarities. If we accept that Peter and Paul may have been together in Rome (see below on where the letter was written) just before the letter was written they would doubtless have talked over many of the issues considered in it (see also Gal. 1:18).

Fourthly, according to Gal. 2:9 Peter and Paul agreed to work in different spheres, and yet the destination of 1 Peter is thought to be an area evangelized by Paul.

The arrangement referred to in Galatians was made at least ten years before the letter was written and in the interval the distinction between Jewish and Gentile churches would have become less clear. 1:12 suggests that Peter had not brought the gospel to his readers, but Acts 16:6–7 suggests that Paul had not visited all of them either.

Finally, some say that this letter does not contain the sort of personal references to Jesus one would expect from a writer who knew him as well as Peter did.

See, however, *e.g.* 1:8, 13; 2:21–25; 3:14; 4:14; 5:1–2 and other references in the commentary below. Let the readers make up their own minds as they read the letter for themselves.

Taken all in all, none of these objections is conclusive. The majority of the evidence, both external and internal, would appear to support the traditional view that Peter the apostle wrote this letter.

Where and when was the letter written?

In 5:13 the writer sends greetings from 'she who is in Babylon, chosen together with you'. This seems like a reference to the local church in Babylon, but it is unlikely that Peter would have gone to the former capital of Nebuchadnezzar's empire. By Peter's time it was a sparsely inhabited ruin (fulfilling Is. 14:23). In Rev. 16:19 and 17:5 'Babylon' is used as a cryptic name for Rome, and Col. 4:10 and Phm. 24 (most likely written in Rome) show that Mark was there with Paul.

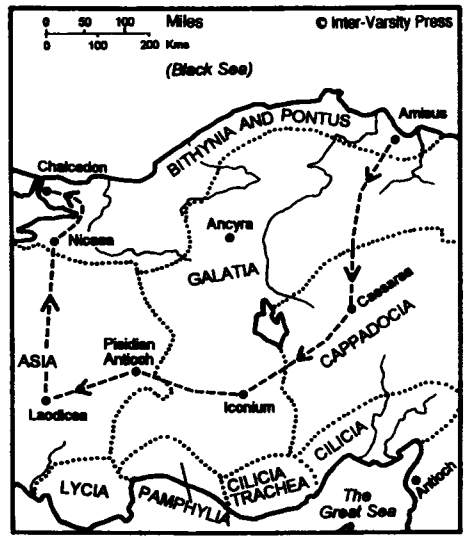
In 2 Tim. 4:11 Mark is in Asia Minor, and Paul sends for him to come, most probably to Rome. The fact that neither Peter nor Paul mentions the other in the list of those sending greetings from Rome merely suggests that they were not together at the time of writing their letters. All this points to the theory that Peter was writing from Rome, which is supported by the evidence of Tertullian (*Against Heresies*, 36) and Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, 2.25.8; 2.15.2 and 3.1.2–3).

In view of what was said above about Christians being persecuted, a date in the reign of Nero (AD 54–68) would seem best. Since Peter makes no reference to Paul's martyrdom, which is thought to have taken place during the outburst of persecution in Rome in 64, the letter was probably written before then (see also 2:13). Links with other writings are thought to suggest a date after 60. So far as we can draw any conclusions from the evidence, the letter was probably written *c.* 63–64.

To whom was the letter written?

Peter answers the question in 1:1. The region described was in the Roman provinces in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) north of the Taurus mountains. It is difficult to be precise as the place-names can refer to both ancient kingdoms and contemporary Roman provinces, and the two did not always have the same boundaries. The map illustrates the theory of Colin Hemer (ExpT 89 [1978], pp. 239–243, *The Address of 1 Peter*) about the most likely route to have been followed by a messenger taking this letter to the main churches in these areas, where it would have been copied for distribution to the smaller centres of Christian witness (see Col. 4:16).

The social status of the recipients probably reflected that of most of the churches of the day, as a cross-section of the community. There



Suggested route taken by the bearer of Peter's first letter from Amisus to Chalcedon.

were husbands and wives (3:1,7), slaves (2:18 – but no reference to masters as in Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22 – 4:1), younger men (5:5) and an eldership giving pastoral care (5:1–4). Some of the women appear to have been able to afford a comfortable life-style (3:3). The description of the readers' pre-Christian manner of life (4:3–4) suggests that some of them might have been involved in the local pagan trade-guilds. Peter calls them 'strangers in the world' (1:1 *cf.* 1:17; 2:11) and this technical term has led John H. Elliott in *A Home for the Homeless* (SCM, 1982), to develop the theory that they were 'resident aliens'. But the case is far from proven and the wording could be being used figuratively to reflect the way in which their Christian life-style had distanced them from their pagan neighbours. It also picks up the OT language of David and Solomon as they saw their life on this earth in the light of eternity (see Ps. 39:12 and 1 Ch. 29:15).

The religious background of the original readers appears to have been both Jewish and Gentile. We know from Acts 2:9 that there were Jewish visitors from Asia Minor in Jerusalem for Pentecost, and those among them who were converted at that time would have taken the gospel message back with them. Converts at Pisidian Antioch and Iconium came from the synagogue (Acts 13:43; 14:1), and Luke specifically mentions in the latter case that the church was formed both of Jews and Gentiles. So Peter's writing reflects such a mixed gathering of believers. He uses the OT to prove his points (1:24–25; 2:6, 7–8, 22–24; 3:10–12;

4:18; 5:5) and makes other allusions that would be meaningful to Jewish readers (*e.g.* in 1:1 'scattered' [Gk. *diaspora*] is the technical term for the Jewish community outside Israel; see also 2:4–10 and 3:20). Other comments he makes would be more relevant to Gentile readers (*e.g.* 1:18, 'the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers'; 2:10, 'Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God'; 4:3, 'you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans[Gentiles] choose to do').

Whether his readers were Jewish or Gentile Christians, Peter is keen to encourage them to believe that they are the 'new Israel'. In the Christian church they inherit all that God promised his chosen people in the OT (see 1:1; 2:5,9–10).

Is the letter a unity?

Those who say the letter is not a unity follow three main lines of argument:

a Some say that 1:1 and 5:12–14 were added after the letter had been written. There is no MS evidence for this, and there is still the reference in 5:1.

b Others say the letter originally ended at 4:11 and that the remainder was added at a later date. They argue that the possibility of suffering is remote in 3:17 but already being experienced in 4:12. 1:6 points, however, to the same situation as 4:12. It seems more likely that Peter's mind was moving between the experience of the church as a corporate body and that of its individual members. It is unlikely that 3:17 would apply to each reader. All churches may well suffer persecution in the near future, so that all members will suffer with one another (1 Cor. 12:26), but few individuals are likely to be called on to suffer in each wave of persecution. The doxology of 4:11 is not necessarily a conclusion. Rom. 11:33–36; 15:33 and Eph. 3:20–21 are other examples where the writer was so thrilled by the truths he was expressing that he was carried away into an outpouring of praise.

c Others see the letter as a liturgy written for baptismal use, a collection of sermons, instructions for new converts or fragments of early hymns. Peter may well have quoted a variety of sources for his purpose (or they may have quoted him!), but there is no reason to dismiss his own statement in 5:12.

The letter reads as a unity written to encourage Christian people, especially those new to the faith, and to declare to them the truth and reality of the grace of God in which they can stand firm with every confidence.

Why was the letter written?

From what has been said in the last section it will be seen that theories abound concerning the purpose of the letter. Fuller details of these can be found in other commentaries on 1 Peter. For our purposes it is sufficient to take Peter's words in 5:12 at face value.

Peter sees Christians in danger of persecution (1:6) and not prepared for it (4:12). In the light of this he aimed to do two things: to encourage and to testify to the true grace of God (5:12) in which he urged his readers to stand. These two purposes are intertwined as Peter gives encouragement by declaring God's gracious acts in Christ, made known and mediated by his Spirit. We can list some of the encouragements as follows:

The scope and goal of God's purposes (1:3–9)
The excitement of the prophets and eagerness of the angels to grasp this wonderful plan (1:10–12)
The costliness of our redemption (1:18–21)
The enduring nature of God's promises (1:22–25)
The privilege of belonging to God's people (2:4–10)
The example of Jesus (2:22–25)
What Jesus has done for us (3:18–22)
The confidence we can have in our Creator and his faithfulness (4:17–19)
The certainty that God will triumph in the end, and that his own will share the victory (5:10–11; *cf.* 1:7).

Such encouragements, and such a statement of the grace of God, offer an equally firm foothold for Christian believers facing whatever the twenty-first century after Christ may bring.

Is 1 Peter like other NT writings?

The author comes across as someone who knew his OT well, and ready to back up his teaching by quoting it, especially Isaiah and the Psalms (see on 1:18–20, 24–25; 2:6–8, 22ff.; 3:10–12; 4:17–18). While he does not quote directly from the gospels, Peter frequently uses words and phrases which remind us of incidents and teachings they contain. We shall draw attention to these in the commentary.

There are also similarities with Peter's speeches in the Acts, *e.g.* Acts 2:23/1 Pet. 1:20; Acts 2:31/1Pet. 1:11; Acts 2:34–35/1 Pet. 3:22; Acts 4:11/1 Pet. 2:7; Acts 4:12/1 Pet. 3:21; Acts 10:34/1 Pet. 1:17; Acts 10:39/1 Pet. 2:24. These are the main places where ideas overlap, and a detailed study of the passages will show many more words and phrases in common.

Peter also uses many key words which are also found in Romans and Hebrews. It could be said that the writers of all three 'breathed the

same spiritual atmosphere'. By the time Peter was writing certain words and phrases would have become the accepted language of spiritual experience. There are also strong similarities of theme with Ephesians and James. These are interesting, and details will be found in a fuller commentary, but it is unwise to construct theories on them.

What theology does 1 Peter contain?

Peter wrote, as we have seen, with a practical purpose, and would no doubt have been surprised if asked about the letter's theological content. He did not write to set out a theology (as Paul did in Romans or Colossians) but, as a pastor, he based his ethical advice on his knowledge of the character of God. So the doctrines set out in the letter are those which provide a motive for Christian living.

Doctrine of God

In 1:1–2 Peter clearly sets out the practical relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. God is sovereign, and so can be trusted (4:19). He is holy, and so is to be copied (1:15–16). He is a Father, and so his children must live up to the family name (1:17), and the fact that he has redeemed his people is a ground for assurance (1:18–21).

Doctrine of Christ

Christ is sinless, obedient and prepared to suffer to the limit. This is an example for us (2:21–24). He died and rose again, so we must die to sin and live by his risen power (2:24; 4:1). His work is described in terms of redemption (1:18–19), reconciliation and being the sin offering and the substitute (3:18), and he was predestined for this very purpose by the Father's love (1:20–21). He is also the foundation of God's church, providing the ground of faith and hope, and inspiring to holiness and love (2:16; 1:21–22).

Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is seen as the agent of sanctification (1:2), the author of Scripture (1:11), the enabler of Christian ministry (1:12) and the encourager of Christians undergoing persecution (4:14).

Doctrine of Scripture

The authority of Scripture is stressed by the way Peter appeals to the OT to support his teaching (*e.g.* 1:24–25; 2:6–8; 3:10–12; 4:18). Its source is seen to be in the guiding of the writers by the Holy Spirit (1:11; *cf.* 2 Pet. 1:21) and its enduring quality is underlined by a quotation from Is. 40:6–8 (1:23–25). Scripture is also pictured as a seed, by which the new birth is effected in human lives as people hear and respond to the preaching of the gospel (*cf.* 1:23 with 25), and as the means of Christian growth (if 2:2 is translated 'milk of the word').

Doctrine of the church

Peter has a high regard for the corporate nature of the people of God, entered into by the individual believer at his or her new birth (2:2–5; *cf.* 1:22–23). The church is God's building, on the foundation of Christ himself (2:4–8), and as such it is the inheritor of the blessings promised to Israel (2:9–10). Its twofold function is to offer worship to God and witness before people (2:5, 9). Already in Peter's day the church had a corporate eldership, seen as a responsible and sacred office (5:1–4), but also encouraged the development and use of spiritual gifts by each member (4:10–11).

Doctrine of the last days

Peter writes as one who looks forward to the great unveiling in the last days, and he uses the Greek root *apocalyp* – ('revelation') to describe the return of Christ. So he reminds his readers that the unseen Christ is never far away, and points them to the glories they will share when Christ is revealed. Their salvation will be fully realized and they will enter into their full inheritance (1:5). Their faith will be finally honoured (1:7; 4:13), and the full extent of God's grace discovered (1:13). Christ's glory will be shared (5:1) and faithful service rewarded (5:4). The expectation of Christ's return is a most compelling argument for holy living and careful stewardship now (4:7–11, 17–18).

What does Peter say to his readers?

Those who originally received this letter were Christians who were in danger of losing their way. Their new-found faith had severed the ties which had bound them to their non-Christian relatives and neighbours and was itself being tested because they were facing suffering. This situation was probably not what they had expected when they had first heard the gospel, and it is an experience faced by every generation since then.

Peter met their needs by reassuring them of the gospel. Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together to bring us a new life (1:3–5; 2:2; 4:1–6) in which the past is forgiven (2:24; 3:18), the present is protected (1:5) and motivated (4:2), and the future assured (1:4, 7). This is a way of life to be lived out in practical terms (1:13–16) and in everyday relationships (2:16; 3:1, 7). It equips the followers of Jesus for living

in the real world of the here and now (4:1–4) and for that world of eternal glory for which Jesus is even now preparing us (5:10).

So Peter's response to the question of suffering is that it is a part of the journey of faith. It tests the seriousness of our discipleship (1:7), joins us to our fellow-Christians (5:9), and will be vindicated on the day of judgment (4:16–19). Though believers are 'strangers' and 'scattered' in this world (1;1), they are part of the pilgrim people of God (2:5, 9), journeying to the Father's home (1:4). They look forward to the day when Jesus will return for his own (1:7; 2:12; 5:4). These are truths which can motivate today's Christians to live for God's glory, just as they encouraged Peter's original readers.

Peter writes as one whose heart has lost none of the fire of love stirred up by the Master at the Sea of Tiberias (*cf.* Jn. 21:1, 15–19 with 1 Pet. 1:8). In this letter there is all the vividness of the personal recollections of a follower of Jesus Christ.

See also the article on Reading the letters.

Further reading, 1 and 2 Peter

E. P. Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, BST (IVP, 1988).
I. H. Marshall, *1 Peter* IVPNTC (IVP, 1991).
W. Grudem, *1 Peter*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1988).
P. H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1990).
J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, BNTC (A. and C. Black, 1969).
J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC (Word, 1988).
C. E. B. Cranfield, *1 and 2 Peter and Jude*, TBC (SCM, 1960).
E. M. B. Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1968).
R. Bauckham, *Jude and 2 Peter*, WBC (Word, 1983).

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Commentary

1:1–2 The writer greets his readers

Peter begins his letter, as was the custom of his time, by saying who he is and with what authority he writes. He then names those to whom he is writing. These are Christians now scattered throughout the Roman provinces of Asia Minor. Their faith consists of a relationship with each person of the Trinity. The Father has *chosen* them and set them apart (sanctified) by the

Spirit that they may live a life of *obedience to Jesus Christ*, having been made clean for that life through *sprinkling by his blood*. Such a privilege leads the writer to enlarge the normal greeting to a wish that they may experience God-given *grace and peace in abundance*. There is a play on words here. The usual Greek greeting (*chairē* – cheers!) is replaced by the profoundly Christian prayer for blessing by God's *grace* (*charis*). In addition, the customary Jewish greeting of *shalom* (*peace*) is added to show that in Christ we inherit the blessings promised under both old and new covenants.

Notes. 1 *Apostle* is Greek for 'one sent' (see the Introduction for details about the author and recipients). **2** *Sprinkling by his blood* has the idea of obtaining the benefits of Christ's death (Heb. 9:13–14), sharing in the blessings of the new covenant (*cf.* Ex. 24:3–8 with Mk. 14:24), and the regular daily cleansing we all need during our journey through life (see 1 Jn. 1:7–9). When God made the old covenant with Moses, the promise of obedience by God's people was sealed by the sprinkling of the blood of the covenant sacrifice on the altar and on the people (Ex. 24:1–11).

1:3–9 God's plan of salvation meets our every need

Once Peter has mentioned our position before God, he follows the pattern of some of Paul's letters and pours out thanksgiving to God for these blessings. They are so great that we can pass joyfully through times of testing holding by faith to a Christ we have not seen. Such faith is the road to a full and final salvation.

Peter gives eleven reasons for praising God: he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (3); he has given us new birth (what Jesus spoke of in Jn. 3:1–8); the motive for this is his great mercy (3); the result is a living hope – the new life is one of hope (3); the means to this hope is the resurrection of Jesus (3); the object of this hope is an inheritance (4); this inheritance cannot be destroyed by hostile elements, cannot be defiled by pollution from outside and cannot fade by wasting from within (4); it has been kept in heaven for us (4); we are being shielded (garrisoned!) for it by the very power of God (5); the means by which we are shielded is faith (*cf.* Eph. 6:16) – by which we hold on to the promises of God (5) and the final goal is a salvation which God will reveal in the last time, when Jesus is revealed (5, 7).

3–5 As Peter explains how rich a salvation believers enjoy he tells us that it comes from God's great mercy, consists of new birth to new life and hope, brings about the resurrection, is made possible by Jesus Christ, and will lead to an inheritance. Salvation is described with reference to the past (Christians have been given new birth by God's mercy), to the present (Christians are being shielded by God's power) and to the future (at *the last time* will come the final deliverance from evil).

6–7 These blessings from God can lead to rejoicing in the face of difficulties. The purpose of earthly trials is to sift out what is genuine in our faith. This in turn will bring *praise, glory and honour*, both to Jesus and the person who has suffered, on the day when *Jesus is revealed*.

8–9 This triumphant faith in the unseen Christ has two results. In the present the Christians can have an inexpressible joy even in the midst of difficulties, and for the future there is the prospect of enjoying that salvation to the full in the presence of Jesus. The language in v 8 is a strong reminder of Jesus' words in Jn. 20:29. *Filled with an inexpressible . . . joy* picks up the word used by Matthew (5:12) to report Jesus' teaching on behaviour in the face of persecution.

Notes. 6 The Greek translated *in this* is the wrong gender to refer to salvation and so must either refer to God himself, or to the facts set out in the previous three verses. *Greatly rejoice* could be a command (omitting the *you*), but is probably better as a statement of fact. *Though* could equally well be translated 'because', which would then fulfil Mt. 5:11–12. *Trials* comes from the same root word as is used of Jesus being tempted and is in the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 4:1; 6;13). *All kinds of* emphasizes the diversity of the trials, and the Greek word is used again in this letter to describe the grace of God which is equally versatile to meet these trials (4:10). Peter stresses that such trials will be relatively brief (*for a little while*), and that God allows them. This is implied by the Greek 'if need be' which the NIV brings out by *may have had*. Peter returns to the theme of suffering later in the letter (2:19–23; 3:14–17; 4:1–6, 12–19; 5:9–10).

1:10–12 How our salvation was made known to us

This is the work of the Holy Spirit (12), the Spirit of Christ (10). He led the prophets to foretell the *grace that was to come to us* (10), and even to foresee the *sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow* (11; see, *e.g.* Ps. 22:7–8, 17–18; Is. 53; La. 1:12). But however hard they tried, the prophets could not find out when and how this would happen. The Spirit had also guided those who understood the good news concerning Jesus' death and resurrection to explain to Peter's readers how these things had been fulfilled for them.

The prophets most naturally refers to the writers of the OT and not to Christian prophets

of the NT age. Their twofold theme was *the grace* that was destined for God's people and the *sufferings* and *glories that would follow* which were destined for Christ. There is a vivid parallelism in the original. V 11 is an important statement about the inspiration of the OT writers (see also Mt. 5:17; Lk. 24:25–27, 44–47; Jn. 5:39, 45–47). These verses also underline the role of the second and third persons of the Trinity in God's plan of salvation: the Son carries it out and the Spirit makes it known. The eagerness of the angels to *look into* it is brought out by the occurrence of the same verb used in Jn. 20:5 of John peering into the empty tomb.

1:13 – 5:7 What our salvation involves in everyday living

All that follows in this letter shows how these great truths of the Christian life are to be lived out by those who believe them. As Peter gives practical advice he constantly takes us back to the basics of the Christian gospel for the reason behind such behaviour. The salvation described so magnificently in the earlier section can and should result in men and women living as followers of Jesus no matter how difficult their circumstances may be.

1:13–21 Living like Jesus

Such salvation and such good news require Christians to exercise mental diligence and moral discipline. This is to be done by looking joyfully and confidently forward to the *grace* that will be given *when Jesus Christ is revealed.* (This phrase pictures not so much the return of one who is absent as the unveiling of one who has been with us all the time.)

Living in the light of Christ's return calls for obedience of life (*cf.* Lk. 12:35–48). We should work out this obedience by modelling our behaviour on the holiness of the God who has called us to himself (*cf.* Mt. 5:48). Previously, spiritual ignorance had allowed Peter's readers to give way to uncontrolled desires, but God's pattern of behaviour for his people is based on his revealed character.

Holiness, Christlikeness, is urged upon God's people for two reasons. It is our example (as his children we should reflect the family likeness) and it is our goal (when Jesus appears we shall be finally and fully like him; *cf.* 1 Jn. 3:2). Three reasons for this behaviour are given in vs 17–19: our Father God will judge his children as to how they have lived up to the family standards; we have been set free (*redeemed*) from the previous empty way of life; and entry into that family is such a privilege, for it was made possible at such a cost.

Speaking of Christ leads Peter at once to develop the theme of the greatness of his work and its results. God chose Christ *before the creation of the world* but has *revealed* him in *these last times* (20). The Christian has grounds for entire confidence in such a God as the object of *faith* in the present and *hope* for the future. This is because Christ has *redeemed* us with his blood and God has subsequently *raised* and *glorified him* (21).

Notes. **13** *To be given* (Gk. 'being conferred') indicates certainty. V 7 links with this to show that *when Jesus Christ is revealed* proven faith will receive its reward, and promised grace will be enjoyed. **14** *Obedient children* reflects a Hebrew phrase suggesting that obedience is a mother, whose characteristics the children should inherit. *Conform* is the same word as used in Rom. 12:2. **16** On *be holy* see Lv. 11:44–45; 19:2 and *cf.* Ex. 19:5–6. How to live like this was made plain in the life of Jesus (Jn. 1:18). **17** *Impartially* has the idea of not looking at anyone else's face to see whether they approve or not. Peter uses the idea in Acts 10:34–35. **18–19** The language used here is reminiscent of Mk. 10:45 and Jn. 1:29. *Without blemish* refers to the moral and *without defect* to the physical perfection of the sacrificial victim (see Ex. 12:5; Lv. 22:17–25; Nu. 6:14; 19:2). **21** *And so your faith and hope are in God* states the result of Christ's death and resurrection. Other translations make it the purpose, 'so that your faith and hope might be in God'. The original Greek could mean either, and both are true.

1:22–25 Loving other Christians

In vs 2 and 14 Peter has already spoken of the place of obedience in the Christian life. As a response to the proclamation and hearing of the truth, it has a twofold effect: it purifies the soul from the sins of the past and it develops a genuine love for other believers which is not a piece of play-acting. The reality of this love should be seen in its intensity and depth. Such love is prompted by the fact that Christians share a new birth made available by the *living and enduring word of God.* This regenerating word is declared when the gospel is preached.

Notes. **22** *Deeply* is used here and in 4:8 of love, and in Lk. 22:44 and Acts 12:5 of prayer. It denotes supreme effort, lit. 'with every muscle strained'. The NIV mg. shows that some early MSS add the word *pure* to *heart.* This is quite a possible reading; as the Greek words 'pure' and 'heart' both begin with the same two letters it would have been easy for copyists to have overlooked one. **23** The Greek is unclear whether it is God or his word that is *living and enduring.* In a sense both are true, as the word proceeds from God. **24–25** Quotation of Is.

40:6–8 stresses the enduring and dynamic quality of the word of God.

2:1–3 Desiring to grow

The new Christian needs to grow spiritually just as a newborn baby needs to grow physically. This involves being protected from all that could harm, and nourished by all that is good. This new life is given to enable us to reach the goal of full and final salvation.

Notes. 2 *Spiritual* is the Greek word *logikon*, which can equally mean 'of the word' (as the AV). Heb. 5:12 has the same idea and the OT is rich in allusions to the law or the word of God as spiritual sustenance. 3 Ps. 34:8 is quoted here either as a motive for the craving of v 2, or the craving may be evidence that one has *tasted that the Lord is good.*

2:4–10 Belonging to God's people

Christians must grow together as well as individually, and Peter now raises this theme. He is so thrilled by the thought that he mixes his metaphors, but the argument is easy to follow. By constant communion with Christ, *the living Stone*, Christians will become like him, living stones. By itself a stone is of little use, but joined with others it becomes part of a building. A 'living' stone has a purpose to be part of the whole. Peter's thought then switches from the structure (presumably the temple) to those who function in that building. Their responsibility as members of God's spiritual household is twofold: to worship, *offering spiritual sacrifices* (5) and to witness, *declaring the praises* (9).

In an aside Peter takes up the OT references to the living Stone, and shows how they have been fulfilled in Christ: the first one by believers, and the latter two by unbelievers. Whether people come in faith to the living Stone, or reject him, God's purposes are supreme. In Mk. 12:10 Jesus applies this text to the Jewish authorities as the builders. Christ has become the head of the corner, the *capstone* of the building, and those who *disobey the message* can only stumble and fall against him, as God decreed they should.

In contrast with the unbelievers last referred to, Peter shows how the Christian church has inherited the privileges promised to the OT people of God. *You are . . . that you may* underlines the biblical principle that privilege involves responsibility. Those who inherit Israel's blessings have Israel's work to do, and must *declare the praises* of the God who has done so much for them.

Two strands of prophecy are drawn together in vs 4 and 6–8: the precious foundation stone of Is. 28:16 (v 6 quotes the LXX, as Paul does in Rom. 9:33) and the rejected capstone of Ps. 118:22. Jesus applies the latter reference to himself in Mk. 12:10 and Peter quoted it of him before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:11. Jesus is both the foundation cornerstone on which his church is built, and the capstone up to which it grows (see 1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:19–22). The NIV mg. shows that the word can mean both. By bringing the two metaphors together Peter emphasizes that Christ is precious only to believers (as the original context showed), and that those who refuse to believe find him a stone which causes them to *stumble*. Here he adds a quotation of Is. 8:14.

Are being built (5) as a statement makes better sense of the Greek than the imperative 'be built' of some translations. The words which follow here and in v 9 (see below) were rich in meaning for God's people in the OT. Their use shows the spiritual continuity between those who respond to God under the old covenant and Christian believers. The use of the word *house* and the emphasis in vs 9–10 on belonging to the people of God could have been a great encouragement to those who felt their position as 'aliens and strangers' (2:11). Peter may have had in mind here the destruction of the temple (foretold by Jesus in Mk. 13:2). Christians individually (1 Cor. 6:19) and the church corporately (1 Cor. 3:16) are seen as God's new temple, *a spiritual house* (5) because it is indwelt by his Spirit. It is on the basis of this verse and v 9 below that Christians have stressed that since Jesus has made the once-for-all sacrifice for sin (see 2:24; 3:18) the only *sacrifices* now to be offered are *spiritual* ones (see Rom. 12:1–2 and Heb. 13:15–16). These are to be offered by all believers. The only ministry the NT sees as set apart in any way is that of the elder appointed to leadership, teaching and pastoral care (see on 5:1–4 below). *Through Jesus Christ* can be taken either to say how the sacrifices are offered, or why they are acceptable.

The word of God, either written (the Bible) or living (Jesus Christ) is the foundation on which to build. Those who disobey Christ will find that he is embarrassingly in their way and will sooner or later cause them to trip and fall (8). (For further discussion of the doctrine hinted at here see 'Predestination', *IBD* pp. 1262–1264.) V 9 claims for Christian believers the promises of Ex. 19:5–6 and Is. 43:20–21 for which Paul argues in Rom. 9. *People* implies physical descent and may refer to the relationship brought about by the new birth. The word from which *priesthood* is derived is never used in the NT to describe the Christian ministry, but rather the task of all Christian believers (*cf.* Rev. 1:6). Throughout the OT, kings and priests were separate individuals. Only Melchizedek and the Messiah combined both offices. Saul

sinned when he tried to discharge both functions (1 Sa. 13:5–15). In Christ the Christian can be both. *A holy nation* is a people called to reflect the character of the God who has called them (1:16). *A people belonging to God* (*i.e.* special) uses the imagery of the eastern king, who kept a special treasure chamber apart from his government exchequer. This was for his own use, and the idea is first found in Ex. 19:5 and picked up in Tit. 2:14 by Paul. *Praises* is a difficult word to translate and the RV's 'excellencies' is probably the nearest to the original. The Christian will find it natural and spontaneous to respond in this way to God and other people once it is understood that all these blessings flow from the free grace and mercy of God (10). Peter quotes Ho. 1:8 – 2:1 and 2:23 to bring this point home.

2:11 – 3:12 Showing others the example of Jesus

Since Christians are in this very special way God's people, their true home is with him. So in passing through this world they must show by their conduct and in their relationships that they are citizens of a better country.

Significantly, the first three of the four sections which follow, giving examples of this behaviour, use the same word *submission* (13, 18, 3:1). The word has the literal meaning of stationing oneself beneath someone else, and so regarding the other person as superior to oneself (as in Phil. 2:3). Both Jesus (Jn. 18:22–23) and Paul (Acts 25:10–11) show us that this does not mean that Christians are to be doormats; they may stand up for their legal rights.

2:11–12 General principles for attitudes in the world of human relationships. From 1:15 Peter has been looking at the positive side of holiness, living for God. Now he takes up briefly the negative side, abstinence, which he will resume at 4:1. Such behaviour silences the slanders which Christians were already having to face. Here are echoes of Jesus' instructions in Mt. 5:16.

Notes. 11 The picture of *Aliens and strangers* found in 1:1, 17 and Heb. 11:13, comes originally from Gn. 23:4. *Sinful* (lit. 'fleshly') *desires* are to be refused, as they destroy the immortal part of our being (see Gal. 5:19–21). 12 *Pagans* (lit. 'Gentiles') describes those who are outside the relationship to God enjoyed by the church as the true Israel (see on vs 9–10 above). *The day he visits us*, *i.e.* to judge.

2:13–17 Attitudes to state authorities. Good conduct is to be expressed in a submissive acceptance of the demands of *every authority instituted among men*. It is striking that Peter, probably writing in the age of Nero, still sees the state as appointed by God for the maintenance of moral values (see Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Tim. 2:1–2). The Christian's upright behaviour should raise him or her above the slanders or suspicions of the ignorant (15). Christians must give Caesar what is his due (Mt. 22:21) and Peter does not hint at any exceptions here, even though he knew how to refuse the authorities when they claimed for themselves what was God's (Acts 4:19–20; 5:29).

Surprisingly, Christian freedom is the liberty to live as the *servants of God*, fulfilling his will (16). It is not, therefore, the licence to please oneself, under the pretext of 'permissiveness'. Four brief commands sum up these practical requirements: *everyone* is to be shown respect, as those for whom Christ died and in whom the divine likeness can be restored; *the brotherhood of believers* is to be loved; *God* is to be approached with worship (*i.e.* reverent fear; see Heb. 12:28–29); and *the king* is to be treated with respect.

Notes. 13 *For the Lord's sake* reminds us of both the example and the teaching of Jesus. *Supreme authority i.e.* over human institutions. 17 Peter quotes Pr. 24:21, where the writer uses the same word to describe attitudes to God as well as the king. Peter does not do this.

2:18–25 Attitudes to employers. Peter gives detailed instruction for two groups of people (*slaves* and *wives*) whose position in the ancient world could make life, especially as a believer, very difficult for them. The lot of *slaves* would not be too bad under a good master, but they were often treated unjustly. While Peter addresses himself to their situation as employees, Paul shows that employers must also show respect and consideration for those who work for them (Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22 – 4:1).

Patience while suffering a deserved punishment is no virtue, but the Christian is called to accept even the harsh treatment of an unkind master. This wins God's commendation. To persevere in doing good, and be patient under suffering, could even be said to be the Christian's calling, as it was part of Christ's sufferings (*cf.* Phil. 3:10). It is also the example left by Jesus. Peter recalls vividly how he behaved during his sufferings. He then reminds his readers of the benefits we enjoy as a result of that suffering.

Notes. 18 *Slaves* were the domestic servants regularly found in Greek and Roman households (see Philemon). 19 *Conscious of God* may indicate either the master's reason for inflicting the undeserved punishment (because he is aware of the slave's faith) or the slave's motive for accepting it (because he is aware that God knows and shares his sufferings; see Acts 9:4).

Peter probably had in mind Jesus' words in Mt. 5:11–12, 46–47; Lk. 6:22–23, 32–35 and Jn. 15:18–21. **21** *Example* is used only here in the NT and describes an outline drawing or copy-book letters to be followed by a pupil. **22–23** Peter quotes Is. 53:9 and 7 (*cf.* Mk. 14:61, 65; 15:29; Jn. 19:1–9). **24–25** This description is so graphic that it could well be that of an eyewitness. *Bore* is lit. 'carried up' and the language is deliberately sacrificial (*cf.* Heb 7:27 where *offer* is the same Gk. verb). The reference to the purpose of Jesus' sufferings (quoting Is. 53:12 and 5) gives the motive for ours. Our response to the sin-bearing saviour must be to return to him as our shepherd in order to *die to sins and live for righteousness*. The imagery reflects Is. 53:6 and Jn. 10. *Overseer* is the word regularly used to describe the function of a shepherd, and so of a spiritual pastor. The English 'bishop' (AV/KJV) is derived from this root.

3:1–7 Attitudes to the family. *Wives* are now commanded to be *submissive* in the same way, for the ancient world classed women and slaves together as 'inferior beings'. Christianity gave dignity to the status of both, and Peter stresses the spiritual equality of man and wife as *heirs* together. Paul interestingly exhorts married couples to mutual submission, where the wife's submissiveness is to be matched by the husband's self-giving love (Eph. 5:21–28). Scripture teaches that men and women complement one another in the marriage relationship. Because men are in general physically stronger than women, they are to use this fact to cherish (*treat ... with respect*) their wives. In a world where the domestic economy depended on the husband earning a living for the family, it was natural that the wife should look to him to make decisions concerning where they should live *etc.* Sarah's readiness to go with Abraham in obedience to God's call is an example of this kind of relationship. Our task today is to interpret the principles laid down in Scripture for the times in which we live. Christian women were often married to unbelieving husbands, and Peter stresses the importance of Christlike behaviour to win them. Marriage is then lifted to its highest plane by the call to husbands to treat their wives with consideration and respect. This is because they have a shared faith and they are a praying partnership and no misunderstandings or wrong behaviour must hinder its effectiveness. This instruction applies of course to Christian couples, here graphically described as sharing the inheritance of God's gracious gift of eternal life.

Notes. **3** The reference to *outward adornment* does not mean that Christian women should not dress well or make use of beauty aids. The nouns which follow contrast sharply with the attitude of v 2 as they are all active and stress the time and energy spent on such personal adornment. God prefers to see beauty of character which will never fade. **4** *A gentle and quiet spirit* is one which puts up with the demands of others without causing any itself. There are good examples of such characters among the people of God – Sarah, Rebecca, Ruth, Hannah – and such women are the true daughters, by spiritual descent and likeness, of Sarah. **6** *Called him her master* may refer to Gn. 18:12 where the word 'husband' can also mean 'lord' or 'master'. **7** *In the same way* may refer back to 2:17 and the general instruction to 'show proper respect to everyone', or it may look to the wife's behaviour and urge husbands to respond with mutual love and understanding (Phillips translates *be considerate* as 'try to understand'). On *weaker partner* see Gn. 2:18; 3:16.

3:8–12 Attitudes to the fellowship. Peter now leaves the field of special relationships and concludes this section with a summary of the attitudes Christians should demonstrate to one another, in both their actions and reactions. This is contained in the one word *blessing* (9), the calling down of God's gracious power and love on all people, even on those who wish or do us harm. To behave like this is encouraged by knowing that Christians themselves will ultimately *inherit* God's *blessing*. This was promised in Ps. 34:12–16 which is quoted here. Christians are called to walk the way of blamelessness and uprightness, actively pursuing peace with all, just like the people of faith in the OT. They have the same motivation because God watches over and blesses such behaviour, but sets himself against evil-doers.

Notes. **8** *Live in harmony* is lit. 'be of the same mind'. This comes about when we share the mind of Christ (see Phil. 2:5; Col. 3:2). We can then enter into the feelings of others (*sympathetic* comes from a Greek word meaning 'feeling with') and share God's love for them. This quality of loving as brothers or sisters has been mentioned before in 1:22 and will be emphasized again in 4:8: it should be the hallmark of Christian fellowship. *Compassionate* brings a new Christian meaning to an old Greek word for 'courageous'. *Humble* (see also 5:5–6) shows that the secret of the character described here lies in a realistic estimate of oneself and a high concern for others. V 9 picks up the picture of 2:23 (see the references there to the example of Jesus, together with Lk. 6:27–28; 23:34). *This* could refer to the inheriting of a blessing, or to the life of repaying cursing with blessing. The words used here, reminding us of 2:21, as well as the quotation from Ps. 34, suggest that Peter

is emphasizing his reasons for godly living in the face of opposition. Such Christian obedience will inherit the blessing God has prepared (*cf.* Rom. 8:17–18). This blessing will be enjoyed to the full in the life to come, but the OT writer obviously had in mind the blessings of a walk with God in this life. God's eyes are on his children to keep them safe and his ears are open to them to hear and answer their prayers. **10–12** The quotation of Ps. 34:12–16 is altered grammatically to fit the context. *Life* was probably intended by the psalmist to refer to temporal existence on earth. Peter may well be using the word (as in v 7) of eternal life, especially as he changes the original 'loves life and desires to see many good days' to (lit.) 'he who wishes to love life and to see good days'.

3:13 – 4:6 Living for Christ in the face of opposition

Since the widespread collapse of communism there are now fewer countries in the world where Christians are likely to be persecuted or imprisoned for their faith. Yet it only needs a totalitarian government (of right or left) to bring back attempts by states to suppress those who speak out in the name of Christ. In modern western society Christians are more likely to be persecuted for standing out against its false values and standards. (In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan describes this happening to Christian and Faithful in the town of Vanity Fair.)

13–16 Peter's confidence in God's sovereignty as well as in his justice leads him to a rhetorical question, *Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?* The remark which follows suggests that zeal on the Christian's part for what is right is not likely to lead to persecution. This seems strangely inconsistent with the warnings of Jesus (*e.g.* Mt. 5:10–12), the teaching and experience of Paul (*e.g.* Acts 14:22) and Peter's own words in the next chapter (4:12–19), or even vs 16 and 17 here. In view of this it is probably right to lay the stress in this question on the verb *to harm* (13). Persecution may well come upon the Christian, but it cannot ultimately do injury. In fact the experience can lead to blessing (14; *cf.* 1:6–9) and the outcome can be left in God's hands (4:19) as he watches over his own and their persecutors (3:12). So believers are urged not to *be frightened.* The positive antidote to fear is to be found in giving Christ the special place that is his due at the centre of our lives. There he is to reign as Lord. Such true fear of the Lord, expressing itself both in upright behaviour and with a well-thought-out statement of faith, will drive out all lesser fears and eventually shame the detractors.

17–22 These verses contain the most complex train of thought in the whole letter. The key idea which links them together is that of suffering (see 3:17 and 4:1). Peter has been preparing his readers for future suffering, and anticipates that they may make the common human reaction to suffering – what a waste! So he points us to the suffering of Jesus and what it enabled him to achieve: he brings us to God; he is raised from the dead; he makes proclamation to the spirits in prison (see below); he makes possible the cleansing and salvation that baptism symbolizes; and he is raised to the pre-eminent position of power and glory.

Such suffering was obviously far from pointless and was in fact the will of God for Christ and could be God's will for his followers. This is not in the sense that they could die to bring others to God, but that the pattern of suffering leading to glory is one that Jesus called his followers to take (*e.g.* Mt. 16:24–26). Mention of this leads Peter to remind us how the God-ordained suffering of the innocent Christ had seven characteristics: it was done *once for all* (18); it was the way to deal with sin (*for sins*; see Rom. 8:3 and the NIV mg.); it was a *righteous* person acting on behalf of the *unrighteous*; it was to bring *you* to God (the Gk. verb here, *prosagō*, is a technical term for introducing someone into the presence of a superior); it was a physical *death* to gain spiritual life; it was an opportunity to go and preach to the *spirits in prison* (see below); it led to God's vindication of Jesus by raising and exalting him (22).

V 18 is one of the most succinct and yet profound statements in the NT on the doctrine of the atonement. Jesus is seen as dealing with the problem of humanity's broken relationship with God in three ways.

1. He made the perfect offering for sin (*cf.* Heb. 9:11–14; 10:1–10) and thereby fulfilled the requirements of the law.
2. He endured the death due to unrighteousness as the penalty imposed by the law on sinners (*cf.* Rom. 6:23; 2 Cor. 5:21).
3. He thereby removed the barrier caused by sin and opened the way back to God (Jn. 14:6).

Having stressed so much the value of Christ's sufferings as our example (*e.g.* 2:21), Peter redresses the balance by stating also how unique and efficacious they are. *The righteous* implies that his suffering was propitiatory (satisfying all God's own demands), while *for* (lit. 'on behalf of') shows that it was also vicarious. The one person whose perfect righteousness meant that he never deserved to die endured the pains of death on behalf of all who did deserve to die. In this way Jesus took our place and endured our punishment. The language reflects strongly that of Is. 53:6.

By the Spirit points to the work of the Spirit in restoring Jesus to life. He died physically on the

cross in that his bodily functions (respiration and circulation of the blood *etc.*) ceased. He also died spiritually in that he underwent the separation from God consequent on bearing the sins of the world. This was expressed by the cry of dereliction (Mk. 15:34). But spiritual death is not annihilation, and once Jesus had undergone in full God's judgment on sin his spirit was released from the body. The Greek of Mk. 15:37 and parallels uses the common but vivid metaphor of 'breathing out' his spirit. On the third day that spirit returned to resume his body at the resurrection. The NIV mg. shows that we could alternatively understand *alive in the spirit* to refer to the activity of the spirit of Jesus during the period between this death and resurrection.

Reference to *the spirits in prison* (19) takes the writer to the *days of Noah*, whose experience of salvation is a striking parallel to baptism.

The faith which is the believer's response to God in baptism is made possible by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Peter now links both strands of thought. He sees the glorification of Jesus not only as the divine sequel to his sacrificial death, but also as the compelling reason for humankind to respond to him in faith. (See further comments in the notes below.)

4:1–6 *Suffering* in the *body* is therefore to be accepted because: it follows the example of Jesus; it unites the believer with his *attitude*; and it enables the sufferer to live *for the will of God*. It is important to weigh passages like this against some of the contemporary teaching on 'health and wealth'. Nowhere in the Bible are we taught that the Christian will always be prosperous and avoid suffering; rather, Jesus suggests the opposite may often be true (see Lk. 6:20–26; Jn. 16:1–4).

Mention of baptism in 3:21 may have prompted Peter to follow the same sort of argument as Paul uses in Rom. 6. Baptism symbolizes the believer's entry into the benefits obtained by Christ's suffering and death. In undergoing it the person baptized is regarded as mystically sharing those sufferings and death. The consequence of such a death in Rom. 6:11 is to 'count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus'. This is what Peter is stating here, adding a note of urgency by contrasting time spent in the past on indulging oneself with the opportunity for serving God in the future.

Those whose behaviour and habits are so changed become the targets for persecution. However, the Christian must remember that it is to God that all must give account of their conduct. The comprehensiveness of this judgment (5) leads Peter to make an aside remark that the death of Christians proves the value of preaching the gospel to people while they are alive. Though now in death they have received in their bodies God's judgment on sin, their spirits are still alive with him. (For other interpretations of this verse see the Notes below.)

In this section, therefore, Peter encourages Christians who are facing suffering (and possibly even martyrdom) by showing them from the example of Jesus that God's plan can be worked out through such suffering and that it will ultimately lead to victory (see 1:11).

Notes. 3:14 The NIV mg. shows that the quotation from Is. 8:12–13 can be taken in either of two ways: 'do not fear what they fear', or 'do not fear what they threaten'. A third possibility is that the command here and in Isaiah is a warning against apostasy – 'do not share their objects of religious reverence' (the Greek verb is used in this cultic sense in *e.g.* Lk. 1:50; 18:2, 4: Acts 13:16, 26). **17** The Greek for *if it is God's will* is 'if it should be'. This suggests that the possibility of having *to suffer for doing good* is rather remote, as in v 14. Peter may have said this to allay the fears of his readers.

19 This verse raises the two most difficult questions in the letter. When did Jesus preach *to the spirits in prison*, and who were they? Some take the verse to refer to the chronological sequel to Jesus' death, when his spirit passed into the realms of the departed. Then, with Acts 2:31 and Eph. 4:9, this verse establishes the clause in the Creeds about Jesus' descent to the dead. In that case he must have preached to all the dead in one of three ways: to offer them a second chance of salvation; to proclaim his victory over death and triumph over the power of evil and so confirm the sentence on unbelievers and announce deliverance for believers; to proclaim release from purgatory to those who had repented just before they perished in the flood (a popular interpretation among Roman Catholic writers).

Neither the first nor the last of these can be supported from Scripture, but the second has been held by many commentators as fitting in with the NT evidence above. E.G. Selwyn (*The First Epistle of Peter* [Macmillan, 1949]), and others see the *spirits in prison* as the fallen angels of Gn. 6:1–8 referred to in 2 Pet. 2:4–10 and Jude 6 as well as in the apocryphal 1 Enoch. Peter's aim in this context is to demonstrate that God's purpose is being worked out even in times of suffering. So it would seem best to understand the preaching as a declaration of Christ's triumph, in order to assert (22) that all *angels, authorities and powers* [are] *in submission to him*. Grudem (TNTC) in an appendix summarizes the views and claims that the spirits were Noah's contemporaries who rejected the

preaching of the Spirit of Christ through Noah (see 2 Pet. 2:5) and are now in the prison of the abode of the dead. The interpretation of *made alive by the Spirit* (18) as a reference to the resurrection, and the *spirits in prison* as a reference to the fallen angels is cogently argued by R. T. France in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Paternoster Press, 1979), pp. 264–281. He claims that NT and contemporary usage favour this understanding of the word *spirits* when used by itself, rather than applying it to men and women who had died before Jesus came to bring the gospel.

No view is free of problems, but the use of a verb implying steady and purposeful progression (*went* [19] and *has gone* [22] are both the same Gk. word *poreutheis*) suggests that Peter is recounting what Jesus accomplished between his death and exaltation.

20 *Disobeyed long ago* refers, on the preceding interpretations, either to the events of Gn. 6:1–4 or to a rejection of the preaching of Noah (see 2 Pet. 2:5). Reference to God's waiting *patiently* while the ark was being built (Gn. 6:13; and *cf.* 2 Pet. 3:5–9) also fits either of these possibilities. *A few people* is a biblical emphasis (*cf.* Mt. 7:14; Lk. 13:23–24). In the OT the equivalent idea is that of the 'remnant' (Is. 10:20–23; Je. 23:3; *cf.* Rom. 9:27–29). Even so, Paul also speaks of the 'many' who will be made righteous through the death of Jesus (Rom. 5:19), and this should be a motive for evangelism. *Through water* has two meanings. In terms of place, the ark brought Noah and his family safely through the water which brought God's judgment on others. The preposition *through* ('by', 'by means of') also suggests the instrument, *i.e.* water was both the means of destruction for their contemporaries and the means of deliverance into a fresh start for Noah and his family.

21 The Greek word *symbolizes* ('antitypon') originally described the impression left on a surface by a seal (*typos*) and so was used of the kind of correspondence a stamp has to its die. Peter sees the picture as a parallel to baptism, for here the water symbolizes God's judgment on sin, and deliverance into a new life. The only way to pass from a state of sinful rebellion against God to new life is through the waters of judgment. Noah and his family did that symbolically in the ark. Jesus spoke of his coming death as a baptism (Mk. 10:38–39) when on our behalf he endured the judgment of God's wrath. In Rom. 6:3–4 Paul sees baptism as portraying the Christian's entering into that experience of Christ's death and resurrection. For Jesus, his death was the enduring of God's judgment on sin and the prelude to resurrection; for the believer, Jesus' death is the means of cleansing from sin and entry into new life. Peter rids his readers of any magical ideas about baptism by making it plain that the efficacy of baptism does not lie in the outward symbolism of *the removal of dirt from the body* but in the inner response of faith towards God. *Pledge* is a word used in the first-century world of the solemn commitment of any party undertaking a contract and so the AV translates it 'answer' (see the NIV mg.). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the great fact which makes real and possible all that baptism symbolizes, and it is only by this means that we are saved (*cf.* 1:3 with 1 Cor. 15:1–2, 14). **22** Reference to this leads Peter to repeat *poreutheis* from v 19 (see above). This describes the triumphal procession of Jesus, which led to his being seated in heaven (thereby fulfilling Ps. 110:1) and the position of supreme power.

4:1 *The same attitude* (lit. 'intention') appears, from the context, to refer to Christ's experience of suffering. His sufferings led to the death of his flesh and enabled his spirit to enter a new mode of existence. This should also be seen in the life of the believer. *He who has suffered* need not refer to those who undergo physical suffering, but includes all who, in the mystical union symbolized by baptism, share the sufferings of Christ. This union should be made effective by claiming deliverance from sin and a new life of service to God. **2** The plural *desires* suggests the diversity of interests pulling a person in different directions (v 3 gives a catalogue of some of these). By contrast *the will of God* in the singular shows that only in obedience to God can the human personality be truly and properly integrated. **3** *What pagans choose to do* is seen by some to point to a Gentile background to Peter's readers which may have involved them in taking part in pagan religious rites or the activities of the trade-guilds. *Debauchery* and all the following nouns are plural and are used to describe a round of activities in which such behaviour was expressed. **5** This verse emphasizes the universality of judgment. Humankind must either face it after death, or else anticipate it here on earth by responding to Christ. 3:18–21 has already shown that in that response their sins are dealt with through their union with Christ. Death is then the gateway to the fuller and freer life of the spirit, and there will be no further judgment to bear (see Jesus' words in Jn. 5:24). Some commentators interpret *the dead* as those who are spiritually dead. Others use this verse to deduce that a second chance of responding to the gospel will be given after death. They link this preaching with the proclamation of 3:19, but this does not suit the context, and is not supported elsewhere in Scripture. **6** *The gospel was preached even to those who are now dead* anticipates a possible objection to the gospel by the

opponents of the Christians – 'If you speak of the return of Christ, and possessing eternal life here and now, why do your people die like the rest of us? Surely you are suffering exactly the same judgment as we are, for you say that death is the wages of sin.' Peter's answer is that those *who are now dead* have been *judged according to men in regard to the body* by suffering physical death but, because *the gospel was preached* to them (while alive, and they responded to it), they are now living *according to God in regard to the spirit. According to men . . . according to God* could refer to judgment in the flesh as being the common lot of humanity, and life in the spirit as the distinctive characteristic of God. Alternatively, the preposition *according to* may mean 'in the sight of . . .'. Either translation makes little difference to the meaning. Another possible translation is 'by men' but this is unlikely and does not fit easily with the parallel *according to God.*

4:7–11 Ministering to one another

The final judgment is no remote contingency. In every age Christians must be ready at all times for Christ's return to wind up this present order of things. So it is urgent for us to watch and pray (*cf.* Lk. 21:36), displaying self-control, mutual love and a diligent stewardship of the gifts God has given us. This is the life that will bring glory to God (see Mt. 5:16).

Notes. 7 The *end* (Gk. *telos*, which also means 'goal') of the present system is not only its climax but also the purpose towards which God has been and is working. *Clear minded* means 'of safe mind'. In the midst of fears and uncertainty the Christian must keep in touch with God. J. B. Phillips' translation is helpful here: 'be calm, self-controlled men of prayer'. **8** On *deeply* see on 1:22. *Love covers over a multitude of sins* could be a reference to Pr. 10:12. This verse has been used to argue that love can earn forgiveness of sins, not only for the one who displays it, but also for the one who receives it as well. This is not consistent with other biblical teaching. The most likely meaning is that true love will overlook its neighbour's faults (see Mt. 6:14–15; 1 Cor. 13:4–7; Jas. 5:20). It could also be taken to refer to God's love covering over our sins, which gives the motive for us to love one another. **9** *Hospitality* was important in the days of itinerant ministers and no church buildings (see Mt. 25:35; Rom. 12:13; 16:3–5a; 1 Tim. 3:2; Heb. 13:2). **10** *Each* implies that every Christian has some gift to exercise. Peter's remarks on stewardship are significant in view of the fact that Jesus spoke on this subject especially to Peter in Lk. 12:42–48. On *in its various forms* see on 1:6 where the same word is used. **11** *Speaks* and *serves* cover the two broad divisions of ministry within the Christian church: ministering the word of God and 'serving tables' in various ways (see Acts 6:1–6). Both ministries are equally God-given and can rely on God to provide what is necessary for their fulfilment. *Very words* (Gk. *logia*) was used in classical times of divine utterances, and in Rom. 3:2 and Heb. 5:12 is applied to Scripture. (For the significance of ascription *To him . . .* here see the Introduction, under 'Is the letter a unity?'.)

4:12–19 Suffering for Christ's sake

Peter now returns to the theme of suffering and suggests seven further reasons to encourage the Christian not merely to endure, but actually *rejoice* in it. The experience of suffering is (i) a *trial* (12; *cf.* 1:6–7) to prove the reality of our faith, and we can expect God to work to strengthen this; (ii) nothing *strange* (12), rather a sharing in Christ's experience; (iii) a pathway to glory for us, as it was for Christ (13; see also Rom. 8:17 and Col. 1:24); (iv) an opportunity for blessing, in a further experience of the Holy Spirit (14); (v) an opportunity to glorify God (14); (vi) a challenge to prove the relevance of the gospel as judgment begins with the household of God (17); (vii) an opportunity to commit ourselves to God and prove his faithfulness (19). God's people can commit the issues of life in full confidence to the one who gave them life. By contrast, the unrepentant sinner has nothing to look forward to here or hereafter once God begins to act in judgment.

Notes. 12 *Painful trial* (Gk. 'exposure to fire with a view to testing') looks back to the argument of 1:6–7. *Strange* is the adjective from the root of the verb used earlier in the sentence for *do not be surprised.* It would therefore be better to have 'surprising' here or else translate 'strange' in both places as the AV and RV do. **14** *Because of the name of Christ* need not mean that it was already a criminal offence to be a Christian, for Jesus himself suggested the possibility of suffering for his name's sake (see Mt. 10:22; Jn. 15:21). For further details see the Introduction on authorship. In every age since Jesus Christians who have tried to live like him have become the target of slander or hatred from those who have been challenged or convicted by their behaviour. Some have taken *the* [spirit of] *glory* ('spirit of' is not in the original) to refer to the *Shekinah*, the visible brightness which symbolized God's presence among his people (Ex. 40:34–35). That may be so, but the context and sentence structure make it more likely to be best taken (as the NIV) to mean God's Spirit. This is the Spirit of glory as he reveals God's glory to his people by making Christ real to them and transforming them into his image (Jn. 16:14; 2

Cor. 3:18). The phrase may have been coined from the LXX of Is. 11:2; though neither glory nor power (an alternative reading) are mentioned there. **15** *Meddler* may seem out of place in this list of otherwise criminal activities, but this was often the effect the gospel seemed to have (as in Acts 16:18; 19:27).

16 *Christian* occurs on only two other occasions in the NT (Acts 11:26; 26:28). In both cases it is assumed to have been used by detractors as a term of contempt. However, people of the day used the Latin ending *-ianus* (anglicized as '-ian') in two ways which might shed light on this usage. Herod's followers were called 'Herodians' (Mk. 3:6) and so 'Christians' could have indicated 'supporters of Christ'. It was the Roman custom for a person adopted into a noble family to use as his own the family name with the *-ianus* ending. So a person adopted into the family of Domitius could call himself Domitianus. Antioch (where the custom began – Acts 11:26) was a Roman city, and so Christians there might well have used the name to show that they had been adopted into the family of Christ (Rom. 8:15–17).

17 For the idea of *judgment* beginning with *the family of God* see Je. 25:29; Ezk. 9:6; Mal. 3:1–3). **18** The quotation of Pr. 11:31 from the LXX underlines the argument of the previous verse, and is a reminder of Jesus' words in Lk. 23:31. **19** If such suffering is accepted in the light of vs 17–18, then far from giving up under it the Christian will persevere in doing *good*. We follow Christ's example, by committing the outcome into God's hands. *Commit* is the word used by Jesus in Lk. 23:46 (citing Ps. 31:5). Every faithful Jew used this as a final prayer at night and this may be the thought here. Paul used the noun derived from this root in 2 Tim. 1:12 to express his confidence in God's safe keeping. *Creator* is used here probably to remind the readers of God's power (*cf.* 1:5 and Paul's thought in Phil. 1:6).

5:1–4 Exercising leadership

People undergoing the experiences and faced with the challenges of ch. 4 will need wise and skilful pastoring. The NIV omits the emphatic Greek 'therefore' which links these verses with those which precede. With his unique position and experience Peter urges the local church leaders to discharge their duties in a ready, enthusiastic and exemplary manner. They should remember both to whom they are undershepherds, and the reward he has promised for faithful service.

Three contrasting ways of tackling the task of a pastor are set out. First, not grudgingly as a duty but willingly as of free choice; secondly, not greedily thinking of the reward but with ready heart for the Lord and those they serve; and thirdly, not flaunting their position but using every opportunity to give the flock an example.

Notes. 1 *Elders* (Gk. *presbyteroi*) were appointed from earliest times to take spiritual charge of the infant churches which came into being with the spread of the gospel (Acts 14:23; 20:17). Acts 15:2 shows that the Jerusalem church had elders at an early date. The role probably derived from Jewish precedent (Nu. 11:16–25; see under 'Elder' in the *NBD*). Their task was primarily a pastoral one. In the early days of the church they were called elders, indicating their status, and also *episkopoi* ('bishops, overseers') to describe their function. This picture is picked up in v 2, and Acts 20:28 uses the two words interchangeably. *Fellow-elder* is not found elsewhere in the NT, but is not an unusual word in this context, where Peter is keen to emphasize his oneness with those he is encouraging. The author claims to have been *a witness of Christ's sufferings*. The fact that the lists of those present at the crucifixion (Mt. 27:55–56; Mk. 15:40–41; Lk. 29:49; Jn. 19:25) mention only the women followers could suggest that Peter was not present. John is not mentioned either, but we know that he was present (Jn. 19:26, 27). Peter could also have been there without specific reference to him. In any case, he would already have seen much of Jesus' sufferings (Lk. 22:28, 54–62; Jn. 18:15–27). On *glory* see on 4:13.

2 *Be shepherds* uses the word Jesus used when speaking to Peter after the resurrection (Jn. 21:16). It is also Paul's charge to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:28; *cf.* Ps. 78:70–72). *That is under your care* could also mean 'to the best of your ability'. Either translation suits the context. *Serving as overseers* is the same root as *Overseer* in 2:25. *Not because you must* suggests a false sense of unworthiness, a reluctance for responsibility, or a desire to do no more than is absolutely necessary. Any one of these attitudes can lead to an unwillingness to take on the task or discharge it adequately. *As God wants you to be* is a possible translation. The Greek could also mean 'as God would do it', recalling the attitude of the Shepherd of souls in 2:25; Ps. 23; and Jn. 10:11. *Greedy for money* does not imply that the elders were receiving a stipend, but that there were opportunities for the unscrupulous to make personal gain from ministry. This spirit could also apply to the love of reputation or position.

3 *Lording it* is often the attitude of the worldly superior (the same word is used in Mk. 10:42). Christian leaders, rather than domineering and manipulating others for their own ends, are to be an example, giving what they can

contribute to them in the way of advice and character-building. *Those entrusted to you* (Gk. *klēroi* means '[your] appointed portions'): *klēros*, from which we get our 'cleric', was originally an allotment of land; then it referred to an office assigned by lot, and here refers to the flock assigned to a particular pastor. *Examples* is the word *typoi*, denoting a model or pattern to be copied (see 3:21 for the derived word *antitypon*). Peter has previously described the second advent in terms of an 'unveiling' or 'revelation' of Jesus Christ. *Appears* Gk. *phanerōō*) brings out the consequence of that revelation, that Jesus will be visible in his glory to all (see Rev. 1:7). *Of glory* refers to the share in glory to be given to the wearer of the crown, as the 'crown of life' in Jas. 1:12 and Rev. 2:10 speaks of the eternal life enjoyed by the wearer. *That will never fade away* is *amarantinon* meaning 'of amaranth', a flower which took its name from the word *amaranton* (used in 1:4) because it was thought to be unfading. This contrasts with the fading crowns of laurel leaves awarded to victors in the games that are being alluded to here (*cf.* 1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 3:11; 4:4).

5:5–7 Being good followers

The kind of eldership just described deserves the loyal support of the younger element in the fellowship. Their submission to godly direction should lead to an attitude of humble respect for one another throughout the fellowship – an attitude which Scripture enjoins. The theme of humility introduces some final general words of advice. Our humility in God's hands enables him to use us in the way which will develop our full potential. This is the way to the truly carefree life, reassured of his concern for us.

Notes. 5 *In the same way* could indicate the conduct required of others in the light of the instructions of the preceding verses, or it could be picking up the thought of 2:13, 18: 3:1, 7. *Those who are older* is the same word as *elders* in v 1 and could be a reference to them. *Clothe yourselves* is lit. 'fasten on with a knot', 'bind to yourselves' and Peter may well have had the incident recorded in Jn. 13:4–5 and 15–16 in the mind. The quotation in this verse is from the LXX of Pr. 3:34 (also quoted in Jas. 4:6). Jesus speaks of this principle in Mt. 23:12. **6** *God's mighty hand* is a familiar phrase in the LXX, usually connected in thought with the deliverance from Egypt (as in Ps. 98:1). Here it reminds us that God can intervene in human affairs and bring blessing out of acceptance of the lowly part of life, even of suffering rightly borne. **7** *Cast* is the vivid verb 'hurl'. The reason for the absence of anxiety is the one Jesus gives, *e.g.* in Mt. 6:25–34; 10:28–33.

5:8–11 Such salvation attracts opposition, but faith guarantees the victory

A carefree life is not a careless one, and the Christian must be watchful as we are involved in a constant spiritual warfare. The facts of this are: there is an enemy, the devil (8); he seeks opportunities to destroy Christians (8); the way to overcome him is by resistance (9); such resistance is based on confidence in God (9); it is also backed by the knowledge that we are not alone in the struggle (9); the outcome lies with God, who, because of his ultimate destiny for us, will meet every need on the way (10); this God has the power for ever (11).

Notes. 8 On *be self-controlled* see 1:13 and 4:7. *Alert* is a striking reference to Jesus' words to Peter (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38). *Enemy* (Gk. *antidikos*) is a legal term, a translation of the Heb. *śāṭān*, used of the adversary of souls (*e.g.* Jb. 1:6). Here, as there, Satan can be seen as the one who stirs up suffering and persecution in order to test and, if possible, destroy the faith of God's children. Peter was familiar with this behaviour (see Mt. 16:23; Lk. 22:31). *Devil* is a Greek word meaning 'slanderer'. In his role of undermining faith the devil slanders God to men (Gn. 3:1, 4–5) and men to God (Jb. 1:9–11; 2:4–5). On *prowls around* see Jb. 1:7; 2:2. **9** *Resist* is the method recommended for dealing with the devil, as in Jas. 4:7 (*cf.* Eph. 6:11–17). It is the desires of the flesh that one has to flee (1 Tim. 6;11; 2 Tim. 2:22). The word *firm* describes the solidity of material objects. No superficial faith will do here, as it is the enemy's desire to make apostates through persecution. Rev. 12:11 gives further advice for victory in such trials. *Throughout the world* contrasts with the group of churches in Asia Minor (1:1) to whom this letter was addressed. **10** The call to perseverance is matched by the doctrine of preservation. Since God has called us to share his eternal glory in Christ, we can ultimately rely on him to bring us safely through to it (see Phil. 1:6; 1 Thes. 5:24; Jude 24). The NIV *will restore*, is a more likely reading than the AV 'make you perfect': this is a promise and not a prayer. *Restore* describes ships being repaired after a battle or storm. *Strong* (Lk. 22:32) is used primarily of physical objects and may denote fixity of position, *firm* denotes firmness of purpose, while *steadfast* has the idea of giving foundations. **11** *Power* (Gk. *kratos*, from which the adjective *mighty* in v 6 is formed) is not the usual word but means God's overruling might which is guaranteed to bring the Christian through.

5:12–14 Personal greetings

Peter now sums up by stating his twofold purpose of encouraging and reassuring and pays tribute to his helper, Silas. The salvation he has been declaring is truly God's grace at work, and so there is not only every reason to stand fast in it, but every confidence that we shall be able to do so. Closing greetings bring the letter to an end with the characteristic Hebrew blessing of *peace* being sent to all the Christian readers or hearers.

Notes. 12 *Silas* (Gk. *Silvanus*, as NIV mg.) is probably the Silas of Acts 15:22 – 18:5 (*cf.* 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1). *With the help of* (lit. 'by means of') may mean that Silas helped in the writing of the letter, or that he delivered it, or both. *A faithful brother* is 'the' faithful brother in the original, which suggests that Silas was known to the readers. Otherwise, it may just stress his relationship to Peter. *This* could be taken as a reference to the promises of v 10, but more likely refers to the whole of the letter. *In* is the more graphic 'into' implying active application of oneself to the goal.

13 *Babylon* has been identified with either the ancient capital of Babylonia, a Roman garrison town in Egypt (now Cairo), or Rome. The last seems most likely – see the Introduction. *She . . . chosen together* is usually taken to refer to the local church with the Greek feminine noun *ekklēsia* omitted. The reference following to *my son* has prompted the suggestion that 'she' was Peter's wife (*cf.* Mk. 1:30; 1 Cor. 9:5), but this is unlikely. *Mark* probably refers to the writer of the second gospel, to whose home Peter came on deliverance from prison (Acts 12:12). Mark accompanied Paul on missionary work (Acts 12:25 – 13:13), but later left him. This displeased the apostle, who took Silas as a companion instead (Acts 13:13; 15:36–40). However, Mark in time regained Paul's favour (2 Tim. 4:11) and was with him, probably at Rome, at the end of his life (Col. 4:10; Phm. 24). Eusebius the historian quotes Papias as saying that Mark compiled a written record of Peter's recollections of the deeds and sayings of the Lord, and from early times Mark's gospel was associated with the church at Rome. *Son* is used in the spiritual sense (*cf.* 1 Tim. 1:2).

14 The *kiss of love*, or 'holy kiss', is mentioned in the NT on several occasions (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12). It appears to have been regularly used when Christians met for fellowship. It may also have been a common practice among Jesus and his disciples (see Lk. 22:48), and could have been misrepresented by those who wanted to slander the Christian faith. *Peace* is the wish with which the letter ends, as it began (1:2). In between these two verses, however, the reader has been made aware how this peace has been made possible even in the midst of suffering, the difficult outworkings of personal relationships and the constant challenge of a pagan society. The source of such peace is to be found *in Christ* (see Jn. 14:27). Whatever the circumstances, the person who is *in Christ* (*cf.* Eph. 1:3–14) can always know the peace of God, for it is freely available to *all of you who are in Christ*.

David H. Wheaton

2 PETER

Introduction

Who wrote 2 Peter?

The writer leaves us in no doubt on the matter. He says he is 'Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ' (1:1). He was on the mount of Transfiguration with Jesus (1:16–18) where only Peter, James and John were with him (Mk. 9:2–12). He had written on a previous occasion to the recipients of this letter (3:1) and is on familiar terms with them (3:1, 8, 14, 17). Furthermore, he calls Paul 'our dear brother' (3:15), and at the time of writing he was expecting to die quite soon (1:14)

There is no evidence to suggest that any of these facts were later inserted into the letter to make people accept it. However, there is a popular modern theory that the letter is a 'pseudepigraph', *i.e.* a writing put out after the death of a great man, published under his name as containing the kind of things he would have said in that situation. Thus it would do him honour by being ascribed to him. Arguments to support this view are as follows.

First, it is claimed that the language and style are not similar to 1 Peter. In places we find complicated phrases in an exaggerated style. This is particularly true in ch. 2 where the writer gets carried along by his theme as he did in 1 Pet. 3:18–22. In any case, 1 Peter was written on different matters, and may have had some input from Silvanus (1 Pet. 5:12). In fact, there are strong resemblances between the letters. Some words and phrases occur only in these letters and nowhere else in the NT, *e.g.* 'goodness' used of God (2 Pet. 1:3; 1 Pet. 2:9 [tr. 'praises']); 'putting aside' (2 Pet. 1:14; 1 Pet. 3:21 [tr. 'removal']); 'never stop sinning' (2 Pet. 2:14; 1 Pet. 4:1 [tr. 'is done with sin']). Other words not common elsewhere are 'brotherly kindness' (2 Pet. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:22), the root of 'eye-witnesses' (2 Pet. 1:16; 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:2) and 'add' (2 Pet. 1:5; 1 Pet. 4:11). There are also similarities in the statements about prophecy (2 Pet. 1:20–21; 1 Pet. 1:10–12), about Christian liberty (2 Pet. 2:19; 1 Pet. 2:16) and about the last things (2 Pet. 3:3, 10; 1 Pet. 1:5).

Comparison of this letter with Peter's speeches in the Acts shows a similar use of language: 'godliness' (2 Pet. 1:6; Acts 3:12); 'lawless' (2 Pet. 2:8; Acts 2:23 [tr. 'wicked']); 'received' (2 Pet. 1:1; Acts 1:17 [tr. 'shared']). Identical phrases can be found in 2 Pet. 2:13, 15 ('paid back with harm for the harm they have done', 'the wages of wickedness') and Acts 1:18 ('the reward he got for his wickedness'). Both 2 Pet. 3:10 and Acts 2:20 draw on OT imagery of the 'day of the Lord' (Joel 2:31). More recent research has shown that objections based on the language have nothing like the evidence to support them that was once supposed (for further details see E. M. B. Green, *2 Peter and Jude* [IVP, rev. edn. 1987], pp. 16–19).

Secondly, Peter's authorship of the letter is also held to be in doubt by some because the early church seemed hesitant to receive it into the NT canon. The fact remains that they finally did so, and this happened at a time when Gnostic writers were circulating definitely bogus writings claiming Peter's authorship.

Thirdly, because 2 Peter contains most of Jude many have assumed that Jude must have been the earlier writing. Had Peter written first, then there would have been no need for Jude to write. But, they argue, such a leading apostle as Peter would not have used material from a writer who, if he was the Lord's brother, did not believe until after the resurrection (see Mk. 6:3; Jn. 7:5). This argument is far from conclusive. Jude could well have made a digest of Peter's letter to send to churches who had not received it, and there is no reason why Peter should not have used another source. Both he and Jude might have drawn on other material being put out to combat false teachers.

Fourthly, others argue that the teaching of 2 Peter bears the mark of a late date. In fact, the seeds of the false teaching attacked in this letter were present, as far as doctrine is concerned, in Colossae (Col. 2:18) and, as far as morals are concerned, at Corinth (1 Cor. 5; 6:12–20). On the other hand, the teaching in 2 Peter about Christ's return reflects (with 1 Peter) the hope of his coming held in the early days of the church. The godly are looking eagerly for it (3:12) and only the 'scoffers' are trying to dispose of it (3:4). This doctrine provides here the same motive for holy living as it does in the former letter (*cf.* 3:11–14 with 1 Pet. 1:7, 13, 17; 4:7, 13).

More recently, conservative scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the theory of pseudepigrapha raised a significant moral problem. False teachers in NT times had written under assumed names, and they had been

denounced for doing so by Paul (2 Thes. 2:2; 3:17). Later generations in the church also condemned the practice. It is unbelievable that a sincere writer could have included the false personal references of 1:1, 16–18 and 3:1 in a letter which lays such stress on holiness and truth (1:3–4, 12; 3:11, 17). Such a deceit could not have been accepted in a church which called its members to such high standards in every respect.

When and where was the letter written?

According to 3:16 it seems that a number of Paul's letters had already been published by the time Peter came to write. Some conclude from 1:12–17 that the gospels were by this time also in wide circulation and 3:4 is sometimes taken to imply that the first generation of Christians had already died by the time the letter was written.

References to 2 Peter in other writings show that, at the latest, it must have been written early in the second century. The heresy attacked in ch. 2 was still at a primitive stage, and this would argue for setting the date in the latter part of the first century. If we are prepared to accept Peter's authorship, then a date shortly before the apostle's death (1:14), somewhere in the sixties, seems most likely.

The letter gives us no clues as to where it was written. If we accept that Peter wrote it, and that he wrote his first letter in Rome (see the Introduction to 1 Peter), then this letter could also have well been written there.

To whom was the letter written?

From 3:1 it could be concluded that the letter was written to the same groups of Christians as 1 Peter. Otherwise, 1:1 suggests it was written for a wider readership, which would have included those who received the first letter and to whom 3:1 would then refer.

Those addressed are obviously Christian churches beginning to be undermined by the Gnostic heresy, and we know that this spread early in Asia Minor (see Colossians). These churches would have contained both Jewish and Gentile believers (see the Introduction to 1 Peter). Arguments about the recipients based on odd phrases in the letter are as inconclusive here as in the earlier letter, *e.g.* if 1:1 suggests Gentile readers, 3:2 can be used to argue for Jewish ones.

Is the letter a unity?

Suggestions have recently been made that the letter originally consisted of chs. 1 and 3, with ch. 2 inserted later. Others argue that each chapter circulated separately at first, with ch. 1 being the earlier letter referred to in 3:1, ch. 3 the reminder promised in 1:13, and ch. 2, again, a later addition. Another approach has been to attempt to isolate sections of the letter which are thought to be genuinely by Peter, and claim that other material was added by a later editor.

There are two strong arguments against these theories: no MS evidence supports the idea of any part of the letter at any time circulating on its own and all three chapters display a marked unity of style.

Why was the letter written?

Three main thoughts dominate the letter. First, the writer has not long to live in this world, and has a pastoral concern that his Christian friends should keep on growing in their discipleship; secondly, false teaching is getting abroad which could prevent this growth, and so must be denounced; and thirdly, the return of the Lord Jesus is certain, and his people must be ready for that. Peter touched on the first and last of these themes in his earlier letter. The second seems to be a major reason for writing 2 Peter, but is best placed in the perspective of Christian growth and destiny.

Is 2 Peter like other NT writings?

It takes only a casual reading to discover that 2 Peter contains most of Jude 4–18. This fact has given rise to the following theories.

Some say that Jude was written first. This is because Peter adds so much to Jude. If 2 Peter had been written first, then Jude would have added only a few verses to what was already in circulation. Jude could, however, have shortened Peter's letter to meet the needs of churches to which it had not originally been sent. Others who support the priority of Jude suggest that Peter softened the harsh tones of Jude, telescoped his metaphors and cut out his references to the Apocrypha. These arguments could be turned in reverse to say that Jude felt he had to rewrite 2 Peter to make the language more harsh, develop an obscure metaphor, and back the arguments with apocryphal references.

Others say that 2 Peter was written first, and they cite the arguments above which can be turned either way. Some point out that a man of Peter's standing is unlikely to have quoted from an obscure person like Jude. It is also argued that dangers foreseen by Peter as in the future (2:1) have been present for some time in Jude (4). But Peter is not consistent in his use of tenses, and in 2:10b–19 he speaks of these dangerous teachers as having already begun their work.

Others suggest there was a common source behind both 2 Peter and Jude. This alternative has been offered because of the problems with

both the above theories. While solving some of them, it still does not explain why Jude bothered to write if he was merely repeating so much of the original source. It is far more likely that he abridged 2 Peter to meet his own needs.

In all fairness it must be admitted that there is no final answer to this question of priority. 2 Peter also shows marked resemblances to other parts of the NT, and these are noted in the commentary below.

What does Peter say to his readers?

1 Peter was written to strengthen scattered groups of Christians being called on to face sporadic outbursts of suffering. 2 Peter was written to encourage Christians beset by two dangers: seducers (2:1) who were spreading false teaching, which would lead to immoral behaviour (2:2, 13–15; *cf.* Rev. 2:14–15, 20–24; Col. 2:8 – 3:17), and scoffers using the fact that Christ had not returned as an excuse for immorality (3:3).

Peter is firm to resist both groups by positive teaching. Just as the first letter emphasized the example of the Lord Jesus, this one underlines the facts of Jesus' life (1:16–18), the Christian faith as the way of truth (2:2) and the certainty of Jesus' return (3:10). In the light of this it is important for Christians to grow (1:5–8; 3:18) and to be preparing for his return (3:11–14). Evil desires are a snare (1:4; 2:10, 18; 3:5); by contrast the Christian is to be zealous for God's purposes (1:5, 10, 15; 3:14 all use variants of the root word for 'zeal'). We look for a new heaven and a new earth in which evil desires will be replaced by God's righteousness (3:13). In 3:1 Peter expresses his aim as being to stimulate wholesome thinking and he does this by summarizing the pattern of Christian growth in 1:5–8. His words in 1:10–11 give us the keynote of the letter. It is Christ-centred thinking, leading to God-directed living, which reassures us of our calling by God, and enables us to maintain an unbroken relationship with him. That spurs us towards the ultimate goal of the welcome into Christ's kingdom at his return.

These truths are just as important for the contemporary Christian, facing the pressures of a multi-faith society or the seductive teachings of the so-called New Age, as they were for those to whom Peter originally wrote.

See also the article Reading the letters.

Further reading

See Introduction to 1 Peter.

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Commentary

1:1–2 The writer greets his readers

As in the previous letter, Peter begins by introducing himself and his credentials in the way followed by letter-writers of the day. He then states the identity of those to whom he is writing, and sends them his Christian greetings. This time he adds a reminder as to where true grace and peace are to be found – only in *the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*

1 *Simon* (Gk. *Symeon*) is a straight transliteration of the Hebrew name as used in Acts 15:14. Use of *Simon* and *Peter* together (as in *e.g.* Mt. 16:16) reminds us of the change grace had brought about in the apostle's life. He calls himself *a servant and apostle* (1 Peter uses the second title only, Jude uses the first) and this emphasizes his authority as one who is only a slave, yet fully commissioned by the Master for his work.

Received is a word meaning 'obtained by lot' and implies grace, and not merit, as the source of this gift. The *faith* referred to here is the God-given ability to respond to his grace by personal commitment and trust (*cf.* Eph. 2:8–9). *As precious as ours* translates a word used only here in the NT. Contemporary writers used it to mean 'of equal standing', referring to those who shared the rights and privileges of citizenship. In that case it could reflect Acts 10:34–35 and Peter's realization that Jews and Gentiles share in the purposes of God. It is unlikely that the letter was written to Gentiles only (see the Introduction to this article and to 1 Peter). This could be further humility on Peter's part, reminding us that, though an apostle, he is still a sinner in need of the *righteousness . . . of Jesus Christ*, just as much as the newest converts among those to whom he is writing. However, the phrase *through the righteousness* may simply refer to the sheer fairness of God.

Our God and Saviour Jesus Christ appears to be a reference to Jesus alone, and so is important evidence for an early belief in the deity of Christ (*cf.* 1:11; 2:20; 3:18 and Tit. 2:13). *Saviour* as a title for Jesus appears mainly in the later writings of the NT, but was a regular emphasis in the early preaching of Peter (see Acts 4:12; 5:31). It is interesting that whereas in 1 Peter there are references to salvation (1:5, 9–10; 2:2) and being saved (3:20; 4:18), in this letter Peter concentrates on the Saviour.

2 *Grace and peace be yours in abundance* repeats 1 Pet. 1:2 (see the note there). *Through the knowledge* stresses here the means by which grace and peace can abound in the believer's life. In the early church there were false teachers who exalted knowledge as being superior to faith, so they were called Gnostics (from the Gk. *gnōsis*, 'knowledge'). In reply, orthodox writers stressed the importance for Christians to acquire *epignōsis* ('full knowledge'; the word used here) in order to combat this heresy. Such true knowledge is never mere speculation, as was the Gnostics'. It springs from a personal relationship with and experience of *God* in *Jesus our Lord* (see Jn. 17:3; Phil. 3:10).

1:3–11 A call to spiritual growth

Peter says the best answer to false teaching is for Christians to be making progress not only in their understanding of the faith but also in living it out. This is also important because God has provided believers with all the resources necessary to make such growth possible and such progress is a means of assuring Christians of their standing before God.

1:3–4 The means have been provided by God

Peter is so carried away with enthusiasm for his subject that the Greek is not at its most polished, but the sense is plain. Progress in the Christian life is made possible and practical by two factors: the power of God and the promises of God. God makes known his calling to the person who responds to Jesus Christ. In knowing him believers have freely at their disposal all the resources necessary to enable them to work out the process of sanctification – growing into the likeness of Jesus. These resources are assured to us by the very promises of God.

3 *By his own glory and goodness* refers to the divine character and high moral quality of the life and person of Jesus which drew Peter to follow him and formed the basis of preaching to those who had not seen Jesus in the flesh. Some translations read 'to his own glory . . .' seeing this as the purpose for which we are called, but this is less likely. Peter may be thinking of the transfiguration when he speaks of the glory of Jesus, and of his own call (Lk. 5:1–11) when he mentions his goodness, but it is more likely that he has in mind the total impact of Jesus on anyone coming to faith (*cf.* Jn. 1:14). The same word is used in this sense in 1 Pet. 2:9 where it is translated 'praises'.

4 *Through these* refers to Christ's *glory and goodness*. Because of the quality of his or her life the believer can receive the promise of sharing the very nature of God. This teaching accords

with Rom. 6, that by virtue of who Christ is, and through faith-union with him, the Christian enjoys the possibility of a life here and now free from sin and its defilement – a life constantly growing more like Jesus. *Corruption* is the steady process of dissolution to which all things mortal are subject. It came into *the world* as a direct result of the fall (Gn. 3),which in turn arose from humankind's giving way to *evil desires*. The phrase may be understood in this way, or may refer to the inevitable consequences of sin in every generation. In either case, God's way of *escape* lies in seizing hold of his *promises* (such as Jesus gave in Jn. 15: 1–18 and Jn. 16, and Peter quoted in 1 Pet. 2:9) and thereby obtaining a share in his own *nature*. (*Through them* means as you apply them to life.) The thoughts behind this phrase can be traced in verses such as Jn. 1:12 and 1 Jn. 3:2–3.

Notes. 3 *His* would appear from v 2 to refer to Jesus. *Granted* (translated in the next verse as *given*) is an unusual word (used only here and in Mk. 15:45), emphasizing the freeness of the gift. *Life* is the abundance of eternal life which Jesus gives (Jn. 10:10). *Godliness* is the Christlike character such life should produce.

1:5–9 The aim is to become fruitful disciples

Because Christians have these resources (the power and the promises) Peter urges the importance (*make every effort*) of the goal (growth to be like Jesus) and spells out the steps towards it:

love
brotherly kindness
godliness
perseverance
self-control
knowledge
goodness
faith

Faith must express itself in action (*goodness*) and this experience deepens our *knowledge* of God. Knowing him will deepen our knowledge of ourselves and where we need to exercise *self-control*. This in turn calls for *perseverance*, which is developed by keeping in view the worthwhile goal of v 4 – *godliness*. This attitude to God facilitates a new openness to our fellow-Christians (*brotherly kindness*), and this in turn blossoms into unreserved and unrestricted *love* – the coping-stone of the whole edifice (*cf.* Col. 3:14). Christians thus face two staggering possibilities. On the one hand, we can work to develop these qualities in increasing measure in our lives, and thus find a deepening experience of the Lord leading to a fruitful Christian life. On the other, we can ignore this provision, but this response is *short-sighted*, even *blind*, as it overlooks the wonder of the fact of our salvation.

Notes. 5 *Add* has the idea of lavish provision, and is a verb used in classical times to describe rich citizens financing a theatrical performance or equipping a warship for the state they were proud to belong to. Sharing the life of God should lead to producing and being the finest and most attractive character for him. *Goodness* may point to the process of assimilation hinted at in v 3. The connection between practical Christian living and developing *knowledge* is referred to again in v 8 (see Jn.7:17; Col. 1:10). 6 *Perseverance* is the ability to hold fast to one's goal in spite of opposition or even persecution (*cf.* the use of the same root in Heb. 12:1–3, where it is translated 'perseverance' and 'endured'). 7 *Brotherly kindness* is emphasized as a fruit of the new birth in 1 Pet. 1:22; 3:8 and is what Jesus required (Jn. 13:34–35). 9 *Short-sighted and blind* seems a strangely mixed metaphor. Peter may mean that such people are *short-sighted* because they cannot look back far enough to remember the sins from which they were delivered. They are also being *blind* to the glorious possibilities of spiritual development that exist in Christ.

1:10–11 The ultimate goal is full and final salvation

This leads Peter to urge his fellow-Christians to demonstrate the reality of their own standing with God (by following the first path outlined above). In this way they will be kept from failure in this life and be welcomed enthusiastically into the Lord's eternal kingdom (see Mt. 25:21–23). Peter is not here teaching that our salvation is to be earned by good works, nor that we can forfeit our relationship to Christ once we have genuinely responded to his call. Rather, he is reminding us that the development of a genuinely Christlike character is the only proof (to ourselves as well as to others) of our Christian status even though at times we sadly fail. This is consistent with the teaching of Jesus (Mt. 7:16–21), James (Jas. 3:2), John (1 Jn. 1:7–10; 3:10) and Paul (Gal. 5:16–25).

Notes. 10 *Eager* is the same root as *make every effort* in v 5 and may be a deliberate reference back. *Make your calling and election sure* is the tension which runs right through the first letter (see 1 Pet. 1:2, 17; *cf.* Phil. 2:12–13). Here too Peter stresses that we who have *received a faith as precious* (1:1) have yet to avoid being ineffective and unproductive in Christ's service. Further, he hints that one can even *fall* from grace (Jude 24 uses the verb in the same sense). It does not here refer to sinning (as in Jas. 3:2) so there is no teaching of sinless perfection here. 11 Instead of this gloomy prospect, the Christian should look forward to a *welcome* into Christ's *eternal kingdom*. The last phrase must refer to its full inauguration when Jesus returns.

Receive a rich welcome translates the verb used for 'add' in v 5 above (see the note there). God's lavish reward is a spur to lavish living for him.

1:12 – 2:22 Reasons for emphasizing these things

Peter explains in detail why he finds it necessary to write in this vein. Believers need constant reminders of the importance of spiritual progress. Peter knows he has not long to live and, as an eyewitness, wishes to stress that the faith we share is founded on the facts of history. Furthermore, these events of Jesus' life are a fulfilment of what the prophets foretold. Mention of them leads to a long warning about the false prophets who will arise in the church just as they did among the OT people of God. The danger of their teaching and the error of their ways are then fully exposed.

1:12–15 Peter's personal appeal

Peter was conscious of his lifelong commission to urge his friends to grow spiritually. By writing now he is ensuring that they will have a further reminder after his death. Although Christian people *know* the truth, it is the constant task of the preacher and teacher to be setting it before them.

Notes. 12 *Established* is the same verb as in 1 Pet. 5:10 ('make ... strong'). **13** *Tent of this body* indicates the temporary nature of our time on earth (*cf.* 2 Cor. 5:1–8). **14** The word translated *put it aside* portrays taking off clothes, and again reflects 2 Cor. 5:1–8. *Made clear to me* may refer to Jn. 21:18–19, or to a more recent revelation. **15** *Departure* is the Greek *exodos*, used in Lk. 9:31 of Jesus' impending death. Its use here shows that Peter may have had the transfiguration experience in mind. Death is the departure from this mode of existence, leading believers to the welcome (11) into Christ's eternal kingdom. *Always be able to remember* may refer to this letter, or to Peter's desire to supply Mark with the information on which he based his gospel.

1:16–18 The faith is founded on facts

Peter's confidence about his own future, and his reason for encouraging his readers' spiritual growth, rests on personal experience of the power and presence of the Lord Jesus, and not on tales dreamed up by human wisdom. Jesus was revealed in time and space, and Peter can testify to having heard the Father's voice affirming Jesus at the transfiguration.

Notes. 16 *Cleverly invented stories* (Gk. 'myths') were a feature of the theological systems of false teachers (see 1 Tim. 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Tit. 1:14). *Power and coming* are both words which could refer to Jesus' life on earth. Because 'coming' is used in the NT to denote the second coming of Jesus (*cf.* 3:12; Mt. 24:3, 27; 1 Thes. 3:13) some suggest the whole phrase must point to his 'coming in power' (*cf.* Mk. 13:26; 14:62). But *power* could refer to the transfiguration and *coming* to his return (Mk. 9:1–13 has a similar connection of thought). Certainly, the transfiguration anticipates the unveiling of the full glory of the divine Christ at his return. Similar claims to be an 'eyewitness' are made in 1 Pet. 5:1; Lk. 1:2; Jn. 1:14; 1 Jn. 1:1–3. *Majesty* is used in the NT only to describe divine glory (Lk. 9:43; Acts 19:27). **17** The voice from heaven, speaking both at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (Mk. 1:11; 9:7) combines the prophecies of Ps. 2:7 (the coronation of the Son of God) and Is. 42:1 (the ordination of the Suffering Servant). Peter omits the final clause, summoning all to listen to Jesus Christ. The *mountain* was *sacred* because it was the scene of a divine revelation (as in Ex. 3:5; 19:23). The wording need not suggest a tradition that developed at a later date.

1:19–21 These events confirm the words of the prophets

The events to which Peter has been referring were seen by the apostles as a remarkable fulfilment of the OT (*e.g.* Mt. 1:22; 2:5–6). Jesus himself had pointed this out to them (Lk. 22:37; 24:26–27, 44; Jn. 5:39) and Peter had emphasized it in his preaching (*e.g.* Acts 2:25–36; 3:22–24). Since so much prophecy has been fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus, Christians must pay all the more heed to what remains to be fulfilled at his second coming. This is especially so, as these prophecies were not the result of human speculative thinking (as the myths of v 16 were) but of God's revelation by his Spirit.

19 Interpretations of *more certain* vary. Some think that the argument is that the word of prophecy is more certain than the voice from heaven. Others take it as above, that the fulfilment of prophecies of the first coming make it easier to believe those yet to be fulfilled at the second coming. *Light* is a well-known picture of Scripture (Ps. 119:105, 130) and this world as a *dark place* without the true light present (Jn. 8:12). *The day* refers to the day of Christ's return (3:10; Rom. 13:12). *Morning star* (Gk. *phōsphoros*) is the star that brings the dawn as was used in antiquity to refer to the planet Venus. Its use here picks up the star symbolism used of Jesus (Nu. 24:17; Lk. 1:78; Rev. 22:16; *cf.* Mal. 4:2). *In your hearts* is a difficult phrase in view of the fact that Christ's coming will be objective and visible. The point is that Christ's return will bring light and joy to the hearts of his own. It is possible, but less likely, that this phrase goes with what follows: *above all, you must understand* ('in your hearts ...').

20–21 These two verses are of great importance for our understanding of how Scripture came to us. While God used men, with all their different backgrounds, interests and temperaments (see *e.g.* Je. 1:6–7; Am. 7:14–15; Lk. 1:1–4) to convey his word, at the same time he guided them in speaking and writing it to us (see, *e.g.* Je. 1:7; Am. 7:14–16; Mk. 12:36).

Above all, you must understand is picked up again in 3:3. *Prophecy of Scripture* is distinct from the false prophecies to be alluded to in 2:1. *Interpretation* is a noun not used elsewhere in the NT although the verb is used in Mk. 4:34 of the explanation of parables. The statement is sometimes taken to assert that prophecy can be understood by the individual only as he is guided by the Spirit (some would say Spirit-filled church) who guided the writers. This requires an unnatural meaning for the verb *came about* and it seems better to understand that the reference is to the origin rather than the understanding of Scripture. This is supported by the NIV: no prophecy of Scripture arises from the prophet's own interpretation of events past, present or future. *Carried along* like a ship borne by the wind is a graphic picture of the Spirit at work.

2:1–22 We must be on our guard against false prophets

Having stressed the importance of looking forward to the fulfilment of Spirit-given prophecy Peter gives a warning about the false prophecies that will be put forward. This was also a feature of Jesus' teaching (*e.g.* Mk. 13:22–23). This chapter should be compared carefully with Jude 4–18.

2:1–3 Their danger. False prophets are dangerous on three counts: their method is underhand, and leads to shameful ways, bringing the faith into disrepute, their teaching is a complete denial of the truth and their destiny is to bring destruction both on themselves and their followers.

1 *The people* seems, in context, to refer to the OT people of God. The activities of false prophets are mentioned in Dt. 13:1–5; 1 Ki. 13:18; 22:5–23; Je. 5:13, 31; 6:13. The falsity of the teachers may refer to the content of their teaching, or to their claim to be teachers. Probably both are implied. *Secretly* is an undertone of the verb, which suggests underhand dealing. *Heresies* translates the Greek *haireseis*, which means simply 'chosen beliefs'. In Christian usage it came to refer to a wrong belief deliberately chosen (rather than a right one revealed by God). *Destructive* is a Hebrew phrase highlighting the consequences both for the holder of such views and for any orthodox beliefs they might have. *Sovereign Lord* is applied to Christ only here and in Jude 4, but is used of God in Lk. 2:29; Acts 4:24 and Rev. 6:10. *Bought* refers to the ransom aspect of the work of Christ (*cf.* Mk. 10:45 and 1 Pet. 1:18).

2 *Shameful ways* reflects the Greek plural (see 1 Pet. 4:3 and the note there). These false teachers claimed that knowledge was superior to practice, so they argued that it did not matter how Christians behaved, as grace could forgive every sin, no matter how great. The NT writers unanimously denounce this view. *The way* was an early name for the Christian faith (Acts 9:2). In 1 Pet. 3:16 and 4:3–5 Peter faced the fact that orthodox Christians will be reproached for their good behaviour. Now he sorrows that the immorality of pseudo-Christian sects will bring the true faith *into disrepute*. 3 *Exploit* has commercial connotations. *False* (*Gk. plastoi*, hence plastic, fabricated) means made up to suit the ears of the hearer (1 Thes. 2:5). *Not . . . sleeping* is a vivid metaphor (*cf.* the NEB 'waits for them with unsleeping eyes'). Retribution for anyone leading another astray may not be swift, but it will be meted out.

2:4–10a Their condemnation. Peter develops the theme of v 3 more fully, drawing on early incidents in the history of God's people to show how his purposes both of salvation and of condemnation are sure and will be completed. Noah and Lot are cited as examples of how God can deliver his own when their ungodly contemporaries are destroyed. The fate of the fallen angels points to the fact of a final judgment when human rebellion, culminating in the unbridled indulgence of self and rejection of God's authority, will be duly punished. Together the three examples show God's punishment of pride, disobedience and immorality.

Notes. 4 See Gn. 6:1–4 and Jude 6, where the writer draws attention to pride as the cause of the *angels'* downfall. *Hell* (see the NIV mg.) in Greek mythology refers to Tartarus, the lowest and most terrible part of hell, reserved especially for those superhuman beings who rebelled against the supreme god. The MS readings of *gloomy dungeons* vary between a word meaning a 'pit' or 'cave', and another word (*siros* instead of *seiros* in Greek) meaning 'rope' or 'chain' (see the NIV mg.). The latter is in line with Jude 6. The imagery is drawn from apocryphal writings. 5 On *Noah* see Gn. 6:8 – 9:28 and 1 Pet. 3:20 where there is also mention of the eight being saved. *A preacher* (Gk. *kēryx*, 'a herald'; see the note on 1 Pet. 3:19) suggests that Noah was commissioned to call his contemporaries to repentance. Another apocryphal work (the book of Jubilees) describes Noah's preaching. 6 Jesus alludes to the *example* of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn. 18:16 – 19:28) in Mt. 10:15; 11:23–24; Lk. 17:29. 7 To be *lawless* is the consequence of having no fear of God and

therefore feeling completely free to live without principles, indulging our sinful desires. **8** *He was tormented* (NEB 'tortured'): originally meant to be tested for genuineness. Godly people living in an ungodly world must be prepared to prove the reality of their faith. **9** *If this is so* – the natural conclusion is that the Lord knows how to hold the unrighteous (which will include the false teachers of vs 1–3) for the day of judgment. Before making this point Peter picks out from these examples the positive aspect of God's mercy, and his ability to deliver his own. This emphasis is absent from Jude. On *rescue . . . from trials* see 1 Pet. 1:6–7; 5:10) **10** *The corrupt desire of the sinful nature* [flesh] is lit. 'those who go after flesh with a desire for pollution'. A similar phrase in Jude 7 links this with the condemnation of sodomy. *Authority* is Greek *kyriotēs* ('lordship') and is most naturally taken as a reference to the Lordship of Christ (*cf.* 1 Pet. 3:15). Alternatively, if it refers to the authority of the *celestial beings* mentioned later in v 10, then it may be the authority of an order of angels to which Jude 8; Eph. 1:21 and Col. 1:16 might also refer.

2:10b–22 Their character. The apostle now emphasizes the dangerous influence of these people by describing their true nature more fully. They are insolent (10–12), licentious (13), immoral (14) and greedy (14b–16). He then condemns them on three counts: what they offer may sound attractive, but it lacks any substance (17); their approach uses the lever of sensual pleasure to attract new Christians back to the ways of the world (18) and it is totally deceptive, because the 'freedom' it offers leads only to the bondage of sin (19). In this passage the language is complicated and unusual as the writer piles word upon word to heighten the enormity of their behaviour. In the contemporary world this kind of teaching is becoming familiar today under the umbrella title 'New Age'.

Notes. 10b *Bold* (lit. 'daring') is the spirit that has no concern for the consequences for oneself or others. *Arrogant* (lit. 'self-pleasing') describes the attitude of being so obsessed with one's own wishes that nothing else can be taken into consideration. *Celestial beings* may refer to angels (see the note above on v 10a), in which case the false prophets may be slandering them in the way in which the men of Sodom slandered the angels who came to the house of Lot (Gn. 19:1–26). Alternatively, it could be that they used the behaviour of the fallen angels in Gn. 6:1–4 as a justification for their own immorality, and slandered the unfallen angels by holding that such behaviour was typical of all angels. The translation 'dignities' in the AV and RV shows that the word could be used of church leaders. **11** *Angels*, by contrast, have the right to complain to God of the behaviour of these arrogant mortals, but refuse to do so. This may be a reference to the kind of incident described in Jude 9. **12** As such behaviour is irrational (the literal meaning of *brute*), like that of *beasts*, then the destiny of these men will resemble that of beasts, to be *caught and destroyed* (see Jude 10). Peter stresses the ignorance of those who criticize the Christian way of life. *Will perish* (lit. 'will be destroyed in their destruction') could be translated in this way, or it could describe the final consequences of the corruption they have allowed into their own lives (*cf.* J. B. Phillips, 'will most certainly be destroyed in their own corruption'). **13** *They will be paid back* is a play on words. Green suggests the right metaphor with, 'being defrauded of the wages of fraud'. Sin attracts with its offer of pleasure, but in the end those who indulge in it find no pleasure at all. Carousing *in broad daylight* is a feature of extreme dissipation. For the Christian the day is the time for work (*cf.* Jn. 9:4; Rom. 13:13; 1 Thes. 5:7–8). *Blots i.e.* 'spots' are something disfiguring and painful. This word and *blemishes* occur in the NT with a negative prefix to describe the character of Christ and what his church should be (see *e.g.* Eph. 5:27). *Pleasures* (Gk. *apatais*) is a word implying pleasures that deceive people into sin. Some MSS read *agapais* (love feasts; see the NIV mg.), which is used in Jude 12. 1 Cor. 11 tells us that the love feast had early become a subject of abuse.

14 *Eyes full of adultery* is a compressed phrase for 'always looking for a woman with whom to commit adultery'. Phillips has 'their eyes cannot look at a woman without lust'. Because they are not content with sinning themselves they must also *seduce* others *i.e.* lead them astray (*cf.* Rom. 1:32). *Accursed brood* (lit. 'children of curse') is a Hebrew phrase (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:14). They have rejected Christ, who alone can redeem them from the curse. **15–16** *Balaam* is the classic example of the false teacher who leads people astray for personal gain. Nu. 22 – 24 shows how Balaam tried time and again to prophesy against Israel for Balak's reward. In the end, after failing to destroy Israel verbally, he is shown as doing so morally (Nu. 31:16; *cf.* 25:1–9; Rev. 2:14). Balaam is the prototype of the false teacher who seeks rewards or popularity by persuading people that God's standards can be lowered. Peter here expands one example cited in Jude 11. Balaam's behaviour is called *madness*, because it is contrary to all good sense.

17 *Springs without water* do not give the satisfaction they appear to offer. *Mists* may refer to the false teachers' instability: their teaching shifts with every gust of wind (*cf.* Eph. 4:14). The phrase could also suggest their failure to give the 'refreshing rain' they promise, or

something which does no good, but only obscures the light. *Blackest darkness* is a word used from classical times to denote the darkness of the regions of hell (see v 4). **18** *Boastful* conveys the idea of something larger than it has any right to be. *Entice* is translated *seduce* in v 14 (see comments there). False teachers frequently make for the newly converted , those who are *just escaping* and who are not yet rooted in the faith. **19** These teachers offer *freedom* from the obligation to serve Christ and grow in him (*cf.* 1:3–11). In doing so they overlook the fact that this kind of licence is only the old bondage of sin all over again (*cf.* Rom. 6 and Jn. 8:31–36). **20** *They* could refer either to the teachers or their victims, possibly both. See the note on *knowledge* in 1:2. *Worse off* may refer to Jesus' words in Mt. 12:45 and Lk. 11:26, though others see a link with Lk. 12:47–48. **21** *It would have been better* ... because if they have rejected God's way in Christ there is no other way of salvation (*cf.* Heb 6:4–8; 10:26–31). *Way*: see on v 2. *Of righteousness* stresses the moral consequences of following Christ. **22** The first proverb is found in Pr. 26:11, and the second appears to come from a source outside the Bible, the ancient *History of Ahikar*. Peter may also have in mind Mt 7:6.

3:1–16 A reminder of the coming of the Lord

Peter began his letter by encouraging his readers to grow in godliness. At 2:1 he digressed because he was so concerned about the damage false teachers can do in preventing such growth. Now he returns to the theme of godly living, putting forward the second coming of Jesus as a further motive for it. Before doing so he stresses the certainty of that coming, and the reasons why God has delayed it.

3:1–2 A call to remember the promise

Peter points out the unity of this letter with the former one, and the consistency of his teaching with that of the prophets and apostles. Throughout, his aim is for his readers to cultivate a Christian mind (*wholesome thinking*). His heart warms as he turns from the false teachers to feed the flock of God, his *Dear friends*.

Notes. 1 *My second letter* could refer to 1 Peter or 2 Peter 1 and 2 (if written separately, see the Introduction to 1 Peter) or an earlier letter, now lost. In general terms, these verses could describe 1 Peter. *Stimulate* is the same word, translated *refresh*, as in 1:13. *Wholesome thinking* contrasts with the ideas described in ch. 2. The phrase has a moral sense ('pure') as well as meaning 'uncontaminated by prejudice'. **2** Peter also emphasizes the unity of the OT with apostolic writings in 1:19–21 and 1 Pet. 1: 10–12. *Command* appears to refer to Jesus' teaching as a whole set out by the apostles (Jn. 14:26). *Our Lord and Saviour* is the final authority behind both prophets and apostles (*cf.* Eph. 2:20). *Your apostles* is taken by some as a reference to 'those who brought you the message'. It is more likely to emphasize their reliability than their function – 'those you trust, who have taught you the orthodox faith' as opposed to the false teachers (*cf.* Jude 17).

3:3–4 A warning to ignore scoffers

Peter knows how quickly despondency can spread in a fellowship, so he warns his readers not to be put off by those who wrongly argue that God's seeming inactivity means that he is not going to act. Jude 18 attributes this warning to the apostles themselves.

Notes. 3 *First of all, you must understand* is the same phrase as 'above all ...' in 1:20. *Scoffers*, together with the reference to their *evil desires*, suggests that the false teachers of ch. 2 are still in mind. Those who give way to their own lusts always mock at any incentive to noble living. *Our fathers* could apply to early Christian leaders such as Stephen, James the son of Zebedee *etc.* or to the older members of the first generation of Christians who died between AD 30 and 60. Paul wrote about the same problem in 1 Thes. 4:13–18, so this is no argument for a late date of writing. The reference to the flood in vs 5–7 makes it more likely that the OT patriarchs are in mind.

3:5–7 A reason not to ignore this word

In actual fact, the scoffers' argument in v 4 is false. They have conveniently forgotten that God did intervene in judgment at the time of the flood. This proves that the stability of nature is no argument, that God will not interrupt its steady rhythm, and that he can again carry out his own promises in his own time.

Notes. 5 *By God's word* (*cf.* Gn. 1:3; Ps. 33:6; Jn. 1:3; Heb. 11:3). *Water* was one of the original created elements out of which God formed the earth (Gn. 1:2). It is one of the means by which he sustains it still. **6** *By these waters* obviously refers to the flood (Gn. 6 – 9). **7** The *present* heavens and earth contrast with the new heavens and earth of the future (Rev. 21:1). On *kept* see on 2:9.

3:8–9 Reasons why God is delaying

Since God's promise of another intervention in human affairs cannot be rejected, Peter gives two factors which explain why he is delaying such intervention as long as he likes: time is of no consequence to him and he is giving time for people to come to repentance.

Notes. 8 *Do not forget* contrasts with the wilful forgetfulness of the false teachers in vs 5–6. *With the Lord* quotes Ps. 90:4, pointing to the fact that God is outside time, and so is in no hurry to work (*cf.* Hab. 2:3). Quoted by some as an argument from universalism, this verse in fact teaches the opposite. It shows that after the second coming, ushering in God's judgment, there will be no further opportunity for repentance.

3:10–13 A reassertion of the fact and its consequences

The argument concerning the certainty of Christ's coming is rounded off with a further reminder of the fact and its suddenness. Peter then comments on the consequences this will have for the physical world as we know it and the consequences knowledge of this should produce in the life of the believer. Since the new heavens and new earth will be the home of righteousness, we ought to be 'making ourselves at home' here and now.

Notes. 10 *Like a thief* picks up Jesus' teaching in Mt. 24:42–43. *The heavens will disappear* is also mentioned by Jesus (Mk. 13:31). *Elements* could equally apply to the substances of which the world is composed, or to the other heavenly bodies. *Everything*, lit. 'the works', could refer to buildings and other material achievements, or to deeds in the moral sense; it depends on which of the readings of the verb is taken. *Laid bare* (lit. 'found out') is the most likely reading of the text, other possibilities being 'burned up' (see the NIV mg.) and 'disappear'. Then *everything* would be the deeds of humankind. **11** Jesus (*e.g.* Lk. 12:35–40), Paul (Rom. 13:11–14; 1 Thes. 5:3–11) and Peter (1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7–11) all use the last judgment as an incentive to godly living. **12** *Speed its coming* is preferable to 'as you wait eagerly' (NIV mg.) stressing the importance of human activity in evangelism, *etc.* (*cf.* Acts 3:19–21; 17:30–31) during the period of divine forbearance. **13** Examples of *his promise* are Is. 65:17–25 and 66:22–23.

3:14–16 A call to right behaviour, supported by an appeal to Paul's writings

This leads to a renewed call to holiness, in expectation of the Lord's return and in gratitude for his forbearance. These are themes about which Paul also wrote, and mention of him leads to a warning that certain people (it could be the false teachers of ch. 2) are ready to misunderstand his words.

Notes. 14 *Make every effort* picks up the advice of 1:10. *To be found* may refer to the being *laid bare* of v 10. *Spotless* and *blameless* contrasts with the teachers of 2:13 (see also Jude 24). *Peace* is the content of a heart right with God. **15** We should *bear in mind* God's *patience* because he is giving time for unbelievers to be saved and for believers to be working out their salvation (*cf.* Phil. 2:12–13). *Just as . . . of these matters* probably refers to general teaching about the second coming. It may, however, emphasize the last point about God's delay being due to his forbearance and not negligence. *Wisdom that God gave him* is a good reminder of the supernatural origin of Paul's letters (*cf.* 1 Cor. 2:13; 3:10). **16** *All his letters* need not suggest that the collection of Paul's letters was already complete, but that by now Christian communities were beginning to gather them. *Hard to understand* could mean 'ambiguous', 'obscure' (NEB), or capable of misinterpretation. Paul had suffered misrepresentation at the hands of those who taught that Christians do not need to keep the law (Rom. 3:8). Since *ignorant and unstable people* behave in this way, it is all the more important for the Christian to grow in knowledge and in building a firm foundation for the Christian life (*cf.* 1:3–11). The phrase *the other Scriptures* can be used to argue that Paul's writings were either included in, or excluded from, Scripture. Peter's teaching (1 Pet. 1:10–12; 2 Pet. 1:19–21; 3:2) shows that Paul's letters possessed the qualifications for acceptance as Scripture (the apostolic authority of the writer and the guidance of the Spirit as he wrote – see 1 Cor. 2:13; 4:17; 2 Cor. 13:3–10; 1 Thes. 2:13).

3:17–18 A call to be steadfast and grow; Peter ascribes the glory to God

Peter now draws the letter to a conclusion by reverting to the great theme on which he began (1:3–11). He appeals to his readers, negatively, to guard against the lawless people who will try to carry them away with them into error, and positively, to go on making spiritual progress. Christ alone has done everything to make this possible, so to him we give all the glory now, as we shall throughout eternity once he returns. So be it!

Notes. 17 *You already know this* could mean that this advice was given before the advent of the false teachers (*cf.* the future tense of 2:1), or more likely refers to the fact that Peter is alerting his readers before this teaching has actually reached them. The rejection of a moral code for Christians was certainly a live issue when Romans and 1 Corinthians were written. Secure *position* is from the same root as Peter uses in 1 Pet. 5:10 (*cf.* Lk. 22:32). **18** *Grace and knowledge* are both divinely bestowed gifts which enable growth along the moral and mental planes. This letter has shown that the Christian should be making parallel progress in both. *Jesus Christ*

can help his followers to make this progress, since he is both *Lord and Saviour. To him* refers to Christ and is an unmistakable assertion of his deity. *For ever* is lit. 'to the day of the age' when Christ will come to usher in eternity. *Amen* is possibly a later addition to the text. 'So be it' is certainly the response of a believing heart after reading through this letter.

David H. Wheaton

1 JOHN

Introduction

This writing is usually called an 'epistle' or letter, but it has neither address nor signature. Indeed, it lacks so many characteristics of a letter that some scholars take 'epistle' as no more than a courtesy title; they see it as a written sermon rather than a letter. Against this, however, now and then there appear passages which justify us in seeing it as a real letter (*e.g.* 2:1, 26), although a letter with some unusual features. Perhaps the explanation is that it was originally meant for more than one community.

Authorship

The traditional view is that the author was John the apostle and the marked tone of authority throughout the letter agrees with this. No other author was suggested in antiquity and perhaps only an apostolic figure could have sent out such a letter without putting his name to it. The writer was evidently an eyewitness of at least some of the things Jesus did (1:1–3; the views that 'we' means 'all Christians', or that it is simply a literary device seem untenable). The style and thought-forms resemble those of the fourth gospel, and all agree that there must be some connection. It has usually been thought that the one author wrote both, in which case everything hinges on the authorship of that gospel. Some critics, however, hold that the author of one of these writings was a disciple of the author of the other; it is not uncommon for people to think of a 'school' of Christians of a Johannine type, one of whom wrote this letter. Such critics hold that there are differences of style (*e.g.* fewer compound words in the letter) and of theology (*e.g.* a different view of the significance of the death of Jesus). While such differences should not be minimized, they do not seem great enough to demand diversity of authorship. They may be accounted for by the different purposes of the two writings and their different forms. 'The similarity between Gospel and letter is considerably greater than that between the third Gospel and the Acts, which are known to have come from the same pen' (J. R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John, TNTC* [IVP 1988], p. 28). Raymond E. Brown, who thinks it probable that there were different authors, agrees that the evidence is such that the gospel and the letters may have been written at different times by the same man (*The Epistles of John* [Doubleday, 1982], pp. 14–30). No conclusive argument for different authors seems to have been produced.

Some critics see 'John the elder' (*cf.* 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1) as the author of the gospel or of the letter (or 2 and 3 John, or Revelation), some of both. This rather shadowy figure, however, is not a likely candidate. It cannot be demonstrated that a John the elder, as distinct from John the apostle, ever existed. And if he did, the reasons for connecting him with this writing are not convincing, not nearly as convincing as the ancient tradition which ascribes it to the apostle.

While, then, the letter makes no claim about its authorship, and while the case cannot be proved beyond doubt, the most reasonable hypothesis is that it came from the pen of the apostle John.

Occasion

It is clear from the letter that its readers were being confronted with a form of false teaching which denied the incarnation. This error was evidently held by people who had been in the church but who had now seceded, for John speaks of them as 'going out' (2:19; 4:1). In the second century there appeared systems of thought now called Gnosticism, systems which took over both Christian and pagan ideas. They emphasized knowledge (Gk. *gnōsis*), and taught a way of salvation known only to the initiates. This included release from the material prison of the body, and an upward rise to God. There is dispute about how early Gnosticism appeared. It is very probable that it was much later than the time when this letter was written, but it did not spring out of empty air. Many of the teachings later included in the fully developed Gnostic systems were in circulation in the first century.

John was opposing some such system, a system that included the idea that matter is inherently evil. God, being good, can have nothing to do with evil matter it was claimed. Therefore, he could not have been incarnate in Jesus Christ. Some held that Christ only *seemed* to live in the flesh (they were called 'Docetists' from the Gk. *dokein*, 'to seem'). But it is probably too much to affirm that John is confronting Docetists, for there is nothing in this letter about a phantom body or the like. What he opposed seems to have been an early stage of the heresy that was to develop into Docetism.

People were denying the incarnation and John took this as very serious. Its effect was to take the heart out of Christianity, for if Christ did not really become a man and did not really die for us, then no atonement has been made for our sins. So John emphasized the reality of the incarnation. He also stressed the importance of upright living, and it appears that in their emphasis on knowledge some of the heretics held that conduct did not matter much. John made it clear that conduct is very important.

It would be wrong, however, to think that this letter is no more than a refutation of heresy. There is a very positive aim, as John tells us himself. He writes 'so that you also may have fellowship with us . . . to make our joy complete' (1:3–4). He makes this more specific when he says, 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life' (5:13). We may contrast this with the aim of the gospel: 'these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name' (Jn. 20:31). Whereas the gospel has an evangelistic aim, the letter is thus directed rather at bringing believers assurance and a true knowledge of what the faith implies. 'The Gospel contains "signs" to evoke faith (20:30–31), and the letter tests by which to judge it' (J. R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, TNTC [IVP, 1988], p. 26). John wrote to take away his readers' anxieties as they came to realize what it meant to be a Christian. 'In the first Epistle, John sets forth three marks of a true knowledge of God and of fellowship with God . . . These marks are, first, righteousness of life, second, brotherly love, and third, faith in Jesus as God incarnate' (*Search the Scriptures*, 1967, p. 289). These three themes recur constantly.

The letter is dominated by two great thoughts: God is light (1:5), and God is love (4:8, 16). God is the source of light to the minds and of warmth to the hearts of his children. These children should accordingly live up to the highest standard; there is constant emphasis on this (*e.g.* 2:1–6; 3:3, 6, 9; 5:1–3). But the letter contains no harsh admonition. Rather, the writer addressed his readers with fatherly care and tender concern: 'little children'; 'beloved'; 'little children, let no one deceive you'; 'little children, keep yourselves from idols'.

Date

There is very little by which to date the writing. The relation to the gospel is not definitive, for scholars differ as to whether it was written before or after the gospel. In any case the date of the gospel is uncertain. Many date 1 John towards the end of the first century, but J. A. T. Robinson argues for AD 60–65 (*Redating the New Testament* [SCM, 1976]). This may be right, but we cannot be sure.

See also the article Reading the letters.

Further reading

D. Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters*, BST (IVP, 1988).
M. M. Thompson, *1–3 John*, IVPNTC (IVP, 1992).
J. R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1988).
I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1978).
R. Law, *The Tests of Life* (Baker Book House, 1968).
S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC (Word, 1984).

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Commentary

1:1–4 Prologue

These verses, one highly compressed and complicated sentence in the Greek, form a prologue to the whole. John outlines some of the ideas he will develop as the letter unfolds.

1 The opening Greek word, translated *that which*, is neuter. It thus appears to refer to the gospel message rather than to a person. But John goes on to speak of hearing, seeing and even touching, which makes it necessary for us to think of Jesus. This is the case also with *the Word of life*, for while this term might well mean the gospel message, we must bear in mind that Jesus is called both 'the Word' and 'the life' (Jn. 1:1; 14:6), it is said that 'in him was life, and that life was the light of men' (Jn. 1:4). This unusual opening, then, reminds us both of the gospel and of him on whom the gospel centres.

From the beginning shows that the gospel is no afterthought. It was always in God's plan. John moves on to the factuality of it all, which is his main point. The gospel is concerned not with some mythical figure like the shadowy forms in the Greek mysteries, but with a genuine historical person. He had been *heard* and *seen* and *touched* (*cf.* Lk. 24:39; Jn. 20:20, 24–27). There is a steadily increasing emphasis on the reality of Jesus. John is referring not to visions, but to physical existence. So he refers to that *which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched. We* is used frequently in this letter (it appears in 51 of 105 verses according to Brown, *Epistles of John* p. 158). The change of subject from *we* to *our hands* may be no more than stylistic, but there may be an emphasis on the physical contact; it was what *our hands* did.

2 John has the habit of emphasizing an idea by the simplest of devices, repetition. Here he begins a little aside by taking up *life*, the last word of v 1, and repeating it three times in three lines. It is *life* that he is writing about, but not life in general terms. It is the life that *appeared* that is his interest; he is clearly referring to the coming of Jesus who could describe himself as 'the life' (Jn. 14:6). And not only did the life appear; the writer can say *we have seen* it. He has already spoken of seeing it (and will do so again in v 3; he loves to hammer in an idea). Further, he and those with him who saw it *testify to it*, and they *proclaim it*. He has already spoken of it as 'from the beginning'. Now he puts the same thought another way when he speaks of *the eternal life*. And he carries on with his repetitions when he says that the life *appeared*. In the gospel Jesus is called 'the life' (Jn. 14:6) and similarly here it is Jesus to whom witness is borne and who is proclaimed. This might be our conclusion also from the expression *with the Father*, where the construction is the same as that used of 'the Word' in Jn. 1:1. *Father* is, of course, the characteristic Christian designation of God. It is found twelve times in this letter.

3 Once again John speaks of what *we have seen and heard*. We should not overlook his emphasis on being an eyewitness nor the fact that this is linked with *proclaim to you*. It is impossible to make good sense of this if we think of *we* as meaning 'we Christians'. It must mean only those believers who actually saw Jesus in the flesh. These *proclaim* what they saw to the rest of the church. Something of John's aim follows: *so that you also may have fellowship with us*. He immediately goes on to speak of *our fellowship* as *with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*. The basic idea in fellowship (Gk. *koinōnia*) is that of possessing something in common, *i.e.* of partnership or sharing. It is often used of business affairs (*cf.* Lk. 5:10). Christian fellowship means sharing the common life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It binds believers to one another, but the important thing is that it binds them also to God. We should not miss the fact that the fellowship is ongoing. The apostles had fellowship with Christ and thus with God. Then they brought others to believe and thus brought them into the same fellowship (a process which carries on to this day). The fellowship in question is *fellowship . . . with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*. Thus, early in the letter *Jesus Christ* is linked closely with *the Father*. One of John's strong emphases is on the high place of Christ and he loses no time in bringing it forward.

4 There is some emphasis on both *we* and *write*. The message is in a precise and abiding form and it is written by those who had full authority to write. There is some MS support for reading 'your' joy, but *our joy* is probably correct. It is only as John brings his friends into the kind of fellowship of which he has just written that his own joy is full, and, of course, the same is true of them. 'Your joy' and 'our joy' go together. For both, true joy comes only from fellowship with God.

1:5 – 2:6 Fellowship with God

John has made it clear that his purpose is to bring his readers into fellowship with God and with other believers. He proceeds to deduce from the nature of God the conditions of fellowship.

1:5 God is light. *This is the message* marks

what follows as important, indeed it sums up the Christian message. That message is derivative (*we have heard from him*), and is not due to original thinking on the part of the apostles or others. The meaning of *him* presents us with a problem and one that will recur throughout this letter. There is no obvious antecedent. The Father and the Son were both mentioned in v 3 and either could be in mind here. Perhaps it is a little more likely that the Son is meant, but we can scarcely say more; the two are certainly closely connected.

The content of the message is summed up in the words *God is light* (*cf.* Jn. 8:12; 9:5) to which is attached (in a manner reminiscent of the fourth gospel where the positive and the negative are often linked like this) *in him there is no darkness at all* (*cf.* Ps. 27:1; Jn. 1:4–9). *Light* occurs often in the gospel, but there it tends to be linked to the Son rather than, as here, to the Father. It is found six times in this letter (1:5, 7 twice; 2:8, 9, 10). To say that God is light is to draw attention to his uprightness, his righteousness. Light is a natural symbol for attractive righteousness, just as darkness is for the blackness of sin. There is an emphatic double negative with *darkness*; there is no darkness whatever in God; he is all *light*. There is probably also the thought that our lives are exposed to the illumination that streams for God. Nothing is hidden from him (*cf.* Ps. 90:8). Because he is light it is important that his people 'walk in the light' (7).

1:6–7 The first error. John is fond of bringing out his point by making a supposition and here he has a string of clauses beginning with *if* (6–10; again in 2:1). He deals with three obstacles to fellowship, the first of which centres on the claim that we have fellowship with God. John has already said that his purpose is that his readers may enjoy this fellowship (3). Now he makes it clear that words alone do not bring fellowship with God. **6** If anyone claims to have this fellowship but walks ('continues to walk') *in the darkness*, then, since God is light, he lies (*cf.* 2:21–22). More than a comfortable religious feeling is needed. We must test our feelings by the revelation God has given. The error John is denouncing is that of refusing to accept the light God has given in the revelation made through the prophets, apostles and others, preferring the darkness of one's own way. This positive is driven home with the negative: 'we do not do the truth' (the NIV paraphrases the Greek with *do not live by the truth*). This unusual expression is also found in Jn. 3:21 (and in the Qumran scrolls). We speak of 'telling the truth' but truth can be a quality of action as well as of speech. The truth that God has made known must be lived out in the lives of his servants. **7** Now comes the contrary supposition, namely that we really *walk in the light*. Walking is a metaphor for the whole way of life. It brings out the truth that the Christian should make steady, if unspectacular, progress. To *walk in the light* is to live righteously day by day. Here it is reinforced in the strongest way possible: *as he is in the light* (*cf.* Mt. 5:48). It is just not good enough to live with our eyes firmly fixed on some decent but merely human standard; the Christian is the servant of God and thus his standards are God's standards. The Christian lives in a God-like way. After the denial of fellowship with God for those who walk in darkness (6) we expect the thought that those who walk in the light really do enjoy fellowship with God. Instead we find that they *have fellowship with one another*. They will, of course, have fellowship with God (*cf.* v 3), but the way John puts it brings out the truth that the fellowship believers enjoy with one another is of great worth. To this John adds, *the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin* (or 'every sin', the Gk. could mean either). The word *sin* occurs in this short letter seventeen times (seventeen times also in John's gospel; the only NT writings with more occurrences are Romans and Hebrews). The human name *Jesus* is coupled with *his Son*, which brings out the Saviour's uniqueness; we should miss the significance of neither the name nor the title. *Purifies* is in a continuous tense; it conveys the thought of a purification that takes place day by day, not a once-for-all cleansing. John is not saying that believers attain sinless perfection (*cf.* vs 9–10), but that when they 'walk in the light' (*i.e.* live close to God) their sins are cleansed. Even the greatest of saints need cleansing. This cleansing comes from the atoning death of Jesus; *the blood* does not mean life released from the flesh as has sometimes been claimed, but life yielded up in death.

1:8–9 The second error. **8** John puts the second error simply: *if we claim to be without sin*. More literally this is 'if we say that we have no sin', an unusual expression (found elsewhere Jn. 9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11; the NIV paraphrases). 'To have sin' means more than 'to commit sin'; it refers to the inner principle of which sinful acts are the outward manifestation. Sin persists. Sin clings to the sinner. The positive statement is reinforced by a following negative, *the truth is not in us* (as also in the preceding and following statements). When we say that we have no sin *we deceive ourselves* (we certainly deceive no-one else!), *and the truth is not in us*. Truth is viewed dynamically; it can take up its abode in people who love truth. But to say such a false thing as that we have no sin makes it impossible for truth to dwell in us. Modern fallacies claim that sin is a disease or a weakness, something due to heredity or environment, necessity or the like; people come to regard sin as their fate, not their

fault. Such people deceive themselves. **9** In contrast we may *confess our sins*. The plural is significant: we confess specific sins, not simply that we sin. And because God is *faithful and just* (*cf.* Dt. 32:4; Mi. 7:18–20; Rom. 3:25) he forgives. He can be thoroughly relied upon. Nothing is said as to the way in which he will *purify us from all unrighteousness*, but v 7 is still in mind. It is the blood of Jesus that cleanses. Nothing else can remove our stains.

1:10 The third error. The next supposition is that *we have not sinned*. All God's dealings with people rest on the basis that they are sinners in need of salvation (*cf.* Rom. 3:23). To deny that we have sinned is *to make him out to be a liar*. Put negatively this means *his word has no place in our lives*. In many parts of the Bible the 'word' has a dynamic character. It effects God's purpose (*cf.* Is. 55:11). Those who deny that they are sinners thus make out that God is a liar and they show by that fact that God's effectual word is not in them.

2:1–2 The propitiation for sins. 1 John often calls his correspondents 'children'; here he has the affectionate diminutive, 'my little (NIV *dear*) children' (Gk. *teknia*; the word occurs 7 times in 1 John and once, perhaps twice, in all the rest of the NT). He writes *so that you will not sin*. Earlier John told them that he and those with him proclaimed the message so that his readers may enjoy fellowship with them (1:3), and that he has written so that his joy may be complete (1:4). This third statement fits in with the others for sin disrupts fellowship and destroys joy. Sin and vital Christianity are incompatible (*cf.* 3:6, 9; 5:18). But, while Christians do not live in sin, they never in this life become completely sinless (1:8). The closer we come to God the more sensitive our consciences become and the more we realize that we are sinners. A paradoxical consequence of this is that we now come to appreciate the fact that in our sinful state we are unworthy to approach our great and holy God. We need help. And John assures us that we have the help we need. When we sin, *we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence* (Gk. *paraklētos*). The term has a legal ring; it often means the counsel for the defence; it is the friend at court. 'The image is that of the royal court at which a suppliant needs someone greater than himself, one who has the ear of the king, to plead his cause' (J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* [Black, 1973], p.64). Its use shows that sinners are in no good case; they are in the wrong with the Father and they need deliverance. Their deliverer is *Jesus Christ, the Righteous One*. We might have expected 'the Merciful One' or the like but it is consistent NT teaching that God forgives in a way that is just. Forgiveness does not avoid the moral law but establishes it.

2 Christ is also 'the propitiation for our sins' (AV/KJV). Most modern translations obscure the meaning by choosing terms that refer to the removal of guilt or punishment, whereas the word (Gk. *hilasmos*) means the removal of wrath (*cf.* the NIV mg.). There is a divine wrath against all sin (*cf.* Rom. 1:18) and forgiveness does not mean ignoring this. Propitiation, the turning away of anger, is not the whole story of Christ's saving work, but it is a genuine and important part of it, a truth which much modern theology overlooks. And Christ made ample provision; his propitiation avails *for the sins of the whole world*.

Those who object to the idea of propitiation often do so on the grounds that this means pitting Jesus against the heavenly Father. This, of course, is not the case. The Father and the Son are at one in the way salvation is effected as in all else. There is a divine wrath against all evil and if sinners are to be forgiven something must be done about this. One aspect of God's forgiveness concerns his anger against sin (Ps. 78:38), and one aspect of Christ's atoning work concerns the divine wrath against evil. Both Father and Son see sin as serious, and in his atoning work Jesus was doing the will of the Father (*cf.* Heb. 10:7).

2:3–6 Obedience. 3 Now comes a test by which we can know whether, in spite of our failures, we are in right relationship with God, and this test is whether *we obey his commands* (again in v 4; 3:22, 24; 5:3; *cf.* 5:2). If we really *know* God, this will have a powerful effect on our daily lives. Knowledge is an important theme in this letter; the verb 'to know' (Gk. *ginōskō*) occurs twenty-five times (and *oida*, another verb meaning 'to know', fifteen times). The knowledge of God is not some mystic vision or intellectual insight; it is manifested when *we obey his commandments*. Obedience is not spectacular, but it is at the basis of all true Christian service. **4** Anyone who claims to have this knowledge but *does not do what he commands*, John says forthrightly, *is a liar*. He underlines this by adding, *the truth is not in him*.

5 By contrast, *God's love is truly made complete* in the person who *obeys his word*. This does not mean that Christianity is a form of legalism. It means that God has revealed himself in Christ who is his Word (1:1; Jn. 1:1), and that the coming of Christ is a challenge to our whole way of life. We are challenged to abandon all self-seeking and to take up our cross; nothing less will do. We anticipate that John will say something about the obedient person's having the truth of God in him. Instead we find that *God's love* is in that person and not only in him but 'truly made perfect' (REB) in him. *Love* (Gk. *agapē*) is stressed throughout this letter. It occurs eighteen times, which is more than in any

other book in the NT (next is 1 Corinthians, fourteen times). In such a short book this is very significant. Love is primarily seen in the divine self-giving of Christ (4:10), but the term can also signify the human response to what God has done; perhaps both are in mind here. Love is seen in obedience, for love delights to do God's will.

At the end of the verse John introduces a new concept: knowing that we are *in him* (in God? in Christ? John probably does not put much difference between the two at this point). He has spoken of fellowship with him (1:3), of walking in the light (1:7) and of knowing him (2:3), but we should not see these as so many different and unrelated ideas. If we are *in him* we enjoy fellowship with him, we know him, and we walk in the light. **6** We can be sure of all this if we *walk as Jesus did*. The Greek means 'he did' but the NIV is probably right in saying *Jesus did*.

2:7–17 The new commandment

2:7–11 Loving and hating. 7–8 *Dear friends* (Gk. *agapētoi*, 'beloved'), an expression that occurs six times in this letter, accords with the writer's stress on love. He does not spell out what he means by the *command*, but there is no doubt that he refers to the command to love (*cf.* 4:21; Jn. 15:12). This is no novelty but *the message you have heard*. It is fundamental to the Christian way and thus was taught from the first. But there is always a freshness about it and thus it is *a new command* (*cf.* Jn. 13:34). The old commandment has a new urgency for those for whom Christ died.

The command was first fulfilled by Christ (*its truth is seen in him*), who puts a like love into the hearts of his followers (*and you*). Thus, our attitude to other people shows whether we are in *the darkness* that is *passing away* or in *the true light* that is *already shining*. To live in love is to walk in the light, to walk surefootedly, for love rids the heart of all that would make us stumble. Love and light go together. **9–11** If anyone *hates his brother*, he is on the wrong track (let him say what he will), a track that can lead only to ruin for hatred blinds the eyes. The repetition of *the darkness* is important; we must not miss the connection between hatred and darkness.

2:12–14 The family of faith. Two sequences, each with a threefold address, to *children*, *fathers*, and *young men* now follow. Considerable ingenuity has been expended on the way we should understand these terms and on the change of tense from 'I write' to 'I wrote' (in the Gk. of vs 13c, 14). It may be argued that knowledge accords with fathers (those old in the faith), and strength with young men. But as all the qualities ought to be found in all believers it is best to regard the division as a stylistic device, adding emphasis. 'All Christians are (by grace, not nature) children in innocence and dependence on the heavenly Father, young men in strength, and fathers in experience' (C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* [Hodder, 1946], pp. 38–39). John's readers have the forgiveness of sins, the knowledge of God, the word of God abiding in them, and victory over the evil one.

2:15–17 Love for the world. 15 John emphasizes *world* by using the word three times in this verse and another three times in the two succeeding verses. It is an important concept (in this letter he uses the term twenty-three times). *Do not love the world*, he says, and some see a contradiction here with 'God so loved the world' (Jn. 3:16). But that passage speaks of God's love for all people, whereas this one is concerned with setting one's heart on worldliness. John makes two points: first, love for the world in this sense is incompatible with love for the Father (*cf.* Jas. 4:4), and secondly, in any case the world and all that is in it are temporary.

16 *The cravings of sinful man* (lit. 'the lust of the flesh') points to the gratification of our fleshly desires. *The lust of his eyes* is the strong desire for what is seen, for the outward form of things; it is the lust after the superficial. *The boasting of what he has and does* (lit. 'the boastfulness of life') is the empty haughtiness of the worldly-minded. (With these three things compare the three things that led Eve to disobey God; Gn. 3:6.) None of these has its origin in God (*not from the Father*). They are all *from the world*, that world that is but a passing show on its way to ruin. *Everything* points to totality: evil is found throughout the world. **17** By contrast, whoever *does the will of God lives for ever*. Obedience is an important part of eternal life.

2:18–27 The Christian and the antichrist

2:18–19 Many antichrists. 18 There is no article with *hour*. John is saying '*this is last hour*', by which he probably means 'this is a last hour'. Human history proceeds by periods of slow unfolding until a crisis is reached, an age is ended, a new age begins, and we say, 'It can never be the same again.' John is affirming that such a last hour has come. He sees evidence in the appearance not simply of *the antichrist*, but of *many antichrists*. The early church clearly expected that a mighty figure of evil, the *antichrist*, would appear at the end of time (*cf.* 'the man of lawlessness', 2 Thes. 2:3). John uses the term four times (and once in 2 John) but he is not interested in the future evil individual. His concern is for his readers, and he stresses for them the fact that the spirit of antichrist is already abroad. The situation is the same today.

19 These many antichrists had been members of the church. They had belonged to the

visible organization, but John is quick to say *they did not really belong to us*. Their membership had been purely outward. This surely implies the doctrine of 'the church invisible' though that terminology is centuries later.

2:20–21 Knowledge of the truth. 20 *You have an anointing from the Holy One* is another way of saying that all have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. *The Holy One* is an unusual expression but there can be no doubt but that it refers to the Holy Spirit. The result is that 'all of you have knowledge' (NRSV; the Gk. does not add 'the truth' as the NIV does; the mg. 'you know all things' has less support). The illumination given by the Spirit means that in Christianity there is no enlightened elite on whom all others depend. Every believer has knowledge. 21 John has this truth well in mind as he proceeds to the central teaching of the heresy he is opposing. While we do not know exactly what the false teachers taught, they clearly denied the reality of the incarnation. There were some false teachers in early days who held that there was a divine Christ who came down on the man Jesus at his baptism, but left him before the crucifixion. John was not perhaps opposed by people holding exactly this belief, but they held something like it.

2:22–23 The lie. 22 They denied that *Jesus is the Christ* and this is fundamental. The person who goes wrong here is not to be depended on anywhere; that person *is the antichrist – he denies the Father and the Son*. The evidence that in Jesus of Nazareth God and humanity are indissolubly united is so strong that anyone who will not accept it is fundamentally astray and is guilty of the radical lie. 23 Without a right view of the Son we cannot have a right view of the Father. If Jesus is not the very Son of God and one with the Father, then it is not the love of God that we see revealed in his life and death; in that case it would be only the love of a good man that is seen. It is only as we receive Christ that we become children of God (Jn. 1:12), so that if we reject him we are not members of the family of God. We then have no right to call God our Father.

2:24–27 Remaining in God. 23 *What you have heard from the beginning* points us back to the simple gospel message. If John's readers let that *remain* (the Gk. verb occurs twenty-four times in this letter) in them then they *will remain in the Son and in the Father*. 25 In this way God's promise of *eternal life* is fulfilled. 26 What the false teachers were saying would lead the new believers away from the truth. That is why John is writing; he will not allow the false teachers to wreck the lives of the new believers who mean so much to him. 27 John has already spoken of *the anointing* (20). It is owing to the enlightenment given by the Holy Spirit within them that believers have the knowledge that matters and that they remain in God.

2:28 – 3:10 Children of God

2:28–29 Confidence. John appeals to family relationship with 'little children' (Gk. *teknia*) and urges his readers to behave in the way that is appropriate at Christ's second coming and which shows that they have been *born* [better, 'begotten'] *of him*. Believers are not simply people who are trying to live a little better. They have been radically renewed, born all over again. The habitual practice of goodness is evidence of what God has done in them.

3:1–3 What we shall be. 1 The wonder of it all grips John. 'Look!' he says (the NIV paraphrases with *How great*), 'Look at what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God!' And not only do we have the name; John goes on, 'And we are!' He leaves us with no doubt but that the divine call is an effectual call; we are what God calls us. This has a consequence: *The world does not know us*. The incompatibility of the world and the Christian way comes again and again in John's writings (*e.g.* Jn. 15:18 – 16:4). The world's failure to know Christ's followers is not to be wondered at for *it did not know him*. Grammatically *him* should refer to the Father, but clearly John is referring to Christ. 2 His recognition of our present sonship does not blind John to the fact that the best is yet to be. *When he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*. Grammatically *he* and *him* should refer back to God but it is more usual to speak of seeing Christ. Probably not too much should be made of this, however, for anyone who sees the Son sees also the Father (Jn. 12:45; 14:9).

3 To see God is to be transformed. *Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself*. This is the only place in John's letters where the word *hope* occurs; his concern in this letter is mainly with the believer's present situation rather than his future hope. But this passage shows that John is aware of the importance of hope. He speaks of the hope as being 'on' (rather than 'in') *him*; the believer's hope has a secure base. Again it is not certain whether *him* means God or Christ; but perhaps here John is not making a firm distinction between them. They are at one in this matter. He is making the point firmly that the believer's hope rests on a solid foundation and that this has consequences for Christian living. To know God does not bring spiritual complacency, but purity of life. It is the pure in heart who see God (Mt. 5:8).

3:4 The necessity for right conduct. The false teachers seem to have held that knowledge was all-important and that conduct

was a minor matter. But John insists that sin is evidence of wrong relationship to God. *Sin*, he says, *is lawlessness*, where the Greek construction implies that the two words are interchangeable. The law here is, of course, the law of God and the essence of sin is disregard for that law of God. It is the assertion of oneself against God's revealed way, the preference for selfishness over the service of God. It is unlikely that John is referring to the law in the OT, the Torah, for he nowhere mentions this law and he appears to be writing to Gentiles, who would not easily pick up such a reference. He means rather a defiant violation of God's moral law. Sin sets the sinner in opposition to God.

3:5–7 Christ and sin are incompatible. 5 Christ came to *take away our sins*. He is completely hostile to evil, and *in him is no sin*. 6 This has effects in the Christian for *No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning*. We must not water down statements like this; the Christian has no business with sin and must never be complacent about it, even about occasional sin. But we should also notice that the present tense in Greek often has a continuous force and this appears to be its significance here: 'No-one who continually lives in him makes a habit of sinning' and again, *No-one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him*. John is not writing about individual acts of sin, but about habitual attitudes. The life we live reveals the source from which we draw our life. 7 To hold otherwise is to be deceived. It is not a matter of right thinking or of wide knowledge or of holding that the body is unimportant so that it does not matter what the body does as long as the soul is pure. John firmly sweeps aside all such specious arguments. *He who does what is right is righteous*. And the standard is Christ: *just as he is righteous*.

3:8–10 Children of the devil. 8 The other side of this coin is that *He who does what is sinful is of the devil*. Both *does* and *has been sinning* point to the habitual practice. John is writing about the habitual trend of the life. He goes on to say that *the reason* for Christ's coming was *to destroy the devil's work*. *Destroy* is not specific; it tells us that Jesus came to do away with the devil, but does not say how. But clearly the believer must not do the works of the devil. The follower of Jesus must side with the destroyer of the devil.

9 *Born of God* points to divine action. There is something supernatural about the life of believers. They have been regenerated by nothing less than the power of God. Again we must give the present tenses their full force: *No-one who is born of God will continue to sin*. Indeed, *he cannot go on sinning*. John has already repudiated the doctrine of sinless perfection (1:8, 10) and we must not interpret these words in such a way as to contradict those. But we must see that sin and the Christian are radically opposed. 'John is arguing rather the incongruity than the impossibility of sin in the Christian' (J. R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, TNTC [IVP, 1988], p.131; see also his Additional Note, pp. 134–140). Should a Christian sin that would be an act completely out of character. On this occasion John gives a reason for the believer's inability to sin: *God's seed remains in him*. It is very unusual to have the metaphor pressed in this way (this is the one occurrence of *seed* in this letter, but it has the verb rendered *born* ten times). It emphasizes the fact that there is a divine power at work in the believer. *Remains* shows that this is not occasional. It is God's continuing gift to his people. It is possible to take *God's seed* in the sense of 'God's children' and *in him* as meaning 'in God' (as Moffatt, for example, does). But this view is less likely and it is rejected by Marshall, Stott and others. 10 John rounds off this section by contrasting *the children of God* and *the children of the devil*. The test is whether we do right and love our brother or not.

3:11–18 Love one another

3:11–15 The opposite of love. 11 Again John insists that love is the first command (*from the beginning*). It is at the very heart of the Christian *message*. 12 Look at what the lack of love does: *Cain, who belonged to the evil one ... murdered his brother*, the logical consequence of his refusal to love (*cf.* Mt. 5:21–22). John's answer to the question *why did he murder him?* is a penetrating critique of fallen human nature. It was no offence of Abel's but his *righteous* life in the face of Cain's bad life. (This is the last use of the 'righteousness' words in the letter; from this point the 'love' words abound.) Evil people do not love the highest when they see it. It accuses them and they crucify it. 13 Thus, John can go on: *Do not be surprised* ['stop marvelling' is the force of it], *my brothers, if the world hates you*. Christians usually find it difficult to understand this. When they act from the best of motives, with love in their hearts for their fellows, when they look for nothing for themselves, but offer the priceless gift of the gospel, the world does not respond with gratitude. It hates believers.

14 The love–hate contrast continues; life and love go together. *We know*, John says; the fact that all Christians have knowledge is important and he brings it out many times. *We have passed from death to life* (*cf.* Jn. 5:24) is expressive and unusual. Unbelievers live in a condition that can only be called *death*. Not so believers. Believers have passed clean out of death and they live the life that really is life. The test whereby we may know that this has happened is that *we love our*

brothers. John keeps coming back to this thought. He reinforces it here with the corresponding negative: *Anyone who does not love remains* (the verb signifies a continuing state) *in death*. **15** This is spelled out with an emphatic declaration about hate: *Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer*. Jesus said that the lustful look is adultery and that the angry word breaks the command 'Do not murder' (Mt. 5:21–22). John follows this example and goes to the deep roots of our actions. Hatred is of the essence of murder, and *no murderer has eternal life in him* ('to take life is to forfeit life', J. R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, TNTC [IVP, 1988], p. 146). This does not mean that a murderer cannot repent and find forgiveness. It means that no-one in whom is the attitude that brings murder is the possessor of eternal life. The two are mutually exclusive.

3:16–18 Love is practical. **16** We can *know what love* (in the specifically Christian sense) *is* only because of what we see on Calvary, where *Jesus Christ* (John actually says 'that one' but the NIV correctly understands this to refer to Jesus) *laid down his life for us*. Since the Christ to whom Christians owe their inspiration died in this way for us, we in our turn *ought to lay down our lives for our brothers*. No less a quality of love is demanded of the Christian.

17 The actual laying down of life has been rarely called for (even in the first century most Christians were not called upon to die for their faith). But love has other outlets and it is constantly needed in daily life. The word translated *material possessions* (Gk. *bion*; only found here and in 2:16 in this letter) is not commonly used in this sense; it more usually means 'life'. But the meaning here is plain. *See* (Gk. *theōre*) means more than a passing glance. The person sees his brother for long enough to be sure of the situation. But he *has no pity on him*, more literally 'shuts up his entrails from him'. The Greeks held that this part of the body was the special location of the emotions so that the use of the term indicates that the person was emotionally involved. For the Greeks in general this meant that the person was angry (though sometimes other emotions were in mind). For the Christians, however, this same expression conveyed the idea of being moved with compassion. If anyone fails to show compassion this shows that *the love of God* (which might mean either God's love for us or our love for God) is not *in him*. **18** Again we have the address *Dear children*, as John urges them to real love. Love is not simply a matter of the words we say. *Actions* and *truth* count for more than *words* or *tongue*.

3:19–24 Confidence

John reassures sensitive consciences. Believers should live before God not in trembling anxiety, but in calm confidence.

19 Another test: this is the way we know *that we belong to the truth* (Gk. 'we are of the truth'), the only place in the letter where the expression is applied to people (though it is used of words in 2:21). It signifies complete and utter honesty, and points to the truth of the gospel. To know that we belong to the truth is to receive assurance. **20** If *our hearts condemn us* this is not the significant thing. It is God's condemnation or approval that matters and *he knows everything*. He knows our motives and those deeds of love for which we may not dare to take any credit (*cf.* Mt. 25:37–40). He knows that we are his and it is this that is important, not our misigivings. (A less likely interpretation is that God, the Judge, knows all our misdeeds and will punish us.) **21** The promises of God are such that there is no reason for uncertainty. We can rely on God and *have confidence* before him. Since we are his we have nothing to fear. **22** Receiving answers to prayer does not at first sight follow on from the fact that our heart does not condemn us. But confidence is common to both, and answered prayer inevitably increases our confidence. Both *obey* and *do* are in continuous tenses. Power in prayer does not come from occasional bursts of obedience, but from lives of habitual obedience. Further, believers do *what pleases him*. This goes beyond the keeping of the commandments. Just as in the Sermon on the Mount there is a concern for the spirit of the commandments; it is not enough to keep the letter of the law.

23 *His command* is defined in terms of faith and love. The singular may indicate that 'but one thing is needful'; there is no great list of burdensome requirements. Further, faith and love are included in the one command; they belong together. Faith is *in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ*, where *the name* stands for the whole person; it is faith in all that Jesus is and does. The second part of the commandment is that we *love one another*. Love and the reciprocal responsibility of believers are two of the great themes of this letter. *As he commanded us* reinforces *his command* and emphasizes the fact that God is not indifferent to the way we live. The tense of *believe* (the aorist) points to the decisive act of faith, while *love* is in the present tense, signifying the continuing attitude. **24** After the singular of v 23 we return to the plural, *his commands*. All who keep them *live in him, and he in them*. This mutual indwelling is another characteristic theme of this letter. How do we know that it has taken place? *By the Spirit he gave us*. The Spirit is given (not earned), and the Spirit gives assurance.

4:1–6 The spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood

How can believers tell those who are truly inspired from those who falsely claim that the Spirit is in them? The problem was not new, for there were false prophets in OT times, and again, Paul had had to give a ruling on when a person was speaking 'by the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 12:3).

1 *Many false prophets have gone out into the world* (*cf.* Mt. 7:15; 24:11, 24; Acts 13:6). The religions of antiquity commonly claimed to have spirit-possessed men, but John warns that not everyone who claims to speak under inspiration is to be regarded as truly inspired. Believers must not accept every claim to inspiration, but *test the spirits*. That the *false prophets* had *gone out* may well mean that they had been church members but had left the church (2:9). **2** The test is the attitude to Jesus Christ. If *the Spirit of God* is in the claimant to inspiration he will affirm *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh*. More exactly he 'acknowledges Jesus as Christ come in the flesh'; the human Jesus is nothing less than the divine Christ. *In the flesh* underlines the reality of the incarnation; it is not simply that Jesus took human nature, but *flesh* (*cf.* Jn. 1:14; 2 Jn. 7). The spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has so come *is from God*. This is not a human discovery but something God reveals. **3** But there is such a thing as a *spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus, i.e.* a spirit that does not acknowledge 'that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh' (2); to deny the incarnation is to deny Jesus. The spirit that refuses this confession is *not from God*. In fact it is *the spirit of the antichrist*. John has already said that there are many antichrists (2:18) and has given something of a definition: 'he denies the Father and the Son' (2:22). The thought here is similar: the essential point about *the antichrist* is his refusal to acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, 'come in the flesh' (2). John's readers appear to have understood the antichrist's coming as future, but John sees it as a present reality; his *even now*, his *already*, and his *in the world* combine to emphasize the present.

4 But there is no need for Christians to be fearful. *You* is emphatic; believers are set in strong contrast to the antichrists. Believers *are from God*, and they *have overcome*. This short letter has the verb 'to overcome' six times, which is more than any other NT book other than Revelation (seventeen times); the note of victory is unusually prominent. Here the verb is in the perfect tense, which shows that the victory is more than a passing phase; it is decisive and continuing. It comes about because *the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world*. The first *one* could be any member of the Godhead; all that we can say is that it is a divine person. The second cannot be any other than the devil. John is saying that God is more powerful by far than the devil and that those in whom God dwells accordingly overcome evil. **5** Once again John repeats a word for emphasis; *world* is the last word in v 4 and it occurs three times in this verse. It is with *the world* that his opponents are associated: they are *from* it, they *speak* from its *viewpoint*, and it forms their audience. **6** Christians should not be surprised if such people do not *listen* to them. They are of the wrong party. But Christians do have their hearers. *We* is emphatic and sets those who are *from God* in strong contrast with others. There is also a contrast in the hearers; those who are *from God* are set over against *whoever is not from God*. Since this is the way *the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood* (Brown translates, 'Spirit of Deceit') are known it is a fair inference that these spirits live in the people previously indicated.

4:7–21 God is love

Love is very important for John and he puts emphasis on it throughout this letter. Here he does this by drawing attention to the fact that love is rooted in God, who is, in fact, love.

4:7–12 Love one another. **7** John reinforces *let us love one another* with the reminder that *love comes from God*. Love, as Christians understand it, is not a human achievement; it is divine in origin, a gift from God. If anyone loves in this sense it shows that that person *has been born of God and knows God*. **8** The negative underlines the point: *Whoever does not love does not know God*. The reason for this is one of the greatest statements in the whole Bible: *God is love*. This means more than 'God is loving' or that God sometimes loves. It means that he loves, not because he finds objects worthy of his love, but because it is his nature to love. His love for us depends not on what we are, but on what he is. He loves us because he is that kind of God, because he is love. **9** This kind of love is not found everywhere, or indeed anywhere as a human achievement. We know it only because God *showed* it when he *sent his one and only Son into the world*. His purpose in doing this was to give us life. Life in the full sense comes to us *through him* alone.

10 The real meaning of love and the real source of life are discerned only in the cross. It is *not that we loved God*. We will never find what this love is if we start from the human end (*we* is emphatic; not that *we* loved). We find it in that God *loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice* (better as the NIV mg. 'the one who would turn aside his wrath'). To see what love

means we must see ourselves as sinners, and thus as the objects of God's wrath, and yet as those for whom Christ died. 'So far from finding any kind of contrast between love and propitiation, the apostle can convey no idea of love to anyone except by pointing to the propitiation' (J. Denney, *The Death of Christ* [Hodder and Stoughton, 1905], p. 276). It is one of the NT's resounding paradoxes that it is God's love that averts God's wrath from us, and indeed that it is precisely in this averting of wrath that we see what real love is. **11** This has consequences. When we see that God loves like this *we* (the word is emphatic) *also ought to love one another.* The mainspring of our love for other people is the divine love shown to us in Christ's atoning work. Christians should love, not because all those they meet are attractive people, but because the love of God has transformed them and made them loving people. They should love now not because attractiveness in other people compels their love, but because, as Christians, it is their nature to love. **12** Love for other people is very important as is clear from the fact that it is this love and not love for God that shows that *God lives in us.* That *no-one has ever seen God* (*cf.* Jn. 1:18) does not deny the visions in the OT (*e.g.* Ex. 24:11). But such visions were partial and incomplete. It is in Christ that we see God. And when we love, God lives in us. Indeed, *his love is made complete (i.e.* reaches its aim) *in us*, a staggering statement.

4:13–16 Living in love. **13** John has already told us that it is 'by the Spirit' that we know that 'he lives in us' (3:24). He now adds the thought that *we live in him.* Both are important and both are emphasized in this letter. **14** As in 1:2 the writer appeals to what *we have seen.* The thought of testimony looms larger as we approach the end of the letter. The verb 'to witness' occurs in 1:2, here, and four times in ch. 5, while the noun 'witness' is found six times in ch. 5. The content of the testimony is that God *has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world* (an expression found only here and in Jn. 4:42 in the NT). *Saviour* covers all aspects of Christ's work for sinners, and *world* the totality of the race. It is a great salvation. **15** But not all are saved, Christ's atoning act is adequate for the whole world, but it is necessary to confess *that Jesus is the Son of God* if one is to experience that salvation. Then there follows a mutual indwelling of God and the believer.

16 We do not read elsewhere of 'knowing' and 'believing' love (the NIV has translated the Gk. *pepisteukamen* with *rely on*, but the meaning is 'we have believed'). We may fairly say that the thought of 'knowing' love is found, as in v 10, but to 'believe the love God has for us' is a most unusual expression. The love of God is never demonstrated in such a way that the worldly-minded have to see it. It is the people of faith and the people of faith only who see it. John repeats the great thought of v 8, *God is love*, and he draws the conclusion that to live in love is to live in God. To love sinners is never a human achievement and where this is found it shows that God is present.

4:17–21 The perfecting of love. **17** The presence of God in us is the way love is 'perfected among us' (NRSV). This is with a view to *confidence on the day of judgment*, and confidence on that day is the ultimate in confidence. *In this world we are like him*: we are children of the Father and Jesus is our model. The world did not welcome Christ and it does not welcome Christ's people. But on the day of judgment the Judge will understand all.

18 The thought of confidence is developed with the repudiation of *fear.* This word occurs three times in this verse and the corresponding verb once, but neither is found elsewhere in the letter; there is emphasis here on fear. Believers need not be afraid, for *perfect love* throws *fear* out. *Fear* and *love* are incompatible, *Fear*, John proceeds, *has to do with punishment*, but God's *perfect love* reassures us. His love ensures that we are saved, not punished. If we fear, that shows in itself that we have not been *made perfect in love* (the perfecting of love brings confidence even on the day of judgment; v 17).

19 *We love*, in the sense of specifically Christian love, the love of the unworthy which proceeds from the nature of the lover and not the worth of the loved one, only *because he first loved us.* Some MSS read 'we love him [or God]' but this, while true, is not the sense of the passage. John is telling how we come to love at all, not how we come to love God. **20** To say *I love God*, while having hatred for one's *brother* (brother-Christian? brother-man?) is to show oneself for *a liar.* Love for God is shown by love for people; if the latter is lacking then so is the former. John goes so far as to say of anyone who does not love *his brother* that he *cannot love God.* He makes a distinction between the brother who is seen and God who is not. To affirm one's love for the unseen while failing to love the seen is to enter the realm of fantasy.

21 John rounds off this section by reminding his readers of the *command* that *he has given*, where *he* might refer to either God or Christ. As often, John does not differentiate sharply. He has already spoken of the commandment to love (3:23) and now he reminds us again that love is not merely an option. It is a positive command.

5:1–5 Faith's victory

The thought of love leads to that of relationship to God, and that in turn to victory. Love and

faith are closely connected (*cf.* 4:16), and the believer overcomes the world.

1 Faith trusts *Jesus as the Christ*, a truth insisted upon throughout this letter, and the believer who so trusts *is born of God*. The confession that Jesus is the Christ is not the result of human insight, but of a divine work in the one who makes it (*cf.* 1 Cor. 12:3). And this divine work produces love for fellow-believers, for love for *the father* means love for *his child as well.* 2 John keeps insisting that love for God and love for other people are closely connected. Usually he speaks of love for God as shown in love for people, but here he reverses the process: we know that *we love the children of God* when we love God. Love for God and love for people go together and form a unity. John's practical turn of mind does not stop at the thought of love for God but goes on to include *carrying out his commands*. Real love is shown by a concern to do God's will. 3 Indeed John can say that *love for God is to obey his commands*. John is not a legalist, but he recognizes that love is busy; it finds its natural expression in doing the things that please the beloved, and where will we find these things better than in *his commands*? When John adds *his commands are not burdensome* (*cf.* Mt. 11:30), the thought is not that it is quite easy to discharge our obligations to God. Rather the thought is that God's commands are not an irksome burden. They may be difficult but they are a delight.

4 This leads on to *victory*. The neuter 'whatever' (NIV, *everyone*) makes the statement quite general (*cf.* 1:1). *Our faith* (the noun occurs only here in 1 John; it is not found in the gospel or 2 or 3 John) stands last with emphasis. *Has overcome* means that the decisive victory is in the past, when Jesus died to overcome evil, and in the case of the individual believer when that believer came to trust in him. 5 The rhetorical question leads to emphasis on the place of faith. Victory comes to the one who *believes that Jesus is the Son of God*. Once more there is emphasis on a right view of his person. We see here again John's habit of emphasis by repetition; in these two verses he has three references to overcoming the world. We cannot miss it. It is important.

5:6–12 The witness to the Son

Since a right view of Jesus matters so much it is important that it be attested. John cites some of the testimony that establishes who Jesus is.

6 That Jesus came *by water* surely refers to his baptism, and likewise *blood* to his death. At his baptism he heard the heavenly voice and he solemnly entered his life's work. Some heretics apparently held that the divine Christ came on Jesus when he was baptized, but left him before his death. John contests this with his emphasis on blood: *not by water only, but by water and blood*. It was (and is) this that is the heart of the gospel. There were apparently no doubts about the *water* but the *blood* seems to have been the stumbling block; heretics evidently found it impossible to hold that the divine Christ could die. John brings out the fact that *the water* did not stand alone. The *water* and the *blood* go together. Further, *it is the Spirit who testifies* (the present tense points to a continuing activity). He has an excellent qualification for this for *the Spirit is the truth* (as is Jesus; Jn. 14:6). 7 The KJV includes additional material which the NIV puts in the mg. The words are rarely found outside the later Latin MSS and they are clearly no part of the true text. 8 There are in fact *three that testify. The Spirit* is listed first, perhaps because he has just been mentioned, perhaps because he is a person and thus a more explicit witness than *water* or *blood*. But in any case the witness is harmonious. The inner witness of the Spirit, and all that is involved in Christ's baptism and his death are not three unrelated items. Together they point to one great act of God in Christ for our salvation.

9 John appeals to the well-known fact of human trust. We accept the testimony of other people and much more should we accept the testimony of which John has been speaking, for it is *the testimony of God* and *God's testimony is greater*. The testimony in question is testimony *about his Son*. Now the giving of testimony commits, so this means that God has committed himself in Christ; he has borne witness that this is what he himself is like. 10 Whoever trusts God's Son *has this testimony in his heart*, which seems to show that the witness of the Spirit (6–7) is a witness to the believer's own spirit. *Anyone who believes in the Son of God* and *Anyone who does not believe God* appear to be opposites, which means that John puts no great difference between believing in and believing, or between faith in the Son of God and faith in God. For him Jesus Christ was God incarnate, so that to believe in Christ is to believe in God. But to disbelieve is to make him out to be *a liar* (*cf.* 1:10). The perfect tense in *has made him out* views this as lasting. The unbeliever takes up the position of permanently having a wrong view of God. 11 The content of *the testimony* is perhaps a little unexpected for it is what God has done, not what he has said: he *has given us eternal life*. Eternal life is God's own deed and God's own gift. As we contemplate it we see a revelation of God. The addition, *this life is in his Son*, is important. We cannot think of eternal life apart from the Son nor can we think of *the testimony* apart from him (*cf.* v 9). Life eternal is life with Christ and in Christ. 12 This is

emphasized in a crisp couplet. Life and the Son go together. It is impossible to have the one without the other.

5:13–21 The knowledge of eternal life

John's gospel was written so that its readers might believe and so have life (Jn. 20:31). By contrast this letter was written to readers who already believe in order to give them assurance, the certainty that they have eternal life. John brings this out as his letter draws to a close.

5:13–15 Confidence. **13** This letter is written to *you who believe*; it is not an evangelistic tract, but a letter to Christians. There has been a good deal about knowledge and now we find that the whole is written *so that you may know that you have eternal life*. Assurance of salvation is important, important enough to have caused this whole letter. This is the only place in the letter where the writer speaks of believing *in the name* of Jesus, *i.e.* in his full person, all that the name stands for (in the similar wording of 3:23 the Gk. means 'believe the name').

14 John moves to confidence in prayer. He sees prayer as having a wide scope for he speaks of asking *anything*, but he immediately qualifies this with *according to his will*. Prayer is not a device for inducing God to change his mind and do what we want. It must be offered in accordance with his will if it is to be effective. When it is offered in this way God *hears us*. Elsewhere we learn that prayer must be in faith (Mk. 11:24), in the name of Jesus (Jn. 14:14), offered by those who abide in Christ (Jn. 15:7), who have forgiven those who offend them (Mk. 11:25); it must be accompanied by obedience (1 Jn. 3:22), and it must not be for the gratification of one's passions (Jas. 4:3). All this is involved in praying according to the will of God. **15** From the thought that God hears us we move to the consequences, namely that he grants our requests.

5:16–17 Prayer for wrongdoers. **16** An abrupt change leads to the forgiveness of sin that can be brought about by intercessory prayer. John distinguishes between *sin that leads to death* and sin that does not (though he does not say what the difference is). He begins with the direction that when we see a *brother* sin *a sin that does not lead to death* we should pray for him. God will hear the prayer and *give him life*. If he was to be given *life* he was not up till then a Christian. He was not alive but dead 'in transgressions and sins' (Eph. 2:1) and in response to prayer God gives him life. We should regard *sin that leads to death* as a state rather than an act; in Scripture there is no one specific act people do which results in death, but there is a state of sin, of being in rebellion against God, which John elsewhere calls remaining in death (3:14). Jesus warned that anyone who blasphemes against the Spirit 'will not be forgiven' (Lk. 12:10), and it is this kind of thing that is in mind here. John adds that he is not saying that believers should *pray about* sin that leads to death (though he does not say explicitly that they should *not* pray about it). This does not mean that we should try to calculate when we may and when we may not pray for others. It is a stern warning that sin damns people. **17** *All wrongdoing is sin*. We must not take sin lightly. But the believer may sin a sin that does not remove him or her from the category of the saved.

5:18–21 The believer's knowledge. **18** Now come three statements in succession introduced by *we know*. The first is, *anyone born of God does not continue to sin*. Again it is the habitual attitude. The reason is that *anyone born of God* is kept safe by *the one who was born of God, i.e.* Jesus Christ. Accordingly, *the evil one does not touch him*, does not make effective contact with him. **19** The second statement concerns the origin of believers; they are *children of God*. By contrast, *the whole world is under the control of the evil one*, lit. 'lies in the evil one'. This is an unusual verb in such a connection and may point to the powerlessness of the world lying under Satan's sway; perhaps, too, to its inertness, its refusal to assert itself against its master.

20 The third of the trilogy directs us to the incarnation: *the Son of God has come*. There is some emphasis on the actuality of the arrival (Gk. *hēkei* conveys 'the idea of having come in the past and still being present', R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, [Doubleday, 1982], p. 623). The Son *has given us understanding*. The Christian faith is not a hindrance to intellectual activity but a stimulus to right thinking. The purpose of this is that *we may know him who is true*, and not only do we know him, but *we are in him who is true*, which is further explained as *in his Son Jesus Christ*. As often in this letter the Father and the Son are seen in the closest possible relationship. To be 'in' the Father is to be 'in' the Son. John goes on, *He is the true God and eternal life*. Once more it is not easy to see whether the Father or the Son is meant, but they are so close that there is little difference. For the people of the ancient world there were many gods. But John sees them all as false gods. There is but one *true God* and we have eternal life in him.

21 As he concludes, John uses again the affectionate diminutive, *Dear* (lit. 'little') *children*. In view of the whole preceding discussion it is unlikely that we should understand *idols* in the sense of images used in worship. The term means 'false gods'. John's readers have been given many gifts by God, including 'understanding' (20). Let them then keep themselves from every false god.

Leon Morris

2 AND 3 JOHN

Introduction

These short letters, the two shortest books in the NT, were not often quoted or referred to in the earliest times which makes it difficult to solve problems like date, authorship and the like. Both claim to have been written by 'the elder' but there is no further description. It is sometimes argued that there was an 'elder John' in antiquity, separate from the apostle, and that he wrote these two letters. But it has not been demonstrated that such an 'elder John' ever existed. Moreover, in antiquity, as far as our information goes, neither of these letters was ever said to have been written by anyone other than the apostle John. The language of both resembles that of the first letter and of the fourth gospel. In the present state of our knowledge it seems best to accept the traditional view and see the apostle John as the author.

2 John is addressed to 'the chosen lady and her children' and there is controversy as to whether this means an individual lady or whether it is a symbolic way of referring to a church. If the latter, the 'children' would be members of the congregation. The principal arguments for the former view are that it is the most natural way of taking the words, that its contents are rather slight for an address to a congregation, and that 'your house' (10) looks like a reference to the home of an individual family. In support of the view that the letter was destined for a church, it is urged that the subject matter is more appropriate for a church than for an individual, and that the letter lacks personal characteristics (in which it stands in contrast to 3 John). Most modern scholars see the letter as written to a church. The problem seems insoluble with the information at our command, though perhaps it is a little more likely that it is a letter to an individual; it does seem rather slight for a letter to a congregation.

This letter appears to reflect something of the same false teaching as lay behind 1 John. It would accordingly have been written to put its readers on their guard against it. Clearly there was some danger that the false teachers would be welcomed and that thus their doctrines would spread. The elder wrote to forestall this. Some writers link 3 John with the same situation. It is concerned with hospitality to visiting preachers, and the Diotrephes who was refusing to receive people the elder commended may have come from the false teachers behind 2 John. But this is somewhat speculative and we must bear in mind that, despite the views of some scholars, there is no indication that Diotrephes held anything other than orthodox teaching. It has been suggested that Diotrephes was orthodox and that the writer of this letter was not! This critic holds that that is why the two were at odds. Such contentions do not seem to be soundly based. We cannot be sure of anything more than that Gaius was being reassured in the face of the unfriendly gossip and the unfriendly actions of Diotrephes. The elder would take action against this man in due course. There is very little on which to estimate the dates of these writings (see the comment on the date of 1 John). Most agree that they come from about the same period and it is usual to see this as not very far from the time of 1 John.

See also the article Reading the letters.
For Further reading see under 1 John.

2 JOHN

Commentary

1–3 Salutation

This is the normal opening to a first-century letter. **1–2** The writer calls himself *the elder*, which may be an indication of age or possibly of an official position in the church. He writes to *the chosen lady*, which might also be understood as 'an elect lady'. One or both of the Greek terms might be a proper name, which opens up several possibilities: 'Electa the Lady',

'the elect Kyria' or 'Electa Kyria'. But the 'elect lady' is probably correct. Whether an individual or a church is meant is disputed (see the Introduction). The elder affirms that he (his *I* emphatic) loves the lady and her children *in the truth*. Both *love* and *truth* are very prominent in this opening (*love*, either noun or verb, occurs four times in the first six verses and *truth* five times in the first four verses). Notice the sequence *whom I love in the truth . . . because of the truth*. *Truth* as John understands it leads to *love*. The truth can be known; it *lives* in believers and *will be with* them *for ever*. It is difficult to think that *the truth* described in this way can be separated from our Lord Jesus Christ who said, 'I am . . . the truth' (Jn. 14:6). We should not miss the connection between Christian *love* and Christian *truth*. Someone has said that the community of love is as wide as the community of truth, which is a significant comment. 3 The addition of *mercy* to *grace* and *peace* in the greeting is unusual in the NT (found elsewhere only in 1,2 Timothy). It strengthens the idea in *grace* which points to the freeness of God's gift in Christ. It is also unusual for it to be said that these qualities will be *with us*; in a salutation one expects 'with you'. This appears to be the only salutation in the NT that reads this way. It is an expression of solidarity linking writer and readers. All alike need *grace, mercy and peace*. Jesus is here called *the Father's Son* (an expression found only here in the NT). He is not to be thought of in isolation from the Father.

4–6 The command to love

4 It gave the writer *great joy* to find some of the *children of* the elect lady *walking in the truth*, an expression that is very nearly equivalent to 'living the Christian life'. That it is put this way shows the stress our writer places on the truth. To follow the truth is not simply an option selected by some people as desirable, but a response to the command of *the Father*. Following truth is certainly attractive, but it is not the attractiveness to which John is drawing attention. In three verses here we have 'command', either as the verb or the noun, four times. It is the repetition for emphasis that we have seen in 1 John and again already in this letter. 5 The elder does not enjoin but says *I ask*, which is the language of polite request. He is not writing *a new command but one we have had from the beginning* (*cf.* 1 Jn. 2:7). The command to love, which our writer immediately spells out, is an old command; from the very beginning of the Christian way its adherents were united in the bond of love. He does not speak of it as also new (as in 1 John). He is content to emphasize the obligation resting on Christians, namely that *we love one another*. This is the central thing and it is emphasized in all John's writings. We tend to use 'love' for an emotion and that cannot be commanded. But for John, while love certainly is warmly emotional, it is basically a response to God's great love for us. Love issues in action, in caring and unselfish service. 6 *This is love* introduces something of a definition: *that we walk in obedience to his commands*. In modern times obedience to commands is often seen as evidence of a legalistic spirit, the very opposite of what we see as love. But the contrast is a false one. True love delights to do the will of the beloved (*cf.* Jn. 15:10; 1 Jn. 5:3). Those who know what love in the Christian sense really is are always eager to obey God's commands. John says again that he is not introducing a novelty, but repeating a command which had been *heard from the beginning*. We should not miss the idea of steady progress that is implied in the twofold *walk*.

7–11 Sound doctrine

7 'For' (which the NIV omits) introduces the reason for what John has just said: *Many deceivers* (people who have wilfully taught erroneous views about the Christian way) *have gone out*. This implies that at one time they had been church members (*cf.* 1 Jn. 2:19). Their error was their failure now to *acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh* (*cf.* 1 Jn. 4:2–3). As in 1 John the point at issue is the importance of the incarnation. Jesus was indeed the very Christ of God come in the flesh. To fail to see this is to fall into the most serious error and John calls anyone who does this *the deceiver and the antichrist*. He has elsewhere spoken of anyone who teaches this error as 'antichrist' (1 Jn. 4:3), but the title *deceiver* is new. Not only is such a teacher in error but he leads others astray.

8 The MSS are divided as to whether to read 'you' or 'we' before *have worked for*. Those who accept 'we' (as *e.g.* the NRSV, RFB) see the writer as warning that what the good teachers have worked for will be lost if believers fall away. Those who accept *you* (with the NIV) see the elder as warning the readers that if they follow the false teachers they will lose the heavenly reward that awaits the faithful servants of God. This, of course, is not salvation, which is God's free gift. It is the reward for the labourer who has served faithfully and which John thinks may be lost if the false teachers are followed. The readers are warned.

9 The false teachers evidently thought of themselves as 'advanced' thinkers. John thinks of *anyone who runs ahead* in this way as having advanced right out of Christianity! The aim of the believer should not be to pride oneself on being 'advanced' but to hold fast to the truth that has been revealed, that is to *continue in the*

teaching of Christ (this could be understood as 'teaching about Christ' as the REB, but more probably means the teaching Christ gave). It is necessary to be right about the Son if we are to be right about the Father (*cf.* 1 Jn. 2:23). **10** Believers must not countenance any other teaching. John is not, of course, saying that the believer should deny common courtesy to a doctrinal opponent. But at that time to receive a teacher into one's home was to express one's approval of his teachings. And since the exercise of hospitality was what enabled preachers to move about with their message it was also a help to them in spreading their teachings. So if anyone *does not bring this teaching* (*i.e.* the teaching that Jesus Christ is God incarnate) he is not to be received. **11** John spells out the reason: to welcome such a teacher is to share in *his wicked work*. The Christian is not to countenance evil of any sort.

12–13 Conclusion

12 The elder makes it clear that the reason for ending his letter at this point is not that he has run out of subject-matter. On the contrary he says, *I have much to write to you.* But he prefers talking to writing. So, having written what is most important, he lays down his pen and saves the rest of his news until he meets his friends. *I do not want to use paper and ink* is an unusual expression but the meaning is clear enough. *Face to face* is lit. 'mouth to mouth'; the Greek is vivid. *Our joy* links the interests of writer and readers. **13** The letter ends with greetings in the normal manner. The reference to *children* is appropriate in a letter to a church; it would then mean 'church members'. But it is not impossible that it signifies 'members of a family'; after all, that is a normal way of using the word.

3 JOHN

Commentary

1 Salutation

As in 2 John, the writer calls himself simply *the elder.* The addressee is *my dear friend Gaius* (more literally, 'Gaius the beloved'; Brown, *Epistles of John* p. 702, argues that 'dear' is too colourless for *agapētos*). The name was a common one and it occurs a number of times in the NT (*e.g.* Acts 19:29. Rom. 16:23). Nothing more is known of this Gaius, but it appears from the letter that he had a position of leadership in the local church. Four times in this letter John refers to him as 'beloved', and here he also says of him, *whom I love in the truth.* Clearly the elder had a deep affection for this man. An important note in this little letter is *truth*, which occurs six times. As in the other letters it is probably connected with the truth of the gospel, the truth that we see in Christ (*cf.* v 8).

2–4 Following the truth

2 It was customary in first-century letters to begin with a little prayer. Now John prays that Gaius's health and his affairs may prosper in the same way as his soul does. **3** The source of his knowledge of his friend's circumstances was a visit by *some brothers* who had told him about *your faithfulness to the truth.* More literally this means 'testified to the truth of you' which may signify that Gaius both knew and held fast to the truth. That Gaius was walking in the truth (*cf.* 2 Jn. 4) means that he was making progress in the truth and this gave the elder great joy. **4** Indeed he has *no greater joy* than *to hear that his children are walking in the truth. My children* means 'my children in the faith', 'those converted through my ministry'. It can mean the congregation over which the user of the expression is pastor, but as he is writing to Gaius who was evidently at a distance that does not appear to be the meaning here. It is the greatest of joys to the elder to know that his converts are making progress in the faith.

5–8 Hospitality

5 The subject-matter of the letter (as opposed to the preliminaries) begins here. It affords a little glimpse into a custom of the early church whereby a Christian travelling in the interests of the gospel would look for hospitality from the local Christians in the community he was visiting. Few preachers would have been wealthy enough to stay at inns, and in any case inns often had a bad reputation. It must have meant a great deal for the spread of the faith that preachers could obtain ready lodgings as they travelled for the gospel. John commends Gaius for his hospitality. *You are faithful* may mean 'you

show a fine loyalty' (REB), *i.e.* you are loyal to your fellow-believers; or the emphasis may be on faith, 'your action accords well with the Christian faith'. *What you are doing for the brothers* is not specific, but the following verse shows that it is hospitality that is in mind. *Even though they are strangers to you* makes it clear that Gaius had provided for the needs of visiting believers who were neither friends nor relatives. It is a little glimpse of the early church at work.

6 Those who had received the hospitality *have told the church about your love*, so that Gaius's good deeds were widely known. John commends his practice and encourages him to continue: *You will do well to send them on their way*, which seems to indicate that hospitality included making some provision for the forward journey. The *Didache*, an early church manual, provides that such a preacher should be given food to enable him to reach his next night's lodging (it adds that if he asks for money 'he is a false prophet'; *Didache*, 11:3). It is some such practice that is in view here. *In a manner worthy of God* sets the highest of standards before Gaius; it is God who is the standard, not his servants (*cf.* Jn. 13:20). **7** It was *for the sake of the Name* that the wandering preachers *went out*. There is no need to say whose name is meant; clearly it is the name that is above all other names (Phil. 2:9). They went out *receiving no help from the pagans*. To do this might well have compromised their message and they would not do it. That made them all the more dependent on people like Gaius. This does not mean that a Christian may never accept help from a well-disposed unbeliever; Jesus himself on occasion dined with Pharisees who did not believe in him (*e.g.* Lk. 7:36). It means that we should not rely on it. Christian work must be financed by Christian people. **8** There is consequently an obligation (*we ought* is 'we owe it') resting on believers to *show hospitality to such men. So that* denotes purpose. The duty in question is not merely an exercise in hospitality, but is done in order to set forward the divine purpose that believers *work together for the truth*.

9–12 Diotrephes and Demetrius

9 Diotrephes was clearly a man with authority, and apparently ambitious for more, though exactly what his position was is not clear. He took the line opposite to that of Gauis and hindered both the elder and the preachers. John had written *to the church* (he says he had written 'something' but the NIV omits the word), but unfortunately we do not know what it was. Diotrephes had evidently prevented the church from getting the letter. Moreover he clearly had enmity towards the elder for he *will have nothing to do with us* (Gk. 'does not receive us'). **10** Diotrephes had slandered the elder, *gossiping maliciously about us*. He added deeds to his words, for he *refuses to welcome* (the tense denotes the continuing practice) *the brothers*. But he went further by refusing to allow others to welcome them. There are two counts: the first is that he *stops those who want to do so* and the second that he *puts them out of the church*. Clearly he held an important position to be able to do this, and equally clearly his opposition to the preachers was implacable. It is possible that, as a local leader of the church, he resented travelling preachers who owed no loyalty to the local church in which he held office.

11 John uses this bad example to impress a lesson on Gaius, whom he calls 'beloved' (NIV, *Dear friend*) for the fourth time in this short letter. He exhorts his friend not to *imitate what is evil but what is good*. Imitation is a natural part of life and we all do it, but it is important that we choose the right models. John insists that his friend should imitate *what is good*. Anyone who does good *is from God*, from whom, of course, all good originates. When anyone does evil (Diotrephes?) he *has not seen God*. **12** *Demetrius* is introduced without explanation, which suggests that he was well known. It has been conjectured that he was one of the travelling missionaries and that he was the bearer of this letter. Both are possible, but of course we do not know. Demetrius was also *well spoken of by everyone* so that he had a good reputation throughout the church. There is more of a problem with the addition *by the truth itself*. This unusual and difficult expression apparently means that this man's conduct squares with the gospel, so that the truth of the gospel is declared in his life. *We also speak well of him* may be the elder's way of saying that he himself declares his approval of the man. But it is also possible that he associates others with himself, though if so we have no way of knowing who they were. But there is no doubting that he expresses his warm approval of Demetrius and makes it clear that he has his strong support.

13–15 Conclusion

13 John closes this third letter as he did the second by saying he has much to write but prefers to wait until he sees his friend. He uses the past tense. 'I had much to write' (the NIV changes it to the present, *I have much*), and replaces the 'paper and ink' of the second letter with *pen and ink*. There seems no difference of meaning. **14** Similarly, his wish to *see* his friend and to *talk face to face* is the same as in the previous letter. **15** *Peace* was a common word of greeting both on meeting and leaving friends. It is particularly appropriate in a situation where Diotrephes was stirring up strife. It is a little prayer that God's

peace will surround them. Peace is not, as with us, a negative term meaning the absence of war and conflict, but rather a positive term invoking the blessing of God. John passes on greetings from *the friends* who were with him and asks Gaius to greet *the friends*, which was evidently precise enough for Gaius to know who were meant (the NIV tries to help us by inserting *there*). *By name* makes it personal. Though the elder does not list the names of all his friends who were with Gaius he wants each of them to know that the greeting is personal. Each is to be singled out by name.

Leon Morris

JUDE

Introduction

Who wrote the letter?

The letter opens with the bare facts about the writer. He is by name, Jude; by birth, brother of James; and by calling, a servant of Jesus Christ. Tradition has ascribed the letter to Jude, the brother of Jesus, mentioned in Mt. 13:55 and Mk. 6:3. This would have been a younger son of Mary, born to her and Joseph, together with James, Joseph and Simon. Some have argued that he was an older son of Joseph by a former marriage. Jesus' brothers refused to believe in him during his lifetime (Jn. 7:5), but James was later converted, possibly through a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:7). Subsequently, he became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17). This James has also been traditionally regarded as the author of the NT letter of James and in view of his eminence it would be natural for Jude to refer to himself in this way as James' brother. The two may be referred to together in 1 Cor. 9:5.

It has been suggested that the writer could have been Jude the apostle, the 'Jude of James' as the Greek of Lk. 6:16 and Acts 1:13 describes him (the Thaddaeus [Lebbaeus] of Mt. 10:4 and Mk. 3:18). Two difficulties with this view are that an apostle would hardly have written v 17 and normal Greek usage requires the word to be supplied in Lk. 6:16 to be 'son' rather than 'brother'.

The theory that Jude is a pseudepigraph (see the Introduction to 2 Peter) has been put forward, but if that were the case one would have expected that the writer would have chosen a less obscure personage after whom to name the letter or, in claiming Jude, he would have used the relationship with Jesus to gain acceptance for his writing. The humility which avoided this description must be regarded as a mark of genuineness, matched by his more eminent brother (Jas. 1:1).

Where and when was the letter written?

Jude gives us no evidence, nor even clues, as to where he was at the time of writing. We know from 1 Cor. 9:5 that the Lord's brothers travelled around in the service of the gospel, and so any suggestion can only be speculative.

Comparison of this letter with 2 Peter quickly reveals that much of it (vs 4–19) is paralleled in that letter (2:1–19). (See the Introduction to 2 Peter and comparisons in the Commentary.) It is interesting that Jude refers to apocryphal as well as biblical illustrations of those who wander from God's way and oppose him (vs 5, 7, 9, 11, 14). Peter restricts his references to biblical incidents (2 Pet. 2:5, 6, 7, 15, 16).

Some who question the traditional authorship do so on the grounds that the letter itself bears the marks of having been written at a late date. Vs 17–18 speak of the apostles as if their generation had already died out, although the recipients of the letter would appear to have been instructed by them. V 3 suggests that the faith was already becoming a systematic body of doctrine.

Neither of these arguments is conclusive, and if we are prepared to accept Jude the younger brother of the Lord as the author then we can date the letter within his assumed lifetime. Eusebius relates a story from Hegesippus about Jude's grandsons being brought before Domitian when the latter was Roman Emperor (AD 81–96). He also says that they were bishops in the time of Trajan (AD 98–117), and this would make it reasonable for their grandfather to have still been alive well into the latter part of the first century. Bearing in mind the arguments for the priority of 2 Peter (see the Introduction to that letter), it would have been perfectly possible for Jude to have written this letter in the late sixties of the first century. Some argue that the absence of a reference to the fall of Jerusalem in v 5, where it could have been relevant, points to a date before AD 70.

To whom was the letter written and what is it about?

Again, Jude gives no clues as to where his original readers lived, or who they were, apart from the fact that they were Christian people (1) and *dear friends* (3, 17, 20). V 3 suggests that he had intended to write a more formal statement on doctrine and Christian living (more like 1 Peter?). Instead, the appearance and spread of false teaching had led him to respond by writing a warning of the consequences of following those who propagate heretical ideas and a call to hold fast to the apostolic faith.

A feature of the letter is that it makes use of Jewish apocryphal literature, and is unique among the NT books in doing so. Some argue

from this that Jude must have been writing for a Jewish readership, but the quotations would spring from the writer's background which need not be that of his readers. Jude's quotations from the *Assumption of Moses* and the *Book of Enoch* in vs 9 and 15, and possibly other apocryphal works in vs 6 and 8, brought this letter under suspicion when the church was drawing up its canon (or list of books to be included in the NT). A high doctrine of inspiration does not, however, preclude the biblical writers from quoting from sources outside the Bible. Paul himself does this in 1 Cor. 10:7; 2 Tim. 3:8 and Tit. 1:12 (*cf.* Acts 17:28). While some queried the letter before accepting it into the canon, quotations from early writers show that it was in use in the church at least from early in the second century. (See the article on Apocrypha and Apocalyptic.)

What is Jude's message to us?

Like us, Jude lived in an age which preferred toleration to truth, and regarded all religions as equally valid aspects of the quest for a supreme being. So he gives a call to stand up for a faith which is both unique and revealed (3–4). He does this in four ways:

1. He exposes the danger, the fruitlessness and the final destiny of false teachers (5–16).
2. He urges God's people to go on growing in their Christian faith and its expression (20–21).
3. He reassures them of God's sure purposes (24).
4. He calls them to lose no opportunity for evangelism (22–23).

These directions are as helpful for today's Christian as they were for Jude's original readers.

See also the article Reading the letters.

Further reading

J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, BNTC (A. and C. Black, 1969).
C. E. B. Cranfield, *1 and 2 Peter and Jude*, TBC (SCM, 1960).
E. M. B. Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, TNTC (IVP/UK/Eerdmans, 1968).
R. Bauckham, *Jude and 2 Peter*, WBC (Word, 1983).

Outline of contents

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Commentary

1–2 Opening address and greeting

The writer introduces himself in traditional fashion, describes those to whom he is writing, and prays for their spiritual growth.

1 *Servant* (Gk. *doulos*) means 'a bond-slave' and Jude is, therefore, a true 'brother' of Jesus according to Mark (Mk 3:35). James (Jas. 1:1) and Peter (2 Pet. 1:1) also use the title. *Called ... loved ... kept* introduces a feature of this letter: groups of three words together. This description emphasizes how much salvation is entirely of God. It is the result of his sovereignty, his love and his power, and its scope reaches from eternity, through time, back to eternity (see Rom. 8:30; 1 Pet. 1:3–5). Some versions read *sanctified*, which has less MS authority than *loved*. *Kept by Jesus Christ* could be translated *for* or *in* (see the NIV mg.) and each alternative gives a different slant (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:5).
2 *Mercy, peace and love* is a unique benediction in the NT and more fulsome than in other letters. It could be a link with the triad of v 1 (God's call brings mercy, his love surrounds his people and his keeping power brings peace). Or it could be read as a Trinitarian formula (God the Father brings mercy, the Son effects peace and the Spirit gives love). *Yours in abundance* is

also the prayer in 1 Pet. 1:2 and 2 Pet. 1:2.

3–4 Challenge to hold firm to the faith

Jude gives his reasons for writing as enthusiasm to write about the salvation we share and concern that we should stand up for the uniqueness of the faith.

This is especially appropriate today for Christians in a multi-faith society, faced with the subtle infiltrations of so-called New Age teaching. Jude is alarmed at the two effects of false teachers: they have made the grace of God an excuse for 'permissiveness' and they have denied the uniqueness of Christ and his salvation.

3 *Dear friends* reflects Jude's pastoral affection for his readers and the mention of *the salvation we share* puts him on the same footing as them before God (see the same word in Tit. 1:4). It also emphasizes that this salvation is open to all. *Contend* implies a strenuous effort. The word is used of participants in athletic contests. Mental effort is needed to understand and teach the word of God aright and moral effort is need to apply that understanding to everyday behaviour (1 Pet. 1:13–16; 2 Pet. 1:5–9). *The faith* here implies a recognized body of teaching, such as we know emerged from Peter's early sermons and began to crystallize in such expressions as 1 Cor. 11:23–26; 15:3–8; 1 Tim. 1:15 and 3:16. *Once for all* underlines the finality of God's revelation in Christ.

4 The allusion to the *condemnation* of *certain men* being *written about* (see the NIV mg.) could have the idea of their names being listed in heavenly books (Lk. 10:20; Rev. 20:12). This condemnation is what Jude goes on to describe. *Long ago* could mean 'already' (as in Mk. 15:44), in which case Jude could be referring to 2 Pet. 2:3. Alternatively, it could refer to the general denunciation of evildoers in the OT. Their teaching, which amounts to a *licence for immorality*, has the same end as that referred to in 2 Pet. 2; Paul answers the arguments they would have used in Rom. 6 and 7. To make a Christian profession and contradict or *deny* it by one's behaviour shows no understanding of what it means to call Jesus *Sovereign and Lord* (*cf.* 1 Cor. 6:19–20). The translation could be 'the only Master and our Lord Jesus Christ' (as the RSV mg.), as the word for Master (Gk. *despotēs*) normally refers to the Father. An exception to this in 2 Pet. 2:1 (where it refers to the Son) may support a similar use here. If it refers to the Father, 1 Pet. 1:17 shows that belief in God the Father demands holiness of life.

5–7 Reminders of God's punishment of past disobedience

Jude backs his argument with three examples which show that status by itself is no guarantee of salvation. First, Israel was delivered from Egypt, but unbelievers died in the wilderness. Secondly, angels have a special calling from God yet those who were disobedient met sure punishment. Thirdly, Sodom and Gomorrah (see 2 Pet. 2:6–8) were cities of the promised land, with God's servants in them, and yet they were destroyed because of the pervading immorality there.

5 *Though you already know all this* presumably refers to catechetical instruction given prior to baptism. As the NIV mg. shows there are three variant readings of *the Lord*. One MS omits any noun as the subject, leaving us to supply one from the end of the previous verse. Most have 'the Lord' and this fits in best with OT usage. A few, however, including two ancient MSS, read *Jesus* which some suggest could refer to Joshua (Heb. form of Jesus). As the same person has to be the subject in v 6 it seems best to accept the reading 'the Lord'. *Later* is lit. 'the second time'. Ex. 6:9 has been suggested as the first occasion of unbelief. However, as the sense and order make this word go better with 'destroyed', it is preferable to take it as the NIV translation. Otherwise it could refer to the flood (mentioned in 2 Peter) as the first occasion of God's punishment. 1 Cor. 10:1–11 is an instructive allusion to this incident.

6 *Angels* may be a reference to Gn. 6:1–4. This incident was described more elaborately in certain apocryphal books to which Jude refers (see the parallel in 2 Pet. 2:4). The angels' *home* was in heaven except when despatched to earth on divine business. Sin led them to want to settle on earth (Gn. 6). For more on *darkness* and *everlasting chains* see on 2 Pet. 2:4. 7 *Gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion* is lit. 'indulged in sexual immorality and went after strange flesh'. This may link with the reference in v 6 to Gn. 6 because the sin of the men of Sodom (Gn. 18:20) reached its peak when they sought intercourse with the two angels sent to Lot (Gn. 19:5). *Punishment of eternal fire* is what Jesus taught in Mt. 18:8; 25:41 and Mk. 9:48.

8–13 Denunciation of false teachers

Jude now turns from examples from the past to the false teachers of the present, and shows that they are following the same dangerous paths. The Israelites polluted their bodies, the angels rejected authority and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah slandered celestial beings. This last act is something even Michael did not do when

he had justification. He preferred to leave God to deal with them. Such false teachers may mock the things they do not understand but they understand enough to be responsible for their own ruin. So Jude again pronounces their doom, for they follow three bad precedents: Cain, who showed no respect for his brother, who was made in God's image; Balaam, who led Israel astray for personal gain; and Korah, who rejected God's authority exercised through Moses.

So they are blamed for spoiling Christian fellowship by their brazen attendance, being false pastors concerned only for themselves, failing to produce what they promise – like rainless clouds or fruitless trees, being lawless as storm-tossed seas, producing only their own jetsam and being wandering stars, giving no clear guidance and so doomed to lose their function. Much of this denunciation reminds us of Peter's words in 2 Pet. 2:10–17.

8 *In the very same way* expresses the surprise that, in spite of God's clear punishment of such evildoers in the past, these men have still dared to follow their ungodly examples. *Dreamers* suggests that they may have claimed to receive some of their teachings through visions. *Pollute, reject* and *slander* set out the three basic charges against them (see above). *Authority* (Gk. *kyriotēs*) probably refers to God's authority (*kyrios* is 'Lord'). *Celestial beings* (as in 2 Pet. 2:10) is used for 'angels'. 9 *Archangel* is a word found only here and in 1 Thes. 4:16 in the NT. *Michael* is known from the book of Daniel (10:13, 21; 12:1) and Rev. 12:7 as the leader of the heavenly host. The apocryphal *Assumption of Moses* tells how Michael was sent to bury Moses. The devil opposed him, claiming that the body, as a material object, belonged to him. Even here Michael simply responded with the words of Zc. 3:2, and so his behaviour contrasts strongly with that of the false teachers. 10 *Whatever they do not understand* could refer to the celestial beings of v 8 or more widely to the spiritual dimension of life. *By instinct* means in a natural or physical way. Having no time for spiritual things, they limit their knowledge to the physical world. Thus they find their downfall, as they then allow the physical side to dominate them, just like animals.

11 *Cain, Balaam* and *Korah* (*cf.* Gn. 4:1–16; Nu. 16; 22 – 24) are classic examples of the disastrous effects of jealousy, greed and pride. The contemporary descendants of this trio are jealous of the Christian progress of others, and so seek to turn them aside to immorality (and so murder them spiritually). They are so keen to gain from teaching what people will pay to be told that they readily persuade them to immorality (*cf.* Nu. 25:1–9; 31:16 and 2 Pet. 2:15), and so great is their pride that they cannot bear to be told of any power (or knowledge) greater than their own.

12 *Blemishes* (see 2 Pet. 2:13) is perhaps better translated 'hidden rocks' (J. B. Phillips has 'menaces'). *Love feasts* were regularly held with the Lord's Supper in the early church, and 1 Cor. 11:20–22 shows that even in early times they could be occasions for behaviour inconsistent with Christian love. The hallmark of these false pastors (*shepherds*) is that they use their position to further their own selfish ends, and not to feed the flock (*cf.* Ezk. 34:2–10; Jn. 21:15–17; 1 Pet. 5:2). *Trees* which have no fruit at harvest time have failed to fulfil the function for which they exist (*cf.* Mt. 7:15–20; Mk. 11:12–14). *Uprooted* is a picture of judgment (*cf.* Ps. 52:5; Je. 1:10; Mt. 3:10). These men are *twice dead* because they have tasted spiritual life (as well as physical life) and rejected it (*cf.* Heb. 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 2 Pet. 2:20–22). 13 *Wild waves* suggests the restlessness of the tide, which, after all its noise and fuss, only leaves a deposit of scum and rubbish on the shore (*cf.* Is. 57:20). *Wandering stars* is another reference to the *Book of Enoch*, which describes stars which have transgressed as being bound together in prison. Some take this to refer to the planets (*wandering* is Gk. *planētai*), whose movements were misunderstood by Jude and his contemporaries; others to the shooting stars which appear briefly to give light and then fall out into darkness. The thought seems to be that of Lk. 6:39 – those who claim to be guides are themselves off course. On *blackest darkness* see on 2 Pet. 2:4, 17.

14–16 The relevance of Enoch's prophecy

Jude draws his denunciation to a climax by quoting the prophecy attributed to Enoch in order to confirm the impending and certain punishment of these men, and he rounds it off with further well-chosen words.

14 The description of *Enoch* as being *the seventh from Adam* (*cf.* Gn. 5:1–18) occurs in the *Book of Enoch*, as does the quotation which follows. This book was well known in NT days and so the reference is relevant (see the Introduction for a discussion on Jude's use of apocryphal literature). *The Lord* is God himself, and the *thousands upon thousands of his holy ones* are the angels (*cf.* Dt. 33:2; Zc. 14:5). For the Christian the words refer to Christ's second coming with his angels (Mt. 25:31; 2 Thes. 1:7). 15 *Ungodly* takes up and repeats (four times) the word used in v 4 to describe these people – it refers to them, their character and their behaviour, all of which stem from an insolent attitude which has no respect for God. 16 They are *grumblers* against God and his ways (*cf.* Ex.

16:2–12; 17:3; 1 Cor. 10:10). This behaviour was characteristic of Israel in the wilderness.

Fault-finders means lit. 'those blaming their lot'. These people are dissatisfied with God's ways of truth and justice because they want to fulfil their *evil desires. They boast about themselves* when they have no reason or right to do so (the same word is used in 2 Pet. 2:18) and they *flatter others* (lit. 'admire appearances') simply for what they can get in return. Such behaviour is different from God's (Acts 10:34; Jas. 2:1–7).

17–23 The Christian antidote

By contrast, Christians are charged to keep in mind the apostolic warning, especially as these people bring in divisions. The positive way to avoid them and their effect is by Christian growth in the life of faith, prayer in the Spirit, abiding in God's love, looking for the completion of God's work in us and reaching out to others with evangelistic zeal.

17 *But* contrasts with the behaviour of the ungodly (see on v 15 above). *Remember* is also the theme of 2 Peter (1:12–14; 3:2) as well v 5 above. The presence of 'scoffers' (*cf.* 2 Pet. 3:3) was *foretold* in Acts 20:29–30; 1 Tim. 4:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:1–9 and *cf.* Mt. 24:23–25. **18** *Said* can refer to writings and need not imply that Jude's readers had actually heard the apostles. *The last times* (*cf.* 1 Pet. 1:20) is the period between the ascension and the return of Christ. There may be an apostolic saying not elsewhere recorded behind both these verses. 2 Pet. 3:4 suggests the content of their mockery. **19** They *divide* the church by setting themselves up as superior to ordinary Christians, as the Gnostics did, dividing the church into 'spiritual' and 'worldly' members. This is a tendency not unheard of today. In actual fact, says Jude, they themselves are the worldly ones, since they do not possess the Spirit, as is evidenced by their lack of his fruit. On *follow ... natural instincts* (being worldly-minded) see 1 Cor. 2:14–16. **20** The opening words of v 17 are repeated for emphasis. *Most holy faith* refers, as in v 3, to the content of the Christian revelation. It is *most holy* as it is given by God and, rightly applied, leads to holy living. *In the Holy Spirit* refers to the experience of abiding in communion with God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:9, 16, 26; Eph. 6:18).

21 *Keep yourselves in God's love* complements what was said of their position in v 1. Once people have realized that they are the unworthy objects of the love of God in Jesus Christ they are challenged to respond in love. That love must be shown in behaviour. Jn. 15:9–10 shows that such response is the way to remain in the consciousness of God's love. Not to do this will deaden the heart to God's love and will result finally in the loss of this consciousness. *Wait for the mercy*: error is best avoided by a keen sense of expectation of the Lord's return, when his mercy, already experienced initially (1) and daily (2; *cf.* La. 3:22–23) will be finally realized as the work of salvation is completed. Tit. 2:11–14; 1 Pet. 4:7 and 2 Pet. 3:11–12 lay similar stress on the advent hope as a motive for godly living.

22–23 In case the reader should think from the last two verses that true faith is simply quietism, nourishing one's own spiritual life, Jude here turns to our responsibility for others. The text here is in doubt, and there may be two or three groups of people in mind: (a) those who are in two minds about the false teaching (some readings suggest they are to be won by arguments); (b) those more deeply involved with heresy, whose position is so serious that they must be snatched as from a fire (see Zc. 3:2, already quoted in v 9, and Am. 4:11); and (c) those who can only be pitied in the spirit of the *fear* of God which acknowledges that 'there, but for the grace of God, go I'.

The NEB and J. B. Phillips understand there to be two groups while the RSV and NIV understand three. *Clothing* suggests the contaminating effect of their sin. Like the leper whose clothing was polluted by the disease (Lv. 13:34; 14:8), they are to be seen as a source of pollution and therefore shunned.

24–25 Closing commendation and ascription of praise

After these sad possibilities of error and apostasy, Jude ends on the positive note of pointing his readers to God and what he can do for us. His goal is to *keep* [us] *from falling* to the end of time and present us *without fault with great joy* into eternity. In view of this Jude ascribes all glory and might here and now to the God our Saviour whose praises his ransomed people will be singing through all eternity.

24 *Keep*: see 1 Pet. 1:5. *From falling* is the same root as the verb in 2 Pet. 1:10 where we are shown how this is to be achieved. *Present* is a formal word suggesting introduction to a dignitary. *Without fault* is used in 1 Pet. 1:19. The Christian, now completely sanctified, can be identified fully with the character of our glorious Saviour. *Joy* is an intensive word, the verbal form being especially dear to Peter (1 Pet. 1:6, 8; 4:13). **25** *Only God* may suggest that the false teachers were already portraying a hierarchy of gods and demi-gods, as the later Gnostics did, or it may be to emphasize that our salvation is the work of God alone. Of the four qualities ascribed to God, *glory* stresses his splendour, as the radiance of light (*cf.* the description of heaven in Rev. 21:23; 22:5), *majesty*, his position (*cf.* Heb. 1:3), *power*, his ability

to carry out his sovereign will, and *authority*, the fact that he has the absolute right to do so. These qualities have always been his, and always will be, for they are the very qualities of eternity by which he created our world of space and time. *Through Jesus Christ* could refer back to God our Saviour (the words are closer in the Greek), reminding us that only through Jesus has God saved us (Acts 4:12), or that our praises are to be through Jesus (*cf.* 1 Pet. 2:5; 4:11). To such a vision of the Almighty God the believing soul can only breathe in response a humble yet fervent *Amen* – so be it!

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REVELATION

Introduction

The nature of the book

Discussion on Revelation has often been dominated by four traditional modes of approaching it. The so-called 'Preterite' method relates the book solely to the circumstances of the writer's age and discounts applications to future developments of history. The 'Futurist' view, by contrast, relates the book solely to the last generation of history, when its prophecies will find fulfilment. The 'Historical' interpretation sees Revelation as an outline of the ages between the incarnation of Christ and his final coming. The 'Symbolic' or 'Poetic' view emphasizes the pictorial element in the book and declines to make specific application of the prophecies to any one era; it views the book as revealing the general principles of God's work in history.

These modes of interpreting Revelation are all unsatisfactory. No-one would dream of applying them to the prophetic works of the OT. It is because Revelation has been interpreted in isolation from the rest of the biblical books, and from other works of a similar literary type outside the Bible, that it has been possible to treat it in this manner. The introduction to the book itself indicates that it belongs to three kinds of literary works, namely apocalypse, prophecy and letter (see the appropriate general articles in this commentary).

1. Apocalypse. The first word in the book is 'revelation.' The Greek term it translates has entered the English language as 'apocalypse'. To modern readers that conveys a quite special meaning, even having menacing overtones. In the author's day it simply meant the removal of a cover from something hidden, and so an unveiling of that which is concealed, as when a portrait is unveiled by pulling back a curtain (or even doing the same to reveal a stage on which a drama is about to be played). The term has become virtually a technical term for a class of writings, mainly Jewish, which appeared during the two centuries prior to the birth of Christ and continued through the first Christian century. Their chief concern was to reveal God's purpose in history, notably in bringing judgment on the wicked of the earth and his kingdom for the righteous. There is little doubt that the model for these works was the book of Daniel. Its style was imitated in them, and they were usually issued in the name of a famous saint (*e.g.* the three books ascribed to Enoch, an Apocalypse of Abraham, the Assumption of Moses, Apocalypse of Elijah, Apocalypse of Ezra, *etc.*).

These books freely use symbols to set forth their messages, though none of them to the extent that the Revelation of John does. Some of the symbols became standard, like the monster of the ocean to denote oppressive political powers, which appears in various guises in Dn. 7 and in Rev. 11:7, and chs. 13 and 17. The closest modern parallel to these figures and their use is the representation of nations and their leaders in political cartoons. A further characteristic feature of apocalypses is their frequent employment of earlier prophecies, both from the OT and later works. This was due not to lack of originality but to the conviction that God's word had yet further fulfilment, and so the apocalyptic writers combined earlier prophetic oracles, rewrote them and applied them to situations in their own times. This is done by John frequently, both in fresh usage of OT prophecies and in applying in a wholly new way prophecies of his contemporaries (see *e.g.* chs. 7, 11, 12).

2. Prophecy. The second sentence of Revelation invokes a blessing on the one who reads and on those who hear and give heed to 'the words of this prophecy.' John thereby numbers himself with the prophets of the OT and also of the new covenant (*cf.* Eph. 2:20). It is generally recognized that the former addressed their contemporaries in relation to their own situation, *i.e.* they gave God's word for their own day. The uniqueness of their ministry lay in the way they set their people in the context of God's dealings with them in the past and in the light of God's purpose for them in the future. Prophecy in the NT can be described as the words of Spirit-guided preachers for the world and the church, through which God's revealed purpose for the world and his will for humankind are revealed. That would be an adequate description of Revelation. It conveys the assurance that the opposition of human beings and of all the powers of evil cannot frustrate God's purpose for the world that he has made, and in the light of this the call goes out for persistence in faith and obedience to the Lord on the part of his people.

3. Letter. The introductory paragraph of

John's book is followed by a typical greeting such as we find in the letters of the NT: 'John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you . . .'. Strangely, it has not been commonly recognized that Revelation is fundamentally a 'letter' addressed to churches for which John was concerned and for which he had special responsibility. The implications of this fact are clear: the book was as truly directed to the situation and needs of the churches mentioned in its greeting as, for example, Paul's letter to the church in Colosse (which lay in the neighbourhood of the seven churches of Revelation), or the letter to the Galatian churches (which were not far east of them). All Christians agree that the letters to the Colossians, Galatians and Romans convey the word of God to Christ's people in all subsequent ages, but the messages of those letters reach us most effectively as we grasp their intention for the churches to which they were originally addressed. That holds good for the Revelation of John equally as for the rest of the NT letters. It is only as we relate its pictorial unveiling of God's word to the situation of the seven churches of Asia Minor that we can understand the revelation for the churches of all generations, including the last generation of history.

The setting of Revelation

It is likely that the tradition, current in the early church, is correct, that the book was written towards the close of the first century of our era, when the emperor Domitian was commencing his persecution of the church. It is unlikely that the persecution had been long under way, for current martyrdoms had as yet been few (2:13). But the fact that John had been exiled to a penal island reflects a beginning of active opposition to the Christian church on the part of the authorities. Domitian was more insistent on pressing his claims to divinity than any of his predecessors; his favourite title was *Dominus et Deus noster* ('our Lord and God'). Nowhere in the empire were there more enthusiastic supporters of such adulation of the emperor than the priests of the shrines devoted to his worship in Roman Asia. But no Christian who acknowledged Jesus as Lord and God could possibly assent to such an acknowledgment of the emperor. In this situation John was given to see the principles at work and their issue in an antichrist who would proclaim war on the only group in the world who would resist him to the death. The end, however, was to be the victory of the Christ of God over the satanic imitation, and the kingdom of the world becoming the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (11:15). It is in this setting that the symbols and the parabolic visions yield their meaning and their message is grasped.

The purpose of Revelation

This is summed up in the saying of E. F. Scott, who called Revelation 'a trumpet call to faith' (*The Book of Revelation* [SCM, 1939], p. 174). The book was written to strengthen the faith and courage of John's fellow-believers in Christ, to nerve them for battle with antichristian forces in the world, and to help them bear witness to the one true Lord and Saviour of the world. This end was achieved by emphasizing the following themes:

1. The sovereignty of God in Christ, in that time as in all times. Just as Jesus made known the advent of the kingdom of God in his ministry, death, resurrection and coming again (Mk. 1:14–15; 8:31; 10:45; 14:62), so that theme is central to Revelation from beginning to end (1:8; 5:5–14; 12:10–12; 19:11 – 21:5). No wonder, for the book is none other than 'the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ' (1:2)!

2. The satanic nature of the contemporary adulation of the Roman emperor. In Rome itself the claim of the emperor to be 'Lord and God' was something of a joke – privately, of course! In the area of the churches to which Revelation was addressed it was taken with deadly seriousness. For Caesar to demand what belonged to God alone indicated that 'the secret power of lawlessness' was 'already at work' (2 Thes. 2:7), and it was to reach its climax in the manifestation of the final antichrist. Even so, God is never more sovereign than in the frantic reign of antichrist (13:5).

3. The inescapable judgments of the Lord upon those who submit to the pseudo-Christ rather than God's Christ. It is significant that the second and third series of the Messianic judgments of this book are reminiscent of the plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians, who resisted the word of God through Moses. Revelation bids us 'consider the kindness and sternness of God' (Rom. 11:22).

4. The sure issue of the conflict between the church and the oppressive powers in the world in the manifestation of Christ and the glory of his kingdom. The victory is 'sure', for the devil is a defeated foe already in the death and resurrection of Jesus (*cf.* Jn. 12:31–32 with Rev. 12:9–12), which anticipates the ultimate completion of God's purpose of good for the world he has made and redeemed (21:9 – 22:5).

Reading Revelation today

The four issues discussed above have characterized history from the first century of our era to the present, and doubtless will continue to do so till the Lord comes. It is significant, however, that the last two thirds of the twentieth century have been characterized by two contrasting phenomena. On the one hand, the most intense

opposition to the gospel and the church since the writing of the book of Revelation and on the other, an unprecedented spread of the gospel and growth of the church. The former has been directed by antichristian secular powers, claiming as theirs what belongs to God alone and launching untold suffering on the world through oppression and wars; the latter advancing perpetually, often in spite of cruel opposition, suffering and poverty. The collapse of many political powers opposed to the gospel illustrates the reality of the sovereignty of God in the contemporary world. The changing patterns of opposition to the gospel and the confused political situation of old and new worlds, with increasing rather than diminishing suffering of multitudes, calls for Christian witness to the gospel of the order of Rev. 11:3–11; 12:11 and 14:2–7, and faith to believe in the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:3–4). Not for nothing has the book of Revelation been the favourite book of the Bible for Christians under oppression in our time. The 'trumpet call to faith' inspires endurance in the kingdom of God living in the spirit of Christ's bearing his cross and the power of his resurrection, and in the light of the revelation of the kingdom of glory at his coming.

The authorship of Revelation

The author announces himself in the opening sentence of the book as 'his [God's] servant John'. He frequently refers to himself in the work, most commonly as a prophet (1:2–3, 9–11; 10:11; 19:10; 22:8–9) but never as an apostle. In this respect he differs markedly from Paul (*cf. e.g.* Rom. 1:1; 11:13; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1). From the latter part of the second century it was assumed that the fourth gospel, the letters of John and Revelation were written by one man, John the son of Zebedee. There are, however, difficulties in this assumption, which were recognized from early times. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria in the third century, was especially impressed by the differences in style and language between Revelation and the other works attributed to John. It has been suggested that these differences may be accounted for by the differences in subject matter and nature of Revelation and the fourth gospel; or by the possibility that Revelation was written a generation before the gospel (at the end of Nero's reign), so giving time for the writer to have improved his style. More plausibly, John may have written the book in his own language (Aramaic), and someone else translated it into very literal Greek out of reverence for its content. If that were the case, the linguistic differences would fall to the ground. On the other hand, if, as some think, John the prophet *thought* in Aramaic and *wrote* in Greek, the differences would be insuperable, for that was not so with the author of the gospel and the letters.

Interestingly, the glimpses in the synoptic gospels of John the son of Zebedee are strikingly consistent with the kind of person who could have written Revelation: he and his brother were named by Jesus 'Sons of Thunder' (Mk. 3:17); he forbade one who was not a member of the apostolic group to do miracles (Lk. 9:49–50); he wanted to call down fire from heaven on hostile Samaritans (Lk. 9:52–54); he was a witness of the transfiguration of Jesus and his resurrection. The possible existence of a 'school of John', from which issued the various books later ascribed to the apostle, could be of help here, for this would explain the positive relationship between the books and also their differences. If we are unable to achieve certainty in this matter, it remains that in no other book in the Bible is the identity of the author of so little importance. The book is not 'the revelation of *John*,' but 'the revelation of *Jesus Christ*, which *God* gave him [John]' (1:1), and its content is further described as 'the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ' (1:2). The authenticity of that claim is settled not by the name of the person who wrote it, but by the nature of his work, which in the providence of God completes the Scriptures as its crown.

The structure of Revelation

The book opens with a prologue (1:1–8), stating its title and address, followed by a vision of the Son of Man, in which John is commissioned to write what he sees and to send the book to the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia (1:9–20). Letters to the seven churches then follow (chs. 2 – 3). A vision of God and the Lamb is recorded (chs. 4 – 5), which both provides the key to understanding Revelation and forms the fulcrum of its structure inasmuch as it indicates the process of events which lead to the final kingdom of God (chs. 6 – 19). Prominent among these are three series of judgments, presented under the figures of the opening of seven seals of God's book of destiny (6:1 – 8:5), seven trumpets (8:6 – 11:19), and seven cups of wrath (chs. 15 – 16). It appears that these three series are not to be viewed as occurring successively, but as basically three presentations of one period of judgment, since the last member of each series leads to the end of history. The outcome of the Messianic judgments is the fall of the godless empire ('Babylon') and the advent of Christ (chs. 17 – 19). The book is brought to a climax in its vision of the triumphant kingdom of God (20:1 – 22:5), and an epilogue concludes it (22:6–21).

Further reading

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Commentary

1:1–8 The prologue

Just as the prologue to the Gospel of John serves as a kind of overture to the book, announcing its chief themes and setting the reader in a position to understand the story of Jesus, so the prologue to Revelation serves a like purpose. It, too, declares its chief themes and provides a vantage point from which the reader may rightly interpret the vision that follows.

A *revelation* may relate to an act of uncovering, or an object uncovered; so here *the revelation of Jesus Christ* may denote the process of the Lord's revealing the issues of history, or the truth that is revealed. The latter will be primarily in mind, without excluding the former. The revelation has been given to Jesus from *God*, just as in the gospel the Son speaks only what the Father has given him (Jn 3:34; 8:26). The mediation of an *angel* is in keeping with the visions of prophets and apocalyptists (*cf.* Ezk. 8; Dn. 10). The announcement of Christ, God and angel as the source of the revelation entails an extraordinary authority for the teaching of the book. The thought is further emphasized in v 2: Revelation is John's witness to *the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ*, *i.e.* the message *from* God and witness *borne by* Christ.

The blessing of v 3 is the first of seven contained in the book (see 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). It declares the 'happiness' of one who reads the Revelation to a congregation and of those who both hear it and take its message to heart. (The Hebrew behind *blessed* has the sense of 'Oh the happiness of!'.)

Revelation is addressed to *the seven churches in the province of Asia (4)*. The nature of the book as a letter is underscored by the blessing invoked on the churches (4–5). It is a prayer for *grace and peace*; the former is the characteristic blessing of the new era, the latter of the old covenant; the two together comprise the salvation of the kingdom of God. The blessing is trinitarian, though, like much in Revelation, it has a complex background. The first element of it reflects the name of God revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:14), but as interpreted by contemporary Jews. The Jerusalem Targum on Dt. 32:29 expanded 'I am who I am' as 'I am he who is, and who was, and I am he who will be,' thereby setting forth God as the Lord of all time. Our text modifies that significantly: God is not only Lord of the ages, it is of his nature that he *is to come* and achieve his purpose. This he does, and will do, through Jesus (the hint of the coming of the Lord at the end of the age is unmistakable). In this context the *seven spirits before his throne* must denote the Holy Spirit; there is a reminiscence here of Zc. 4:6, 10 (*cf.* Rev. 5:6) and of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the seven churches and therefore of the whole church (*cf.* Rev. 2:7 *etc.*). The description of Jesus in v 5 is peculiarly apt for the believers to whom the book was first directed. Jesus was the supreme *witness* for God, and he died on account of his witness (*cf.* Mk. 14:62–63; 1 Tim. 6:13, and note that the Greek term for witness has come into English as 'martyr'); *the firstborn from the dead* indicates that by his resurrection Jesus assumed the first place in the kingdom of God (*firstborn* = heir) and opened it for all humanity; *ruler of the kings of the earth* points to his supremacy over the hostile rulers of this world, whose opposition cannot prevent the victory of his kingdom.

The doxology of vs 5–6 reflects a fundamental theme of Revelation, namely the concept of redemption as the second exodus. The first exodus brought about the deliverance of Israel from Egypt's slavery that they might become the covenant people of God at Sinai and the free people of God in the promised land. Their hope was summed up in the belief that the works of 'the first Redeemer' (Moses) would be repeated by 'the second Redeemer' (the Messiah). This hope God brought to pass through Jesus by his death and resurrection and will complete it through his future coming. The Redeemer *loves us* – eternally, *freed us from our sins* – once for all, and *made us a kingdom and priests*, *i.e.* kings and priests in the service of God, so bringing to fulfilment the calling of Israel at Sinai (see Ex. 19:6 and Rev. 5:10, 22:5). Jesus worshipped, loved, trusted and obeyed *his God and Father*, as all Christians should. Strikingly, however, God is never spoken of as the Father of believers in Revelation: the relationship of 'Father' is reserved for Jesus alone, thereby emphasizing his unique relation to God.

V 7 has been called the motto of Revelation. The first line of the sentence echoes Dn. 7:13, the rest draws on Zc. 12:10; the same connection is made in Mt. 24:30 (but not in Mk. 14:62). The Zechariah passage speaks specifically of the 'tribes' of Israel mourning ('The land will mourn, each clan by itself'), and of their bitter grief as the mourning for a firstborn son, in consequence of which a fountain is opened to remove all sin and impurity (Zc. 12:10 – 13:1). That *all the peoples* ('tribes') *of earth* are to mourn because of him is natural, since all are implicated in the death of Christ through their sin. The question whether the mourning of all humankind for their sin against Christ means a repentance acceptable to God, or a remorse that is too late, is uncertain. 15:3–4 suggests that the former interpretation is possible.

The declaration that God is *the Alpha and the Omega* (8) is a pictorial way of affirming that God is the sovereign Lord of all ages. *Alpha* is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, *Omega* is the last; the equivalent in English would be 'I am A and Z'. Jews were accustomed to use an equivalent mode of speech in their own language. The rabbis, for example, said that Adam transgressed the law 'from A to Z', whereas Abraham kept the law 'from A to Z'. That suggests that *I am the Alpha and the Omega* means, 'I am the beginning of history and the end of history and the Lord of all that lies between.' Such is implied in the 'translation' of the following line: *the Lord God, . . . the Almighty* maintains his control over the world from the beginning to the end of all times, even when the powers of this world resist his will, and he intends to *come* and complete his good purpose for it. (Note that the simile of A and Z is applied to *Jesus* in 22:13.)

1:9–20 The call of John to prophesy

The vision calls to mind experiences of OT prophets when they received their call to prophesy. It is doubtful, however, that this signifies the beginning of John's prophetic ministry; he had been banished to Patmos because he preached *the word of God and the testimony of Jesus*! The vision rather was the occasion of his call to receive and write Revelation. His self-description as *your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus* (9) is significant; that was the common lot of most Christians in the first century AD (*cf.* Jn. 16:33), and John anticipated an intensification of the suffering and endurance required later (*cf.* chs. 11 – 13). Tribulation and kingdom are part of the Messiah's pattern (Lk. 24:26); to be *in Jesus*, therefore, is to experience both now, with a view to sharing the kingdom's glory in the future.

John was *in the Spirit on the Lord's Day* (10), *i.e.* in a condition of ecstasy, not by being transported to view events of 'the day of the Lord', but to receive the vision on 'the day that belongs to the Lord' (as in the phrase 'the Lord's Supper'; 1 Cor. 11:20). The expression 'the Lord's Day' was probably modelled on the comparable *Sebaste*, *i.e.* 'Caesar's Day', which in turn imitated the action of the Egyptian Ptolomy Euergetes, who named the 25th day of each month 'the king's day' in honour of his coronation on the 25th day of Dios. It is thought that Caesar's day was observed weekly in certain areas. Evidently an unknown Christian claimed the title 'the Lord's Day' to celebrate the day when Jesus, God's own appointed Lord of this world, rose from death to share the throne of God.

The list of the seven churches (11) is in the order of their occurrence on the road which led from *Ephesus* northwards through *Smyrna* to *Pergamum* and then southwards through *Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.* C. Hemer suggested that this itinerary had existed since Paul's day and agreed with Sir William Ramsay that the seven cities had acquired 'special importance as organization and distributive centres for the church of the area' (*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, *JSNT* Supp., 11 [1986], p. 15). The cities were both postal and administrative centres. It has been reckoned that at the time of John's writing this area had the greatest concentration of Christians in the world. In addressing these churches John could reach not only others in Asia Minor, but those scattered through the world.

The imagery of the *seven golden lampstands* (12) recalls the seven-branched lampstand in the Jerusalem temple (Ex 25:31; Zc. 4:2); but the one people of God is here represented as seven lampstands, in whose midst stands the risen Lord. The whole church, thus, is represented by each congregation, and each knows fellowship with the Redeemer.

The description of the risen Lord in vs. 13–16 echoes that of 'the Ancient of Days' in Dn. 7:9 and of the powerful angel in Dn. 10:5–6. The intention is to show that the Lord possesses the glory of heaven and shares the likeness of God. The expression *one like a son of man* goes directly back to Dn. 7:13 (rather than the gospels), where he is one to whom the kingdom of the world is given, the representative alike of God and his people. That he wears *a robe reaching down to his feet* could indicate his priestly character (Israel's high priest wore such a robe; Ex 28:4); but since a robe of this kind was also worn by men of high rank, the point may not be pressed. That *his head and hair were white like wool* is a deliberate reminiscence

of Dn. 7:9, where God is so described. The application to Christ of the attributes of God is a constant phenomenon in Revelation. *Eyes like blazing fire* (*cf.* Dn. 10:6) penetrate the depths of the heart, and are suitable to one who judges the world. The *voice like the sound of rushing waters* in Ezk. 43:2 describes the awesome voice of God. That *a sharp double-edged sword* issued from his mouth again alludes to the role of the Lord as judge of humankind, the power of whose word is irresistible. It is such a Lord who held *in his right hand . . . seven stars, i.e.* the churches; he has power not only to judge evil, but to sustain those who are his (*cf.* v 20).

John's reaction to the vision of the exalted Lord is similar to that of all who have had such experiences (*cf.* Is. 6:5; Ezk 1:28; Dn. 7:28). *I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One* is a virtual exposition of Alpha and Omega in v 8 (*cf.* also Is. 44:6; 48:12), but it is applied to the Christ in the light of his death and resurrection. *The First and the Last* became incarnate and died and rose, and as *the Living One* he has power over death and the realm of the dead, and so has opened the doors of the eternal kingdom for all humanity.

The command to write *what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later* (19) is commonly thought to indicate the divisions of Revelation. On that understanding *what you have seen* is the vision just given; *what is now* denotes the letters to the churches in chs. 2 – 3; *what will take place later* comprises the visions of chs. 4 – 22. That is possible, but it does not apply to chs. 4 – 5, which describe events present, past and future (as also does ch. 12). It is best to see v 19 as a command to write the entire Revelation, rather than as an analysis of the book itself.

The interpretation of *the seven stars* as *the angels of the seven churches* has occasioned difficulty. To understand *angels* in a literal sense raises the question why John was told to write to angels. In any case, the letters have in view the churches themselves and individual members. Are then the 'angels' the leaders of the churches, such as bishops or messengers ('angel' means 'messenger', whether heavenly or earthly)? That is possible, but it is exceptional in apocalyptic literature for angels to symbolize men, and again the letters have in view the churches, not their leaders. The most plausible view is to understand the angels of the churches as the churches in relation to their exalted Lord. Although they live on earth, their existence is determined by the fact that they are *in Jesus* (9), and so priests and kings with Christ. The angelic nature of the church recalls Christians to realize on earth their heavenly calling. To help them to do that is the purpose of the seven letters.

2:1 – 3:22 The letters to the seven churches

These letters are brief and very concentrated in their content. They remind us of the short prophetic oracles of the OT, above all those of Am. 1 – 2, which are also seven in number. The letters to the churches have an almost identical structure. They begin with a description of Christ, drawn from the opening vision, citing elements that have special relevance for the church addressed; praise for the commendable features of the church follows and then criticism of its faults. They conclude with a promise of rewards to be bestowed at the advent of Christ, usually relating to features in the vision of the city of God at the end of the book.

2:1–7 The letter to the church in Ephesus

Ephesus was one of the great cities of the ancient world and by far the largest in Asia Minor. It was proud of its title 'Temple Warden', which originally referred to the temple of Artemis (Diana) but later included two temples devoted to the worship of the Roman emperors. The temple of Artemis was a famous place of refuge for fugitives, but its vaunted 'salvation' was greatly abused, and the surrounding area gave the criminal a sanctuary beyond the reach of the law, becoming the headquarters of organized crime. The interest of the populace in magic and superstition is illustrated in Acts 19:13–20. Paul founded the church in Ephesus and made it the centre for evangelizing the province (Acts 19:1–10). According to later tradition the apostle John and Mary, the mother of Jesus, settled there. **1** The opening greeting cites 1:12, 20: the Lord *holds the seven stars in his right hand.* This indicates that he maintains the spiritual life of the churches; he *walks among the seven golden lampstands*, and so is present with all the churches. But the power that sustains is also capable of judicial removal; the title thus prepares the hearer for v 5.

2–3 *I know your deeds* heads each of the letters, sometimes imparting encouragement (*e.g.* 2:9, 13) and sometimes causing shame (*e.g.* 3:1, 15). Here it introduces a commendation. The *deeds* of the Ephesians are *hard work* and *perseverance*; the former shows itself in efforts to overcome false teachers, the latter in endurance in face of opposition, whether from false prophets or from other sources. The *wicked men* are *those who claim to be apostles but are not.* It is likely that these are the persons named in v 6 as *Nicolaitans.* Their *wickedness* relates not so much to their doctrine as to the moral evil to which the doctrine gave rise. (On the Nicolaitans, see on 2:14–15.)

4–5 The failure of the Ephesians was the perversion of their chief virtue: *You have*

forsaken your first love The call for repentance and *to do the things you did at first* suggests that the failure of these Christians was not primarily loss of love for God but loss of love for people. When hate for the practices of those who err (6) becomes hatred of those who err, Christians depart from the redeeming love of God in Christ (*cf.* Jn. 3:16) and pervert the faith. Hence the grave warning in v 5: *I will come to you* denotes a coming in judgment, even as the Lord will come to the world one day to sweep away its evil. The removal of the *lampstand from its place* can signify nothing less than the end of Christ's recognition of the church as a church of his. It will become as devoid of Christ as the temple of Jerusalem became empty of God prior to its destruction (*cf.* Ezk. 11:22–23; Mt 23:38). So grave is the sin of lovelessness in a Christian church.

7 The injunction *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches* appears in the promises to the overcomers in all seven letters. It is unlikely that the Spirit speaks only the promises; he speaks throughout the letters. It would appear that the risen Lord addresses the churches through the Holy Spirit. This is wholly in accordance with the teaching of Jesus in the upper room discourses of Jn. 14 – 16 (see especially Jn. 16:12–15). The believer who *overcomes* does so by virtue of Christ's conquest over all powers of evil; he shares in his Lord's victory (see 12:11; Jn. 12:31–32; 16:33). To the overcomer will be given *the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.* The term *paradise* is a Persian loan word, denoting especially a park surrounded by a wall. The term was used in the LXX to translate the word 'garden' (Eden). In Jewish literature 'Garden of Eden' and 'paradise' were both used for the dwelling of the righteous in the future life. Jewish teachers therefore spoke of the paradise of Adam, the paradise of the blessed in heaven and the paradise of the righteous in the coming kingdom of God. It is the last of these meanings which is in mind in this promise. Adam and Eve lost access to the tree of life and were driven from the garden (Gn. 3:22–23); the believer who shares his Lord's victory is promised that both blessings will be restored (see 22:2). A frequent term for the cross of Jesus in the NT is 'tree' (especially on the lips of Peter; see Acts 5:30; 10:39; 1 Pet. 2:24). The temple of Artemis was built on a tree shrine, and a tree frequently symbolized Ephesus or its goddess. Whereas the Ephesian believers once viewed the tree of Artemis as the seat of divine life and the intermediary between that life and human nature, they now learn that life eternal in the paradise of God was theirs through the cross of him who died and rose.

2:8–11 The letter to the church in Smyrna

Smyrna was a seaport, and its prosperity on account of its position was well established before Christian times and continues (as Izmir) to this day. The first city on the site was destroyed in 600 BC, and it was rebuilt by the successor of Alexander the Great. The image of the phoenix, the legendary bird that rises from the ashes of its destruction, was applied to Smyrna. This is not the only instance of a church reflecting the history of the city in which it is set. For one theme dominates this short letter, that of suffering persecution. Hence the greeting from the Lord in the opening sentence: *These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.* The church is reminded that its Lord is the conqueror of death and has conquered it for their sakes. It so happens that one of the best known Christians in the early church was probably sitting in the congregation when this letter was read. This was Polycarp, who later became Smyrna's bishop and was martyred about 160 AD. When at his trial he was commanded to curse Christ, he stated that he had served the Lord for eighty-six years and had received only good from him, how could he forswear his king?

9 The *afflictions and poverty* of the Smyrnean Christians are likely to have been due to the persecutions they had suffered. (For this see Heb. 10:32–34, and contrast what is said of the Laodiceans in 3:17). The *slander* of the Jews of Smyrna is characteristic of the Jewish bitterness against Christians in this city, and is referred to by other Christian writers. These Jews would have taken the opportunity of informing against the Christians. The church of Smyrna later cited the Jewish allegations that Polycarp resisted the state religion; they spoke of him as 'the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the puller down of our gods, who teaches numbers not to sacrifice nor to worship'. Such Jews were no longer worthy of the name 'Jew', but had become *a synagogue of Satan* (*cf.* Nu. 16:3, which reads 'the synagogue of the Lord' in the LXX). The name *Satan* means an accuser, slanderer; this group of Jews had approximated to his nature. Naturally this is not an indication of John's view of Jews; he was a Jew himself! It reflects the depths of apostasy to which this congregation had sunk.

10 *The devil* through his instruments will put some of the Christians of Smyrna into *prison*, and their persecution will last *ten days.* Prison was not for punishment, but a place to await sentence, whether for forced labour in salt mines, or deportation, or death. The persecution will be short, but it could suffice for some to pay the ultimate sacrifice. If so, there remains

the assurance of *the crown of life* from the Lord, *i.e.* the laurel wreath for the victor at the games which will consist (in its application) of life in the kingdom of God.

11 The overcomer's consolation is that he or she will *not be hurt . . . by the second death.* That is a Jewish expression, which contrasts the death which all must suffer with the fate of those who are destined never to escape its power, either because they are unworthy of resurrection from death or because they suffer judgment at the end of the age (in 21:8 it means to be cast into the lake of fire). Such a doom is to die twice. The Smyrneans are reminded that to die through human wrath is small compared with suffering the judgment of God.

2:12–17 The letter to the church in Pergamum

For many years there was rivalry between Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum as to which was the first city of Asia. Of one thing there was no doubt: Pergamum was the centre of the religious life of the province. The city was dominated by a huge hill that rose to 1000 ft above sea level and had many temples. The most famous was the temple of Asclepios, the god of healing, closely associated with the snake, which gave Pergamum a reputation like Lourdes today. There was also a huge altar of Zeus, built to commemorate a notable victory. Most important of all, Pergamum had the first temple in the area dedicated to Augustus and Rome, hence it became the centre for the worship of the emperor in the province. As this was as much a political as a religious affiliation it created peculiar problems for Christians. The titles of Lord, Saviour and God were constantly applied to the emperor, which Christians could do no other than resist in the light of their sole rightful ascription to Jesus.

12 The title echoes 1:16 and anticipates 2:16.

13 The Lord acknowledges Pergamum as being *where Satan has his throne.* This most plausibly relates to the throne-like altar of Zeus, itself a symbol of the idolatry that held sway in Pergamum. Yet these Christians remained *true* to the *name* of Jesus, the only Lord, Saviour and God incarnate. Clearly a persecution had taken place, when one of their number had been executed, *Antipas, my faithful witness.* This could be the first occasion of *witness* (Gk 'martyr') being consciously used of one who laid down his life on account of witness to Christ.

14 But the church in this city had *some who hold to the teaching of Balaam,* with which was associated *the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* From early times the latter were reputed to have been followers of Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the Seven appointed to help the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 6:5). The two names were popularly assumed to have a similarity of meaning. Nicolaus means 'he overcomes the people' and Balaam 'he has consumed the people'. The evil at stake was persuasion to *sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality.* After Balaam uttered his oracles of blessing instead of cursing on Israel (Nu. 22 – 24), the Israelites engaged in sexual immorality with the Moabite women and ate their sacrifices and worshipped their gods (Nu. 25:1–2). In Nu. 31:16 it is stated that the Moabite women acted by the counsel of Balaam. In Pergamum, as elsewhere, teachers had entered the churches and sought to persuade the members to act freely on the acknowledged truth that Christians were not under the Mosaic law. The concept of a permissive society is clearly not new! Likewise its evils.

16 The Lord calls for repentance (*i.e.* turning from such sin), otherwise he will *soon come* and exercise judgment on those who so teach and act (*cf.* 2:5).

17 The promise to the overcomer is twofold. *I will give some of the hidden manna.* This is in accord with the understanding of redemption as a second exodus. The Jews put it thus, 'As the first Redeemer brought the manna down, so the second Redeemer will bring the manna down.' For the Christian, of course, that is given a spiritual meaning, akin to the 'water of life' (*cf.* 22:17). The *white stone* is ambiguous, in that it had a variety of meanings and uses in ancient society. An individual on trial would be given by the jurors a stone, a black one indicating guilt, a white one acquittal. If this were in mind the promise would be related to that given to the Smyrneans (2:11). A custom existed when two persons wishing to seal friendship, broke a stone into two and each retained a half, thereby giving access to each other's home. An extension of such a custom was the use of a stone for admission to a feast; when it applied to an association that regularly held feasts it could be expensive and restricted – much like an exclusive club today. There is evidence of donating to victors at the games a stone which served as a reward and was provided out of public funds. Much would depend, in interpreting possibilities of understanding, as to whose *new name* written on the stone is in mind. If it were the Christian's, then the promise would indicate entrance into a distinctive relationship in the new life of the kingdom of God. If it were the name of God (*cf.* 3:12), or of Christ (*cf.* 19:12b), then it would denote a new and hidden relationship with the Lord, with perhaps an allusion to the power inherent in the name of God. The Christian participates in the power of the Lord and, in a unique manner shared by none, in the character of God.

2:18–29 The letter to the church in Thyatira

Thyatira was a city of craftsmen and merchants. We recall that the first convert in Macedonia was Lydia of Thyatira, a seller of purple cloth (Acts 16:14). The major problem for the church was posed by the many trade guilds in the city. This was unusual, in that Roman administration discouraged such; but it is thought that Thyatira was useful to the Romans as a supplier for their garrison in nearby Pergamum, so they could overlook the guilds. The Christians, however, could not. Guilds had a patron god; the local god of Thyatira, a representation of Apollo, probably served that purpose. The feasts of the guilds were held in a temple and were viewed as religious occasions; the meat was offered to the god, so that participators shared it with him, and the occasions not infrequently ended in debauchery. How could Christians participate in such meetings? *That woman Jezebel* had an answer (20).

V 18 echoes 1:14b and 15a. *Eyes . . . like blazing fire* see all. *Burnished bronze* was a popular alloy and was produced in Thyatira, though strangely the technical term for it used here occurs nowhere else in Greek literature. Its association with the local representation of Apollo, and the finding of coins on which he is portrayed as holding the emperor's hand, may be in mind in this introduction, where the Son of God is described as arrayed in armour flashing like the refined metal from the furnaces of the city! The *deeds* mentioned in v 19 are significant, not least for understanding what are acceptable to God, and for the interpretation of judgment according to works in 20:12–14. Here was a church that was growing in its service for Christ (*you are now doing more than you did at first*).

20 But the church allowed a prophetess to exercise a dangerous ministry in its midst. *Jezebel* is clearly a symbolic name, recalling King Ahab's queen, who introduced idolatry into Israel and threatened the continued existence of true religion (see 1 Ki 16:29–32; 2 Ki 9:22). Some authorities have a curious variant in v 20 and read *your wife Jezebel*; it is unlikely to be correct, but it reflects a belief that the prophetess would have been the wife of the 'angel' of the church, namely its bishop. Jezebel would have been of the order of the Nicolaitans and encouraged the members of the church to have no scruples about participating in the meetings of their guilds and so freely engage in *sexual immorality and the eating of foods sacrificed to idols.* This is typical of the 'beyond morality' attitude of the libertarian gnostics.

21 Warning had already been given to Jezebel to cease her baleful influence, but to no avail. Accordingly, she and those responsive to her were to be punished. The language in vs 22–23 is clearly figurative, setting forth a punishment befitting the crime. *Those who commit adultery with her* are the same as *her children* – the entire group of her followers will be brought to an end, and *all the churches will know* by experience what they already know in theory, that the Lord *searches hearts and minds* and repays according to deeds.

24 *Satan's so-called deep secrets* could refer ironically to the gnostics' claims to know (in an exclusive manner) the deep secrets of God; the Lord's response to such a claim would then be that their 'deep secrets' are inspired by Satan, not by God. Alternatively, the Nicolaitans may have taught that Christians should not hesitate to learn the 'secrets of Satan', but rather demonstrate their superiority over the sins of the flesh, since in any case these cannot affect the spirit within. Either interpretation demands a repudiation of such notions. *I will not impose any other burden on you* alludes to the two chief demands of the apostolic council in Acts 15:28, namely abstention from food sacrificed to idols and from immorality. The call to perseverance in v 25 occurs again in 3:11, but with a significant addition.

26–27 The overcomer is described as one who *does my will to the end.* Such a person is to receive a delegation of Christ's authority over the nations and share in his triumph over rebellious peoples. The verbs in v 27, *rule* and *dash . . . to pieces*, are in parallelism, and either term may be viewed as controlling the meaning of the other. While most opt for the latter (*i.e.* destroy) the former would be more in keeping with the context: the Christians in Thyatira, conscious of their helplessness, are promised power over their adversaries. (Note that the term here translated 'rule' means lit. 'to shepherd' and originally referred to the use of a shepherd's staff, and so of a sceptre [Ps. 45:6] and also of an instrument of punishment [Is. 10:24].)

28 *I will also give him the morning star* is less to be interpreted in terms of 22:16, where Christ himself is the bright Morning Star, than by the fact that the morning star is Venus. For the Romans that star was a symbol of victory and sovereignty; Roman generals built temples in honour of Venus, and Caesar's armies had its sign inscribed on their standards. If that be in view the promise strengthens the declarations in vs 26–27; the overcomer is doubly assured of his participation with Christ in his triumph and rule.

3:1–6 The letter to the church in Sardis

Sardis was a city with an illustrious past of which it was proud, but it had less to be proud of in John's time. The capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, it reached the peak of its wealth about 700 BC under Gyges, known to the Assyrians as Gugu. The Jews called this king Gog, and he was thought of as symbolic of the evil powers to arise at the end of the age. He was slain in a surprise attack by the Cimmerians. The city sank into oblivion after the Persian conquest, but it recovered something of its prestige when, through the help of Tiberius, it was rebuilt following an earthquake in AD 17. The church in Sardis reflected the history of the city; once it had had a name for spiritual achievement, but now it was lifeless (1). Two other elements in the city's life are echoed in the letter. Sardis was built on a mountain and had an acropolis which was viewed as impregnable. 'To capture the acropolis of Sardis' was proverbial in Greek to do the impossible. But no less than five times the acropolis was conquered, twice through lack of vigilance. The parallel with the church's lack of wakefulness and its dire situation is striking (2–3). Sardis was also a centre for woollen goods and claimed to be first in the business of dyeing wool; this, too, seems to be reflected in vs 4–5.

1 The title echoes 1:4 and 16. The risen Lord possesses *the seven spirits of God*; in view of the imagery of 1:4 this would appear to represent the Holy Spirit sent to the seven churches. The Spirit inspires prophecy and quickens the dead; this church needed to listen to the prophetic warning and seek the Spirit's quickening life. As in 2:1 *the seven stars*, the churches, are in Christ's hand, both to hold fast and to judge. *I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God* (2). But none are mentioned! The Sardis congregation needed those qualities which the church in Thyatira had: love, faith, service, perseverance. If they had any of those, or any like them, they were half-hearted in putting them into practice. Nothing they started ever came to completion. The church therefore is called on to *awake* (*cf.* Eph. 5:14); to *strengthen what remains, i.e.* whatever was of God in the church that had not died; to *remember what you have received, i.e.* of the apostolic gospel and teaching on the Christian life; to *obey* it and *repent* (3), i.e. turn to God as at their conversion. Otherwise, says the Lord, *I will come like a thief.* The parable of the thief is clearly echoed here (Mt. 24:43–44; *cf.* 1 Thes. 5:2–4), as it is in 16:15. In view of the use of this language in the letters to Ephesus and Pergamum (2:5, 16), however, it is likely that a coming of the Lord for judgment in the present is in view, rather than the possibility that the church will suffer judgment at the Lord's coming in power and glory.

4 The *few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes* are those who had resisted the temptation to accommodate their lives to the heathen customs of their neighbours. They, accordingly, will *walk with* the Lord, *dressed in white.* **5** The same promise is addressed to the overcomer (*cf.* 19:7–8). Holiness is always a gift of the Lord wrought in the life of the believer, the life of the Redeemer lived out in the redeemed. Note further that the wearing of white is associated with festivity (as in 19:7–8; *cf.* also Ec. 9:8) and victory. A complex of ideas attaches to the picture. For the concept of erasing a name from the book of life see Ex. 32:32, where the thought is of a register of citizens. In Dn. 12:1, Lk. 10:20, Phil. 4:3 and in this passage it symbolizes a register of the citizens of the kingdom of God. The Lord's confession of the overcomer echoes Mt. 10:32, 'I will also acknowledge him before my Father'.

3:7–13 The letter to the church in Philadelphia

Philadelphia, like the neighbouring town of Sardis, suffered grievously from earthquakes and, while not so badly affected as the latter in the catastrophic earthquake of AD 17, it experienced them more frequently. Of this aspect of the city's life Strabo wrote, 'The walls never cease being cracked, and different parts of the city are constantly suffering damage. That is why the actual town has few inhabitants, but the majority live as farmers in the countryside, as they have fertile land'. The insecurity of life in Philadelphia is contrasted in v 12 with the promise of a permanent place in the city of God, and they who live in it will not have to find a safer place outside its walls! The whole letter is dominated by the sure and certain prospect of life in the kingdom of God.

7 The risen Lord is *holy and true*, like the Father (6:10), and so may be trusted to keep his word. He *holds the key of David.* In 1:18, as the resurrected one, Jesus has 'the keys of death and Hades', and so can unlock the gates of death and lead into eternal life; here the phrase recalls Is. 22:22, where it signifies authority over David's house and means the Messiah's undisputed authority over entrance into, or exclusion from, the kingdom of God.

8–9 The symbol of the *open door* is often interpreted in the light of Paul's usage in 1 Cor. 16:9 and 2 Cor. 2:12, namely the opening up of evangelistic opportunity. In this context, however, it almost certainly refers to the door of God's kingdom. As in Smyrna, the Jews of this city are called *the synagogue of Satan*; they would

have not only opposed the Christians but asserted that the latter had no place in the kingdom of God, since it was for Jews alone. On the contrary, the Lord of the kingdom has already opened it to his followers, and in the day of its revelation he will make these apostate Jews do what they expected the Gentiles would do for them: they will fall down before the Christians they despised and will acknowledge that they are the beloved of the Messiah (see Is. 60:14).

10 The *hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world* denotes not the clock time when the Messianic judgments come on the world, but the trials themselves. A comparable use of *hour* is seen in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, where it represents the horrors of the crucifixion and all it signified for him (Mk. 14:35; Jn. 12:27). The tribulation is to test *those who live on the earth.* This phrase is regularly used in Revelation for the unbelievers of the world (see 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8). The preservation of the church from the effects of these judgments is set forth in various images in this book of the judgments of God (see 7:1–8; 11:1; 12:6) and has a close parallel in Jn. 17:15.

11 A note of urgency is now introduced, which appears again in 22:7, 12, 20.

12 The conqueror is to be *a pillar in the temple of my God.* 21:22 makes it clear that there is to be no temple other than God and the Lamb in the city of God. The promise here given is an assurance of inseparable unity with God in his coming kingdom. *I will write on him the name of my God* ... continues the metaphor of the pillar, hence the inscription is depicted as on the pillar, not on the forehead of the victor. 1 Macc. 14:25–27 relates how the deeds of Simon Maccabeus were inscribed on tablets of brass, which were fixed 'in a conspicuous place in the precincts of the sanctuary', so ensuring a permanent record of Simon's greatness. The victor's glory, however, is not to be in his deeds but in that he bears *the name of my God, the name of the city of God* and Christ's *new name, i.e.* in the fact that he belongs to God and to the Son of God in his glory, and is a citizen of the new Jerusalem, the eternal kingdom of God (21:2).

3:14–22 The letter to the church in Laodicea

Laodicea was situated on the bank of the River Lycus. Its position at the junction of three imperial roads traversing Asia Minor favoured its development as a wealthy commercial and administrative centre. Three facts known throughout the Roman world about the city throw light on this letter: it was a banking centre, whose banks even Cicero recommended for exchanging money; it manufactured clothing and woollen carpets, made especially from the glossy black wool of sheep reared locally; and it had a medical school and produced medicines, notably an eye ointment made from a pulverized rock in the area. The stern characterization of the church's spiritual life (17) and the call for its repentance (18) are both couched in terms of these three activities of the city.

14 As *the Amen* Jesus is the embodiment of the faithfulness and truthfulness of God (see Is. 65:16). The Christian use of 'Amen' adds the thought that he is also the guarantor and executor of the purposes of God. Such a designation stands in vivid contrast to the faithlessness of the Laodiceans. The title *the ruler of God's creation* is better rendered 'the prime source of all God's creation' (NEB). it is like 'Alpha' in the title 'Alpha and Omega' (1:8), and here is perhaps intended to emphasize the Lord's authority and power to carry out that purpose of which he is guarantor and faithful witness.

15–16 The terms *cold, hot* and *lukewarm* are likely to relate to waters around and in Laodicea. Nearby Hierapolis was famed for its hot springs; Colosse, also near at hand, was noted for a cold, clear stream of excellent drinking water. Since, however, the River Lycus dried up in summer, Laodicea had to use a long viaduct for its water, which was not only tepid but impure and sometimes foul, making people sick. The church of that city had that effect on Christ – a vivid and horrifying picture of judgment. (V 16 should not be taken as indicating that the Lord prefers an atheist or a fanatical religious zealot to a tepid Christian. The issue is the possession of genuine life in Christ by those who profess the Christian faith, not the way they hold it.)

17–18 In a single sentence with contrasting clauses (*You say ... I counsel you ...*) the irony of the Laodiceans' situation is brought home to them. In spite of their wealth they are *wretched* and *pitiful*; despite their physicians and medicaments for the eyes they are *blind*; and in spite of their abundance of cloth they are *naked.* Accordingly the Lord calls on them to *buy* from him what they lack (*cf.* 1 Cor. 2:6–16; 2 Cor. 4:1–6).

19 The nauseating condition of the Laodiceans has not quenched the love of Christ for them; his scathing judgments are the expression of an affection that wishes to lead them to repentance (*cf.* Heb. 12:4–11). The gracious invitation that follows in v 20 is given, not to the church as a whole, as though Christ was outside the church (which would require, 'If the church will hear my voice ... I will go in and eat with *them*, and *they* with me'), but to each individual within it, conveying the offer of the risen Lord to share with any who will open the door of

fellowship in even the commonest activities of life.

21 Just as a high privilege is offered to these unworthy Christians so is a promise greater than all those previously uttered: just as believers invite Christ to make his home with them in this transitory life, so the Lord will invite anyone who endures to the end to share in the coming ages the throne that the Father has given to him. The fulfilment of the promise is portrayed in 20:4–6, the 'millennial' rule in history, and 22:5, the eternal reign in the new creation.

4:1 – 5:14 A vision of heaven

This section may be viewed as a turning point in the book of Revelation. It provides a fuller understanding of the Christ and his salvation that dominates the previous chapters and of the judgments and the kingdom which are the subject of the chapters that follow. A single motif binds together the twofold vision of chs. 4 and 5, namely that the God of creation is the God of redemption, who brings to pass his purpose through the crucified and risen Christ. Ch. 4 reads like one of the visions of God in the OT (*cf.* Is. 6; Ezk. 1), where God is presented as exalted in holiness, far above the storms of history and the efforts of evil forces to resist his will. In ch. 5 attention is concentrated on the Christ who has conquered all evil powers and thereby won the right to open God's scroll of destiny and carry out what is written in it. Through the combination of the two visions it is made clear that God's will in creation, celebrated in the closing hymn of ch. 4, is accomplished by the Lamb who was slain and raised to the throne of God; and so history ends in the acknowledgment and worship of God and the Lamb by the living and the dead.

4:1–11 The throne in heaven

The scene of John's vision changes from earth to heaven and remains there until ch. 10, after which the point of view continually alternates. It is to be noted that the prophet alone, not the church, is called to go through *the door*; his elevation in vision is for the purpose of revelation, in order that he may communicate what he sees to those on earth.

2 The first object to catch John's eye is *a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.* It is of first importance to know that the God who dwells in heaven possesses absolute authority over the universe. **3** No description is given of God; John simply tells of various colours emanating from precious stones flashing through a strange rainbow-cloud. There is some uncertainty about the names given to jewels in the ancient world: *jasper* was probably a diamond (*cf.* 21:11), *carnelian* was red, but we are unsure about the *emerald.* It may denote rock crystal, which acts as a prism, and in that case the rainbow after the flood is recalled, a reminder of God's covenant to restrain his wrath from humanity on earth (Gn. 9:13). Throne and rainbow, omnipotence and mercy, are significant symbols in a book whose overriding theme is the judgment and kingdom of God.

4 The *twenty-four elders* are reminiscent of Is. 24:23, where the 'elders' were viewed as Jewish leaders. These *elders* have often been interpreted as representatives of Israel and the church (twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles). In 1 Ch. 24:4, however, we read of twenty-four priestly orders, and in 1 Ch. 25:1 of twenty-four orders of Levites appointed to prophesy and praise with harps and cymbals. Since in 5:8 the elders present the prayers of God's people and in 4:6–11 are linked with the four living creatures, they are evidently to be understood as exalted angelic beings, worshipping and serving the Creator. **5** The *flashes of lightning* and *peals of thunder* recall the theophany at Sinai (Ex. 19:16) and portray the awesomeness of God. For *the seven spirits of God* see 5:6. **6** It is not said that the *sea of glass* was a literal sea, but that it *looked like* one. It is an adaptation of the conception of waters above the firmament (Gn. 1:7), but is here introduced apparently to emphasize the greatness of God.

Four living creatures stand around the throne. Their description is drawn from Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim (Ezk. 1:5–21) but considerably modified. The chief differences are that in Ezekiel the cherubim each have four faces, but here each has only one. The former possess 'wheels' with rims 'full of eyes all around' (they bear the throne of God), but here the creatures themselves possess the eyes. **7–8** Their ceaseless worship rendered to God may well represent the subjection of all creation to God. The Jews came to understand Ezekiel's vision in this way, regarding the *man* as chief representative of creatures, the *eagle* of birds, the *lion* of beasts, and the *ox* of cattle. The ancient symbolizing of the four winds and the four chief constellations of the zodiac by these four figures, if known to John, would but serve to strengthen this view. The song of the cherubim implies that the future triumph of God is rooted in his very nature; the Lord, who is holy and almighty, *is to come.* **9–10** The renunciation by the twenty-four elders of their crowns would appear to be the expression of adoration given on special occasions when God 'comes' and manifests his sovereign power to judge and to save (see 5:8, 14; 11:15–18; 19:4). **11** The elders recognize that one only is worthy to take

pre-eminence in creation – the Creator. In their song that celebrates his worth read 'on account of *your will they were created* (instead of *by*). This has a forward rather than backward look; God's will is the ultimate power in the universe and that will shall be done. That is the supreme lesson of the visions of Revelation.

5:1–14 The scroll and the Lamb

The focus of the vision dramatically changes. It is as though a television camera in heaven zooms in on the hand of God to show a scroll which no-one can open. The camera then focuses on one as yet not seen: he is standing in the centre of the throne, and by virtue of his 'triumph' he is able to take and open the scroll. When he does so, all heaven rings with his praise. It is likely that we have here a representation of the coronation of Jesus the Lord in terms of the ancient enthronement ceremonies of the Middle East. The steps of the ceremony are generally defined as exaltation, presentation, enthronement and acclamation. The equivalent of the exaltation is seen in v 5, the presentation in v 6, the bestowal of authority in v 7, and the acclamation in vs 8–14. So the Christ-Redeemer enters upon his reign in power.

1 There has been much speculation as to the nature of the scroll in the hand of God. Of the suggestions that have been advanced, two are especially noteworthy: one that it is a double inscribed contract deed, the other a testament or will. The former goes back to ancient time, when contracts were written on tablets, wrapped round with clay, on the outside of which the nature of the contract was briefly stated. When papyrus or parchment was introduced, fundamentally the same procedure was used, and the document was sealed with seven seals. A related procedure took place with the writing of a will, in that a will was sealed by seven witnesses, and after the death of the testator it was opened, when possible, in their presence. No description of the contents was written on the outside, but that feature in John's vision could be due to a conscious echo of Ezk. 2:8–10. In reality the two notions are closely related, in that a contract is an everyday form of covenant, and a testament is a special kind of covenant. On that understanding, the scroll in the hand of God represents his covenant promise of judgment and kingdom for humanity.

2–3 The angel must be *mighty*, since his voice has to carry throughout heaven, earth and the realm of the dead (*under the earth* is Hades; *cf.* Phil. 2:10). **5** *The Lion of the tribe of Judah* (*cf.* Gn. 49:9), *the Root of David* (Is. 11:1, 10) has *triumphed* through his death and resurrection, and so *he is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.* The redemption wrought by the Christ was the means by which God's kingdom of salvation was established. **6** The description of the Lamb combines varied uses of this figure in Hebrew thought. It looks *as if it had been slain* and yet *is standing in the centre of the throne*, alive and victorious! In Revelation, exodus is the fundamental picture of redemption; the slain Lamb then is the Passover lamb. We also recall the slaughtered lamb of Is. 53:7, the Servant of the Lord, suffering in innocence for all humankind. But the Lamb has *seven horns*, which signifies immense power (Ps. 75:4–7) and royal status (Zc. 1:18). This takes up the contemporary apocalyptic representation of the Messiah as the powerful leader (Ram!) of the flock of God, who delivers the sheep, conquering the wild beasts that seek to destroy them. In Zc. 4:10 it is God who has *seven eyes*, symbolizing omniscience; here they are identified with *the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth*, in harmony with the teaching of Jn. 16:7–11. The Messiah of OT promise and apocalyptic hope thus stands revealed in terms of new covenant fulfilment.

8–10 The cherubim and the elders sing *a new song*, because Jesus has introduced the new era of the kingdom of God by his redemptive work (*cf.* Is. 42:9–10, which speaks of the new song in a similar context). The Lord has *purchased men for God* from all nations. The figure is that of setting people free at a price. In the ancient world slaves were sometimes set free through generous people paying the cost; in the modern world hostages have been similarly liberated. The pattern in view here, however, is that of the liberation of Israel in Egypt to become the free people of God in the land of promise. The greater emancipation, for life eternal in the kingdom of God, has been accomplished for all humankind at the cost of the Redeemer's blood. Hence the redeemed become *a kingdom and priests to serve our God*, so fulfilling the vocation to which the ancient people of God were called (Ex. 19:6). Their *reign on the earth* will be their 'service' (*cf.* 20:4–6; 22:3).

11–14 The angelic multitudes now take up the song of praise to the Lamb (*cf.* Dn. 7:10). The doxology has reference to the power and blessings of Christ at the commencement of his reign (11:17) and is closely similar to that sung to God in 7:12. All creation in heaven, earth, sea and the realm of the dead finally joins the host of angels and archangels (13). Whereas the praise of heaven in vs 8–12 celebrates the Lamb's initiating the kingdom of salvation, the universal worship of God and the Lamb awaits its consummation in the future. The like applies to the hymn of Phil. 2:6–11: the Lord has been given the name above every name at his exaltation to the throne of God; its acknowledgment awaits his manifestation in glory.

6:1 – 8:5 The seven seals

Many complex elements flow together to form the panorama which the prophet now describes. The conviction that judgments will precede the coming of the kingdom of God is rooted in the teaching of the OT prophets concerning the day of the Lord (see *e.g.* Is. 13, 34; Je. 4 – 7; Ezk. 7, 25; Am. 5:18–29; Zp. 1 – 3). John has elaborated and schematized them in a unique manner, but the division of the Messianic woes into several sets of sevens may well be inspired by the doom prophecy of Lv. 26, where it is stated four times, 'I will punish you for your sins seven times over' (18, 21, 24, 28). The discourse on the end times in the gospels (Mt. 24; Mk. 13, Lk. 21) contains the seven judgments enumerated in Rev. 6, but the form of the opening four judgments reflects the vision of four chariots and horses in Zechariah (*cf.* Zc. 1:7–17), adapted by John to convey his message. Note that while the opening of the seals brings judgments, these are but the precursors of the final kingdom of God. The scroll represents God's covenant to give humanity the kingdom of salvation.

6:1–2 The first seal

The command '*Come!*' is directed to the rider who appears at the opening of the seal (the same is true in vs 3, 5, 7). Many interpreters regard the conquering horseman as Christ and link the passage with the vision of the returning Lord in 19:11–12. The only element in common in the two pictures, however, is the white horse, a symbol of victory. Others hold that the rider represents the triumph of the gospel, and cite Mk. 13:10. (2 Thes. 2:7 is also interpreted in this light.) Nevertheless, in view of the evident similarity of the four horsemen, it seems more natural to interpret all four as symbolizing judgments. This rider appears to signify an overwhelmingly powerful military force.

6:3–4 The second seal

The rider on the *fiery red* horse also denotes a warring power. If it is to be asked how he differs from the first, the language suggests that the first rider represents an army invading other countries; the second a general confusion of strife, including hostilities between countries, and perhaps even civil war (. . . *to make men slay each other*). Note the double reference to war in Mk. 13:7–8 and parallels.

6:5–6 The third seal

The rider on a *black horse* denotes famine. The balance in his hand suggests scarcity of food, the prices quoted are prohibitive. The NIV rightly paraphrases the term *denarius* as '*a day's wages*' (*cf.* Mt. 20:1–2). *A quart of wheat* would suffice for a man's daily ration, leaving nothing, however, for his family. *Three quarts of barley* would go further, but it would still remain a bare subsistence allowance. On the other hand, *do not damage the oil and wine* reflects a concern to give priority to such for those who could afford them. In AD 92, shortly before the writing of Revelation, an acute shortage of cereals, together with an abundance of wine in the empire, caused Domitian to order the restriction of wine cultivation and an increase of corn growing; the order created such a furore it had to be abandoned. The text may have such a situation in mind.

6:7–8 The fourth seal

The fourth rider is named *Death*, but it is likely that it represents a special kind of death, namely pestilence. Ezekiel tells of God's four sore acts of judgment: sword, famine, evil beasts and pestilence (Ezk. 4:21), and the Greek translation renders the last by the term *death* (possibly John does the same in 2:23, and certainly in 18:8). That *Hades was following close behind* is a reminder that death does not end life's story; judgment awaits sinners (*cf.* Heb. 9:27–28).

6:9–11 The fifth seal

The souls of the martyrs were *under the altar* because they had been, as it were, 'sacrificed' (*cf.* Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6). The thought was beloved by the Jews. Rabbi Akiba taught: 'He who is buried in the land of Israel is as if he were buried beneath the altar, for the whole land of Israel is appropriated for the altar; he who is buried beneath the altar is as if he were buried beneath the throne of glory.' In the light of 12:17 *the testimony* the martyrs *had maintained* is the testimony of Jesus (see also 1:2 and 19:10).

10–11 The *white robe* given to them is likely to be a representation of their justification through Christ in face of their condemnation by the world, and so a sign and pledge of the glory which is to be theirs in the 'first resurrection' (20:4–6). This vision of the martyrs is viewed as an integral part of the judgments of the Lord, for the prayer for justice (10) is answered, and the end thereby hastened.

6:12–27 The sixth seal

The description of the cosmic signs at the end of the age is drawn from a number of OT passages that speak of the day of the Lord (for *a great earthquake* as a sign of the end, *cf.* Ezk. 38:19–20; for *the sun* turning *black like sackcloth* and *the moon blood red* see Is. 13:10; Ezk. 32:7–8; Joel 2:10; 3:15; for the falling *stars* and the rolling up of *the sky* like a scroll see Is. 34:4; for the hiding in the rocks see Is. 2:10; and for prayer to

the mountains see Ho. 10:8). These 'signs' are indications not that the end is drawing near but that it has arrived (so v 17, *the great day of their wrath has come*). They originally were pictorial expressions of the terror of the universe before the majesty of the Creator as he steps forth in judgment and deliverance (see especially Hab. 3:6–11), and so served to magnify the awesomeness of the Lord in his theophany.

15–17 These verses give a sevenfold classification of humankind, ranging from *the kings of the earth* to *every slave and every free man.* Their cry in vs 16–17 is a counterpart to that of the martyrs beneath the altar. The last day reveals the identity of him who has ultimate authority over the universe and the irresistible judgment of the Lamb; but the end of their exercise of authority and judgment is the triumph of the kingdom of grace and glory (see 21:1 – 22:5).

7:1–17 An interlude between the sixth and seventh seals

The sixth seal heralded the end of history in the coming of God and the Lamb. One expects the seventh seal to be opened now and the kingdom of glory to be revealed. Instead John recounts two visions of God's people in the last days. The first relates to the period prior to the judgments described in ch. 6; the second reveals the redeemed in the glory that follows them. John's purpose is to assure his Christian readers (and hearers!; 1:3) that they have no need to dread the judgments of the last times since God will protect them.

It is often thought that the two halves of the chapter relate to two different companies of people, so that vs 1–8 show God's care for Israel in the last times, or at least for Jewish Christians, whereas vs 9–17 depict the saved of the nations of the world. This is a doubtful interpretation. If the 'sealing' of the first vision portrays God's protection from the destructive judgments coming on the earth, then all God's people will need that, not a limited section of them (and that is done; see 9:4). Moreover, the expression *the servants of our God*, who are sealed (3) occurs elsewhere in Revelation, and regularly denotes the whole company of the redeemed (see 2:20; 11:18; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6). It is likely that John was guided to employ a prophecy that originally was intended to assure Jews of the certainty of their inheritance in the kingdom of God. He applied it to the church as the new Israel, since its symbolism thereby comes to perfect realization (for the church as the new Israel see Rom. 2:28–29; Gal. 3:29; 6:16; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9).

1 *After this* marks a new vision; it is not a note of time in relation to the events narrated in ch. 6 but introduces a fresh revelation given to John. *The four angels . . . holding back the four winds of the earth* are an alternative symbol of the four horsemen of the previous chapter (so in Zc. 6:5). The destructive fury of the winds represents the whole manifestation of judgment symbolized by the seals, trumpets and cups of wrath. **2–3** The picture of the seal of the living God applied to the servants of God goes back to Ezekiel's vision of the man with a writing kit, who is told to go through Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of the righteous that they may be spared by the agents of destruction (Ezk. 9:1–6).

4–8 The enumeration of the tribes one by one serves to emphasize the completeness of the number of God's saints for whom he cares during the coming trials. The list is unusual in several respects. Judah comes first, instead of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn (Gn. 29:32; *cf.* Nu. 13:4–15; Dt. 33:6); this doubtless is due to the recognition that Judah is the tribe of the Messiah. Dan is omitted, but Manasseh appears, although the latter is included in Joseph. This is certainly deliberate. Jewish teachers persistently associated Dan with idolatry. In 'The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs' Dan is told, 'Your prince is Satan'. From Irenaeus on it was maintained among Christians that Dan's name was omitted because the antichrist was to come from his tribe. This was, of course, the view of Jews, but in reality the representations of the antichrist in Revelation are irreconcilable with it.

9 The vision of the 144,000 sealed against the effects of trial is replaced by that of *a great multitude that no-one could count*, standing before God and the Lamb in the glory of the kingdom. A. M. Farrer considered that this contrast gives expression to two complementary themes of the Scriptures: on the one hand that God knows the number of his elect, and on the other, that those who inherit the blessing of Abraham are numberless as the stars (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine* [Clarendon, 1964], p. 110). Their *white robes* signify purity and resurrection glory, the *palm branches* victory and joy after war.

10 *Salvation belongs to our God . . . and to the Lamb* echoes Ps. 3:8 (see also Rev. 19:1). The victors ascribe their redemption to God and the Lamb. **12** The praise of the angelic orders reflects the praise of the redeemed multitude.

13–14 John's answer to the elder's question implies, 'I also would like to know'. *The great tribulation* out of which the multitude has come is not a general designation of the trials which are the Christian's normal lot, but the tribulation that occurs at the close of this age. The vision depicts the scene after the cessation of the

judgments of the Lord within history and the sufferings of Christians at the hands of the opponents of God, and so has in view the last generation. Yet the elder's statement in vs 14b–17 describes the blessedness of the whole church. The difficulty is relieved if we remember that John prophesies of a day that to him is almost on the horizon; it was not given to him to see the period that intervened before the end. The last persecution may come at any time. Those who have gone before, having witnessed a good confession, are of course included in this throng, but it was superfluous to state that. The church of the present is the subject in view, and its situation fills John's canvas. For us, nearly two millennia later, the church is mainly in heaven, but we may know that all believers, including ourselves, will be among that throng.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb is a symbolic expression of the forgiveness of sins through faith in the Christ who died for all. The phrase *the blood of the Lamb* is a shorthand expression for the death of Christ viewed as a sacrifice for sins, hence the imagery of v 14 depicts the effectiveness of the Lord's redemption in the lives of his people. It includes the overcoming of sin in life by virtue of the power of Christ's atonement and so covers the whole of life's pilgrimage, as well as the event of conversion. Vs 16–17 use language drawn from Is. 29:8 and 49:10: Christ assuages people's thirst by providing in himself the antidote to their restlessness, the complete counterpart to their unsatisfied desires. The *springs of living water* in the final vision of the city of God turn out to be a river of living water (22:1–2) – more than enough for the needs of all!

8:1–5 The seventh seal

1 *A silence in heaven* occurred. In the light of vs 3–4 it is likely that it was to enable the prayers of the saints to be heard. In the Talmud seven heavens are distinguished; in the fifth heaven 'there are companies of ministering angels, who utter songs by night, and are silent by day for the sake of Israel's glory', *i.e.* they are silent in order that the praises of Israel may come before God. We have read in chs. 4 and 5 of the exultant worship of the angelic companies; here heaven is silenced in order that the cries for deliverance from the suffering Christians on earth may be heard. **3–4** *Incense* offered *with the prayers of all the saints* serves to make them acceptable before God; they must be cleansed from all taint of selfishness and sin. **5** Their prayers are answered. The *fire* that burned the incense is thrown to earth and becomes a means of judgment. There follow the phenomena that indicate that the Lord comes and the kingdom of God is established in power (see 11:19, consequent on the seventh trumpet, and 16:18, following the seventh cup of wrath).

8:6 – 11:19 The seven trumpets

Trumpets have many associations in the OT. At the manifestation of God at Sinai a prolonged sounding of a trumpet took place, terrifying the people (Ex. 19:16–19). A trumpet blast heralded the accession of a king to his rule (1 Ki. 1:39–40), and the celebration of God's kingship was so marked (Ps. 47:5–9). Trumpets were blown to announce declaration of war (Jdg. 3:26–28; 7:19–20; Ne. 4:18), and the day of the Lord was so to be announced (Joel 2:1; Zp. 1:16). All the festivals of Israel were announced with trumpet blasts (Nu. 10:10); in these there was a strange mixture of joy and judgment. To the rabbis of Israel the Day of Atonement was the day of judgment. Caird pointed out that in the Mishnah it is stated that God judges the world at Passover in respect of produce, at Pentecost in respect of fruit, and at Tabernacles in respect of rain, but Tishri 1 (the beginning of the preparation for the Day of Atonement) is the day when he judges all mankind (*The Revelation of St. John*, [Black, 1985] 109–110). Some passages in the NT represent the coming of Christ in his kingdom as heralded by a trumpet (Mt. 24:31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:16). These multiple assocations of trumpets would have been known to John, above all their connections with the day of the Lord and the kingdom of God. In his employment of them, the judgments announced by trumpets fall into two groups of four and three (as with the seven seals). The first four are reminiscent of the Egyptian plagues at the exodus; the fifth and sixth less clearly so. In 15:3 the coming of Christ is tacitly compared to the exodus (the redeemed sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb); it is comprehensible, therefore, that the final redemption, the second exodus, is heralded by similar plagues as at the first exodus.

8:6–12 The first, second, third and fourth trumpets

The first trumpet affects one third of the *earth* (*cf.* the plague of hail and fire in Ex. 9:24). *All the green grass was burned up, i.e.* in the third part of the earth which was affected; the locusts of 9:4 are forbidden to hurt the grass of the earth, which would not have existed if this were a universal judgment.

8 The second trumpet affects one third of *the sea*. As the Nile was turned into blood in the first Egyptian plague (Ex. 7:20–21) so is the third part of the sea here.

10–11 The third trumpet causes a third part of fresh *waters* to become poisonous and so

continues the thought of the previous plague (*cf.* 16:3–7). Since the star that falls at the sounding of the fifth trumpet (9:1) is an angelic being, it is possible that *Wormwood* is also an angel. For the *bitter* waters *cf.* Je. 9:15.

12 The fourth trumpet darkens a third part of the heavens, so that *a third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.* Again we are reminded of the Egyptian plague of darkness (Ex. 10:21–23), which is perhaps the reason why the striking of the heavenly bodies results in a reduction of their length of shining rather than of their intensity of light. Is it that John hints that people experience darkness in the day and intensified darkness in the night because of their sins, but the Lord gives them light enough by day and by night that they may forsake their moral darkness for life in the light of his presence?

8:13 – 9:21 The fifth trumpet

13 *An eagle* now announces *in mid-air* (that the whole world may hear his cry) a threefold *Woe* to those who dwell on the earth. The three woes correspond to the three trumpets yet to sound; they will be more drastic than the former trumpet judgments, since they are directed not to the elements but to the rebellious of humanity. Ch. 9 will describe the first two woes, but the third is not described, only its consequence in the revelation of the kingdom (11:15–19). That woe is reflected in 11:18, more explicitly stated in 16:17–20, depicted in greater detail in 17:12–18, celebrated in the dirge of ch. 18 and the hymns of 19:1–10, and finally portrayed in 19:11–21. The exodus typology is evident in the first woe, having a parallel in the Egyptian plague of locusts (Ex. 10:1–20), but less so in the second, which may be compared with the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt, the ultimate judgment of God on the nation.

9:1 On the sounding of the fifth trumpet *a star that had fallen* received *the key to the shaft of the Abyss.* The star is an angel; if *fallen*, he yet remains an instrument for doing God's will (the *key* to the *Abyss* was given by authority from God). *The Abyss* represents the chaos of waters; in the mythology of the ancient orient they were personified in a power of evil that opposed the powers of heaven, and so came to denote the abode of demonic agencies. In 20:1–3 it is the place into which Satan is thrown and imprisoned. So here the reference to *the key* indicates that all its inhabitants are firmly under God's control.

2–4 That clouds *like the smoke from a gigantic furnace* arose is intended to convey the impression of an advancing cloud of locusts. The comparison of these demon hosts to locusts echoes the vision of Joel 2:1–10, where it is said that the locust armies look like war horses running to battle, rattle like chariots, charge like mighty men, darken the heavens, and have fangs like lions. In addition to these features John declares that the locusts have power to inflict pain like scorpions (*cf.* 9:10). Locusts eat vegetation and do no harm to human beings, but these demonic locusts ignore vegetation and attack people, more precisely *those who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads* (they, on the contrary, have the mark of the beast; see 13:16). *Five months* is the normal length of a locust's life (spring and summer), but their visitation of any one place is naturally more limited in time.

7–9 The description of the locusts recalls Joel 1:6; 2:4–9, but it is common in Arab traditions. C. Niebuhr in 1772 reported an Arab's depiction of a locust: 'He compared the head of a locust with the head of a horse, its breast with the breast of a lion, its feet with the feet of a camel, its body with the body of a snake, its tail with the tail of a scorpion, its antennae with the hair of a maiden'. **11** Their *king* is named *Abaddon* in Hebrew but *Apollyon* in Greek. The former in the OT denotes the depths of Sheol and means 'destruction'. The latter is close to the Greek verb *apollumi*, 'to destroy', but may well be intended as a variant of Apollo, which Greek writers have derived from *apollumi.* The cult of Apollo used (among others) the symbol of the locust, and the emperors Caligula, Nero and Domitian claimed to be incarnations of Apollo. If this was in John's mind, the irony of the fifth trumpet is mind-blowing: the destructive host of hell had as its king the emperor of Rome! (This is factually paralleled in 17:16–18.)

13–14 When the sixth trumpet is sounded *a voice* comes from *the golden altar that is before God.* It is thus linked with the cries of the martyrs beneath the altar in heaven (6:9–10) and the prayers of the saints on earth for deliverance (8:4–5), though it is to be understood as that of God who answers the prayers of his people. *The four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates* are to be *released.* This river and the Nile formed the ideal limits of the land promised to Israel (Gn. 15:18). It also formed the eastern limit of the Roman Empire, and beyond it lay the Parthian (or Persian) Empire, the only military power in the world which had decisively defeated Roman armies and which Rome had cause to fear. Jews looked to this area for armies from the north to invade Palestine (1 Enoch 56:5–8 appears to interpret the Gog prophecy of Ezk. 38 – 39 as fulfilled through the Parthians and Medes). The four angels, however, command no human army but a terrifying demonic force, invading not the promised land but the godless world. **15** Nothing in the programme of God is accidental. The precise

moment of this invasion is fixed. **16** The number of the mounted troops is given as *two hundred million*. This and other computations like it are inspired by Ps. 68:17 (the number of the chariots of God as he came from Sinai) and Dn. 7:10 (the number of angels who come with God for judgment). The demonic army as truly serves the purpose of God as the angelic company.

17–19 The description of the horses and riders is horrifying, inconceivable and revolting. Strangely it is the horses which terrify and destroy; the riders and horses seem to melt into a unity, but their destructive power (from *fire, smoke and sulphur*) issues from the horses' mouths. These creatures are not of the earth; *fire* and *sulphur* belong to hell (19:20; 21:8), just as *smoke* is characteristic of the Abyss (9:2).

20–21 The plague fails to produce a salutary effect on the God-opposing world; people persist in idolatry, with its attendant evils, and find no place of repentance. How are we to interpret these extraordinary depictions of the first two 'woes'? G. B. Caird suggested that 'in them lies a most important theological affirmation: that the powers of evil have an immense reserve army, from which they can be steadily reinforced, so that no earthly order can find security from attacks from beyond the frontier, except in the final victory of God. In a world in which evil is virulent and tenacious, the programme of the gospel must not be expected to produce a steady whittling away of Satan's power, until he is reduced to impotence, but rather a steady hardening of resistance, leading inexorably to a last great battle' (*Revelation*, p. 123).

10:1 – 11:14 Interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets

Just as John inserted a parenthesis between the sixth and seventh seals, so he does between the sixth and seventh trumpets. Whereas, however, the purpose of the earlier interlude was to convey assurance of the protecting hand of God over his people during the Messianic judgments, that motive is but briefly mentioned in the little oracle of 11:1–2. The primary purpose of this interruption in the story is quite different. First, a solemn declaration is made of the certainty and nearness of the end when the seventh trumpet is sounded (1–7); secondly, John's commission to prophesy is freshly affirmed and even extended (he is to prophesy again about *many peoples, nations, languages and kings*); and thirdly, the task of the church in the time of tribulation is made plain, namely to bear witness to Christ before the opponents of the gospel (11:3–13). Here for the first time the figure of the antichrist appears (11:7), and the dual nature of the last tribulation becomes apparent, namely judgments of God upon those who oppose him and war against the church by the followers of antichrist. No promise of escape from the latter is given, but the end of the story is the vindication of the church and conversion of many.

10:1–11 The proximity of the end. **1** *The mighty angel* is sometimes identified with Christ, but it is unlikely that John would speak of the Lord as an angel. The language of the vision is reminiscent of Dn. 10:5–6 and 12:7. **2** In view of v 11 the *little scroll* appears to include the rest of the visions of Revelation. **3** *The seven thunders* were not uttered by the angel, for they followed his cry. Presumably they came from God or Christ (as also the command of v 4). **4** John is forbidden to write down the message of the thunders. What the message was and why it was not to be revealed has intrigued exegetes through the years. Perhaps it is meant to indicate that God's will is far greater than that which prophecy is able to express.

5 The angel stands on the earth and sea because his message is of world-wide importance. **6–7** The burden of his declaration is that *there will be no more delay*. God's purpose for humankind, revealed to the prophets, is now to be accomplished; when the seventh angel sounds his trumpet *the mystery of God will be accomplished*. The *mystery* is not a 'mysterious' revelation but God's secret purpose hidden from the unbelieving world. Its content is revealed and celebrated in 11:15–18.

8–11 Having been denied the right to write down one message John is now given a fresh commission to proclaim other messages. This part of the vision recalls Ezk. 2:9 – 3:3. As in the case of Ezekiel, eating the scroll caused both sweetness and bitterness, illustrating (certainly in Revelation) the mixture of joy and pain in receiving and making known the revealed blessings and the judgments of God.

11:1–2 The security of the church. In this short oracle the temple at Jerusalem and its worshippers are measured off for protection in the period of trial (for the symbolism see Ezk. 40:3–4 and Am. 7:7–9); the outer court of the Gentiles and the city are abandoned to destruction by a heathen power. It is unlikely that John wished this 'prophecy' to be interpreted literally (the city and temple had been destroyed a generation earlier), or that he framed it as a kind of prophetic parable. Rather, as in ch. 7, he appears to have adapted an earlier Jewish prophecy; literally it has been unfulfilled, but spiritually it conveyed the truth of the security of the church in its endurance of suffering. The same procedure of adaptation is apparent in the prophecy of vs 3–13.

1 *The temple of God and the altar and . . . the*

worshippers convey one idea, the church (*cf.* 1 Cor. 3:16). **2** Similarly, *the outer court* and *the holy city* together represent the world outside the church. It is a bold transformation, but v 8 implies that the one-time *holy city* has now become one with sinful Sodom, Egypt the oppressor of God's people and the tyrannous empire that wars against the Messiah. The *42 months* of v 2, '1,260 days' of 12:6, and 'a time, times and half a time' of 12:14 are equivalent expressions for the three and a half years of the antichrist's rule, and are all derived from Daniel's prophecies (see Dn. 7:25; 9:26–27; 12:7).

11:3–14 The prophecy of the two witnesses. This involves similar principles of interpretation as vs 1–2. The OT closes with a prophecy of Elijah returning to minister at the end of the age (Mal. 4:5–6). The great rabbinic teacher Johanan ben-Zakkai, a contemporary of John who wrote Revelation, declared that God said to Moses, 'If I send the prophet Elijah, you must both come together'. Such an identification suits the description of the witnesses depicted in vs 5–6. Did John, then, intend us to understand that Moses and Elijah are themselves to return and fulfil the ministry described in this passage? No, there are indications that, as in vs 1–2, the vision is to be interpreted symbolically. John in v 4 represents the witnessing prophets in terms of Zc. 4; there 'the two olive trees' represent Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor, and 'the lampstand' is Israel. The single lampstand becomes two to conform to the two trees, and they portray the church in its prophetic capacity. The lampstand had already become seven to represent the seven churches of Roman Asia (1:12; 2:1); it was a simple transition to make them become two to correspond to the two prophets. So also, when it is stated in v 7 that the beast attacks (better 'makes war on') the two witnesses and kills them, and that *men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies* and celebrate by sending gifts to each other (9–10), it is evident that an original picture of two prophets martyred in Jerusalem has become a symbol of a world-wide endeavour to crush the church of God. The celebration, however, is premature (11–12)!

3 The witnesses are *clothed in sackcloth*, for their message is one of judgment, calling for repentance, and is therefore parallel to 14:6–7.

5–6 The extraordinary power of the witnessing church is set forth in terms reminiscent of Elijah and Moses. The destroying fire recalls 2 Ki. 1:10–11; the ability to prevent *rain* 1 Ki. 17:1; the turning of *waters into blood* and striking of earth with *every kind of plague* Ex. 7 – 12.

7 Here is the first mention in Revelation of *the beast that comes up from the Abyss.* He is spoken of as well known, but fuller descriptions of him occur in chs. 13 and 17. Observe the similarity of language in 13:7 to describe the warfare of the beast against the church. For *Abyss* see on 9:1. **8** *The great city* originally denoted Jerusalem (*cf.* vs 1–2 and the last clause of this sentence), but has now come to mean what John Bunyan called 'Vanity Fair' (M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* [Hodder and Stoughton, 1940], p. 185). Throughout the rest of the book the phrase is used of the harlot city Rome (16:19; 17:18; 18:10–24). In one remarkable stroke of the pen, John identifies Jerusalem with Sodom, Egypt, the city of the antichrist and the world that rejected and killed the Son of God.

9–10 Jew and Gentile combine in celebrating their apparent victory over the church. Refusal to allow a corpse to be buried signifies the greatest depth of shame to which a person can be subjected (see Ps. 79:3). **11** The church is crushed by its enemies for *three and a half days*, a deliberate play on the three and a half years of the tribulation, which, however, is also the period of the powerful ministry of the witnesses. In comparison with that the victory of the antichrist is no victory at all. The statement that *a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet*, cites Ezk. 37:10, which refers to the spiritual quickening of the nation Israel. This 'resurrection', therefore, could be taken as signifying a revival so great as to fill the world with awe; but in view of the apostolic instruction on the resurrection of the dead and transformation of the living (1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thes. 4:14–18) it is more likely to signify the 'first resurrection' (20:5). With the severe earthquake of v 13 *cf.* 6:12 and 16:18, both implying the arrival of the end prior to the revelation of the kingdom. **13** The number *seven thousand* would suitably indicate a tenth of the population of Jerusalem in the first century AD. In making the city to represent the world city John had no need to alter the figure, for seven thousand could be interpreted to mean any large number. The fact that the survivors *gave glory to the God of heaven* indicates that these events evoked repentance from the hitherto unrepentant populace (*cf.* Jos. 7:19).

11:15–19 The seventh trumpet

The sounding of the seventh trumpet is intended to bring *the third woe* (14), but instead of a description of calamity, proclamation is made of the advent of the kingdom of God. The nature of the third woe is expounded in detail later (see note on 8:13).

15 The language of the proclamation echoes Ps. 2:2, but uniquely phrased, for that which has

arrived is *the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ* – an indivisible sovereignty. *He will reign for ever and ever.* Who is *He? Our Lord,* or *his Christ?* We have here a close parallel to Jn. 10:30, 'I and the Father are one'.

17 The customary attribute of God is significantly shortened; no longer is it said that he 'is to come' (*cf.* 1:4), for he has come! The reign has *begun,* in that God has put forth his *great power* to subdue the rebellion of humankind against his sovereign rule, which has existed through all ages. The kingdom of God is essentially deliverance from evil and the gift of life. Ch. 5 shows that it began in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and its victory is celebrated in the song of v 17. The song marks an ordered progression of thought which is expounded later in Revelation. God has begun *to reign,* as seen in the millennial kingdom (20:4–6); *the nations were angry,* rising in rebellion (20:8–9); *your wrath has come,* manifesting itself in judgment (20:9); *the time has come for judging the dead* (20:11–15), when the saints are to be rewarded in the city of God (21:9 – 22:5), and the destroyers of the earth cast into 'the lake of fire' (20:15; 21:8). 19 *God's temple in heaven* is opened to reveal *the ark of his covenant.* Its manifestation at this point implies that the goal of the covenant, which is the promise of the kingdom, is now in the act of coming to pass. *Flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, earthquake etc.* testify that the consummation has arrived (*cf.* 8:5; 16:17–21).

12:1 – 14:20 The conflict between the church and the powers of evil

Since the seven trumpets followed on the seven seals, it would be natural to assume that the seven cups of wrath would immediately be poured out, so completing the story of the birth pangs of the kingdom of God. A lengthy parenthesis, however, intervenes. It is necessary to reveal the nature of the conflict which the Christ will bring to an end at his appearing. The struggle of the Christians against the contemporary exaltation of the emperor as Lord and Saviour of the world is set in the context of a yet more terrifying contest, in which the age-old adversary of God and people strives by all possible means to thwart the purpose of God. The 'parenthesis' thus lies at the heart of the book, in significance as well as in position. It covers the whole Messianic period from the birth of Christ to the consummation.

12:1–17 The woman, the dragon and the deliverer

It is not difficult to recognize the essence of the Christian story in vs 1–6, but of one thing we may be sure: no Christian would summarize the gospel of Christ in this manner, omitting all reference to Christ's life and death. Many similar accounts, however, existed in the ancient world of conflict between the powers of heaven and hell. The Ugaritic Baal cycle tells of the battle of Baal, the storm god, with Yam, the prince of the sea. The Babylonians told of Marduk slaying Tiamat, the seven headed monster of the deep. (Marduk's mother was depicted similarly as the woman in 12:1, and Tiamat in battling against heaven is said to have thrown down a third of the stars.) The Persians spoke of the son of Ahura fighting the evil dragon Azhi Dahaka. The Egyptians recounted how the goddess Hathor (Isis, wife of Osiris) fled from the red dragon Typhon to an island; the dragon was overcome by her son Horus and finally destroyed by fire. The Greeks had a similar story in the birth of Apollo from the goddess Leto, who was pursued by the great dragon Python, because he heard that her offspring would kill him. Leto was hidden beneath the sea, and the newly born Apollo immediately attained maturity and slew the dragon. Other variants and additions to the story were current in the Middle East, and some Jews saw in them striking parallels with the promise of the Messiah. An unknown apocalyptic writer took up the saga and adapted it to Jewish hope by adding in v 5 the reference to the male child who is to rule all nations (*cf.* Ps. 2:9) and the defeat of the dragon through Michael, the guardian angel and protector of Israel (*cf.* Dn. 12:1; there is a remarkable parallel to vs 1–6 in one of the Qumran Hymns of Thanksgiving). It would appear that John was led to set forth the fulfilment of these expressions of pagan belief and OT promise in the Christ of the gospel by the simple addition of vs 10–11, thereby transforming the story into a proclamation of the victory of the crucified and risen Lord over the powers of sin and death.

1–2 Religious people of the ancient world would have seen in the travailing woman a goddess crowned with the twelve stars of the zodiac; a Jew would have understood her as Mother Zion (see Is. 26:16 – 27:1; 49:14–25; 54:1–8; 66:7–9), but for John she represented the 'Mother' of the Messianic community, the believing people of God of old and new covenants. 3 The *enormous red dragon* is identified with Satan in v 9. He is the antichrist of the spiritual world, just as his agent, the 'beast' (13:1), is the antichrist of earth. 4 *His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky* echoes a victory of the devil over angelic powers, but for John it will have been simply a pictorial allusion to the dragon's fearful power. 5 The statement of the child's destiny to *rule all the nations* (*cf.* Ps. 2:9) explains the dragon's desire to devour him – he

regarded the nations as his legitimate prey. Whereas the snatching of the child *to God and to his throne* originally was for his safety, the scene is sufficiently similar to the victorious ascension of Jesus to apply it to him in this sense in the passage. **6** The people of God are safe from the devil's wiles during the period of the antichrist's reign; this accords with the teaching of 7:1–7 and 11:1–2.

7–9 The *war in heaven* originally may have signified an attempt to storm the refuge of the Child-Redeemer. The heavenly protagonist is Michael the archangel, leading the hosts of God to conquer the devil and his demonic army. But the significant addition of v 11 transforms the picture. The real means of the dragon's overthrow was the atoning work of Christ; his people share that victory as they confess their faith in the gospel and bear witness to it through their word and deeds. The angelic conquest becomes a figure for the victory of Christ and his followers.

The song of vs 10–11 expresses in different words the songs in ch. 5 that celebrate the victory of the Lamb through his sacrificial death and his resurrection. So also in the extraordinary parallel Jn. 12:31–32, the hurling down of Satan is the result of the 'lifting up' of Jesus on his cross, therefore to the throne of God. The imagery of v 9, as v 10 explicitly states, indicates that Satan can no longer fulfil his function of falsely accusing the saints before God (see Jb. 1 and Zc. 3), since Christ has secured their acquittal and reconciled them to God through his redemption.

13 The dragon now turns his attention to the woman (*i.e.* the church), having failed to overcome its Lord (*cf.* Jn. 15:20). **14–16** In the symbolism of the story the serpent-dragon is a sea monster, and so to be in the desert is to be out of his reach.

The parallel with Ex. 19:4 suggests the motif of the second exodus as the Lord delivered Israel from the tyrant Pharaoh, cared for them in the wilderness and led them into the promised land, so he will do the like for all his people in the tribulation that leads to the final kingdom. **15–16** The serpent sends a flood of water after the woman, but the earth swallows it up, and he can do no more. The picture illustrates the spiritual security of believers in relation to all that Satan can do against them. **13:1** *The dragon stood on the shore of the sea* – to call up an ally from the Abyss, his own home.

13:1–18 The antichrist and his prophet

The dragon, in his determination to annihilate the church, calls to his aid not one helper but two. The first beast comes *out of the sea* (1) showing its character as a sea monster like the dragon himself, and therefore demonic. The second beast comes *out of the earth* (11). This difference corresponds to that between behemoth the land monster (Jb. 40:15–24) and leviathan the sea monster (Jb. 41); in the prophetic and apocalyptic literature these creatures typify God-opposing powers (see *e.g.* Is. 27:1; 51:9; Ezk. 32). Consonant with this, the dragon, the beast from the sea and the beast from the land form a kind of evil trinity (see 16:13). Satan claims to be God; the antichrist is the christ of Satan; and the beast from the earth performs the function of an unholy spirit. The antichrist persuades the world to worship the devil; he has a fatal wound but lives (3), in a monstrous imitation of the Christ of God. The second beast seeks to persuade the world to worship the antichrist by his witness in word and deed, as the Holy Spirit witnesses to God's Christ; and through the mark of the beast (itself a parody of the seal of God) he creates a devilish imitation of the church of Christ. So John depicts the world as divided between followers of the Truth and followers of the Lie.

1–2 The details of the sea monster are drawn from Dn. 7, but there the characteristics of leopard, bear and lion were shared out among four empires and their rulers. Here they combine in one fearful unity of power and wickedness: the leopard signifying cruelty and cunning, the bear strength, the lion ferocity. **3** That *one of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed* indicates that one of the emperors had died but come to life. Precisely that was being asserted of Nero at the time of writing Revelation; for though Nero committed suicide in AD 68, it was widely believed that he had come to life and would return to lead the eastern powers against Rome. (See further on 17:8, 11, and the note on the antichristian empire at the end of the exposition of ch. 18.)

4–7 The world worships both the devil and the pseudo-christ. The latter was given *a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies* (already apparent in the claims of the Roman emperors to divinity) *and to exercise his authority for forty-two months, i.e.* the period of tribulation, (see 11:2–3; 12:14). Who gave him that authority, including *power to make war against the saints and to conquer them* (7)? In v 4 it is the dragon who gave the authority; but the limit of *forty-two months* was set by God. Accordingly, it is the divine permision that ultimately controls the actions of antichrist (*cf.* Dn. 8:9–14; 11:36). The sovereignty of God is never more apparent than when wickedness reaches its limit – as is evident in the crucifixion of Jesus. **8** The reference of the words *from the creation of the world* is uncertain; they can be linked with the slaying of

the Lamb (as in the AV, RV and NIV) or with the writing of names in the book of life (as in the JB, NASB and NRSV). Both meanings are equally true; for the former *cf.* 1 Pet. 1:19–20; for the latter Eph. 1:4. The difficulty is settled for most by appeal to 17:8, where almost identical language is used, linking the phrase with the writing in the book. Nevertheless, the word order here does not favour this interpretation, and it is best to keep to the NIV.

10 The AV takes both parts of this couplet as referring to persecutors of the church ('He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity . . .'), indicating that justice will be meted out to the oppressor. The NIV is better. The saying echoes Je. 15:2 and is a call for endurance and faithfulness to death in the spirit of Jesus (*cf.* Mk. 8:34–35).

11 The second beast *had two horns like a lamb*, simulating the character of Christ, but its words were devilish (*cf.* Mt. 7:15). That this beast *made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast* suggests that it represents the priesthood of the cult of the emperor and the political authorities who supported it. It is later called 'the false prophet' (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). It is possible that as the first beast signifies the antichristian empire embodied in a personal antichrist, so this heathen priesthood is represented in a supreme head that directs its demonic work. **13–15** Heathen priests had little compunction in resorting to tricks, such as the production of fire, allegedly from heaven, and making an idol talk through ventriloquism. Note, however, that it is a standard feature of Christian prophecy that antichristian deceptions will take place in the end time (*e.g.* Mk. 13:22; 2 Thes. 2:9).

16–18 The *mark* of the beast on non-Christians is a counterpart of the seal of God on Christians (7:1–8); both show the allegiance of an individual, whether to God or the devil. The immediate effect of demanding that all receive the mark of the beast is the social ostracism of those who refuse it, and it entails economic warfare by the state against the church, with death to those who do not comply.

The *mark* is described as *the name of the beast or the number of his name.* Many ancient languages did not have figures for numbers but used instead the letters of the alphabet (a = 1, b = 2, c = 3 and so on). This made it possible for a name to be represented by the number obtained through adding the numerical values of the letters of the name. For example, there is a piece of graffiti on a wall in Pompeii which reads, 'I love her whose name is 545'. Doubtless the young lady knew whose name that was! So also despite the many possibilities that the number 666 yields, it is virtually certain that the individual thereby indicated was known in all the churches addressed by John, and probably far wider. The name Nero Caesar transliterated into Hebrew from Greek yields the number 666. If it is put into Hebrew from Latin it gives the number 616, which is read in some early manuscripts of Revelation. The number would have been seized on in apocalyptic circles where Hebrew (the language of the OT) was known. For Christians, 666 was an eminently suitable figure for the antichrist; it represents a consistent falling short of the divine perfection suggested by 777, whereas the name Jesus in Greek totals 888! Therein lies one aspect of the difference between the devil's christ and the Christ of God: the pseudo-christ falls as far short of being the deliverer of the world as the Christ of God exceeds all the hopes of humankind for a Saviour.

14:1–20 Oracles of kingdom and judgment

The NIV with the NEB divides the chapter into seven short oracles: vs 1–5, a vision of faithful believers in the kingdom of Christ; vs 6–7, the preaching of the gospel in the period of tribulation; v 8, a declaration of 'Babylon's' doom; vs 9–12, a warning concerning receiving the mark of the beast; v 13, a beatitude on those who die 'in the Lord'; vs 14–20, two visions of judgment, one using the symbolism of grain harvest (14–16) and the other the figure of grape harvest (17–20).

14:1–5 The 144,000 on Mt Zion. The purpose of this vision is to encourage Christians in view of the account of antichrist's reign in chs. 12 – 13.

1 The identity of the 144,000 is determined by 7:1–8 and 5:9–10. John would not represent two different groups by such an unusual symbolic number, especially when he states that in both cases they bear the mark of God on their foreheads (7:3–4). The multitude is defined as *those who had been redeemed from the earth* (3), an echo of the description of the church in 5:9. They stand *on Mount Zion*, *i.e.* in the heavenly Jerusalem (21:9–27). This too conforms to the song of thanksgiving in 5:9–10, but represents an advance on the previous picture of the 144,000 (7:1–8), where this multitude is still on earth, though afterwards viewed in heaven but not yet entered on their kingly privileges (7:9–17). The name written on their foreheads explains the nature of the 'seal' spoken of in 7:1–8; it is the name of the Lamb's Father (contrast the name or number of the beast on the hand or forehead of his followers!). **3** The angelic hosts in 5:9 sang a new song, but only the 144,000 could learn this one; it deals with the experience of redemption, which only saved

sinners could know. **4–5** This description of the saved multitude is as pictorial as their number. They are viewed as males *who did not defile themselves with women*, most plausibly because they were soldiers of the Lamb engaged on active service (*cf.* the OT regulations concerning holy war, which include abstention from sexual relations: Dt. 20:1–9; 23:9–14; 1 Sa. 21:4–5; 2 Sa. 11:6–13). The symbolism could include abstaining from 'fornication' with the harlot Babylon (*cf.* v 8).

14:6–20 The day of wrath. This succession of short oracles is unified by the use of six angels, who announce the judgment and carry it out. Like vs 1–5 it is intended to strengthen the Christian's nerve, the former vision depicting a requital of good, the other a requital of evil works.

6–7 A last warning is given to the unbelieving of humanity. All the nations are summoned to repentance and the worship of God. The message is called *the eternal gospel*, since the eternal blessings of the good news still remain for those who will respond. Observe that the representation of an angel preaching the gospel is part of the symbolism of the prophecies; the term 'angel' means messenger, and the messengers are of flesh and blood.

8 The fall of *Babylon* is recounted at greater length in chs. 17 – 18. This name is applied to Rome in 1 Pet. 5:13 and in other, extra-biblical texts.

9–13 This warning forms a complement to the preaching of the eternal gospel in vs 6–7. Followers of the beast will drink *the wine of God's fury . . . poured full strength.* The Greek text describes the wine as 'mixed unmixed', *i.e.* mixed strong wine that has not been watered down (for the symbolism see Ps. 75:8; Is. 51:17–23). The symbolism of *burning sulphur* as a judgment goes back to the overthrow of Sodom in Gn. 19:24–25 (*cf.* Is. 34:8–10). **12** The call for *patient endurance on the part of the saints* finds an additional spur in the contemplation of the doom of the worshippers of the beast; just as the knowledge that many Christians will be called to suffer imprisonment and death (see 13:10).

13 The beatitude for *the dead who die in the Lord* serves a similar purpose. If *from now on* denotes a point of time it will be the 'now' of Christ's redemption (*cf.* 12:10). An alternative translation is 'assuredly'; in which case, the statement is simply emphatic – 'Blessed assuredly are the dead who die in the Lord'.

14–20 It is common to interpret vs 14–16 as portraying the gathering of the church by Christ at his coming and vs 17–20 as the gathering of the unbelieving world for judgment, especially in view of the appearance of *one like a son of man* in v 14 (*cf.* 1:13). Yet it seems strange that Christ should be commanded by an angel to appear in glory and perform his saving work. It is more likely that the 'humanlike one' is a heavenly figure sharing something of the glory of Christ, like the 'mighty angel' of 10:1. The reaping of the wheat and gathering of the grape harvest then represent one inclusive act of judgment, as in Joel 3:13, on which these two oracles are based. For the reaping of earth by angelic instrumentality *cf.* Mt. 13:41–42.

The sixth angel *had charge of the fire* and *came from the altar*; this links up with 6:9–11; 8:1–5; 9:13; 16:7. It exemplifies again the connection between the sacrifice and prayer of God's saints and the advent of God's kingdom. The image of divine judgment as a trampling of grapes goes back to Is. 63:1–6. It is as symbolic as the measurement of the flow of blood from the wine vat, and typical in its exaggeration, *and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses bridles* (20).

1 Enoch 100 tells of warfare in the last days when fathers and sons fight one another and brothers fight brothers 'till the streams flow with their blood . . . and the horse shall walk up to the breast in the blood of sinners, and the chariot shall be submerged to its height'. The Jews similarly described the slaughter by the Romans in Hadrian's time: 'They murdered people [of Bether] continually, till a horse sank to its nostrils in blood. And the blood poured into the sea to an extent of four miles. If you think, however, that Bether lay near the sea, do you not know that it was forty miles away?' John's prophecy is a characteristic apocalyptic representation of the judgment at the parousia of Christ and is to be interpreted in the light of the nature of apocalypse.

15:1 – 16:21 The seven cups of wrath

After finishing the lengthy parenthesis of chs. 12 – 14, John returns to the theme of the Messianic judgments of the end time. As with the seven seals and seven trumpets the number seven is retained, but the symbolism is perpetually spoiled through translators interpreting John as speaking about *bowls* of wrath (in 15:7 and throughout ch. 16). The Greek term in question is commonly used of domestic bowls (so probably in Rev. 5:8), but it can also be used of cups for drinking (so clearly in Pr. 23:31). The frequency of God's 'cup of wrath' as an image of judgment in the OT should be determinative of its meaning here (of its many instances see *e.g.* Je. 25:15; 49:12; Ezk. 23:31–32; Hab. 2:15). Is. 51:17, 22 are of particular importance, with their references to the 'cup' and 'goblet' of wrath. (Most translations

mistakenly render 'goblet' as 'bowl'.) Since John himself uses the symbolism of drinking from the cup of God's wrath in 14:10 and 16:19, it looks as if the same image controls the presentation of the judgments in chs. 15 – 16.

The cups are said to cause *the seven last plagues* (1). This is often linked with the fact that no description was given of the seventh trumpet judgment, although it brought the end (11:15); it is then suggested that the cup judgments follow the sounding of the last trumpet. This is conceivable, but unlikely. The contents of the seven cups are very similar to those of the seven trumpets; in most cases the difference lies in the amplification of the earlier plagues by the later. For example, the second and third cups reveal that the second and third trumpet plagues have increased in extent (8:8–11; 16:3–4); just as the earthquake following the seventh trumpet seems to be that of the seventh cup, only more fully described (11:19; 16:17–20). The parallels between the fourth trumpet and fourth cup are evident (8:12; 16:8), as also between the fifth and sixth trumpets and fifth and sixth cups (1:1–21, 16:10–16). The cup judgments, accordingly, appear to give a fuller revelation of what had already been shown under the trumpet judgments, along with certain new features.

The song of the conquerors by the sea of glass (3–4) celebrates the conversion of the nations on the completion of God's 'righteous acts' (4). The vision, therefore, exults in the effects of the last plagues rather than heralds their coming. It is looking forward and serves to underline the statement of v 1: *with them God's wrath is completed.*

One further feature of the cup judgments calls for mention: they bear a striking similarity to the plagues of the exodus. This was noticed in the first four trumpet judgments (8:7–12), but it is clearer in this series, in that all the cup judgments reflect the plagues of Egypt, and their issue is celebrated in 'the song of Moses . . . and the song of the Lamb', sung beside a heavenly 'Red Sea' (15:3–4). Everything in this second exodus is greater than what took place at the first exodus, alike in its judgments and its blessings, but that is consonant with the mission of the Christ as bringing to fulfilment the promises of God under the old covenant.

15:1–8 Introduction to the cup judgments

2 *The sea of glass*, mentioned in 4:6, is *mixed with fire*, intimating the wrath about to be revealed from heaven (*cf.* 8:5). But *those who had been victorious over the beast* stand beside it on God's side, as the Israelites stood beside the Red Sea and sang their song of deliverance (Ex. 15:1–18). **3–4** *The song of Moses . . . and the song of the Lamb* is one, since the pattern of redemption at the first exodus has been fulfilled and completed in the second exodus. Every line of the song is reminiscent of the prophets and psalmists. *Great and marvellous are your deeds, cf.* Ps. 98:1; 111:2; 139:14. *Just and true are your ways, cf.* Dt. 32:3; Ps. 145:17. *Who will not fear you . . ., cf.* Je. 10:7. *All nations will come . . ., cf.* Ps. 86:9. *Your righteous acts have been revealed, cf.* Ps. 98:2; Is. 26:9. The vision is remarkable in its context, and is a reminder that the success of the antichrist is less than the hyperbolical pictures of the Messianic judgments may suggest.

5 *The tabernacle of the Testimony* (or tent of witness) was the name given to the tabernacle in the wilderness (Nu. 9:15), because in it the chest ('ark') containing the stone tablets of the covenant was kept. Since the chest was later housed in the temple, the temple itself was sometimes called a tabernacle (Ps. 84:1–2). The expression *the tabernacle of the Testimony* here emphasizes that the judgments about to be executed are the expression of God's righteousness. **6–9** When the seven angels were given *the seven golden cups filled with the wrath of God the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God* . . . (8); for similar occasions of this phenomenon see Ex. 40:35; 2 Ch. 7:2–3; Is. 6:4; Ezk. 10:4; 44:4). Such a manifestation denotes the presence of God, and in this context it indicates that God himself is to execute the judgments that will lead to his kingdom. The angels are but his instruments.

16:1–21 The cup judgments described

1 Since no-one could enter the temple till the cup judgments are finished (15:8) the *loud voice from the temple* must be that of God. 2 The judgment of the first cup repeats the Egyptian plague of boils which issued in sores (Ex. 9:10–11). **3–7** The turning of the sea and the fresh waters into blood, like the second and third trumpet judgments (8:8–11), divides into two the single Egyptian plague (Ex. 7:19–21). The angel's statement in vs 5–6 has the same thought as The Wisdom of Solomon 11:5–14, but applied to the antichrist and his agents for shedding the blood of the saints and prophets. *The altar* concurs in this judgment (*cf.* 6:10; 8:3–5). Note the absence of 'who are to come' in the second line of the song (as in 11:17); since God himself is active in the judgments which will issue in his kingdom, it is inappropriate to speak of his future coming.

8–11 Once more an Egyptian plague (that of darkness; Ex. 10:21) is distributed into two cup judgments. The angel's pouring the fourth cup on the sun increased its heat without extinguishing its light, but the fifth cup was poured on *the throne of the beast* and so produced darkness. It is possible that the pain of this plague was due to the demonic locusts of the

fifth trumpet, which caused torments to the adherents of the beast (9:1–6). This interpretation accords with the relation of the trumpet and cup judgments outlined in the introduction to chs. 15 – 16.

12–16 The sixth cup, like the sixth trumpet judgment, affects *the great river Euphrates* (*cf.* 9:13–16), but whereas the sixth trumpet brought forth demonic hosts the sixth cup prepares for the invasion of the empire by *the kings from the east.* These latter are further described in 17:12–13 they put themselves at the antichrist's behest (17:17), ravage the harlot city (17:16) and make war against the Lamb (17:14). The impulse to do these things is through *three evil spirits . . . like frogs* issuing from the mouths of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. In ancient times frogs were viewed as foul creatures, sometimes even as agents of evil powers. Here their task, like that of the lying spirit in the story of Ahab (1 Ki. 22:19–23), is to persuade rulers of the world to join in a great final battle against God, *in the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.* The signification of the name is unknown. It is a transliteration into Greek of the Hebrew Har-Megiddo, 'the mountain of Megiddo', but the town is located in the plain of Esdraelon in Israel and has no mountain (the nearest one is Carmel in the north). Like the number 666 it had a history in the apocalyptic tradition, but we do not possess its secret. For John it designated not so much a place as an event, namely the last uprising of the wicked against God that issues in the establishment of his kingdom.

17–21 The seventh cup is poured *into the air*, suggesting something even more awesome than the havoc wrought by the previous judgments; it signifies the final blow against the forces of evil, hence *a loud voice from the throne* (the voice of God?) proclaims '*It is done!*'. We cannot but think of the cry of Jesus from the cross, 'It is finished' (Jn. 19:30) and the declaration when God's purpose in the new creation is achieved, 'It is done' (21:6). The *flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, etc.* suggest, as in 8:5 and 11:19, the theophany which concludes judgment and introduces the kingdom of glory. But while *earthquake* is an integral element of the coming of God (*e.g.* Is. 13:13; Hg. 2:6–7; Zc. 14:4–5), this earthquake is separated out because it shatters *the great city* and *the cities of the nations.* The fleeing of every island and the mountains symbolizes the reaction of creation to the overwhelming glory of God in his appearing (*cf.* 6:12–14). The ultimate judgment is caused by *huge hailstones* (*cf.* the Egyptian plague, Ex. 9:24; the routing of armies pursued by Joshua, Jos. 10:11; and the doom of the hosts of Gog, Ezk. 38:22). All such descriptions are eclipsed by this event, but it does not lead people to repentance.

A fuller explanation of what is entailed in the last two cup judgments is given in chs. 17 – 19.

17:1 – 19:10 The reign and the ruin of the city of the antichrist

This section expands the vision of the judgment of the seventh cup, briefly described in 16:17–21. It is important to observe that it does not describe what takes place *after* that judgment, for in it the end comes (16:17). Rather, the passage tells how 'Babylon' is made to drain the cup appointed for her (16:19).

The imagery in ch. 17 fluctuates in a complicated fashion. In ch. 12 the dragon with seven heads and ten horns is said to represent the devil (v 9), and in ch. 13 he is an incarnation of the spirit of evil, the antichrist. In ch. 17 the beast supports a woman, seated on it; she is declared to be the city of antichrist (18), and the beast is clearly the empire that maintains her. This use of the symbolism is comprehensible, for in the Akkadian form of the battle of the monster of the sea and the gods of heaven the monster is feminine. The woman and the beast are alternative ways of representing a single power of evil. But further, in v 11 the beast is a *king*, in whom the nature of the empire is embodied. This accords with the frequent manner of identifying kings and their kingdoms in apocalyptic writings (see especially Dn. 2:38–44; 7:2–8, 15–26). The portrayal of the woman who represents the city of the Antichrist in this chapter is contrasted in extremist fashion with the description of the woman who represents the city of God in chs. 19 and 21 – 22. For example, the former is described as *THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES* (5); the latter as the pure 'bride', 'the wife of the Lamb' (19:7; 21:9). Babylon is drunk with the blood of the saints and by her wine brings death to the world (6; 19:2); the bride offers water of life to the world (22:17) and witnesses to the redemption of the eternal kingdom of God (21:6 – 22:5). Babylon ends in eternal destruction (19:3); the bride-city is the heart of the new creation (21:1–5). Revelation is well characterized as 'The tale of two cities'!

17:1–6 A vision of Babylon in her glory

1–2 The angel's words to John could form a fitting title to the whole of 17:1 – 19:10: *The punishment* (or 'judgment') *of the great prostitute.* The city of Tyre was called a harlot by Isaiah (Is. 23:15–17), and so was Jerusalem (Is. 1:21; Je. 3) and Nineveh (Na. 3:4–5). The latter part of v 2 alludes to Jeremiah's address to Babylon, 'You who live by many waters and are rich in treasures' (Je. 51:13). The River Euphrates

flowed through the city, which also had many canals, and maintained an irrigation system that brought wealth. From v 9 it is clear that the city of Rome is in mind – it has become the new 'Babylon', repressing the people of God and corrupting the whole earth. 3 In v 1 the 'prostitute' *sits on many waters*, but here she is seated on a beast in *a desert*; the contrary imagery is explained by the association of the desert with demonic beings (*cf.* Lk. 11:24). The beast is *scarlet*, sharing the likeness of the dragon, *i.e.* the devil (12:3). It was *covered with blasphemous names*, referring primarily to the claims of the Roman emperors to divinity. 4 The luxury and moral filth of the city are here vividly set forth, again with the aid of Jeremiah's characterization of Babylon (Je. 51:7). 5 The statement of the name on the prostitute's forehead alludes to the custom of Roman harlots having their names written on the headband which Roman women used to wear. The prefix *mystery* signifies that the name is symbolic (*cf.* 11:8). The title characterizes the tyrant city as of the same nature as that against which the prophets of old vehemently protested. 6 *The woman was drunk with the blood of the saints*, especially through the inexpressibly cruel persecution of Nero, but also in anticipation of the war of the antichrist against the church.

17:7–18 The vision interpreted: Babylon's doom

For the explanation of the vision in vs 1–6, v 8 is crucial. The 'beast' on which the woman 'rides' is plainly the empire of the antichristian city, yet the language appears to relate to an individual who *once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss* (*cf.* 11:17). In reality this expression applies to both empire and emperor. The ancient myth of the conquest of the primeval monster of the sea came to denote on the one hand the nature of the political powers that oppressed the people of God (therefore God opposing!) and on the other hand their certain defeat by God. In some versions the monster was slain, in others he was simply subdued. The former is in view in Is. 51:9–10 and is applied to the defeat of Egypt at the exodus; the latter appears in Is. 30:7 to indicate the powerlessness of Egypt to aid Israel. Applying this to the end times it may be said that the monster from the Abyss *was*, it was overcome and rendered helpless, and so *is not*, but it *will yet come*; and so the power of Satan will be seen in another political power headed by another evil ruler. In John's time a peculiar circumstance made this concept extraordinarily powerful. When Nero died the news seemed too good to be true. Rumours circulated that he was still alive and would return at the head of an army to attack Rome. As years passed it was realized that he had died, but the fear spread that he would rise from the dead. So in true apocalyptic symbolism John combined the two expectations to express the hideous reality of the godless city and its godless ruler, both hellish in their nature and both instruments of the devil. (On this theme, see further the note on the antichristian empire at the end of the exposition of ch. 18.)

9–11 The duality of application of this imagery is expressed in v 9, but with a specific identification: the seven heads of the beast are *seven hills on which the woman sits*, *i.e.* Rome, familiarly known as 'the city of the seven hills'. Rome was acting the part of the 'Mother of prostitutes'. But the seven heads also represent *seven kings*. Whatever the number seven meant to other writers, to John it was a symbol of completeness. Accordingly, *five have fallen* means that the majority have come and gone; *one is* relates to the present ruler; *the other* (*i.e.* the seventh) *has not yet come*, but when he does *he must remain for a little while*, naturally, because 'the time is near' (1:3). After his departure the beast will reveal itself in all its bestiality in *an eighth king*, who is not a newcomer, for he has already appeared as one of the seven, *i.e.* Nero; but he is not to be feared, for *he is going to his destruction*, as every God-opposing monster is doomed to go.

12–14 *The ten horns*, in line with Dn. 7:7, are interpreted as *ten kings*. In Daniel's vision they precede the anti-god power (some are overthrown by him; Dn. 7:24), but in John's vision they are confederate with the antichrist, rulers of satellite states or governors of provinces. But they *have not yet received a kingdom*, and when they do they will receive their authority along with the beast *for one hour*. So short is the time when they are allowed to go on rampage! Their *war against the Lamb* is useless, for *he is Lord of lords and King of kings* – including antichrist's kings; and his *called, chosen and faithful followers* will share his victory (*cf.* the promises to the 'overcomers' in chs. 2 – 3).

15–18 While *the waters* of Babylon were literally meant in Jeremiah's prophecy (Je. 51:13; see note on v 1), John regards them as aptly symbolizing the people over whom the antichristian city rules. The returning antichrist with his confederates will *hate the prostitute* and *bring her to ruin* (the language of v 16 is drawn from Ezekiel's description of the chastisement of Israel; Ezk. 23:25–29). No explanation is given why the antichristian ruler turns against the antichristian city. The popular Nero story expected the emperor to arise to overwhelm the empire, yet this chapter, and v 13 explicitly, assumes that he will rule over the empire and with its aid rage against the works of God. But

God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose. The agents of the devil execute the will of God. Evil is destroyed by evil and reaps its own harvest. The antichrist and his allies, like the devil they serve, are in the hands of God *until God's words are fulfilled.* **18** The woman is now identified, at least as clearly as apocalyptic writing allowed, and enough for John's readers to know of whom he speaks: she is *the great city that rules over the kings of the earth, i.e.* in John's day Rome, the mistress of the world. For the significance of this identification for modern Christians, see the note on the antichristian empire at the end of the exposition of ch. 18.

18:1–24 A dirge upon Babylon

This chapter is modelled on the doom songs of OT prophets over oppressive and arrogant nations of their times. So reminiscent is it of these that it may be said to summarize all prophetic oracles on the doom of unrighteous peoples. The prophecies against Babylon (Is. 13, 21, 47; Je. 50, 51) and against Tyre (Ezk. 26, 27) appear to have been especially in John's mind. The song about the ruin of Babylon is considerably longer than John's description of the event in 17:12–18, but it forms part of that story and supplies a powerful climax to it.

1 The glory of the angel coming down from heaven is described in words used by Ezekiel of the glory of God returning to the restored temple in the new age (Ezk 43:1–2). **2** *Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great!* is a quotation from Is. 21:9. For the rest of the verse *cf.* Is. 13:21–22. Strictly speaking this picture is not consistent with that in 19:3, but they are different ways of portraying the judgment of God on a city. John has no hesitation in mixing his symbolism, and he expects his readers to interpret it in the light of the prophetic scriptures. **3** John lays to Rome's charge the responsibility for the corruption of the whole earth, therefore this new Babylon must be destroyed from the earth. **4** *Cf.* Is. 52:11; Je. 51:6, 45. **5** *Cf.* Je. 51:9. **6** See Is. 4:2; Je. 16:18; 50:29. The cry of v 6 could be thought of as addressed to the avenging armies of the antichrist and his allies. See 17:12, 13, 16. Rome's judgment is to be proportionate to her self-glorification, wantonness and pride; *cf.* Is. 47:7–9. **8** Of the plagues that overtake 'Babylon' *death* is likely to signify pestilence (see on 6:8), and *mourning* calamity, so making the three plagues 'pestilence and calamity and famine'. The destruction by fire is performed by the invading armies under the antichrist; *cf.* 17:16.

The lamentations over Babylon are uttered by *the kings of the earth* (9–10), merchants (11–17a) and sailors (17b–19). John is here particularly indebted to Ezekiel's doom song over Tyre (Ezk. 26 – 27). **9** *The kings of the earth* are those mentioned in 17:18, not those in alliance with the beast (17:16–17; *cf.* Ezk. 26:16–17). **10** The substance of each lamentation is the same: *In one hour your doom has come* (see vs 17, 19).

11–13 *Cf.* the list of merchant nations that traded with Tyre (Ezk. 27:12–24) and their astonishment and fear (Ezk. 27:35–36). Vs 12–13 furnish a list of goods sold by the merchants to Rome; *cf.* the imports of Tyre (Ezk. 27:12–24). *Citron wood* was a sweet scented hard wood from North Africa, especially used for making expensive tables. *Ivory* was popular among Romans both for decorating furniture and ornaments. The term for *spice* denoted a fragrant plant from India, used for making costly hair ointment. *Chariots* are of a special kind, having four wheels and often expensively decorated. Two words are used for slaves, *bodies* and *human souls.* The latter expression occurs in Ezk. 27:13, and while in ordinary speech both were synonymous the latter virtually signified human livestock. On this Swete commented: 'The world of St. John's day ministered in a thousand ways to the follies and vices of Babylon, but the climax was reached in the sacrifice of human life which recruited the huge *familiae* of the rich, filled the brothels, and ministered to the brutal pleasures of the amphitheatre' (*The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 235).

17–19 The concern of the seamen, as that of the merchants, is not for the city, nor for those who perished with it, but for their own loss of revenue. **20** The appeal to *rejoice* over the judgment of Babylon should be separated from the lament of the sailors. It is best viewed as the completion of the angel's statement beginning in v 4, and including the lamentations of the kings, merchants and seamen. Whether intentional or not, 19:1–7 forms a fitting response to the cry. **21** The symbolic action of the angel is suggested by a similar one performed over Babylon by Jeremiah (Je. 51:63–64). Vs 22–23 are reminiscent of Ezk. 26:13 and Je. 25:10 in their descriptions of the cessation of crafts, industry, the joys of marriage and all means of illumination. *Your merchants were the world's great men* was uttered by Isaiah concerning the merchants of Tyre (Is. 23:8). It is adduced as a reason for Rome's judgment because, to judge from v 3, its merchants fostered the wantonness of the city and so were themselves bound up with the luxurious vice of Rome. Isaiah had already commented on the sorceries of the original Babylon (47:12), and Nahum condemned those of Nineveh (Na. 3:4). The NIV renders the term 'sorcery' by *magic spell*; this harmonizes well with the view that it represents not so much literal witchcraft as 'the witchery of gay luxurious vice and its attendant idolatries, by which the world was fascinated and led

astray' (Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, p. 240). **24** *Cf.* Mt. 23:35, where our Lord so accuses Jerusalem. John's statement is justified not only by the persecutions of the past and of the future tribulation, but also by his understanding of Rome as the incarnation of the spirit of evil that has ever assaulted God's people (see notes on 17:7–18).

Note on the antichristian empire. One urgent question arises from the reading of chs. 13, 17 and 18. In these descriptions of the doom of the city and empire of the antichrist there is little doubt that Rome was in John's mind. He all but names it in 17:9, 18, and through his use of the mystic name Babylon. His prophecies set forth the impending appearance of an antichrist who would embody its wickedness, but whose reign would last only a short time, concluding with the destruction of the city and the appearance and reign of Christ. It is the height of irony that Rome, instead of becoming the sphere of the antichrist's rule, capitulated to the Christ of God and came to be a world centre of Christianity. Many have concluded that John's prophecies therein received their true fulfilment; but the prophet, with his anticipation of the coming of Christ and the descent of the city of God from heaven, would hardly have acknowledged that interpretation.

Here it is necessary to recall that John's vision is fundamentally related to those of the OT prophets. All the prophets, in their representations of the overthrow of the oppressor nations of their day, looked for the establishment of the kingdom of God to follow on those judgments (*e.g.* Isaiah awaited the Messianic deliverance following on God's judgment of Assyria, Is. 10 – 11; Habakkuk looked towards the destruction of Babylon, Hab. 2:2–3; Jeremiah and Ezekiel expected it after the return of the Jews under Cyrus, Je. 29 – 31; Ezk. 26; and every vision of Daniel looks for it to follow the overthrow of the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes; see especially Dn. 7 – 9, 11 – 12). In the NT the evangelists place our Lord's teaching on the second advent in proximity to his prophecies concerning the judgment on Jerusalem (Mt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 21), and that advent is awaited in the not distant future, though never dated (*cf.* Rom. 13:11–12; Heb. 10:37; Jas. 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:7; 1 Jn. 2:18). To this John was no exception. Two realities would have been before his mind: on the one hand, the Lord had achieved a redemption that brought the kingdom of God into the world, and he was to come soon for its consummation; on the other hand, the 'mystery of lawlessness' was most obviously at work in the world (2 Thes. 2:7), and Rome was already playing the part of the antichrist. The stage was thus set for the end, and John describes the drama as taught by the prophets, by Christ, and by his apostles. He applies that doctrine to the situation of his day. The time scale was too short, but the essence of his prophecy is not thereby invalidated. The 'many antichrists' (1 Jn. 2:18) since John's day have increasingly approximated to his portrait and will culminate in one who will perfectly fulfil it.

The symbolism used in this 'portrait' of the antichrist is as evident as that employed in the portrayal of Satan, the city and the empire, and its use in ch. 12. John adapts the contemporary expectation of Nero's resurrection from the dead to depict the coming antichrist as 'another Nero'. There is a parallel to this in his application of the prophecy that Elijah will come before the day of the Lord (Mi. 4:5). John would have known how Jesus applied this prophecy to the ministry of John the Baptist (Mk. 9:12–13); he himself puts it to an even wider use in relation to the ministry of the entire church (ch. 11). It was as natural for him to represent the antichrist as working 'in the spirit and power of Nero' (*cf.* Lk. 1:17), by employing the story of 'Nero redivivus' without further explanation, as it was for him to use the prophecy of 'Elijah redivivus' without explanation.

Just as we should not try to define Jesus' coming with outward calculations, but pay attention rather to what God's providential rule creates before our eyes, so we should allow God to fulfil John's prophecy in his own way and day.

19:1–10 Thanksgiving for the judgment of Babylon

The words of praise that thunder from heaven for the manifest justice of God in destroying the city of antichrist form a response to the cry of the angel in 18:20 to 'Rejoice' over what God has done. The praises of *heaven* are recorded in vs 1–4, and those of 'saints, apostles and prophets' in vs 6–8. The order of heaven's praises in ch. 5 is reversed; first the myriads of angels voice their exultant joy, then the twenty-four elders and four living creatures add their *Amen*. The call for praise from the servants of God, small and great (5) is answered in the roar of the redeemed in vs 6–8. The fourfold *Hallelujah* in this passage is unique in the NT; the term occurs nowhere else in its pages. We know it through its use in the Psalms, in particular the so-called Hallel, *i.e.* Pss. 113 – 118, sung at Israel's festivals and associated above all with the Passover.

1–2 The song expands 7:10 and is similar in meaning to 12:10. *Salvation* includes deliverance from anti-god powers and therefore judgment. The angels celebrate the latter, as is characteristic of Revelation (*cf.* 7:9, after the judgments of the seals; 11:16–18 after the

trumpet judgments; 15:3–4 in anticipation of the outpouring of the cups of wrath). 3 The second *Hallelujah* celebrates the irreversibility of Babylon's destruction. Its language echoes Is. 34:9–10, the day of the Lord on Edom, which itself recalls the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The description of the unquenched fire of burning pitch in Edom, however, is followed by one of the land being inhabited by wild birds and animals, entailing two symbolic pictures of judgment, strictly irreconcilable. So also v 3 has to be qualified by John's description of the new creation (21:1–5), wherein there will be no room for Babylon's fires.

5 The voice *from the throne* will be from one of the four living creatures, not from the glorified Christ, who would hardly call on God's people to *Praise our God.* 6–8 The praises of the church relate to the coming of God's reign and the wedding of the Lamb rather than the desolation of Babylon. The statement, *our Lord God Almighty reigns* should be, as in 11:16, 'our Lord God Almighty has begun his reign' – he has brought to perfection his kingdom of salvation with illimitable blessing for humankind. Now, therefore, is the time for *the wedding of the Lamb*, in a similar sense, for the church is already the bride of Christ, but not yet the 'radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish' (Eph. 5:25–26). The explanatory comment *Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God* (8) clearly comes from John and is no part of the song. But note the delicate balance of the grace of God and human response entailed in the statements, *Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear*, for holiness is the gift of God, and the *bride has made herself ready*, engaging in *righteous acts of the saints.* This twofold reality continues through the entire Christian life (*cf.* Phil. 2:12–13).

9 The fourth beatitude of Revelation anticipates the climax of the relations of Christ and his people. *Those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb* are believers, indicating that a double symbolism is here employed: the bride and the guests are one (*cf.* 21:9–10, where the bride is also the holy city). *These are the true words of God*; they include also those that tell of the judgment on Babylon and the blessedness of participation in the Lamb's marriage, *i.e.* the visions of 17:1 up to this point. 10 The angel refuses John's worship since he too is *a fellow-servant* who holds to *the testimony of Jesus.* God alone is to be worshipped, for the *testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.* That rendering could mean that Jesus' witness is the 'breath' or principle of prophecy, but that is too impersonal. The statement is illuminated when it is realized that the favourite name of Jews for the Spirit of God was 'the Spirit of prophecy'; hence it means, 'The testimony borne by Jesus is the burden of the Spirit who inspires prophecy', and he glorifies the Lord! That perfectly expresses the teaching on the Holy Spirit in the discourses of Jn. 14 – 16 (see especially Jn. 14:26; 16:12–15).

19:11 – 22:5 The revelation of the Christ and of the city of God

The judgment of Babylon has been the theme of 17:1 – 19:10, stated above all in the seventh cup judgment of 16:17–21. But we have not yet been told of the fate of the antichrist and his confederates, the subject of the sixth cup judgment (16:12–14). This prefaces the final visions of the triumph of Christ and his kingdom, which consist of a description of the coming of Christ and the subjugation of the evil powers (19:11 – 20:3); the kingdom of Christ in this world (20:4–10); the last judgment (20:11–15); and the new creation and the city of God (21:1 – 22:5).

19:11–21 The rider on the white horse

11–15 The portrayal of Christ's coming is achieved through a series of symbolic pictures which highlight aspects of an event too great to comprehend in advance. When heaven is opened the first thing John sees is *a white horse*, with *Faithful and True* riding it. We do not commonly think of Jesus returning on a horse, accompanied by multitudes of angels on horses, nor should we do so. It is a representation of Jesus the almighty Conqueror, 'Field Marshal' of the armies of heaven, coming to subdue the rebellious of earth, which are led by the powers of hell. His *blazing* eyes relate to judgment; his *many crowns* to his position as 'King of kings and Lord of lords'. He has *a name ... that no-one knows but he himself*, yet his names are given in vs 11, 13, 16; these testify as to who he is, but God alone can grasp the mystery of his person (*cf.* Mt. 11:27). His blood-dipped *robe* is that of God (see Is. 63:1–6), which the rabbis said God would wear on the day of his vengeance on Rome. *The armies of heaven* that follow the Christ are the 'hosts of heaven', *i.e.* the angels that surround him (*cf.* 1 Ki. 22:19; Ps. 103:20; Dn. 7:9–10, 13; Mk. 8:38; 13:26–27; 2 Thes. 2:5–6). The Lord *will strike down the nations* with the sword of his mouth and tread *the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty* – two complementary pictures wherein Jesus is revealed first as a soldier and then as a farmer securing his grape harvest.

16–18 The angel's summons to the birds of prey *to gather together for the great supper of God* is drawn from Ezekiel's vision of the overthrow of Gog and Magog (Ezk. 39:17–20), though the assault of Gog and Magog is set by John at the

close of the earthly kingdom (20:7–9), in harmony with Ezekiel's vision (Ezk. 38:7–9). This *great supper of God* for birds of prey is a gruesome counterpart to the feast that begins the kingdom of God (Is. 25:6), here described as the wedding supper of the Lamb.

19–21 The beast and his confederates *gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and his army.* They are *gathered*, that is, to Armageddon (16:16). But there is no battle! The armies of heaven watch while the beast and the false prophet are captured, the Christ wields the sword of his mouth, and the devil is thrown into the Abyss. This is a judgment scene by the power of the word of God. The whole description is pictorial, including the horse of Christ, the sword issuing out of his mouth and the vultures that gorge the flesh of the slain. We cannot be sure of the details of the picture, apart from one dominant reality: the victory of Christ over those who oppose him is total. The antichrist and the false prophet are *thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulphur.* This *fiery lake* is a variant picture of hell, which in Greek is *Gehenna*, a transliteration of the Hebrew *Ge-hinnom*, 'the valley of Hinnom', where the Jews in Jeremiah's time offered by fire human sacrifices (see Je. 7:31). In apocalyptic literature, both terms are pictorial, the former a development of the concept of the Abyss, both representing the inescapable judgment of God on those who persist in rebellion.

20:1–3 The subjugation of the dragon

The description of the subjugation of the 'dragon' (Satan) continues without a break the account of the conquest of the evil trinity which had gathered 'the kings of the whole world ... for the battle on the great day of God Almighty' (16:14). The paragraphs should never have been separated. After the judgment on the antichrist and the false prophet and the multitudes they had deceived, the ultimate enemy is dealt with, namely the devil, who had inspired the rebellion against God. No great contest is necessary; an angel *seized* him, *bound him* with a chain, *threw him into the Abyss*, and *locked and sealed it over him* – a fourfold means of ensuring that he was removed from all contact with humanity on earth (for the symbolism see Is. 24:21–22). As the text states, this was to *keep him from deceiving the nations any more* – until a time decreed by God when he should be released for a short period, *i.e. until the thousand years were ended.* The release, as the imprisonment, are for the accomplishment of God's inscrutable purpose.

Note. The thousand-year kingdom of Christ. The 'binding' of Satan for a thousand years coincides with the 'reign of Christ' for a thousand years (20:4). This thousand years' reign has gained for itself the name 'millennium' (*mille* is Latin for 1,000), and the doctrine is called 'chiliasm' (*chilias* is Greek for 1,000). The limitation of the Messiah's reign to a thousand years is not found in the OT, but the kingdom over which the Messiah rules is typically represented as a kingdom of this world, centred in Jerusalem. Is. 65:17–25 and 66:22–23 speak of the creation of new heavens and a new earth, but the description of the kingdom of God therein is wholly in terms of this world (a joyful Jerusalem, human longevity, stability in homes and farms, happy children, peaceable animals). Some apocalyptic writers emphasized this conception of new creation, so among the Jews it became common to distinguish between the reign of the Messiah in this world and the kingdom of God in the new world (though not without the Messiah). Great diversity about the length of the Messianic kingdom existed among the rabbis. Suggestions were that it would last forty years (corresponding to Israel's years in the wilderness), or 400 years (Israel's stay in Egypt), or 4,000 years (from creation to the present). Other views were that it would last 365 days (Is. 63:4 speaks of a 'day' of vengeance and a 'year' of redemption) or 365,000 years (Ps. 90:4 speaks of a day as a thousand years with the Lord). This latter scripture became conjoined with the idea of history as recapitulating the week of creation: as the six days of creation were followed by God's Sabbath rest, so the six days of human history would yield to the Sabbath of history, the kingdom of the Messiah, which would be followed by an eighth day without end. This view is stated in ch. 15 of the Epistle of Barnabas, a Christian work roughly contemporary with Revelation. For John the 'thousand years' probably indicated the character of the kingdom of Christ rather than its length, *i.e.* it speaks of its nature as the Sabbath of human history, and so links with the teaching in Hebrews of the kingdom as the Sabbath-rest that awaits the people of God (Heb. 4). Doubtless John would have been confirmed in this interpretation by his reading of Ezk. 36 – 48, where Israel's restoration to their land under the Messiah, the new David, (chs. 36 – 37) is followed by the rebellion of Gog (chs. 38 – 39) and the promise of a new Jerusalem with a new temple (chs. 40 – 48). The prayer Jesus taught his disciples would have been yet more important ('your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'; Mt. 6:10); and John would also have known the beatitudes ('Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth'; Mt. 5:3, 5).

Paul's exposition of the kingdom of Christ in 1 Cor. 15:22–25 is closely related to John's exposition and indicates the likelihood of its being an established tradition in the early church. Certainly it was so in the early centuries, but it was opposed by some significant Christian leaders in favour of more extravagant interpretations. Augustine's interpretation, that the millennium is the period of the church between Christ's first and second advents, became the official teaching of both the Catholic and Reformed churches. It is exemplified in Hendriksen's commentary on Revelation (*More than Conquerors*, IVP, 1939); he identifies the binding of Satan (20:1–3) with his ejection from heaven (12:9), the thousand years of the church's power (20:4–6) with its time of triumphant witness (11:2–6; 12:14–15), the onset of the armies of Gog and Magog (20:7–9) with the persecution of the church by the antichrist (11:7–10; 13:7–8), the ensuing destruction of those armies (20:9) with Armageddon (19:19–21), and the last judgment (20:11–15) with the Messianic judgment (14:14–20).

This is a plausible and interesting interpretation of the text, but seems to entail insuperable difficulties. In 12:9 Satan is cast out of heaven, where he may no longer accuse the saints before God, *to* earth, where his war against the church *intensifies*, because his time is short; in 20:1–3 he is taken *from* earth and imprisoned in the Abyss, that he may no longer corrupt humanity. The judgment of 14:14–20 is aligned with the Messianic judgments of the last times, above all that which happens at Christ's coming (19:19–21); whereas the last judgment of 20:11–15 is of all generations of human kind. The conquest of the evil powers is described in the indivisible passage 19:19 – 21:3, and that takes place at Christ's advent in glory, which is followed by his thousand years' reign. Add to that the impossibility of reconciling the assumption of John, shared by the prophets generally, that the Lord may come soon (1:3; 22:20) with the notion that the thousand years' kingdom will precede his coming, one has difficulty in attributing this scheme of interpretation to him. John well knows that the kingdom of God was established through Christ's redemption (ch. 5; 12:10–12); the kingdom that the Lord will bring at his second coming will be the triumph of that which he brought through his incarnate ministry, hence the revelation of that which has been in the world from Easter onwards.

Why, then, does God permit the release of Satan at the end of the thousand years? John would have answered, 'It is so written'. The prophecy of Gog's attack upon Israel (Ezk. 38 – 39) is set *after* God's restoration of the people to the kingdom. Gn. 1 – 3 supplies much of the symbolism of the city of God in Revelation; John's meditation on those chapters could have suggested to him that as Satan was allowed to enter the Garden to expose the nature of human hearts, so he will be allowed to do the like in the final paradise, so that all hostility to God can be brought into the open and be annihilated before his reign is made absolute. Like other apocalyptists, John would have known that the fulness of God's kingdom cannot be attained within the limitations of this world, not even in a restored paradise; the goal of creation can be reached only through resurrection like that of Christ.

20:4–6 The millennium

The description of Christ's kingdom is extraordinarily brief; no word is given of the conditions of life in the thousand years, only a bare statement of who will exercise rule in it. There is reason to believe, however, that the extended description of the city of God in 21:9 – 22:5 applies to the kingdom in the millennial age as well as in the coming eternal age. 19:6–7 celebrates the marriage of the bride at Christ's coming; 21:9 reveals the bride to be the holy city Jerusalem. The hosts of Gog surround *the camp of God's people, the city he loves* (20:9), which must be the city of God, the new Jerusalem in the world. The nations walk in the light of the city and bring their glory into it; but nothing unclean enters its gates (21:24–25), and the leaves of the tree of life heal the nations (22:2). Such statements are even more appropriate to the city in the world than in the new creation. There is not a line in 21:9 – 22:5 that could not apply to the kingdom in this world, which suggests that it means life in history as well as in eternity.

4 Who are those *seated* on *thrones*? Dn. 7:9–14, 27 give the answer: 'the saints, the people of the Most High', with which Rev. 5:9–20 and 19:7 agree. Of these 'saints' John makes special mention of the martyrs and confessors of Christ, for the encouragement of all who may be called to tread the path of martyrdom. **5** *The rest of the dead did not come to life* almost certainly relates to the dead without Christ; John would not deny the resurrection of the church at Christ's coming (see the comments on v 4; *cf.* on 11:11–12; 1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thes. 4:16). **6** The fifth beatitude declares the blessedness of those who share in *the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them* (*cf.* v 14 and on 2:11), and they will be *priests of God and of Christ* as they reign with him. Their reign, therefore, is their service of God and humanity.

20:7–10 The last insurrection of evil

As mentioned above, John here follows Ezekiel's prophecy of the invasion of Israel's

land by Gog and Magog after the Messianic kingdom has been established. Whereas in Ezk. 38 'Gog of the land of Magog' comes from the north to invade the holy land, in John's vision Gog and Magog stand for *the nations in the four corners of the earth* (8). *They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded* the city God loves – a city some 1,400 miles (2,200 km) long, wide and high (21:16)! The event is as symbolic as Armageddon and represents an attack on the manifestation of Christ's rule in the world. **9b–10** The would-be destroyers are themselves destroyed, and the devil is thrown into the fiery lake, never to trouble humanity again.

20:11–15 The last judgment

If the fleeing of heaven and earth from the face of God is to be viewed as the precursor of the new heavens and earth (*cf.* 2 Pet. 3:10–13), the spectacle of the great white throne as the one reality on which humankind can gaze is indeed an awesome sight. But the description is likely to be symbolic, to enhance the terrifying grandeur of the scene – the last overwhelming theophany from which creation wants to escape but cannot (*cf.* 6:12–17).

12 *The dead, great and small*, stand *before the throne*, *i.e.* all humankind is summoned to judgment. Is the church exempted from this? 20:4–6 suggests that it is, but in that case believers will have been judged earlier (*cf.* 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:10), but John gives no hint of this. The passage stands for the necessity of all to be judged, saints and sinners alike, and there's plenty of time for it to happen! The judgment proceeds according to two criteria: first, *according to what they had done*, and secondly, the testimony of the books. This latter feature is taken from Dn. 7:10, which reflects both ordinary court procedure and the habit of Persian kings to record every detail of events in their provinces. The important thing is that the joint testimony of the two criteria agrees, and the book of life will reveal it.

14–15 *Death and Hades* represent the fact of dying and the condition entered on after death. Both *were thrown into the lake of fire*, a circumstance that shows the sheer pictorial nature of the scene, including the lake of fire. Into that *lake* were thrown any whose *name was not found written in the book of life.* That *lake* has its origin in the Abyss, the home of the monster, the enemy of God, and traditionally the abode of evil spirits and the place where fallen angels were punished. It is the alternative to the city of God. Accordingly, John represents the same reality by the very different symbol of life outside the city (21:27) in contrast to life inside the city (21:24–26). Significantly it all begins in connection with the new creation, the work of God in Christ; we can be assured that grace and truth (Jn. 1:17) will be as truly united in the judgment as they were in the cross of Christ.

21:1–8 The new creation

The unfolding of God's dealings with humanity in Revelation reaches its climax in this passage: vs 1–4 describe a new creation in which God and people dwell together in fellowship; vs 5–8 declare the truth of that description and its implications for the readers. Its purpose is to strengthen the faith, hope and resolution of the church as it faces its ultimate trial.

1 The creation of a *new heaven and new earth* is taught in Is. 65:17 and 66:22 (*cf.* Mt. 5:18; Mk. 13:31; 2 Pet. 3:12). Jewish teachers interpreted Is. 65 – 66 variously; some held that God would *renew* creation for his kingdom, others that he would *replace* it by an entirely new one. John's vision is capable of either interpretation; the fact that 20:11 describes a theophany, *i.e.* a pictorial representation of creation's response to God's coming for judgment, may be held to favour the former view. In any case, *there was no longer any sea* is less concerned with water than wickedness: the devil, the antichrist and antichristian empire are all depicted as sea monsters; nothing of that order survives into the new. **2** The imagery used in the portrayal of *the Holy City* here and in 21:9 – 22:5 fluctuates between the bride-city, as the context of life in the kingdom of God, and the fellowship of the redeemed with God. **3** This latter feature appears as the first and greatest blessing of the eternal kingdom. The term for *dwelling* is lit. 'tent'; it harks back to the tabernacle in the wilderness, on which the pillar of fire and cloud rested, the sign of God's presence and manifest glory. The same association of language is used in Jn. 1:14; in the new creation all that Immanuel signifies is forever fulfilled. **4** *Cf.* 7:17; Is. 25:8. **5** *I am making everything new* refers to God's action in the new creation, but it was begun in Christ's resurrection and is experienced by all believers in the present (2 Cor. 5:17). *It is done* echoes the cry on the cross (Jn. 19:30) and the voice from the throne (16:17). God is *the Alpha and the Omega*; his character guarantees the truth of this revelation. The added promise recalls Is. 55:1 (*cf.* also 22:17; Jn. 7:37–38). **7** A final promise is given to the Christian who *overcomes*: the blessings of the Holy City will be his or her inheritance. **8** In contrast to the overcomer, who inherits the kingdom, are those who preclude themselves from it. *The cowardly* either deny or reject God's Christ and worship the antichrist. The remaining terms describe *the unbelieving*, whose lives demonstrate their opposition to God.

21:9 – 22:5 The city of God

For the suggestion that this section portrays the city of God alike in Christ's 'thousand years' reign and in the new creation, see the note on the millennium.

9 The revelation of *the bride* was anticipated in 19:7–9. Here the bridal metaphor gives way to that of a city; a similar transfer of imagery is made in Is. 54:4–8 and 11:12. **10** The language is so similar to Ezk. 40:2 that we must assume that John had it in mind; the city descends from heaven to the mountain whereon he stood. Heaven comes to earth in the kingdom of God! **11** The city's appearance is compared to that of *a jasper*, and so its glory is like that of the Creator (see 4:3). **12–13** The *great, high wall* serves the dual purpose of keeping out those who have no part in the city (21:27; 22:14–15) and of providing eternal security for those inside. Its *twelve gates* are inscribed with the names of *the twelve tribes of Israel*, just as the wall's *twelve foundations* have on them *the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*. Therein the unity of the people of the old and new covenants is seen; together they form 'the Israel of God', expanded to embrace all nations in Christ. **14** *The twelve foundations* of the city's wall are not to be thought to stand on one another but as forming a continuous chain round the city, divided up by its twelve gates. *The twelve apostles* correspond to the twelve tribes of v 12; like the latter they denote a collective whole rather than a list of individuals. There is no need, therefore, to ask whether Paul's name is included in the twelve, and if so whose name is omitted; the question does not arise.

16 *The city was laid out like a square*; but as its height is the same as its breadth and length, it is a cube. One structure in the OT is mentioned as a cube in shape, namely the Most Holy place in the temple (1 Ki. 6:20); here the cubic shape indicates that the entire city is a sanctuary and partakes of the holiness of the ancient inner shrine. *12,000 stadia* represents approximately 1,400 miles, but to translate it into modern mileage is to rob the measurement of its clear symbolism – an infinite multiple of 12. John may be saying that the city of God reaches from earth to heaven, and so unites them into one. **17** *The wall* was *144 cubits* (216 ft), probably 'high' rather than *thick*, again a perfect multiple of 12. In this context there is no need to stress the disparity between the measurements of the city and the wall; the latter is big enough to serve its purpose!

18–21 The language of symbolism continues in John's description of the materials of the city. He has already said that its sheen is like that of *jasper*, the appearance of God (11); he now declares that the wall is entirely built of *jasper*. The *pure gold* may recall the sanctuary of Solomon's temple, which was covered completely with gold (1 Ki. 6:20–22), or it could allude to the thought in 3:18. The list of jewels that decorate the foundations is startling. Despite some uncertainties of translation they appear to be identical with the jewels inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes on the high priest's breastplate (Ex. 28:15–21). Philo and Josephus both draw attention to the fact that those jewels also represent the twelve signs of the zodiac. On the basis of an old correlation of the jewels and the zodiac signs it appears that John's list of jewels portrays the progress of the sun through the twelve signs of the zodiac, but in reverse order! Perhaps John wished to dissociate the Holy City from pagan speculations about the city of the gods in the heavens; or it may be that the reverse is true, and John was showing that the reality for which the pagans longed is found in the revelation of God in Christ (the foundation stones have on them the names of the apostles of the Lamb – his witnesses!).

22–27 In a city modelled on the holy of holies there is no need for *a temple*; all is holy, and God is everywhere adored (*cf.* Jn. 4:20–23). **23** Is. 60:19–20 is clearly in mind. It is not that *the sun or the moon* have ceased to exist but that their splendour has been surpassed by the glory of God himself. **24–26** These verses reproduce the substance of Is. 60:3–11, but with a difference: there the nations bring Jewish exiles to Jerusalem and their wealth to Jews; here they *bring their splendour . . . glory and honour* to God and the Lamb, so fulfilling 15:4. The language of the whole paragraph is especially suitable to the kingdom of Christ in the millennial age, but it can also apply in a less direct sense to the kingdom of God in the new creation.

22:1–5 This conclusion of the vision of the city of God shows conscious links with the description of the paradise in Eden (Gn. 2 – 3).

1 *The throne of God and of the Lamb* is the source of *the river of the water of life* (*cf.* 7:17; 21:6; 22:17). The Garden of Eden had a river (Gn. 2:10). In Ezekiel's vision a river flowed from the temple (Ezk. 47:9; see the application of this passage to Jesus in Jn. 7:37–38). **2** *The tree of life* (unlike Gn. 2:9; 3:22, but as in Ezk. 47:7ff) is viewed collectively. Like the symbol of the water of life, the *healing* powers of *the leaves* are taken in a spiritual sense, possibly in the first instance for the healing of the wounds inflicted in the great distress. **3** *No longer will there be any curse* cites Zc. 14:11 and reverses the curse pronounced in the original paradise (Gn. 3:14–19). In the new Jerusalem the effects of that curse are completely overcome. **4** The goal of

redeemed humanity is here stated: *They will see his face*. Such a vision will involve the transformation of the beholders into the same likeness (2 Cor 3:18; 1 Jn. 3:2). For the *name . . . on their foreheads* see on 3:12 and 19:12. **5** *They will reign for ever and ever* expands 20:4 and is the final fulfilment of 3:21 (note that in 11:15 'he will reign for ever and ever' includes the millennial reign and that in the new creation).

22:6–21 The epilogue

Three themes find prominent expression in this conclusion of Revelation: the authenticity of the visions narrated (6, 7, 16, 18, 19); the imminence of Christ's coming (6, 7, 10–12, 20); and the necessity for holiness in view of the impending consummation (10–15). It is difficult to be sure of the identity of the speakers in the various utterances. Vs 7, 12–13 and 20a appear to be utterances of Jesus; vs 6, 8, 14–15 the angel's; v 16 Jesus through the angel; vs 8–9, 17–19, 20b and 21 John's additions. A great deal of variation is possible, but in the last resort it matters little, for the speaker is ultimately Christ, whose messenger is the angel (9) and whose utterances John records as a prophet (10).

6–7 In the light of v 7, 19:9 and 21:5 the *trustworthy and true* words relate not only to the preceding context but the whole book. They concern events *that must soon take place* because the Lord is *coming soon* (*cf.* also v 20). **8–9** The inclusion of this passage by John does not necessarily mean that some of his readers engaged in angel worship, though the practice did have a place among the Jews, and apparently even among Christians (Col. 2:18). John's action is natural enough, and its narration needs no other explanation than its occurrence and its interest. It is not so much a polemic against angel worship as a correction of the overexaltation of all instruments of revelation. Angels, prophets and other Christians are on one level before God.

10 The injunction is the reverse of that in Dn. 8:26; 12:4, 9 and of Jewish apocalypses generally. Whereas these prophesied of remote times, John's message was of immediate importance and was issued in his own name. **11** There is irony in this utterance. Daniel had said (Dn. 12:10) that in the last days many would be purified by their experience of trial, but the wicked would act wickedly; *i.e.* in the last crisis people will come out in their true colours and range themselves on God's side or against. That teaching is continually stressed in Revelation (7:1–8; 11:1–2; 12:1 – 14:5 *etc.*). Here it receives its final exposition. Since *the time is near* let the person who insists on clinging to evil continue therein; he will soon meet his judgment. Let the righteous and holy guard themselves, for their Lord will soon come for their deliverance. To make of this statement a doctrine of the fixity of character and destiny of people in the last times is contrary to the context and the general teaching of the book (*e.g.* 14:6–7; 15:4; 21:6–8; 22:17). **12** *Cf.* 11:18; Is. 40:10; Rom. 2:6. **13** See the note on 1:3. **14** The last of the seven beatitudes of Revelation. *Those who wash their robes* have had their guilt removed through the crucified and risen Saviour and so *have the right to the tree of life* and may enter into the city (*cf.* Gn. 3:22–24). **15** This verse almost repeats 21:8, but the fate of those concerned is very differently represented. The fundamental reality in common is their exlusion from the city of God. John's use of such different images to express judgment indicates the great flexibility of his symbolism.

16 Jesus as *the Root and the Offspring of David* fulfils Is. 11:1. As *the bright Morning Star* he fulfils the prophecy of Baalam in Nu. 24:17. **17** *The Spirit*, who is especially active in the prophets (19:10), joins the church in calling upon the Lord to *Come*, according to his promise (7, 12; *cf.* v 20). The individual hearer of the prophecy of this book, as it is read in the churches, is bidden to say *Come*. The repentant sinner is invited to *come*, and *take the free gift of the water of life* and so be ready to welcome the Lord when he comes.

18–19 John has been harshly judged for concluding his prophecy with these words. It was, however, customary for ancient writers to protect their works against mutilation and interpolation by adding such an anathema. John's concern was to prevent his message from being perverted through addition or removal. The same concern is seen in Dt. 4:2. The so-called canonization formula in the passage – 'not add nor take away' – has been traced back to 2450 BC in Egypt. Instead of the usual curse, John warns of judgment and loss of the kingdom of God.

20 John's response to the last promise of Revelation corresponds to the Aramaic watchword *Maranatha*: 'Come, O Lord' (see 1 Cor. 16:22). The promise is the culmination of all promises; and the response is the sum of all living hopes.

21 The benediction reminds us that Revelation is a letter, and that its lessons are to be personally appropriated. Only by *the grace of the Lord Jesus* can that victory be gained which will receive the recompense portrayed in this book. It behoves us to open our lives to it continually, and to add our own *Amen*.

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